

Maintenance of Ports Operations Act, 1986

I must confess that initially that was my reaction, that for a change the real culprit was to get it in the neck. Initially, I suppose as a committed democratic socialist, those were my thoughts about the Bill. However, when I looked with some measure of responsibility at its over-all effects and whatnot, I was not in such a rush—and I do not think my colleagues are—to support the legislation even though it would end an employer strike.

There are some serious ramifications in the legislation, both omissions and commissions, affecting the workforce. I am not only referring to longshoremen, but there are some serious ramifications for workers in other fields, particularly in ports and generally in transportation. We cannot ignore that, as much as I relish the idea of kicking the B.C. employers' associations in the backside.

● (1600)

The Minister mentioned what happened at Thunder Bay, and quite properly so. I want to remind the House that the grain handlers union in that instance knew very well, as all unions do, that you need to have not only a majority of support of your own membership but you must have some measure of public support, or at least sympathy, for your case in order to help you win it. The grain handlers union knew that if it shut down the entire Port of Thunder Bay it would lose whatever public support or sympathy available to it, particularly from northern Ontario west. The union, after 18 months without a contract—you could hardly say they were not patient—struck the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. Before, during and since the debate to get rid of the statutory Crowsnest pass grain rates, all of the grain companies have talked to us about the beauties and blessings of competition, that you need to have competition. The co-operative grain companies said that, the private grain companies said that, so did the wheat pools, the UGG and so on. All have maintained that you need to have competition.

One would have thought that when the grain handlers struck the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool terminal in Thunder Bay, the other grain companies would say: "Oh, goody, goody. Now we get a chance competitively and because of this stupidity to get some of their business away from them." That did not happen. Competition went out of the window. All of the other grain companies locked the doors of their terminals and locked out the grain handlers. In other words, the other employers, and I think of the UGG, the Manitoba Pool, Pioneer Grain and Otto Lang, the Cargill Grain Company, said: "We are not going to allow our members and owners—in the case of the co-operative elevator companies—and we are not going to allow our customers—in the case of the private grain companies—to deliver any grain". So the entire Port of Thunder Bay ground to a halt. I hope that members and shareholders of the United Grain Growers, the Manitoba Wheat Pool and the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool during the course of the next few weeks will ask some very searching and probably embarrassing questions of their management and boards of directors. I do not know how they can get at the private companies. I do not think they

can, but at least they can bawl them out and perhaps quit delivering grain to them once in a while. I might say that, in spite of alarmist press reports I have yet to see any evidence of any specific grain sale loss.

Mr. St. Germain: Good.

Mr. Benjamin: In fact, as has occurred in other years, you end up in a catch-up situation and all our contracts will be met. We have not lost any sales, but we may have lost some revenue from sales over the period of that strike. It will, however, all be regained. The problem is that, as a result of the war with the United States and the European Economic Community, there will be a revenue loss, but not a loss in the volume of grain sales. In fact, there will probably be an increase in the volume of grain movement through Thunder Bay.

The next thing we know is that we have a mess at Vancouver. In many respects that port has been in a mess in many ways for many years. There is nothing new about it. Not only the longshoremen's but several other unions have been pleading and begging the City of Vancouver, the Vancouver Port Authority and the federal Government to do a whole number of things to make that port bigger, better and more competitive, and to increase business and increase employment, all of which pleading has been ignored on the grounds of restraint, budget deficits and plain mismanagement from Vancouver to Ottawa. When an impasse is reached between the longshoremen and the Maritime Employers Association, the centrepiece of the impasse and disagreement will be the container clause. That is the one on which neither side cannot, will not and have not for yea these many years reached agreement. All other items get shunted off to the side even though they have been negotiated, agreement reached on a few with disagreement on others. Obviously they could arrive at a contract settlement, I suspect, within 48 hours if that darn container clause 2605 were not in the piece.

I have a personal feeling, and I do not know if it is held by others in my caucus or anywhere else, that both sides want us to settle that issue for them, even though both sides ain't going to like it. Since they cannot and will not reach agreement, I appreciate that the Minister really has not a heck of a lot of choice.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Benjamin: The Minister has to settle. We have to settle the issue for them. Warning was served on both sides to settle or Parliament will do it for them. This causes me to suspect that both sides decided not to settle because they knew they would never reach agreement for another 100 years. Having said that, the Minister includes in his legislation a whole lot of other items on which if they do not reach agreement either he, his Commissioner or his referee will settle. I know he gives them until the end of 1988, a period of two years. But it is not free collective bargaining when a gun is pointed at your head and you hear: "You guys reach agreement on every clause,