

... more effort should be expended, world wide to ensure the preservation of genetic material. While there is an extensive system for collection and storage, the importance of effective, internationally coordinated, adequately financed gene banks cannot be overstated.

● (1450)

The Agricultural Institute of Canada also made a point of noting that the widespread use of improved varieties of crops such as wheat, rice and maize has caused the displacement and disappearance of the genetic variability in older varieties and native land races of these and other species. The institute stated:

The collection and presentation of this germ plasm is an urgent requirement which is not being adequately met.

It notes that plant breeders' rights in Canada are only marginally related to the issue and that, as a separate issue, they should be seriously discussed.

Others feel that even if this bill itself does not patent life forms, as such, it will lead inevitably to future legislation that will. Representatives from Genetic Resources of Our World, GROW, among others, spoke strongly on this point. They stated, in part:

Once we have allowed property rights to be applied on plants we will find ourselves granting exclusive rights on animals, human cell lines and individual genes, as has been the case in the United States.

Their brief noted that the progression in the United States from plant breeders' rights in 1970 went to full patent rights on micro-organisms in 1980, to full patent rights on plants in 1986 and on animals in 1987. The witnesses also suggested that human and cell lines have been patented, in some cases without the knowledge or consent of the donor.

Representatives from GROW suggested that our committee should have cross-country public hearings on this bill and that the government should produce a white paper on plant breeders' rights so that, prior to the passage of this legislation, the Canadian people and the farm community could be fully informed. They were joined in their discussion by the Canadian Environmental Law Association.

I personally do not believe that this particular bill is the vehicle by which to undertake the far-reaching studies suggested by some of our witnesses. It is clear to me, however, that there are some questions of major public policy here that need priority examination by government, by Parliament, and by the public. We certainly have not had the necessary scope of opportunity under this bill. Indeed, it is not the function of this bill. We need a special and a strong process to address the environmental problems developing on our prime agricultural lands as well as the security of our future food supply and our world competitiveness in food products.

The minister in his testimony spoke of a balance between economic growth and environmental health, but without a healthy environment we will have neither the capacity nor the economic growth for the ability to enjoy it. Investment in systematic gene banking, public research, and Third World

development is not just a nice thing to do—it is a hard-headed investment in the wellbeing and prosperity of ourselves, our children, and, indeed, our planet. To my mind it is the role of the government, both national and international, to work effectively to ensure that these investments are made. Not to do so, in my view, is an abdication of duty.

Honourable senators, I recommend the passage of this bill today, but the questions that have been raised around Bill C-15 are serious ones and they deserve to be dealt with seriously in appropriate forums of public discussion. I urge the government to provide that opportunity before events in other countries of the world move technological development beyond our own legislative control.

Hon. H.A. Olson: Honourable senators, I have serious apprehension about what this bill is leading us into. I went to most of the hearings about which Senator Fairbairn has been speaking. It is certainly true that she has reported accurately that there were a number of people who also expressed serious apprehension about the possibility that we are about to take one of the best plant breeding programs in the world and subject it to a great deal of jeopardy. I say that because we know that Canada has the greatest reputation in the world—absolutely bar none—of being able to sell cereal grains. Every country in the world accepts our grading standards and buys grain on the basis of those grades that are offered. Every other country in the world, including the United States, has to submit samples of the grain it is selling. Its grades are not accepted. Then, after it has submitted the samples, it has to guarantee that the product will meet the samples that have been submitted. We do not have to do that, and that has been worth a great deal to our grain producers over the years.

But there are people other than cereal grain producers who have appeared before the committee and they have persuaded me, at least, that perhaps we should let them try this measure. Representatives of the horticultural industry, for example, have stated that when they produce a new rose with a beautiful colour and other characteristics, they have no way of getting a reasonable amount of return, unless we pass this bill. As far as I am concerned, I am ready to get out of the way and let them try it.

I asked the Minister of Agriculture about this. I said, "Let us go ahead with the bill. I will help you pass it, but can we not exempt cereal grains for about five years until we see how it works?" Of course he refused. He said that that would strip the bill. "Strip the bill of what?", I asked. It may strip the bill for some elite seed producers or the seed registers or foundation seed distributors and prevent them from making an additional charge on the grain producers. That is all that may happen.

I agree that people should be rewarded when they spend time and investment in producing something that is useful and which, therefore, has a market, as new plants do. I want honourable senators to know that I have been involved in this area for 22 years. When I was Minister of Agriculture we studied a bill similar to this one. We conducted an investigation of the various plants that people were trying to bring into