

Oral Questions

● (1415)

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[English]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

PROPOSED ACQUISITION OF NUCLEAR POWERED SUBMARINES

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Winnipeg—Fort Garry): Mr. Speaker, my question is directed to the Deputy Prime Minister in the absence of the Prime Minister. This weekend the Government's own Ambassador to the United Nations, Mr. Stephen Lewis, joined the succession of other important voices such as the Right Hon. Leader of the Opposition, the former Chief of Staff, Mr. Thériault, the Ambassador for Disarmament, Mr. Roche, and other leading defence specialists, in condemning the Government's decision to proceed with the purchase of a fleet of nuclear submarines, especially at a time when the superpowers themselves are engaging in important efforts to disarm their nuclear arsenals.

Will the Government finally admit that this costly and ill-considered nuclear sub program is the wrong initiative and there are far more constructive and productive ways for Canada to secure its security and provide for the defence of the sovereignty of our nation? Is it not time that the Government admitted, considering this overwhelming evidence and contradiction of its own officials, that it has embarked on the wrong course?

Hon. John C. Crosbie (Minister for International Trade): Mr. Speaker, with reference to that question, I believe Ambassador Lewis himself, during his speech on Saturday to the Congress of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, noted he was "neutered" until August 1, but that he endorses everything Mr. Broadbent said about the plan to acquire nuclear submarines. Well, while he was neutered, he was endorsing a neutered policy. It is not our policy. This is a private opinion of the Ambassador to the United Nations who had noted that his term was drawing to a close—

Mr. Broadbent: Like yours.

Mr. Orlikow: You have a few more months than he does.

Mr. Crosbie: The term of the NDP has never come and never will, Mr. Speaker.

Ambassador Lewis' views and ours on this question do not coincide. We believe, and we advocate, that Canada should have the means to defend its territorial sovereignty. We should be in the position to exercise control over the Arctic. We can do this with the nuclear propelled submarine policy outlined in our defence White Paper. We are going to stick to it. We will put the question clearly before the Canadian people and see if they want the neutered policy of hon. gentlemen opposite.

Mr. Broadbent: Do that!

Mr. Axworthy: Mr. Speaker, if it is the Minister's conclusion that the Ambassador of the UN is neutered because he is coming to the end of his term, I suggest that puts him in exactly the same position as the Minister himself.

COST OF SUBMARINE PROGRAM

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Winnipeg—Fort Garry): Mr. Speaker, I would like to direct my supplementary question on the same topic to the Minister of Finance. Last Thursday in the House in response to a question put by my colleague, the Hon. Member for Papineau, the Minister of Finance said that the precise numbers on the cost of submarines would be compiled after the country of origin for the submarines is chosen. That was compounded by statements by members of the Department of Defence admitting the \$6 billion of operating costs have not been included in their estimates, so that no one knows what the final exact cost will be.

Is this a new way for the Government to do business, to make a decision before it even knows what the costs will be? Is that not a foolhardy and unwise way to proceed with a major expenditure of taxpayers' dollars on an ill-founded policy when the Government does not even know what the cost will be? Is it not time the Minister of Finance stepped in and took some control of this matter and tried to save this country from a disastrous decision?

Hon. Michael Wilson (Minister of Finance): Mr. Speaker, I think the Hon. Member is drawing too precise conclusions to things that have been said. What we are facing right now is a decision on the country of origin for the submarine purchase. We have a fairly good idea of the cost of this program at this point. It is not until you can get into the detailed discussions, which come only after you make the decision on country of origin, that you are able to define the cost of the program with the degree of precision that would be necessary before a final decision is taken. That is the position we are in right now.

● (1420)

Mr. Axworthy: That reminds me of that saying, "What's a billion or two", Mr. Speaker. Is that the new position of the Finance Minister?

POSITION OF AMBASSADOR TO UNITED STATES

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Winnipeg—Fort Garry): I have a supplementary question for the Deputy Prime Minister speaking for the Prime Minister.

A speech this weekend by Ambassador Lewis to the United Nations, I think it would be fair to say, has left considerable confusion on the question of the Government's foreign policy. The Ambassador over the last four years has accepted and articulated government policy on a wide range of issues from nuclear arms to foreign aid. Either the Government has radically changed its position, or the Ambassador has decided that the policies no longer warrant his support.