

Extension of Sittings

Mr. Francis G. LeBlanc (Cape Breton Highlands—Canso): Madam Speaker, I too am rising to give my first address to the House, and I share with my colleagues who are here for the first time the sense of awe, pride and humility in having the privilege of representing our electorate here in this House. For my part, I am particularly proud to represent a constituency as varied and as interesting as Cape Breton Highlands—Canso.

[*Translation*]

I am also especially proud to be the first Acadian to represent that part of the world.

[*English*]

I would be remiss if I did not begin my remarks by expressing my sincere gratitude to the people of Cape Breton Highlands—Canso for their support and their confidence which enables me to be here to address the House this evening. The people of Highlands—Canso take their politics seriously. They are great teachers in the art of politics and they ensure that their representatives are constantly made aware of their concerns. They never let them forget it.

I would also like to pay tribute this evening to the previous Liberal Member for Cape Breton Highlands—Canso who, as all Hon. Members know, is one of the most distinguished Canadian Parliamentarians this House has ever known. I am speaking, of course, of the Hon. Allan J. MacEachen who has made such a contribution to this House and to Canada over his long years of service to the Canadian Government and whose guidance and friendship has been of such valuable support to me.

As others have said before me, the election campaign was a passionate debate among Canadians about one single issue, the Government's Free Trade Agreement. That issue absorbed the country as no issue had ever done before. In fact, our neighbours to the south marvelled at the extent to which we as a country were able to mobilize during an election campaign, to have intelligent conversations among Canadians about an issue that was of such deep concern to us. I suggest that if this agreement goes through, we may not have a chance to see that again because our future election campaigns may look very much like the one we saw in the United States this fall.

In my constituency of Highlands—Canso, the free trade deal was the central issue of the campaign, as it was across the country. My constituents wondered why, after arguing so strenuously against a comprehensive

trade agreement with the United States, this Government was so hell-bent on entering into one even before calling an election on the issue. They wondered particularly once we started to get into the details of the agreement as the election campaign progressed.

I am prepared to look at these things dispassionately. Having been trained in economics and having studied at some of the best universities in Canada, universities like St. Francis Xavier, Dalhousie, Queen's and Université Laval, having studied economics with Professor Richard Lipsey, who I admit is one of the ardent supporters of this agreement but is also one of Canada's best economists, I was prepared to look at both sides of the issue.

Fundamentally, I am philosophically for free trade because of my university training and also because I am a Liberal, because as a Liberal, I know that it has been successive Liberal governments that have promoted free trade in Canada and have promoted the successions of agreements and international arrangements which have promoted prosperity in Canada through an extension of the reduction of our trade barriers.

● (2300)

Successive Liberal governments have been responsible for that since the war, and we have always been a Party for free trade.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. LeBlanc (Cape Breton Highlands—Canso): I was even prepared to entertain the notion that a comprehensive free trade agreement with the United States might conceivably be in Canada's interests. I was willing to listen to reasonable arguments in favour of such an idea and to consider the benefits that it might have for our country. I was even prepared to suspend judgment when I kept hearing about all the flaws in this agreement and about the hastiness and the secrecy with which it had been negotiated.

I started to discover, as we did throughout the debate prior and during the election campaign, that the agreement did not provide secure access to U.S. markets. It left several key sectors of the Canadian economy like agriculture, textile, and several other industries vulnerable to being overrun by U.S. competition. There was no protection for the displaced workers before the agreement would go into effect. Our social programs were in no way protected. There was no commitment on the part of the Government to ensure that they were protected. Our oil and gas and other natural resources were pretty well laid on the table for the United States to take over.