

Oral Questions

[English]

Hon. A. C. Abbott (Minister of National Revenue and Minister of State (Small Business)): Mr. Speaker, I think that the hon. member's information came from a distorted press résumé.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Abbott: I simply stated at the press conference that we had over 200,000 people employed in the textile industry and that there was no way in which we could have over 65 per cent of our imports coming from abroad, and increase that amount, without jeopardizing the industry.

Having made that point, I said that academically it could be conceived that perhaps other people could produce textiles for the Canadian consumer cheaper than we could. I went on to say that this was unacceptable to us, but unfortunately the only part of my comments which was reported, that I saw, in this context was that I had suggested that perhaps our textile business should be shut down.

Mr. Grafftey: Mr. Speaker, the minister is correctly quoted as saying "and we should leave the field to others who can produce the commodity more cheaply". Does the minister feel that if other countries can produce the product more cheaply than Canada, we should shut down all our industries?

Mr. Abbott: Mr. Speaker, that is not my position at all. I tried to explain in the first answer that I proposed it as hypothetically possible that people could argue that those nations producing such products more cheaply, should do so and let us produce something else. I went on to emphasize that this was not our policy and that it would not be our policy.

[Translation]

Mr. Grafftey: Mr. Speaker, my supplementary question is directed to the Minister of Finance. Since the minister has repeatedly stated in the House that the textile industry was doing well in Canada, and since he agrees with the Minister of National Revenue's statement abroad that the production of textiles should be left to other countries where labour is cheaper and that Canadian plants should be closed, what does this all mean?

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Minister of Finance): Mr. Speaker, I do not think that the Minister of National Revenue made a statement to that effect. What he said, rather, and which is also extremely important, was that developed countries must allow developing countries, whenever possible, to expand in such areas. Our policy in Canada is to allow the import of certain quantities of commodities made in developing countries, while keeping a share of the market for our own producers. To my mind, this is not an overly restrictive policy, as it protects Canadian producers while keeping a good share of the market for products made in developing countries.

[Mr. Grafftey.]

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

OVERPAYMENTS OF BENEFITS—MINISTER'S POSITION

Mr. Maurice Dupras (Labelle): Mr. Speaker, my question is directed to the Minister of Employment and Immigration and concerns the overpayments made to 6,000 unemployed in the province of Quebec because of an administrative error and a false interpretation of section 37 of the Unemployment Insurance Act. Is the minister willing to cancel the claim he sent to at least 15,000 Canadians, including 6,000 Quebecers?

● (1440)

[English]

Hon. Bud Cullen (Minister of Employment and Immigration): No, Mr. Speaker. We had indicated that there was an overpayment as a result of an error. We are contacting each individual person who received the overpayment. We are looking at each case sympathetically to ascertain those that we can write off or abandon.

We are also indicating in other areas that the collection procedure will be dealt with as sympathetically as possible. I do not think we have authority under the legislation simply to write off an overpayment of that size.

* * *

CONSUMER AFFAIRS

MONITORING OF SALES TAX CUT TO ENSURE CONSUMERS BENEFIT

Mr. Lorne Nystrom (Yorkton-Melville): Mr. Speaker, may I put a question to the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs? An hour or so ago the Consumers Association of Canada sent a letter to the Minister of Finance and to the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs saying that the 3 per cent manufacturing sales tax cut announced in the last budget had not been passed on to consumers. Indeed, some consumer prices went up by 1.9 per cent in December, compared with November.

Can the minister tell the House why the cut in sales tax was not properly monitored by the government? What steps is the government now planning to take to make sure that the \$1 billion cut is not being kept by the corporations as a gift, but is passed on to the consumers where it belongs?

Hon. Warren Allmand (Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs): Mr. Speaker, the many offices of my department across the country have been monitoring the sales tax cut, and I must say that since its introduction we have received very few complaints that it was not being passed on, although this would only begin to show up in recent weeks. We have been monitoring, however. I have not yet received the letter referred to by the hon. member, but I shall be glad to pursue the matter.

Mr. Nystrom: A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker. This morning, the Consumers Association of Canada said that in