

Metric System

Mr. Peter P. Masniuk (Portage): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to take part in this debate on Bill C-23, an act to facilitate conversion to the metric system in Canada. The debate on this bill during second reading was very extensive, and the bill has had a very interesting history since it left this House following second reading. We are now aware that it has been the subject of some very active cabinet discussions as well. At any rate, the government has now decided that agricultural measurements will not be converted to metric right away.

A few months ago metric conversion was a pressing necessity, of top priority, but today we are told that metric conversion in agriculture can wait a little longer and that the acre and the bushel will be with us for a while yet. Of course, what this amounts to is an admission by this government of something we have been telling them constantly since this bill was first introduced—that the Canadian farmer is totally opposed to metric conversion. With an election only a year or less away, what was of top priority yesterday has become politically inexpedient today. At the present time, Liberals have become an endangered species on the prairies, and just before an election is certainly the wrong time to do something which has aroused so much antagonism and anger among the prairie farmers as has metric conversion.

Canada is a nation that lives by trade, and she must be in step with the rest of her trading partners if she is to survive and prosper in an interdependent world. I truly think that the metric system for Canada is inevitable and, in the long run, even desirable. But most Canadians, if my mail is any indication, are not in favour of the metric system and the Canadian farmer—the western farmer certainly—is actively opposed to it. In these circumstances, metrication just cannot be imposed on the country in the way proposed by Bill C-23. Canadians must first be accustomed to it on a gradual basis over a period of time.

An entirely new system of measurement is, after all, a major change and requires major adjustment, adjustment which is neither easy nor painless. Our position, then, should be to try to make the best adjustment we can. This sensible and reasonable approach has been the position taken by our party right from the beginning. These latest developments indicate that perhaps the government has listened to some of the things we said during second reading, Mr. Speaker.

Bill C-23 is described as “an act to facilitate conversion to the metric system”. But despite this title it does nothing to facilitate our conversion to the metric system. Instead, it imposes this system on the nation in the most arbitrary and dictatorial manner imaginable; in a way which can only produce the maximum confusion, bitterness and disruption. It was the purpose of the amendments proposed by the hon. member for Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain (Mr. Hamilton) and the hon. member for Moose Jaw (Mr. Neil) to put some truth into the title of Bill C-23 and to really facilitate conversion to the metric system and make that conversion less painful.

The amendments of my colleague from Moose Jaw would have done this by providing for a dual system, Imperial and

[Mr. Ritchie.]

metric, in agriculture. The intent of the amendment proposed by the hon. member for Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain was to facilitate the conversion of Canadian consumers to the new system by providing for a three-year transition period using both systems, during which period the metric system would be phased in while the Imperial system was phased out. We think that these amendments were entirely reasonable and practical, Mr. Speaker.

Bill C-23 as presently framed is really one of the most cold, heartless, humanless pieces of legislation which I have ever seen. It is not legislation at all; it is a bureaucratic edict which says, in effect, “In order to comply with certain requirements,” etc., etc.—the language of the bureaucrats—“henceforth things shall be done thus and so”. One of my constituents told me that he thought the metric system must have been invented by Ottawa bureaucrats, and while we know that that is not true, it certainly is tailor-made for them.

In the immigration bill we saw a bit of philosophy and rationale for the legislation; but in this bill, which legislates a complete change, conversion to a totally new system of measurement, where such a rationale really is necessary and important and would have been welcome there is no humanness at all. We are, after all, doing more than just changing a system of measurement; we are trying to effect a change in people as well.

This government has just not faced up to the tremendous problems which metric conversion is going to cause, and the horrendous human inequities which it will create. I am not suggesting that we stop conversion. That is not realistic. We cannot turn the clock back and we cannot stop it, either. But to continue with the clock analogy, Mr. Speaker, metric conversion involves more than just turning our measurement clocks to another system, as we do in the spring when we switch to daylight saving time. That is all this bill does; it just sets Canada's measurements on another system and says, “Learn to swim in it in a hurry, or sink”.

The same “You're on your own” principle is the one which the government has adopted regarding the cost of conversion, Mr. Speaker. It is to be borne individually by each sector—business, labour, manufacturing, agriculture. Of course, it is not reasonable to expect government to bear the major cost of conversion, but the present approach, the rigid imposition of the metric system on every sector, is not the right way to bring about the change. We would not be going metric at all if there were not at least some consensus among us that it will be in our best interests over the long run—and I believe that it will. But I am troubled by the suggestion I have heard, that the original pressure and the major impetus for metric conversion came from the big, multinationals because a completely metric world is in their interests. If this is so, then the result will be that the groups which metrication will most serve—the very big companies, the multinationals—will be the ones who can most afford the cost of conversion, and the smaller national and local industries which will realize the least benefit from metrication are the ones who can least afford it.