

Western Grain Transportation Act

the best legislation to meet the objectives on which I think most of us agree, rather than push through legislation which, for a political reason today, might seem acceptable but tomorrow could seriously harm both the West and Canada itself.

Mr. Albert Cooper (Peace River): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have an opportunity to enter this debate on Bill C-155 because it is certainly a very important piece of legislation to the Peace River country. I guess the reason for that is very simple. Farming is one of the most essential elements of the Peace River economy. The communities and businesses existing in that area have largely been built because of the agricultural sector and the economy which has contributed to the well-being of the area. Therefore, the prosperity and well-being of the region are dependent, to a very large extent, upon farming.

Another thing that makes our country and our area unique is the fact that we are in the far northern part of Alberta where we have a unique climate and unique soil conditions. We have a unique growing season due to the fact that our days are long and we have an abundance of sunshine. Despite the fact that we are so far north, we can produce very good, high quality crops.

• (1130)

Another factor which makes us unique in that part of the country is that we have a large amount of undeveloped land which is still to come onstream. It is one of the last large agricultural frontiers in Canada which is essentially still populated by pioneers today. They are pioneers who originally came here in the early 1900s and are still taming and developing new agricultural lands in our area.

The people of that region have faced hardships, which has been particularly evident lately. That is one reason why I am so concerned about Bill C-155. As a result of the fact that we have experienced drought conditions in the last four crop years, our farmers are facing difficulties.

Another problem our area faces is the long distance which must be travelled to major centres. Consequently, our local farmers have had difficulty being productive and ensuring that their land is productive. They have had to pay the price to do those difficult tasks.

The Crow rate was originally established to aid the pioneers of an earlier age. I do not believe that the goal of that original philosophy has been reached in my area. In terms of Bill C-155, I do not foresee a great deal of improvement for the people of the Peace River country.

Let me elaborate on the problems there. I believe the most serious effect of this Bill is that it will take away a consistent freight rate which is the one thing that farmers could plan on to predict their economic situation. All other agricultural factors, such as fuel costs, fertilizer costs and machinery costs, have fluctuated. The freight rate has been the only consistent cost that farmers could relate to.

This legislation does not in any way enshrine that freight rate. The Western Grain Transportation Act will create a new

bureaucracy, which always causes me concern. Another concern is the fact that there will be open-ended price increases. I suggest that the settlement for the railway companies is too generous and not essential.

I am also concerned that there will once again be too much ministerial power. We have seen that demonstrated in many Bills that have been brought before the House.

Mr. Pepin: That is not true at all.

Mr. Cooper: The Minister of Transport (Mr. Pepin) should read Bill C-48 for a good example of ministerial powers being placed one upon the other. We are seeing the same thing in this Bill.

I want to re-emphasize the problem of distance from markets in the Peace River country; I believe that will have a real impact on this Bill. I have discussed this issue with the Minister of Transport in the past. In the Peace River area there are places like La Crete, Fort Vermillion and Worsley which do not have rail service. Today there are farmers in our area who must load their grain in trucks and travel from 50 miles to 120 miles, in some cases, to the nearest railway. That is money they have already been paying but the average Canadian farmer has not since they only travel an average of 20 miles to the nearest elevator. That is an additional expense that the people in our area have faced. As a result of this legislation this problem becomes intensified and more serious. There is no possibility of a resolution of the problem for those people.

Another problem is the 31.1 million tonne limit. Again, that is a disincentive to people in my area. It is a disincentive to increase production and a serious disincentive to land development and improvement. That development is very essential to the Peace country since there is so much new land that we would like to see brought onstream in order to benefit the economy of the Peace country.

I believe the people of the Peace country will suffer doubly as a result of the proposed changes in Bill C-155. They will be at the mercy of the bureaucratic structure. They will have to pay high initial handing rates and high rail rates. All of that will be a disincentive to increased production in the Peace country. Of course, they are still adding the high cost of initial freight rates in taking grain from the farms that 50, 100 or 120 miles to the nearest elevator.

I believe it is important to note that this legislation reflects a change in attitude away from the support of grain production. It is a deviation from that policy which has been so important in the past. This legislation ignores the Hall Commission Report while it accepts the Snavely Report and the Gilson Report. But then, it is even changing the Gilson Report to the advantage of the railways. The Gilson Report initially recommended that producers would pay 4.5 per cent of the cost as opposed to the 6 per cent inflation which is now proposed. The increase in the open-ended freight rate makes it difficult for producers in our outlying areas to carry on grain production. That is a major concern in an area that is developing new land. I cannot emphasize enough the fact that the farmer will be