

*Private Members' Business*

I know that the region of Lac-Saint-Jean and Chibougamau-Chapais is not the only one in Quebec, and indeed in Canada, where rail services are being shut down. I know that Crown corporations need to rationalize their expenses. I know the various services provided to Canadian taxpayers are expensive. But I also know that infrastructure is needed to further the economic development of a region.

Some people will say that, of course, we must shut down trunk lines, especially those that are not really profitable. However, as far as the region of Lac-Saint-Jean is concerned, and especially the Chibougamau area, we are talking about a crucial infrastructure for mining development throughout the region.

I know that members of this House are in the habit of using such expressions as "it is vital for the development of my region" and we "cannot do without it".

• (1335)

In this instance, we should realize that a railway is frequently the only viable alternative for moving the output of mining companies from a remote region like Chibougamau-Chapais or even Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean, both of which are quite far from Quebec City or Montreal. Infrastructure is needed to offset geographical disadvantages.

I would not raise this issue in the House if the CN did not turn a deaf ear to repeated pleas by people in my riding. I would not make representations in the House if the Minister of Transport proved more sensitive to this problem.

Yes, we can all agree on reducing rail service in many regions of Canada. We are ready to look at the problem responsibly as elected representatives who want to spend public money sparingly. My colleagues responsible for regional development and transport tried to make the Minister of Transport more aware of the problem and get regional public hearings before unfortunate decisions are made that could jeopardize the future of a whole industry.

Unfortunately, I was not able to convince the Minister of Transport that he should review these decisions. I have found and read reports dating from the days when those who are now government members or ministers were in opposition. In a paper those people, including the present Minister of Transport, wrote and signed, we read that the Conservatives set out to dismantle our railway network, especially in Quebec. They called for an end to that strategy, which was being implemented irresponsibly, and demanded public hearings in affected areas to allow people there to at least have a say and voice their concerns.

One cannot make cuts in a railway system, in an infrastructure essential to the development of an area, and get away with it, if

one has not previously taken the trouble to go to listen to local people and determine the risks involved in dismantling it.

It has to be understood that there are two important rail lines in northern Quebec, namely the Franquet-Chapais line, which is the object of my presentation today, and the CRAN line.

In the case of the Franquet-Chapais line, Canadian National Railways, when it submitted a request for abandonment, was authorized to dismantle this rail line in June. You can understand, Madam Speaker, how important it is to deal with this issue today because, starting in June, CN will be at liberty to dismantle the Franquet-Chapais rail line, the line between Franquet in the Abitibi and Chapais in the Chibougamau-Chapais region.

Canadian National Railways has also indicated that it intended to ask the Transport Commission for authorization to abandon its operations on the CRAN line. For the benefit of those who are not familiar with the local geography, the Franquet-Chapais trunk line is presently not in use, operations having been stopped for some time already. The mining companies are using the CRAN line for their operations.

Just imagine the vicious circle the people of Chibougamau-Chapais are caught in; they need rail service to carry their ore, but the Franquet-Chapais trunk line was closed down some months ago and is about to be dismantled, and now CN is announcing that in an effort to streamline, it has decided to drop rail service through the Lac-Saint-Jean region that allowed the companies to carry on their operations.

• (1340)

It is absolutely unthinkable to use trucks for transportation in the mining sector. Yet, that is what the people of Chibougamau-Chapais are being told to do, use trucks to transport the ore to where the concentrators and the necessary facilities are. However, this would mean a 50-per-cent increase in transportation costs. Given the state of the economy today, what business could absorb a 50-per-cent increase in operating costs? In some respects, this decision jeopardizes the development of the Chibougamau-Chapais region.

The Franquet-Chapais line is located along a geological fault where new deposits are discovered nearly every day. New hopes arise each day along the geological fault, from the Chibougamau-Chapais sector all the way to Abitibi. Ore deposits are being discovered every day and every day, new projects are on the verge of being launched. However, a decision such as the one Canadian National is preparing to make will snuff out any hope that the Chibougamau-Chapais region may have. This is a region in desperate need of hope, given its remote location in