

External Affairs

in the completion of their applications, and by insuring that they have submitted the necessary documentation, photos and fee.

I should perhaps add answers to a couple of questions that were asked me and which I promised to answer. The first was a question about the repayment of refunding of fees to persons who cannot obtain requisite service or who cannot obtain their passports. If the passport office is unable to issue a passport for various reasons, or an applicant fails within a reasonable period to reply to a request for additional information or documentation to substantiate his entitlement, the fee is automatically refunded after due warning by two follow-up letters.

If an applicant informs the passport office that he is forced to cancel his travel plans, photographs and any documents submitted will be returned and the fee refunded. If in such a case an application has reached the stage in production where the document is being prepared, or already has been issued, the document is however forwarded. I suggest that at this stage it would be unreasonable for the passport office to refund the fee in view of the administration costs that have been invested. In any event, the passport when issued is normally valid for five years. The chances are, therefore, that the cancelled trip might be taken in the season or in an ensuing year.

● (2:10 p.m.)

There was also a question about payment of overtime to the staff of the passport office. There is no authorization to pay clerical employees for overtime at rates higher than those already established by the Treasury Board. When collective bargaining agreements have been ratified by the union membership, overtime will be compensated at time and a half and employees working on Sundays and holidays will be paid at a higher rate.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. R. Gordon L. Fairweather (Fundy-Royal): I think Members of Parliament will agree that despite all the difficulties under which they work the employees of the passport office have shown patience in the face of what amounts to intolerable working conditions and hours. It is because the passport office enjoys such a low priority—I say this with great frankness—in the affairs of the department, that these conditions have not been remedied long ago.

[Mr. Sharp.]

I hope that when the minister begins his advertising campaign people will be told in plain language how to go about obtaining not only birth certificates but citizenship. There has been a crisis in this division for some months. Many hon. members have hesitated to raise this matter, feeling that to do so might only add to the problems which the overworked division is experiencing. I am glad the minister has finally recognized that conditions are altogether intolerable. Members of all parties have been subjected to forceful importuning over the last few months by citizens whose mail, telegrams or telephone calls have not been answered by the passport office.

I regret the program did not include the simple step of opening offices in other cities in Canada, as announced by the government some months ago. Heaven knows, there are plenty of facilities in our major cities for the receipt of passport applications. The government might follow the example set for some years in the United Kingdom, by decentralizing its passport system so that people could obtain passports in many places across Canada.

Mr. Max Saltzman (Waterloo): The calm statement we have just heard from the minister belies the absolute chaos which exists in the passport office at this moment. We are facing an emergency situation and the government has been caught completely unprepared.

It is a situation which is intolerable. There are more people travelling today than ever, and these people are being seriously inconvenienced. At every airport in this country there are cases of passengers waiting for passports which have not arrived and which will not arrive.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Saltzman: I do not know the reason for those comments from members on the other side. Apparently they do not admit there is any kind of urgency here, though I believe every member of this house knows that there is an emergency. Indeed there is a tendency for this house to bog down because Members of Parliament are almost totally occupied looking after passport problems. Something has to be done about this.

I was over at the passport office yesterday, and the way in which those girls have to