

Blue Water Bridge Authority Bill

do primarily with section 19 of the original Blue Water Bridge Authority Act. The desire of the member in whose name Bill C-16 stands is that section 19 of the Blue Water Bridge Authority Act be repealed and that in its place there be reinstated a rather lengthy section, the purpose of which would be to have the financial situation of the bridge authority made known to members through the Auditor General. I trust I have not oversimplified the position of the hon. member, but that is how things stand as I read the bill.

I have taken a great deal of interest not only in the bill but in the background to it. The history of this bridge authority is fascinating. One detail which has not come out is that back in 1964, when there was also this true party spirit supporting the original set-up of the bridge authority, the bill was not a House of Commons bill but a Senate bill. It was Bill S-4 as it came to the House in 1964, and when it came from the other place to this chamber it resulted in a very short debate.

This demonstrated the amicability in this House concerning such a bridge authority. There seemed to be no division at all about it. The hon. member for Red Deer (Mr. Thompson), the then leader of the Social Credit party, gave his support. The member who spoke on that occasion on behalf of the New Democratic Party was the member who is sitting at the helm of the New Democratic Party this afternoon, the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles), and I thought he gave one of his better speeches on that occasion.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): It must have been short.

Mr. McBride: It was extremely short, only two sentences, if my memory serves me right. I thought it did him credit. The matter was dealt with expeditiously. Bill S-4 came in as a Senate bill precisely because it was not intended to draw any funds from the public purse. I believe it was the hon. member for Medicine Hat (Mr. Olson), now Minister of Agriculture, who raised that question during the debate on Bill S-4. He pointed out—and the minister of transport of that day, Mr. Pickersgill, agreed—that there was no suggestion that there would be any expense to the public treasury resulting from this bridge authority, and it is my understanding that since 1964 there has been no draw on the public treasury.

As one member of this House, I am slightly confused as to whether or not an accounting of the expenditures and the revenue taken in by a Crown authority is a property under the purview of the Auditor General. It would seem to me it would make more sense not to pursue the avenue suggested by the hon. member for Lambton-Kent but, rather, to endorse the suggestion put forward by the hon. member for Sarnia-Lambton, namely, that we ought all to be encouraged by the order in council that is being drafted.

• (1640)

I want to say also that Bill C-16 is deficient or perhaps even slightly misleading in that it calls for the submission of the authority's financial reports to some representative of the United States. We are all aware that when the bridge act became law in 1964, those passing the legisla-

[Mr. McBride.]

tion in this country assumed that there would be an international authority. In fact, the United States, and in particular the state of Michigan, have not established a joint administration of the bridge, with the result that the Blue Water Bridge Authority is totally Canadian and its financial reports should be submitted to the Canadian government alone.

The hon. member for Sarnia-Lambton has pointed out very well something that I wanted to bring to the attention of the House, namely, that there has been an avenue available since 1964 for the Blue Water Bridge Authority to report. I would suggest this is rather inadequate so far as making available to the public their financial situation. So I think that the order in council that is in the process of coming forward and which will have the bridge authority report to the Minister of Transport is extremely relevant, important and urgent.

As I understand the rules of this chamber, when the Minister of Transport comes before the Standing Committee of Transport and Communications, and when the information is made available to him, it would be properly within the ambit of the committee to ask specific questions of the minister on this subject. On delving into the history of this matter I found that there is no record of a member asking the Minister of Transport when he was before the committee with his estimates for information that is being sought by way of this bill. This has been sought through other avenues by the hon. member for Lambton-Kent who has taken a prime interest in this whole subject.

I think that this reporting through the appropriate order in council will clear up the whole issue before us today because certainly the gist of the substance—and I suppose a debate on second reading is a debate on principle—would be supported in principle by all hon. members because to reveal the financial transactions of this authority would be a worth-while endeavour. I find myself more in agreement with the hon. member for Sarnia-Lambton, that the other avenue is perhaps the best one.

In conclusion I should like to raise a couple of questions. First, I wonder how well the hon. member for Lambton-Kent or any other hon. member is aware of the profit potential of this authority. I was particularly interested to discover that the commissioners served at no cost. This is what I understood the hon. member for Sarnia-Lambton to say, namely, that the men and women who serve as commissioners on the bridge authority do so out of the goodness of their hearts.

This would suggest to me that the authority does not have much resources at its disposal, yet when we look at the statistics, at the thousands upon thousands of vehicles that go over this bridge and consider whether any cost is being planned for the future in the form of tolls and so on, it seems to me that we should become aware of what the profit potential is. If it has a potential to make a profit, perhaps we should raise a still more basic question, one that permeates all of our culture concerning such enterprises as Air Canada, the CNR, the CBC and, this afternoon, the Blue Water Bridge Authority, namely, whether many of these services that are rendered to the public should not be taken over by private enterprise.