

Supply—Labour

Mr. Forrestall: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to lead off at last in reply to the minister's opening statement.

We in the Conservative party along with all members of the committee, I am sure, are most hopeful that the events of the next two hours will turn out favourably. We are most hopeful that the meeting at five o'clock will be useful and serve to bring about the result which every member of the house desires to see, a settlement of the serious dispute at Montreal and other Quebec ports. We are hopeful that settlement will come out of this meeting. Most of us recognize that when it is possible for government to stay out of labour problems this is the best course to follow. However, where government is able to mediate and assist in the reaching of a settlement between management and labour, such assistance should be forthcoming. Again I express to the minister through you, Mr. Chairman, good wishes for the meeting this evening.

In the stage of history we now appear to have reached it would seem that strikes and labour disputes are with us with the persistency and certainty of the seasons of the year. We have had some serious labour disputes already this year, the oil refinery strikes in the west, the pending air line strike, the Ontario truckers dispute and now the serious situation affecting seaway workers. In my own area of Halifax there is a serious situation involving workers employed by the Department of National Defence.

● (3:20 p.m.)

The remarks I wish to make this afternoon centre around the situation in Halifax, and I express the hope that in this particular labour matter the government will take every means available to it, having had the benefit of ample forewarning of the impending action threatened in Halifax, to overcome the difficulties that exist in the very critical field of national defence. The matter involves labour policy. It also involves dollars and cents. I am not going to suggest that the government should intervene in a situation that possibly should be handled internally or by the treasury board, but I suggest that the government, having been forewarned of the impending action, will be held morally responsible for what could happen in eastern Canada if a strike takes place.

I share the hope of all hon. members that the Department of Labour is not about to disappear entirely from the scene. I hope that the reduction in estimates which the minister

[Mr. Caouette.]

has outlined will not mean the complete abolition of the department. Its role and function in our society are too important for that to happen.

We share the minister's sentiments with regard to the work of Mr. Justice Freedman with respect to the railways and railway unions. I spoke of the government taking steps beforehand to overcome impending labour difficulties. This was an excellent example of how meaningful preparatory work can bring labour and management together before a strike so that Canada benefits. When that is not possible it is Canada that suffers.

In this context the same effort should be made in the Halifax area because the workers there have already engaged in a strike vote process among the several unions involved in the Halifax Dockyard Trades and Labour Council. Now is the time for the government, within its internal machinery, to move quietly to do those things which will preclude the necessity of government intervention after a strike has taken place.

I know the difficulties which the minister faces in the Montreal situation. I am one of the 10 per cent he referred to who are familiar with the technological problems. Just recently at Halifax and Saint John we went through the process of reducing the number of men in longshore gangs and the result has been effective. I am hopeful about the meeting that will take place later today with respect to the Montreal situation. We all agree that the strike must be settled because its disastrous effect on the economy is almost beyond description. It will take us years to recover the ground lost if the strike is prolonged further.

The labour safety code is now being considered in the other place. It is of great concern to us in the maritimes. We have a great shipbuilding industry, but when vessels come into our yards for overhaul, repair, modification and so forth we seem to lie in that area of shadow where there is always a question whether the provincial or federal authority has jurisdiction. We hope the safety code will provide an answer to that because people in the shipbuilding industry have for a long time been seeking meaningful guide lines on jurisdiction.

The minister has mentioned that the Canada Labour (Standards) Code has presented problems with respect to certain deferment requests concerning standards of wages and amounts paid. I am sure that when the