

Vehicular Seat Belts

problems confronting our country. Since the first traffic fatality in North America in the year 1899 there have been almost two million such fatalities in the United States and Canada. In this country we are presently suffering between 5,000 and 6,000 traffic fatalities per year, and it is often brought to our attention that more Canadians and Americans have been killed in traffic accidents than have been killed in warfare in this century.

If we were confronted with the prospect of 5,000 or 6,000 Canadians being killed in military action somewhere in the world, this House would be filled; this country would be concerned. Yet the challenge is there that such a large number of Canadians are facing death within the next 12 months through traffic accidents. We must become increasingly conscious of the need to take steps that will lead to greater traffic safety.

I should like to take a few moments to deal with an aspect of this problem not dealt with by the bill and which perhaps cannot be dealt with by committee. That is the limitation on the effectiveness of such legislation. I agree that we should have such an act, and I agree that the owners of the vehicles affected should be required by law to equip their vehicles with the kind of seat belt that the bill would demand.

● (1740)

But we must remember, even if we accept the terms of reference mentioned earlier by the hon. member for High Park-Humber Valley (Mr. Jelinek), that we cannot through legislation make sure that the maximum number of drivers of commercial and personal vehicles will actually use seat belts. You can legislate ownership but you cannot legislate common sense. The trouble is that we can have laws requiring cars, trucks and other vehicles to be equipped with seat belts, but we cannot require people to use them. Even the threat of a penalty often may not be enough to make people do what common sense instructs them to do. That is why I think the government ought to institute an effective educational program.

It has been my experience in elementary and secondary schools of a particular community of this country that such traffic safety educational training programs have an impressive effectiveness. I use the occasion of this debate to draw to the attention of the House the need for the federal government to invest more resources in traffic safety education. We are told that not only are 6,000 people being killed on our roads every year but that 200,000 are sent to hospital as a result of traffic accidents. Indeed, one-tenth of hospital beds in Canada are regularly occupied by accident victims.

In such a situation I think it is mandatory for the federal government, in co-operation with the provinces, to help boards of education finance expanded traffic educational and safe driving programs. If we were to do that we would, over the years, build up in the minds of the public a consciousness about this matter that would reinforce what this bill seeks to do.

Speaking in terms of what this would cost, I remind hon. members that local boards are possessed of limited resources and therefore must get assistance from the federal level of government which has much greater resources. If we were to put into traffic safety education

[Mr. Stackhouse.]

programs across this country even a fraction of the millions of dollars we are squandering on some kookie schemes which have been carried out under LIP and OFY, we would be doing a great service for the safety of the people of this country.

Mr. Joseph-Philippe Guay (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, I, too, want to say a few words on Bill C-35, an act to amend the Motor Vehicle Safety Act with specific reference to seat belts. Having listened to other hon. members speaking, I also feel that the jurisdiction in this field is that of the provinces and of the federal government.

The seat belts now being fitted to vehicles sold in this country are undoubtedly the single most valuable and effective safety device required by the motor vehicle safety regulations. For this very reason I am not opposed in principle to laws requiring the wearing of seat belts. In a very real sense they are a logical outcome of the public concern over traffic safety which brought the Motor Vehicle Safety Act and regulations into existence.

Perhaps it is time for us to say to the public, "The government has done a great deal in recent years to make safe the motor vehicles you drive. Now we are going to require you to do your part and to use this most effective safety device, instead of either ignoring it completely or actively inhibiting its function". I have very serious doubt, Mr. Speaker, that amendment of the Motor Vehicle Safety Act is a proper or even a feasible method of compelling the use of seat belts, but I do not propose to dwell on that point at the moment.

I express my concern that this bill, undoubtedly introduced with the most humane of motives, attacks only one part of a larger problem, implies little appreciation of the wider issues involved, and consequently could ultimately cost more Canadian lives than it would save. Mandatory seat belt wearing could save as many as 1,500 lives each year and could eliminate or alleviate many thousands of injuries which now occur unnecessarily as the result of motor vehicle accidents. However, a partial measure, introduced without the necessary preparatory programs, could well produce such a hostile public reaction that subsequent, more comprehensive and effective measures would be condemned to public rejection from the outset.

For I believe, Mr. Speaker, that public acceptance is essential to success in such measures as the one we are discussing. In a democracy such as ours, conformity with the law does not depend on the powers of the enforcement agencies. It depends on the respect of the ordinary citizen for the social purpose and inherent reasonableness of the provisions of the law. And I believe that the actual usage rates of seat belts in this country indicate that we have some extensive ground work to do before we will get the acceptance which is so essential to success.

For this reason, the government is currently conducting a number of independent studies of the factors which determine seat belt usage. Why do many people appear unconvinced, in the face of all the contrary evidence, that wearing a seat belt substantially increases one's chance of escaping death or injury in a collision? Why do people who believe in the value of seat belts so frequently fail to "buckle up"? How many people support the principle of