

Privilege—Ms. Copps

witnessed personally Members of Parliament and various other people briefing witnesses before the committee. It is a totally acceptable form of behaviour. This is the type of thing that our traditions are built on, and it has gone on for a long time. It is almost laughable to find that to be a fundamental part of a point of privilege.

● (1610)

Citation 630 of Beauchesne's goes on to indicate that witnesses before a committee have the right to counsel. What is that, if it is not legalized and acceptable briefing in the eyes of Beauchesne?

The fourth point that I wish to touch on very quickly is the point raised by the Opposition House Leader when he stated, if I understood him correctly, that the committee has no role to play in privilege. On page 24 of Beauchesne's, paragraph 76, it states:

Breaches of privilege in committee may be dealt with only by the House itself on report from the committee.

Now, if there had been a serious breach of privilege in the viewpoint of the Members who have raised this before the House, I would suggest to you that their first obligation would be to raise that point of privilege at the place of the so-called crime, which would have been in the committee. The committee would then hear the arguments, the chairman would then hear the arguments and rule whether it was a case of privilege, and then the committee would report accordingly to the House of Commons. That never happened. That proves the point at which I began, that really what we are engaged in here is not a point of privilege but a partisan exercise which undermines the role of committees, and has certainly taken up a good deal of the time of the opposition debate in the House of Commons today.

Mr. Nelson A. Riis (Kamloops—Shuswap): Mr. Speaker, I wish to add two or three comments to what I believe is a very useful debate. I am pleased that we are having it today. Hopefully, as a result of your ruling, this type of debate and topic will not be raised again in the House.

The comments of my hon. friend, the Member for Peace River (Mr. Cooper), were thoughtful comments, particularly on the perceived partisan nature of this activity that is being debated here today. As the Hon. Member has indicated, the new provisional rules are very much appreciated by all Members of the House. They certainly have added a new dimension for those people who receive appointments to various boards and other organizations associated with the federal Government.

From the role I played, particularly on the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs when various officials who had received a government appointment were before that committee, I recall that they were in attendance with absolutely no briefing or no coaching of any type. As a matter of fact, on a number of occasions I recall individuals stating that they had literally got off the plane and walked into

the committee room, and were not even certain of the procedures, or what types of questions would be put to them. Nevertheless, in a non-partisan way the appropriate questions were put from all sides of the committee table. By and large, I think people felt that a complete and appropriate vetting had taken place.

One of the questions, Mr. Speaker, that you must look at is this. These individuals were appointed by the Minister of Justice (Mr. Hnatyshyn), which is quite appropriate. The information that we have is that when they arrived they had been summoned by the Prime Minister's Office, not by the Minister of Justice's office, not by the clerk of the appropriate committee, not by Members of Parliament from their appropriate or respective constituent, but by the Prime Minister's Office.

The question that must be asked is why would the Prime Minister's Office, of all offices, want to contact these individuals for briefing, or coaching, or providing certain types of information or advice on how to approach the committee. That is the critical question. If there is any political involvement, if there is any partisan aspect of this discussion, surely to goodness that is it. The question is why does the Prime Minister's Office involve itself in a matter that was strictly that of the committee? If any part of the Cabinet should be involved, Mr. Speaker, certainly it should be the Minister of Justice who ought to have been involved in terms of concern that the individuals coming before the appropriate committee within his jurisdiction would receive at least a briefing on the rules, regulations and procedures of that committee.

I submit to you that we also are concerned about the possible partisan involvement in this particular discussion. But I say it is the involvement of the Prime Minister's Office where the partisan nature becomes a reality.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Gérin (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada): Mr. Speaker, I was involved in the questions raised by the Hon. Member for Burnaby (Mr. Robinson) and by the Hon. Member for Hamilton East (Ms. Copps), and since they had received an explanation last night, I find it hard to understand their present approach.

First of all, I would like to make it clear that the meeting held yesterday morning was not a secret one in any respect. There was no secret about the number of people who attended the meeting, about who was invited, or about where the meeting was held, and I may add that when a witness was unable to name the people who were present, I immediately agreed to give the Committee the requested information, without any reservations. So it was not exactly what you would call a secret meeting.

Furthermore, and here it becomes a matter of personal privilege as a Member of this House, I may not have many years of experience in the House, and my English may not be perfect, but when I heard the word "tampering", I sent for a