

Railway Operations Act

● (2100)

I think it is incumbent upon this government, in addition to the reply by the Minister of Transport earlier today, to give an undertaking to the governments of both Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island—which by the way, acted in a very similar manner in respect of the suspension of basic ferry services to those provinces—that in the succeeding weeks and months a definite agreement will be worked out with these two provinces so that they will not in future be faced with the kind of strikes that cause serious economic harm not to just one segment of the society in either of these two provinces but in a total way. It has been mentioned already in the newspapers and, I believe, in other ways that the premier of my province is taking court action to sue the federal government for its failure to continue service between the mainland and Prince Edward Island. I understand that similar action is to be taken by the government of the province of Newfoundland.

While this action shows in fact the seriousness with which these two governments view the suspension of service, I think you will understand Mr. Chairman, that it is not the basic requirement. What we must arrive at in the very near future is a solid agreement which will for ever and a day prevent a situation arising again where service can be totally disrupted. In the case of Newfoundland we see a situation in which it is virtually impossible for there to be any service in respect of goods or persons by water, and one does not have to conjure up much imagination to realize the disastrous economic effects being felt at the present time in that province.

My province of Prince Edward Island is not faced with a total blockage by water, because we do have the private service operated by Northumberland Ferries. However, the main Canadian National operation between Borden and Tormentine has been suspended. There is not only the problem that the suspension has gone on now for some days, but also the fear of that suspension which has been felt for over a month. One cannot describe the effect in terms of millions of dollars of business lost in our second largest industry, the tourist industry, plus the related effects to the farming and fishing industries and the effect this has on the other industries within the province.

I would suggest that at a very very early date the Minister of Labour and the Minister of Transport convene a meeting with responsible officials from the government of Prince Edward Island, as well as with representatives of both management and unions of the railways, to work out a new format and a new structure that will prevent this kind of disastrous result that is felt in particular by these two island provinces.

It is perhaps a truism to say that by the terms of confederation both in respect of the province of Prince Edward Island—which ironically is celebrating its centennial year of confederation this year—and the province of Newfoundland which is celebrating almost 25 years of confederation, a basic fundamental agreement was to continue transportation and communication with the mainland. That fundamental agreement has been destroyed. We must, in the context of working out the particular problem that affects the non-operating and other employees of the railways of this country, deal with the specific and very

[Mr. MacDonald (Egmont).]

difficult problem concerning the ferry operations to Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island.

I would invite, in particular, the Minister of Labour to make a commitment this evening that as soon as we have dealt with the immediate crisis concerning the non-operation of railways that there will be convened at the highest level a meeting of himself, the Minister of Transport and responsible officials from the governments of Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland, and the railways, in order that we may arrive at a structure and method whereby we will not have to see an individual group of employees suspend the vital transportation link to these island provinces.

I do not think I would be a responsible member of this House if I did not receive that kind of commitment from the Minister of Labour and his colleague. Without that commitment, this kind of approach to end this crisis is merely a band-aid approach in respect of a fundamental problem that has become increasingly recurrent in the last two decades. In 1950, in 1966 and again in 1973 we have seen the kind of serious harm that results to the economy and society of these island provinces when there is in effect no continuous transportation or communication link between these provinces and the mainland of Canada.

Mr. Munro (Hamilton East): Mr. Chairman, I have listened attentively to the hon. member. I realize, as does the government, the tremendous inconvenience and indeed suffering in many cases to Prince Edward Island, the hon. member's home, and of course Newfoundland. I think really what the hon. member is getting down to is that he wants some assurance that a strike will not occur. In essence, that is how I interpret the hon. member's remarks. If he wishes to tell me otherwise, I will listen. In other words, he wishes assurance that a strike will not occur in those areas where such service is so essential to the survival of the people of islands such as he described.

We have already had some debate in this House in respect of how we can deal with strikes in essential services. I think the hon. member's leader indicated he would set up an essential services disputes commission.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Munro (Hamilton East): There have been other remarks in respect of the comments of the Leader of the Opposition relating to the Mills task force study. It might interpose various stages, but ultimately it comes down to the question of whether we are prepared in certain specific cases to deny the right to strike and impose compulsory arbitration.

No matter how we clothe it, and no matter how edgy we might be in respect of this fundamental question, I can answer the hon. member right now by saying yes, we could correct that situation assuredly so that it would never happen again. The answer to that type of question, some people would be prepared to say, is compulsory arbitration. In that way there could be assurance that there would be no suspension of essential services in terms of transportation to Prince Edward Island.

However, the hon. member's party is not advocating compulsory arbitration. No party in this House advocates compulsory arbitration. This points up the necessity that