

however, with the duties or tariffs levied by the Soviet government on these modest gift parcels, and there is a serious complaint to be lodged here. These duties are substantially higher than duties levied on similar commercial articles, and have recently been raised from their already exceptionally high levels.

● (2210)

The objective of the Soviet government appears to be the prohibition of gifts within families by using the guise of duties. These duties vary from gift item to item, but in the past have averaged between 30 per cent and 40 per cent of the value. In June of this year these duties were raised by what seems to be a factor of two or three times from those already high levels. The minister's own department is having difficulty in ascertaining what the new duties are in precise terms.

Let us consider these facts. These are small gifts, for example window curtains, stockings, overcoats, gloves, children's games, Christmas toys and food parcels. The typical parcel will be worth between \$100 and \$300. These are gifts of a completely inoffensive character. They are gifts specifically permitted to be sent as gifts and are not for commercial purposes. They are sent to a member of one's own family.

Finally, these new duties are in effect prohibitive in economic terms for most families. They are an affront in terms of human justice.

I want to appeal to the minister to investigate whether such duties violate Canada's trade agreement with the Soviet Union. If they do, I ask him to raise the matter with Soviet authorities with a view to correcting the situation. If they do not violate trade agreements, I ask the minister to convey to the Soviet Union the intense dissatisfaction and concern of Canadian citizens at these artificial barriers to human contact.

These new barriers came only months after the signing of the Helsinki accord in which Canada and the Soviet Union, among many other states, pledged to facilitate human contact, individually or in groups. Yet Canadians know too well how virtually impossible it is to arrange visits to Canada of relatives in the Baltic countries or in the Soviet Union. Short visits cannot be arranged even in cases supported on clear humanitarian grounds. Many family reunifications have to be dragged out of the Soviet government one by one, and then only on humanitarian grounds by direct representations made by the Canadian government.

An average of only 14 persons per year, for example, has been permitted to immigrate to Canada from the three Baltic countries combined in the past eight years. How can Canadians believe in the Helsinki pledge to strengthen friendly relations and trust among the peoples of our two countries when they are sealed off by the Soviet Union from visits by relatives, when they are sealed off from family unifications, and when they are now sealed off from sending small gifts by these new tariffs which seem to have no foundation in reason except to prohibit a natural human practice, or to exploit family relations for monetary gain?

Adjournment Debate

This action by the Soviet Union is cynicism piled upon cynicism before the ink is dry on a document pledging humanitarian contacts. If the Soviet Union had sought a means of increasing distrust among Canadians in respect of détente it could not have found a better means than to block simple human desires for family contact through inoffensive gifts within families. We know too well that distrust was already growing because of the build up of conventional arms in the Soviet Union, in spite of détente. This latest move will further confirm Canadians in their growing realization that the Helsinki document contained hollow pledges.

In the case of family visits and family unifications, the Soviet authorities have frequently hidden behind the decisions made by local authorities, but in the case of these exceptionally harsh new tariffs it is the central government itself that imposes them. This will surely be taken as a signal to local authorities to be even more restrictive, and can only lead to a worsening of the prospects for family visits and unifications.

I ask the minister, therefore, to protest to the Soviet Union its excessive use of trade mechanisms such as tariffs to deny Canadian citizens the opportunity to send small gifts to relatives. I ask that he seek levels of duty equivalent to those levied in the case of small commercial transactions with Canada under the most favoured nation agreement. I ask him further to seek bilateral arrangements with the U.S.S.R. with respect to duty payable on gifts sent to family members. I make this request conscious of the fact that the Helsinki Accord itself pledges the signatory nations to conclude such agreements among themselves as might be needed to facilitate human contacts. Surely this is a situation which calls not only for simple justice for Canadian citizens but also for insistence that solemn pledges made between Canada and the U.S.S.R. be honoured.

Mr. Hugh Poulin (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce): I thank the hon. member for Scarborough East (Mr. O'Connell) for his representation. May I say that I intend to join with him in supporting the principle to which he has addressed himself? The matters he discusses are so fundamental to the Canadian sense of justice and to our trade policy that their resolution is to be desired by us all.

We have, however, encountered some difficulties in this field. For example, it has been difficult to obtain complete information from Soviet officials on this subject. Although we know that the rates of duty applied to gift shipments to the U.S.S.R. were substantially increased last summer, we are still trying to ascertain whether or not gift parcels are assessed higher rates of duty than commercial shipments of like products to the Soviet Union.

We are pursuing our discussions with Soviet authorities, and until we have completed our investigation of this question and are sure of our facts, it would be premature to comment on whether or not the Soviet Union is in breach of its trade agreement with Canada.