

been more than satisfactory. The attendance of the minister who is still present, the Leader of the Government, has been exemplary. But in recent weeks it is happening more and more frequently that ministers are either absent or leaving early, and this interferes with the Question Period, especially on days when other orders are called between 2 o'clock and 3 o'clock and the Question Period is not reached until after 3 o'clock.

Today, the Minister of State for Economic Development has left early again, and I want to make the point that, while the Leader of the Government has said that the minister has to attend a cabinet committee meeting, I do not believe it is being presumptuous to suggest that when there is a conflict between a minister's attendance in this chamber and his other administrative duties, his attendance in this chamber should take priority.

GRAIN

SALES TO U.S.S.R.

Hon. Lowell Murray: Honourable senators, having delivered my word of complaint and caution, perhaps I might put a question to the Leader of the Government concerning the grain embargo on the Soviet Union, about which there were some exchanges with the Minister of State for the Canadian Wheat Board the other day. My question, however, is to the Leader of the Government because I am asking him to ascertain from his colleague, the Secretary of State for External Affairs, the basis on which the government calculates that five million tonnes or more per year is a normal and traditional level of Canadian sales. I ask him to obtain that information from the Secretary of State for External Affairs because it is Mr. MacGuigan who has to explain these matters internationally.

Hon. Raymond J. Perrault (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, the question will be directed to my colleague, the Secretary of State for External Affairs, but I suggest that we hear from the minister responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board, our colleague, Senator Hazen Argue, who in the national interest has spent many long hours working with this question.

Hon. Hazen Argue (Minister of State for the Canadian Wheat Board): Honourable senators, Senator Murray has complained that the ministers are not here. I have been guilty of not being present when I had other calls which I felt required my absence from the chamber. His question relates, I believe, to the policy of the Department of External Affairs, and neither the Leader of the Government nor I can discuss that, but I think I can answer the question on the basis of what is normal and traditional. To do so I may have to go through a little bit of a rigmarole, since one cannot just say offhand what is normal and what is traditional because we have seen what we feel to be a normal and traditional pattern build up with regard to the sale of grain to the Soviet Union over many years.

We were the first in that market. The pattern that has built up is that when the Soviet Union requires grain they come to

[Senator Murray.]

Canada first. The normal and traditional pattern has also been that when we have had the grain supplies we have endeavored to provide them to that market. Over the years we have sold, depending on which year you take, anywhere from about 300,000 tonnes to something in excess of 5 million tonnes. If I recall correctly, in the year in which we sold an amount in excess of 5 million tonnes, the 5 million tonnes came out of western Canada, and some smaller additional quantities came from other parts of Canada.

Looking to the future and following the policy that I announced in the Senate on July 16, we are prepared to sell at normal and traditional levels. In this current year we are not prepared to accept, and have not accepted, a fixed ceiling. We have not endeavored, and we are not now endeavoring, and we shall not endeavor, to supplant the Americans in that market. I think in fairness it has to be pointed out to everyone that in the crop year just ended Canada was reduced to the fourth position in this market. We are the only exporting country that did not sell record quantities in that market in the crop year just ended.

We have suffered from the policy of the administration of Prime Minister Clark, which held us to 3.8 million tonnes. We do not accept that as a reasonable and fair basis; and if we should go to 5 million tonnes, or somewhat beyond 5 million tonnes, in the sale of grain to the Soviet Union this year, it should be kept in mind that the United States this year will sell larger quantities of wheat in that market than to Canada. We think it is certainly normal and traditional within those patterns to sell 5 million tonnes, or perhaps even more.

● (1520)

Senator Murray: The minister has indicated that there was one year, I believe, in the past 10 in which we sold 5 million tonnes to the Soviet Union. To clarify the point, I take it that the minister is selecting the one year in which we sold 5 million tonnes and defining that amount as being "normal and traditional."

Senator Argue: It was normal and traditional under the kind of criteria I have used for that particular time. Obviously, the Soviet Union bought 5 million tonnes because they needed it, and, obviously, we sold them 5 million tonnes because we had it for sale. That was normal and traditional at that time for that year; and under similar circumstances we want to be able to do that again.

I have no objection to the honourable senator's questions. It is pretty clear from his questioning that he is opposed—and I take it his party is also, but he may not be speaking for his party—to any sale beyond 5 million tonnes, or perhaps he is opposed even to going beyond 3.8 million tonnes. It would be interesting to me—and I am sure it would be interesting to the farmers out west—to know that the Conservative Party not only put this unfair arbitrary restriction on sales to a market where other exporting markets were allowed to sell record quantities, but would not have us get away from these restrictions.

Some Hon. Senators: Shame.