

Oral Questions

● (1430)

[English]

THE ECONOMY

REPORTED STATEMENT BY NEWFOUNDLAND PREMIER

Hon. James A. McGrath (St. John's East): Madam Speaker, I should like to direct a question to the Minister of Finance. He will know that the Premier of Newfoundland is reported as having said that the Prime Minister and the Premiers agreed that the recovery would be short-lived, 18 to 24 months at best, after which the country would slide back into a prolonged bout of high unemployment and low productivity.

Does the Minister of Finance subscribe to the consensus which has apparently developed among First Ministers and, if so, notwithstanding the position he has taken earlier in the House, is it his intention to try to achieve some kind of consensus with the Provinces on a common strategy to cope with this mounting crisis?

Hon. Marc Lalonde (Minister of Finance): Madam Speaker, out of experience I would like to check with the Prime Minister about the consensus arrived at at the meeting rather than rely on the words of Premier Peckford.

Mr. Nielsen: Write him a letter.

Mr. McGrath: Madam Speaker, that kind of attitude on the part of the Minister of Finance of Canada is hardly helpful in this sort of situation.

PLIGHT OF PEOPLE ON WELFARE

Hon. James A. McGrath (St. John's East): Madam Speaker, I have a supplementary question for the Minister of Finance. Press reports say that 1.8 million Canadians are now on the welfare rolls of the country. That is 1.8 million men, women and children are on welfare, and last year alone 640,000 Canadians were added to the ranks of the poverty stricken of this country. In a survey conducted in January 50 per cent of those surveyed by Gallup said they would be touched directly or indirectly by unemployment. That is the state of this nation today. I want to ask the Minister of Finance, who surely has some responsibility here, what hope he can offer to those on welfare, to the unemployed, and to those forced on to the poverty rolls?

Hon. Marc Lalonde (Minister of Finance): Madam Speaker, the Hon. Member will surely recall what Premier Peckford used to say about him during the last election campaign. Surely he would not want me to believe a press report on what Premier Peckford said about a possible consensus, after knowing what the Premier had said about the Hon. Member when he was Minister of Fisheries in the former Government.

Mr. McGrath: Madam Speaker, I believe that the House and the country are entitled to a reply from the Minister of Finance to this most serious question. What is left of his reputation is on the line here.

REQUEST FOR MEETING OF FINANCE MINISTERS

Hon. James A. McGrath (St. John's East): Madam Speaker, I am going to ask the Minister of Finance if he intends to meet with his provincial counterparts at least to address the problem of the two million Canadians who are on the welfare rolls, for which the Provinces have to pick up half the tab.

Hon. Marc Lalonde (Minister of Finance): Madam Speaker, I do not know where the Hon. Member has been lately. I met with my provincial colleagues last December and again two weeks ago, to address those very questions.

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[Translation]

TRANSPORT

CN—POSSIBLE TRANSFER OF PERSONNEL FROM MONTREAL TO TORONTO—GOVERNMENT POSITION

Hon. Roch La Salle (Joliette): Madam Speaker, my question is directed to the Minister of Transport. The Minister is no doubt aware of the fact that employees of the CN Express Department in Montreal are very concerned about the possibility of this department being transferred to Toronto. In the interest of these employees who are seriously worried about the future, could the Minister inform the House whether he is aware of CN's plans and what he intends to do about it?

Hon. Jean-Luc Pepin (Minister of Transport): Yes, Madam Speaker, I am aware of CN's intentions. We must look at the facts. Last year, CN Express lost \$30 million, and one of the reasons was that they were unable to compete with entrepreneurs in the private sector. That led to a plan to merge CN Express and CN trucking services. A study revealed that the centre of operations, and therefore, what might become CN Headquarters for this sector, should be located in the Toronto area. I was told about this, and I said that it was a subject of considerable concern to the Minister of Transport and the Prime Minister. No decision has been made as yet. I have also asked CN to see whether it would not be possible to achieve a compromise.

Mr. La Salle: Madam Speaker—and this also concerns the Minister of Transport—not long ago, the Member for La Prairie, in a paper he drafted, deplored the fact that for ten years Air Canada had been toying with the idea of transferring some of its activities from Montreal or Quebec to Ontario. He also urged the Minister of Transport to force Air Canada to make a statement on this subject. Has the Minister of Transport asked Air Canada to make public, or to comment on, the paper presented by the Member for La Prairie?

Mr. Pepin: Madam Speaker, the Member for La Prairie and myself have been having a very friendly discussion about this for some weeks now. I maintain that the percentage of Air Canada employees working in Montreal has not changed in ten