

Excise Tax Act

My remarks have meant to convey the incredible problems that will be created by this incredible tax. People across this country, especially small businessmen, are concerned about the government's increasing intervention in their affairs and the complexities the government is introducing into the operation of business and the earning of a livelihood. This tax is discriminatory in principle. It imposes the burden of the one-price oil equalization policy on the individual consumer. It also discriminates against all users of gasoline because it imposes additional administrative burdens and, on businessmen and farmers, additional problems to do with the reporting of income. It seems to me that many small businessmen and farmers will question whether it is worth going to the trouble of applying for a rebate. Many will wonder if the moneys they may receive as a refund will compensate them for the additional income tax calculations and verification. Time is money to the small businessman. The Minister of Finance can be sure that this bill will bring one substantial result: it will create substantial resentment on the part of hundreds of thousands of this country's citizens. I ask the minister to reconsider the advisability of introducing this legislation and I ask members on the government side to consider seriously, during their caucus deliberations, the advisability of withdrawing the provisions of this bill with regard to the excise tax on gasoline. The Minister of Finance has, by introducing this legislation and other budgetary provisions, given us an opportunity to demonstrate our responsibilities—after all, it is the role of the opposition to criticize constructively—to good effect in the interests of Canada's future.

Mr. Perrin Beatty (Wellington-Grey-Dufferin-Waterloo): Mr. Speaker, at the outset I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. member for Saskatoon-Biggar (Mr. Hnatyshyn) with respect to the tirade of the hon. member for Nickel Belt (Mr. Rodriguez). Anyone who has listened to the hon. member for Nickel Belt for about 2½ years cannot help feeling that our socialist friend has only one speech, culled from his cliché collection and closet full of conspiracy theories—theories he brings forward when speaking on any issue before the House. When one has been here for some time, exposed on a daily basis to the tantrums of NDP members, it is hard not to wonder whether they have had one fresh thought in the past 30 years.

● (1730)

I remember being told as a child that if a person does not have something kind to say, he should not say anything at all. As a consequence, my comments with respect to the excise tax bill will be very brief. On the night of June 23, the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) introduced his most recent budget, his fifth in a little over three years. The most charitable thing that can be said about it is that the government has found a cure for voter apathy in Canada. As a statement of economic policy, however, the budget constitutes an admission of failure and an abdication of responsibility. When we cut through the rhetorical weeds that mask what these proposals really mean to Canadians, when we push aside the excuses, the apologies and the equivocations so that the effect of this document upon our economy can properly be viewed, it becomes clear that it represents one of the most regressive

[Mr. Hnatyshyn.]

and unfair statements of policy to be made by any federal government in Canada in recent years.

What is the government's solution to the country's rampant inflation? It is to raise prices, to increase government spending, to decrease the ability of the average person to cope by increasing taxes, and to allow the bureaucracy to expand even further. What is the government's response to the recession into which they have led us—the worst since the depression of 1929? It is to take yet a greater share of the national income at a time when our gross national product is in decline. What is the government's response to the plight of the farmers, small businessmen, housewives, senior citizens and working people? It is to ask them to tighten their belts at the very time the government itself refuses utterly to reduce waste or contain its greed.

If there was ever a document which details the government's intellectual squalor and its absolute lack of compassion for those least able to protect themselves, it is this budget. And if there ever was one single piece of legislation which symbolizes the contempt in which the Liberal government holds the people of Canada, particularly the people of my province, it is this proposal for a tax increase of ten cents on gasoline.

On budget night the Minister of Finance stated he hoped his budget would lead to the conservation of gasoline and the increased use of public transportation. Two days later, however, when questioned about these assertions by my leader he was forced to admit that the primary purpose of the tax was to pay for maintaining a single oil price in Canada. He added that it was difficult at this stage to estimate how much gas would be conserved. Asked what the administrative cost of collecting the tax would be, he confessed he simply did not know.

Mr. Speaker, there is only one purpose for this tax and for the other tax increases in the budget, and that is to pay for the unrestrained growth in federal spending. This is why income taxes are increasing, and this is why the government has decided to unload the staggering cost increases of medicare into the laps of the provinces, despite the fact that medicare is a federal program and that some provinces, such as Ontario which had a completely adequate medical insurance plan already in place, were strongly opposed to the program.

The members of the Progressive Conservative Party support the concept of one gasoline price for Canada but reject unequivocally the idea that the one-price system should be financed by those least able to pay, through a regressive excise tax. Instead, we believe it should be paid for out of general tax revenue and that those with the highest incomes should be asked to pay the highest share of the cost.

On the Friday following the budget presentation I asked the Minister of Finance about the problems of people in rural areas who need their cars because there is no adequate public transportation. I asked him whether the government would rebate this unfair gas tax to them or, if not, whether he could provide an assurance that rural Canadians would be given access to decent public transportation. His enlightening reply was that I had asked the Minister of Transport (Mr. Marchand) questions about the need for public transportation on earlier occasions. Everyone knows how much action has been taken by the Minis-