

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Indeed, it is. The Hon. Member for Ottawa-Vanier (Mr. Gauthier) has described exactly the procedure to be followed.

[English]

The matter is put to the House as if it were second reading to give Members an opportunity to debate it. Members may agree to the amendments or may further amend the amendments. I will then put the question, after which the Bill will be sent back to the Senate.

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, in answer to my colleague opposite, I would like to ask the concurrence of the House in some minor technical amendments made by the Senate to Bill C-59, the Customs Act Bill. As the House knows, this Bill was given third and final reading here in early November after consideration by the House and by the House committee designed to review it. It was subsequently sent to the Senate, where it was also passed before the end of last year.

During study of the Bill in the Senate it was discovered that some minor corrections were required. There are four technical changes which have been made to Bill C-59 in Sections 64, 142 and 160. Two of these are minor corrections made to the French text so that both language versions of the Bill are identical in meaning. The third is a correction in a cross-reference to a subsection of one of the Bill's clauses. The fourth is the reinstatement of a line which was inadvertently dropped from the printed version of the text. None of these changes have any bearing on the substance of the Bill or alter any provisions in any way. As was stated when this Bill was presented in the House by spokesmen from all Parties, it is a much-needed and long-awaited overhaul of an important federal statute.

We are anxious, as are those who are affected by the provisions of this Bill, to have a new Customs Act in force as early as possible. As a result, with the co-operation of all Members we are working toward a target for proclamation of this new Act as well as the regulations in early June of this year, if possible. Therefore, to help expedite passage of this important legislation, I hope that Members will agree to the minor amendments that I have described in order that we may obtain Royal assent to the measure as soon as possible.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Robert Gauthier (Ottawa-Vanier): Mr. Speaker, I would like to comment briefly on the matter under consideration, namely the amendments proposed by the Senate. I agree with the Minister that we must act without delay and refer the amendments back to the Senate, if they are in order.

Mr. Speaker, it goes to show that the Senate can be useful. To many of us who used to have doubts about it, this confirms that the Senate really acts as an Upper House of sober second thought on proposed legislation. As the Minister himself admitted, one sentence was missing from the Bill and the Senate reinstated it. Amendments of technical and terminological nature have been introduced.

Customs Act

I think it is a good thing. The Senate should take full credit; it reviewed a rather complex and extremely long Bill, it was able to study it and propose amendments, which proves that the Senate is a worthy institution, an important Upper House.

I agree with the Minister, Mr. Speaker, but I do not want to take too much time. All Parties in the House and all Members agree that a revision of Bill C-59 respecting customs was long overdue. It has to be made easier to read and understand, it needs to be amended to simplify the existing statute, bring the terminology up to date and, for example, eliminate the requirement that importers prove their innocence in a court action; all these are good points.

I have no intention of going into the details of the Bill, but I would simply say that my party supports the amendments. We commend the Senate for its initiative, and we will support these amendments at the appropriate time.

● (1230)

[English]

Mr. Steven W. Langdon (Essex-Windsor): Mr. Speaker, we also have no strong arguments to raise with respect to this Bill. The Bill reflects changes upon which both this and the previous administration agreed. On behalf of our spokesperson who usually deals with this subject, I can indicate our Party's support for the general thrust of the Bill.

However, a number of important points that were raised in committee are worth repeating. Union representatives who spoke in the committee raised some questions with respect to the honour system as an impractical vehicle for collecting funds that are owed. They have made some suggestions that might surpass the present approach to sending out several notices with the hope of a return. They believe such an approach could possibly mean that importers will wait until the second notice before paying.

Our greatest concern about this Bill is that it seems likely that it is part of a process to reduce the number of Customs employees who are administering the system. For instance, it is suggested that reductions of perhaps 875 person years could be involved. While some of this will be within the administration cadre itself, there will also be a reduction of operational personnel which will discontinue certain functions and cost 164 positions. There will be a reduction of support staff that will cost another 360 positions.

While we recognize the service at the point of contact with the public, there is a concern that we are cutting back on the level of service which is important to make the Customs service operate effectively and efficiently. Questions have been raised within the legislative committee about the logic of some of those cuts and we are not entirely satisfied with the answers that have been provided.

It is difficult to consider this Bill which will involve such cuts in person years without taking into account the fact that there seems to be a move to cut back positions and reduce person years within the Public Service generally. If this Bill were to be seen as an isolated effort to rationalize and improve