

Metric System

● (2130)

An hon. Member: We even went to your house.

Mr. Hnatyshyn: Yes, they even went to my house. As a matter of fact, I lost a silver knife. It was only a \$50 silver knife but I am not going to suggest that one of the Liberal members took it. That is how generous I feel tonight.

In a more serious vein, Mr. Speaker, the minister knows that the consultation process with the western farmers will not take place overnight. Why is he wasting the time of this parliament by bringing forward this legislation before he is in a position to tell us categorically what amendments he will make to the legislation and regulations to accommodate the western farmers? His statement is an absolute admission of the failure of the government properly to explain the metric legislation to the western farmers. It is a failure, and the minister knows it.

I do not take any great pleasure in saying that. Parliament should be able to work and the government should always try to do the best thing. But when there is failure and the minister admits it, then he has the responsibility for withdrawing the legislation and bringing in new legislation after he has consulted the western farmers. Wasting the time of parliament when we should be trying to get through more important legislation now before committee is an absolute travesty. If I ever hear the government House leader stand up and talk about wasting time, I will remind him of the kind of planning that leaves him with nothing else to present but this metrication bill.

It is my own impression from watching the implementation of metrication that the root problem is the method by which the government brought forward the general adoption of the metric system in Canada. I refer not only to the western farmers but to metrication generally. It has been pointed out on a number of occasions that the correct way to introduce metrication would be to bring in not a resolution, as convenient and appropriate as resolutions are in certain circumstances, allowing for the creation of a metric commission with what I consider to be wide, sweeping powers, but rather to bring in a bill which would specify precisely what steps would be taken, which in turn would be enshrined within the statute books of this country. In this way each step in the introduction of the metric system in Canada could have been considered, rather than the government's bringing in a bill setting up arbitrarily a metric commission which, although accountable to parliament somehow, does not appear before parliament on a regular basis. As far as I know it has never appeared before any standing committee of this House or reported to the House directly.

The reason we are in this predicament today is that this is another example of the government's attempting to impose from above a system of metric conversion, as much as I approve of such a conversion, by regulation instead of by legislation. It is the function of each and every one of us in this parliament to ensure that so far as possible—

Mr. Marchand: You are contradicting yourself.

[Mr. Hnatyshyn.]

Mr. Hnatyshyn: The minister talks about contradictions. I could, of course, deal with the many contradictions on the part of the government with regard to this whole program, but I will not. Introducing the metric system through a group of civil servants who apparently are not accountable to parliament is the reason we are now facing difficulties, particularly so far as the western farmer is concerned.

The western farmer is a unique breed of person. I suggest he is the last of the really legitimate small, independent businessmen in this country. The western farmers generally across the country make a very substantial capital investment. As a result of monetary inflation, inflated land values and cost of equipment and materials, in order to get into operation even in a very modest way in western Canada a farmer must spend at least \$150,000. This kind of capital investment produces for him an income which often is not all that great. He is now facing additional expense and additional concern in his operation.

The minister opposite is from western Canada and can understand how the small farmer is reacting to this process. A farmer does not have an easy life; he works hard for the money he makes. The minister talked about consulting with the farmer, and I was pleased to hear him say that because I believe that is absolutely necessary. This is why I am mystified that we are discussing this bill this evening and wasting the time of the House. I am mystified why the minister did not stand in his place immediately after my colleague from Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain moved his amendment, which gave the minister an ideal opportunity to consult with the western farmer through the vehicle of a standing committee, and say that he would accept it. Instead he kept silent in his place and told us nothing of the kind of consultation he has in mind.

We are all reasonable people in this House, Mr. Speaker; at least I would accept that as a basic proposition. But what the minister is asking us to do in terms of political reality is to accept his word in regard to what consultation will be held. I do not think the minister should treat us in this way; certainly I would not treat him that way. I want to know what the minister has in mind so far as consultations with the western farmer are concerned. As a representative of a western constituency I want to hear, assess and judge that particular proposal. I am not going to sit here like a puppet and give him carte blanche to consult with the western farmers. We have seen what the consultation has consisted of thus far, and it has not been very impressive. Therefore, I ask the minister whether he is really serious about consulting with the western farmer. Why does he not stand up in parliament, which I suggest is the proper place, and say what he has in mind? What kind of amendments would he be receptive to? What kind of implementation does he have in mind? What kind of time frame would he accept in the application of the metric system?

The government has put itself into a very peculiar situation. As a result of this announcement it has seriously antagonized the farm organizations of western Canada. Without exception, the farmers, the representative associations and the farm