

Oral Questions

citizenship. My business is to ensure that people have the franchise to vote, whether it is in a referendum, a provincial election or a federal election. We make no apologies for that.

• (1445)

The member of Parliament accuses me of writing wrong letters to all the people who become new citizens. Let me quote from the former secretary of state in the preceding government, who is currently the leader of the Bloc Québécois. He stated in the letter: "I wish to extend to you my personal congratulations and those of the Prime Minister on the occasion of your becoming a Canadian citizen. Your government is pleased that of all the nations of the world you have chosen Canada as your new home".

* * *

PORCUPINE CARIBOU

Mr. Gordon Kirkby (Prince Albert—Churchill River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the U.S. Congress is considering legislation to allow oil and gas development in the calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd in the Arctic national wildlife refuge in Alaska. An all-party report supported protecting the calving grounds of the herd which migrates between Yukon and Alaska.

Could the Minister of Foreign Affairs tell the House what the Canadian government has done to protect the calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd?

Hon. André Ouellet (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada has expressed its strong opposition to the congressional proposal. Indeed I wrote to Warren Christopher about the question. My colleague, the environment minister, also wrote to her counterpart. The Prime Minister has spoken to President Clinton.

We certainly hope the congressional proposal will be amended. If not, the president will exercise his veto.

* * *

FISHERIES

Mr. Mike Scott (Skeena, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans.

When the Liberals announced the Atlantic groundfish strategy in May 1994 they called it a program to end all programs. Significant funding was allocated to reduce industry capacity and for retraining.

The government has already siphoned money away from retraining. Last week the minister announced funding reductions to the \$300 million buy back program, the heart of capacity reduction, because TAGS benefits are running unchecked resulting in a massive deficit.

Will the minister admit to the House and to the fishermen in Atlantic Canada that TAGS is in total chaos and will do nothing more than perpetuate income dependency?

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will make no such admission.

The Reform Party really has to sort itself out. Its members spend most of their time calling for a total cancellation of the TAGS program, cancellation of all forms of unemployment insurance assistance and, if we read between the lines, cancellation of Atlantic Canada on most days.

The Liberal Party announced last week in consultation with my colleague, the Minister of Human Resources Development, the beginning of the early retirement component of that program for fishermen between the ages of 55 and 64, the first round of a licence retirement program. The Minister of Human Resources Development will proceed shortly with details on early retirement programs for plant workers.

We are well on our way to achieving our 50 per cent capacity reduction objective and we are on our way to rebuilding the Atlantic fishery for the long term.

Mr. Mike Scott (Skeena, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, this is not our program; this is their program. They are not meeting their own targets.

Fishermen in Atlantic Canada tell me that TAGS has a \$400 million projected deficit because, to be frank, just about anybody could qualify for benefits. One fish plant operator told me that one-third of his workforce left their jobs to go on TAGS. Another fisherman told me: "All you need to do to qualify for benefits is show up at a TAGS office wearing a pair of rubber fishing boots".

• (1450)

Will the minister admit that TAGS is an abject failure because it has been totally mismanaged and will now do almost nothing to reduce industry capacity?

Hon. Brian Tobin (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is tragic when a member is on the job for a short period of time as a critic and then perpetuates certain rather destructive myths about a region of the country. "All you have to do to qualify for assistance is show up with a pair of rubber boots" is the kind of cruel and twisted humour that does nothing to solve the problems of Atlantic Canada.

The reality of the TAGS program is that 39,000 people qualified, but only 25,000 have actually taken assistance. The others have been able to find new kinds of work in the fishery or in other sectors. Fourteen thousand people who qualify based on the criteria have gone off to find a new start in their lives. Thousands more have entered training programs and many more thousands are now in the process of moving out of this industry and making a new beginning in their lives.