

*Adjournment Debate***PROCEEDINGS ON ADJOURNMENT
MOTION***[English]*

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 45 deemed to have been moved.

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS—TRANSFER OF HEAVY FREIGHT OPERATIONS FROM PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND TO NEW BRUNSWICK. (B) REQUEST THAT MINISTER INVESTIGATE TRANSFER

Mr. Tom McMillan (Hillsborough): Mr. Speaker, on Wednesday, January 19, and again on Friday, February 4, I posed questions to the Minister of Transport (Mr. Pepin) concerning the consolidation of Canadian National Carload Centres throughout the Atlantic region, especially in Prince Edward Island. CN has decided to fold the Prince Edward Island Carload Centre into its operations at Moncton as part of an over-all rationalization of services throughout the Atlantic region. All three Maritime Provinces, as well as border communities in Quebec, are being affected. But the Island will be especially hurt because our Province will be rendered the only one in all of Canada without a fully operational Carload Centre.

On the Island, the number of employees is to be reduced from 11 to five through layoffs, transfers or early retirements. More than jobs, however, are at stake. Instead of being able to deal directly and personally with knowledgeable CN personnel right on the spot, in the Province, local shippers will be forced to rely on whatever assistance they can obtain from a computer network based in Moncton. If a shipper requires information or advice, or if a shipment gets lost or delayed, the shipper will just have to hope that

someone at the end of the computer terminal might have a vague idea of what the matter is all about. No longer will the customer be able to count on the help of a familiar face at the Carload Centre in Charlottetown because, for all practical purposes, the doors will be locked.

The CN elite, in their plush boardrooms in Montreal, argue that Prince Edward Island will not be hurt by the gutting of the Province's Carload Centre. The official line is that the change is merely administrative and that the Island will continue to be serviced the same way as before. But we Islanders know better. We have long experience with having to plug into some elaborate and esoteric computer system in centres remote from our shores for services that other Canadians receive right on the spot in their own communities.

No one is arguing, and I am certainly not today, that CN should not keep its operations lean and modern and efficient. Nor is anyone proposing that the corporation should keep jobs on the Island just for the sake of creating employment. What is being said is this: We need the CN Carload Centre because it provides an essential service to our Province. Being an island, by definition, P.E.I. depends on its transportation links with the outside world more than any other single Province in our Confederation, with the possible exception of Newfoundland, which is also an island.

• (1805)

By stripping the Province of its railroad bit by bit, step by step, inexorably, CN is undermining a vital part of our economic base upon which both the public and private sectors depend to create jobs and other economic opportunities. The emasculation of the Carload Centre is yet another tightening of the noose around the neck of the Island's railway. If the present trend is allowed to continue unchecked, nothing worth saving will be left. The irony of history is that all of this is happening in the very Province that entered Confederation in the first place for the sake of its railway.

I urge the Minister of Transport to put a halt to the dismantling by Canadian National of P.E.I.'s railway system. He should instruct, in fact order, Canadian National to present to the Government a five-year plan to modernize the entire system. If certain essential parts of the Island's railway cannot be operated without a subsidy, the Government should provide assistance up to some reasonable maximum amount. Meanwhile, an immediate freeze should be imposed on all plans by CN to withdraw jobs and services on the Island, including those of the Carload Centre.

In conclusion, allow me to serve notice that I intend to press the Minister in the coming weeks for such a rational approach to the railway on P.E.I. Few issues were more important to the Province back in 1873 when we joined Confederation. Because rail is more energy-efficient than any other mode of transport, the issue remains as relevant now as it was over 100 years ago. That is why for us on P.E.I. the demise of the Carload Centre is not just a symbolic matter. It is a question of preserving an essential instrument of commerce, without which our very future as a viable partner in the Canadian economic union is jeopardized.

Mr. Dave Dingwall (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources): Mr. Speaker, it is somewhat ironic to hear the Hon. Member talk about subsidies and various forms of assistance to those enterprises, whether they be Crown corporations or public corporations, which may need financial assistance from the Government of Canada. I am hopeful that when the federal Government introduces its budget in the not too distant future, if there is an increase in the deficit of the Government of Canada, the Hon. Member will support it and not take the official position of his Party, which would reduce the deficit at all costs.

As the Hon. Member knows, CN's customers conduct their day-to-day communications with the railway by toll-free telephone to the Carload Centre from where they receive information on traffic movement, equipment orders, availability, and train and yard operations. Computers at the Carload Centre process traffic data and customer invoices. Recent advances in computer systems and mini-computers have made it possible for a carload centre to serve a larger area without loss of service. CN therefore decided that several centres could be consolidated at a single location, reducing CN's costs without any decrease in service. That has to be underlined. Service will not be decreased as alluded to by the Hon. Member.