

when he spoke before the United Nations. I think it is inappropriate for a country like Canada, which has in the past been actively involved in such matters, simply to be silent in this instance. Therefore, I ask the minister when there will be some response by the Canadian government to these very important questions that were raised by Mr. Gorbachev.

**Hon. Lowell Murray (Leader of the Government, Minister of State for Federal-Provincial Relations and Acting Minister of Communications):** Honourable senators, on December 7, which was the date of President Gorbachev's address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, the Prime Minister issued a brief statement with regard to the President's announcement about unilateral reductions in military forces. Further to that, on December 8, the NATO ministers issued a statement on conventional arms control. Of course, Canada is part of that alliance. Our view is that, taken together, President Gorbachev's announcement and the December 8 statement on conventional arms control issued by NATO ministers indicate that both sides are preparing seriously for the negotiations, to begin next year, aimed at maintaining stability in Europe at lower levels of conventional forces. These will be important negotiations, because, even after the announced Soviet reductions have been implemented, serious conventional force imbalances to the benefit of the Warsaw Pact will remain. In our view the prospects for serious and productive negotiations have never been better. Honourable senators, that information is taken from a statement made by my colleague, the Secretary of State for External Affairs.

With regard to the proposals made by President Gorbachev on commercial debt reduction and a call for an international debt conference, I can tell honourable senators that these are also under consideration, although the government has reservations about any scheme to transfer responsibility for commercial debts to the public sector. We do believe that the use of existing international fora obviates the need for a debt conference.

Canada has been a leader in bilateral and multilateral efforts to ease the debt burden of developing countries and help them carry out essential economic reforms. We and a number of other developed countries have already written off much of the official development assistance debt for the least developed countries. We also took action at the Toronto Summit on the matter of debt relief. My colleague states that we are prepared to work constructively with the U.S.S.R. and other countries in finding realistic and constructive approaches to managing the problems of the less developed countries' indebtedness.

I do not have notes from my colleague with regard to the statements of President Gorbachev on environmental matters, but I shall ask him what comment he may wish to convey to the Senate in that regard.

**Senator Olson:** If I may, I will point out to the Leader of the Government that these statements, innocuous as they are, are not entirely satisfactory. Take, for example, the Third World debt problem, which we in this country have regarded as one of the major difficulties facing world commerce. Indeed, many

[Senator Olson.]

believe that a crisis will develop unless some additional action is taken. It seems to me that all the Leader of the Government has said is that Canada is acting cautiously and that the government does not believe that any further action needs to be taken. I think that is an inappropriate response.

I shall simply ask again whether the Government of Canada intends to take some further action involving the other half of the world—something which has never happened before—in trying to come to grips with this critical problem.

Honourable senators, I will go no further today, but I hope that the Leader of the Government will give us some indication of what the response of the government will be with respect to the significant offer made by President Gorbachev with respect to the environment.

### FIRST MINISTERS

#### PROSPECTIVE MEETING—MEECH LAKE ACCORD AS AGENDA ITEM

**Hon. Jack Austin:** Honourable senators, I have a question supplementary to others that were raised earlier with respect to the situation in Quebec. I am sure the Leader of the Government is aware that this evening three members of the Bourassa cabinet, all anglophones, resigned from their positions, and the fourth member has not yet taken a decision in that regard. I raise the question simply to demonstrate once again the sensitivities that are being expressed in the province of Quebec in a language group that does feel threatened.

● (2200)

The *Toronto Star* today is quoting Senator Murray as having taken steps to organize an informal meeting of First Ministers in January. Can Senator Murray confirm that this is being done, and can he also tell us the purpose of that meeting?

**Hon. Lowell Murray (Leader of the Government, Minister of State for Federal-Provincial Relations and Acting Minister of Communications):** Honourable senators, I can only tell the house that in October the Prime Minister wrote to the First Ministers because the annual First Ministers' Conference had been scheduled for November and had to be cancelled because of the calling of the election. He wrote to them to indicate that he would be calling them together some time early in the new mandate, as he put it, for an informal meeting, and that this would probably be followed by a more formal meeting later on.

No date has been set, but we will be in touch with the provinces before long to arrange an informal meeting. This is the practice that was followed immediately after the 1984 election.

**Senator Austin:** Can we expect the question of the process of the approval of Meech Lake to be one of the agenda items?

**Senator Murray:** Honourable senators, I would be astonished if it were not.