

Privilege—Hon. M. Lambert

Last Monday morning some concerns were raised with me as a result of some publicity or other information that had come to the attention of some hon. members who brought the matter to my attention. I immediately contacted the organizers of the event to receive their assurances in respect of the conditions I had previously laid down. Having received those assurances I informed all House leaders, by letter on the following day, that the original permission was under certain conditions, and that I had received assurances that those conditions would be met not only as to the use of the premises but also as to the recovery of cost, which in every case would be a full recovery of cost, in order to make sure that nothing would be taking place at public expense which was for a private purpose.

That permission was granted, and I think hon. members will understand that it would not be my intention to withdraw that permission at any time, particularly close to an event, even if it meant a re-examination of the policy would have to take place. I think that would have been an abdication of the responsibility I had originally assumed, and would have been an injustice to the organizers of an event which would perhaps have left them unable to complete the arrangements they had in mind on the basis of the permission which I had earlier given.

In any case, on Wednesday further concerns were raised, and the hon. member for Edmonton West raised a formal question of privilege in the House. Extensive discussions were held on that question of privilege, during the course of which the President of Privy Council (Mr. MacEachen), representing the government in this matter, indicated a willingness to discuss it with me. The matter was therefore held under reserve. I should indicate that while the matter was under reserve there was a fundamental difficulty with the question of privilege, in my mind. That was, of course, that having given my decision and my permission, if I were to give a preliminary decision on the question of privilege in such a way as to put it to the House, I really would be asking the House to send to a standing committee a matter which would place under scrutiny my own decision. I frankly did not have much relish for that. I would likely, therefore, have had a good deal of difficulty in granting the question of privilege.

I recognize the merits and concerns in the point that was raised, however, and it would have led in any event, and will lead to discussions about this policy and the feeling of members about it, as well as, perhaps, an attempt to formulate something more exact.

I am happy to say the matter largely becomes academic now; because of the discussions offered by the President of Privy Council last week I may now inform the House of a letter I received this morning from the minister. It is available in my office for members who wish to read it in its entirety, but I think I should quote only from two paragraphs. The letter sets out the background as I have cited it to the House, and the guidelines and principles that I have exposed to the House.

[Mr. Speaker.]

The last paragraph on the first page reads as follows:

In spite of compliance with these guidelines, the proposed function has caused concern among some members and has placed you in a position of having to make a ruling on a question of privilege. This seems to me to exaggerate this matter out of all proportion in relation to the time the House of Commons should be devoting to the important issues before it. As I noted earlier, no final decisions have been taken on the location and the nature of the social event in question. I should now like to advise you that the members of parliament involved are withdrawing their request to you and will choose one of the other alternatives which were also under consideration.

The letter goes on to request further discussions in respect of the policies to be followed in this case, because the difficulties remain that access to these buildings for the purpose of meeting with, sometimes on a partly social and partly parliamentary occasion, elected members, is still a valid use of the premises. On the other hand, there are the other principles that have to be followed such as an assurance that this does not come in competition with commercial enterprises in the city, and also that any event that takes place here respects the privileges and rights of other users of the buildings and, of course, respects the dignity of the premises.

I will be inviting representatives of all parties, as they have always done in the past, to cooperate to establish and formulate clearer guidelines in respect to the use of these premises in the future.

● (1512)

MR. HNATYSHYN—PRESENCE OF MINISTERS IN HOUSE DURING QUESTION PERIOD

Mr. Ray Hnatyshyn (Saskatoon-Biggar): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege. I will attempt to make my interjection brief at this time because we have important business to carry on.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, certainly members on this side of the House have attempted on every occasion to take steps to expedite matters and to try to do things with respect to the order of business of the House generally. In this connection part of my responsibilities on this side of the House involves the arrangement of question period, that portion of the day involving the questioning of members of the government and members of the treasury bench, and we have followed a policy of attempting to notify individual ministers who might be asked questions from time to time so that they would know in advance they will be asked questions and that their presence would help facilitate the business of the House. Indeed, we went to some trouble on this side of the House to contact individual cabinet ministers who might be involved in respect to the question period on a specific day.

As a result of this particular effort, which I thought was a courteous gesture on my part, there were a number of complaints raised with my office and my staff that we were in effect bothering individual ministers by asking that they be telephoned during the course of the day to determine whether they would be in the House. Whereupon I was subsequently informed that henceforth an arrangement would be entered into with the chief government whip's office by which one phone call in advance of the opening of the proceedings of the