

Farm Debt Review Act

Mr. Foster: Mr. Chairman, can the Minister indicate the number of boards he envisages across the country? Would there be one for each province? Can he give us some idea of the general framework of the organization involved?

• (1630)

Mr. Wise: Mr. Chairman, it is a little difficult when you are breaking new ground. This ground has not been broken in the last 50 years. The Act allows for at least one farm debt review board to be established in each and every province. If the province wishes to establish additional review boards because of need, we, in consultation with the province, determine if it is in the best interests to provide additional service to the farmers within that province. In some provinces there is a higher concentration of farmers. Certain provinces have, because of the nature of its production, a greater number of more urgent and pressing financial problems, or cases. Therefore, if we deem it necessary, then the Act would allow for the establishment of two or more boards within a province.

I would think if this were done in consultation with the province, we would likely assign specific areas or regions. In the Hon. Member's case it might well be advisable to establish a separate board for northern Ontario. We might establish one for eastern Ontario and southwestern Ontario. I do not think that will be necessary. However, it will allow that to go forward.

On the other hand, in consultation with some of my provincial counterparts from Atlantic Canada, there was at one point some discussion with them and they felt perhaps one board might serve Atlantic Canada. On second thought, the last time my counterpart from Nova Scotia was in Ottawa, he told me that, after having an opportunity to think about it, he would want a separate board for his own province.

Mr. Althouse: I wonder if the Minister of Agriculture could explain a little about the selection process. We know the qualifications are quite broad and general. It says, "must have a knowledge and experience in agriculture or in financial matters". The Act is fairly clear that the board once named, and the Minister names the board, the board then names the various panels. I am wondering where that board is expected to find the names of those panel members. Will they simply select them from candidates that they know or will there be an advertising process go forward so that people who are not known to the board members, as such, might be subject to an interview and have an opportunity to serve, if they so choose?

Mr. Wise: Mr. Chairman, on that particular issue I have indicated that the debate around this piece of legislation is not new. It has been a debate that has been an issue in the public forum for quite some time. It has occupied a great deal of discussion at federal-provincial meetings going back to last fall, going back to January, going back perhaps about four weeks ago. I indicated to my provincial counterparts that I would be asking them for the submission of some suggestions.

If we are looking at a chairman plus a 10 man review panel, a total of 11, I would expect that the provinces would want to submit some names. I thought it would be reasonable to take at least three of those names from the provincial lists. In addition, we have been discussing this process with the farming organizations and commodity groups across the country.

I extend an invitation to my colleagues on all sides of the House in all parties to feel free to make suggestions, look around their own constituencies, make some choices as to who would be appropriate to serve on the review boards, and in addition to that bear in mind that we will be requiring quite a number of names to be available to serve on the panels from time to time. So it is an invitation that I extend here and now to all Members of the House.

Clause agreed to.

Clauses 12 to 16 inclusive agreed to.

On Clause 17—*Idem*

Mr. Foster: Mr. Chairman, I would like to urge that the Minister and the House defeat Clause 17 and paragraph 2 of Clause 18. We cannot put in an amendment because we are just voting against the Bill, but this clause allows a bank which has a debt, and the Minister tells me the debt must be over \$4,000, to approach the review board, fill out an application and move that the farmer be petitioned or requested to appear before a review panel, that the review panel be established and his debts be reviewed with a view to facilitating an agreement.

This may seem a casual thing. It may appear to some to be a desirable thing, but I would argue that this is a very intimidating section. Farmers, as everybody in this House knows, cannot be petitioned into bankruptcy, but under this section they would be able to be petitioned into a review procedure having only missed the payment of one debt. It just seems that this allows a situation for a bank or other creditor to intimidate a farmer.

Farmers are generally pretty conscious of their debts. The last thing they want to do, when they have missed perhaps just one payment, is to have the bank contacting the debt review board for their province, filling out an application and having the debt review board contacting the farmer to ask if he wants to have his debts reviewed. What is the farmer going to say? He is going to agree to having his debts reviewed by the review board or the bank might lower the boom.

I would ask the Minister that Clause 17 and paragraph 2 of 18, which is a supplementary to it, or consequential upon it and the two words in paragraph (3) "or 17", be withdrawn by the Minister. I think it is a very bad clause and will not service, in my opinion, the farmers of this country facing serious financial difficulty.

[Translation]

Mr. Boudria: Yes, Mr. Speaker. To save time, I will comment immediately on Clauses 17 and 18.