

The government has changed that, which is their right, but it was an irrelevant comment.

Second, it is not based on the failure to recognize that I was trying to be constructive and not be flamboyant in what is a very delicate situation. I got back a lot of homilies from them. Third, I want to point out that this letter is dated November 6, 1979, which is the time of the information service and it is clearly their responsibility, not that of the previous government.

My point is more narrow. During the reply by the President of the Treasury Board, he implied that the letter from Mr. Celovsky with regard to the competence and integrity of Statistics Canada really was based on more narrow criticisms of personnel or administrative policy. That is misleading the House. I will grant that it may be an inadvertent action by the President of the Treasury Board. We will see in a minute.

It is misleading the House, inadvertently at best, or implying that he really has not read or understood the implications and the allegations by a quite respected gentleman, Mr. Celovsky, about Statistics Canada. If he read the letter, he clearly should understand that there are many more serious implications contained in it than simply personnel or administrative policy.

I want to put one paragraph on the record in support of my question of privilege that there was in fact, inadvertently or otherwise, a misleading of the House. The letter, as reported, reads:

A third example. For years the labour division has been putting together estimates of labour income derived from the bureau's various surveys and other sources. At the same time, in recent years, national accounts officials have struggled with the problem of ever larger residual errors. They naturally focused on one of the national accounts' largest components, labour income, and asked for revisions which are called in the jargon "macro-economic adjustments" but more colloquially known as "cooking" or "fudging".

● (1230)

That is not a personnel matter or a purely administrative matter. I can see no way in which that interpretation could be placed on this letter. It goes on to say—

So that the published labour income data have been constantly yo-yoed up and down and up again the inevitable result has been that the users of these statistics, including ministers of finance, are totally confused.

Mr. Speaker, that is not merely an administrative or a personnel matter as alleged by the President of the Treasury Board when he seemed to dismiss the seriousness of the situation in his answer to me. I will accept from the hon. gentleman that, in fact, he has not read the letter, or that he has failed to understand it, but he cannot have it both ways. This is a very serious situation and one which really should be cleaned up on a non-partisan basis out of respect for the information base upon which so many economic decisions are taken in this country, not the least of which relate to the budget which the Minister of Finance (Mr. Crosbie) will, I hope, be bringing forward in the not too distant future.

Hon. Sinclair Stevens (President of the Treasury Board): I am, of course, more than willing to answer the point made by the hon. member but I think it would be helpful, Mr. Speaker,

Privilege—Mr. Andras

if you would indicate whether there is really a question of privilege involved here.

Mr. Speaker: This is an appropriate time to do so. I indicated just recently that I have perhaps been generous in encouraging members to continue the question period, much as the President of Privy Council (Mr. Baker) has just mentioned, by allowing members to get up to discuss what was essentially a disagreement. I think I ought to take a firmer line on non-questions of privilege of this kind and when I find a member simply voicing disagreement with an answer given by a minister, I think I ought to be quite strict. However, we have customarily accepted, at least in a preliminary way, any question of privilege which is based on a complaint that there has been serious misleading of the House, whether inadvertent or otherwise.

The hon. member for Thunder Bay-Nipigon (Mr. Andras) said today it is his view that the minister misled the House, perhaps inadvertently, and customarily whenever that phrase has been used. We have allowed the minister involved to indicate whether or not there was misleading. I have to judge whether it is simply a matter of disagreement or whether a misleading has taken place, and I do not want to be too strict on that. If the minister tells me that in his view there has been no misleading of the House, I am prepared to accept his statement and set the matter aside. But when this point is raised a minister would often feel deprived if I did not give him a chance to get up and at least indicate whether he has the same opinion or otherwise so as to set the record straight.

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Speaker, I am only too anxious to assure the hon. member that there has been no misleading of the House in that connection. He has read the letter one way. I have re-read it since he indicated he would raise the matter as a question of privilege. I still feel it is a question of personnel disagreement touching on various administrative matters within Statistics Canada.

Frankly, we are concerned here with a group of highly qualified people dealing in a very technical field, and I think it only natural there should be disagreement from time to time as to what is the proper statistical approach in mustering the various data they need and preparing it for publication. As I indicated, we have an overview of this subject; I have a person who is in direct liaison with Statistics Canada. I hope to meet with the gentleman who wrote this letter—I am sorry he is in hospital. I intend to get to the bottom of it, but in the meantime I can only say I believe this amounts to a disagreement involving various personnel within Statistics Canada and the administration of that organization.

Mr. Speaker: The intervention of the minister places the matter within the area of a disagreement and not that of a question of privilege.