

[English]

It was disappointing to find out that the Public Service Alliance of Canada has refused the government's buyout package for downsizing.

• (1450)

Could the minister reassure public servants that the government remains committed to fair treatment of its employees and will continue to try to reach an agreement with unions and to minimize any job losses as a result of downsizing?

Hon. Arthur C. Eggleton (President of the Treasury Board and Minister responsible for Infrastructure, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yes, I can give those assurances to the hon. member.

We certainly want to make sure that our employees are treated in a fair and reasonable fashion, both those who will be leaving as a result of the downsizing and those who will remain to provide excellent services to the public of Canada.

May I also point out that I will be meeting further with union representatives with respect to this matter. I have been doing that for a number of months in an attempt to reach a mutually acceptable agreement. I am quite willing to continue to have a dialogue with them.

We are however running out of time. Soon we must make decisions about this matter with respect to the forthcoming budget.

In terms of minimizing any job losses, we have reviewed the programs and services of the federal government. We are not out to cut employees per se, but as a result of reduction of programs and services there will be downsizing necessary.

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SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Mrs. Diane Ablonczy (Calgary North, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, apparently the human resources development minister has finally come to realize that we have no more money for increased spending on social programs. We are mortgaged and taxed to the max.

Why can the minister not understand that social programs can be reformed without spending more money?

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Minister of Human Resources Development and Minister of Western Economic Diversification, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I draw the hon. member's attention to the opening statement we made about a year ago in the House. Right from the very beginning we said that one of the most important reasons for undertaking social reform was to make existing programs work better, to get better value for our money, to make the money go further, and to target it where it would do the most good.

Oral Questions

That is exactly the purpose we intend to follow. That purpose is entrain, on schedule. We will continue to put together the kinds of proposals we hope to receive this afternoon from the House of Commons committee that has spent a lot of its valuable time listening to Canadians. Once we have that report we can then get on with the job.

Mrs. Diane Ablonczy (Calgary North, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, just last week the minister was quoted as saying that the government would have to deal with its budgetary problems before it would be able to get on with the reforms.

When will the minister show some leadership and start real reform of Canada's social security programs?

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Minister of Human Resources Development and Minister of Western Economic Diversification, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, unlike the hon. member we believe that it is possible, to use an old metaphor, to walk and chew gum at the same time. Unlike the Reform Party that seems to be focused on only one issue, this party is able to take a number of issues and deal with them simultaneously.

We have said very clearly that a precondition, a necessary condition for social reform, is having a stable and effective fiscal system in the country. It is not a sufficient cost. It is a necessary cost.

We have to put the two of them together: good reform in the budget to bring about fiscal stability and then good reform of our programs to get people back to work.

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[Translation]

U.S. PRESIDENT'S VISIT

Mr. Philippe Paré (Louis-Hébert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, my question is directed to the Prime Minister.

Obviously put out by the Leader of the Official Opposition's request for a meeting with U.S. president Clinton during his official visit to Ottawa on February 23 and 24, the Prime Minister objected to such a meeting. Yesterday, his Minister of Foreign Affairs set the record straight and stated that the government would not object to a meeting between the American president and the leader of the official opposition.

Could the Prime Minister indicate on what grounds he objected to this meeting on Friday? Could he also explain since when a Canadian Prime Minister dictates whom an American president may or may not meet?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I was asked that question. I thought it was about a letter sent to me but it was a letter to President Clinton.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.