

CUSTOMS TARIFF—EFFECT OF TARIFF ON BOOK PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

Ms. Lynn McDonald (Broadview—Greenwood): Mr. Speaker, in June of 1986 the Conservative Government slapped a 10 per cent duty on imported English language books. This very mistaken policy of the Conservative Government was in response to the tariff on shakes and shingles.

• (1800)

The Conservatives did that without thinking about it. They did not consider the consequences. It was convenient. There was a provision there and it was easy to do. So this very mistaken policy was adopted. It became very clear soon after, and in the intervening months it has become even clearer, that this policy has not resulted in punishing the Americans. It has certainly not made the Americans withdraw their duty on shakes and shingles, but it has hurt the Canadian publishing industry. It has raised prices on books and has hurt Canadian consumers, Canadian readers. It is in effect a tax on reading. The Government agreed to look at the situation. It has received information in the intervening months, and I would call upon it to reverse itself and take off this 10 per cent tariff.

We have information from the Canadian Book Publishers Council on the impact of this policy. Prices have been raised on books and, of course, administrative costs in managing this new tariff have raised the price of books even further. Canadian libraries are forced to buy books offshore. It is a peculiarity that books destined for public libraries are exempt from the duty. Librarians would expect rebates from the publisher. However, the rebate process costs more than the rebate itself. To get around this, libraries are buying directly from American agents. This means that Canadian publishers who previously had this business and could use the profit from that to help subsidize the publication of Canadian books have lost those subsidies they were in effect earning from their imported English language books.

Most imported books are sold through Canadian publishers and that important business has been lost. International co-publishing has been threatened. Canadian trade publishers have expanded their lists to include foreign originated books for which they have secured copyright in Canada. These books are often printed in the United States. Original Canadian books are often printed offshore for many other reasons, and there is a duty when they come into Canada. Therefore Canadian authors are hurt by reduced sales as a result. This has been an extremely unfortunate policy.

I would like to read what the League of Canadian Poets has to say:

The League of Canadian Poets strongly objects to the imposition of a tariff on imported books and periodicals—

The League has supported positive Government actions on behalf of Canadian writing and the Canadian publishing industry. The League, however, deplors any tariff barrier to the free flow of information, and opposes, specifically, this linkage of books and periodicals with current trade disputes and free trade negotiations.

Adjournment Debate

The League of Canadian Poets strongly urges the federal Government to rescind this tariff.

I wholly support that recommendation. This policy is not hurting American publishers, it is hurting Canadian publishers. It is not going to cause unemployment in the American industry. The Americans have their vast markets in any event, but it will hurt some co-publications.

We have as well information on the legal status of this provision. I agree with the legal opinion obtained by the Canadian Book Publishers Council that the policy is unconstitutional. It goes against the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which provides for equal treatment of our languages. People are not supposed to be discriminated against and now English language readers are being discriminated against because this tariff does not apply to French language books or, indeed, books published in any other language. The tariff is offensive to Section 16 of the Charter of Rights which provides that English and French are the official languages of Canada and have equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions. How can we justify, then, discrimination against the English language?

Finally, the tariff is incompatible with the guarantee in the Charter of freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communications. Clearly, this impedes the free flow of ideas and information and is highly offensive to Canadians for those reasons.

We have the hypocrisy of the Government. At virtually the same time, it announces a program of support for Canadian book publishing. It specifically included provisions to encourage the Canadianization of the industry, a large part of which is foreign-owned; to strengthen the Canadian part of it; and specifically to encourage Canadian institutions to make their purchases, even of imported books, through Canadian publishers. This very policy encourages them to buy around because of the financial penalty.

• (1805)

I also know that the amount of money the Government is putting into its positive measures for the encouragement of book publishing is actually less than what it is taking away as a result of the negative measures of this book tariff. We have an extremely unfortunate and misguided policy. I urge the Government to admit that it has made a mistake and to withdraw entirely this 10 per cent tariff on imported books in the English language.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Lanthier (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Public Works): Mr. Speaker, I want to assure the Hon. Member for Broadview—Greenwood (Ms. McDonald) that our Government is committed to promote the Canadian book publishing industry. I also take this opportunity to describe to the House a series of measures which were unveiled by our Government earlier this year.