

Routine Proceedings

to smoke; and new approaches for reaching groups who have not responded to earlier campaigns.

[English]

We are determined through the four point national plan I have outlined today to eliminate smuggling as a significant national problem. Even more, this program will help restore respect for the laws of the land, will help restore safety in our border communities and will help destroy smuggling rings.

I will be honest with Canadians. This has not been an easy decision for the government or for me. I know it is not a perfect solution but, more important, I know there is no perfect solution. We have come up with a fair, workable, decisive action plan. I am convinced it is the right thing to do.

I ask members of the House and all other Canadians for their help and support. It is our responsibility to end this unacceptable situation that is destroying all the values in our land. Three or four years of tolerance of smuggling and people defying the law is unacceptable. We have to restore order and respect in our land. This is what we have decided to do and we shall succeed.

• (1030)

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval): Mr. Speaker, I will start by apologizing for the absence of the leader of the opposition, who had a previous engagement in Montreal North, made more than two months ago, while we only had a 24-hour notice of the Prime Minister's statement.

I would also like to say that I deplore the government's lack of courtesy, considering that for the past three weeks, it was the Official Opposition that moved this issue along, patiently asking question after question, day in day out, to make the government and the Prime Minister realize there was a problem.

I may add that despite our contribution, the government gave us only 24 hours notice that there would be a statement, ordering a briefing session behind closed doors at 9 a.m. today. Our members did not come out of the lockup until 10 a.m., when the Prime Minister started his statement in the House. Obviously, we would have liked to examine carefully every aspect of the action plan announced by the Prime Minister. We would have liked to provide a thorough analysis—based on the figures—of each of these measures, because there are measures that would require further study.

At this stage, we cannot do much more than give our impressions of several aspects of the plan. I may recall that three weeks ago, in response to our first questions in this House, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance said that the tax on cigarettes would not be changed. Three weeks ago, the Prime

Minister told us that the RCMP was doing its job and was doing it very well. It was arresting all smugglers, and if the opposition had any names, it should say so. Three weeks ago, the Prime Minister told us that the law was being enforced throughout Canadian territory, without any problems.

Today, the government said, basically, that there is a problem with cigarette smuggling. The law is not fully enforced throughout Canadian territory, and so far the RCMP has not been able to prevent these unlawful sales of cigarettes and tobacco. That is what we heard this morning. Today the Prime Minister hit the jackpot, after three weeks of making what proved to be totally inaccurate statements.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Gauthier (Roberval): Mr. Speaker, we are sceptical, because the Prime Minister says that from now on the law will be enforced throughout this country, no exceptions.

The RCMP's has figures that both confirm and emphasize the figures of the Official Opposition, according to which in 1993, only one per cent of contraband cigarettes were seized by their officers. I repeat, one per cent, while today we heard, as we were told in the lock-up, that 70 to 75 per cent of this unlawful trade was being carried on through Mohawk territory in southern Quebec and southern Ontario. Seventy-five per cent of this trade is carried on in those territories. So far, the RCMP has been unable to improve its score of one per cent interception, and today we are told that 350 additional officers should be able to deal with the matter.

It may be a significant improvement, but there are a number of very serious questions that have yet to be resolved. We have chiefs of Amerindian nations and the Mohawks saying they have arms on the reserves and that any police intervention might cause a blood bath. It might lead them to use the illegal weapons now on the reserves. The question that I should be asking the Prime Minister, and one that will most certainly be put to him, is this: Good God, what means does the RCMP have now that it did not have before to intervene and intercept the remaining 99 per cent of smugglers who conduct their business virtually in broad daylight? Is it that it lacks the means to intervene or does it fear reprisals from persons who are illegally armed?

• (1035)

The Prime Minister informs us that an \$8 export tax will be imposed on each carton of cigarettes. I will remind you that a similar tax was introduced in 1992, only to be withdrawn two or three months later because it proved to be completely ineffective. Why could the government not come up with a more original solution that simply to reintroduce a tax that only a short while ago proved to be totally unworkable, inadequate and unenforceable?