In the first half of the current crop year, that is, from August 1994 to January 1995, grain exports through west coast ports increased by 45.6 per cent. Any prolonged work stoppage now could have a disastrous effect on the agricultural economy of the west, at a time when grain elevators are operating at full capacity. Given the intense competition Canadian grain producers face in international markets and the pressing need to maintain Canada's reputation with its major trading partners, it is essential that this bill be passed.

Although I have primarily spoken about the movement of grain in west coast ports, my colleagues know very well that Vancouver is an important international port that receives a wide variety of bulk and containerized cargo, whose transportation depends on the presence of a stable and efficient workforce in the port. The rapid passage of the bill I have tabled is necessary to maintain the viability of this activity.

As I have already said, the parties have already had the benefit in their negotiations of all the assistance possible from impartial third parties, measures which led to the report by the conciliation commissioner, Mr. Thompson.

In his report, the commissioner indicated that "there is a climate of hostility between the parties, at least as far as the Association and the Union are concerned". He even added that "the members of the Association believe that the Union is refusing to adapt to the evolution of economic conditions in the industry, while the Union, for its part, is of the opinion that the employer is attempting to weaken its position in the collective agreement, particularly with respect to job opportunities".

Mr. Thompson summarized the situation as follows: "There is nothing to indicate that the parties wish or are capable of working together creatively to resolve their problems". Even though he has presented a rather sombre picture of negotiations to date, I should add that the conciliation commissioner pointed out that the parties demonstrated excellent co–operation in their dealings with him, and I take this opportunity to congratulate him on his detailed and thorough report on this situation.

• (1855)

In his report, the commissioner made specific recommendations on all matters remaining in dispute, and as hon. members can see, I have no hesitation in using these recommendations to establish the dispute settlement mechanism described in the bill before the House today.

Many points on which the parties agreed in the course of the negotiations were directly inspired by the existing collective agreement between the parties for persons employed in longshoring on the west coast. The conciliation commissioner made his recommendations so as to guarantee that the port of Vancouver remains competitive with other ports on the Pacific coast and with types of transportation elsewhere on the continent. He also avoided any major changes in the structure of the collective agreement which he found was, on the whole, satisfactory.

In his comments, the commissioner indicated that both parties would probably receive the report with mixed feelings but felt that it offered a firm basis for a settlement. It was this conviction which inspired the bill before the House today.

The West Coast Ports Operations Act, 1995, provides for the immediate resumption of supervision of longshoring and related operations at ports on the west coast of Canada and for the appointment of a mediator–arbitrator to resolve matters remaining in dispute between the parties. As soon as this act comes into force, the employers will be required to continue or immediately resume, as the case may be, supervision of longshoring and related operations at all ports; employees will be obliged to continue or immediately resume, as the case may be, their employment when requested to do so. The term of the collective agreement is extended to include the period beginning on January 1, 1993 and ending on the date fixed by the mediator–arbitrator, which may not be earlier than December 31, 1996. The act provides that as soon as he is appointed, the mediator–arbitrator shall endeavour to mediate the matters remaining in dispute and to bring about agreement between the parties on those matters.

If he is unable to bring about agreement on a matter, the mediator–arbitrator will hear the parties on the matter and arbitrate the matter after taking cognizance of the report of the conciliation commissioner. All costs incurred in the appointment of the mediator–arbitrator and the exercise of his duties shall be paid equally by the parties. In addition, a series of fines is provided for, should the parties contravene the provisions of the act.

Finally, this act shall come into force on the expiration of the twelfth hour after the royal sanction, which will allow the parties enough time to bring employees back to work and give sufficient time for the resumption of the employer's operations.

The passing of this act will permit the resolution of the present dispute, but, in my opinion, we must find long term solutions to the problems that have been the source of labour disputes in Canadian ports for years. My colleagues are aware that an in–depth review of Part I of the Canada Labour Code is currently underway under the authority of the assistant deputy minister of the Department of Human Resources Development.

However, in the case of the present labour dispute, this is the second time in a little over a year that Parliament has had to intervene in a dispute involving the west coast ports. This would seem to indicate that there is a basic problem in the structure of collective bargaining in B.C. ports.