

dants' allowance, clothing allowance and exceptional incapacity allowance.

I do understand that the merchant mariners want their access criteria widened to other programs the veterans have. In response to that, I might say that this government has undertaken, with veterans groups, the most comprehensive review of this issue since World War II.

I indicated on February 28 that I would have an answer shortly. When the government has a response, we will make a response in the House or elsewhere.

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PRESENCE IN THE GALLERY

Mr. Speaker: I wish to draw to members' attention the presence in the gallery of His Excellency Dr. Heinz Fischer, President of the National Council of Austria.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

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PRIVILEGE

REPLY IN QUESTION PERIOD

Mr. Ian Waddell (Port Moody—Coquitlam): Mr. Speaker, yesterday in Question Period I put a question, answered by the government House leader, in which I asked him why the government was continuing to index judges' salaries—they are making over \$147,000 a year—and freezing other salaries. One hundred thousand PSAC people make less than \$25,000 a year.

The minister answered my question by saying he could not answer because there was a bill before the House with respect to judges' salaries.

Ironically, on checking, I found that the bill does not deal with indexing at all. However, that is not the point. The point is that a minister can answer in the House by saying that there is no answer and he cannot give an answer because a bill is before the House.

I made reference to Beauchesne's in which it clearly says that when we are talking about a bill before the House, we are talking about a bill to be debated that day. The Deputy Speaker, Mr. Speaker, in your absence, indicated that she did not know that there had been a ruling in the House that day, a House order, that the

Privilege

debate for the afternoon would be on the environment, not on a judges' bill.

I raise the matter because I am concerned that we might fall into a bad practice in the House. I think this matter needs clearing up because it affects future questions. If a minister can simply stand up and say: "Well I am answering by saying I don't have to answer this question because there is a bill before the House", a pension bill, an environmental bill or whatever, it would seem to me that the government could duck answering a lot of questions. I think this should be cleared up.

Mr. Speaker: I am going to hear further, but I think it is important if there is going to be any discussion on this to understand clearly what the issue is.

The first issue is whether or not the question put by the hon. member yesterday is out of order because it anticipates an Order of the Day. That is the first question.

If it is, then the second matter of whether or not the minister has to answer does not even come into play. Of course a minister does not have to give an answer if the minister does not wish to do so.

But I think the issue we really have to look at here that the hon. member has raised is this: Is the question in order?

The hon. member may want to address the Chair further on that, because that really is the question.

Mr. Waddell: Mr. Speaker, I understood the question was: Is the answer in order? But, of course, a question has to be in order before an answer can be in order.

I would submit the question was in order, in that no Order of the Day was anticipated because the Order of the Day was to discuss an environmental bill. There was before the House sitting on the table a bill on judges' salaries which, of course, did not even deal with indexing, which is what my question was about. But even if it had dealt with indexing—I do not want to stray from the point—my submission is that I could still ask the question because we were not debating that bill.

There are a whole slew of bills before the House and we can still ask general questions on those bills.

The question clearly dealt with what was the government's priority, where it was granting indexing to one group and freezing salaries and not granting indexing to another group?