

Government Orders

assistance. Nobody has ever suggested that the at and east should be maintained, as far as I am aware.

I would like to ask the member this question. Is his position that the bill before the House should not be passed, that the at and east should be retained and another \$40 million should flow into the coffers of the railway company with very marginal benefits to the agricultural industry in Nova Scotia, to the port of Halifax, to the port of Saint John? Or would he prefer some other kind of method to assist those valuable sections of our economy—the port trade, the agricultural industry and so on?

Is he saying that he wants this anomaly that it no longer has the basis that it had when it was first introduced in 1961 to continue? Is that his idea of progress? Is that what the member wants to maintain, the *status quo* regardless of the advantages of maintaining the *status quo*?

Mr. Axworthy (Saskatoon—Clark's Crossing): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank the member for his question.

If he had listened carefully to the point that I had been making with regard to the Atlantic Provinces Transportation Commission, he would have known that I was suggesting that the government pay attention to the recommendations of that commission and that the government reconsider its proposals in Bill C-26 and make real changes to the program which can ensure the economic viability of both the ports of Halifax and Saint John and preserve the jobs and the contribution to the economy which the program has provided.

There are 500 jobs at stake in an already fragile economy. It is important for the government to respond positively to those workers and to respond positively to the need to ensure that maritime farmers, the maritime brewing industry and the local economy be supported as much as possible.

What I am suggesting is that the government reconsider this bill and consider changes which will make the at and east program one which deals with the problems which are at stake. To discard it altogether, throwing 570 people on the scrap heap, along with their families, as well as a couple of hundred indirect jobs is simply not acceptable.

Mr. Crosby: Madam Speaker, I am sure if the member examined the situation he would very quickly discover

that the difficulty with continuing the at and east is that it was intended to make competitive the east coast ports with ports in the United States of America. That situation no longer exists with respect to the movement of grain and flour traffic.

The competition is between St. Lawrence ports and east coast ports. If the at and east is removed the east coast ports would require some assistance to remain competitive. But all the jobs and all the money will stay within Canada in any event.

I take it the member is suggesting that the St. Lawrence ports should lose their advantage over east coast ports. I agree with the member if that is his position. I agree that there should not be special advantages to St. Lawrence ports or with the east coast ports. I hope he will make that position very clear and bring with it the support of his party for this disadvantage that has been retained over the last few decades in favour of St. Lawrence ports.

The difficulty is that in order to right the advantages and to make both east coast ports and St. Lawrence ports competitive we on the east coast need some further competitive edge. That competitive edge can be delivered if ice-breaking charges are imposed with respect to movements flowing through St. Lawrence ports.

I would like to ask the member if he is so interested in the at and east and he is so interested in the welfare of east coast ports—and his party backs him—why did they not act in this House to ensure that charges would be made against vessels using the St. Lawrence ports. Why did they fail to back that measure when it was before the House of Commons?

Mr. Axworthy (Saskatoon—Clark's Crossing): Mr. Speaker, there are a number of changes which can be made to the at and east program to ensure that the Halifax and Saint John ports remain viable in terms of exporting grain. We should take every effort we can to ensure that that is the case.

I think by removing the subsidy which this bill attempts to do we do indeed favour central Canadian ports. We should be ensuring that those Atlantic ports, the two which are open throughout the winter, are indeed given the preferences they need in order to sustain themselves. We should be looking at the total support program which is represented by at and east to ensure that that continues.