

Railway Act

upgrading. I presume he approves of that, but I would like confirmation of it.

Second, I should like to ask him if he is aware of the fact that we have committed \$100 million for rebuilding the rail system, that during 1977 that program began in a very important way and that in 1978 it is continuing. This is money to be spent on the grain dependent lines on which there was a subsidy.

Mr. Benjamin: On the basic network.

Mr. Lang: Of course, the basic network was created by action of this government after the Hall Commission report. I should like to ask the hon. member whether he is aware that in that case too the government had very carefully signed an agreement with the railways whereby they have committed exactly what they are doing for the \$100 million so that every penny is spent on rebuilding the rail lines.

Mr. Murta: We are certainly aware of that. It is an amount of money which we believe is badly needed in western Canada. We believe also that the money is being spent on what we call the soft areas. The government has really not grappled with some of the more difficult questions that arise from the Hall commission report. When I mentioned the branch line subsidy I was referring to up to the present time. We in this party agree with the Hall recommendation regarding the difference in the amount between the Crowsnest pass rate and the rate for which the railways haul grain, which has been documented, we think correctly, by both Snaveley and Hall.

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, every time we get into any kind of discussion about railway matters—and it is happening again on this occasion—the subject of the pensions of railway workers comes to the fore. This happens not only when we discuss railway matters in the House but also whenever there are negotiations between the railway management and the railway unions. It took many years, in fact many decades, to come to the point where there was any discussion at the bargaining table about pension matters, and even since the time when such matters do get discussed very little progress is made on pension questions.

I believe it was during a special session which we had in the House of Commons late in August or early in September, 1972, just before the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) asked for the dissolution of parliament and we headed into the election of October 30 of that year, that in the dispute that took place here in the House we again raised the question of pensions and got nowhere, except that we got out of the Minister of Labour (Mr. Munro) a promise that there would be a full scale inquiry and examination into the whole matter of railway pensions.

On came the election, so nothing happened in that vein during the next few months. When we were back here in parliament in 1973, the issue of railway matters came up again and we kept on pressing the Minister of Labour to implement his promise to institute a full scale inquiry into railway pension matters. He finally did so in July of 1974. In fact, it was on July 9, 1974, that the Minister of Labour appointed Dr. Noel

[Mr. Lang.]

Hall as a commissioner to go into the whole question of Canadian railway pension plans.

● (2052)

I interject to say that when we discuss railway matters we frequently find ourselves referring to the Hall report. It has to be noted that there are two Hall reports—the two or three reports of Mr. Justice Emmett Hall and the report of Dr. Noel Hall on railway pensions.

I had the feeling at the time, out of a fair amount of experience around here, that referring pension matters to a commission of inquiry was a way of getting rid of the issue. Yet somehow I felt there was a measure of sincerity on the part of the Minister of Labour and that he wanted to see the issue resolved. I dared to hope that the appointment of Dr. Noel Hall to study the question would result in some real progress being made in this area. As I say, it took from 1972 to 1974 to get Dr. Hall appointed. It was September 8, 1976, before he submitted his report to the Minister of Labour. It was some time later, I believe in 1977, before we got copies of the report. Now we are into 1978 and very little has been done to implement even the meagre provisions of the Dr. Noel Hall report.

I say that those recommendations were meagre but at least there were some proposals in the report. As a matter of fact, Dr. Hall made one set of proposals covering railways in general and a special set of proposals with respect to the CPR. He pointed out that in the case of the CPR the situation is much less favourable than for the CNR, and he felt that as a first step the CPR should be required to bring its pensions provisions at least up to the level of pensions provided by the Canadian National Railways.

The report does not mean to say that things are perfect with respect to the CNR because Dr. Hall suggested what he called a heritage fund in the hope that ways and means might be found to improve the pensions of railway workers down the line.

I think it is fair to say that during the months and years the Hall commission was sitting, railway workers and retired railway workers were hopeful something would be done. With all the time that has gone by with very little being done, railway workers and railway pensioners are beginning to feel that once again they have been sold down the river by means of a commission of inquiry.

When we got the Hall report and started asking questions about it in this House—and when I say “we”, I mean members of this party and members of the official opposition—we were given the usual run-around—that these were matters to be dealt with by negotiation between management and the employees. We were told that these matters were being studied in the department but there was nothing the minister could do by way of giving any direction to the railways.

It always astounds me that the government can exercise its authority in so many ways, yet when it comes to telling railway management that it should give a better break to its employees or pensioners, the answer is always that this cannot be done.