

Our Ottawa Letter

Railway amendments—Free wheat—Election reforms—Declaration of independence

(By The Guide's Special Correspondent)

Ottawa, May 4.—The week in parliament has been marked by the discussion of a diversity of interesting topics, some of them incident to the budget debate, and others introduced by members on motions to adjourn. These have included debates on various phases of the fiscal question, the high cost of living, and, more particularly the rapidly increasing prices of wheat and flour. In addition the report of the commission appointed at the last session of parliament to inquire into the condition of Canadian railways was tabled on Tuesday and created a great deal of interest. A summary of the findings of the commission appears elsewhere in this issue and it is only necessary here to say something as to how they have been received by parliament and by people in the East. Even at that it is rather early to commit oneself to definite statements. The reports are so voluminous in character that comparatively few members of the house have yet found the opportunity to read them. While much praise is given to the majority report of Sir Henry Drayton and W. M. Ackworth, recommending the nationalization of all the Canadian railways with the exception of the C.P.R. under one system, the opinion is expressed in many quarters that it is not likely to be adopted in its entirety in connection with any railway legislation which may be introduced by the government before the end of the session. The framing of such legislation awaits the return of Sir Robert Borden from England. Meanwhile the government proposes to keep its ears to the ground.

The reception accorded to the majority and minority reports by the press, the people, as well as doubt as by the railway and financial interests, will be closely observed and noted. The value of the reports as a guide to parliament is generally recognized as both sides of the case have been ably presented by Sir Henry Drayton and Mr. Ackworth on one side and by A. H. Smith, who favors a continuance of private ownership, on the other. The criticism of the Drayton report most frequently heard is that if government ownership and control of railways is to be adopted by Canada the C.P.R. with its big dividend paying capacity should be included in the system in order to produce the necessary revenue to meet the interest obligations involved, at least in part.

Railway Act Amendments

Meanwhile with revolutionary changes in our railway system in the air the special committee of the House of Commons which is considering the bill amending and consolidating the Railway act has been proceeding with its labors. A clause in the proposed new act gave the Railway Commission power to alter or reject any location plan of any railway although this might be approved by the railway committee of the commons, or the minister of railways. It was claimed in the committee that this power was so drastic that it would enable the Railway Commission to prevent the construction of the Hudson's Bay Railway or any other railway despite the wishes of parliament. After some discussion the clause was altered to limit the power of the Railway Commission to deal only with the location of paralleling and duplicating lines.

Another clause in the bill proposed to give the Railway Commission control over the stock issues of the railways. This was vigorously opposed by the representatives of the railways and was likewise disapproved by Sir Henry Drayton, chairman of the Railway Commission. He said it would interfere with the right of the board to fix rates. When a vote was called on the clause W. F. Maclean alone raised his hand in support of it. He remarked that "there was nothing for it but the nationalization of the railways."

The Price of Flour

The liveliest debate of the session so far occurred on Thursday over the rapid increase in the price of flour.

Geo. Kyte considered the jump of \$1.20 in the price of flour within twenty-four hours sufficient justification to move the adjournment of the house in order that the matter might be considered. He charged that the rapid advance in wheat and flour prices was due almost entirely to the manipulators of the stock markets and urged immediate action on the part of the government to prevent further advances. Mr. Kyte favored the commandeering of all wheat not in the farmers' hands, and the compelling of the milling companies to grind it at reasonable rates. He ridiculed the efforts which have been made by Hon. T. W. Crothers, minister of labor, to reduce the high cost of living.

Mr. Kyte's remarks drew speeches from Hon. T. W. Crothers, Sir Thomas White and Hon. Arthur Meighen in defence of the government. The minister of finance argued at length that the price of wheat and flour was due entirely to the present unusual conditions and to the law of supply and demand. He said it would be quite impossible to fix a price for wheat in Canada without similar action being taken in the United States. He announced that Sir George Foster who is at present in Washington was taking up the question with the American authorities. On Friday, Sir Thomas told the house he had been reliably informed that the corner in wheat at Winnipeg had been due to the circumstance that the British wheat commission had been purchasing large quantities of the higher grades. The result was that elevators and other vendors who had purchased wheat for May delivery were unable to get sufficient quantities to fill their contracts. This had resulted in forcing up the prices. He had cabled Sir George Percy that the situation would be relieved if the British wheat commission would take some lower grade wheat thereby releasing higher grades for the filling of contracts. He added that if government action was necessary later on the government would not hesitate to act.

Dictating Wheat Prices

Critics of the government for failing to do anything to control the prices of food included W. F. Cockshutt, member for Brantford, who advocated the appointment of a food dictator. Western critics were told that the government could not undertake to buy the grain on farmers' hands for \$1.50 or \$1.75 per bushel with wheat ruling at present prices. Mr. Turriff and others retorted that the government had offered the western farmers \$1.80 for this year's crop and the farmers had replied that they would sell at \$1.70 for No. 1 Northern, delivered at Fort William. The farmers would be reasonable they said, and sell at a fair fixed price if it was necessary in the interests of the Empire. The minister of finance and Mr. Meighen in reply both vigorously asserted that no wheat offer had been made by the Dominion government. All they had done was to conduct negotiations between the Imperial authorities and the representatives of the farmers relative to a proposal by the Imperial wheat commission to purchase the Canadian crop.

Free Wheat Permanent

Sir Thomas White made a second contribution to the budget debate when he discussed for some two hours Mr. Turriff's free wheat amendment proposal and incidentally all other features of the fiscal situation. The effect of the minister's speech was to make it perfectly clear that it is not the intention of the government to depart from its protective policy. He maintained that the acceptance of the free wheat offer of the Wilson tariff does not involve any departure on the part of Canada from the fiscal policy of the past. There has been no departure in this respect, he argued, from the traditional policy of the Conservative party. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, he said, had been on safe ground when he adhered to the Conservative policy of protection but when he adopted the reciprocity idea he had

both an economic and political mistake. The minister of finance made it perfectly clear that he is an incurable protectionist. It must be said to his credit, however, that he appears to be absolutely sincere and is, apparently, quite willing to stand or fall by his convictions. Despite his contentions that the government has been right in the past Sir Thomas gave the house a practical assurance that free wheat was likely to remain in force. It would not be removed except with the consent and approval of parliament. Should an election take place before such a thing is mooted in parliament it is probably safe to assume that western sentiment will be so strongly represented in the house that any reversion to the old

policy will be practically out of the question.

Eastern Tariff Views

During the debate at least one eastern member of the opposition stated that he was prepared to go quite as far as the farmers of the west in the direction of free trade. This declaration came from Geo. Kyte, of Richmond, N.B., who said that he was entirely in accord with the demands of the West and was willing to support them.

Levi Thompson made a strong speech in support of freer trade. He stated that it was absolutely necessary in the interests of the West that the tariff should be reduced to the disappearing point on a large number of articles. It



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