

Extension of Sittings

We had to cope with the premier coming into the riding and scaring the hell out of senior citizens. In my door-to-door canvassing, I came across people who were thoroughly terrified that they would lose their pensions. As well, those in Metro Housing Authority dwellings were very much frightened. It took a lot of talking to reassure these people.

People were told that free trade was good for the rich but terrible for the poor. They were told that our water would be diverted to the United States, that the lights would dim, and all sorts of other dreadful things.

The people of Don Valley North were able to see through much of the rhetoric, and today those people, if they are watching this debate, are probably shaking their heads at this very moment and asking themselves why it is that we are here this evening, the fifth day of this Parliament, December 16, and we are still not debating the substantive issue of free trade.

An Hon. Member: A good question!

Ms. Greene: The people of Don Valley North, and the people of Canada, must surely consider this situation to be ridiculous. We had an election in which the major issue was free trade. The timetable in respect of the implementation of the agreement has been well known all along. It is a date that is set out in the agreement itself. And yet here we are, their representatives in Parliament, debating a procedural matter.

We hear from the other side of the House that this is a debate about fundamental democratic processes, and so forth. To my mind, it is insane that we are here debating a procedural matter.

I was 11 years on the Metropolitan Toronto Council, and the number of times that we varied the procedures of Council, the number of times we dispensed with normal parliamentary procedures in order to deal with a given issue is countless. Any kind of parliament occasionally varies its procedures. The issue is not whether procedures should sometimes be varied; the issue is whether this particular issue deserves to have our procedures varied. And if any issue deserves to have our procedures varied, it is this issue.

The amount of debate to which the Free Trade Agreement has been subjected is unequalled. I cannot think of an issue that has been the subject of so much debate.

We had the Royal Commission on the Economy, a commission headed by a very prominent, distinguished and patriotic Liberal, recommend that a free trade agreement with the U.S. be negotiated. As well, we had

the process engaged in during the course of the last Parliament, including many public hearings across Canada; literature distributed by Members of Parliament; and Members of Parliament meeting with their constituents to discuss the free trade deal. As well, we had an election called on the free trade issue, and it was an election that was called because the Opposition asked for it. During that election campaign, the public had the opportunity to listen to an enormous amount of debate on the free trade issue. The news media did an excellent job in presenting the different viewpoints. The amount of time devoted to the free trade issue by the CBC was nothing short of incredible. As well, the issue was fully debated and discussed on numerous phone-in radio programs, and other public fora.

The public had so much exposure to the issue, I feel they became truly sick of it, and I feel that they are sick of it now. Everybody knows what the issues are. Those who sit on the opposition side of this House are not going to change their minds, and we on this side are not going to change our minds. We are in a very fixed position.

In so far as adjustment programs are concerned, who knows what adjustment programs will be necessary, if any. At the moment, finding a job is not difficult for anyone living in the Metropolitan Toronto area. In fact, one can get several jobs, if one wishes. And certainly any employer offering only minimum wage will find that he will not be able to attract applicants.

An Hon. Member: Try British Columbia!

Ms. Greene: The Hon. Member suggests that one should try in British Columbia—and he is right: British Columbia really needs free trade, as does the rest of Canada.

The Liberal and New Democratic Parties, during the election campaign, tried to saddle the electorate with an almost impossible task, that of understanding free trade. As a candidate in the election, I felt it necessary that I be fully informed on it, and with that in mind I read the Free Trade Agreement in its entirety. Once I had read it for the first time, I think I understood about 25 per cent. I thought it an absolute bore. I then decided that, given its importance, I had better find out more about it, with the result that I read all of the available literature, including that of the Opposition. I struggled to find the answers to the various criticisms put forward in the literature of the Opposition, and I found them. It is my view that those criticisms are simply not valid.