

abandonment of branch lines in western Canada. As a matter of fact, our record is pretty clear on that account. I think that our record of performance clearly speaks for itself. However, placing this particular motion before the House and having it incorporated into Clause 17(4), notwithstanding the good intention of the Hon. Member for Regina West (Mr. Benjamin), in the event a branch line became unserviceable for a period of time if there was a bridge washout or if the line was soft, would preclude the opportunity to truck that grain, affecting the ability of producers to deliver, thereby affecting their cash flow position. I point that out because, notwithstanding the good intention, it could very well tie the hands of the Administrator if this particular amendment were to be incorporated.

I know that the New Democratic Party seems to be trying to make the case that if one allows trucking one will accelerate the demise of the branch line system. They carry this point a little too far, so much so that they tend to deliberately mislead and spread fear and anxiety. I think it clearly overstated the situation. If we read Clause 17(4), we find that it states:

That the administrator, on behalf of the Minister, may enter into agreements to provide for the movement of grain by motor vehicle transport where, in his opinion, such agreements would be in the best interests of the grain producers.

That is pretty clear. It certainly does not set out to accelerate the branch line system as the NDP suggests. That is simply not true. We are really proposing to provide a service to the grain producer in areas where farmers have in fact lost their branch line, or where they have never had a branch line. As the Hon. Member for Peace River (Mr. Cooper) and the Hon. Member for The Battlefords-Meadow Lake pointed out, there are areas of Alberta and Saskatchewan which have never had branch lines in existence or have lost them through the abandonment process.

I repeat that our Party's commitment to the retention of the branch line system is very clear. When we were in Government, our policy was that we would maintain branch lines in those areas where the elevator companies thought that they would be providing facilities and service to the year 2000. We believed it was the elevator companies that were in the best position to determine whether they would maintain an elevator system or whether they would build such a system on a given branch line.

It was based upon their knowledge of the facts that we assessed and indeed rationalized the branch line system. In the course of so doing, the Hon. Member for Moose Jaw (Mr. Neil) commissioned a one-man study to consider the retention of branch lines which were up for abandonment under the previous administration. Concerning some 1,500 miles put under the aegis of PRAC, the Prairie Rail Action Committee, he recommended that a good portion be guaranteed to the year 2000. That recommendation was ratified by the Governor-in-Council, with some 500 miles placed in the permanent network and 236 miles frozen for five years pending the testing of the off-line elevator concept, which was a recommendation advanced by the Hall Commission. Seven hundred miles were referred to the CTC for the purpose of examining the necessi-

ties and conditions surrounding the maintenance or abandonment of those particular lines.

We certainly are not a Party which designs our policies around the rationalization of the branch line system to the extent that we will end up with 50 or 60 centralized locations—quite the contrary. Where there is a need for service, where the line can be developed and the elevator system is developed in the interest of serving the producer, it is in everyone's interest to ensure that that branch line system remains in place.

I repeat, that those producers who are situated in isolated areas, such as the northern parts of Saskatchewan and Alberta, are the ones who have been shortchanged concerning the grain handling and transportation system.

• (1620)

We have a system that has been developed on the basis of equity in which there is a pooling of all the receipts and expenses. However, when we look at northern Saskatchewan and northern Alberta, we see that many of those producers must haul their grain over a distance of from 60 miles to 100 miles. That imposes a very heavy cost upon them. If we consider the freight rate under the new regime, the increase in the freight rate will escalate more dramatically for them than for the producer in Regina or Saskatoon. Therefore, they will be doubly affected. I submit that there could have been an important role for the off-line elevator concept to serve those producers in the northern parts of all three prairie Provinces if that concept could have been tested. It could have restored some sense of equity and equality in the whole system, but unfortunately that has not been done. I very much regret the fact that the Government chose not to test the off-line elevator concept.

I believe the New Democratic Party is really working against the principle of equality and greater equity for all grain producers by trying to lock out the trucking system. By virtue of its tactics, the NDP is denying producers that opportunity, and the amendments which it has proposed deny the trucking industry, and therefore the producers, that opportunity, particularly those producers who have not heretofore experienced a sense of equity or fairness.

Fairness, equity and a semblance of equality is a cornerstone and a very fundamental principle of our entire grain handling and marketing system. Since many areas have been shortchanged in terms of the fulfilment of that principle, I believe that, as we are debating this important piece of legislation, we should try our very best to restore equity and fairness so that all producers would be treated equally in terms of their handling and transportation costs. We believe that subclause (4) which would allow the Administrator to become involved in negotiating a contract for the trucking industry to provide a service to producers which they have not yet received would go a long way in fulfilling an objective which I am sure all Members of the House want to achieve.

In conclusion, our Party's position is certainly not one which would aid and abet the demise of the branch-line system. That