

fulfilling their function, he would be a lot better off and would do a much better job for his Party.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Shall the remaining questions stand?

Some Hon. Members: Agreed.

● (1550)

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

ATLANTIC FISHERIES RESTRUCTURING ACT

MEASURE TO ESTABLISH

The House resumed consideration of the motion of Mr. De Bané that Bill C-170, an Act to authorize investment in and the provision of financial assistance to the Atlantic Fisheries for the purpose of restructuring fishery enterprises, be read the third time and do pass.

Hon. Pierre De Bané (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans): Mr. Speaker, when I introduced this Bill for second reading, I ventured the opinion that it was one of the most important in the history of the Canadian fisheries. Since then, I believe it has acquired another distinction. I know of no other Bill affecting the fisheries which has moved through the House so rapidly and with such thorough scrutiny by all interested parties.

A great deal has happened in a very short time. As Hon. Members know, this Bill received second reading on November 18. Since then it has been the subject of intensive hearings before the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Forestry. The Committee, in a truly marathon effort, Mr. Speaker, held meetings which went far into the night, right through the week. In the case of the sessions, last Thursday we did not finish our work until 4.30 in the morning. Even yesterday at 11 p.m., I was appearing before the Senate Committee which was studying the same Bill. They were very well attended hearings. A cross-section of the industry was present. Inshore and offshore fishermen were both represented. So were the representatives of the similar independent processing companies of the region.

If I may say so, Mr. Speaker, I wished at times that the parliamentary television audience across Canada could have seen these hearings. It would have been a powerful advertisement for the benefits of an open parliamentary system. I can think of no interest which was not represented, no important concern or apprehension which was not expressed, no potential pitfall which was not explored. And all this was done in one week.

The industry, for its part, needs to look Government in the eye and make up its mind about its commitment and its intentions. You cannot legislate this kind of confidence, nor can you build it from a distance. You can, however, develop it through direct dialogue. I will not pretend that we have

Atlantic Fisheries Restructuring Act

dispelled every single doubt in committee. However, we have made an impressive start toward improved confidence. One unfounded concern, which had become visible both in this House and outside it, was that the Government was coming into the Atlantic fishery industry to stay on a permanent basis. That concern emerged even after specific formal commitments were made, for instance, in the Newfoundland agreement and in public statements. I believe we have successfully dealt with these concerns. The Bill now contains a clause by which the federal Government commits itself to divestiture if the circumstances are right and as soon as the industry is profitable. On the other hand, and I think rightly so, I could not give an ironclad guarantee because it would be most imprudent to give such a commitment without being able to assess the particular circumstances of the moment. The intention is there, however. It is clear. It is included in the agreement we have reached, both with the Government of Newfoundland and the agreement in principle with the Government of Nova Scotia.

We have also added a clause to the Bill which sets up a systematic process of keeping Canadian taxpayers, who are now temporary shareholders of the industry, informed about the state of their investment. The Bill now calls for the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans to report to this House on an annual basis. Those reports, incidentally, will cover progress toward divestiture, if the Minister has some relevant information to give in that regard. However, again, while the intention is clear, I believe it would have been most imprudent to have accepted amendments which would have committed the Government, without regard to the circumstances, to follow only one course of action. On the other hand, if circumstances are right, the companies are profitable and suitable buyers are interested to invest, then, of course, the Government would be anxious to get out.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, we have been careful in these measures to avoid what one might call "institutional role conflict". We did not feel that the Department of Government which is responsible for managing the fisheries and for setting the ground rules, should even be a temporary shareholder in the industry. We were able to clarify this in committee by stipulating that the Government's share will not be held in the name of the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans. The moment he buys shares he will have to transfer them to another Minister, for instance, the Minister responsible for the Canada Development Investment Corporation.

More generally, Mr. Speaker, these hearings have helped to clarify the broad purpose of these measures. I believe it is now more generally understood, for instance, that this Bill is not simply a mechanism to ratify agreements between the federal Government and the Governments of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. I believe that the committee and the fishing industry also understand that it is not an appropriation Bill, that it does not deal in programs. If specific programs need to be set up in the future, that will be done subject to the normal budgetary and other procedures of Parliament.