

Oral Questions

In my opinion, the Government of Quebec is facing a much more serious situation, which explains why it has decided to accept the offer we made very seriously. I am pleased that it did so.

As for the other provincial governments, we will see what they will do. We however have not backed away from our responsibilities. We began discussions with the provinces, and specifically with Ontario in December. Eventually they will have to make a decision and that is what we have done.

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval): Mr. Speaker, in spite of some vigorous opposition from Ontario members within his own caucus, the Prime Minister has decided to move on this plan anyway and to roll back cigarette taxes. Is he not concerned that Ontario's refusal to come on board with his plan could turn that province into the next centre of smuggling in Canada?

[English]

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, as Prime Minister of Canada I took my responsibilities. If others do not want to act that is their responsibility.

To pretend there is not a problem when one-third of the market of cigarettes is sold under the table is an opinion I do not share.

• (1420)

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval): Mr. Speaker, this morning the Prime Minister said in his statement here in the House, and I quote: "Along with these resources are new strategies to crack down on organized smuggling groups and to increase surveillance of these groups".

Could the Prime Minister tell us whether other strategies will include providing the RCMP with new equipment or action plans appropriate to this particular situation?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, we have told the RCMP officers we would support them in this difficult endeavour. We intend to do what has to be done to help them. As far as day to day strategy is concerned, that is the RCMP's responsibility, and in situations like this, it is no use giving away the game plan to the other side. It is better to keep it quiet until we are ready to use it.

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CIGARETTE SMUGGLING

Mr. Michel Bellehumeur (Berthier—Montcalm): Mr. Speaker, my question is also for the Prime Minister. As the RCMP itself admits, cigarette seizures by police forces last year amounted to only 1 per cent of all the contraband. It is a real sieve! Nevertheless, the government repeated again today in this

House that it intends to enforce the law throughout Canadian territory.

Can we take the government seriously today when it promises to enforce the law throughout Canada, without exception, while smuggling is going on with the knowledge and in full view of the police authorities, who have not made any move to stop the smugglers?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, I think that the figures given by the Solicitor General in this House in recent days prove that a tremendous amount has been seized and that there will be much more now that we have given them everything they need to do so, and we have also helped the personnel of the Department of National Revenue do a better job. Given the size of the problem, they needed reinforcements and the government has given both the RCMP and the Department of National Revenue the necessary reinforcements.

Mr. Michel Bellehumeur (Berthier—Montcalm): Mr. Speaker, I wish to ask the Prime Minister a supplementary question.

Does the Prime Minister make the commitment that the federal government will end the activities of some 500 smugglers in the Akwesasne region, identified yesterday by his colleague from Sault Ste. Marie, the Minister of Indian Affairs?

[English]

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, I think that I said very clearly that the law will apply everywhere in Canada. The notion of some people trying to make this just a problem of the natives of Canada is not correct. It is not true at all. There are problems across the nation. What the member is trying to do is create the impression that the problem is a native problem when, as I said today in the House, there are two million people in Canada who are buying illegal cigarettes. So there are two million people involved. That does not mean it is just an Indian problem. It is very unfair to try to create that impression.

Mr. Preston Manning (Calgary Southwest): Mr. Speaker, my question is also for the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister announced today the government's action plan on smuggling but the plan was not accompanied by a detailed breakdown of the costs of this program to the Canadian taxpayer.

Can the Prime Minister tell us what the net cost of this program will be on an annual basis and is he willing to table in the House the detailed cost breakdown of this program?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, there will be a budget in a couple of weeks and all the expenditures of the government will be listed on the balance sheet for the whole nation. This is a problem we are tackling at the moment. I said this morning that it will cost some money. However if we do not act now it will cost a lot more in the medium term.