

Vehicular Seat Belts

Let me say that this bill needs more work done on it. It is the type of bill which should go to a committee of this House but not in its present form. Indeed, what should happen is that a motion should come before this House directing the Standing Committee on Transport and Communications to make an investigation of the kind of regulations and suggestions which should be made for the automobile industry in connection with safety. I commend the hon. member for bringing this matter before the House. I know other members wish to speak on this subject, so I will conclude my speech now.

Mr. Mather: Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the hon. member, as he resumes his seat, would permit one short question from me?

Mr. Blenkarn: Yes, certainly.

Mr. Mather: Would he object to the subject matter, not the bill, going to a committee for further consideration?

Mr. Blenkarn: Mr. Speaker, in my view the whole subject matter should go to the standing committee immediately. There are a number of important matters on which leadership should be given to the automobile industry. We should not have to depend on foreign suggestions relating to safety and have those imposed upon us here in Canada.

Mr. Charles Turner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labour): Mr. Speaker, the Motor Vehicle Safety Act is designed to protect the public against personal injury, impairment of health or death. The Motor Vehicle Safety Act achieves this end by permitting the Governor in Council to make regulations respecting the use of the national safety mark in relation to motor vehicles. These regulations take the form of safety standards applicable to various classes of motor vehicles. In other words, it is illegal to apply the national safety mark to a motor vehicle unless that motor vehicle complies with the safety standards applying to it. Furthermore, provincial legislation makes it illegal to sell a new vehicle which does not bear the national safety mark. Regulations in the form of safety standards are not written directly into the act because the rate of technological change is of such a magnitude that it would be impractical to change the act every time a safety standard was improved.

During 1972, for instance, the safety standards were amended 18 times and three new standards were introduced. Before going further, I must emphasize that our objective is to obtain the highest possible seat belt usage rate. It is obviously impractical, however, to achieve this objective through the amendment of an act which already, by means of the regulations, requires seat belts to be fitted in every new automobile, together with a warning system in the case of front seat-occupants, which reminds the driver to fasten his seat belt and to ask his passenger to do the same.

Seat belts have been required equipment on new automobiles sold in Canada since the regulations, made pursuant to the Motor Vehicle Safety Act, became effective on January 1, 1971. The effectiveness of the relevant safety standard was widened on July 1, 1972 to include trucks, buses and multi-purpose vehicles. This widening of the safety standard required a seat belt of a specified type

to be provided at each designated seating position of a truck and multi-purpose vehicle regardless of the vehicle weight. It also required that a seat belt of specified type be provided for the driver of a bus.

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Various provincial governments required that seat belts be fitted to automobiles some time before the federal Motor Vehicle Safety Act became law. Some provincial requirements on this topic go as far back as 1967. The adoption of what is called the auto pact influenced the design of automobiles designed in the United States and manufactured in this country, bringing about the widespread installation of seats belts in anticipation of government regulations.

Seat belt utilization is admittedly more infrequent than we would like it to be. However, improved motor vehicle safety regulations are resulting in safety belts which are more comfortable to wear and are easier to fasten and unfasten. These trends should result in the greater usage of these important safety devices. Furthermore, amendments to the motor vehicle safety regulations, which are in the process of being proposed for adoption at present, will make safety belts even easier to use, resulting, we hope, in a further increase in their usage.

The proposed amendments address themselves to emergency locking retractors and one piece shoulder and lap straps among other things. The inertia reel device allows the wearer of the belt full freedom of movement under all conditions except in emergencies which involved the rapid deceleration of the vehicle. The one piece shoulder and lap strap requirement will result in the wider use of shoulder straps. The effect of this trend will be to reduce the number of instances of the occupant of the automobile striking the windshield, the steering wheel, the mirror, the instrument panel, and other objects within the occupant compartment of the vehicle, thereby reducing injuries in motor vehicle accidents.

The national highway traffic safety administration of the United States government has recognized the hostility of a large majority of automobile occupants to the wearing of seat belts and is slowly moving toward the introduction of a regulation which will require the installation of automatic occupant restraint systems which will necessitate no action on the part of the occupant to make them effective. These systems, however, are complex and costly when compared with the well-tried and well-understood seat belt. It is hoped that in Canada gentle persuasion of motorists to use the seat belt will result in the saving of lives and reduction of injuries, thus creating a trend superior to those that the more complex restraint systems favoured by the United States government can achieve.

While comparing the Canadian situation with that prevailing in the United States, it should be pointed out that since August 15, 1973, U.S. safety regulations require automobile seat belt systems to be interlocked with the motor in such a way that the vehicle cannot be moved unless the driver and passengers on the front seat are first seated and then have fastened their seat belts properly. In Canada, it is considered that such an involved arrangement might merely increase the automobile users hostility toward seat belts as a result of the numerous inconveni-