

Oral Questions

Mr. Beatty: It is a novel approach if the cabinet process suddenly changes the legality of something when the Department of Justice says it may be illegal. His document said that even this review process may be struck down by courts.

PROPOSED ESTABLISHMENT OF PRESS COUNCIL

Hon. Perrin Beatty (Wellington-Dufferin-Simcoe): Madam Speaker, I would like to ask the minister about another proposal which was made in his document. It is the proposal to set up a government sponsored press council. Instead of laying on another layer of government bureaucracy at a considerable cost to taxpayers, why would the government not simply ask that existing press councils agree to hear complaints from individuals about non-member newspapers? Why could the situation not have been handled in that manner instead of proposing that the government intervene in the newspaper industry in this way?

Hon. Jim Fleming (Minister of State (Multiculturalism)): Madam Speaker, with regard to the issue of the right of the Restrictive Trade Practices Commission to review prospective purchases by the newspaper industry, we believe, indeed, in the advice of our counsel, and the Department of Justice says that we are quite within our legal rights. The hon. member is misunderstanding if he suggests otherwise. Perhaps he may be referring to criminal penalties following a rejection by the Restrictive Trade Practices Commission, or a failure to comply. That is quite different from our right to have that review process.

On the question of why do we not simply refer any grievances to the existing councils, we believe that those councils are set up to operate according to a membership that they have established. The proposed Canadian advisory council on newspapers does not force any newspaper to belong to it. It simply has the right of receiving grievances about a newspaper if that newspaper does not belong to an existing press council. As a result of all the discussions I have had with journalists, the public and a variety of interested segments of Canadian society, I believe that that was found overwhelmingly acceptable.

The only complaint I would get was from certain publishers who said, "It should rest with us to decide whether or not a grievance is fair." I do not believe that that is fair when there are so many Canadian cities with only one newspaper. I believe the public should have the right to go to an independent body, not to a government body. That council is absolutely independent of the government. An endowment fund is the proposal, not paid for by the government, and completely independent of government.

● (1420)

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Madam Speaker: The hon. member for Durham-Northumberland.

Mr. Lawrence: Madam Speaker, to no one's surprise, my question relates to the continued existence in the government of the Solicitor General, which only the Prime Minister can answer. He is not here, as I know he has a four o'clock press conference, but he will obviously be turning up in the question period before the conference. May I ask the indulgence of the Chair to defer my question to that time, and ask you to recognize the hon. member for Victoria?

Madam Speaker: Well, the hon. member simply need not get up and I will not recognize him.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Lawrence: She loves me!

Madam Speaker: The hon. member for Comox-Powell River.

QUERY RESPECTING CORPORATE TAKE-OVERS

Mr. Ray Skelly (Comox-Powell River): Madam Speaker, my question is also directed to the minister in charge of the Kent Commission. I would like to remind the minister of his own words in Vancouver on February 26, 1982, when he said, "Anybody who tries something fast between the recommendations of Kent and the government's decision on what to do—we'll reach back if you are trying to beat us." Will the minister explain to the House what his recommendations will be in dealing with Torstar's take-over of Inland Publishing and Maclean-Hunter's acquisition of Sun Publishing in Edmonton, Calgary and Toronto?

Hon. Jim Fleming (Minister of State (Multiculturalism)): Madam Speaker, the situation of Torstar taking over Inland Publishing took place during the course of the Kent recommendations, long before I made the statement that if, between the time of that statement and our recommendations, anything took place, they would face the fact that they had gone in opposition to a direction the government was considering. Concerning the second instance involving Maclean-Hunter, once the direction is given to the CRTC on cross-media ownership in the context of the announcement made yesterday, the CRTC will surely consider that acquisition in the light of that direction.

ALLOWABLE LEVEL OF CONTROL BY NEWSPAPER CHAINS

Mr. Ray Skelly (Comox-Powell River): A second strange situation arises in this incredible report, Madam Speaker. The minister has proposed a law which will restrict any single corporation to 20 per cent of the national daily newspaper circulation. Will the minister tell this House why he is prepared to place Southam and Thomson above the law by allowing those two firms to control approximately 60 per cent of the circulation of English-language dailies in Canada?

Hon. Jim Fleming (Minister of State (Multiculturalism)): They are not above the law, Madam Speaker. When these