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JANE TABER AND THE GLOBE'S PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU SET THE AGENDA

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Wednesday, May 26, 2010 4:44 PM

Who's the biggest bully in the House of Commons?

Jane Taber

Fingers wagging, their voices full of outrage, Stephen Harper's Conservatives and Michael Ignatieff's Liberals traded insults over who is the biggest bully during today's version of Question Period.

You are. No, you are. No, really, you are – that's pretty much how the exchanges went over the government's decision to prohibit political staffers from testifying at Commons committees.

That and issues around the upcoming G8 and G20 summits, including the huge costs for security, occupied much of the 45-minute session. And although the biggest-bully issue was never really decided it did make for good theatre:

“Mr. Speaker, what we have seen increasingly over the last number of days,

weeks and months is our staff, our political staff subjected to bullying and intimidation and at committees,” Government House Leader Jay Hill said. “And quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, we find it completely unacceptable.”

That’s why Mr. Hill officially announced yesterday that ministers would appear for their staffers, upholding the principle of ministerial responsibility and accountability.

It’s not clear exactly what is behind the government’s last-minute decision although several staffers were to testify soon before the government operations committee investigating Rahim Jaffer’s alleged lobbying activity.

The opposition is clearly ticked over this decision. In fact, Liberal MP Marlene Jennings accused the government of doing an “end run around the power of Parliament” with its new edict.

This, she said, is a “direct affront to the powers of Parliament” especially given the recent ruling by Commons Speaker Peter Milliken about parliamentary supremacy in ordering the government to reveal secret Afghan detainee documents.

Replied Mr. Hill: “The fact of the matter is the coalition opposition has been calling political staffers to appear before committees and then bullying and intimidating and attacking them and demeaning them and quite simply we will no longer tolerate that type of abuse.”

Ms. Jennings was not satisfied with that answer: “It’s a complete fabrication. It’s that party, it’s that government that is the bully. It’s not the opposition. It’s that government and that Prime Minister.”

And so it went. In addition to being called a bully, Mr. Harper and his government were called incompetent for what the opposition is characterizing as haphazard planning for next month’s G8 and G20 summits – planning that is so bad it has led to massive costs to the public purse.

NDP Leader Jack Layton asked about the G8 maternal health plan, which has become a huge source of controversy as a result of the government’s refusal to fund safe access to abortion as part of the initiative. He said some of the extra security costs could have been used to benefit mothers in the developing world.

“Why is the government so obsessed with excluding abortion from any maternal health initiatives? Why?” asked Mr. Layton.

The Prime Minister replied that his government’s position is clear, Canadians don’t want to debate abortion and that the initiative is designed to “save lives of women and children.”

Top of mind among the opposition, too, are reports that security alone is costing nearly \$1-billion for three days of meetings that begin June 25.

“They changed their mind about the sites; they changed their mind about who would be invited,” Liberal MP Bob Rae charged. “It’s been improvisation with respect to the agenda. Nothing has stayed constant and nothing has stayed true.”

Public Safety Minister Vic Toews explained the costs were a result of an “unprecedented event” with two back-to-back summits.

“And we believe the experts when they say this is the necessary level of security. I understand that the Liberals don’t believe in securing Canadians or the visitors here. We are different,” Mr. Toews said.

Question Period, however, was no different – insults, heckling, shouting – the usual.

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