

Regional Development

Mr. David MacDonald (Egmont): Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate that the minister, in the concluding lines of his speech, said that he would welcome suggestions and then had to leave the chamber. I hope he will not only read my speech but respond to it.

As the Minister for Regional Economic Expansion (Mr. Marchand) spoke, I looked to the Chair a couple of times to see whether Your Honour was still there. At several points during the speech I assumed that Parliament had been dissolved and a general election called. Certainly, it sounded to me like the opening shot of the minister's defence.

It is unfortunate that the minister, during his time in office, has been unable to distinguish between two basic functions of public life: the exercise of one's duties in whatever responsibility one is called upon to perform and the perpetuation of one's political role. The minister has always lumped the two together so that we get speeches that sound for all the world like Grade A stump speeches—they are full of sound and fury, signifying you know what. This is a very sad fact, particularly to those of us who have a very great interest in and basic concern for the administration of the Department of Regional Economic Expansion.

If ever there was a time when there was need for a concise and rational explanation of the problems of the Department of Regional Economic Expansion, it is right now. The minister has repeatedly failed to come to grips with the legitimate questions being raised by opposition critics. In addition, he has not come to grips with the constructive suggestions from his own office, his own advisory council of rural development, the council for the Atlantic provinces or the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council. I do not think the minister could accuse the latter of being partisan.

I, therefore, find it incredible and sad that the minister should think that the only defence he has left for his departmental administration is to launch into the kind of sweeping, general attacks that do no one any good and negate the hard work being done through his department. Surely, it is difficult for the most objective observer to take the minister seriously when he suggests, and I quote him, that "No one wants to find out what the truth is" or that he has not heard one criticism from anyone who is anxious to improve the situation. Does the minister really understand the particular weaknesses of the present programs and policies of the department?

In debate and discussion in this House, he should be outlining the steps being taken to alter programs or compensate for some obvious faults in evaluation.

Mr. McBride: You heard the hon. member for York South (Mr. Lewis) and the hon. member for Vegreville (Mr. Mazankowski) this morning.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): I heard both speeches but I am not aware that either of those members has the responsibility for running this department.

Mr. Peters: Just because he defeated you in Renfrew, don't cry.

[Mr. Marchand (Langelier).]

An hon. Member: This looks like a United Church squabble to me.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I have to remind hon. gentlemen that the hon. member who has the floor should be heard.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): Mr. Speaker, I would be tempted to say it is "all in the family" but I think that has a dangerous connotation these days.

Unfortunately, the minister's penchant for flying into oratory rather than viewing the substance of issues, has been carried into the department itself. That is not to say that the department is sending forth apostles to preach in the same virulent manner as is exhibited by the minister from time to time, but there has been a paucity of objective information from the department about the success being achieved and about the evaluation of programs attempted during the past 2½ years. There has been a lack of information ever since this department was established. There has been no opportunity for a public evaluation and no real suggestions in concrete terms for guidelines in the administration of vast sums of money.

• (1500)

Are there guidelines, for instance, to suggest the criteria that ought to be followed if departmental policies are to meet with success? There should be some guidelines. Is the department following any industrial strategy, or is it merely accepting the present industrial structure of this country? One is led to believe that that is the case. Also, others suggest that the department is trying significantly to alter the industrial structure of the country.

Apart from some inconclusive signs that one might try to decipher there is no information coming from the department, no factual statement to indicate what the present situation is. Members of the House and the general public need factual information if they are to understand whether headway is being made in closing the economic gaps existing in our country. We want to know, as well, when the federal government has initiated new programs and when there has been a proliferation of provincial schemes in this country, if many of these don't work at cross-purposes to some degree with respect to incentives provided by other agencies of the provincial governments or the federal government.

Valid questions have been raised from time to time about the end benefits accruing from the kind of general incentives approach which has been adopted by governments in this country. It is time we had concrete information so that we might know whether incentive grants are actually reaching their supposed goal of creating economic activity and closing to a certain degree income gaps in this country, or whether major benefits are going to company investors and shareholders.

In his speech the minister suggested that people were accusing him of giving away money, and that was all. Anyone who thinks that that is the major strategy or policy that motivates this department can only have been strengthened in that belief by the minister's performance earlier this afternoon. If the minister's remarks represent the best intellectual arguments and rationale that can be brought forward in defence of present regional develop-