

Withholding of Grain Payments

To begin with, such a position is nothing less than blackmail. The minister in effect is saying to the opposition, "Either you allow the legislation, which you consider to be bad legislation and which many farm organizations consider to be bad legislation, to pass or we will starve the farmers by withholding urgently required income and we will blame it on you."

An hon. Member: Shame!

Mr. Rowland: The minister tonight is being told where he can get off, and deservedly so. There is a great deal of noise being made these days about the responsibility of the government, about its accountability to the people and about the need for allowing it to get on with the work of fulfilling its mandate. One can hardly disagree with any of these concepts. However, there is another side to the coin. It is the responsibility of the opposition to see that the government does not ramrod through bad legislation. The opposition is accountable to the people for its actions in that respect.

If the opposition has the "temerity" to delay government legislation—and here, referring to Bill C-244 I might say, as someone said earlier, that it has only been before this House for 12 hours and before the committee for 24 hours—the mere fact that the opposition is also engaged in electoral politics and must seek the approval of the voters means either that in all likelihood there is overwhelming opposition to the idea, that there is a great division of public opinion, or that public opinion has not yet become clear. Surely in the case of any one of these three eventualities delay is justifiable. If the opposition is wrong in its assessment of public opinion, then it will suffer for its mistakes at the polls. This, as I said, is the other side of the coin to government responsibility; it is the side of opposition responsibility, a side too seldom seen and seldom understood. Surely the government has no justification, moral or otherwise, to employ blackmail in an attempt to get the opposition to avoid its responsibilities. Beyond that, the minister's assertion that the opposition is at fault in delaying the flow of cash to farmers is simply untrue. We on this side of the House have frequently suggested to the minister that he split Bill C-244 so that we might deal rapidly with its provisions for \$100 million in acreage payments, something which all of us on this side of the House would agree to. But the minister will not do that. That is his decision, not ours. We have made the offer. As a separate measure, the acreage payments could have been put through the House before we rose for the summer. That measure could be put through very quickly right now. The cheques could soon be in the hands of the farmers of the country. The minister, however, was simply too stiff-necked to co-operate. Even the minister must understand that the other provisions of Bill C-244 are, to say the least, extremely controversial and required detailed examination.

Without giving a speech which might be more properly made during consideration of the grain stabilization bill, Bill C-244, let me mention a few areas that cry out for detailed consideration. First there is the provision for the cessation of payments to offset storage and carrying

[Mr. Rowland.]

charges for unsold wheat. We ask: Is it legitimate to require the farmer to bear this cost on his own, since reserves of grain are requisite to Canada's being able to supply customers on orders and thus favourably affect the balance of payments of the country?

Another example, is it realistic to base an income support program on the gross income of a farm? Would it not make much more sense to base the program on net farm income? Gross income can be high, but so are overhead costs which could make real income marginal if not non-existent. Yet another example, is it legitimate to require farmers to contribute 2 per cent of their gross earnings to such a plan when their real earnings are so marginal that 2 per cent off the top might mean the difference between survival and failure? Surely, these are legitimate questions requiring the most careful examination. Who is the minister to demand that we in the opposition cast aside our obligation to give it that examination?

Finally, Mr. Speaker, even if the minister were right in his assertion that this is all the fault of the opposition, a point which I do not concede for reasons I have given earlier, what does that have to do with the substance of the argument before us? Absolutely nothing. The Temporary Wheat Reserves Act is the law. The government has not abided by the law. In 1968 when the opposition defeated a proposal for a 5 per cent surcharge on income tax, the government did not like it, but they paid back the money collected. They obeyed the law then, and they should do so now.

Sheer bloody-mindedness has placed the government in the position in which it now finds itself. It is time it acknowledged that fact and carried out its obligations under the law, if for no other reason than that the western economy needs the money which they are withholding.

Mr. F. J. Bigg (Pembina): Mr. Speaker, I was born and raised on a farm in western Canada, but that does not mean the farm problems which face us in Canada today are not shared by everyone who loves the land in this country. I wish this bill, and this problem which we face, related only to agriculture. If it did, I would be content to go home, take to my bed and perhaps settle this another day.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Francis: A good idea.

Mr. Bigg: I do not think there will be any applause coming from the other side of the House when I finish my remarks. I am shocked that a debate of this importance and magnitude is not attended as it should be. This House should be jammed. I wish the gallery were jammed as well.

It is not the Temporary Wheat Reserves Act that is on trial today, it is democracy itself. I wonder where the cheering ranks are that were here an hour or two ago when the minister was defending the indefensible. I call him a minister with my tongue in my cheek. No minister of the Crown worthy of the name could stand up in this