

Supply—National Defence

this afternoon when certain items were quoted from the United States congressional records of a committee inquiring extensively into defence activities down south. I got the impression from our newspapers that, some of us, have the feeling that some of the information that was given in public at these committee inquiries in the United States was as much a surprise to the officialdom of this country as it was to the general public here. I should like the minister to comment upon that.

Personally, I really feel that we have assumed the role of me-tooism so much lately with respect to the United States in recent times that that challenge and criticism may be very well founded. I should like the minister to assure this committee, not that anything that was said there was a surprise to him personally but was a new piece of information as compared to the information that might have been given to this country by the United States in an official capacity.

I was curious also this morning when the minister indicated the choice of the government, announced only today—again there were a lot of ifs and provisos—of the Lockheed plane, the F-104G. Again I emphasize the provisos and back doors that were left open by the minister, but he indicated that that plane was, I think, a similar plane to the one chosen previously by the West German government. Does the minister recall—I have not got the information here—when the West German government made that decision? In other words, our criticism is that this government has been very dilatory in making decisions of this kind. I recall, too, that one has to be very careful in criticizing the minister or the government in connection with matters of this kind. This morning the minister said that statements with respect to the obsolescence of equipment we have been buying hitherto have been very unhelpful to him and to the government, and to the cause of freedom and traitorous to our position vis-à-vis those we believe might be the potential enemy.

This, of course, is a serious statement and one that we must respect, as I do. On the other hand I must at all times recognize that it is one that can be used in a democratic parliament by one on the government side improperly to protect himself from criticism for delay with respect to taking decisions that might have been taken. I wonder if the minister would tell us about the negotiations with West Germany for our equipment manufactured in Canada, and was he aware at the time when the West German government had decided to take the advanced F-104?

[Mr. Benidickson.]

Would he give us some indication of the time lapse in between the decision of that government and the decision announced only this morning? With respect to this equipment, the minister indicated that as to the details, as to information respecting production, quantities and the time element on availability of this particular NATO aircraft, we would have to ask the Minister of Defence Production. Fortunately, we understand his estimates will follow very shortly upon those of the minister of defence, and perhaps we can get that information fairly soon.

However, I believe he recognizes that throughout the country there is a recognition that more than a year ago it was known that our F-86 squadrons would either have to rely on the early delivery of our Arrow aircraft for perhaps a different role than was assigned to them, or they would have to have assigned to them aircraft that the minister tells us now the government has decided to assign to them. Regardless of that, however, I say that there was a poor synchronization with respect to those decisions.

Rightly or wrongly I continue to think, as I have thought ever since last fall, that most of these decisions were delayed—and there has been a resulting continuous delay in decision—because so many senior members of the cabinet were not here in Canada at the time when these serious matters had to be decided upon. I do not blame the minister. He was attending to his responsibilities of course. But at a critical time with respect to decisions in the defence department there was an absence on the part of senior members of the cabinet whose decisions would be necessary in matters of this kind. Other governments—and I think particularly of the West German government—were able to reach a decision with respect to their role in NATO and this government has only now reached its decision.

Mr. Pearkes: I am speaking now entirely from memory, but I think the West German government reached a decision about three weeks ago; it was very recently that they did so. The fact that the West German government had accepted this particular aircraft or, shall I say, the fact that another NATO government had accepted this particular aircraft influenced the decision that Canada reached because of the obvious advantages of having similar aircraft used by various NATO countries. We have been talking about the standardization of equipment. This is a case where partial standardization is being accepted. We have come to the conclusion that this is the best aircraft for our purposes.