

Canadian National Railways

Mr. Benjamin: Mr. Speaker, I am sure the hon. gentleman now wishes that he had not brought up the subject. Suffice to say that the comment he made is answer enough.

This multiplicity of companies, all heavily financed and pursuing a limited volume of air traffic, is suicidal. The only result will be severe financial difficulty for a number of airlines in the future. Will we keep this up until we find the people and the government of Canada being called upon to bail out several bankrupt airlines? Surely, this is a classic case of history repeating itself. One only has to go back to the period 1880 to 1923 when everybody wanted to get into the act, particularly the wealthy friends of the government of the day, and build a railway. We had railways of a wide variety and kind, and with the exception of Canadian Pacific—we gave them enough to make sure they survived—they went bankrupt. If we did not learn from that lesson when are we going to learn?

I submit that we are following exactly the same pattern with regard to air traffic and airline policies as we did back in those days regarding railway policies. If we are to have an efficient and viable national transportation system by rail and air, it will require a fundamental change in the thinking and attitude of the government. It will be necessary to indicate that service takes priority over interest charges.

Speaking of service, Mr. Speaker, I for one do not put all the blame for the deterioration of service on the CNR management. With the kind of financial situation they have faced since 1923, no matter how worthy their intentions, they have had no option but to reduce service. One should give them full marks for making the maximum effort in attempting to improve and enlarge passenger services and passenger revenues as they have. It is probably the only railway in North America that increased passenger revenue and revenue miles between 1960 and 1969; in fact, in that period they almost doubled.

When you have a national transportation policy that places greater emphasis on interest charges and on making sure that bond holders are looked after rather than service to the public, then services are going to suffer. Since the end of World War II we have seen a reduction in train service. Some of these reductions were legitimate, the result of technology, particularly in the case of diesels. The discontinuance or reduction of passenger service lowered the volume of traffic and meant smaller revenues. Then, we saw the closing of railway agencies and ticket offices, followed by the abandonment of whole railway lines and railway subdivisions. Under this bill, though, money could be borrowed to build branch lines for mining corporations and the like, but never mind the public of Canada.

This has been the pattern followed by Canadian National Railways, and even more so by Canadian Pacific Railways, as well as railways in the United States. In considering railway costs, we must not forget to count the cost to our nation and our economy of the reduction of rail services. As a former railroader I readily admit

[Mr. McCleave.]

that a few of the branch lines were superfluous, but a reduction of the scope proposed by CPR is unwarranted. I do not think the cost of that action has been considered by this government or the provincial government.

If one were to consider the cost of up-grading municipal road systems to accommodate traffic that would otherwise have travelled on railway branch lines, Mr. Speaker, it would amount to hundreds of millions of dollars. These costs have not been weighed against the cost of maintaining railway lines. Before more branch lines are abandoned, agencies closed or passenger trains discontinued, I think that the government, parliament as a whole, the Standing Committee on Transport and Communications and even the Canadian Transport Commission—although I do not think that body will do what I suggest—ought to look at the question of costs and determine what the total costs are in this area for all of Canada. It seems to me that we can make a more imaginative use of our rail transport and communications systems, and other transport systems such as trucking firms. In the towns or villages that have a population of 500 or more, why should there not be a transportation and communications centre? There, if you wanted to do so, it would be possible to make a telephone call, send a telegram, or send a telex message. Shipments arriving either by truck or rail would arrive at such centres. If you wanted to ship out goods by rail, road or any other transport system, you could ship them from such a centre. There, an interested person could have access to tariff information, to teletype facilities and to computers that might be located in cities such as Montreal, Calgary or Toronto.

• (3:50 p.m.)

An hon. Member: Or Regina.

Mr. Benjamin: Or Regina. Most facilities of this kind are being discontinued in areas around that city. Most of these small communities have lost their post offices; many have already lost their station agent. In some of them, there were two station agents but both of them have gone. Few of those centres have any sort of permanent truck depot, and none of them have immediate access to air transport facilities. The establishment of such centres would make available to the Canadian people such national transportation facilities as are available. I have thrown out that idea off the top of my head. Perhaps this would not be a practical suggestion for towns or villages with a population of 500; perhaps it would only work with centres of 1,000 people and more. Yet, it seems to me that that is the kind of facility which would make available to all Canadians the benefit of the different kinds of transportation and communications systems in the country.

In speaking about reduced train services, may I say this: it has been brought to my attention today that the Canadian National management intends to replace the passenger trains now operating between Ottawa and Montreal with dayliners. I understand this affects all present passenger trains, except the transcontinental service. All other trains will be replaced with dayliners. If my