

Oral Questions

Will the minister also recognize that the government has progressed through three different stages in this? It said that the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement was flawless. Then it said that the NAFTA negotiations gave the opportunity to improve the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. Now it takes a third position, which is presumably that it will not proceed with ratification until such time as the U.S. demand for parallel agreements on labour standards and on the environment are met.

What is its position today?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, our position is completely unchanged. We have a North American free trade agreement and we will seek ratification of that appropriately in the House of Commons just as soon as we possibly can. The minister has just indicated our time frames in regard to that.

President-elect Clinton indicated to me his very strong support of the free trade agreement that we concluded with the United States in 1988 and he confirmed to President Salinas his strong support of the North American free trade agreement as it exists.

He may indeed want to bring about some parallel agreements that do not impact on the principal one, but that has not been conveyed to us. Our information from President-elect Clinton and his officials is that he is very much a free trader along those lines and will be very supportive of initiatives such as the free trade agreement between Canada and the United States and the North American free trade agreement with Canada, the United States and Mexico. We are delighted to have that kind of leadership in the United States to pursue these common objectives.

Mr. Brian Tobin (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte): Mr. Speaker, my question is also for the Prime Minister.

Let me say that given the Prime Minister's earlier statements in the House today about acknowledged economic mistakes of the past, we on this side of the House are, to say the least, surprised to hear the Prime Minister say that this government, in its final months in office will seek—and I think I am quoting the Prime Minister properly—ratification of the NAFTA at the earliest possible opportunity. The Prime Minister said this, notwithstanding the fact that a new U.S. president has said he wants to study this agreement closely, and

the U.S. Congress, and that a new U.S. presidential administration has said it will seek agreements on environmental and labour standards.

I want to ask the Prime Minister, given his admission of economic mistakes of the past, will he now not do the prudent thing, will he set aside the ratification process in Canada until such time as we know what the final draft of the NAFTA will look like after consideration by a new U.S. administration and president and by Congress?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Given my hon. friend's reputation for accuracy in this House, I reluctantly point out that he has just inadvertently made a substantially inaccurate statement in regard to any acknowledgement that I made about economic mistakes. He should read the transcript that is there and I am sure he will want to correct what he has just said on the floor of the House of Commons.

I was interested in his second point where he was conveying to the House President-elect Clinton's point of view. This was interesting to hear, because in my conversations with President-elect Clinton he conveyed no such views to me.

• (1450)

An hon. member: Maybe you didn't ask the right questions.

Mr. Brian Tobin (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has had most of his conversations with the current U.S. President who is about to become the ex-president. Indeed he will be able to join him fishing in Maine full time very soon.

I want to again put the question to the Prime Minister. The incoming U.S. administration has made clear that it will seek parallel agreements both with respect to environmental standards and labour standards. The current U.S. Congress has made clear it will closely examine NAFTA and may propose amendments to it.

Given that the government's projections on employment were wrong, on GST were wrong, on free trade were wrong, on deficit were wrong, would it not be prudent to wait until the new U.S. administration has examined it and proposed changes and until Congress has examined it before we blindly proceed in this country once again?