

Oral Questions

Hon. Harvie Andre (Minister of State and Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Madam Speaker, as everybody in the House knows, the ancient fleet of 707s was replaced by the purchase of five A-310 airbuses. The 707s could no longer legally fly in many of the world's airports because of noise and environmental considerations. Indeed some of the press wondered about their safety although they were safe.

The A-310s were purchased. They need to be modified to meet Canadian National Defence standards. The modifications are to provide for cargo and passengers. One particular aircraft is being outfitted with a VIP section to transport the Queen, the Governor General and the Prime Minister. Ninety per cent of the time the aircraft will be used for—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Andre: Apparently hon. members are not interested in the answer; they keep heckling from the other side. Ninety per cent of the time the aircraft will be used for transporting cargo and DND personnel. Ten per cent of the time it will be used for special occasions for the Prime Minister, the Governor General and Her Majesty. It is not an Air Force One or a Taj Mahal at question here.

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): Madam Speaker, the explanation of the minister is absolutely unbelievable. We all know the President of the United States has Air Force One. Now the government is buying a plane that will be called air farce one to satisfy the ego of the Prime Minister.

If this aeroplane is to be used for that, why not cancel it right away when there are people in Canada who are starving? There is no need for such a plane. These planes were bought to transport troops, not to have the Prime Minister flying at 35,000 feet, soaking himself in a bath. It is the taxpayer who has been soaked.

Will the government come to its senses and cancel this stupid extravagant expenditure?

• (1420)

Hon. Harvie Andre (Minister of State and Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Madam Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition was making wild, ridiculous charges. In particular he said this was because of the ego of the Prime Minister. I might remind him

that the Prime Minister will be stepping down in about three or four weeks and the plane will not be finished for a few months. To suggest this is being called for by the Prime Minister to satisfy his desire is ludicrous. To suggest this is an Air Force One is ludicrous.

Let me repeat part of my first answer. His colleagues were heckling and perhaps he did not hear it. Ninety per cent of the time this plane will be used for transporting DND personnel and/or cargo. It has an executive component.

I am sure the hon. Leader of the Opposition recalls the executive layout in the 707s. This is an update from that, no question, but it is the same kind of thing.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): The minister who says it is not for the present Prime Minister but for the next Prime Minister may be sure it must have been ordered by the Minister of National Defence, who hopes to be that next Prime Minister.

I went around the east end of Montreal on Saturday and saw all the poverty in that area. I think it is high time this government set an example and cancelled this frivolous project.

[*English*]

Hon. Harvie Andre (Minister of State and Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Madam Speaker, the hon. member knows full well that we have a set of social net programs second to none. Yes, there is poverty. The growth in the economy that has just been announced and the kind of increases we are to see in the country will give us a chance to address those poverty questions.

To make some relationship between that and the fact that DND has five aircraft for transporting military personnel around the country, for transporting its cargo and so on, and that one of them has a small portion of the plane outfitted for the comfort of the Queen or the Governor General is somehow hurting the poor in Montreal, is beneath the dignity of a so-called responsible leader.

Hon. Herb Gray (Windsor West): Madam Speaker, the minister still has not given a satisfactory explanation of why the Conservative government has such a twisted sense of priorities.