

Maintenance of Ports Operations Act, 1986

● (1540)

I bring to your attention, Mr. Speaker, the position taken by the Conservative spokesperson during the debate on the West Coast Ports Operations, 1982 Act. At that time the Hon. Member for Rosedale was making the case on behalf of his Party. In order to come to grips with the solution at the time of the stoppage of work on the West Coast in 1982, he was critical of the then Government of the day for not having a full-time tribunal.

If I may be somewhat bolder, Mr. Speaker, I draw your attention to the debate in 1978 on the Shipping Continuation Act. At that time you, Sir, were a spokesperson for the Conservative Party on such matters and you said that a permanent mechanism such as an essential services disputes commission should be put forward as a way of coming to grips with these issues.

I could repeat several other of your statements, Mr. Speaker, but I am sure that you know them better than I, and there is no point in taking up the time of the House.

Mr. Speaker: I am quite sure that the Hon. Member can repeat many of my assertions. I wish to assure the Hon. Member, and all other Hon. Members, that even if he does, I will not be tempted to rise in debate.

Mr. Axworthy: You have relieved my anxiety greatly on that point.

I am simply pointing out by reviewing the historical record that there has been a consistent pattern, a presentation on the part of members of the Conservative Party that they wish to see a form of permanent council or tribunal established which would take away the adjudication of these disputes from the collective bargaining process.

I wish to make it clear that we do not see our support of the Minister's Bill in any way endorsing or adopting that philosophy. We see it as a very specific circumstance caused by extremely difficult problems faced by western producers that a work stoppage would aggravate to an unacceptable degree. Therefore, we recognize the necessity of Parliament to act at this point in time. However, I take some issue with certain parts of the Bill. There will be further opportunity when we get to committee to move amendments in this area.

As a second part of the Bill, the Minister has included the implementation of an inquiry under Section 7(2) of the industrial inquiries legislation to look specifically at the container clause. We know that this has been a matter of long standing. The Minister himself said that attempts have been made to find a resolution of this issue for some 16 years. We recognize that it is part of that much larger continuing set of problems and difficulties in labour-management relations. When conditions of work change and new technology or new equipment is introduced, obviously fears of job security are raised, and working people are faced with major problems in coming to grips with these issues. We recognize full well that we cannot stand in the way of change, if we are going to be a

competitive society and maintain our productivity and our ability to assure international markets.

The world of port development is one which is highly competitive. I can recall, from my experience as a former Minister of Transport, how important it was to be constantly upgrading and modernizing our approach to port development, because there was so much other competition in both the eastern and western seaboard.

I am afraid that in some ways the net has been cast too small. By concentrating exclusively on the question of the container clause, it tends to put in the background a number of other equally crucial matters relating to the productivity and the competitiveness of the Vancouver port. There could be a built-in bias to the way in which this industrial inquiry has been tailored against the labour side of the equation. We know that labour itself feels that the removal of the container protection clause would cause a major job loss.

I am sure the Minister has the various presentations and proposals in which it is argued quite strenuously that there are a number of other significant factors related to the port that also have to do with efficiency, productivity, and competition. But these are not specifically under the purview of the inquiry. I recognize that the Commissioner may consider them. But when it comes to the recommendations, the recommendation will be for the container clause. It may not be recommendations related to job security, or recommendations related to improvements in the port facilities, or recommendations related to substantial improvement that is required in the railway organization and administration moving into the port; it may not be recommendations related to the marketing questions. So there are a number of related matters of equal, crucial concern to the operation of the port that, as I read the Bill and listen to the Minister, tend to get excluded and pushed aside. Therefore, there might be a bias creeping in by the terms that the Commissioner is using to focus exclusively on the container clause, and not having the power or the purview to make recommendations in a much broader vein.

If the Minister is going to use this legislation as the lever to find a solution finally to the problems facing the Vancouver port, then it would have to be a broader definition than is included in the Bill. It may very well be that the proper way of doing that would be in parallel to the establishment of the inquiry commission, and to have a special ports committee working with the Vancouver port and Ports Canada that would look at the parallel concurrent problems relating to the port in terms of capital financing, improvement of marketing, job security, and the rest. If not, I would suggest quite strenuously—and I thank the Solicitor General (Mr. Kelleher) for appearing in the Chamber to listen to these words of wisdom—that in committee it may be that the Minister will take some time to consider whether the terms as included in the Bill might be broadened in the inquiry itself.

Mr. Kelleher: I won't tell you that it is House duty.

Mr. Axworthy: He sure knows how to hurt a guy.