

Private Members' Business

It is a great pleasure for me to support the motion and I ask all members in the House to do the same.

Mrs. Marlene Catterall (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Treasury Board): Madam Speaker, I too am pleased to congratulate my colleague from Leeds—Grenville and to speak in support of his motion.

I do not know if the infrastructure program is the best or only way to fund the improvements to highway 416 which have been needed for so long. However I do know that I recently saw a list of announcements for funding of major transportation projects. There was not one for eastern Ontario.

There was funding for the Go transit system in Toronto. Supposedly it was a railway project but really it is an urban transit development that is of assistance to the local community in the metro Toronto region. In this region of eastern Ontario and the nation's capital, we have not had that kind of co-operative approach to meeting our transportation needs.

I do not think I need to tell anybody in this House that government is undergoing a major transformation. That has meant the economy of this region, our nation's capital, is undergoing a major transformation.

It is a challenge to our regional economy which started back in the mid-seventies with the decentralization of a number of government operations and the removal of 15,000 jobs from the downtown area to across the river to Hull. Personally, that is something I support because I support the idea of an integrated national capital covering both sides of our river.

I also support very much the idea of getting services to Canadians out in the communities and getting a federal presence across this country from coast to coast to coast. Anything that builds national unity is important to all of us in this House and to all Canadians.

Our community was presented with a major challenge back then, nearly two decades ago now. We were suddenly left with close to one million square feet of empty office space in downtown Ottawa.

● (1715)

The local business community working together with our board of trade, our Economic Development Corporation, our businesses individually, building owners and managers, rose to that challenge and addressed the issue of diversifying our economy.

We are now facing another major change in our major employer. I do not think it is a surprise to anybody in this House that we are looking at a major rethink of what the role of government is, how much service to the public we can afford, what has to be done by government and what should be done in other ways, what is the proper role of the federal government and the provincial governments.

Again, for my community in this region of eastern Ontario that is going to mean another major change to our economy. The work that our business community in co-operation with our public and municipal politicians particularly and the federal and provincial politicians over the years has done to diversify our economic base is a foundation on which we can face further changes.

If the federal government as the major employer in this region is going to have a significant impact on the community like other major employers in other regions then there is also an obligation to work in partnership with the community to help the adjustment. We are doing that with National Defence, for instance. Where we are closing bases across Canada we are setting up processes to work with the local communities to readjust their economies.

We need to look as well at how we co-operate with the community in the nation's capital toward supporting that community's efforts to diversify its economy.

Transportation is key to that. We cannot have a healthy economy if we cannot get our goods to market, if we cannot get to our customers and if we cannot get our customers here.

We have had a long battle about adequate air transportation out of Ottawa, links to our markets and to the United States and so on. However, road transportation is also important.

We have heard described the situation of highway 16 as a funny little dumb-bell that has a magnificent expanse wonderful interchange with the Queensway through this region on one end and then it sort of dwindles off into a windy, curvey little road that, as people have said, is dangerous.

Most important, it is of tremendous cost to people who want to do business with this region, who want to do business out of this region. It is a major inhibitor to the development of our high technology sector which is one of the strongest in the country. That is an issue not only for this region but for the nation.

This is one of the hubs of the future of high technology in Canada and without that critical mass in locations like the nation's capital, like my city of Ottawa, like the member for Nepean's community of Nepean and throughout this region, high technology in the nation is not going to flourish. We happen to have built the beginning of that critical mass here. It is in the national interest for that to flourish. Again, the transportation link is important.

Others have spoken very eloquently of the importance of tourism, our second biggest industry in this region. You cannot visit it if you cannot drive to it or if you cannot get to it. I believe that we have a responsibility to build a sense across this nation that our capital is something that all Canadians should be proud of. We seem to have done just the opposite of what most nations have done and developed our nation's capital as a place to be avoided, shunned and criticized.