

Export Development Act

● (1230)

Rightly or wrongly—and I submit to a large extent wrongly—there is a belief that many public servants have not the capacity to fill the talent required. I feel that that prejudice is probably, to some extent, unjustified. However, it is important in an economic recovery of any kind, Mr. Speaker, that the confidence of the people at large be assured. One example of that is that Canadians today have the largest amount of their money sitting in saving funds. Canadians have the largest amount of savings of any other industrial nation of the world. I understand that there is just short of 20 per cent of the cash wealth of this country in savings accounts.

The main reason we do not take our money out and spend it is the question of confidence. We are more confident in having our money in savings than in investments, and I submit that that question of confidence, whether justified or not, is one that is extremely important to the enhancement of our economy. Because there is that belief held by the Canadian people generally that our exports will be better served if we have people from the private sector with exporting experience working in our best interests and enhancing those exports, then we are by that very philosophy likely to have a better export agency in choosing our directors from that perspective.

The other reason for opening up seats on the board of directors to others besides public servants is the search for talent. If we have the best talent, we have the best results for Canada. If we specify that a specific number of public servants are going to be members, we obviously, by that formula, limit the search. What we should be doing is opening up the EDC to talent of the highest quality which we can possibly discover. If we are able to do that, Mr. Speaker, then it seems to me we will have eliminated the right of the Government to influence as well as having sought out the best talent.

The other aspect which I would like to speak on for just a moment is that when there are persons appointed from the Public Service there is the opportunity for political influence. The Minister may suggest that that influence would never be exercised, that he would not do that. However, it is irrelevant whether or not he, as a person, would exercise this influence. The fact is that influence is possible.

Second, there is always suspicion that it is going on even if it does not take place. Those dangers can be avoided simply by ensuring that the majority of persons who are appointed to the board of directors come from the exporting field of the private sector and can serve the philosophies which the Minister has established for the EDC, as opposed to having persons there who are Public Service related. Whether they come from the Minister's department or not, the fact is they are servants of government. The concept is not widely understood among Canadians that civil servants are neutral to politics. The belief is that they are servants to persons and to political parties rather than servants to the country. While it is an unfortunate perspective, the truth is there have been enough incidents in the past to give credence to the Canadian belief that some civil servants do in fact lend themselves to political influence.

Therefore, there is the long-held understanding of Canadians, then, that bureaucrats, by nature, build sandcastles and empires as opposed to being leaner in structure and staffing than do those who traditionally had to work towards a bottom line—they could not have that which they could not pay for. Because in government any time you want something more you simply are able to ask the taxpayers to pay more, the confidence is in those who are operating in the private sector, the belief being that they will run a leaner enterprise.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, I believe the Minister should see there is some wisdom in the amendments we are putting forward and should find that that amendment is acceptable. While there is not a great deal that one can add to this particular point—we have gone at it from different angles with different words to express essentially the same thing—we should not but underscore that this point is important, even though there is not a great dimension to which we can expand the concern. If it is the whole nature of a Crown corporation to be removed from government, then surely if we are to have an agency which is removed from government, its board of directors should be removed also by having persons involved other than those civil servants of government. That ought to be the bottom line for the operation of Crown corporations, not just this one but as a general principle.

Mr. Dave Nickerson (Western Arctic): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to speak very briefly on the amendment because I do not want to become repetitive. We have before us the Export Development Act. We are discussing Motion No. 1 which deals with the appointment of the board of directors. I want to say, Mr. Speaker, that there is probably a greater consensus among Parliamentarians on all sides of this House on the issue of the Export Development Act and the EDC than on most issues. I do not think there are any Members of this House who do not support the EDC and what it is trying to do. We might have some differences of opinion about the exact directions it might take and the exact ways in which it goes about its business, but in general we all support what has been very beneficial to Canada in the past and we hope it will continue to be equally beneficial.

● (1240)

In my usual co-operative fashion I am going to address Motion No. 1 which deals with the various appointments and isolate those areas in which I and my colleagues find ourselves in agreement with the Government. First of all, we have no real objection to the proposed increase in the board of directors of the EDC from a chairman and 11 directors to a chairman and 14 directors. On occasion I have spoken in this House in opposition to increases to boards of directors of Crown corporations and other agencies, but in this particular case I will not belabour that point.

It is nice to see, Sir, that the age limit of 70 has been removed. It is only a few years ago that we put an age limit on senators, and in this particular piece of legislation we are taking the opposite tack and allowing people above the age of 70 to be appointed to the board. As a personal opinion, I think