

Government Orders

The legislation before us today also deals with the issue of future requests for increases in borrowing. This legislation gives the governor in council the power to fix the authority's borrowing limit at an amount greater than \$100 million if a need can be shown. We can avoid the need for future legislative amendments which become costly and time consuming and are basically administrative in nature.

This administrative change will give the Peace bridge authority additional flexibility to meet more immediate operational needs and future major capital requirements. The simplified procedure will be more responsive for the Peace bridge authority.

The reduced time required to authorize an increase in the borrowing limit will also be less costly for taxpayers. Any increases of this nature will still be thoroughly reviewed before authorization by the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Transport. As a matter of note, such review would also be undertaken in the state of New York.

The act also provides for a transfer of authority. It is understood that the Minister of Transport has the prime responsibility in co-ordinating the role for federal policy on the international crossings. Of all the international bridge crossings, the Peace Bridge is the only one that comes under the authority of the Minister of Finance. This change therefore is an administrative rationalization. The transfer of legislative responsibility between ministers will correct what can be referred to as an administrative anomaly, as it is understood that the Minister of Transport again has the primary responsibility.

There are currently 24 international highway crossings between Canada and the United States. The Minister of Transport is directly involved in three that are federally controlled: the seaway, Thousand Islands and Blue Water bridges. Furthermore, some of these international crossings combine rail functions which are also the responsibility of the Minister of Transport.

It should be pointed out that Transport Canada assumes certain responsibilities associated with all 24 international crossings, such as policy directives, system planning, granting of construction and operating permits, environmental assessments and as previously mentioned, ownership in certain cases.

These activities are being co-ordinated and more often than not are being carried out jointly with our U.S. counterpart, the federal Secretary of Transportation, who shares similar responsibilities. In fact, in the United States all international crossing matters are dealt with through the International Bridge Act of 1972. It authorizes the United States president, secretary of state and secretary of transportation to negotiate, co-ordinate and sign international agreements in order to allow these crossings to be built, operated and maintained.

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Therefore, transferring responsibility to the Minister of Transport will result in streamlining the relationship between the minister and the various bridge operators, whether private or public, dedicated public authority or provincial government. It will also facilitate the process of dealing with our U.S. counterparts. As well it will indicate to Canadians that this government is committed to efficiencies in public administration.

Henceforth, both the New York state and U.S. federal governments will be able to deal more effectively through the Minister of Transport. The minister and his U.S. counterpart meet regularly, particularly as a result of the North American free trade agreement, in order to facilitate the transborder movement of people and goods. International crossings are often a priority topic at these meetings.

The transfer of responsibility to the Minister of Transport will indicate to the various bridge operators that the current Transport Canada policy of promoting and supporting decentralized commercialized operations will be maintained and enhanced.

I will not say that these initiatives have been without their opponents who legitimately questioned debt servicing concerns and the environmental impact on adjacent neighbourhoods, especially as it relates to noise and pollution. In particular, the residents whose homes will border on the commercial vehicle processing centre had some very real concerns. I am satisfied that these concerns have been met.

I urge the authority notwithstanding to take its role as a community partner very seriously and to be mindful of its responsibilities to these community concerns. To date it has met these responsibilities and I am confident it will continue to do so.

There is no doubt in my mind that these upgrades and new facilities are urgently required. The planned improvements of the gateway project will speed the movement of traffic, particularly trucks, across the bridge. Streamlining the flow of bona fide cross border traffic is in keeping with the more liberalized international trade environment under the NAFTA. The importance of cross border trade in our community is enormous. The benefits of these improvements will be felt throughout the region, throughout the province and throughout our country.

[Translation]

Mr. Paul Mercier (Blainville—Deux-Montagnes, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-81 is the bill before us.

The Buffalo and Fort Erie Bridge Company is a company formed by the Government of Canada in co-operation with the Government of the United States. The increased traffic on the international bridge resulting from the free trade agreement, which, it will be remembered, the Liberals opposed vigorously at the time, has now necessitated construction work.