

Transportation

Mr. Neil: Then that committee would have reported to the government. However, what is going to happen is that Dr. Gilson will hold his hearings. I call them hearings; the minister calls them negotiations. Those hearings will be held in camera so that producers and Members of Parliament will not know what representations are made to Dr. Gilson. Surely the western grain producer is entitled to know what representations are being made on his behalf. Why are these negotiations being held in secret, Mr. Speaker? Why are they not being held in the open when they affect every grain producer in western Canada? No doubt the minister will claim that the farm organizations represent the farmers, and perhaps they do but if that is the case, why are the hearings not held in the open so that the farmers know what their farm organization representatives are saying and what the railways are saying about costs so that they and we as Members of Parliament, can judge the result.

• (1530)

No doubt when Dr. Gilson is through with these in camera meetings he will make a recommendation to the minister. Legislation will be drafted, and then the minister will tell the committee that it is the result of a consensus negotiated by the farmers of western Canada or their representatives and that we will have to pass it. We will not have, as is our right, the opportunity to discuss the matter. The fact that the negotiations are to be held in camera has cast a cloud of suspicion over the whole procedure.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I should like to say that an election is to be held in Saskatchewan very soon.

Mr. Pepin: That is not true. There will not be an election in Saskatchewan.

Mr. Neil: It is unfortunate that Mr. Blakeney and members of his government are using this matter as an issue for an election. The premiers of every province in western Canada should set up a joint committee to study the anomalies in the movement of grain. The minister should set up a standing committee in Ottawa to do the same thing. Then the two committees could get together in an effort to arrive at a consensus.

Agriculture is the most important issue in Canada today. Mr. Speaker, It is an absolute shame that at the present time an attempt is being made to use it as an election issue. The future of western agriculture is at stake. The provinces should be concerned about agriculture and the federal government has to be concerned about it so there ought to be input from both sources and non-partisan discussions in an effort to arrive at a solution.

Unfortunately, that will not happen because the minister and the government have decided that they will unilaterally take steps to deal with the issue of the Crow rate. The minister says that the amount will be negotiated, but I regard his actions as unilateral action. It is actions such as this which create the alienation which exists in the country, Mr. Speaker. We know about separatism in Quebec but now there is a

separatist MLA in Alberta. This type of unilateral action can do nothing except feed the fires of separatism.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Robert Bockstael (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, as I complete my term as parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Transport (Mr. Pepin) it is as a result of first-hand observation that I can assure hon. members opposite that the minister has worked steadfastly and unrelentingly to resolve these issues to the benefit of the west. The efforts of the minister go far above and beyond the call of duty. He has tried to do what is necessary to resolve the problems of the west. Perhaps the minister does not realize it but I think there is something of overcompensation in his efforts because we do not have many representatives from the west on this side of the House. He spends his energy unrelentingly. He has travelled and met the people of the west and is well aware of their problems.

I am pleased to speak against this opposition motion. It is misleading and smacks of political opportunism. Hon. members opposite are taking this position to be able to tell their electors that they opposed any change in the Crow rate. In fact, several members opposite have admitted to us privately, and some even have said in their own communities, that the time has come to do something about the Crow rate, that a change is long overdue. Some tell me privately that the Minister of Transport is taking the correct approach.

I think we should reverse the motion which says, "we condemn the government." I think we should condemn the opposition for the stand it takes in attempting to thwart the progress of our efforts to meet the needs of transportation in the country. The opposition is doing a disservice to the country by perpetuating old myths and even by inventing new ones.

Let us look at the chronology of the Crow rate, Mr. Speaker. In 1897 an agreement was made between the Government of Canada and the CPR. In 1901 the province of Manitoba obtained better rates from the Canadian Northern Railway than the Crowsnest Pass rate. In 1903 the CPR had to meet the competition and lower the Crow rate to meet that of the Canadian Northern Railway. There is an effort to persuade people in Saskatchewan that the Crow rate was a condition of their entry into confederation. That is not the case. In World War I the Crow rate was suspended but it was brought back in 1925. In that year an application was made to the CPR for a rate for the transportation of grain from the west to the Lakehead. In 1927 a rate was implemented for the transportation of grain to the west coast and was applied to all railways. It is not a part of the Constitution, Mr. Speaker. In 1931 the Crow rate was applied to grain being shipped to Churchill.

In the 50 intervening years there have been commissions, studies and reports that have confirmed the adverse impact of the status quo on our national economy.

Today another myth is fostered by the opposition motion which holds that the government wants to put an end to the Crow rate. On the contrary, Mr. Speaker, we are enshrining the Crow benefit by statute at the 1981-82 level. We are