

REPORT FROM THE HILL



The al-Mashat Affair

■ The third session of the 34th Parliament, which had opened on 13 May, adjourned for the summer on 21 June and is scheduled to resume on 16 September. Ottawa was gripped during May and June with the case of Mohammad al-Mashat, the former Iraqi ambassador to the United States, who had landed in Canada on 30 March after receiving permission to immigrate to Canada in a speedy twenty-eight days.

The Government asked the House of Commons Standing Committee on External Affairs and International Trade (SCEAIT) to look into the matter. It began hearings on 30 May and received testimony from a wide range of witnesses including several senior cabinet ministers – Constitutional Affairs Minister Joe Clark, Secretary of State for External Affairs Barbara McDougall and Immigration Minister Bernard Valcourt among them. The government stated that the former diplomat had entered the country as a result of, in McDougall's words, "a whole series of errors of judgement."

In testimony late in the proceedings, Joe Clark maintained that two officials – his chief of staff, David Daubney, and Raymond Chrétien, the Associate Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs – owed him an apology for their failure to inform him of the controversial case because it might have embarrassed him as External Affairs Minister at the time of an important trip to the Middle East following the end of the Gulf War. Glen Shortliffe, a senior official in the Privy Council Office, revealed that he had called Chrétien into his office on 13 May to endorse a description of events (including an apology to the government) with

which Chrétien disagreed. Chrétien subsequently told the Committee that he had followed all of the correct procedures and had nothing to apologize for.

The inquiry also witnessed public recriminations between Chrétien and de Montigny Marchand, the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, two of the most senior public servants in Ottawa; a verbal slanging match between one of the Committee substitutes, John Nunziata, and Paul Tellier, the head of the civil service in his position as Clerk of the Privy Council; and an admission by David Daubney under cross questioning by NDP MP Svend Robinson that he had not understood the importance of a key memo he had received on the case and, therefore, had neglected to inform Mr. Clark about it. Later Daubney told the Committee that he had been singled out to provide "symmetry" – "because Mr. Chrétien had been isolated as an official who made an error in this matter. Given his name and his relationship to the Leader of the Opposition [a nephew], I think there was some symmetry."

In a report released on 20 June the Committee agreed on the need for improved communications "both within and between government departments." It also recommended that the House Committee on Labour, Employment and Immigration examine the Immigration Act and Regulations to find ways in the future to avoid the, "evident unfairness associated with Mr. al-Mashat's admission to Canada." Finally, it urged the government to appoint a "high-level task force of retired politicians, public servants, and experts to clarify and foster consensus concerning the meaning of ministerial responsibility..."

Members of Parliament differed sharply about who should be blamed for the imbroglio. The Conservative majority accepted the government's version of events; the Liberals accused various ministers, including the Prime Minis-

ter, of mishandling the case after it became public, while the NDP insisted on the resignations of Clark, McDougall and Valcourt. One Conservative backbencher, Geoff Scott, broke with his party and called for a judicial inquiry into the unanswered questions.

Arms Exports Bill

■ Another major controversy in the House in May and June concerned Bill C-6, an act "respecting the exporting, importing, manufacturing, buying or selling of or other dealing with certain weapons." The government introduced the bill on 23 May by way of amending the Export and Import Permits Act and the Criminal Code to permit two Canadian companies to pursue major weapons sales, one to the Netherlands and one to Saudi Arabia.

Diemaco Ltd. of Kitchener is attempting to sell 100,000 C7 automatic rifles to the Netherlands for \$ 120 million, while General Motors of Canada is seeking the sale of 1,117 light armoured vehicles equipped with machine guns for up to \$ 800 million to Saudi Arabia. International Trade Minister Michael Wilson insisted that the legislation did not contradict the government's campaign to restrain the international arms trade following the Persian Gulf War. He indicated that campaign was aimed specifically at "weapons of mass destruction" which would not include automatic rifles and armoured vehicles.

Until then, the Criminal Code made it illegal for automatic weapons to be sold to anyone except Canadian military and police forces. The new provisions establish strict criteria for the sale of weapons to foreign countries. No sales will be permitted to civilians, each sale will be reviewed by the government, and an annual report will be submitted to Parliament. In addition, the government will set up a "control list" of countries that are permitted to buy guns from Canada.

Opposition MPs criticized the new legislation. NDP MP Ian Waddell told the House on 23 May, "Canadians were waiting for a gun-control bill and instead we got a gun-export bill." Liberal MP Warren Allmand proposed two amendments to the bill. One would have required scrutiny by Parliament whenever a country is added to the list of those permitted to buy weapons from Canada. The second would have prohibited the sale of guns to countries involved in armed conflicts or human rights violations.

In the end, however, the government and opposition parties reached a deal which permitted Bill C-6 to pass the Commons and the Senate and receive Royal Assent on the day Parliament adjourned, 21 June. In return for speedy passage, the government promised to suspend all further exports of automatic weapons to the Middle East for the rest of the year and while a special Subcommittee on Arms Exports of the SCEAIT holds hearings on the question. That sub-committee is expected to begin its work as soon as Parliament resumes in the fall.

Other News

■ Under the new House rules, Parliamentary Secretaries (PS) to Ministers will now be members of the relevant committees. This will mean, for example, that the newly-named PS to External Affairs Minister Barbara McDougall, Benno Friesen, will be a member of the SCEAIT, while Patrick Boyer, the PS to National Defence Minister Marcel Masse, will be a member of the House Defence Committee.

■ It was also decided before the House adjourned for the summer that two sub-committees of SCEAIT would be established: one, on International Trade, with John Reimer as its chair; the other, on Human Rights and Development, with Walter McLean in the chair. □

– GREGORY WIRICK