

am sure on behalf of all honourable senators and of all Canadians who have attended Expo '86—our hearty congratulations to the government and people of British Columbia and to the people who organized Expo '86 for making of that exposition a resounding success that has done both British Columbia and Canada proud.

AGRICULTURE

GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE—FEDERAL-PROVINCIAL DISCUSSIONS

Hon. H.A. Olson: Honourable senators, I would like to direct a question to the Leader of the Government in the Senate. First of all, may I offer him my congratulations on his being appointed Leader of the Government in the Senate, but more particularly on his appointment as Minister of State for Federal-Provincial Relations. I think that this is a very good and useful position for the Leader of the Government in the Senate to hold, because it provides both the Leader of the Government and all other senators with assistance in carrying out our responsibilities as representatives of regional interests. I, therefore, hope that Senator Murray will be forthcoming in updating us from time to time on the discussions taking place between the officials of the federal government and the provincial governments on a number of matters that are of primary concern, or which may be topical from time to time.

Right now I can think of two very specific matters in my part of Canada that fall under that heading, and those are agriculture and energy and the depression in those two areas. I think it is particularly appropriate that the Speech from the Throne, as read yesterday, did make mention of both of those economic areas and referred to the fact that discussions were to be held with the provinces with a view to finding solutions to those problems, and particularly those in the agricultural area.

I wonder, therefore, if the Leader of the Government in the Senate can tell us what kind of discussions are taking place. In other words, what is the subject matter of those discussions? Are we talking about the debt load of farmers, or are we discussing some assistance in dealing with problems resulting from the severe harvesting conditions, or are the discussions more in the area of how to deal with the intense competition in world trade? That subject was also mentioned in the Speech from the Throne yesterday, particularly with respect to grains and what is being done by both the EEC and the United States in that respect. As I said, it would be helpful if the honourable minister could give us an update on those specific matters, and if he could, perhaps, set out generally how we should approach him in order that we can receive updating from time to time on how these matters will be resolved.

Hon. Lowell Murray (Leader of the Government and Minister of State for Federal-Provincial Relations): Honourable senators, the Speech from the Throne has, I believe, sent a pretty strong signal to the farmers of western Canada and to our international competitors that the government intends to stand behind western farmers, confronted as they are with unfair competition from some of our international competitors.

[Senator Murray.]

As to the variety of other subjects that the honourable senator has raised, I can tell him that the federal Minister of Agriculture and his provincial counterparts have been working these past months on a common agricultural strategy for discussion at the First Ministers' Conference in Vancouver in November. If there is specific information required on any one of these subjects that the honourable senator has raised, I will be glad to refer the question to the Honourable John Wise.

I may take the occasion to say that in the Department of Agriculture—as in virtually every department of government—there are bilateral programs and bilateral discussions going on between Ottawa and the provinces in which I am not directly involved, and for which I am not directly responsible. My role is to act as an adviser to the Prime Minister on federal-provincial relations and, in particular, on constitutional matters, to chair a cabinet committee on federal-provincial relations, and to assist with first ministers' conferences and a number of other matters of that kind. Therefore, I am not directly responsible for the many scores of bilateral programs between provincial and federal departments. However, I will be glad to obtain as much information as I can for the Senate on those matters.

Senator Olson: Honourable senators, I thank the honourable minister for that much information, but I must tell him that at the conclusion it is almost as nebulous as it was at the beginning. In other words, you can throw the whole thing into the pot and say we are responsible for all of these things.

I want, first of all, to have clarification on his stated viewpoint that these matters can be passed to federal-provincial conferences. When can we have an indication of what will be on the agenda at the federal-provincial conference? For example, we know now that one of the most difficult elements of the agricultural problem in western Canada—and there are several—is the enormous debt service charges. I would like to ask the minister whether that matter is on the agenda.

Perhaps we could be a little more frank and open about this.

● (1440)

I could ask all of the specific questions. Could the leader tell us what they are dealing with at the moment? Are they dealing with that debt problem at the moment, or are they dealing with the international trade competition problem, or what? I think it would expedite our discussions if the leader were a little more forthcoming.

Senator Murray: As far as the agenda for the First Ministers' Conference is concerned, I trust that that will be settled shortly. That is the subject of ongoing discussions between the provinces, represented by Premier Getty, who is co-ordinating on that side this year, and the federal government. Officials have met and ministers have been in touch with each other. It should not be long before the agenda is settled.

I can say that agriculture will be placed on the agenda, because that item was left unfinished at the previous First Ministers' Conference, as were several others.

As far as discussions regarding specific problems in the domain of agriculture are concerned, I think my friend can