

Mr. Coates: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a similar point of order. I have a number of questions that have been on the order paper since September 30, 1974; Nos. 40, 41, 42, 46, 47, 48 and 50. I appreciate that there is detail associated with them. For example, one question relates to the number of times government aircraft were used by cabinet ministers between May 8 and July 8, 1974. It is very important that the House of Commons and the public know whether during a federal election campaign cabinet ministers were using government aircraft. We are entitled to this information. We are entitled to know if government aircraft were used for political purposes and whether repayment was made to the federal treasury for the use of those aircraft.

There are a number of other questions that are similar. In view of the fact the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Sharp) and a number of his colleagues went to Great Britain to see how questions are answered in that country and they discovered that most could be answered within one week, any member of this House who has had to wait since last September 30 deserves an explanation and the answers as quickly as possible.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Speaker: On the points of order raised, particularly the one with regard to a delay in answering questions, this is something the House had heard before. Although this may be a grievance, it is not a point of order.

On the point raised by the hon. member for Leeds (Mr. Cossitt), the practice of asking that certain responses be deemed to have been made orders for return in order that the returns can be tabled forthwith, is, of course, at the pleasure of the House. If hon. members are unhappy with that practice, it is to be hoped a way will be found to improve it. The failure to do so might ultimately result in the withholding of agreement of the House to that tabling. This might lead to the question being put as to whether that can or ought to be done at that time. Although it might be dramatic, it would be a rather cumbersome procedure. That is the logical conclusion of a disagreement about whether such responses can be tabled in that way. As I say, if there is difficulty about the procedure, hon. members can agree on a way to improve it.

Mr. Diefenbaker: Mr. Speaker, I rise regarding a question having to do with the Hon. J. W. Pickersgill—starred question No. 1,526. I endeavoured to get this information by means of an ordinary question placed on the order paper in the month of October, I think it was—I do not have it before me. It has to do with pensions and the amount paid to Mr. Pickersgill when he headed the Transport Commission. The answer previously given was completely without information as far as answering the question was concerned. Therefore, on February 5 I put down a starred question regarding the same matter. Starred questions have to be answered orally. I realize it is going to be embarrassing if this answer is given, but I would point out to Your Honour that the contemptuous way in which questions are being answered, or answers withheld, constitutes an endeavour on the part of the government to place a blindfold on parliament.

Oral Questions

I shall not deal with that matter at the moment, but I think I should say to you, Mr. Speaker, as custodian of our rights in the House of Commons, that this hiding of the facts, the delays in answering that are taking place, indicate that the government has complete contempt for the right of members to secure information. This is a matter which I may bring to your direct attention shortly.

Mr. Speaker: Shall the remaining questions be allowed to stand?

Some hon. Members: Agreed.

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[English]

PUBLIC SERVICE

POSSIBLE SUBMISSION OF INCOME GUIDELINES TO UNIONS— GOVERNMENT POSITION ON COLA CLAUSE

Hon. Robert L. Stanfield (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, I wish to direct a question to the Minister of Labour arising out of a statement of the Minister of Finance that public service employees had been represented at talks with union leaders aimed at reaching some kind of consensus to restrain inflation. I should like to ask the Minister of Labour who has, I understand, been participating in these talks, whether the government has outlined to the unions, particularly, in this case, the public sector, any specific guideline respecting incomes, wages or salaries which the government feels would be suitable and appropriate in present conditions.

Hon. John C. Munro (Minister of Labour): Not in the discussions in which I was present.

Mr. Stanfield: A supplementary question to the Acting Prime Minister. It arises from the statement made by the Minister of Finance in the House on January 28. I quote:

From my point of view the addition of a COLA clause makes a good deal of sense because it responds to the cost of living rather than anticipating rates of inflation, which hopefully will not be attained.

I should like to ask the Acting Prime Minister whether the endorsement of a COLA clause by the Minister of Finance is government policy, particularly with relation to public service contracts?

Hon. Mitchell Sharp (Acting Prime Minister): As the Minister of Finance said in the statement which has just been quoted, there is something to be said for this. But, regrettably, there is more to be said than that. I would not look upon the statement of the Minister of Finance as being an endorsement at all. He merely comments that there is something to be said in favour. There is something to be said on the other side, too. I would not interpret the Minister of Finance as endorsing COLA.

Mr. Diefenbaker: There is something to be said for cabinet solidarity.