

National Defence Act Amendment

to restoring our naval strength. An inconspicuous fishing trawler or a high-speed submarine with a mine-laying configuration could effectively seal Halifax harbour to all shipping for an indefinite period of time. There would be virtually nothing the Royal Navy could do about it at the present time because of the ludicrous mine warfare policies which have been adopted by this minister and the government. In my opinion, if the present attitude toward our navy is maintained by the government, prior to any obvious act of war a foreign naval power could stop almost completely the movement of every commercial or war vessel in or out of Canadian waters. With our ships bottled up in harbour, North American defence on our seacoast would have to be taken over by the American navy, which hopefully would not be faced with a similar problem.

In view of the Soviet military might which I have cited, it is evident to me, if not to the government, that Russia has not altered its objectives. The detente at present being experienced in Europe is indicative only of the fact that the Soviets have altered their timetable.

While I realize it may be unwise to consider defence spending as an essential component of economic activity, I would also point out to the minister that the economic results of defence spending cannot entirely be overlooked as a means of helping to restore the great economic imbalance that exists between the Atlantic provinces and the more prosperous parts of Canada.

For these reasons, Mr. Chairman, I believe that we must reassess our military thinking, as well as the stand taken by our external affairs department toward our position in NATO. In my opinion, a nation of 20 million people living in a country the size of Canada must depend upon the support of its allies in time of war for the collective defence of this country. In the course of next year Canada will be reviewing her military commitments under NATO, and common sense alone tells us that we should delay any major revisions of our defence forces at least until these revised undertakings become known. I hope the minister will follow this course in the best interests of all Canadians.

● (5:20 p.m.)

[Translation]

Mr. Asselin (Charlevoix): Mr. Chairman, Bill No. C-243 which has been before us for several weeks has obviously raised great

[Mr. Crouse.]

interest among the Canadian people as a whole.

The government claims that we have spoken enough on that legislation and that we should now vote on it. But before doing so, I think that we, as members of the opposition, must ask ourselves certain questions. We must first ask ourselves whether we should let the government take its responsibilities and accept the judgment of the population for the errors which, in our opinion, are contained in this bill on unification.

We know that in a democracy, the official opposition is formed by the party having the greatest number of seats in the house of commons, and that that political party will be called upon eventually to replace the government in office. In fact, as a wise politician once said: When we are sitting in the opposition, we are headed for power but when we are in power, we are headed for the opposition. You might tell me that this is self-evident but if the minister fails to be more co-operative in this legislation he has introduced, I am convinced he will be co-operating more with the Canadian people, so that his government and his party will sit in opposition after the next election while we, on this side, will take over.

Mr. Chairman, if we are to pursue further the discussion of this most important legislation which will have grave consequences for the organization of our armed forces, it is because the members of the opposition in the last few days, have put certain questions to the minister and asked him to supply to the house the information required to understand the bill now under consideration. We must regretfully state that the minister has neglected, refused or deliberately avoided supplying to parliament, the representatives of the people, the necessary information to enable them to take a decision and to vote on this bill.

I compare a piece of legislation brought before the house to a case a lawyer has to plead before a court and, of course, when appearing before the court, it is necessary to prepare it properly in order to win. In the present case, namely the measure before the house, that is Bill No. C-243, I must say that the minister has failed to prepare his case, because if he did, he made a botch of it or he has been ill-informed about the object of the bill under study.

When a bill is first brought before the house, the onus of proof as to the aims of the bill lies with the minister of the crown, just as the burden of proof lies with the lawyer