

CIDA

world economy in recent months. The inflation which has gripped the world, and the energy crisis with ensuing balance of payments difficulties, have had a very serious if not tragic impact upon the poorest countries of the world and the poorest peoples of the world.

Probably we ought to be devoting our attention in the long run in the House of Commons to consideration of ways and means of cushioning the impact of these global problems upon the developing countries of the world. Hopefully, today is the beginning of a process that will continue in the standing committee, in the House of Commons and in the country and will enable us to arrive at a consensus as to how best we can cope, as a nation, with world problems, especially those that affect the third world.

I was impressed during the debate by the general support for Canada's international effort in the field of aid. I want to tell my friends in the House of Commons that as Secretary of State for External Affairs for a very short time, I have discovered, as did my predecessor for a much longer time, that the perception of Canada's role in the world, a perception shared by the developing world and by others who are engaged in the developing world, is very favourable indeed.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. MacEachen: I do not make that comment in any way to turn aside the criticisms which have been advanced in respect of our aid program. The hon. member for Saint-Hyacinthe (Mr. Wagner) in moving this motion has made a call for scrutiny. He has asked why the Canadian International Development Agency has become the fiefdom of one man. If Canada's international aid program, on which millions of dollars are being spent, has become the fiefdom of one man, the responsibility lies on the shoulders of members of the House of Commons. But I want to assure my hon. friend that the Canadian International Development Agency is not a fiefdom. It continues to be responsible to the government, and through the Secretary of State for External Affairs it is responsible to parliament. The head of CIDA has exactly the same status as any deputy minister in the Government of Canada, and his relationship to the minister and to parliament is precisely the same as that of any deputy minister.

● (1640)

Hon. members say they have had no opportunity to scrutinize the affairs of CIDA. Well, I must say that I do not take that seriously at all. The charge of secrecy is so ill-founded that it smothers the opposition in ridicule.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. MacEachen: The Secretary of State for External Affairs and the president of CIDA have been prepared to appear before the Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence in all those past years. As I have looked at the record, I have found that the president of CIDA has in fact appeared before the committee every year and has been willing to answer questions. Indeed, he has been willing to come back and to provide the committee with the questions it might want to ask. He has invited members of parliament to go to CIDA to get more informa-

[Mr. MacEachen.]

tion. But members opposite make the plaintive cry, "We are powerless".

What has happened to the official opposition? What has happened to the public accounts committee? The chairman of the public accounts committee is a member of the official opposition, and the accounts of CIDA must go to the committee every year; but never has the public accounts committee asked that CIDA officials appear before it as witnesses. Perhaps the reason is that the former auditor general—the gentleman whom my friend, the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin), respects so greatly and who has presided over the accounts of Canada—has never raised a single criticism about the administration of CIDA. Maybe that is why the official opposition have failed, through the public accounts committee, through the estimates committee or through any other process, to conduct the scrutiny that they now desire.

So far as I am concerned as minister responsible, I welcome the fullest scrutiny. In fact, today I welcome the opportunity to set the record straight on some of the ill-founded criticisms. I do not mind criticisms that are based on fact, but I do mind criticisms that are ill-founded and based upon ignorance. Do not say that CIDA has been immune from scrutiny. The opportunity has been there. If the House of Commons has failed to take advantage of that opportunity, we should not blame CIDA but ourselves.

Some hon. Members: Blame the government.

Mr. MacEachen: No, sir, not the government. CIDA has been one of the most open agencies that I know. The avalanche of press releases informing members of parliament of projects is enormous. I have looked at these releases coming out every so often, advising us of the projects that are being financed by CIDA throughout the world. But hon. members do not know about it. Do hon. members blame CIDA because they do not read their mail?

Then I think of sitting in the House of Commons since the end of last September as Secretary of State for External Affairs, waiting every day for penetrating questions from the official critic of the opposition on CIDA in particular, in which subject he has shown such a recent and accelerated interest. I must say that the record of penetrating interrogation on the floor of the House by the opposition is dismal. I believe that from the opening of parliament on September 30 until the Christmas recess—that is, three months and about 40 hours of oral questions' time—exactly five questions have been put to me on international development. Since January, the record is hardly better. There were a few more questions, all vague, always general and very slightly related to Canada's bilateral aid programs in which hon. members opposite have shown such interest today. So I have been coming in every day loaded with papers, waiting, sharpening my wits—and nothing has happened. I wonder what is the point of becoming informed in the House of Commons about CIDA when nobody else seems to care. I am glad that attitude has changed.

The hon. member for Saint-Hyacinthe has said that it would be interesting to know about certain projects. He