

Railway Act

was set up between the Minister of Transport and the four western ministers responsible for transportation. The arrangement is that the studies remain confidential. However, I certainly agree with the hon. member that we should seek to expand that particular reference. I am sure the minister and the provinces, too, would agree with this approach as we move further along the road to getting a better understanding of the issue.

We have all heard about the inequities which exist. The difficulty has been to define them specifically. I hope that in the coming months we can make available to the transport committee more of the information which has been gathered in some of the studies to which the hon. member referred.

There is one other point on which I might comment. An inquiries procedure has been announced with respect to the examination of the 6,000 miles of branch lines presently in the "in-between" category, that is, whether or not they will be a permanent part of the system. I can tell the hon. member and the House that further detailed announcements on the matter should be made by the Minister of Transport and the minister responsible for the Wheat Board (Mr. Lang) within the next week. These will set out the nature of the inquiries and the kind of information and answers it is hoped the inquiries will produce. I agree with the hon. member that we will have to move fairly rapidly in dealing with this question.

● (1410)

Let me point out to him that the uncertainty in respect of these rail lines has been with us for a long time, as I am sure he is aware. Abandonments have been frozen, deferred and put off indefinitely, while the grain companies and the people living in the communities affected, as well as others who might be looking at these areas for future industrial development, want to know whether they will have a rail line. These difficulties have been with us for a long time, and the purpose of these inquiries is to try to clarify some of the very matters about which the hon. member for Vegreville is concerned.

I think when the hon. member hears the details of the inquiries process and how they are to be conducted, he will be happy with the approach; and I can assure him of the full co-operation of the minister and the ministry. Certainly, if we are to clarify some of the questions and issues which are of very deep concern to western Canada, we will need to get some of these answers—and that is what the whole inquiries process is all about. These inquiries will be looking into some of the problems of rebuilding and improving branch lines, as well as the whole grain collection system.

The hon. member made reference to a broader type of information bill which will involve modes of transportation other than rail. That will be coming in the future. The hon. member points out, quite rightly, that a good deal of the transportation on the prairies is carried out by truck. If we exclude bulk commodities such as potash, grain and coal, it is pretty well even in distribution as between rail and truck. The over-all information bill will be designed to provide the government with the information on these other modes of transportation needed for the development

[Mr. McIsaac.]

of the kind of policies which will meet the needs of the various areas of Canada.

As my primary interest is in western Canada, I can assure the hon. member of the co-operation of the government side of the House in trying to obtain some of these answers. Bill C-48 is an auspicious beginning in that regard. This process is now working very well in giving us the kind of information we need to set the stage for the development of policies which will resolve some of the concerns of western Canada and other parts of the country.

Mr. J. R. Ellis (Hastings): Mr. Speaker, like the previous speaker, I intend to comment only briefly on Bill C-48, a bill which in my opinion is nothing more than window-dressing. I am sorry that the parliamentary secretary did not more clearly enunciate the reason for bringing this bill before us; he did not justify the purpose of the bill at all. We have known for a long time that something was required to bring out the facts in respect of freight rate issues. I do not know why this has not been done before, in view of the fact that the authority was already in existence either through the governor in council or the Canadian Transport Commission.

I have only been a member of this House for a few years, but in the years before that there were many debates on freight rates, an issue which has been a bone of contention in Canada for many years. While it is fine to agree with the provinces, as happened at the western economic opportunities conference a couple of years ago, that this information is necessary, surely it could have been made public long before now. Surely this information could have been collected for the Minister of Transport (Mr. Marchand) in the past and made a matter of public record. Surely the minister should have reacted by taking the initiative, in view of the demand and the number of requests in respect of this information. The minister has had the authority all along to take this initiative and straighten the matter out. He has claimed many times that these matters are beyond his control. I suggest that the principle, the need and the ability may be beyond his comprehension, but they certainly are not beyond his control.

One of the studies in which I am greatly interested was not mentioned by the hon. member for Vegreville (Mr. Mazankowski). I understand the study has been on the desk of the minister for almost two years and has been upgraded twice because of changing economic conditions. I refer to the study in regard to rail passenger transportation. I realize that this is a deviation from the issue before us, but it is a very current and pressing matter. The suggestions of the two major railways in this country have been kicking around for some time. In answer to a question I asked a few weeks ago, the minister would only say that he had just started to look at the study. If it has been available for a couple of years and he has just started to consider it, I wonder how long we will have to wait before getting satisfaction. Perhaps the parliamentary secretary would undertake to see if he can have this study made public as well, so that some of us can look at it.

We have only had two spokesmen from this party in respect of the bill but they are two of the most knowledgeable men in the House of Commons on rail transportation and freight rates. I refer to the hon. member for Lisgar