

Oral Questions

[English]

GOVERNMENT POLICY

Right Hon. John N. Turner (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, my problem here is to try to ascertain what is the position of the Government. I have listened to the Prime Minister. He has said that he is reopening a dossier in response to his caucus from Quebec yesterday, but a day earlier his Minister of Regional Industrial Expansion said, and I quote him, "the Government has decided not to provide financial assistance for new plant establishment or expansion of capacity in the forest products industry". That is his release. If that is not bad enough, the Minister of State for Forestry said yesterday that he didn't know what was going on. I use his words: "I'm surprised. I don't understand that". I think the Prime Minister could understand in the circumstances that we would appreciate a statement from him on what the policy of the Government really is.

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, I think my right hon. friend asks a legitimate question. What can the policy of a Government be when it has inherited a \$35 billion deficit from its predecessors? What can the policy be?

For example, on Monday—and I say this with no malice—we receive requests from the BCNI, from the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, and from the finance critic of the Opposition, with good reason, saying: "Please cut your deficit", and on Tuesday somebody walks in and says: "Write a blank cheque for \$100 million". I think my right hon. friend would agree that that would be difficult to accommodate no matter how legitimate the objective.

● (1420)

We have said that we will not grant a \$100-million blank cheque out of borrowed money. The Government of Canada would have to borrow that money. We are already borrowing to pay the interest on the debt we were left. The Government of Canada would have to borrow the \$100 million to give it to a private company. While the financial posture of the Government is, unfortunately, not such as to enable us to do that, we will be meeting with the company to see if we cannot be helpful in a job-creation project which is of value to the Eastern Townships and the people of Quebec and Canada.

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FORESTRY

NEGOTIATION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA AGREEMENT

Right Hon. John N. Turner (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, my supplementary question again relates to forestry. I am not getting very far in trying to get any precision from the Prime Minister as it relates to Quebec. I would like to turn to the forestry situation in British Columbia.

There are reports out of Victoria indicating that the federal Government intends to propose to the Government of British

Columbia a ten-year rather than a five-year agreement for the \$300 million. In my view, this does not meet the approval of the people of British Columbia nor of the Government of British Columbia. Indeed, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, while in Vancouver yesterday, expressed dissatisfaction with this arrangement. In light of the contradictory expressions made by members of the Government, will the Prime Minister tell us what his position is with respect to the forestry agreement with the Province of British Columbia?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, what we will try to do in British Columbia is what we attempted to do in Newfoundland, and that is to conclude an agreement, something that apparently escaped the capabilities of the previous Government. We are going to be as fair to the people of British Columbia in regard to the forestry commitment as we were to the people of Newfoundland and Labrador in regard to offshore oil. I know my friend would agree with that.

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MAIN ESTIMATES

PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE

Hon. Donald J. Johnston (Saint-Henri-Westmount): Mr. Speaker, my question is also directed to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has spoken of the financial posture of the Government and of the issue of fiscal restraint. Everyone in Canada, and certainly most Members of the House, including Tory back-benchers, must be asking themselves why the Prime Minister is writing himself a blank cheque for an additional \$2 million to cover expenses in his own office. I know it is a tiny amount in the view of the Prime Minister, but it works out to approximately \$8,000 to \$10,000 for every working day, or \$1,000 per hour as we sit here during Question Period. We have not had an explanation of what these additional 30 people are going to be doing. Yesterday, Mr. Speaker, you will recall—

Some Hon. Members: Question.

Mr. Johnston: The question is this, Mr. Speaker. We know by looking at the Estimates that this expenditure is not because of the disappearance of the central agencies. What in God's name are these 30 political aides going to be doing? Will the Prime Minister at least guarantee that no more aides will be taken on by way of contract and that the limit will be 120?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, yesterday I acknowledged in regard to this matter that it was our intention to reduce that number, and in point of fact it has already been reduced from that which it was on the day of the printing of the Estimates. Having said that, I acknowledge that there are 120 people in the Prime Minister's Office. By way of comparison, the Hon. Member for Winnipeg-Fort