

Furthermore, this recent decision illustrates a rather interesting change in policy for Ontario. In 1971 the Premier of Ontario announced important reforms to the OHIP premium system. One of the reforms which was highlighted at that time was a general reduction in premium levels. The 1978 version of reform announced by the same government is a general premium increase of 37.5 per cent. This change has taken place even though health costs in Ontario are consuming a lower percentage of the total governmental expenditures than was the case in 1970-71.

I do want to make several comments on the implications for the health programs per se, even though I view the OHIP changes—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order, please. That will be impossible because the allotted three minutes for the answer have expired.

TRANSPORT—MOVEMENT OF POTATOES FROM EASTERN TO CENTRAL CANADA

Mr. David MacDonald (Egmont): Mr. Speaker, our farmers, our marketing boards and even the provincial government have been on record for a long time regarding their views about the approaching crisis in potato transportation. I first drew this matter to the government's attention about 16 months ago, on November 30, 1976. Half a year later the Minister of Transport (Mr. Lang) got around to appointing a group to study the problem, in May, 1977. We still have no official word on new rail cars, and meanwhile the rail car unit or reefer car fleet of some 4,500 a few years ago has now been drastically reduced to some 700.

Finally, in July of last year the first report of the government group studying potato distribution was released. This group, headed by a senior official from Transport Canada, Mr. Nick Mulder, included a representative from DREE in Prince Edward Island, and made a valuable contribution to underline the present concern and growing apprehension about potato transportation.

In this group the Minister of Transport's own officials spelled out to him what Islanders have known for years about our potato industry. They told him that "the problems have become acute" in distribution; that "of late, because of cost pressures, the lean years seem to be outnumbering the fat ones" for our farmers; and that "the problems of potato distribution have been ignored too long" by government. If that is not enough to get action from this minister, when his own officials condemn his neglect of the industry, I do not know what will.

The only reason there was no crisis this season was the extremely low level of shipments from New Brunswick, thus meaning there were enough transportation vehicles available to move the heavy shipment of potatoes this season to market. The minister, to his credit, did upgrade the potato ports in the three maritime provinces, but on the single, most significant and immediate need of the industry, new rail cars, he has been absolutely silent, even though the first report was made in July of last year.

Adjournment Debate

Last July the minister's own officials informed him that at least 170 new cars were needed for the next season. Rail will obviously continue to be the backbone of our potato distribution network, carrying some 85 per cent of our shipments to central Canada.

Two weeks ago, on March 7, the minister promised me in the House of Commons that an announcement on new rail cars would be made roughly within two weeks. His two weeks are up today. Today is an important day for me because it happens to be my daughter's birthday. Certainly I will remember the minister's failure to make an announcement by this date. If he has any regard for the situation in Atlantic Canada, surely he will live up to that commitment.

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The Minister of Transport is not the only footdragger on this issue. I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that Canadian National Railways has obstructed progress on this problem at almost every stage. Instead of constructive proposals for helping our potato industry, our supposed public railway has given excuse after excuse for washing their hands of the problem. Fortunately, the Mulder report shows up the excuses of CN for what they are—a sorry evasion of public responsibility by one of Canada's oldest Crown corporations. CN indicates that there are enough rail cars.

The report prepared last summer, after extensive consultations with informed potato industry representatives, indicated that at least 170 new cars are needed for the next shipping season alone. CN said that the new cars should not be its responsibility. The report referred to the following:

... acceptance by transportation companies of the responsibility for supplying equipment which is properly designated and maintained for potato transportation...

Specifically it recommends that the new cars be ordered and paid for by CN. The report continues by indicating that CN should lower its rates and ensure stricter government control, inspection and maintenance of cars during the cold shipping season. In addition, the report shows that CN's claim that trucks will eventually replace rail cars is a lot of hot air. That is the only hot air CN has with respect to its reefer cars. The claim that trucks will replace rail cars is absolute nonsense, as every potato grower knows.

There is an example in the report which illustrates how unresponsive CN has been on this question. Canadian Pacific, which is a privately owned company, has agreed to lease and improve the extra rail cars needed for the short term, while CN simply continues to make excuses. Recently there was the further suggestion on an interim basis, as I mentioned to the hon. minister the other day, that some 300 cars were available at roughly one-quarter of the cost from Hanover Trust.

In my opinion, one of the most valuable conclusions of the government's report is the following statement:

The federal government must provide the leadership and stimulus to resolve the major problems over the next few years.

We are still awaiting an answer from the minister. He is not present in the chamber tonight, but perhaps his parliamentary