

[English]

CANADIAN TRANSPORT COMMISSION

MANDATE TO RETAIN BRANCH LINES

Mr. Arnold Malone (Crowfoot): Madam Speaker, I have a question for the all too comfortable looking Minister of Transport. In view of the fact that the minister, by order in council, has provided for hearings to abandon more railways on the prairies that were originally secure until 1985, and in view of the fact that the mandate of the CTC allows it only two options—one, is to abandon and, two, is to retain for five years—will the minister give consideration to an extension of that mandate for abandonment to five years, fifteen years, or into the permanent network? I ask the question in view of the fact that multi-million dollar investments cannot be made on the basis of five-year projections, such as grain elevators, building up of the road bed, or any other structures requiring that kind of expenditure.

Hon. Jean-Luc Pepin (Minister of Transport): Madam Speaker, the rehabilitation of branch lines in the west has reached quite an extensive level. At the moment the system is working quite well. The other day I was pleased to announce that we now have a detailed program for a period of three years. I was also pleased to put during the summer on behalf of the government, \$45 million more in the next three years into that branch line rehabilitation program. Obviously there are limitations to the number of miles of lines that can be included in that system. The process of elimination must follow its normal course if we want to have a manageable situation. I do not know precisely what my hon. friend has in mind, but maybe he can elucidate that in his next question.

SUGGESTED EXTENSION OF MANDATE

Mr. Arnold Malone (Crowfoot): Madam Speaker, what I am pointing out with respect to any abandonment of branch lines taking place in the normal course is that abandonment automatically happens at the end of a five-year extension. This means that the railway companies will not put in new ballast because of the amount of investment required, and no new grain elevators will be built because they require an investment of several millions of dollars each. Such investment will not be undertaken if only a five-year projection can be given. There must be greater security of investment provided.

Would the minister give consideration to changing the mandate of the Canadian Transport Commission so that instead of it having the option to postpone an abandonment for five years, it could postpone it for 15 years, or even transfer the branch line in question to the permanent network? In that way grain companies and railway companies could proceed with their investments, without concluding that at the end of five years, and a few hearings, abandonment would automatically take place because by that time the track would be so torn up that nothing else could happen. Would the minister consider making that kind of recommendation with respect to the Canadian Transport Commission?

Oral Questions

Hon. Jean-Luc Pepin (Minister of Transport): Madam Speaker, my hon. friend, generally speaking, is asking how the system operates at this time. When a line is abandoned or before the line is abandoned, the elevator companies are fully consulted as to their intent. A line is not abandoned without that process of consultation. Also, after which a decision is made, there is a five-year period of time when it can be reviewed by the CTC. It is complicated enough as it presently exists. I suggest that adding more complications to it would not be in the best interests of western grain producers.

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RAILWAYS

PLANS FOR FUTURE IMPROVEMENT

Hon. Don Mazankowski (Vegreville): My question is also directed to the Minister of Transport. The budget outlined that there would be \$1.3 billion spent over the next four years to improve western transportation. I should like to ask the minister two questions. First of all, can he assure this House that the \$1.3 billion will not vanish like the \$4 billion we heard in last year's budget? Will he advise the House whether he will be approaching the improvement of the transportation system on a comprehensive basis, or is it his intention to proceed on a project by project ad hoc basis? If a decision has not been made, could the minister indicate when such a decision will be taken by cabinet?

● (1140)

Hon. Jean-Luc Pepin (Minister of Transport): Madam Speaker, obviously I have to restrain myself in answering this question. There are two approaches. One is known as the comprehensive one which is the terminology used by the hon. member for Vegreville. It is also known as the system approach. The other approach is less pejoratively referred to as the special projects approach. I can only say for today that cabinet will very soon be seized of that choice and will have to make a decision as to the best possible use of the \$1.3 billion which the distinguished Minister of Finance has made available for the maintenance of capacity in the main line in western Canada, a line that will be more and more double-tracked, as the Prime Minister indicated before.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Pepin: I gather from the tone of the question that my hon. friend is already favourable to the comprehensive approach. Should that be so, I have a question to ask him. How many of his colleagues are in agreement with that?