

Fisheries Improvement Loans Act

● (9:30 p.m.)

Any measure proposed by the government in order to help fishermen deserves to be considered and read by all members.

So, we of the Ralliement créditiste, are happy to see the government introduce a bill the purpose of which is to help Canadian fishermen from the west as well as from the east.

[*English*]

Mr. Frank Howard (Skeena): Mr. Speaker, it is fairly easy at the outset to see that the government house leader is back in control of things because already this evening two items of business have been fouled up and confused. It is a matter of regret that the fisheries committee is meeting tonight to consider the estimates of the Department of Fisheries while we are also required to be here to deal with a legislative item under the jurisdiction of the minister. This accounts for part of the hurrying and scurrying back and forth between here and the west block in order properly to look at the item before us. It also accounts for the absence from the house this evening of members who would otherwise be here because of their interest in fisheries matters; they are trying to attend to two items at the same time.

On the surface, the bill before us looks good. It increases the amount of money available to fishermen for certain purposes and extends the period for which loans may be made. Yet underneath it all, Mr. Speaker, the bill before us is very misleading and needs extensive examination. From my reading of the bill it seems, when one considers the present act, that the government has given no thought to allowing fishermen to refinance their current indebtedness for boats or equipment and thus extricate themselves from the clutches of fishing companies. When the fisheries committee recently held a series of meetings on the west coast that was one of the major points brought to its attention. Many of those making presentations asked the government to make available to fishermen the opportunity to refinance existing debts in order to enable individual fishermen to become free agents. Since this bill contains no such provision, that indicates to me the government does not desire to help the fishermen escape from the clutches of the fishing companies on the west coast. On the other hand, it indicates a desire to perpetuate a system of feudalism which ties the individual fisherman so tightly to the operations of the fishing company that he loses those freedoms and rights the people of this society have.

On reading the conditions of a typical sales agreement between a fishing company and a fisherman on the west coast it appears that in many cases the fisherman becomes nothing more than a serf. One of the conditions of such conditional sales agreement, and I paraphrase, is that the individual financing the fishing boat or fishing gear with moneys advanced by the fishing company shall deliver his fish catch to that fishing company at whatever place the fishing company may designate. The fisherman may not offer his fish for sale to anybody else, not even to a cash buyer who may pay higher prices for the fish; he must deliver his catch to that company at prices established by that company and at no other prices. Surely, such provision is an infringement of basic freedoms.

The minister ought to recognize such provisions as infringing on the rights of individuals. Surely, fishermen have the right to refinance their debts and become free agents. Surely, they can sell their fish for the highest prices and thus advance their own economic well being.

The loan made under the conditional sales agreement is a demand loan, incidentally, repayable whenever the company wants its money, for whatever reason. Another condition of the typical sales agreement entered into originally for the purchasing of the boat relates to the purchase of additional fishing gear, supplies, equipment, grub, gasoline and repairs at the company shipyard as well as other sundry items. These charges are added to the original debt the fishermen incurred in the main conditional sales agreement.

Because of restrictions applying in the fishing industry, especially the salmon fishing industry, and because fishermen often are allowed to fish on only one or two days a week owing to conservation measures and other factors, many fishermen, especially native Indians who face economic difficulty in the best of times, at the end of the fishing season find themselves more indebted to the company than they were at the beginning of the season. Since this indebtedness is brought about in some degree by the structure of the conditional sales agreement, which in my submission constitutes an infringement of the rights of fishermen, and since the minister has not seen fit to correct the situation, it seems obvious that the minister is not interested in providing assistance to our fishermen.