

[Translation]

Hon. Monique Bégin (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Madam Speaker, I would be pleased to explain for the umpteenth time to the hon. Leader of the Opposition the work method we used, namely a letter which is, shall we say, public, easy to read, short and written by the ten members of east central Montreal who meet once a week to express the concerns of their respective ridings. The subject of this letter or of the topic selected is normally piloted by two members or one, depending on who is in charge. This one was indeed sponsored by two members. We all sign. In the future, of course, the two ministers will not sign! The group will continue its work and will select the mechanism of representation it deems the most appropriate.

Next Monday we will be in the port of Montreal but instead of writing a letter we will call a press conference after a public meeting. If the hon. member wants to see what east central Montreal is all about he is invited for a visit. In our caucus we do not muzzle people. I think that what matters is that the members expressed some concerns over an issue which perhaps happened to have national implications.

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[English]

ENERGY

OWNERSHIP OF NEWFOUNDLAND OFFSHORE RESOURCES

Hon. James A. McGrath (St. John's East): Madam Speaker, I should like to direct a question to the Right Hon. Prime Minister. Could the Prime Minister tell the House why the government was not prepared to set aside its claim to the offshore and so instruct its representatives before the Federal Court, in order not to jeopardize the negotiations presently under way with the government of Newfoundland, and to create the proper climate for these negotiations?

Right Hon. P. E. Trudeau (Prime Minister): Madam Speaker, I believe the hon. member is showing a misunderstanding of our position. For some 14 years now we have been setting aside the question of ownership and not referring the matter to the Supreme Court because we hoped to reach a political, negotiated solution which would be to the advantage of the people of Newfoundland and of the people of Canada. This has been our position since I have been in office, but years go by and the offshore is in a state of uncertainty as to the regulations which prevail. There was a case brought before the courts by the Seafarers' International Union. Apparently Newfoundland is still unable to reach a decision to negotiate with us in good faith while the ownership question is held in abeyance. This has been the situation for 12 or 14 years. The hon. member should not ask why we are not prepared to set ownership aside. We have done nothing but that in order to try to reach a negotiated agreement.

Sometime last July I wrote to the Premier of Newfoundland saying, "We cannot wait any longer, beyond the next six

Oral Questions

months, but let us try to reach a negotiated agreement by the end of February. I am just telling you that if we cannot, we will certainly take a reference on our own. We have been trying for years to obtain a negotiated agreement with you or, alternatively, to obtain a joint reference. You have been unable to do either. Newfoundland did not want to join the other maritime provinces when we signed an agreement in 1977. Please let us try to do it before the end of February."

Now, three weeks before the deadline, Premier Peckford is apparently waking up to I do not know what new reality, but he sent a telegram which indicated what I have been saying for 14 years—let us reach an agreement without going to the courts. I am not saying that it is a matter that the courts will never determine. It may be determined, for all we know, in the SIU case. What we are saying is that if we negotiate in good faith we can reach an agreement without knowing who really is owner under the Constitution, because the courts will not have decided by the end of February.

REQUEST THAT COURT ACTION BE DELAYED

Hon. James A. McGrath (St. John's East): Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister knows that a political settlement is a much better settlement in the spirit of confederation than a judicial one. Accordingly, I ask him why his government did not agree to delay these proceedings while the negotiations were under way, even if it meant laying aside for the time being the federal government's claim to the offshore? He knows full well that as long as the decision is hanging over these negotiations obviously they cannot be conducted in a spirit of good will.

Mr. Lalonde: It is not our choice.

Right Hon. P. E. Trudeau (Prime Minister): Madam Speaker, if the hon. member is referring to the special SIU case, it was not taken by the federal government. It was a case taken as a result of a decision by a board of the Newfoundland government, which the SIU is contesting. We have no influence on whether or not that case should be pursued. I understand that even the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources gave instructions to his lawyers not to make any point when the delay was requested by Newfoundland.

But returning to the main substance of the matter, we have been saying for 14 years what the hon. member said we should be saying—a political settlement is better. I have tried dozens of times in meetings with the premiers and through negotiations by ministers to reach a negotiated settlement, but obviously Newfoundland does not want to play that game. Newfoundland wants to drag out this thing forever, not realizing that it is against the interests of the people of Newfoundland since the offshore will not be developed as long as there is uncertainty as to the administrative problems there.