Western Grain Transportation Act

● (1200)

By once more harming the aspirations of western Canada, the Government has again succeeded in pitting region against region and class against class. It is tragically fitting that the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (Mr. Ouellet) should have branded the Crown initiative as the third major initiative since this Government was re-elected in 1980, referring also to the patriation of the Constitution and the National Energy Program. Like its predecessors, Sir, Bill C-155 has divided rather than reconciled.

At one time the Government claimed to have the interests of western Canada in mind. Much was heard, Sir, about the famous Western Development Fund that in 1980 promised $4 billion. Now, of course, this Fund has been relegated to the corridors of oblivion. Only $659 million has been allocated, and allocated primarily for very unimaginative and ad hoc measures. I would like to know what has happened to the Western Development Fund.

On another occasion I will make some remarks about a proposal that I want to bring to the House for a western development council that would be composed of experts on economic and social questions from the four western Provinces and the North. This council could provide a basis for integrated economic and social development in the West that would co-ordinate data from all spheres and could certainly find a just solution to the long standing problem of the Crow so that grain production in western Canada can meet the demands of a world that is in great change.

Mr. Cyril Keeper (Winnipeg-St. James): Mr. Speaker, it is indeed an honour to have the opportunity to participate in this debate. This issue is a very fundamental and crucial one for the nation, Mr. Speaker, and this is the first chance I have had to rise in the House and address this issue in debate. Clearly I have been preceded by numerous colleagues of mine from the New Democratic Party who have put the case for the western farmers very eloquently and very strongly and have based their arguments upon concepts of social justice.

Much has already been said and there is not a great deal that I can add in terms of detail or even in terms of understanding to this issue, but I still feel that because of the fundamental importance of this issue I should add my words to what has already been said about the Government's efforts to ram through the House of Commons changes to the Crow rate.

I would like to mention briefly, Mr. Speaker, that the Government's efforts to ram changes to the Crow rate through the House has brought about a kind of an alliance, at least for a while, between the interests of people in Quebec and the interests of people in western Canada. The fact that the Government backed away from its original proposals and was forced to change those proposals—and, Mr. Speaker, we expect more changes from the Government—shows the force and the power of a potential alliance between western Canada and Quebec in terms of serving the interest of justice for all people of the nation.

[*Translation*]

I would like to stress, Mr. Speaker, the power of an alliance between the people of Quebec and the people of western Canada. In view of the fact that an alliance would serve the interests of social justice, it is very important to recognize in Canada that it would be easy for both the people of Quebec and of western Canada to work together to find a solution to some very formidable problems and to promote the interests of social justice. I hope, Mr. Speaker, that the House will, through legislation, pursue this objective in other areas, both economic and social.

[*English*]

The fundamental question that faces the House with regard to this legislation is the question of who the Government is listening to. Whose side is the Government on? To whose problems are they paying attention? Clearly there are two groups of people who have put their cases to the Government and the Government is listening to one side only. These two groups are the farmers and the corporate executives of the railways. The Government has clearly put its full weight behind the interests of the corporate executives of the railways. It has decided to serve private corporate interests and to ignore community interests and the needs of many small farmers across Canada. That really tells us what the Government is all about.

Both the railways and the farmers have received subsidies and now it is the farmers who are being asked to give up those subsidies and to pay market value. Where is the proposal to ask the railways to pay market value for the subsidies that they were given in order to build a transportation system in the country? Fairness demands that both groups be treated alike. As long as the railways are allowed to continue to reap the benefits of the enormous subsidies given to them when they were formed, the farmers of the country who are in much greater financial need should be allowed to continue to reap the necessary benefits of the modest subsidies that they have been getting over the years.

This is a question of fundamental social justice. It is one of the principles of democracy in the sense that the purpose of an elected Government and an elected Parliament is to bring public concerns, the concerns of the community, to bear upon legislation and not to ally itself with powerful private interests in the country.

A part of this legislation obviously relates to a question of investment in railway redevelopment. The question that faces the House is, who will pay for that investment? The Government's policy and legislation calls upon the farmers to pay for that investment. It claims that this investment cannot go ahead unless the farmers pay for it. Well, Mr. Speaker, one of the basic principles of investment is that investment, if it is true investment, pays for itself.

The notion that is contained in the Government's proposal is that somehow, if all parts of a transportation system do not pay market value, the investment is called into question. That, Mr. Speaker, is a ludicrous notion. It is a notion that fails to