

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[Translation]

FINANCE

DISCREPANCY BETWEEN ESTIMATES OF PRESIDENT OF TREASURY BOARD AND MINISTER OF FINANCE

Hon. John C. Crosbie (St. John's West): Madam Speaker, I would like to put a question to the Minister of State for Finance. First, I would like to congratulate him on his appointment.

[English]

I would like to ask the minister: In view of the discrepancy between the spending estimates tabled here yesterday by the President of the Treasury Board, of \$58.4 billion, and the projections of the Minister of Finance tabled on Monday night, of \$60.4 billion for total outlays—which are said to be the result of increases in the oil import compensation program, and also increases in public debt charges totalling \$2 billion altogether—and in view of the inability of the President of the Treasury Board to explain the discrepancy on what the latest estimates are—he has taken it under advisement—could the minister tell us, and the President of the Treasury Board, how the Minister of Finance arrives at the estimate of total spending this year under the headings of the oil import compensation plan and public debt charges?

What are the amounts now estimated by the Minister of Finance? Would he tell us and share the knowledge with the Treasury Board?

[Translation]

Hon. Pierre Bussi eres (Minister of State, Finance): Madam Speaker, I thank the member for St. John's West for his congratulations and I would like to tell him immediately that the Minister of Finance and I have full confidence in the ability and competence of the President of the Treasury Board. I think that the member for St. John's West can see in the statement of the Minister of Finance that the amounts stated are taken from figures which he had himself anticipated and from the differences in the negotiations on oil prices now under way.

[English]

ESTIMATES FOR OIL IMPORT COMPENSATION PAYMENTS AND PUBLIC DEBT CHARGES

Hon. John C. Crosbie (St. John's West): Madam Speaker, my supplementary question is to the President of the Treasury Board, since the minister of state does not know what these figures are. He has greater confidence in the President of the Treasury Board than we have learned yet.

The Auditor General has pointed out that the spending figures in the estimates are incomplete and sometimes incomprehensible—which is easy to understand, when ministers cannot comprehend them. Has the President of the Treasury Board now been advised by the Department of Finance as to what the government's estimates contain under the heading of

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oil import compensation payments for 1980-81, which I think is \$3.1 billion, from what I can read, and \$10.7 billion for public debt charges? Could he confirm whether these are the figures, or what the figures are, and advise us whether the Treasury Board might be going back as a branch of the Department of Finance?

Hon. Donald J. Johnston (President of the Treasury Board): Madam Speaker, I am surprised that the former minister of finance and his colleague, the former president of the treasury board, short though their tenure was, do not seem to understand that there is a fundamental difference between an expenditure projection and the number which is found in the main estimates.

Mr. Andre: There is not supposed to be.

Mr. Johnston: That has always been the case. That always will be the case. When the former minister of finance made his projections on that infamous day in December, of \$58.4 billion, those were projections; and had the estimates been tabled at that time, they would have been in the order of, say, \$57 billion because the reserve to which he sometimes makes reference is not included there.

With specific reference to the oil import compensation payments, the amount provided for in the main estimates is \$2.6 billion, and the current projection is in the neighbourhood of \$3.1 billion. Yesterday, I indicated that with respect to debt costs, the main estimates provide for \$10.275 billion and the current projections are \$10.775 billion.

Mr. Crosbie: Madam Speaker, I have a final supplementary for the President of the Treasury Board. That infamous budget has been adopted holus-bolus, with respect to about two-thirds of it, by the hon. gentlemen opposite. So he should watch his epithets, because they will turn into an epitaph.

May I ask the President of the Treasury Board this: he has now got the figures for the latest projections, or estimates, for this year. Could he explain to us this statement by the Minister of Finance which says, "implementing blended oil pricing could alone reduce expenditures and financial requirements by as much as \$1 billion"?

● (1420)

How will this famous blender reduce these amounts by \$1 billion? Could he explain that to the House? We all await it with bated breath. If that is the case, why do not the estimates reflect it, if they are only projections?

Mr. Johnston: Madam Speaker, the former minister of finance apparently still does not understand the difference between main estimates and projections.

An hon. Member: What are our estimates, if not projections of expenditures?

Mr. Johnston: The projections clearly do not take into account whatever pricing arrangement is arrived at by my colleague, the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources.