

Railway Act

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): No confessions, Stanley!

Mr. Benjamin: Sometimes is better than not at all.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Yesterday was not one of the times I loved her. She complained that I should not continue to argue for the lowering of the pension age to 60 because conditions have changed and people now want to work longer rather than retire early. She must not be aware of the struggle it is for those who work in railway shops, steel mills, packing plants and clothing establishments. She may not meet these people, but I do. There are men 55 and 58 who look older than I do. They feel they simply cannot maintain the struggle to age 65. I did not have time to say that yesterday when we were speaking on that other motion. I got it in now.

The point I am making is that it is real people who work for these railways. They are human beings. They have their rights, their hopes and their entitlement. This parliament should be doing something for those people. It is not enough just to debate niceties, techniques and so on, and I am glad the hon. member for Winnipeg South Centre has put down this motion which gives us the right to talk tonight about problems faced by the real people who work for the railways of this country. Not only should there be a better basic pension and built in guaranteed escalation, but there should also be an opportunity for earlier retirement without penalty. There must also be an improvement in the position of the widows of retired railway workers.

● (2112)

I know that what I am about to say now I have said so often that other members could probably quote it back to me. By what rule of decency or common sense or humanity do we stand for the proposition that if a man and wife live and work together and build up their home and their assets and obtain a pension we then provide that if she dies first his pension is 100 per cent, but if he dies first her pension is only 50 per cent? I know it stems from the day when we thought it was a man's world and it was very nice for those who ran this man's world to provide for 50 per cent pensions for widows. It does not stand up. It does not wash to make that type of discrimination. It is not only the Canadian National and the Canadian Pacific which practises that discrimination; the federal government does it and the public service and private industry do it everywhere.

But tonight we are talking about railway pensions and, in particular, we are talking about the Canadian National. The hon. member for Winnipeg South Centre, quite appropriately, is asking that we have an audit of their pension plan and pension operation so that we can look at these things every year. My plea, Mr. Speaker, is that we not only look at these things but that we do something about them. I say again, better pensions in terms of the basic amount, capacity for early retirement without penalty, escalation or indexing of railway pensions to the fullest extent of the cost of living, and equal pensions on retirement or death for the husband or the wife. These are things we must achieve. If we do not, then let us not

have all this bragging about all the good social legislation we have brought in. Let us not have all this bragging about equal rights for men and women. Men and women, particularly older women, do not enjoy equal rights and this matter brings it to a head tonight.

I have no doubt my hon. friend from Winnipeg South Centre feels as I do and that he wants to go a lot further than this amendment, but under the rules affecting a private member, this is all he can do. He has performed a service by bringing this issue before us. He is trying to find an arrangement under which we can look more closely every year at the pension operations of the Canadian National Railways and, in an ancillary way, at the pension operations of Canadian Pacific as well. It is to be hoped that, having done so, we will one day become sufficiently human and decent in our treatment of our railway workers, particularly when their working days are over, when they become retired railway workers or leave their wives as widows, to provide better pensions for these people.

Mr. Speaker, I support the amendment and I know the hon. member who moved it will support me in my determination that we still have a lot further to go.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Charles Lapointe (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, I would like very briefly to reiterate the commitment made by the minister at the beginning of the sitting tonight when he said that the government intends to support the motion introduced by the hon. member for Winnipeg South Centre (Mr. McKenzie).

After listening to all the comments on the problems facing CN pensioners and the pension fund at the present time, including the delays on the part of the CN to put up the money it must pay into the pension fund, I think all members of this House will agree that those problems are extremely important. Indeed the Hall Commission was set up in the early 1960's to study that problem which, unfortunately, has not yet been completely solved. However I think that progress has been made in the right direction. For example, during this year's negotiations between the CN and the various unions representing CN employees, an agreement was reached on the heritage fund that had been recommended in the Hall report, but there remains a lot to be done. That is why we welcome the motion of the hon. member from Winnipeg South Centre. In fact, each year parliamentarians now will be able to deal specifically with this problem at the Committee on Transport and Communications since the report of the auditors on the pension fund will now be referred to it. I believe this is a commendable initiative but we should also keep in mind, Mr. Speaker, that we parliamentarians are here to exert pressure on that Crown corporation to find solutions to this urgent problem. But on the other hand we must realize that all the responsibility does not rest with us but also and mostly with the management of the CN and its unions. So, Mr. Speaker, we will be happy to support the hon. member's motion.