

CNR and Air Canada

tions should be taken over by the people of Canada. I refer to the entire rail transportation system and the auxiliary systems, such as telecommunications, hotels, steamships and truck services. We could provide an integrated transportation system that would have the admiration of many countries of the world. We could set an example. If they should lose money, so what? I submit we can set up this kind of a transportation system which would be a credit to the people of Canada and would provide the type of service to which they are entitled.

• (1640)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Albert Béchard (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Justice): Mr. Speaker, while we remember that railways in Canada were built to connect the various parts of this vast land and thus help to melt in steel this unity that had been conceived by the architects of confederation, and also to open new frontiers and extraordinary opportunities to the Canadian economy, it is normal and natural in my opinion for all members of the Canadian family to contribute to their expansion, improvement and maintenance.

It is true that transportation has made huge progress since the first spike was driven to fasten tracks in the late 19th century to bear the first transcontinental train in Canada. Indeed, it took about 10 days at that time to go from Halifax to Vancouver, whereas this distance can now be covered in less than six and a half hours on an Air Canada DC-8 or 747.

Even though air transport companies offer ever lower rates, it remains that this means of transportation may be too expensive for some people. Moreover, operation costs and the remoteness of airports adequate for the various needs of industry and the population throughout the country make it unrealistic in the present context to consider replacing a good and efficient railway system, both for passengers and for merchandise, and equipment, by an air transport system.

The consideration of this bill since Monday by this House gives me an opportunity to make a few remarks which I consider very important on railway transportation.

I decided to take part in this debate and to make the following remarks because the people of Canada and particularly those I represent are tired of the constant threats, whether by way of rumours or otherwise, of abandoning passenger services, reducing services, in my region and throughout the country, which are forever being dangled over our heads.

Long before my election to this House, Mr. Speaker, I had occasion, whether in such agencies as the Chamber of Commerce or as secretary of my municipality during ten years, to fight continually with the management of Canadian National to retain and improve services in my region although the railway was the only public transportation system available.

Progressively, by dint of perseverance, of representations and sometimes even of vociferation, some improvements I shall call major were brought about. Among

[Mr. Benjamin.]

others, since I came to the House, the best achievement and the most highly appreciated in the field of railways or common transportation was the implementation of direct passenger train service between Gaspé and Montreal in 1967.

Incidentally, I feel it is proper to ask the hon. Minister of Transport (Mr. Jamieson) or his parliamentary secretary (Mr. Duquet) who is present, to inform the management of Canadian National that the schedule of the train operating between Montreal and Gaspé should remain the same in winter and summer instead of being adjusted to the needs of the Maritime provinces, which I certainly do not blame for this.

However, Mr. Speaker, any concession made by the CN authorities was inevitably followed by worrying decisions on their part, such as threatening to close down stations, reducing the number of key employees responsible for railway maintenance, transferring employees and services from the Gaspé Peninsula—and particularly from my riding—to New Brunswick, to the city of the Minister of Public Works (Mr. Dubé), and so on and so forth.

I would not like, Mr. Speaker, to create the impression that I am opposed to development and progress as materialized by certain steps proposed in the last few years, and which are about to be realized by the Canadian National for greater efficiency of the services it provides for the public. We have to make sure, however, that the objective pursued is not lost and upset because of overcentralization. Anything that can help improve passenger and freight service for Canadian taxpayers and for the people I represent will always get approval from the hon. member concerned—and I am sure that my colleagues would support this statement.

The authorities have to understand, however, that the break from traditions established for half a century or more cannot be effected without some pain and without a certain regret. Human beings cannot be knocked about—or at least they can no longer be knocked about the way they used to be in the past. In this connection, I want to give credit to the officials of the "Chaleurs" area for the co-operation which they have always given to me as well as to the representatives of the people in my area whenever major decisions concerning railway transportation in the Gaspé Peninsula were involved. We must admit that there have been isolated and sometimes unfortunate omissions, but on the whole our relations are excellent.

• (1650)

Briefing sessions and meetings were held periodically to explain to us the guidelines, the programs and the intentions of the company as well as the difficulties encountered.

Although it is not easy for my constituents to do so, I must recognize that the railway companies do face today greater financial difficulties than ever before because of a diminishing number of customers due to fierce competition by other means of transport which are more modern and faster.

Furthermore they are obliged to take those unpopular steps because of an act of Parliament forcing them to become efficient. Thus, in recent years both the CN and