

ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE

LEGAL AID—SASKATCHEWAN USER FEES

Mr. Simon de Jong (Regina East): Mr. Speaker my question is directed to the Minister of Justice, if I could have his attention. The Minister should be aware that since user fees for legal aid services were introduced in Saskatchewan in early August, there has been a sharp increase in the number of people who have appeared in court without a lawyer because they cannot afford the fee. As well, people are pleading guilty to rather serious charges rather than paying the user fee.

Given this shameful situation, is the Minister prepared, in the negotiating process which is currently under way to renew the federal-provincial cost-sharing agreements on legal aid, to withhold the federal contributions until the Saskatchewan Legal Aid Commission withdraws its user fees?

Hon. Ray Hnatyshyn (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada): Mr. Speaker, I think I should remind the House that legal aid is a matter of exclusive provincial jurisdiction. Notwithstanding that fact, I have personally on behalf of the Government taken steps, manifested in real dollars, to show our commitment to an effective legal aid system.

I would like to point out to the Hon. Member that in terms of Saskatchewan, taking into account contributions with respect to young offenders as well as to legal aid generally, there has been a substantial increase in the amount of contributions to the point where, in this past year, the amount of our contributions to legal aid in the Province of Saskatchewan comes to \$2.4 million. I think this demonstrates our commitment, in an area which is under provincial jurisdiction, to have a full and effective legal aid system, and the federal Government stands very firmly on that policy.

REQUEST THAT FEDERAL CONTRIBUTION BE WITHDRAWN

Mr. Simon de Jong (Regina East): Mr. Speaker, the Minister is surely aware that there is an agreement with the province and that in that agreement provision is made that the province should not impose fees if they pose a real hardship and prevent access to legal counsel. Again I ask the Minister if he is prepared to use the fact that the federal contribution is so important, to withdraw that contribution until the Province of Saskatchewan ensures that anyone in need of legal counsel will be provided that counsel and that user fees will not be used as a deterrent, so that poor people will not have to appear in court without the advice of counsel?

• (1450)

Hon. Ray Hnatyshyn (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada): Mr. Speaker, this is probably one of the most cockamamie suggestions I have heard from the NDP in a long time. What members of that Party are suggesting we do now is withdraw all support for legal aid in the Province of Saskatchewan. If I even thought of that or, if I dreamt of that

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at night, there would be whimpering from the New Democratic Party, Mr. Speaker, like you have never heard before.

I simply say to the Hon. Member that this is a matter of provincial jurisdiction. There are other provinces which use user-fee systems whereby there is a collection of moneys—

Mr. de Jong: Is it not time you spoke out about it, Ray?

Mr. Hnatyshyn: Mr. Speaker, we make a very substantial contribution. If I walked into the province of the Hon. Member's friend, Roland Penner, and told him and the Province of Manitoba how to run their system, we would see convulsions opposite unequalled in the history of Parliament.

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[Translation]

TAX REFORM

FOOD TAX—REQUEST FOR EXPLANATION FROM MINISTER

Mr. Jean-Claude Malépart (Montreal—Sainte-Marie): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the Deputy Prime Minister.

A short while ago, the Deputy Prime Minister replied to questions about the intentions of the Government for a tax on food products, such as bread, milk and butter, that there was no evidence in the documents showing that the Government had such intentions.

I see here in black and white, on page 49 of the French version of the paper on the sales tax reform and on page 45 of the English versions of the leaflet sent to Canadians that the Government is considering imposing a tax on food.

Can the Deputy Prime Minister tell us why he replied as he did earlier? Is he not aware of these documents or did he simply misinform us?

[English]

Hon. Don Mazankowski (Deputy Prime Minister, President of the Privy Council and President of the Treasury Board): Mr. Speaker, I responded to that question. I stand by my answer.

Ms. Copps: You misled the House.

[Translation]

INQUIRY WHY GOVERNMENT WANTS TO TAX FOOD

Mr. Jean-Claude Malépart (Montreal—Sainte-Marie): Mr. Speaker, tomorrow, the public will be able to read the reply of the Deputy Prime Minister which clearly shows that he either is not familiar with the documents or that he simply tried to hide the facts.

My supplementary to the Deputy Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister did not reply to this, is as follows: Why is the Conservative Government maintaining its option to tax food in spite of the objections of 71 per cent of the population, in spite