

Oral Questions

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, whenever we have a chance, we raise the issue of human rights throughout the world, and that includes when we discuss politics with the Chinese. We also discuss the problem when it is time to make decisions on distributing envelopes for development assistance.

However, we realize that we must maintain normal trading relations with China as with other countries. We also believe, as has been the case in the Soviet Union, that these countries become more open as a result of economic growth and trade with democratic countries, and that when they experience the benefits of market economies and democratic freedoms, obviously attitudes change.

When I go to China, I intend to raise the issue of human rights, but at the same time, I would like to maintain normal trading relations with that country. I think this is the best way for Canada to protect our commercial interests and at the same time be present so that we can raise the issue of human rights with the authorities of that country.

Hon. Lucien Bouchard (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, does the Prime Minister realize that by letting commercial interests prevail over human rights, Canada is relinquishing its historic responsibility, since the Prime Minister knows perfectly well that polite comments behind closed doors will have no impact on foreign leaders who systematically violate human rights? I would like to ask him whether that is why Canada did not express public support for U.S. protests against China on the issue of human rights.

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, we always raise this issue, and we did. We have an international policy that is different and does not depend on the position of the United States, and I think Canadians want Canada to take an independent position in this respect. For instance, we were the first country, well before the United States, to recognize China. It was not until after Canada recognized China that the United States did so.

I think Canada has always raised the issue of human rights and has always traded with China. Under the Diefenbaker government, we were already selling wheat to China. We have had trading relations with the Soviet Union, and we always raised the issue of human rights. We did not change our priorities, but we know, and we say this quite frankly, that it is no use being holier than thou. If I told the President of China, who represents 1.2 billion people, that the Prime Minister of Canada was telling him what to do, he would laugh in my face. I think the best way to accomplish something is to help this country develop its potential, and once they have had many exchanges with the Western world, they will understand the benefits of democracy and respect for human rights and economic progress in a market economy.

Hon. Lucien Bouchard (Leader of the Opposition): The Chinese leaders are not going to be impressed by our dollars. What they will respect is an international conscience which Canada has always brought to bear throughout the world and on which its present prestige in the world is based.

There is a clear lack of continuity between the great international accomplishments that are largely the work of the Liberal Party, and its heirs here in the House today, who are frittering away that legacy.

I would like to ask the Prime Minister whether this means that on his trip to Mexico, he will not raise the issue of human rights violations in the province of Chiapas with the Mexican President, although as a trading partner, he will be in a position to do so.

• (1420)

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, as soon as we were informed of the problems in Chiapas, we sent a note of protest to the Mexican government. If you read the notes that came from Mexico, you would see that we were one of the first countries to do so and one of the countries that protested most vigorously.

Nevertheless, we believe that it is normal to have trading relations with Mexico. I am surprised to hear the Leader of the Opposition say we should not have trading relations with Mexico and China because we do not like the way they govern their countries.

We have always had trading relations, and it would be hypocrisy to claim that we can cut off our trading relations with countries with whom we disagree on the issue of human rights. We have always traded with China, the Soviet Union and Mexico. We intend to continue and to raise the issue of fundamental freedoms at the same time.

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GOVERNMENT'S CREDIT RATING

Mr. Yvan Loubier (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot): Mr. Speaker, as expected, the Dominion Bond Rating Service of Toronto lowered the federal government's credit rating yesterday, justifying its move by the government's inability to put its fiscal house in order. This lower rating, which will translate into hundreds of thousands of dollars in costs to the taxpayers of Quebec and Canada, revives the spectre of major hikes in interest rates, a scenario which occurred before under the Liberals in the early 1980s.

Does the Minister of Finance not agree that this lower rating is tantamount to an unequivocal condemnation of Canada by the financial community, signalling the failure of his budget with regard to public spending control?

Hon. Paul Martin (Minister of Finance and Minister responsible for the Federal Office of Regional Development—Quebec): Mr. Speaker, in lowering this rating, the