Customs Tariff (No. 2)

● (1540)

Regardless of whether one looks to figures supplied by Statistics Canada or to those made available by the Department of Industry, Trade and Commerce, it becomes evident that in the last three years our net trade surplus has been declining. This is true in spite of the fact that our total export trade has been increasing. It is a simple fact that our imports, in dollar value, have been increasing at a more accelerated rate than our exports.

Accordingly, if we are to reverse this trend, as reverse it we must to avoid a deficit balance in trade, we must stimulate those industries involved in the export of Canadian goods and, more important, we must establish industries or provide incentives to those industries which we have, to provide in as large a measure as possible the goods which are presently being imported. In other words, we should attempt to stimulate those industries which can supply our market with Canadian products presently being serviced by imports.

For the last quarter of a century Canada has been lowering its tariff protection, particularly with respect to manufactured goods, at a rate far in excess of other trading nations and today we possess fewer non-tariff barriers to trade than any of our major trading partners such as the United States and countries in the European Economic Community. One has to be concerned, as we approach the forthcoming trade negotiations with the United States, with which country we conduct some 75 per cent of our trade, as to exactly what strength we possess at the bargaining table and what tools we have at our command with which to obtain trade concessions from the United States and, indeed, from other trading partners all of whom have lately manifested an increasingly protectionist attitude.

We do have our natural resources, including water and the products of our forests, which are coveted by most of our trading partners, particularly the U.S., but if we are to rely on these as pawns at the bargaining table and as our sole trump cards, I suggest we shall be playing a reckless game of poker with the destiny of this nation at stake.

The Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) has told us that the unilateral removal and reduction of tariffs as this bill proposes is done in the name of reducing prices to the Canadian consumer. While there may be some evidence of this, I have yet to be convinced so far as the whole list is concerned. There is no doubt that as a result of the tariff reductions, United States exports to this country will increase, and the question has to be asked: At what cost to the Canadian manufacturer or the Canadian producer? I trust that the minister is sincere and, more important, that he is correct in stating that the reason for and the result of the tariff reductions will be lower costs to the Canadian consumer. I trust that the purpose is not an attempt to soften, placate or be nice to the Americans, because nice fellows seldom finish first, particularly when the stakes are so high.

I wish to direct the attention of hon. members to an industry which I am convinced will not be helped by the tariff cuts and in fact is put in a more perilous position by this bill. I have little doubt that hon. members have heard of the southerly half of Ontario's golden horseshoe, but I doubt if many members are aware of the importance of Niagara's tender fruit, grape and wine industry and the problems which that industry faces today.

A while ago, when this House was sitting in committee, I entered the chamber while a spirited debate was taking place with regard to the plight of the western wheat grower. I listened intently to speeches from both sides of the House. Knowing very little about the problems of producing and selling wheat, I was left unsure as to who was right. But if this government and previous Liberal administrations have treated wheat growers as they have the Canadian fruit industry, I can well understand why the Liberal Party has been nearly decimated and obliterated in western Canada. Judging from the attitude of this government, the fruit and vegetable grower simply does not exist, for it has consistently ignored every measure to assist this industry and appears to believe that the industry can go down the proverbial drain with scarcely a ripple.

The Niagara fruit industry is centred in an area of my riding bounded on the north by the south shore of Lake Ontario, on the west by the great industrial city of Hamilton, on the east by the Niagara River and on the south by the Niagara escarpment. It is a basic element to the economic well-being of the towns of Grimsby, Lincoln and Pelham, the city of St. Catharines, and the most historical town of Niagara-on-the-Lake. This area of some 40,000 acres is well suited for the production of sweet and sour cherries, peaches, pears, plums and grapes as a result of several unique physical features including soil and climate duplicated by few areas in Canada or, indeed, anywhere in North America.

There are approximately 3,000 fruit growers in my riding who pay wages to 5,000 full-time and seasonal workers estimated at $7 million. The tender fruit processing industry creates additional work for another 5,000 seasonal workers with a payroll averaging $6 million annually. Because of an increasingly higher volume of tender fruit sold privately on highway markets, caused to a great extent by a feeling of insecurity in the processing industry as a result of unfair offshore competition of processed fruit, it becomes difficult to state accurately the total value to growers of all fruit produced; however, the value of processed tender fruits averages approximately $7 million, and grapes about $12 million.

Taken in total, the fruit industry together with its attendant or associated industries represents to all those involved an industry of some $50 million. In short, the Niagara fruit area ranks among the prime tender fruit growing areas in the world and produces 80 per cent of all Canada's tender fruit crops plus 90 per cent of Canada's grape and wine production. However, this industry, like others, is not without its problems, the most important of which is to remain economically viable against rising costs of labour, chemicals and containers, skyrocketing land values as a result of the pressures from five or six major cities surrounding the fruit belt, and increased competition from offshore products of like kind.

Most basic in any discussion of Canadian agriculture—here I refer specifically to the Niagara fruit industry—is the firm resolve to maintain and nurture that agricultural industry of which fruit and vegetables are an important part. Any nation that does not possess and protect an