

Excise Tax

losses could have been covered by insurance. With that exception, it includes the cost of restoring essential private property to its pre-disaster condition, or restoring small business enterprises where the owner's livelihood has been threatened by the disaster. I suggest this approach, Mr. Speaker, is a reasonable one. It does not attempt to respond to every situation involving property loss from natural causes.

For example, not long ago, as the hon. member for Oxford has mentioned, tornadoes caused extensive damage in his constituency. Almost all of the losses were covered by insurance. In any event, there was no request by the provincial authorities for federal aid in that case. Where citizens can provide their own protection through insurance, this should be the normal procedure. This is an area where the role of government should be to help with problems which are beyond the ability of individuals to deal with.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, I do not feel this kind of problem should be dealt with by means of a further tax concession. At best, the proposed remission of sales tax would provide only marginal assistance, as I have indicated, even assuming that an answer could be found to the serious problem of how in the world to administer the particular tax remission. Where a case can be made for government assistance, I think it would be preferable to provide that aid through direct expenditure programs.

I thank the hon. member for bringing forward his suggestion and bringing this very important problem before the House for debate today.

Mrs. Margaret Mitchell (Vancouver East): Mr. Speaker, I, too, thank the hon. member for bringing this issue before the House today. I think it is important, not only from the point of view of those who suffer from disasters, both past and future, but it gives us an opportunity to look at the whole question of what disaster is. It enables us to look at some extension of programs which would apply to housing and building improvements generally.

As a new member of the House, it is surprising to me that our federal government has not already made compensation by removing the excise tax for victims of major disasters. I thank the government member from Ottawa Centre (Mr. Evans) for explaining some of the intricacies of the financing of these matters. The fact is we can find ways to do these things and we should not be leaving it to such complicated mechanisms. Of course, I realize the provinces, too, are involved.

It is also important that we look back at the kinds of disasters we have had in Canada. While I was waiting to speak, I talked to several of my colleagues who reminded me of a number of disasters we suffered in recent years. Mississauga was mentioned. In the port of Vancouver, which surrounds my riding, we suffer the possibility of disasters from explosives coming into our port almost daily, not to mention the very dangerous materials which are brought into that area by rail, truck and, now, by air as well. So there is a high possibility of disasters happening there.

We also recalled the floods in Manitoba. I think it was within the last two years where rural communities were inundated. Surely there was extensive damage to homes. In fact, whole rural communities suffered. They certainly would have appreciated help in the way of removal of the excise tax from any materials they would use for home repairs. In British Columbia, which is a mountainous community, houses are quite often built on the slopes of hills. We have disastrous floods in the spring. I recall on a number of occasions houses being flooded and, in fact, some houses being swept into gullies as the spring floods came down the mountainside.

My colleagues also reminded me of tidal waves. There was the Tsunami tidal wave in Port Alverni, which caused extreme damage to homes in that area. So there is no question we should do something about this immediately, to remove the excise tax and use mechanisms to make this a kind of relief for victims of disasters, not just for the person selling the building supplies.

We, in our party, believe that this measure does not go nearly far enough. We believe there should be no excise tax on building materials generally. Why should we be taxing and reaping a profit from the disaster our present housing crisis is creating? I know the IWA in British Columbia has a very strong policy with respect to the removal of this tax. It has pleaded for the removal of it. It does not like to see our Canadian forest products going over the border to the United States. The industry has not done too badly this year with regard to jobs, mostly because of the Canadian dollar and the fact that so many of our supplies, even our forestry supplies for housing, are going to the United States.

We would like the tax removed on building supplies generally so that not only would jobs be created for our people in the forest industry, but so that we would have more affordable housing supplies for the repair of homes and, of course, the building of new homes.

I think it is timely to look at the whole question of disasters. I spoke in the House last week, as did many other members, about the tragedy of our housing crisis in Canada. Surely this is a disaster of the first order which faces all of us in our constituencies.

If we look at the state of housing in certain areas, particularly on Indian reserves, what could be a worse national disaster and more of a national disgrace than that? Some 50 per cent of the people living on reserves are living in housing, if you can call it that, which is completely uninhabitable by our standards. The houses do not have running water, toilet or sanitation facilities. They do not provide any kind of warmth in the wintertime. In fact, the neglect of this housing is such a disaster that it is causing deaths in many Indian families.

Of course, just the removal of the excise tax on building materials will not completely solve that problem. The solution requires major and immediate government action to put more money into native housing and to work with native groups in order to do away with the bureaucratic hassles they constantly face. Thus, they would be able to get on with the job of upgrading present housing, bringing down the cost of construc-