

Free Trade

Mr. Speaker: Before I hear the Hon. Parliamentary Secretary, perhaps I could ask a question which the Hon. Member for Winnipeg—Fort Garry (Mr. Axworthy), the Hon. Member for Windsor West (Mr. Gray) or others might want to answer briefly. As I understand it, the argument is that, in the interests of clarity, this amendment would be appropriate because after the next election—and I think it is clear that is what it is referring to—we will have an expression by the Canadian people of what is in the public interest.

● (1540)

What about a minority Government? Can someone address that matter?

Mr. Axworthy: Mr. Speaker, if I may say, before the Hon. Member for Calgary West (Mr. Hawkes) responds, no one can predict the outcome of an election. As Your Honour suggests, one of the possible outcomes could be a minority Government. However, as we have seen in the past, that coalition of forces elected to the House will be based upon the very clear lines that have been taken thus far in the election process. There are three Parties. They are offering themselves for election. Two of them are opposed and one is for the agreement. Out of those three Parties—and let me just speculate for a moment—let us say that the Liberal Party receives the largest number of seats but without a clear majority, the Conservatives may receive the second largest number of seats, but the third Party, known for its judgment and goodwill at times, will be in a position to support a new Government. Therefore, we could have, as we now have in public opinion polls, close to 60 per cent or 70 per cent of the Canadian people being represented against a national interest as defined as being for or in favour of the free trade agreement.

So I would think that a minority Parliament, while it may be more complicating in the life of the Speaker, would also be able to speak with the same clarity on the national interest as one with an elected majority Government.

Mr. Hawkes: Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a small contribution to this debate. There has been some conversation about intelligibility. It is an interesting word. It is there and it is in our precedents to help us all remain aware of the reality that when we take an action as a House in relationship to a motion, the action we decide to take should be clear to the Canadian people. Ultimately, we are accountable to them for the actions we take.

There has been some discussion about whether or not the amendment as proposed refers to a previous election, any general election in our history, provincial or federal, I would assume, or whether it refers to an election in the future. I think there is a tendency in the discussions to this point to say that it probably refers to an election in the future. That makes a great deal of sense but it is not clear in the wording. But that comes to mind because it is an action the Government has taken on December 11, and we are probably referring to an election in the future without specifying. If that is true, I think we would

end up with a logically inconsistent motion, even if reworded, because the main motion calls for this House—this House, not a future House, and we must all remember that this House disappears on election day—to endorse, and so on. If they wanted to move an amendment that added a new concept, they could have added a concept that there be a referendum, and then we could argue about whether or not it was acceptable. But the suggested amendment provides no mechanism for the resolution of an issue.

We do not have proportional representation in this country where we could run one Party against another on the basis of a public policy. We have an electoral system with 282 ridings, and perhaps after redistribution a few more, where people select the best representative for their community to come to this House. It is not a referendum on a single policy issue. It never has been. I suggest it is unlikely it ever will be in the future.

Therefore, there would be no resolution unless there had been an added kind of concept like a referendum being held, or something of that sort. If we accept the motion, we have, first, the lack of intelligibility about which election is meant, historical or future, and we are left without a mechanism to resolve the issue of whether this initiative itself, as a discreet and distinct piece of public policy, is or is not in the public interest. If Members opposite wanted to move, as determined by the people of Canada, in the 1984 general election, then this House, which was elected in 1984, would be expressing an opinion on whether this is in the national interest. But we leave it vague and unintelligible. We are not making a statement to the Canadian people about the will of the House.

I think that on that basis it should be ruled out of order, and they can come back with some other wording that might indeed be intelligible.

Mr. Speaker: I do not want to prolong this because I am going to give it very careful thought. I think I can indicate to all Hon. Members who have intervened, and it has been helpful to me, that certainly the Chair takes it that this is a reference to the next general election. I do not think anyone need to argue that point.

Mr. Gray (Windsor West): Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Member for Annapolis Valley—Hants (Mr. Nowlan), who spoke a few moments ago, said, as I understood him, that the motion before the House is simply that this House endorse the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement. But I want to bring to your attention, Mr. Speaker, the point that this motion is not so narrowly worded or limited as the Hon. Member for Annapolis Valley—Hants suggests. Instead, the motion itself brings in the concept of the national interest. It brings it in as an additional concept or factor with respect to approving the agreement.

The Government itself, having inserted in the motion a phrase “the national interest”, I submit, cannot argue to you, Mr. Speaker, that an amendment intended to give meaning to