

THE ECONOMY

FIRST MINISTERS MEETING—ATTENDANCE OF PRIME MINISTER

Hon. Royce Frith (Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, I have a question for the Leader of the Government in the Senate. There is a report from Canadian Press that Prime Minister Mulroney has told the premiers he does not have time for anything more than a one-day meeting on the economy this month—not two days as expected—and they better have their homework done.

In a recent letter to B.C. Premier Mike Harcourt, acting as provincial coordinator, apparently the Prime Minister flatly rejected preliminary plans drafted by provincial and federal officials for a two-day meeting in Ontario. Instead, Mr. Mulroney said he wants a one-day session on March 25 because—and I emphasize this—of the busy schedule of meetings on constitutional reform.

Can the people of Canada infer from this that the Prime Minister and his government place a higher priority on solving the constitutional problems of Canada than on Canada's serious economic problems?

The Hon. the Speaker: Honourable senators, before the Leader of the Government answers the question, I must advise you that the 30 minutes allotted for Question Period have now expired.

Hon. Lowell Murray (Leader of the Government): I am sure the Leader of the Opposition would agree, honourable senators, that the two issues—the unity of the country and economic prosperity—are intimately related.

• (1520)

DELAYED ANSWERS TO ORAL QUESTIONS

Hon. John Lynch-Staunton (Deputy Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, I have a response to the question raised on February 27, 1992 by the Honourable Senator Stewart regarding the Harris Report on northern cod stocks.

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

DECLINE OF NORTHERN COD STOCKS—REQUEST FOR GOVERNMENT REPORT

(Response to question raised by Hon. John B. Stewart on February 27, 1992)

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans has sought to integrate information from inshore fishermen into the process of stock assessment. Back in 1987, the Task Group of the Newfoundland Inshore Fishery was commissioned by the Honourable Tom Siddon to provide an independent analysis of the factors which had influenced the decline in inshore catches.

The Task Group, which included independent scientific experts from Europe, U.S.A. and Canada, concluded that, while there had been a decline in inshore catches, the total biomass of the northern cod stock had been increasing.

The Task Group attributed the decline of inshore catches to a combination of factors. These factors were: 1) changes in fish availability resulting from predator-prey and/or environmental conditions; 2) differential mortalities imposed on offshore stocks migrating to inshore fishing grounds; 3) overall decline in inshore fishing effort and/or redeployment of fishing effort to other target species, and; 4) potential overfishing of inshore stock components by inshore fishermen in southern areas. The first three points thus confirmed the findings of the Canadian Atlantic Fisheries Scientific Advisory Committee (CAFSAC) but the Task Group also noted that there was a reasonable possibility that declines in inshore catches in some inshore areas had been due to heavy fishing on groups of cod that live most, or all of the time in inshore waters. The Task Group also indicated that the analytical techniques employed by the Canadian scientists were standard contemporary methods for stock assessment.

This is where we were at the end of 1987. In fact, as the inshore catches exceeded 100,000t in 1988 (from a level of 72,000t in 1986), these findings provided the most likely explanation of the declines in inshore catches in the mid-eighties.

In January 1989, CAFSAC reviewed the most recent information on the northern cod stock and concluded that the stock was far less abundant than they had estimated in preceding years. The assessment also implied that the stock would remain stable, i.e., no growth, no decline, with a TAC of 235,000t. These reductions in productivity were related to the poor production of fish in 1983 and 1984 and to a reduction in the growth of cod throughout the eighties. The news of lower than expected productivity for this important stock was responded to immediately by the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans who announced, on February 12, 1989, an independent panel to review the scientific advice on northern cod. The Panel was chaired by Dr. Leslie Harris, President and Vice Chancellor of Memorial University of Newfoundland. The Panel included two eminent fisheries biologists, namely Dr. Lee Alverson, who chaired the Task Group on Northern Cod Inshore Fisheries in 1987 and Dr. John Pope of the Lowestoft Laboratory of the United Kingdom. The Panel concluded that the most recent CAFSAC advice was "in the right domain".

There is a tendency to forget that the marine environment is not static, but changes over time. In that respect, the marine environment is no different from that of the land where droughts, floods, or other environmentally-induced disasters are known to occur. Droughts and floods are difficult to refute as the cause of hardship because they themselves, as well as their impacts, are so visible to us. Changes and disasters in the marine environment are more difficult to demonstrate as they are only detected through their impact on fisheries, which can themselves be affected by other factors (e.g., overfishing). This leads