NEWS

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Free Trade debate sizzles

By JOYCE OUELLETTE

What happens when a theologian, an economist and a politician meet in a room? A public forum on Free Trade with three distinct arguments that make for a fiery debate which sizzled on later than expected.

Close to a hundred persons attended this forum held Tuesday evening at St. Paul's United Church auditorium. The panel consisted of three individuals whose involvement in the discussion of this policy was apparently well researched. Paul O'Connell, a former federal trade negotiator for two years and practicing economist, Dr. Roy De Marsh, theologian and minister of the United Church of Canada, and John "Bud" Bird, former mayor of Fredericton, federal P.C. partisan took part in the debate.

An informative overview of the Canadain-U.S. Free Trade Agreement was put forward by Mr. O'Connell. Quoting Adam Smith, he argued that both countries would benefit from an opening of markets. Stating that this agreement is not as drastic as some citizens may believe because it is taken from the General Agreement of Trade and Tarriffs (G.A.T.T.) which has reduced trade barriers up to 85% since the 1940's. Thus the Free Trade Agreement is an extension of GATT.

Four important aspects of the agreement are designed with GATT principles in mind. The first purpose is to remove all tariffs and trade barriers between the two countries including rules for duty fees, non-trade barriers, etc., in a period of ten years. The second aspect deals with the four sectors which have been dealt with separately because of special needs such as agriculture and it's twenty year protection to insure that the industry will not suffer, a removal of discriminatory pricing of alcoholic beverages (exempting beer), a provision on energy and the Auto-Pact. The thrid section deals with non-traditional GATT issues such as services, investment and finances which represent a first in international trade. The last part deals with the amending formulae and dispute-solving mechanism which will set up a bi-national panel to replace the existing judicial review. The agreement may be cancelled by any party with a six month notice.

Dr. Roy DeMarsh questioned the motives of business persons who support this agreement because they would benefit from a continental economic accord. "Will global trade put Canadian sovereignty at risk?" His conclusion, illustrated by a biblical reference, expressed that the Free Trade's economic domination would result in political oppression. He also brought up several studies about the consequences of an opening of the service sector such as Marjorie Cowan's discoveries that women would lose if the agreement is accepted because 70% of the jobs in this sector are held by women.

Mr. Bird described the policy with words such as "attractive", "appealing" which would guarantee "greater prosperity and significant improvements for all Canadians." He believed that the "riskspale in comparison to the benefits of lower prices and a chunk in the larger U.S. market."

Mr. Bird enumerated ten advantages given by the federal government which explain why Free Trade is not a threat but an essential alternative. These include job creation because of greater supply of goods and services, greater prosperity, economic growth, lower consumer prices and sales tax, and secure social programs.

Mr. Bird admits that his "confidence in the federal government may be a bit naive, but opposing citizens are over reacting with myths, superstitions, simple over generalizations and patriotic feelings without giving it (the accord) a chance."

The individual debates were followed by an open question period with the audience. Concerns, views, and opinions reflected both optimism and skepticism and challenged the panelists to thoroughly construct their arguments to persuade their audience. Questions expressed various fundamental elements such as "why the sudden rush to free trade with the U.S. since only 15% of barriers remain with GATT" or "will the influence of the Canadian-U.S. free trade push toward interprovincial free trade?" or "how Canadian sovereignty will be protected with an omnipresence of open competition" and the consequences on various groups such as the poor, women or others which has been overlooked by government and their hopes to accomodate multinational and big corporations.

An interesting observation from a 20-year Canadian resident who was originally an American citizen concluded the debate by suggesting that Canadian sovereignty could benefit from American statehood, but that social programs and services would not be in jeopardy because citizens in both countries would continue paying taxes separately.

Abortion - Now who decides

The Supreme Court of Canada has ruled the country's anti-abortion legislation to be in violation of the constitutional rights of women.

Now they must decide upon the rights of the unborn child.

Last Thursday's ruling struck down a law brought in twenty years ago by then Justice Minister John Turner. It restricted access to legal abortion.

Previously, four doctors had to certify that the procedure was necessary to protect the mother's physical or mental health. It could only be performed in hospitals certified by the Canadian Council on Hospital Accreditation. Women who broke the law could go to jail for two years. Abortionists faced a possible life sentence.

In 1985, 61 000 legal abortions were performed in Canada. Thousands more were done in the independent clinics set up by Dr. Henry Morgentaler and elsewhere.

The basis of the Supreme Court decision is a section of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms which guarantee "security of the person." It has been interpreted to mean that a woman has the right to make decisions regarding the use of her own body.



File Photo: Henry Morgentaler's 20 year fight appears to have been successful, as the Supreme Court struck down the country's abortion legislation.

A survey conducted by the New Brunswick Council on the Status of Women in April of 1987 found that 30% of women in the province wanted unlimited access to abortion. 48% favoured access to therapeutic abortions only. 20% said abortions should never be done under any circumstances. 2% did not answer.

The Right to Life movement argues that abortion denies the right of an unborn child to exist. What must be determined in light of last Thursday's ruling, is when life begins. At what point in a pregnancy does aborting a fetus cease to be a medical procedure and become murder?

Several opinions on this matter have been put forward.

Some people say that life begins at conception. Certain medical authorities have cited the first sign of brain activity (6-8 weeks after conception) as a possible cut off point after which abortions should not be performed. The logic of this argument is that medically, the cessation of brain activity is considered to be the end of life. An alternative point of view claims that abortions may ethically be done up until the point at which the fetus becomes "viable". That is, when it can survive outside the womb. Others say life begins at birth. Under the law before birth, the fetus is not a person, and therefore has no legal rights.

The Supreme Court has agreed to hear a case brought forward by Joe Borowski, an anti-abortion activist from Manitoba. It will focus on the rights of the fetus. No court date has yet been set.

In the meantime, the responsibility for resolving the issue has returned to the House of Commons. The government must decide whether to amend the criminal code to prohibit abortion or to let the Supreme Court Ruling stand unchallenged.