

*Government Orders*

I also take the opportunity to thank, on behalf of the Minister of Finance, the finance committee for its work not only on prebudget consultations but on many other issues. I see both of my colleagues from two opposition parties here and I extend my thanks to them.

The chair of the finance committee who was here earlier to present a report told us yesterday that the finance committee has met over 200 times since the government was formed. It has a considerable workload. The attendance has always been first class. There is continuity in what has been said in debate in the committee. The collegiality we have in the organization of our work is greatly appreciated. We know that in a partisan House there are natural divisions, some very heartfelt divisions, but it is also reassuring to those of us who enjoy Parliament to see a committee work so well. On behalf of the minister I say thank you and wish everyone season's greetings. I look forward to continuing the work in the new year.

Today's debate is an accumulation of the work done by the committee as well as individual members of Parliament. Since September we have been meeting with Canadians in Ottawa and across the country. The committee split itself in half. Half went west and half went to Atlantic Canada and Montreal. We have heard hundreds of witnesses in a series of round table discussions. We have also heard individual presentations. The interested public as well as members of the committee are getting more familiar with the process. We have had some very good debate.

I would highlight the work by charitable organizations. They have given us some new ideas. I would also highlight the work by health coalitions. They have given us some suggestions on what the budget response should be on health care. We have also heard from several business organizations who talked about their optimism with the economy and at the same time their desire to see some changes in the way we do business.

These suggestions are always considered. They are always taken in good faith. They are very much appreciated. The government has every intention to follow up on these many ideas. The government is awaiting the committee report which will be tabled in the House during the Christmas recess. It will have more ideas and a semblance of what we think should be done.

The Minister of Finance was before the committee last week. He presented his idea of where we should be heading, the 2 per cent target for the deficit in two years. That was the new announcement for the second year of our rolling target. The committee wholeheartedly endorsed the suggestion, although there were two dissenting opinions. On the whole, the committee appreciated that the minister was very forthright about our new target. Parliamentarians, Canadians and people around the

world watching the Canadian fiscal situation were very pleased with what the minister said.

One of the pledges which brought our government to office was to deliver genuine change in how the federal government manages its fiscal decision making, change that provided the public with more open access to information and a change which would give Canadians and their representatives, their members of Parliament, a real role in charting the course of action for the nation.

[Translation]

The latest economic and fiscal update, which the Minister of Finance submitted last week to the House Standing Committee on Finance, is a very concrete example of this commitment to account publicly for our actions and to make our decisions openly. The same thing can be said about this debate.

• (1130)

Again, I must challenge my hon. colleagues from all parties to seize this opportunity and provide the government with concrete, sensible, non-partisan advice. This is a chance to really make a difference in the interest of our constituents and of all Canadians.

[English]

The 1995 budget demonstrated clearly and convincingly that public and parliamentary input was valued and acted on by our government. This was confirmed by the substantial public acceptance of that budget.

It must be and will be the ideas and suggestions of all members that dominate this debate. Meaningful discussion occurs most easily when there is a clear and defined context for the issues involved. When it comes to budget planning, that context is nothing less than Canada's economy and the fiscal situation of this government.

I would like to spend a few minutes highlighting some of the key points that the finance minister made in his presentation to the finance committee last week. Let me start as the finance minister did by reiterating one fundamental point.

Our government's objective is not simply to provide a better balance sheet. It is to provide and work toward a better country, a fairer society. It is an economy that more than anything else is capable of producing the kinds of jobs and growth that will enable Canadians to have faith in their future. This is a compelling reason why our commitments to fiscal health will not falter.

There is simply no contradiction between deficit reduction and job creation. Continued deficit reduction is essential if we are to get our interest rates down, interest rates that stand in the way in the creation of jobs.