

Softwood Lumber

We have this government to hold accountable for this serious problem. We will continue to pressure this government to do the proper and right thing, to take the measures that are required and to ensure that this industry does not go the way of the dodo bird because this government is incompetent and incapable of leading this industry out of this problem.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Gérin (Mégantic—Compton—Stansstead): Mr. Speaker, I welcome this opportunity to take part in this emergency debate on softwood lumber, an extremely important issue for many workers in Canada and in Quebec as well, especially in the eastern townships and Beauce, which are my particular concern.

I fail to understand why the government did not agree to an emergency debate on such an urgent matter when it was first requested. The opposition parties, including the Bloc Québécois and a few government members, actually had to get together and tell the government this didn't make sense, that we had to react, that there was a serious problem and that we needed an emergency debate. The government resisted and postponed the debate. Today the debate is on. Incidentally, Mr. Speaker, when the Mulroney government gets together with the Group of Seven, it pretends Canada is a really important country, but when we are talking about GATT, all of a sudden Canada is only a very small country, one of 108.

This goes to show how little the government is concerned about the damage it is doing to this country's workers. Well, in any case, we got this emergency debate, a bit late, but we are having it today. This reminds me of what the Minister of State for Agriculture said earlier: Now we are going to act. Yes, but it's too late! Now we are going to act, when the deed is done. And this is more or less what the government is doing all the time. Now we are going to act. Well, it's pretty late to do anything at all, isn't it?

I suggest that members with sawmills in their ridings go and explain to those workers who are going to lose their jobs why this government did too little, too late. Thousands of jobs in Quebec are at stake.

• (2220)

Tonight I want to tell you how off-hand this government has acted with the interests of those workers on this whole matter of softwood lumber. I don't understand this behaviour. I don't understand why they acted

this way. Does it have hidden interests? Does it have something it wants to deal under the table, giving up in the process an industry employing thousands of people in Quebec? Because Quebec is a bigger loser in this whole matter of softwood lumber than any other province. Quebec could have dealt with this problem without any help from the Government of Canada and would have done much better.

Today a sawmill sent a closing down notice to the Quebec labour minister; 55 jobs are lost. They had just received this notice about a 14.48 per cent tax, and I will talk to you about it. I can tell you also that I have some ideas about what the Government of Canada should do to try to pick up the pieces.

Now, Mr. Speaker, this government's off-hand way of dealing with the problem of course has been denounced by the Quebec Lumber Manufacturer's Association. Prior to the American action, the association told the Canadian government: Do not give away the 3.1 per cent tax agreement we have with the Americans. Do not do that, you would make a serious mistake. The government ignored it. The Canadian Forest Industries Council had told the government: Do not give away this 3.1 per cent tax agreement we have with the Americans. It's just what we need. If you remove it, we will have a serious problem. And you know our Finance Minister who has more than doubled the national debt, when he had said in his first budget speech that there would be no more deficit in 1990-1991.

That same person, the lord from Toronto, without paying any attention to the Quebec government or to the association representing dozens of sawmills in Quebec, decided unilaterally to terminate the agreement that we had with the Americans at 3.1 per cent. The Prime Minister, decided to do that unilaterally. He said, and so did his minister, that they took political precautions. He had met Mr. Bush who had not given him any answer. As they say today in most American newspapers, maybe he did what Mr. Bush had told voters to do a few years ago, "Read my lips", but he did not read much. One thing is sure, either President Bush is a liar or Prime Minister Mulroney was completely mistaken. But one of them has gone wrong somewhere, and I think he is on this side of the border because, after the American government decided to impose a 14.48 per cent duty on all softwood lumber exports to the United States, the Canadian Prime Minister said that it was the doing of some bureaucrat. Well, the director of the Quebec association told me that more than 65 American senators had signed the petition