

*Customs Act*

be a heavier workload on those who are left. That could and probably will mean that people who, by design, are attempting to avoid paying the necessary tariff or attempting to circumvent the law and bring into Canada illicit substances will have a better opportunity to do so. I have to wonder whether that is what the Government had in mind. I seriously doubt it.

In any event, as I said, the changes are welcomed in general by most people. The effect on the employees will be felt fairly dramatically. The possibility of a loss of a substantial number of dollars is there. The honour system, as I understand it, is not yet fully analysed and will require further analysis before we make any final and conclusive decision. However, I suggest to the Minister that at the end of a reasonable period of time, perhaps six months from now, he take it upon himself to report back to the House on the actual workings of the honour system. He could perhaps report by way of a statement regarding the revenue collected under the system as opposed to the previous system, as well as on whether or not the methods of collection are yielding the results the Government anticipated and hoped for. If he does that, if he keeps a very close watch on the increased workload which may and I think will result from the decrease in manpower, if he makes a commitment should it be the case that either we are losing money or the workload is being increased to the point where individuals are required to do far more than can reasonably be expected of them, and he undertakes to make the changes necessary, then I think we would accept the legislation. We will expect to hear from him in regard to those two important matters.

**Mr. Stan J. Hovdebo (Prince Albert):** Mr. Speaker, I wanted to make a few comments, but I am not going to talk about the technical features of this Bill. Rather, I will talk about the Department as a whole and the image it has developed over the years and how it will be helped or possibly hurt by this Bill.

It is very frustrating for an individual who knows his duty and his responsibility but is unable to carry it out because there is just not enough manpower. It is important that we put on the record the feelings the public has about the Department, particularly those crossing our borders and paying their customs and excise duties and who are being hassled while they do so.

If I understand it correctly, the purpose of the Bill is to overhaul the 118-year old Customs Act. Periodically over the years the Government has responded to problems which have developed in this area by making changes. Bill C-59 seeks to respond to a number of archaic provisions in the Act and to improve its administration. Because of that, I suppose we are allowing the Government, as is its responsibility, to update and codify what it must do to make it work better and easier. The customs branch is primarily concerned with the processing of goods and individuals across international boundaries. To a great extent that has involved for the general public the crossing of the U.S.-Canadian border.

● (1220)

In 1983 the Department undertook a study and there were a number of interesting things revealed in it which we should not lose sight of. The real impact of that study was that, despite all the rules and regulations which exist, the individual judgment of the officer is the most important factor in dealing with the Department. The study concluded that no matter how well intentioned entry laws may be, compliance with them, in the final analysis, is directly proportional to the Department's capacity to enforce them. In other words, the Department has to be concerned with the ability of individual customs officers to enforce the rules and regulations. How they do it is as important, in many cases, as the rules themselves. The kind of character which determines how those rules are put into effect establishes the kind of experience which the general public will have with the Department and, therefore, establishes the image of the Department.

We all know that the taxation branch of the Department of National Revenue has a great deal of discretionary power which, in most cases, is used very well. However, the cases which we hear of are those cases in which that discretionary power is abused. I am sure that every Member in the House could relate one or two incidents which happened to them, their families or their constituents where the people on the receiving end felt that they had been abused. In my own experience as a Member I know that in some cases the officer has been over-zealous in trying to fulfil what is required of him. I have sometimes worried about whether there is pressure on the officer to make a certain number of inspections even when it involves the same individual on many occasions.

In the city of Prince Albert there is a small office and probably only half a dozen businessmen use it on a consistent basis. I become concerned when, after using the services for many months or years without any concerns, an officer suddenly decides it is time to check on something. I can give a number of examples of goods being sent back before the period of time for holding them had expired. I do not want to belabour that particular point and I know the Minister has received a number of letters from me about that concern.

I think we all know that it is necessary for the powers to be put in the hands of the officer. He needs those powers and it is a good thing that he has them. I am, however, concerned that the powers are sometimes used to the detriment of the image of the Department. In some cases it may be good judgment to be less zealous.

To expand upon this concern, I suppose we should worry about the process by which the officers are recruited and the training which is given to them after they are recruited as well as the type of individual that is recruited. I am sure that Canadians generally expect their customs officers to be civil, reasonable and respectful in order that the crossing of a border will not be an unpleasant experience. I have crossed the Canadian border in both directions countless times and have never had an unpleasant experience in doing so. I believe that probably 99 per cent of crossings are not unpleasant experiences. I also believe that 99 per cent or more of the people