

Statements by Ministers

What was said by the Minister I take as a preliminary statement in that it sets out the basis upon which assistance will be given but that there is ample evidence to show that the losses may well be far in excess of the original determinations that were made at the time, and with each passing day there are clear indications of even greater losses than might have been anticipated.

● (1520)

I would say to the Minister that it is interesting and commendable to see the comprehensive nature of the Government's involvement in this matter. It is good to see the thoughtfulness that has gone into seeking out from the many and various Ministries the kind of support that will assist people who have lost belongings or, in many instances, businesses and the way in which the Government has been able to co-ordinate things through the office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Nielsen). There has been an over-all effort on the part of the Government in all of its manifestations.

I suppose the key to the matter is that an ongoing assessment must be made and that this assessment may take a long time to reach a conclusion. It may be a year from now or even longer, based on previous experiences with similar circumstances before we are able to assess accurately the extent of the damage and loss.

I hope that the Minister will come to the House from time to time to update us on the level of contribution from private individuals, the continued involvement of the provincial Government of Ontario, to what level that involvement is incurred and also to what level the federal Government becomes committed in terms of the allocation of financial resources in particular.

As I said, it is not often that people in the House of Commons join together with one common goal. However, I think it can be said that in this instance, everyone here shares the concern expressed by the Minister. I would say on behalf of this Party that we are prepared to support the initiatives brought forward by the Government.

Mr. Waddell: Mr. Speaker, I am not from Ontario. Actually, I am originally from Ontario but I now represent British Columbia.

I would like to say to the Minister that I found it very impressive when watching the television to see neighbours helping each other after the disaster. We are very proud of those Canadians who live in that area for rallying so quickly. I do not think that I will ever forget seeing on television the woman who spoke of losing a 13-year old boy who babysat for her family. I will continue to remember that, as I am sure will many watchers of that program. One can replace lost property but one can never replace lost family.

My question to the Minister is a broad one. Sometimes we learn things from a disaster. At least the smart people learn things from a disaster. This area was hit by a tornado. Perhaps there could have been better warnings or perhaps people could have responded to the warnings more quickly. Perhaps people

could have understood more about what tornadoes do. What have we learned from this disaster? What will the Government do to try to make sure that if there is another tornado disaster like that one, there will not be loss of life?

Mr. Beatty: Mr. Speaker, I thank the Hon. Member for his question. There are a number of things which I think all of us have learned from this disaster. Emergency Planning Canada in conjunction with its provincial and municipal counterparts will be doing an assessment to see how the emergency services responded. I think that for the most part the emergency services responded astoundingly well. I was on the scene within a matter of an hour or two after the disaster took place and was astonished to see how quickly the OPP, the Red Cross, the Canadian Forces people from Base Borden and others were on the scene to help out. Obviously we will gain from this experience and what we learn will be applicable in the future.

One of the things that is clear is that it would be extremely helpful for us in the future to encourage all levels of Government to develop disaster contingency programs. This should be done as well at the municipal level and at the hospital level to ensure that the provision of emergency services is there as quickly as possible when they are needed.

I do not want to sound trite in making these observations, but two things left a very deep impression on me. The first thing was that sometimes we as human beings are arrogant enough to think that we have tamed nature. We have not. By having a chance to visit the area on the ground shortly after the disaster took place and by touring the area from the air, I was able to see the absolute capriciousness of the disaster. It was simply a matter of fate whether a person lived or died. We now realize something about the frailty of human beings and how subject we are to the whims of fortune.

The final thing that stands out most pointedly in my mind is the essential generosity and strength of the individuals who were involved. Being in the area both immediately after the disaster took place and in the days following, I was astonished to find people coming to the area who had no connection with the area at all to say that they had shovels and strong backs and to ask if there was anything they could do to help out. Just to give one example of this, a crew of over 200 Mennonites came to the area and moved systematically from the western to the eastern end of the disaster area to clean up farmers' fields and assist in hauling physical damage out of the way. This generosity and neighbourliness on their part was something that I think has left a permanent impression on everyone who was affected.

At the headquarters in the area where relief was being provided, immediate offers of accommodation were being made. People offered to take whole families in to live with them if they needed help. In visiting the area, I saw that there were stockpiles of blankets, food, clothing and other necessary goods. It was just overwhelming that people were offering everything they could. The number of generous individuals who volunteered financial contributions was remarkable as well.