

Main Estimates

at a time when housing should be encouraged, and in all aspects of the construction industry which plays a major and decisive part in the economic development of any nation. With a buoyant building industry far more tradesmen with all kinds of skills would be employed and I need to go through the whole list of them, ranging from foundation diggers to roofers, chimney workers and so forth. This is why I think this is a very important area which should have been encouraged through lower interest rates. That way, the government would have been able to get back part of the interest it has to pay out to promote development in this area, as was the case, for example, in the Maritimes and eastern Quebec, through tax credit. The idea behind all that was to help industries in this part of our country.

Another point I would like to talk about is the debt. I was shocked when I looked at this earlier. It is terrible to see a responsible government, which has all the tools to do something truly useful—we have to read this to believe it—according to the table, in 1975, which is not so long ago, the net debt of our country was \$19,275 million. From the start of Confederation in 1867 to 1952, over a 100 years, the debt grew to \$11,185 million, and from 1952 to 1975, our debt increased by \$8 billion. This is unacceptable, Mr. Speaker, when we consider that in 1975 the debt was \$19 billion and that in 1978, it will reach \$38 billion, which means that it will have doubled. There has been no war, no disaster, we did not develop a merchant navy, we have done nothing very special, and our national debt has doubled.

This is the criticism that I want to make, but at the same time I would like to make a practical suggestion that the government can follow if it wishes. If not, I wonder what the national debt will be in four years since it has doubled in the last four years. At the present time, Mr. Speaker, it costs us \$25 million a day, the debt grows by \$25 million a day. The figure would be even more shocking if this were broken down into hours and minutes. I do not have the time to do it, but others who have the time can do so. I invite the unemployed of Canada to consider this. They have the time to figure it out and they will understand why they are unemployed because it is shocking to see that we have come to the point when we pay \$25 million a day on the national debt and when we are not even able to know to whom the interest is paid. I understand that there are people who own bonds, but that interest is paid to big financiers.

I see here that there will be an increase of \$1,150 million this year for interest alone. The hon. member for Lévis (Mr. Guay) could build a merchant marine with this and we would get something out of it. This is a cancer. Someone talked about a cancer in his speech earlier, and he was right.

Mr. Lefebvre: The opposition is a cancer!

Mr. Lambert (Bellechasse): The hon. member says that the opposition is a cancer, but if it is, we have a seriously cancerous democratic system because it has happened that the cancer has changed sides and this can still happen. But this remains a cancer, a necessary cancer. The opposition is not there only to

[Mr. Lambert (Bellechasse).]

criticize, but also to inspire wisdom in those who are responsible for public funds, that is the members of the cabinet. It must be a very discouraging situation for a finance minister who will have to get all the money that the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Andras) requested today in his estimates. It will have to be an income budget to pay the expenditures. In a healthy administration, expenditures and income should be balanced, and when they are not, we get into debt. For individuals, getting into debt means that you are not able to balance your budget, which is not a good thing. This is no good for a municipal government, let alone a provincial or national government. I would therefore suggest to the Minister of Finance (Mr. Chrétien) and hon. members of cabinet the solution would be to amend the Bank of Canada Act. You feel this is funny. You are making fun, but if your former leader Mr. King was here now, he would tell you: well boys, you have not made much progress over these 50 years. Because he said there had to be a Bank of Canada, a bank for Canadians, a bank to serve Canadians, a tool to manage the nation's credit in order to create a healthy monetary system in Canada. He said so. If we are to succeed, we should therefore amend that. Let us be up to date. In 1978, the Bank of Canada can only make loans to the federal government up to certain percentages of the estimates, and for six months. How far can we go on that?

The Minister of Finance proposes to go and borrow abroad, in order precisely to protect our Canadian dollar. I read in a newspaper today the Canadian dollar will soon drop to 80 cents. This will happen for the precise reason we are doubling our national debt; if we owe more than we have, creditors will become tougher. We will soon learn about that. Creditors are beginning to lose confidence in this country's economic stability and our Canadian dollar.

I therefore very sincerely urge the minister to propose an amendment to the act to allow our own bank to lend the money our government needs. We would be lending ourselves money. Figures computed here at home by ourselves and for ourselves are as valid as those borrowed in Italy, Germany or New York, because this is only figures. So we have means, we can do so because we are a responsible parliament. In view of this, we should change our ways of financing the public sector to prevent such huge and discouraging debt increases.

● (1552)

[English]

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I think it is appropriate in the circumstances to understand the importance of the step taken by the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Andras) today in the tabling of the estimates. They are, of course, central to the whole process of the examination of the estimates by parliament. His remarks are important, and it was for that reason that extensive participation took place by members opposite. It must be remembered, however, that the purpose in tabling the estimates and in referring them this afternoon to the standing committees is that extensive questioning will take place at each of the standing committees on the separate estimates.