Ministerial Statements

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

My right hon. Friend referred earlier to the discourtesy of leaking to the press, but does he agree that these leaks involve a discourtesy in that they might be given to some hon. Members before others, placing some Members at a disadvantage?

Greg Knight (East Yorkshire, Conservative)

I do indeed, and I believe that that happened last week. For example, the BBC television news in Humberside had the Chancellor’s announcement on the plan to reduce the tolls on the Humber bridge pretty much word for word and ran it 24 hours before the House was told. It seemed rather strange to me that a couple of hon. Members who happened to have seats near the Humber bridge were available on the bridge itself to do media interviews when the leak occurred.

If the Government do not believe what they say about Parliament being told first and want to leak or announce policies or decisions to the press first, they should come out in the open and say so and they should change their ministerial code.

I now turn to the motion before us. Although I think we are all grateful to my hon. Friend Mr Hollobone for bringing this matter before us today, I must say that I would have preferred it had he consulted the Procedure Committee before he settled on the wording of the motion. I understand that Mr Barron, to whom I have spoken about this matter and who chairs the Standards and Privileges Committee, was also not consulted on the terms of the motion before it was tabled or the timing. That is unfortunate. I do not want to tell the right hon. Gentleman, who does his own job perfectly well without any intervention from me, what he might or might not want to do, but he might have wanted to take the matter to his Committee and to have shown it the scope of the draft motion before it was brought to the House.

It is a pity that neither of the two Committees that the House has asked to consider these matters was consulted by the signatories to the motion. That is important because we have not yet debated the Procedure Committee’s report in the House, but the motion addresses only some of the issues raised by the Committee in its report on ministerial statements and ignores others. It is a cherry-picking motion and its scope has been determined without any reference to those who have responsibility for looking into this matter, having been asked to do so by the House.

The motion ignores the Procedure Committee’s recommendations on urgent questions and written statements. For example, we believe there are some occasions on which written statements should be open to oral scrutiny. The motion is therefore unsatisfactory and its timing, coming as it does without that consultation having taken place, is unfortunate. I do believe that action on this issue is necessary, as Governments of both political persuasions have been prepared regularly to flout the ministerial code when it suits them by leaking
news to the press. However, I also believe that the way this matter has been brought forward today is unfortunate. Rather like the leaks themselves, it is no way to do business.

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Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

Clearly, in that instance, Members of this House hear the statement at the same time as members of the press. If leaks are going to take place, which my hon. Friend is justifying, should they also be to Members at the same time?

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