

Softwood Lumber Products Export Charge Act

probably should take precedence. Could I hear the Hon. Member?

Mr. Nunziata: Mr. Speaker, I am prepared to set down my question of privilege until the Hon. Member for Winnipeg—Fort Garry (Mr. Axworthy) completes his submission.

Mr. Speaker: I thank the Hon. Member. The Hon. Member for Winnipeg—Fort Garry.

Mr. Axworthy: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague. I believe my point of order in fact will address the issue to be raised.

We certainly accept and thank the Chair for the condition applied, that any debate would take place without prejudice. I would only say, in parentheses, that it is unfortunate the Government House Leader or his Parliamentary Secretary, taking into account what they heard today, did not show some eminent sense and simply defer debate on the Bill until such time as we have had an opportunity to hear the Speaker's ruling. Nevertheless, that was their decision, and the commentary it makes about their respect for the process of this House stands.

However, what I want to raise by point of order is the conduct of the debate. The Government has just now tabled the Memorandum of Understanding. There are people with immense talents on this side of the House but a capacity for speed reading is not necessarily one of them. For us to ask Hon. Members to proceed with the debate, having just received that memorandum—

Some Hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Axworthy: —is a matter of privilege.

Miss MacDonald: Come, come, don't you read your mail?

Mr. Axworthy: Mr. Speaker, I would be the first to admit that through my own ingenuity I was able to procure a copy of the Memorandum of Understanding at an earlier date. However, that was certainly without facilitation by the Government. It was just that we have an incredibly effective staff that is able to pursue these things to the furthest reaches of the earth.

However, that may not be the case of other Hon. Members who are busily occupied with other matters. As the trade critic, I would have more of a preoccupation. However, we still have Members of the House—

Some Hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Axworthy: Mr. Speaker, can you hear me over the uproar?

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

Mr. Axworthy: I would like to make a further point, if I may.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I assure the Hon. Member for Winnipeg—Fort Garry that I can hear him. I am having a little more difficulty understanding him, but—

Mr. Axworthy: Mr. Speaker, I know it is late in the afternoon. I realize the powers of comprehension have a tendency to wane by this time of the day.

The second point I would make is one which was made earlier. How do I know that the document just tabled is the same document as the one that was signed? There have already been indications by the Minister that the document was to be changed. We are now faced with having to continue a debate on the basis of documents in a Memorandum of Understanding which we are not sure are bona fide or in fact whether it is the same Memorandum of Understanding which was signed on December 30.

I simply wanted to make that point of order and perhaps plead with the Government House Leader that, for the sake of some respect for the rights of Members of Parliament, he call another order of business until such time as we have perused these documents, and of course to await the ruling of the Chair.

Mr. Nunziata: Mr. Speaker, I would have otherwise been scheduled to speak on Bill C-37 at second reading stage exactly four minutes ago. I requested a copy of the Memorandum of Agreement about 10 minutes ago. It was tabled about 15 minutes ago in the House. I just received the Memorandum of Understanding signed by officials of the Government of Canada and by officials of the Government of the United States.

It is a 17-page document. I have to take exception with the Government for proceeding with Bill C-37, notwithstanding the fact that we have argued the point as to whether or not Bill C-37 is properly before the House. I submit that that shows contempt, not only for other Hon. Members in the House but for the Chair, in view of the fact that the Chair has reserved on this particular ruling.

My question of privilege is as follows: If as a duly elected Member of Parliament I am required to speak to a particular piece of legislation, which is in question at this point in time, how am I able to do so when I have been given four minutes to read and understand a 17-page legal document?

● (1540)

I submit that it is your responsibility as Speaker of the House of Commons to protect the rights of individual Members of Parliament who may be affected by the actions of the Government. I cannot speak to Bill C-37 given the circumstances that occurred. The Memorandum of Agreement was just tabled. I say to you, Sir, that this is the first time I have seen this Memorandum of Agreement referred to in Bill C-37.

Mr. Speaker: I will respond immediately to the Hon. Member for York South—Weston (Mr. Nunziata) who, as usual, has made his points succinctly. I want to say to the Hon.