

Oral Questions

• (1430)

Ms. Mary Clancy (Halifax): Mr. Speaker, if the government is truly going to do all in its power to assist the Port of Halifax, that will be reassuring, as opposed to empty rhetoric.

If every region of Canada is important to this government, will the minister explain why his government has failed to intervene and undertake the necessary assistance to create a truly level playing field for the hard pressed Port of Halifax? We do not need mere words, we need some concrete action and we need it today. I would like to hear from the minister.

Hon. Jean Corbeil (Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, I did not have the pleasure of sitting in this House at the time, but I am informed that in a previous sitting of this House in years past, this government introduced some legislation to do precisely that. The most vocal opponent to those measures was a representative from the Atlantic provinces.

Mr. Ron MacDonald (Dartmouth): Mr. Speaker, my question is also to the Minister of Transport. It concerns the crisis in the Port of Halifax caused by the policies of Canadian National.

CN is a Crown corporation. The National Transportation Act clearly states in section 3(d) that transportation is recognized as a key to regional economic development.

My question is how do the rates charged by the CN monopoly contribute to regional economic development when it was exactly these rates that caused the loss of over 400 jobs and over \$24 million annually from the Port of Halifax last week? Can the minister please tell me how that is in concert with the stated intentions of the National Transportation Act.

Hon. Jean Corbeil (Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, an individual, who probably knows more about shipping and the Port of Halifax than the hon. member, mentioned yesterday that a representative of the Halifax Port Authority, one of the officials on the board of directors, indicated that even if CN had reduced its rail rates to zero, it would not have prevented this move by the two companies that decided to take their business away from the Port of Halifax.

Mr. Ron MacDonald (Dartmouth): Mr. Speaker, my supplementary is to the same minister.

Will the minister confirm that the real reason the government refused to act and allowed this crisis to develop was to force the province of Nova Scotia to come up with over \$4 million a year to subsidize the leasing of new container cars by CN or run the real risk of losing thousands of jobs and hundreds of millions of dollars from the economy of Nova Scotia, which has already been badly battered by this government's economic policies? Is that the real reason for the inaction?

Hon. Jean Corbeil (Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, if the member is interested in knowing the real reason for the decision by these companies, it is because of the over-capacity on the high seas. It has nothing to do with the railway rates.

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THE CONSTITUTION

Mr. Lorne Nystrom (Yorkton—Melville): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister Responsible for Constitutional Affairs. It is about opening up the constitutional negotiating process to the public.

I would like to ask the minister to elaborate on his ideas yesterday of an aboriginal panel to be attached to the constitutional committee next fall. I would like him to tell the House what kind of powers that panel would have and who would appoint the panel. Could he elaborate a bit more on that for us today?

Second, can he tell the House what ideas he might have for expanding that concept to citizens' panels for a number of other key areas in building the Constitution of Canada?

Right Hon. Joe Clark (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and Minister Responsible for Constitutional Affairs): Mr. Speaker, I think we all recognize that the situation of aboriginal Canadians is not comparable of that of any other group in the country.

Having said that, I would not exclude the possibility of considering the application of the idea of panels or something like that for some other groups. It is a proposal that is still being worked out and considered by the government.