

Supply—Transport

Miss LaMarsh: Mr. Chairman, I should like to ask the minister whether, in view of the continuing representations from those interested in the reduction of tolls on the Welland canal, he has anything to announce respecting the reductions of these tolls. I am informed that within the past month or so the minister has received a brief from the St. Lawrence seaway development association and that some assurances have been given to that group that favourable consideration will be given this year to a reduction of the tolls.

Mr. Balcer: Mr. Chairman, as I said earlier in this house, we had a very interesting meeting with the association. They presented me with a brief, gave all kinds of explanations and brought forward the various factors which could justify the abolition of tolls on the Welland canal. At the conclusion of this meeting I gave them the assurance that I would personally convey their request to the government and that it would be given very close study and very serious consideration.

Unfortunately I cannot give the hon. lady an answer yet on what the government is going to decide; it is a complicated matter. However I can assure her that the government is giving very serious consideration to the matter.

Miss LaMarsh: Mr. Chairman, perhaps the minister will say whether the matter will be considered with a little more speed than has been the case in the past few years, particularly bearing in mind the repeated reports in the press that in New York state it is likely that an all-American canal will be built with a view to bypassing the Welland canal if the tolls continue.

I should hope that one of the oldest canals in the country, which has had a considerable amount of money spent on it through the years and which has generated a considerable amount of business for the people in my riding and in the other parts of the county of Welland, will not be allowed to go by the board because of any possibility that because of these tolls the United States will bypass it completely by constructing their own canal.

The Chairman: Shall vote 666 carry?

Mr. Fisher: No, Mr. Chairman. I wonder whether the minister could indicate what the estimated deficit is for the coming year in relation to the St. Lawrence seaway. I think it is fair to ask the question, since

[Mr. Bourget.]

it has been apparent that the seaway has not been the financial success that had been anticipated; that is, it is running behind schedule. Also, as the questions just asked by the hon. member for the opposition indicated, there are very active pressures on hand seeking reductions in tolls, which would probably immensely increase the possibilities of a deficit.

For this reason I would like to ask the minister this question. If, for example, the thesis or argument being advanced by Admiral Mainguy was accepted in toto, would it mean the end of the conception of the St. Lawrence seaway as a revenue producer that would in the long run be able to pay itself off? I would like to ask the minister, is this one of the factors the government has under consideration at the present time?

Mr. Balcer: Mr. Chairman, there is no doubt that an abolition of tolls, a reduction in tolls or a new set-up of tolls would have quite an effect on the future financial picture of the St. Lawrence seaway. However, I am not a financial expert, and it would be pretty difficult for me to tell at this stage what would be the effect on the future financing of the seaway. But there is no doubt that any reduction in tolls or the abolition of tolls would have its effect on the revenue and expense figures of the St. Lawrence seaway.

Mr. Fisher: I have seen reports in the press that the minister's officials have been meeting with their United States counterparts in relation to the St. Lawrence seaway project as a whole. I want to ask the minister a specific question. Have any discussions been held, not with the United States seaway authority people but with United States cabinet or executive officials—I am thinking in terms not of the authority but of the President's executive—with a view to determining what the United States policy position would be if Canada decided either to abolish or to drastically reduce the tolls on the Welland canal? I ask this question because I assume it is a relevant consideration. If tolls are to be abolished the United States government must be consulted, because of the general agreement that there are certain balances when charges are made. I should like to have an answer to that question.

Mr. Balcer: There is very close co-operation between the two authorities, and I am sure that if anything were done on this side we would keep the Americans informed. As to whether there has been any discussion at cabinet level, I must say there has been none in the last few months.