

Privilege

The principles of the committees and the principles of reform that we were all looking for are that the committees be masters of their own destiny. That is essentially what we have been trying to work with. That is the kind of thing that I think is essential. Part is that it is absolutely necessary to treat our witnesses with some respect and to do our best to accommodate them when they have scheduling difficulties.

It is not a case of privilege, as I am sure you are well aware already. I think what we have is a political debate, a debate that, if all the facts were known, would change the tone of it considerably to say that we were simply trying to accommodate a witness.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. member for Burin—St. George's is rising. I happen to have some indication of what he wishes to say. I will, of course, hear him in a moment.

This may help hon. members. There are two issues in this application. One of them is procedural, and I intend to give it very careful consideration.

The other is a question of what happened at the committee and whether it should or should not have happened. The House knows, and it is the House's wish and has been for decades, that it is not the place of the Chair to interfere with what goes on in the committee.

The procedural point that has been raised by the hon. member for Glengarry—Prescott—Russell is that a notice went out which gave people an idea that certain things would be done, and something else was done. That is a procedural point. I am taking that procedural point and I will be considering it carefully. I do not intend to rule on it right now.

I say to the hon. member for Burin—St. George's, who is an experienced member of this House, because I do not know yet what he is going to say, that I would ask him to keep in mind that I am not going into the question of who said what and under what circumstances at that committee because the House, decades ago, made it quite clear that it does not want your Speaker to be doing that. I will hear the hon. member.

Hon. Roger C. Simmons (Burin—St. George's): Mr. Speaker, I intend to come to the procedural issue. I just want in passing to say to the Parliamentary Secretary that it did not really get bogged down on the issue of whether someone should come on a given date or not, in this case Mr. Don Lander. The real issue and our concern—and I believe the gentleman who raised this issue and I are the only two in this room who were actually at the meeting—was procedural. Our concern was in terms of the precedent it could set.

We saw the green piece of paper that my colleague has referred to as the "order paper". We saw it as embodying a decision of the committee, a steering committee, then adopted by the full committee, according to procedures laid down by the committee.

As an aside I submit, yes, the committee is the master of its destiny, but within the framework of the parameters of the House rules. It cannot go outside them. It is our point that, procedurally, the committee yesterday went well outside the parameters of the way the House operates. The House sets an order of business and can only change it by unanimous consent. No unanimous consent was sought yesterday.

There is another way. Either the chairman could have sought unanimous consent or could have very quickly convened a steering committee either before or after the other meeting. The mechanism is in place in that committee to take care of an emergency which apparently rose yesterday.

I point out, in closing, that it was not the emergency that it has been represented as here. While it happened kind of at the last minute—but not quite—there was time for a government member to have a typed motion when he arrived at the meeting. I submit to you, Sir, there was time for that. There was time to convene a quick steering committee and allow the thing to go forward as is normally the process. We saw it as an absence of some good faith. We think there was a better way. We are concerned in terms of the precedent it could set. If the government can change the order of business one day for a small matter, another day it can change it for a quite more substantial matter.

Mr. Speaker: The Hon. Parliamentary Secretary in reply.