

Oral Questions

Hon. Allan J. MacEachen (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance): Madam Speaker, I believe the request of the association to which the hon. member refers but with which I disagree is certainly reasonable, in so far as a request for an opportunity to have all the aspects of the program examined is concerned. That will be possible through the bill which has already been referred to committee by the House under the name of the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources. It will also be possible through the bills which I hope will be given first reading today and which will be considered in the House of Commons and in the Senate. So it is possible for every point of view to be heard. It would be my wish that the fullest opportunity be given to have the facts laid out and the situation judged on the basis of fact rather than by what I consider to be, at times, ill-considered statements.

● (1425)

Mr. Andre: Madam Speaker, this so-called ill-considered statement was written by the association which represents about 325 Canadian owned oil and gas companies. These are not the multinationals. Would the Deputy Prime Minister reconsider his quick, off-the-cuff decision in view of the fact that he is talking about four or five bills to cover a variety of areas and that no one bill covers all the aspects of this particular program? Would it not speed up House business to have this program considered in toto by a special committee? With that kind of understanding, I am quite certain that the specific pieces of legislation would receive quicker passage through the House if, after the facts are out, the government would still want to sponsor the bills.

Mr. MacEachen: Madam Speaker, it is a fact that there are, as the hon. member has acknowledged, a number of bills containing components of the National Energy Program. The necessity for a number of bills, of course, arises from the rules of the House. If the government House leader can make arrangements with his counterparts in the opposition parties to find a better way to deal with these bills and to achieve, as the hon. member states, speedier passage and a more complete examination, I would be the first to support any such examination. However, we are proceeding according to the rules of the House, and these rules will provide ample opportunity for the consideration of every aspect of these bills. If a better method can be suggested, then it would receive my support.

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CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

REPORTED TESTING OF CHEMICAL DEFOLIANTS

Mr. Terry Sargeant (Selkirk-Interlake): Madam Speaker, my question is for the Minister of National Defence and it arises out of the question I directed to the Prime Minister on Friday morning. Is the minister now able to tell us why the government has repeatedly denied any involvement in product testing for Vietnam when this clearly was not so, particularly in light of the very disturbing comments which were made this

weekend by Mr. Paul Hellyer, the minister of national defence at the time, that such tests were routine?

Hon. J. Gilles Lamontagne (Minister of National Defence): Madam Speaker, I read very carefully the question asked of the Prime Minister by the hon. member for Selkirk-Interlake last Friday, and I listened to his question today. I will give his question all the importance and concern which it merits. Over the weekend I read many of the reports in the media, and I hope that the hon. member did not over-dramatize the issue merely to get press coverage, because I refuse to play politics with the nerves of the people. This report is not secret; it was unclassified and available to everyone.

Mr. Lawrence: You did not know anything about it.

Mr. Lamontagne: I knew of the matter last September when it first came out and I am aware of the situation.

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): The Prime Minister did not know.

Mr. Lamontagne: It is true that DND collaborated with the United States in 1966-1967 to test the various formulations of different herbicides. I can assure hon. members that Canada's only interest in the tests was to obtain technical advice and assistance in range clearance and bush control. It has been alleged by some people that Agent Orange could be health hazardous, but there is no confirmation as yet. I do not believe that we should play with this question until we are sure that—

Madam Speaker: Order, please.

Mr. Sargeant: Madam Speaker, I would point out that this paper was not available through Canadian sources, that I had to obtain it through American sources by taking advantage of their freedom of information act. The minister has often said in the past year or so that chemical warfare testing in Canada was only of a defensive nature and was conducted only in the open air using harmless simulants. Will the minister kindly explain to the House how he defines the Gagetown tests as defensive, how he defines Agent Orange as a harmless simulant, and can he tell us if there were any other such tests?

● (1430)

Mr. Lamontagne: Madam Speaker, I think I have been very clear about this. I said the only interest of DND in this was to get technical advice and assistance on range clearing and bush control. If the hon. member wants proof that there was never any question about Vietnam or anything like that, we can take the main estimates in SCND of June 29, 1966, where Mr. MacLean asked about tenders. To his thinking, it was much too expensive to clear the bush on the Gagetown base and he asked for new tenders to see what kind of clearance we could get more cheaply.

I can assure the House that this hon. member is trying to make it appear as though we were involved in the Vietnam war. We were never mixed up in that. I listened to the answer of the Minister of National Health and Welfare on Friday.