

*Government Orders***SMALL BUSINESS LOANS ACT**

Hon. Sheila Finestone (for the Minister of Industry) moved that Bill C-99, an act to amend the Small Business Loans Act, be read the third time and passed.

[Translation]

The Deputy Speaker: Again, under the terms of the agreement, a member from each party will be allowed to speak to this bill for 10 minutes.

[English]

Mr. Dennis J. Mills (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak on third and final reading of the amendments to the Small Business Loans Act.

I will review some of the initiatives we have accomplished in the industry committee over the last year. It is important to do this because I see in the House tonight the member for Okanagan and the member for Trois-Rivières, the members who led the debate on behalf of their parties.

• (1840)

The industry committee in the last year was one of the most unique committees on Parliament Hill. When the public sees members of Parliament getting together, especially in the Chamber, all it sees is the adversarial debate. It sees by and large the experience of question period, which is such a misleading image of what the Parliament of Canada is all about.

This will be my last speech in the House for this year on matters related to industry and on the whole issue of access to capital. To the members for Trois-Rivières and Okanagan, it was a real pleasure.

When I leave the House to go back to whatever I will do when it is all over and reflect on my experience in Ottawa, I will say one of the most productive years in Ottawa was working on this committee when our focus was so united on the whole issue of access to capital for small and medium size business men and women.

I believe with all of our differences on distinct society and veto and so on, and goodness knows there are a lot of other issues we differ on, there is one common cause shared by every member of the House: the small business community represents the greatest hope for putting Canadians back to work.

The number one issue or the number one difficulty that community faces is the issue of access to sufficient capital to support its risks, to support its basic business activity. If we move the banks an inch, and I think we have moved them only an inch, it is because banking institutions have not been able to break up or divide the industry committee. We have worked as a team.

I have to confess to Canadians that the best lobby system on Parliament Hill is the financial institutions. They have a way of lobbying and intimidating, but we held firm in our convictions, in our cause in the last year. I hope that over the next year we can keep that type of commitment. Whoever else is on the industry committee, I hope they carry on with the torch and keep that cause moving forward.

I am optimistic about this. Last night I watched the Prime Minister in the second national town hall meeting. Canadians from across the country asked the Prime Minister many questions. I remember vividly the question from a small business entrepreneur who ran a grocery business. He asked the Prime Minister when he was going to get serious about his commitment to take on the banks.

• (1845)

I was pleased that question was put to the Prime Minister and for a split second it caught the Prime Minister off guard. The Prime Minister is well aware that we are working hard on the issue. Because we are working as a team one would think we would be moving the banks forward, but it is such a small movement that it has not really impacted yet. The Prime Minister said that we have been working on that.

The idea was put forward by the member of Parliament for Trinity—Spadina. He has been pushing, debating and arguing for the past year and a half that all banks in Canada should have a target of approximately 30 per cent of their total corporate loan portfolio devoted to the small business sector. I was stunned that the Prime Minister mentioned that objective. Many members of the committee thought that the member for Trinity—Spadina was being overly aggressive in directing the banks on to whom they should lend money. I opposed the member's recommendation that these targets be put in writing.

I am beginning to think that maybe the member for Trinity—Spadina was right when he told us a year ago that the banks were not really going to deal with the issue unless we gave them a specific benchmark. The member for Okanagan remembers how we almost ganged up on our fellow member saying that we cannot go quite that far, that we cannot dictate 30 per cent of the total loan portfolio.

The Deputy Speaker: Order. My hon. colleague does not seem to realize that the agreement was said to be a maximum of 10-minute speeches for anybody from the three parties speaking on the bill.

Mr. Mills (Broadview—Greenwood): Mr. Speaker, in summary, the bill before us tonight is a reinforcement of the government's commitment to support small business loan activity. We have accepted amendments to the bill from the Reform Party.