

ROYAL COMMISSION—TENURE OF CHAIRMAN

Hon. Duff Roblin (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, if I may continue the line of questioning begun by my colleague, I would like to ask the minister to clarify the position of Mr. Macdonald as chairman of this royal commission. Mr. Macdonald has stated, as reported in the press—and he has not disavowed the statement—that he has taken on the task of heading the commission on the condition that he was free to step down to run for the Liberal leadership if Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau retires before the commission's three-year mandate expires.

My question is: In the event of that happening and Mr. Macdonald's stepping down, as he says he is entitled to do, what plans has the government got for maintaining the continuity of the work of the commission?

Hon. H. A. Olson (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, essentially the same question was asked yesterday, and I gave an undertaking that I would check it out. I am sorry that my honourable friend is repeating exactly the same thing as he said yesterday. That is, he is really asking whether or not a statement that appeared in the press is true; but he has put it in the context that he wants me to ask whether or not the press statement can be verified, and I will endeavour to do that.

Senator Roblin: I am really not concerned whether the statement appearing in the press is true. I am concerned whether the statement made by Mr. Macdonald, that he is going to step down from the chairmanship of the royal commission in the event that he chooses to run for the Liberal leadership, is true. That is the question to which I want an answer.

Senator Olson: I understood that part of the question. I also understood the explanation of where my honourable friend got the information. I do not believe he has a letter or some other document of greater substance than a press report. I believe that is where he got the information from, and that is why I gave the reply I did a few moments ago.

Senator Roblin: I would remind my honourable friend that a good deal of the information that he dispenses comes to us in terms of press reports and press releases, so he need not be the slightest bit surprised if we pay some attention to them. This is from a report of a telephone conversation with Mr. Macdonald. There is little point in trying to fudge the issue with some reference to press reports. We want the facts, and the minister will undoubtedly get them for us.

Senator Olson: That is right, and I have given an undertaking to do so. But I would like the honourable senator to understand that I do not accept *prima facie* that press reports are facts.

Hon. Jacques Flynn (Leader of the Opposition): We all know that.

Senator Roblin: No one is asking my honourable friend to accept any press report *prima facie* or any other way, although he is the author of a good many of them, as he must admit.

[Senator Olson.]

Even if he does not choose to believe himself, I am not sure whether he chooses to believe Mr. Macdonald. We do not care about the press report; what we care about are the facts. What about the chairmanship of this royal commission? Is it to be headed by a man who is ready to cut and run if he sees the chance to run for the Liberal leadership? That is the question we want answered.

Senator Olson: I understood that, and what I said a few moments ago is just as valid now as it was then.

THE CABINET

ABSENCE OF MINISTERS FROM CHAMBER

Hon. Jack Marshall: Honourable senators, can the Leader of the Government advise us if the Minister of State for Social Development and the Minister of State for Fitness and Amateur Sport will be in the chamber today?

Hon. H. A. Olson (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, no, they will not be here today. Indeed, the house leader advised honourable senators yesterday that the Minister of State for Social Development would not be here today.

HEALTH AND WELFARE

PLIGHT OF CERTAIN WOMEN BELOW AGE SIXTY-FIVE

Hon. Jack Marshall: Honourable senators, I should like to address a question to the Leader of the Government concerning the widows in this country who are below the age of 65, and also those women who are divorced, separated, deserted and living alone. For the many years that I have been in the Senate, nothing has ever been done for them. I have heard nothing but statements that funds are not available.

• (1415)

Considering the way inflation and the state of the economy are going, I think it is about time that these people across the country be given some help. Granted, the honourable senator may be getting some advice right now that this matter falls within the jurisdiction of the provinces, but I think the federal government should show some leadership in this area and provide widows throughout Canada with some help—help which they deserve. Right now they are well below the poverty line.

Hon. H. A. Olson (Leader of the Government): I shall take the question as notice and get a detailed answer for the honourable senator, but I do not accept the premise on which the question was based, that nothing has been done. When Senator Marshall receives the answer he will see that a number of substantial things have been done by a government that has a very keen social conscience.

Senator Marshall: The honourable senator can make that comment all day if he wants, but what the government has done so far is not to my satisfaction.