

Railway Act

Mr. Mazankowski: If the minister is not in a position to bring forward a comprehensive transportation plan, he should at least bring forward guidelines which could apply right across the country. I suggest the minister could establish a national conference on transportation in which all experts in the transportation field could participate, in order to arrive at a consensus because, Mr. Speaker, transportation cannot be dealt with in isolation. It is as vital to our nation as our social security system and our energy resources.

The minister's approach to the problem of transportation is disjointed. He says one thing in one part of the country and another in another part. He speaks out of both sides of his mouth. After saying one thing in the Atlantic provinces, he says something different in central Canada and something different again in western Canada. We cannot develop policy if the minister's approach is so disjointed. A parliamentary committee might be helpful in making suggestions on transportation, but the guidelines and initiatives can only come from the government. During the election campaign the government pretended it had all the answers. We agreed with many of its proposals; many of them were similar to proposals we had advanced during the election campaign.

Mr. Paproski: The government stole our ideas.

Mr. Mazankowski: Matters involving grain handling and grain handlers' strikes come within the purview of transportation; but the government has taken no corrective initiatives in this field. We call on the government to take initiatives and to act. Surely somebody in the government is working on transportation. If members opposite had visited western Canada in the last week or ten days they would have sensed the anger and frustration of western producers—anger and frustration brought about by their inability to move products. What is the point of the kind of stabilization program we discussed last week, and will discuss again soon in connection with grain, if we cannot move products to market? The situation is ludicrous.

The provinces themselves asked for disclosure of certain cost information in order to be in a better position to evaluate freight rate structures, the manner in which they are arrived at and their application. Such disclosure is important for the provinces as they are concerned about the impact of freight rates on regional growth. Transportation policy is an important tool in bringing about regional growth. It has been acknowledged that there are anomalies and discrepancies in this country's freight rates; studies have proved it and the minister himself acknowledged it.

The method provided under section 23 of the National Transportation Act for curing these anomalies and discrepancies is far too complex, as is made evident by the appeal in connection with rapeseed. The procedure must be shortened and changed so that freight rate anomalies which are against the public interest can be redressed in short order. An opportunity for intelligent discussion of this matter and intelligent argument is necessary. That is why we welcome this bill.

[Mr. Stanfield.]

On February 24 of this year the Department of Transport released a communiqué which reads in part as follows:

Calgary. At a breakthrough meeting at Calgary the federal and four provincial ministers responsible for transportation arrived at accord on five major principles on transportation policy affecting western Canada.

We welcome that statement which has been a long time coming. We want to be sure action is taken. Anomalies in freight rates can only be resolved on the basis of facts. So far, not one freight rate item has been changed, not one anomaly rectified. It has been acknowledged that we suffer from freight rate discrepancies. The railways voluntarily provided cost data almost two years ago. The government had two years to act. Surely that was long enough for it to put right some of these anomalies. The commitments which have been made—I will not go into them—are embodied in this communiqué. We take very seriously indeed the pledge and commitment made in the statement of February 24, 1975. As I said earlier, the principles include rejection of horizontal increases, maximum rate restrictions, long-haul and short-haul, and raw and finished products anomalies. These are all very important to the various regions of Canada.

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The Minister of Transport said he was opposed to any further general horizontal percentage increases in rail freight rates. We take these pledges very seriously and we are going to hold this government to them. If the government refuses to bring in corrective measures, we can only assume that these communiqués are nothing more than political rhetoric and that the Speech from the Throne and commitments made during the last election campaign were simply a bill of goods sold to the Canadian people for the purpose of political expediency.

We in this party support this bill. We hope it is the beginning of a number of broader measures which must be brought forward to redress the whole question of transportation in Canada. I think that as a party we have proven that we are prepared to work with the minister and the government in arriving at a realistic, comprehensive and effective transportation policy. However, as I said before, the initiative and leadership must come from the government side. We certainly look forward to that initiative and we will be reminding the government on a day to day basis of the commitments and promises they have made.

[Translation]

Mr. Armand Caouette (Villeneuve): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak today on a bill concerning a department involved in my constituency.

We all know that railway companies are experiencing serious problems. It is normal for the provinces to obtain on due time all the information concerning freight rates and it is reasonable for Canadians to expect better services from a company which is theirs and which they own since their taxes assure its existence. It is not reasonable for individuals to be unaware of the costs incurred by a company which belongs to them.

In the transport field, services should be compared to the profits realized by the undertaking. It is not proper to