

Proceedings on Adjournment Motion

country. I wish to ask what action the government contemplates taking in the immediate weeks ahead with respect to a great opportunity that our country faces in terms of its international trade.

On June 13 I asked in the house whether the Prime Minister, in light of the meeting to be held shortly in Ottawa with representatives and heads of government of the British West Indies, could not tell us whether the government was contemplating some form of customs union with the islands involved.

At a later date we had one hour's debate during private members hour about this, and we discussed in part the importance of such a proposal to the future economic trade of our nation, and to the future development of the islands known as the Little Eight, namely the Leeward and Windward islands of the British West Indies.

Perhaps I should put on the record the names of the islands concerned. They are the islands of Antigua, St. Kitts, Montserrat, Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Granada. The land area of these islands is about half that of Prince Edward Island. Their population is close to 700,000.

As I say, there is to be a conference in Ottawa between July 6 and July 8. It is believed by many of the representatives of these islands that there will be considered in Ottawa the possibility of far reaching economic and customs ties. I know for a fact that the Minister of Transport has made at least three trips to the islands and has shown considerable interest in the proposal I have referred to. I believe he has given encouragement to the whole idea.

Indeed, at the conclusion of the private members hour dealing with this question the other day the Minister of Public Works said this:

With your indulgence I should like to say something about the subject matter of the debate that has taken place in the last hour. The government will take cognizance of the apparent unanimity in respect of this important subject matter. It is of importance and concern to the government and is receiving active consideration. I might say that I have a personal interest in this subject, having had a somewhat similar motion on the order paper some years ago.

I heartily support the minister's interest.

Because we have this interest that has been expressed in this way, and because it will not be long before these islands have virtual independence, it is of great importance that we be assured publicly that the government of

[Mr. MacDonald (Prince).]

Canada is moving in the direction that I have suggested. I can see that if the government takes far reaching action in the early days of July, without first having informed public opinion, the public might not be prepared for this kind of activity and might resent it. We all know what happens when public opinion is not informed and directed in the right way.

Time is running out. Representatives of the West Indies governments have come to Canada, almost cap in hand, in order to determine what our government's position on this matter is. We must have a statement either from the Prime Minister or from his representative. We must be put much more into the picture as to what action our government plans to take in this regard.

Mr. P.-E. Trudeau (Parliamentary Secretary to Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Prince has expressed amazement in his suggestion that the government has been somewhat laconic about its relations with the commonwealth countries of the West Indies. I will try to put an end to that amazement by stating the following:

The high importance attached by the present government to Canada's economic relations with the commonwealth countries in the Caribbean is well demonstrated by the initiative which it has taken in co-operation with those countries to hold a meeting of prime ministers and chief ministers from the commonwealth Caribbean countries and Canada in Ottawa in less than a fortnight's time. At the forthcoming conference much attention will be given to the question of the best basis for trade relations between that area and Canada.

• (10:10 p.m.)

The 1926 agreement between those countries or territories and Canada has served well the interests of all participants in the circumstances which have existed since it was negotiated. The problem of working out the best form of trade relations is not a simple one. A customs union would have important implications of various kinds which would clearly require the most careful examination by all prospective participants. Other arrangements would have different implications. We should be prepared to examine any reasonable proposal. The fact that the economies of the Caribbean countries and Canada are complementary means that the trading potentialities are very considerable. It