

*Atlantic Regional Freight Assistance Act*

which are more in the cultural field and in the general areas outlined in the official languages bill. Therefore I assure the committee that it is my intention to do everything possible to bring about an effective transportation policy for the Atlantic area, not merely because I happen to be a resident of that region and a representative of one of the four provinces in the region but because as a Canadian I recognize, as do hon. members opposite, the importance of this kind of legislation.

I think it is important, too, that we trace a little of the history of the bill before us this morning. It would have been far simpler in many respects for the government to do what hon. members in all parts of the house originally suggested, that is, merely maintain the freeze on freight rates for an additional 12 months. That was the position when I assumed the portfolio I now hold, and it was as a result of representations from members opposite and from others that it was decided—and I made the decision—that rather than take that simple course, which would have maintained and quite literally frozen the status quo for another 12 months, we would attempt, within the time frame that we had, to introduce some of the improvements which members of the Transport Committee and others had indicated at the hearings were advisable.

● (11:40 a.m.)

On the point about this legislation preceding the presentation of the 12th report of the Transport Committee, let me say that there was nothing occult in my powers to determine what the committee was going to produce. It was simply a matter of knowledge obtained from various members of the committee and indications from various people that these were the lines along which the committee was thinking, and rather than delay and perhaps face the prospect of not getting this legislation through at the present session I proceeded in the manner that I have.

When I decided some time ago that it was necessary to change the original bill and to proceed somewhat beyond the original proposal merely to freeze the rates for a further period of 12 months, one of the first things I did was to undertake discussions with the representatives of the four Atlantic provinces. I spoke with Premier Smith in Nova Scotia, with Premier Campbell in Prince Edward Island, with the hon. Mr. Higgins, the Minister of Economic Development in

New Brunswick, and with Premier Smallwood in Newfoundland. I undertook to do this because of a commitment I had made at the outset that we would consult with them, and I did not want to go to them with a proposal which was cut and dried so that the whole consultative process would be merely a meaningless gesture.

As a result of the discussions that I had with the gentlemen to whom I referred I came back and made significant changes in what I had originally thought might have been an acceptable proposal. I want to say today—and I believe that all of the gentlemen concerned and their advisers will be prepared to confirm this—that this bill represents in very significant measure the result of the consultations which I had with the representatives of the four Atlantic provinces and, incidentally, to a lesser degree with spokesmen for the trucking industry.

The hon. member for St. John's East said, in that manner of his which seems to indicate so far that solutions are simple and can be drawn like rabbits out of a hat, that all we had to do—and this was the reason for the humour in my response rather than any lack of concern or interest at this moment in the work of the Transport Committee—was to extend the benefits of M.F.R.A. to the trucking industry. I suggest to the hon. member, and indeed I am sure he knows, that that simple solution is precisely the kind of answer that the Atlantic provinces spokesmen themselves do not want and, indeed, it is also to some extent at least a solution that the truckers do not want. Simply to extend the Maritime Freight Rates Act benefits to the trucking industry would not provide a viable and meaningful alternative to the arrangement that we have at the present time. The premiers of the four Atlantic provinces made a number of recommendations, all of which are being considered and will be considered at the same time as we consider the further recommendations which are contained in my own statement of a few days ago and those that were made by the Transport Committee.

When I made reference to this bill as being an interim measure, I want to assure the house that I meant that it is only interim in the sense that it represents a portion of a much broader concept that we hope to develop with the help of the very excellent report of the Transport Committee in the coming months and on which I will be working during the summer recess. There is no suggestion, and I want to make this perfectly clear to the house, that there will be any significant