

Customs Tariff

Even more at issue is the fact that under Bill C-87 the power to reduce the amount of funds coming into the government Treasury by way of customs tariffs and other such revenues is being left essentially with the modern-day representative of the monarch, the Prime Minister and his Cabinet. We are seeing the age-old attempt under a constitutional monarchy by representatives of the Crown to make decisions with regard to the collection and expenditure of taxation without reference to the House of Commons which, under our system, is supposed to represent the people.

The principle which we are trying to establish with this series of motions is that within 60 days of the signing of an agreement which changes the procedure for the collection of tariffs, that agreement shall be submitted to the House of Commons for ratification. One would not think that this is a terribly radical initiative until you see the horror with which Members on the government side react.

We are attempting to continue a practice which was set in motion in 1215 and has been slowly and painfully continued through the centuries since then of putting the power to impose and collect taxation back into the hands of the House of Commons, which is the true representative of the people, rather than leaving it in the hands of the representatives of the monarch, namely the Prime Minister and his Cabinet.

We are not in any way restricting the monarch and her representatives, the Prime Minister and Cabinet, from undertaking initiatives by way of international treaties or by proposing changes to the amount of taxation which they will be levelling at or within our borders. We are simply asking for the maintenance of the ancient right that once decisions are made they cannot continue after 60 days without the approval of the House of Commons. This is not even as strong in some ways as that which the Lords demanded at Runnymede. We are saying "within 60 days" which seems to me to be a very reasonable request.

• (1210)

Two or three of these motions already in the first draft of the Act indicate that the Government is prepared to do so, would deign to do so, after 180 days. We are simply saying that we should speed up that process. This is consistent with some of the proposals made by both the McGrath commission and the Cooper commission, if I could call it that, two parliamentary groups which studied the activities of the House of Commons. The McGrath committee made proposals to strengthen the power of the back-benchers and of the Commons itself. The committee under the chairmanship of our friend, the Hon. Member for Peace River (Mr. Cooper), dealt with the question of parliamentary oversight and how Parliament could continue to build control over the budget and expenditure systems of this Chamber.

These proposed amendments which we are now discussing would force the Government to present such changes to our tariff laws, the amount of tariffs being levied at our borders,

within 60 days for approval by the House. This follows through with the initiatives the committee, chaired by the Hon. Member for Peace River, was attempting to impose on our processes in this Chamber. We were attempting to make the budgetary process more reasonable, to have the Chamber itself deal with government Bills. We were attempting to force the Government to come forward with government Bills in fact very closely in concert with the presentation of the Budget so that we could avoid the spectacle we often go through in this Chamber of imposing taxes, collecting taxes, income taxes and other taxes, long before the law actually passes this Chamber.

What we are trying to do from now on is to keep our procedures a little more tight and a little more proper in the administrative sense so that this Chamber does get a chance to do its job of overseeing the expenditure plans of the administration of the executive branch of the Cabinet itself. This Bill proposes to give away close \$2 billion in Government revenues, and because the Government is already in a deficit position of around \$30 billion per year, this money will have to be made up through the tax system by some other means. We think that because there are a host of possibilities before us at the moment with the clauses mentioned in this Bill. There are potential changes to the tariff rates with Great Britain, the United States and various Commonwealth countries, some of the nations which have already been granted most-favoured-nation status, and a great long list of others who may in fact be granted such status to the point where they may eventually pay zero tariff from the current high level of 35 per cent tariff.

We think that before the Government makes permanent such arrangements by treaty, which it has under our constitutional monarchy every right to do, that treaty or those obligations should be transferred in front of this Chamber within 60 days so that this Chamber could have the opportunity to reject or ratify them. We presume that in virtually all cases the Government will be a majority Government which will be assured of its taxing proposal, or its proposal to give away tax revenue. But the principle should remain constant. This Chamber, and this Chamber alone, should make the final decision as to whether or not that should be ratified. That is what these amendments are attempting to do. I would urge all Members of the House, whether in government or in opposition, to see the extreme importance to this Chamber and to the representative system in this country for that to be strengthened and to continue.

Mr. Maurice Foster (Algoma): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to have a word to say on motions Nos. 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11. This essentially gives the responsibility to the Government for any changes in customs duties or tariffs to be brought before the House for consideration by the House within 60 days. I think that is especially desirable at this time. We know that even though there has not been a firm agreement made between Canada and the United States with regard to the free trade agreement, we believe that the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) will plunge ahead and sign this document on January 2 or January 3. It has long-term implications for all