

*Senate and House of Commons Act*

sponsored by the Member from Moose Jaw would change the prohibition against receiving public money contained in the Senate and House of Commons Act and make it apply only to contracts or agreements of sale or service. In my mind, such a change would immediately raise the issue of what the definition of a contract of sale or service would be. If the present exclusion of Senators and MPs is limited only to government contracts or sale or service, loopholes could possibly arise.

I understand the Member's objective that a parliamentarian should be able to receive government funding if he or she is a Member of a broad class of individuals, for example, farmers, eligible for financial assistance under a general government program. I think that this matter can be dealt with, however, without making the proposed changes to the Senate and House of Commons Act as proposed. Perhaps the most important point to make is that the present legislation does not disqualify Senators and Members of Parliament from receiving financial assistance from the Government for which a large number of Canadians can qualify. The key word in the Act is contract. Most general assistance programs sponsored by the Government of Canada do not, strictly speaking, involve a contract.

It is one thing for a Senator or a Member of Parliament to seek a contract with the Government in competition with other individuals or businesses which would lose out if the Senator or Member of Parliament were to get the contract. In this case, there could be a suspicion of conflict of interest. This is what the Senate and House of Commons Act is intended to prevent. If, however, a contract is not involved and the financial assistance, rather than being awarded on a competitive basis, is available to a class of individuals or businesses, there would be no possibility of conflict of interest.

I would submit that the Senate and House of Commons Act even now does not apply to such programs. Having said this, it is important to ensure that Section 20(1) of the present Act is properly administered so that the statutory clause prohibiting Members of Parliament from participating in or benefiting from any government contract, agreement or commission is not inserted in any general program of financial assistance.

I know that the Bill proposed by the Hon. Member for Moose Jaw is well intended that there is a clear understanding in connection with Members and with general assistance programs. I would also suggest, and I take heed of the suggestions made, that this motion go to a standing committee for study. Therefore, I move:

• (1730)

That the motion be amended by deleting all the words after the word "that" and substituting the following therefor:

"Bill C-257, an Act to amend the Senate and House of Commons Act (independence of Parliament), be not now read a second time but that the Order be discharged, the Bill withdrawn and the subject-matter thereof referred to the Standing Committee on Elections, Privileges and Procedure".

**Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina West):** Madam Speaker, I would like to take a few moments to say a word on this Bill. Now that a motion has been moved, I think the Hon. Member

for Moose Jaw (Mr. Gottselig) would be able to speak again. I would be interested to know if he would be prepared to accept the motion put by his colleague. If he is satisfied with it, he will not get any argument from me or my colleagues. If he is not prepared to accept it, we are quite prepared to help him turn it down, although I think he is stuck. Even if he just gets the subject matter of his Bill before committee, then at least he has gotten that far.

I think that the Hon. Member is worrying too much. There are many others of his colleagues who should have been worried about conflict of interest. In this instance, I do not believe that the Hon. Member had a worry.

With government agricultural programs to which a farmer contributes, there is no problem, whether it is crop insurance, the Western Grain Stabilization Act or other programs. If a farmer contributes, he pays a premium to be covered.

In the case of the Special Grains Program, the Hon. Member as a farmer would of course have a direct interest in the matter, and, though I am no lawyer, I think that there is something in law about the rule of general application. If a program like the Special Grains Program is universal, then every farmer who holds a Wheat Board permit is eligible. It would not matter if the Hon. Member for Moose Jaw were a farmer, a Member of Parliament, an MLA, an alderman or a rural municipal councillor, or none of the above. He would be included under the umbrella of the general application of that particular law. That is why I think the Hon. Member was worrying too much.

If we were to follow the argument to its logical conclusion, then all of us would be in conflict of interest. For example, Members from all sides fight for improved old age pensions for which we are eligible. At the same time, MPs draw a pension as MPs if they have been here for six years or longer. One could conclude that there is a conflict there.

Corporate executives often come to this place. If a Member were to be on leave of absence from a corporation and his corporation, by taking advantage of a government program which meant millions and millions of dollars for the corporation, were to give him a better deal on his stock options, his dividends or his pension, he would be in a conflict of interest. That is why I think my hon. friend is worrying too much about this matter.

In any case, if this will make the Hon. Member or any other Hon. Members who come here from the farming or fishing communities feel more comfortable and more straightforward, that is fine. I have no problem with that. If that is all it will take to make them feel better, I am quite willing to help.

I wish to say something else as well. When I came here, I burned all my bridges behind me. I learned from other people who had been in this place years and years before me that if an MP is to do a full, good job representing his federal constituency, he does not have time for anything else. Some of my caucus