

Customs Tariff

We are dealing with a very basic principle of accountability here. I referred particularly to Clause 22, one of the clauses to which we have proposed amendments, which amendments require that no country benefiting from Canada's most-favoured-nation tariff like the United States could get lower tariffs than the most-favoured-nation rates without an Act of Parliament. That sounds very simple, but in fact the reason this is required now while it has not been required in the past is because in the past, it has not been an issue.

Governments with a certain amount of credibility acted responsibly on tariff matters. We have now a Government that has no credibility, is down to 25 per cent of public support and did not have a mandate for free trade in the last election. That Government is now moving to sharply cut rates of tariffs to the United States, our greatest trading partner, without an Act of Parliament.

I suggest that because the Government has violated the trust Parliament has put in previous Governments to deal with customs matters, this Bill which might otherwise be a routine one has become an extremely important Bill. It is important because it enshrines basic principles about parliamentary accountability. I asked the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) during Question Period earlier today: "What about the people?" The Prime Minister suggested that there had been ample consultation about this and cited the Macdonald commission report. No one knew the Macdonald commission report would recommend free trade until it had reported.

The Prime Minister suggested that there had been consultation with various industry groups. That is true, but the members of those sectoral advisory groups have all committed by oath not to share information with anyone in the public sector and I presume that even means other people in their own industries. What they are doing within their own trade groups I do not know, but trade unionists, workers, consumers and citizens of the communities in which those companies operate have had no information through that form of consultation.

When it comes to consumer groups, trade union groups and the opposition Parties, which I remind Hon. Members represent half the population according to the last vote in Canada and which today represent something like 75 per cent of the electorate according to the opinion polls, there has been no consultation at all.

Why do we suggest that there should be parliamentary accountability and that no reductions in MFN tariff rates should go forward without an Act of Parliament? It is because the Government is violating the trust of Parliament.

I listened with concern to some of the statements that were made both today and at other times. The Minister of State for Finance (Mr. Hockin), for example, rose in the House a few minutes ago and said that it was unfortunate that this most important piece of legislation which is historically important was being subjected to what he called delays. He spoke in the

forty-fifth minute of debate, hardly a lengthy delay in my opinion.

This matter has been discussed by the Government of Canada in consultation with the trade sector since 1981. The Government has been in power for more than three years. It chose not to bring this legislation before Parliament until the beginning of October and now it suddenly says that it is rush, rush, we must put it through. In addition, the Minister of State for Finance said that the legislation is needed by January 1 because Canada has made a commitment. I would suggest that he misleads the House because in the—

Mr. Clark (Yellowhead): Order!

Mr. Cassidy: His comment is misleading. During the seminars and information sessions which were held with brokers and importers by the Department of National Revenue over the course of the last few months, the commitments which were made were quite specifically otherwise.

• (1650)

I have a document which was distributed to importers about two and one-half months ago which indicates, as the Minister of State has indicated, that Canada has been committed to a change-over to the harmonized system of tariffs for some years now and began to develop the Canadian tariff based on this system in 1981.

It says that in early 1986 the Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson) confirmed the adoption of a new system for January 1, 1988, under the condition that our major trading partners, i.e., the U.S. and Japan, adopt the harmonized system at the same time. That is what was being told to importers only two months ago, just before this Bill was published.

We have taken care to find out the situation of our major trading partner, the United States. Are they in fact putting this harmonized system into force? Given the degree of interchange between the two countries it would make sense for computerization, record keeping, and so on that the two countries move to the same system at the same time. Contrary to the statements made by the Minister of State for Finance, and contrary to what was said to the brokers and importers, that is not taking place.

We talked to the head of the trade division of the Department of External Affairs last week. He indicated that there is "still some uncertainty" as to whether or not the United States will move to this new harmonized system on January 1. The information of External Affairs was that the harmonized system was part of the omnibus trade Bill which is as protectionist and objectionable a Bill as we can imagine. According to our officials, the Americans have now removed their Bill from the omnibus Bill and introduced new legislation. However, it remains uncertain that the Americans will deal with the legislation prior to January 1.

That was the American story. When we talked to the American trade representatives here in Ottawa, the American