

Prairie Farm Assistance Act

The government should resist the Gardiner hanky-panky of the late thirties, forties and fifties up to 1957. It is to the credit of the Diefenbaker administration that they made some real effort to put a stop to that. They had some success. I was not aware of any re-occurrence of that sort of operation during the Pearson years. However, I cannot say the same for the Trudeau years with regard to the administration of PFAA and other programs for the prairie provinces related to agriculture. I sincerely believe the Minister of Agriculture will not allow the situation to revert to what occurred in the forties and the fifties. However, it is cropping up again.

I ask the minister to examine this operation very closely. I hope this will include looking at the operations of one of his colleagues from the prairie provinces whose name I need not mention. The minister owes it to the employees and to the farmers who contributed the funds to give a full report, and to arrange for the referral of the subject matter of this legislation to the standing committee.

The minister and the officials in the three provinces concerned should do what they deem best with the \$7 million or \$8 million left in the fund. I leave that to them. We can offer suggestions which may or may not be worth considering. However, I believe the money should go to the crop insurance program. The minister in charge of the Canadian Wheat Board should not be allowed to get his hands on one nickel of it. We can go into the reasons for that when we finally get to the bill covering the grain stabilization program. Those are all the remarks I will make at this point. I am anxious to hear from the minister at this stage of the debate, and also in the committee.

Mr. Gordon Towers (Red Deer): Madam Speaker, from the evidence given by the previous speakers, including the hon. member for Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain (Mr. Hamilton), it is clear that someone, or some organization, is responsible for the present mess in the PFAA administration. The point of this debate is to try to decipher who is responsible for it. If it is the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan), he will have to take full blame. If that is the case he will find that the smell of rotten eggs is like perfume compared to what will come out of this. I am sure the smirk on the face of the hon. member for Assiniboia (Mr. Goodale) will be on the other side before we are through.

If the Minister of Agriculture does not accept responsibility, it must lie in one of two other areas. One is in the realm of the minister in charge of the Canadian Wheat Board (Mr. Lang). If that is not where the blame lies, it has to be in the Liberal organization.

Reluctantly I rise to participate in this debate on Bill C-30. This bill should not have been put before the House while an investigation is being conducted into reported irregularities within the administration. No valid reason was given for presenting this bill to repeal the Prairie Farm Assistance Act now when important legislation directly affecting Canadians has been set aside.

I received documentary information which I turned over to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The Minister of Agriculture cannot say he is unaware of the current RCMP investigation into the PFAA for which he is responsible, or is he going to shift this responsibility to the Canadian Wheat Board?

[Mr. Benjamin.]

Not only was the minister's attention drawn to alleged unauthorized payments by the hon. member for Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain on December 9 last, but the Solicitor General (Mr. Allmand) was questioned in the House three days later about the same matter. Last week the government House leader was requested to delay this bill until the RCMP had an opportunity to submit its report. He did not agree. I asked him the following question, as recorded at page 4719 of *Hansard*:

Mr. Speaker, my question is for the government House leader. In view of the fact that four months have passed since the Minister of Agriculture was questioned about reported irregularities in the operation of the Prairie Farm Assistance Act during his term of office and that the House leader has said Bill C-30 which would repeal the said act will go before the House today, and in view of the fact that the RCMP investigation might not be completed for some time, would the government House leader agree to withhold Bill C-30 at least until the report on the investigation has been submitted?

● (1700)

The House leader would not agree to that request and, as a result, we now find ourselves spending time on legislation which might well be dealt with later without anyone being adversely affected.

What is the reason behind the minister's insistence on putting this bill through at this particular time? Surely the minister and the government, no matter how irresponsible they may be, realize that there was an element of wrongdoing within PFAA or the RCMP, in conjunction with the Auditor General, would not have decided that such an inquiry was necessary. Another important reality is that regardless of the findings of the investigation, and whether or not charges are laid, the minister will be answerable for the repeal of this act no matter when the report is submitted or on what date second reading is given to Bill C-30. I feel sure most members of the House would be willing to listen to an explanation of the supposed urgency attached to the repeal of the Prairie Farm Assistance Act.

While the minister in charge of the Wheat Board lives in the PFAA region it is not my wish, nor is it the intention of any member, to cast a reflection on innocent people but, unfortunately, until we know whether or not there were irregularities within PFAA a cloud hangs over every one of its employees. The purpose of the investigation is to find out who is responsible for the actions now being questioned. A line must then be drawn between what is right and what is wrong so that, if guilt is established, punishment will follow; otherwise public servants generally, as well as the public at large, will be without the protection which is their right.

We have to ask why any employee of the federal government would become involved in a situation whereby his integrity is at stake and he could be subjected to charges of fraud at the cost of his job. Who was the instigator of these alleged misdeeds? Who placed these people in such an unfortunate position? What were they doing, and for what purpose? Were they electioneering on behalf of the federal Liberal party on the instructions or advice of someone in a senior position, even someone from the other chamber—the highest court in the land?

Were they offered inducement to commit fraudulent acts? Is the minister running for cover by demanding that Bill C-30 be rushed through parliament now, or is someone