

Finance

I think it is fair to say that there are three major purposes to this debate tonight. The first is to find out what the government is doing in the face of a sliding dollar and what it intends to do. That is of interest to us, and it is also important to have that spelled out so that the uncertainty which corrodes confidence will be put aside.

Second, we in this party want in this debate to force the government to realize the seriousness with which parliament views this matter. We think we are dealing with a matter which has virtually crisis proportions, partly because of the nature of the problem itself, but more particularly because of the nature of the response of this government. The response of this government has been virtually to pretend the problem is not there, and then when there are actions to take, to be indirect, vague and evasive about the nature of those actions as well as the motivation behind them.

Finally—and I say this seriously and with some sadness—a major purpose of this debate is to tell the Minister of Finance that it is time for him to take his responsibilities and his position much more seriously than recent behaviour suggests he has taken it. I think it is fair to say that from all corners of this House there is a respect, and at times even an affection, for the minister as an individual. He is an engaging partisan. He is a man who has gone out of his way to cultivate a reputation here and in the country as a street fighter. The engaging nature of his personality and his capacity as a street fighter—

Mr. Railton: Let's get down to the debate.

An hon. Member: Take an aspirin and come back in the morning.

Mr. Clark: The hon. member for Welland (Mr. Railton) is making his usual contribution to debate in the House. The personality of the minister is not in question, nor is his capacity as a street fighter. What is in question here, and what even the hon. member for Welland must take seriously—because his constituency among others suffers seriously when the value of the Canadian dollar drops, and if he does not care about that, the electors of Welland will make a change when the next election comes—

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Clark: —is what effect the minister's demeanour and behaviour have upon confidence in the Canadian economy.

I first met the minister when I came into this House as the member of parliament for Rocky Mountain. At that time the minister was, in effect, the mayor of three of my municipalities because he was then minister of Indian affairs and northern development.

It was difficult then to get a straight answer from him, as it is now. The point is that it was probably less dangerous then for the country, and less important if the minister evaded questions and played games with the opposition, than it is now when he is Minister of Finance. It was probably even less important if he did that when he was minister of industry,

[Mr. Clark.]

trade and commerce. But he must recognize that he is now much more than a domestic politician.

The investment community, particularly the international investment community, makes its decisions about Canada in part on the basis of its estimate of the competence and the sense of responsibility of the Minister of Finance. Unfortunately—and it is as well to have it said directly here—the recent behaviour of the minister serves to erode the confidence the international community has in this government and, unfortunately, in this country. It is bad enough that the government keeps pretending that the economic situation in Canada is better than it is. That pretence, which is probably for election purposes, makes the problem worse.

That is a matter to which I want to return because it has also got in the way of some of the solutions this government could be adopting. The minister's determination to play petty politics and his determination to be a street fighter when the nation's reputation is at stake can only endanger confidence in Canada. In recent days the minister has been treating this serious matter like some kind of debating game in this House. In answering serious questions he implied that the ten premiers of Canada had approved the position of the federal government in relation to the dollar. That is not so, and the minister knew it was not so when he said it.

Today he blamed the drop in the dollar on the hon. member for Central Nova (Mr. MacKay).

Mr. Nowlan: Better than the weather.

Mr. Clark: He also blamed the provinces for not borrowing when it was the policy and the explicit request and position of this government that put the provinces in a position where they were asked by this government not to borrow. He condemned them for doing what he asked them to do.

● (2012)

Again he has been almost unbelievably careless in his statements. On Thursday in this House, in reply to a question from my colleague the hon. member for York-Simcoe (Mr. Stevens), the Minister of Finance said as reported at page 2914 of *Hansard*:

—the Canadian dollar has been floating freely for a number of months and the government has no intention of changing its monetary policy. We do not intervene in the market place and we let the value of the dollar fluctuate according to the market situation. Moreover, the government has no intention of determining a fixed rate for the Canadian dollar.

That was Thursday, six days ago. One of my colleagues says that was last week. The policy of the government seems to change from week to week. Certainly on Tuesday, unless the minister was deliberately misleading the House of Commons when he spoke here, it literally did change from hour to hour on that day. But the point is that that careless reply by the Minister of Finance last Thursday created an impression internationally that this government would do nothing at all to bring stability to the dollar. That further endangered the position of the Canadian dollar on international markets.