

Business of Supply

Mr. Baldwin: Mr. Chairman, I think this shows the kind of man the Prime Minister is. Clothed in the imperial purple he has condescended to come down and talk to hon. members, not to answer questions. No one is allowed to question him; he is above that. I know hon. members will say he comes to the House for 40 or 50 minutes and answers questions, but no 10 per cent of the questions asked are answered honestly and in a straightforward way. That is how he conducts himself in response to these questions.

● (2110)

The second point I want to make is that significantly the Prime Minister started off his speech this afternoon by saying he would not get into the petty details of the candelabra, the ashtrays, and all these things. Yet he spent most of the time on the defensive with regard to these matters. It is the Prime Minister who opened up the attack on the swimming pool today, and it is the Prime Minister who spoke about the speech made by the right hon. member for Prince Albert. This shows he is very sensitive and very much on the defensive with regard to these issues. I suggest to members of the committee that when they come to read the speech of the right hon. gentleman tomorrow, they will find that it shows a guilty conscience, and that is the reason he made that speech.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Baldwin: My leader asked the President of the Privy Council a question with regard to examining witnesses. I would like to repeat that question and have it answered straightforwardly and squarely. Is it the view of the government, is it the view of the Acting Prime Minister, does he support the Prime Minister and the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources in their position that civil servants are not competent and cannot be compelled to be witnesses, that unless they receive permission from their ministers they cannot appear before a committee, and that if they do appear before a committee with the consent of the responsible minister they can only answer such questions as the minister or the Prime Minister allows them? That is an issue of the very important jurisdiction of parliament. Here is parliament, the highest court of this land. We rank above all other courts. The right to summon witnesses, the right to question those witnesses, is paramount to the exercise of our jurisdiction.

Does the government take the position that we can summon ordinary citizens, we can call people off the streets, we can call presidents of unions and presidents of corporations, but civil servants are sacred and cannot be summoned unless with the consent of the minister? That is a question that I put to the minister in the hope that he can reply to it later.

My second question regards the matter of secrecy. I hesitate to say this, but it must be said that in many ways this House has become the House of lies.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Baldwin: Yes, there are a lot of "oh's" on the other side. I am not saying they are deliberate lies but a distortion and an exaggeration of facts, a suppression of the truth so that private members, not only members of the

[Mr. Stanfield.]

opposition but members on the government side, have lost the capacity to challenge the government on issues of the day, to question government members and receive honest, sincere and complete answers.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Baldwin: The Prime Minister, the President of the Privy Council and the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources talk about responsible government. They have a distorted idea of responsible government. Responsible government to me, to my colleagues, and to most members of the House I think, means a government that is answerable to parliament, to the people. It does not mean that if a government is elected and happens to have a majority, as this government does, it is answerable to nobody. I suggest that if that is the kind of rule, then we might as well wrap this House up and forget about it between elections because it is meaningless, useless.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Baldwin: I am the first to recognize that we cannot expect the government to answer questions about everything. I have admitted that in the House, and in the committee which is seized of the private member's public bill which I have put forward and which also deals with the question of guidelines. There are areas of confidentiality dealing with security, with criminal investigations, and with matters on which information is given to the government, such as under the Income Tax Act, which should not be made publicly available. I am the first to accept that. But what do we have today?

We have a set of guidelines which are all embracing. I challenge the government to point out any loophole whereby it would be possible for a question to be asked and for the government not to find security in hiding behind those guidelines. They are wide and comprehensive enough so that the government can say it does not need to answer the questions because of this or that particular guideline. Not only that, but who sets the standard, the yardstick?

What is the criterion as to whether or not a question comes within those guidelines? It is for the government to say, and it has used this over and over again. It says, "In our opinion this question contravenes the guidelines which we set, and therefore we will not answer it". That is not good enough. As I say, I have a private member's public bill which is before the Regulations and Other Statutory Instruments Committee where we are dealing with these guidelines.

I should like to put the following questions to the President of the Privy Council. Have the Prime Minister and the government laid down instructions that under no circumstances will members of the Privy Council office or the Prime Minister's office be allowed to have access to members of the press and have interviews or answer questions?

Second, given the statements some years ago by the Prime Minister and the present Minister of Finance, then minister of justice, as to freedom of information, will the government say that it is not categorically opposed to and will give favourable consideration to the introduction of a