

Motor Vehicle Safety Act

belts by the operators of these commercial vehicles also be mandatory. This legislation is already in effect in the United States on interstate and foreign-operated commercial vehicles. It is already beginning to save lives in that country.

In this country 5,000 Canadians are killed each year on our roads, streets or highways as a result of motor vehicle accidents. No less than 190,000 people are wounded every 12 months on those same streets, roads or highways and the economic toll taken by reason of accidents in Canada is estimated at approximately one billion dollars every 12 months. To give a broader perspective of the significance of the statistics I have quoted, let us extend that thought about the casualties to a four-year period. A four-year period is one which most members of this House are well aware of, as well as many people in the country, because it is approximately four years since the present government took office. I do not want to hold the present government in any way responsible for the slaughter on the highways, but let us consider the toll which has taken place on the streets, roads and highways in Canada in the last four years. In that four-year period 20,000 Canadians would be killed, 760,000 people would be injured on our roads, streets or highways and the economic loss would be in the order of more than \$4 billion.

The toll in respect of motor vehicle accidents can be said to be representative of the world's worst war. In my view it demands a great deal more attention than we have given it. This is not a political issue. I know members on both sides of the House and in all the legislatures across the country agree that the damage, loss of life and the economic loss involved day by day in our country is a very great threat to Canada. So, when I say we must take action to attempt to curtail the loss I am not making any particular political expression. Although I do not think this is a matter in which we can bring about a truce or armistice let alone a peace, I think it deserves all our attention.

The three main features in motor vehicle accidents concern the driver, the vehicle and the road or driving conditions. My proposal has to do with two of these elements. In the United States, commercial vehicle accidents involving the vehicles covered by my bill claim 10,000 lives a year with 124,000 persons disabled. In our terms, if we take the usual one-tenth standard with regard to the difference in population between the United States and Canada, this would mean that approximately 1,000 Canadians are killed every year and approximately 12,000 are injured in bus or truck accidents. Toward reducing the loss, the United States department of transport, federal highways administration, in 1970 introduced new regulations providing that seat belts for the drivers of buses and the drivers and co-drivers of trucks and truck tractors must be installed in all motor vehicles used in interstate or foreign commerce which are built on or after July 1, 1971. Older vehicles, manufactured after January 1, 1965 must be retrofitted with seat belts by July 1, 1972. In the news release which was issued in respect of this new regulation it was stated that a landmark provision of the new regulations is the requirement that a motor vehicle which has a seat belt assembly installed at the driver's seat shall not be driven unless the driver has properly restrained himself with the seat belt assembly.

This is exactly in line with what the bill I have brought forward tonight seeks to achieve in Canada; that is, the mandatory equipping and use of safety restraint seat belts in commercial vehicles. I think it is clear to anyone who has considered the situation that the drivers of commercial vehicles, notably buses or trucks, have many lives other than their own in their hands when they are driving these vehicles on the highways. I believe it is obvious that if an accident occurs or a crash takes place and the driver of the commercial vehicle, a bus or a truck, is not wearing a seat belt and is hurled forward or into the roof of the vehicle or ejected from the vehicle, that vehicle would be out of control and would very likely be involved in the destruction of property or possible loss of the lives of people in other vehicles. It has been estimated that the use of proper seat belts in trucks or private cars has cut the rate of fatal accidents by 40 per cent. In this small bill, I am introducing I am simply seeking to make a change in the safety provisions in respect of motor vehicles which I believe is necessary and quite simple to bring about.

We have in our hands in this place this evening the power to save lives, if not by passing the bill, at least sending it to the proper committee for detailed study. This is a proposal to make mandatory the use of seat belts in commercial vehicles. I urge that my colleagues will give this motor vehicle proposal their approval so that it might be considered in committee and improved on if necessary.

Mr. Francis: Mr. Speaker, may I ask the hon. member a question? I have listened to the hon. member's remarks. He indicated the purpose of the bill is to require the mandatory installation of seat belts and also their mandatory use. Does the hon. member not concede that there might be a constitutional problem in a federal requirement concerning the use of seat belts?

Mr. Mather: If that should be so, and I do not know offhand whether it is, I believe this would be another reason for allowing the subject matter to go to the committee for detailed study.

• (1710)

[Translation]

Mr. Gaston Clermont (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Treasury Board): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Surrey-White Rock (Mr. Mather) would like to amend paragraph (b) subsection (1) section 4 of the Motor Vehicle Safety Act by adding the following words:

(b)—including equipping motor vehicles with safety belts for mandatory use by operators—

The amendment proposed by the hon. member though commendable lies beyond federal jurisdiction. It would rather be the responsibility of the provincial governments following agreement between them and the federal government.

[English]

As you know, Mr. Speaker, responsibility for the federal government's role and leadership in the field of road and motor vehicle traffic was assigned to the Department of Transport in 1967, following an extensive inquiry into this national problem by one of the parliamentary committees. Preliminary discussions were successfully concluded