

Grain Advance Payments

the constant disruptions in the movement of grain. I have never experienced such frustration and anger as that which prevailed among producers in this country this year because of inability to move our products to market. Ships tied up in the port of Vancouver caused huge demurrage costs. The price of grain declined day by day. This resulted in the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars to the Canadian producer.

● (1600)

So though we are supporting this legislation, let us serve a warning on the minister to get on with the job of improving the reliability of the grain handling and grain moving system. This is of the greatest importance, since we need export markets and the prompt movement of grain to pay off the cash advances which will be available to producers under the terms of the bill before us.

Mr. G. W. Baldwin (Peace River): Mr. Speaker, I shall not take up much of the time of the House this afternoon. We on our side were willing to let the bill go through all stages today. However, the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) has taken a different position. I understand his point of view and do not dissent from it. I might point out, though, that clause 1 provides for a method of recovery of moneys advanced under the Prairie Grain Advance Payments Act, which leads me to discuss a matter about which the minister and I have had correspondence in the past.

Up in the northern part of western Canada, particularly in the northern part of Alberta, there was a series of difficult harvests for a number of years due to adverse weather conditions. People I knew from personal observation to be good farmers found themselves in the position of having no cash flow at all; the weather during the seeding season had been bad and the fall was marked by heavy rain, snowfall and early frost. I recall during the election of 1972, I think it was, driving around my constituency and seeing farmers combining at midnight though they knew the grain recovered would be so damp as to be almost useless. But they were driven to extract whatever they could from their farming operations during the year.

I know that in the farming community there are some who deliberately default on their obligations, as there are in all quarters of society, but it has been my experience not only as a member of parliament but as a resident of the north who was a lawyer for a great many years that the percentage of farmers defaulting is very small indeed. To confirm this we need only look at the figures relating to the operation of this act generally, to the farm credit legislation and to other legislation under which the government guarantees loans which farmers take out through banks and other financial institutions.

Nevertheless, I find that over the years the Canadian Wheat Board has been engaged in what I can only describe as wholesale persecution. I do not mean this in the sense that they deliberately set out to persecute these farmers, but I do say the board failed to ascertain the reasons behind defaults in repayment when they occurred, made little or no attempt to inquire as to the character or record of the farmers concerned, and appeared unconcerned that these were individuals who paid their bills when they were able to do so. I found, to my dismay, that the court

[Mr. Mazankowski.]

authorities had issued a large number of writs. I found the bailiff going around serving these writs at considerable cost to the farmers concerned. Actions were embarked upon by the board at a time of year when it must have known that farmers, in these circumstances, would have no money with which to pay these accounts.

The issue of the writ was followed in due course by the issuance of a default demand. It would have been possible under the court procedures in my province for the farmer concerned to have filed a demand for information and a statement of defence and by these means to have stalled the proceedings for some time. But this would have meant the added cost of engaging a solicitor and would have substantially added to the amount the Wheat Board would have been able to claim against them. Naturally, they let these cases go by default. In many instances, in response to appeals I received I wrote letters to the minister. The minister had no recourse other than to refer these matters to the Wheat Board, and the answer from the Wheat Board was that there was nothing they could, or would, do.

Mr. Speaker, I consider that the actions of the board in these cases were severe, harsh and arbitrary. As such, they are deserving of a measure of censure. I recognize that the board has an obligation to administer the act, to see that payments are properly made and that people do not deliberately evade their responsibilities. But from personal experience and observation over a number of years I believe the actions of the Wheat Board with regard to the recovery of advances made under this legislation have been most unfair. I am not aware of instances where judgment was followed by execution or seizure, but I personally investigated very many cases; I admit that in one or two cases the board was justified in taking action, but in 90 per cent of the cases the action taken was very unfair and I believe the board should be censured for it.

I do not know whether the board was following instructions from the government or from the minister, or whether it had set out a policy with regard to these actions, but farmers have often said to me, "I wonder whether the federal government and its agencies are as zealous, harsh and arbitrary when collecting from some of their friends in industry and business." They compare their situation with that of certain people in the field of labour, to whom the hon. member for Davenport (Mr. Caccia) has referred, where workers involved in the loading and transportation of grain seem to get preferred treatment. I do not object to that, but I suggest that when you put one alongside the other you will see there are very marked differences. This is one of the reasons people in the agricultural community are suspicious and angered about the administration of this government in respect of agriculture.

● (1610)

I wonder what we would see in the future, if we could look into a crystal ball, regarding the prosecutions which are now being carried out in connection with harbour dredging. I should like to polish up my crystal ball and peer into the future to see how the federal government will treat its friends who are involved in this gouging of the public purse. I wonder if the government will take the action it will be entitled to take against these people if the evidence supports the allegations and there is proof that these individuals are guilty of the criminal offence of