

Oral Questions

[English]

STATISTICS CANADA

TREATMENT OF EX-EMPLOYEE, DR. CELOVSKY

Hon. Robert K. Andras (Thunder Bay-Nipigon): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the President of the Treasury Board. As stated in a motion under Standing Order 43 by the hon. member for Ottawa-Vanier yesterday, there appeared to be very serious allegations contained in a letter dated November 6 from Boris Celovsky to the Chief Statistician which implied some doubt about the competence and integrity of Statistics Canada. Of course, this is extremely important in terms of economic decisions.

I must say that I have not had the opportunity to fully corroborate this, and that I am not offering it in any flamboyant sense, but today I am informed that Mr. Celovsky was grilled yesterday by security people in Statistics Canada and is now in the Queensway-Carleton Hospital under intensive care. Of course, this episode is alarming to all of us.

I would appreciate it if the President of the Treasury Board could enlighten us as to the treatment of Mr. Celovsky and the situation in that regard. Of course, there are other serious economic implications to explore.

Hon. Sinclair Stevens (President of the Treasury Board): Mr. Speaker, I am not aware of the comment made by the hon. member concerning the grilling of Mr. Celovsky, I understand, yesterday. Certainly, I am most sorry if anything of that nature took place, and particularly if the gentleman is in hospital.

When I heard of this incident yesterday, I indicated that I would like personally to meet with Mr. Celovsky to hear first-hand his concerns with respect to the operation of Statistics Canada. I have so advised Mr. Peter Kirkham, the Chief Statistician. I was hoping, if not today, that certainly at an early opportunity I would be able to have that meeting and judge from that personal meeting what action should be taken, if any, as a result of any discussions I had with the gentleman.

PREPARATION OF BUDGET—EFFECT OF SUSPECT ECONOMIC INFORMATION

Hon. Robert K. Andras (Thunder Bay-Nipigon): Mr. Speaker, I hope that there will be a thorough look at the treatment of Mr. Celovsky. I should like to move to the economic implications and pose my question to the Minister of Finance.

Most certainly, for everybody's sake—Statistics Canada and everyone else—it seems to me that there must be an immediate, factual and public assessment of this situation. For instance, how can the Minister of Finance prepare a budget in confidence if the economic information base is now suspect? Indeed, that is the result of these allegations. What confidence can there be in the economic decisions which he takes, or the economic decisions of the government, unless this matter is cleared up?

[Mr. Clark.]

● (1150)

I would, therefore, ask the Minister of Finance, since those many important economic decisions are based upon the reports of Statistics Canada on the economy, what immediate and public steps will the Minister of Finance insist upon in order to correct this situation and clear away this serious doubt?

Hon. John C. Crosbie (Minister of Finance): Mr. Speaker, quite obviously, what was reported in Mr. Celovsky's letter yesterday were matters which occurred during the past two or three years in connection with Statistics Canada. These are matters which unfortunately were not cleared up by the last administration, and they permitted millions of dollars to be wasted.

I am as concerned as the minister of finance of the previous government should have been concerned, and as is the President of the Treasury Board, about this suggestion that there are wrong procedures being followed. The President of the Treasury Board has been looking into this matter and is looking into it now. If anything can be done about the situation, hon. members can depend on the fact that he is the man to do it.

STEPS TO RESTORE CREDIBILITY OF STATISTICS CANADA

Mr. Donald J. Johnston (Saint-Henri-Westmount): Mr. Speaker, my question is directed to the President of the Treasury Board. We often hear expressions of concern, as we just have, from the Minister of Finance. Undoubtedly, the President of the Treasury Board is very concerned about the cloud that has been cast upon the credibility of Statistics Canada. What immediate steps will the President of the Treasury Board take to remove that cloud from the credibility of Statistics Canada and re-establish it as being a credible instrument for economic planning and other matters upon which so many of us depend?

Hon. Sinclair Stevens (President of the Treasury Board): Mr. Speaker, I would point out to the hon. member that I was the first minister in 11 years to actually visit the premises of Statistics Canada.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Stevens: I also have a person on my exempt staff who has been given the assignment of keeping proper liaison between the ministerial office which I now hold, and Statistics Canada. This, incidentally, has been welcomed by Statistics Canada.

In direct answer to the hon. member's question, I think it would be most unfortunate if members of the opposition were to distort what was said yesterday. The comments yesterday were concerning personnel questions and certain programs within Statistics Canada which the gentleman felt were not properly conceived and had caused unnecessary expense.

Mr. Andras: He talked about the cooking and fudging of the economic reports.