

Adjournment Debate

Marketing Corporation, including the resignation and dismissal of a large number of senior staff and the unfavourable profit and loss picture of that corporation, does the minister intend to refer the matter of the administration and operation of the corporation to the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Forestry for investigation and report?

The minister's reply was as follows:

Mr. Speaker, the answer is yes. As hon. members know, we have encountered management problems in the operations of that joint federal-provincial Crown company. This matter must be referred to the committee because of the financial losses involved.

By February 2 no action had been taken with respect to an inquiry, so I put a further question to the minister as follows:

A couple of weeks ago the minister gave an undertaking to the House that there would be an inquiry by the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Forestry into the operations of the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation. Is he now in a position to indicate to the House when he expects this inquiry to begin, and when he expects the committee to be set up, and would he also give some indication of the terms of reference to be given to the committee?

The minister's answer was:

I hope to be able to make a statement to the House in this connection shortly.

Mr. Speaker, it is now April 3, two months later, and an inquiry has yet to be held. There has still been no reference to the committee with respect to the affairs of the corporation. Each day of delay in referring the matter to the committee ensures that the committee will encounter increased difficulty in getting to the bottom of the questions which are currently the source of rumours and discontent with the corporation. Each day's delay means it will be more difficult for the committee to call key witnesses before it as they become dispersed and involved in other employment, in some cases.

I realize that the standing committee is presently examining the minister's estimates and that during this examination the committee is free to make inquiries about the corporation. However, examination of the estimates does not provide the committee with the time or the scope for the undivided attention this subject demands. The FWFMC is the key to the livelihood of virtually every commercial fisherman in northwestern Ontario, the prairie provinces and the Northwest Territories. It is a Crown corporation and it has been the instrument of introducing radical changes into the fishing industry in the regions mentioned. Because of its importance to a key sector of the western economy, and because the livelihood of large numbers of Canadians is totally dependent upon its efficient operation, the subject demands a full inquiry based upon terms of reference permitting a complete examination of the corporation's operations and administration.

There are many questions to be answered. For example, did the Auditor General refuse to endorse the corporation's books and, if so, why? Has the corporation suffered losses? If so, did they amount to \$1 million, \$1.5 million, \$3 million or \$5 million? I have heard all those figures cited. Then again, is part of the corporation's inventory of fish unaccounted for? If so, how much, and why?

Have purchasers of fish from the corporation defaulted on payment for goods received? If so, how many and in what amounts? Why have large numbers of senior staff of the corporation been dismissed or resigned, and what is their side of the story? Has adequate compensation been

[Mr. Rowland.]

granted to fish buyers, processors and distributors displaced by the corporation? Are there large amounts of expensive fish processing equipment lying unused and deteriorating in the new Transcona plant? Has the new plant proved to be inadequate for the task of handling the volumes of fish reaching it for processing, with resultant wastage? Are other new plants being contemplated? Have attempts at new marketing procedures and the development of new fish products been abandoned? If so, why and with what result?

Why are there large fluctuations in the labour force associated with the processing of fish by the corporation, and can these fluctuations be controlled? Why have fishermen in northwestern Ontario elected to cease operating under the auspices of the corporation? Why has the Saskatchewan Fishermen's Co-operative voted to do the same? What are the grievances of fishermen in The Pas, Manitoba, and are they justified? Was the new plant located in Transcona rather than in Selkirk because of cold, hard, economic fact, or because of political patronage of the worst sort, as claimed by Liberal candidates during the last election would seem to indicate?

All these questions and many, many more require answers. In posing these questions, I in no way wish to imply anything beyond the fact that those are questions that are being asked, and because they are being asked they demand to be answered. If half of these problems exist, then a public inquiry is necessary. Answers to these questions can only be obtained through a full public inquiry. Thus, I wish to know when this House may be presented with the terms of reference for such an inquiry by the minister, and when the standing committee can get down to that job. I hope the minister will be able to supply us with that answer this evening.

Hon. Jack Davis (Minister of Fisheries): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Selkirk (Mr. Rowland) has asked a number of questions, such a large number that I shall be able to answer only a few of them this evening.

I should like to inform him that the estimates of my department have been before the fisheries committee of the House on three separate occasions and will be before members of this House for another ten days. I will be in attendance at all times and would be glad to try and answer these questions there. The chairman of the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation is scheduled to be there next week and for as long as the committee wants to keep him there. So I suggest to the hon. member for Selkirk that either he get himself on the committee or that he arrange for somebody else to ask these and other questions on his behalf.

This is a serious matter. Unlike the Saltfish Corporation, the Freshwater Fish Corporation has run into financial difficulty. This is a corporation that was set up originally at the request of the three prairie provinces. It is a corporation which is a joint enterprise between the prairie provinces and the federal government, with Ontario included and the Northwest Territories. It was created to deal with a very difficult, I would say messy, fish marketing situation. Its main purpose was to create a single selling desk instead of dozens of local operators operating mainly from telephone booths. The single desk was an