

April 20, 1874

MERCANTILE AGENCIES

Mr. DOMVILLE moved for a select committee of members to enquire into a mercantile agency system now in operation in Canada, with power to send for persons, papers and records, to be constituted as follows:—Messrs. Laflamme, Brouse, McKay, Wright (Pontiac), Haggart, Caron, Plumb and the mover. He said a similar committee was appointed last year, but the object was not reached during the session.

Hon. Mr. MACKENZIE said the resolution was a very important one. The hon. gentleman brought this matter up at the close of last session, and had a committee appointed to enquire into the reasons which in his opinion justified his endeavour to do something to stop the operations of these mercantile agencies. He (Hon. Mr. Mackenzie) had no objection to enquiry into the system; but the hon. gentleman must see the necessity of placing some of the leading commercial men of the House on that committee. It would never do, in a matter of this kind, to have the committee composed of gentlemen who, like the hon. gentleman himself, were pledged to hostility toward the agencies.

His (Hon. Mr. Mackenzie's) impression was that these agencies had done good service in the country. They were very seldom mistaken, and always took as much pains as possible to get accurate information. While he did not see any objections to the constitution of the Committee, he would suggest that the names of Mr. Jones (Halifax), Mr. Young, Hon. Mr. Holton, and Mr. Thibaudeau should be added to the Committee.

The House at this point rose for recess.

AFTER RECESS

Mr. DOMVILLE resumed his speech on mercantile agencies. He disclaimed any personal motive in pressing for this investigation, and, in support of his motion, presented a petition from St. John merchants praying for legislation on the subject. Mercantile men contended that the secret circulation of information generally was more injurious than any libel that could be published in the public press and further that the agents of these institutions were frequently engaged in mercantile pursuits themselves, and reported on their rivals incorrectly. He would not go into the details of the subject tonight. This Committee would prove whether these agencies were beneficial or not. If they were, no harm could be done by the investigation; if not, it would be advisable that legislation should be had to check their operations.

Mr. JONES (Halifax) hoped Mr. Gillmor would be substituted for him on the Committee, as he had enough to attend to on other Committees.

Mr. YOUNG thought this was not the proper time to discuss the question involved and objected to the hon. gentleman's profession to speak in the name of the whole mercantile community. He expressed surprise at the assertion made by the hon. gentleman that

the premier was not an exponent of the views of the mercantile man. He contended that the expression of opinion by the Dominion Board of Trade that some proper regulation should be made for the guidance of these agencies was a fair representation of the feeling of the country in that matter. He would for the present express no opinion on the matter himself, and thought the mover of the motion would have done wiser to act upon the same principle, instead of to some extent anticipating the result of the enquiry.

Mr. WALKER defended the position of mercantile agencies, holding that they, on the whole, had done their work satisfactorily, and thought it would be perfectly safe to leave the standing and respectability of these institutions in the hands of those whose interests they affected. They saved mercantile men a great deal of expense and trouble. The information they afforded was correct and just, as a rule; and although they sometimes did make mistakes, he thought the appointment of a Committee was uncalled for and unnecessary. He would not, however, oppose it.

Mr. WOOD (Hamilton) gave his personal testimony to the excellent working of the system in the West, and considered that they were institutions which it was the interest of the mercantile community to maintain in their integrity.

Mr. GORDON also paid a high compliment to the general honesty of the agents of these institutions, and to the reparation which the Companies were always ready to offer when an injustice was done by them.

Mr. BERTRAM suggested the addition of the names of Messrs. Wood (Hamilton), Stuart, and Wilkes to the Committee.

After a few remarks from Hon. Mr. Mitchell and Mr. White (Hastings East),

Mr. GORDON said all the gentlemen whose names had yet been proposed were in the wholesale trade, and he thought some retail men should also be elected.

Mr. DOMVILLE then added the names of Messrs. Wood (Hamilton) and Gordon.

Mr. DYMOND pointed out that there was no Toronto man on the Committee.

With the addition of the names of Messrs. Wilkes and Bunster, the motion was carried.

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NOVA SCOTIA RAILWAYS

Mr. BORDEN moved for a copy of the minutes of Council authorizing the recent increase of the tariff upon the Windsor and Annapolis Railway, and of all communications between the Government, the Windsor and Annapolis Railway Company, the Local Government of Nova Scotia, or any individual relating thereto; also for a report of the tariffs upon the various lines of railways in Nova Scotia, viz., the Windsor and Annapolis Railway, the Intercolonial, and the lines between Windsor and Halifax.