

Customs Tariff

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): When Bill C-87 was last before the House, the Hon. Member for Ottawa Centre (Mr. Cassidy) had the floor.

Mr. Mike Cassidy (Ottawa Centre): Mr. Speaker, I want to continue some of the remarks I made yesterday about Bill C-87 which, as I said, is a bit like a Trojan horse. It purports to be a routine Bill to harmonize the Canadian tariff system's nomenclature with that of other countries. In fact it is also a Bill which gives or continues powers given to Cabinet to cut tariffs to other countries in return for compensation, without defining what it should be and without any form of accountability to Parliament.

We are just about at the Christmas break. As the House began meeting in mid-August, I think Hon. Members are looking forward to a few weeks away. I am sure that that is true of most Canadians as well. If I may put it bluntly, we are not in a mood to consider a major and fundamental decision about tariffs, yet essentially that is what is being done with Bill C-87.

As I was saying yesterday, I speak with particular reference to the Canada-United States trade deal because it involves the reduction of tariffs worth some \$2 billion a year, at current values, which Canada imposes on goods imported from the United States.

Therefore, the tariff cutting powers in Bill C-87 are not just theoretical matters nor powers which can be used in the event of some minor deal with Papua New Guinea or some other such country. In fact they are powers which the Government now has every reason to use if it intends, as seems likely, to avoid any more than a very modest kind of reference to Parliament of a text that none of us have yet seen.

I must say as well that as of today all we have to go on in terms of the tariff cuts that are about to take place and to be mandated by treaty between Canada and the United States are a series of announcements, some rumours, some back-stage briefings that have been given to certain journalists, and the elements of the agreement, which are extremely vague. We do not know which tariffs are to be removed immediately. We do not know which tariffs are to be removed over a period of five years. We do not know which tariffs are to be removed over a period of ten years. Yet the Bill, as it stands, allows the Government to make those decisions without any further reference to Parliament.

● (1720)

I would have to say that it is grossly inadequate that the text should be released perhaps tomorrow, perhaps the next day, perhaps Monday, who knows, and that the House will then be asked to debate it for a few days and then a motion of approval would be given at that time. On other important matters such as the Bill that we have just debated on grain handling, I think of the fact that a Bill has to go through a number of stages. If it is a financial Bill, it requires a Ways and Means motion. If it is a non-financial Bill, it requires first reading, second reading,

reference to committee, report stage, and then third reading. In the case of Bill C-87 those stages have been followed. Bill C-87 is the umbrella Bill which allows the Government to cut tariffs. But when it comes to the actual tariff cutting, there is no such requirement on the Government. Since this Bill refers to the compensation that may be given in return for tariff cuts, there is also no way by which Parliament has a chance to study whether or not the compensation being offered is adequate.

I notice that the Chairman of the Standing Committee on External Affairs and International Trade indicated that his committee is not in a position to make a judgment about the final text. The committee has decided that it will issue an interim report towards the beginning of next week, but not a final report. So we have a situation where, using the powers given in Bill C-87, the Government is going ahead and signing a treaty with the United States, despite the fact that Parliament, through the relevant committee, has been put through a sham. The committee went from coast to coast in a couple of weeks. It was a joke of a parliamentary hearing process in which no witness, group, individual, company, or interested party who wanted to comment on this trade deal was able to comment on the specifics because details were not available. A few of the people who commented may have known some of the details, because certain details were released to the sectoral advisory groups which were made up of persons representative of different industries across the country, almost all of whom were spokespersons or representatives of different business concerns. However, in that particular case those persons had no ability to talk because they were bound to secrecy.

I know you wish me to talk about the Bill, Mr. Speaker, and I am talking about the Bill. I want you to understand that very clearly. I am talking about the Bill, because the Bill gives the authority to the Government to do what it is doing without adequate access or recourse to Parliament. You will know, Mr. Speaker, because you sat in this House for some time as we were looking at the Bill, that in a number of ways my Party tried to reinforce the concept of accountability with respect to major trade actions by the Government. Unfortunately, we were beaten back by the majority on the government side at every effort that we made. I have to say with regret that we lost on the simple concepts that we were putting forward, which is that it is not fair to make major tariff changes without reference to Parliament; that it is not just for Parliament to be ignored in those matters; that it is not right for a trade agreement to be signed with a major trading partner without a means by which Canadians in general, and not only this Parliament, can have access to what is being done and an ability to influence the result before the decision is made. It seems that the government side did not understand that at all, which I regret. I think that that fundamentally undermines this Parliament, and I believe that that is wrong.

When I was first elected to this place in 1984, one of the promises made by the Government was that we would reform the parliamentary process. Back-benchers would be given more of a say. Parliamentary committees would be given more