

Railway Act

Minister (Mr. Trudeau) opened his campaign in Toronto by stating, and I quote him "The issue is not this or that or the next problem. The issue is what group of men and what party can give the leadership to the country to solve its problems." At the present time that quotation must have a very hollow ring even for the government backbenchers. There has not been leadership in the transportation area, to be specific, nor has there even been a passing interest in transportation from the Minister of Transport himself.

I would like to close by saying that it can only be hoped that part of our transportation problem will be solved by the replacement of the Minister of Transport at the earliest possible time.

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina-Lake Centre): Madam Speaker, many people in many parts of the country have been waiting many years for something to happen to our freight rate structure, in fact for as long as 40 or 50 years for parliament to act in this regard. I was hoping that the government would have deemed this important enough that we could have dealt with it a little earlier tonight, but there was agreement to do so at this time and I must abide by that.

I want to say that legislation has been promised by the government and by the Minister of Transport (Mr. Marchand) for almost two years. The bill proposes a new section of the Railway Act empowering the minister to require the railways to furnish specified cost information, either at his request or at the request of the provinces, and to release such information to those provinces. As the hon. member for Lisgar (Mr. Murta) said, such information will be kept confidential. The first question I want to raise with the minister and with hon. members is why the necessity for confidentiality. There is no need for it, particularly where there is no competition. There is very little need for it even wherever there is some small semblance of competition in transportation. The minister himself has said that competition in transportation in Canada does not work.

I agree with the hon. member for Lisgar, and I hope that the minister will do this himself without our having to try to amend the bill so that it will read that the minister shall, not the minister may. I am sure the minister would want to amend his legislation to that effect.

● (2200)

I have a lot of quotations from speeches of the minister and the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) but I will be lenient on hon. members tonight, Madam Speaker, and not quote them all. I want to quote some of them, however, to illustrate what I believe to be the case, that the Minister of Transport does not have the support of his colleagues in caucus and in cabinet for what he would like to do for transportation in Canada. One only has to notice the minister in charge of the Canadian Wheat Board run from one end of the country to the other, making announcements about Crowsnest pass rates, freight rate freezes, branch line abandonments and other areas of transportation that are the prerogative of the Minister of Transport, to see how he is being undermined by his colleagues.

[Mr. Murta.]

This bill is only a small beginning regarding the disclosure of costs. The minister promised a new transportation information act prior to the election, and the Prime Minister promised it during the election. If, and when, we get it we will want an extension of the disclosure provision to cover all federally regulated modes of transportation. We will press for a full disclosure, not only to provincial governments but to the public, where massive public subsidies are involved. Every mode of transportation in this country gets massive subsidies. The railway subsidies show up clearly, but the greater subsidies to highways, trucks and airlines do not show up as readily. There is no real competition in most areas of transportation in Canada, and so there is not the excuse of confidentiality. The public has a right to know, and this parliament has a right to know.

It is not sufficient for the railroads just to disclose their costs. I, for one, do not believe their figures, and the minister, the provinces and this parliament need to be satisfied that their costs are not padded. If the minister does not have the authority to investigate the railways' claim of their costs of freight rates and branch lines, etcetera, then I hope that he will ask for that authority by amending this legislation.

The hon. member for Lisgar said that he thought this bill was a farce because the government already had the power it sought. Certainly in certain circumstances it does, but I think it is significant that the provinces still want this disclosure legislation. That indicates to me that they do not believe the figures that are being given. I have only to quote the Premier of Alberta on this. The premiers of other western provinces agreed with him, and I am sure the premiers of the Atlantic provinces would agree as well. In March, 1973, Premier Lougheed said:

We call here and now for the federal government to order both national railways to provide every aspect of their costs to interested provincial governments.

The fact that the provincial governments want this legislation indicates to me their lack of trust in the railroads' figures. The four western premiers pressed their demand further in July, 1973, and secured a commitment from the federal government to get information on railway costs. In November, 1973, in this House the minister said:

We made a commitment in the west to the effect that the provinces would be informed as to all details of the railway rate structures.

Since he himself has said "we"—meaning the government—made a commitment, I ask why they have the word may in the legislation instead of shall. Later in November, 1973, the minister said:

... the commitment we made was to have the CTC and the railway companies give the information—on costs—at the request of the provinces. The provinces have made a number of specific requests and information with respect to them will be furnished ...

Perhaps the minister will tell us when we get to committee whether these requests have been complied with fully. I should also like to know what information the provinces asked for that they still have not received. The fact of the matter is that the provinces want all the information there is, not only on freight rates but on the cost of operating branch lines and so on. That commitment, made by the minister and the Prime Minister, applies to everything.