

Western Grain Transportation Act

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Corbin): Order, please. The Hon. Member for Bow River (Mr. Taylor) is rising on a point of order.

Mr. Taylor: Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Member for York-Peel (Mr. Stevens) spoke for only five minutes the last day, and he commenced today at 11:39 a.m.

Some Hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Taylor: I am sorry, Mr. Speaker, that does amount to ten minutes.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Corbin): The Hon. Member for Bow River is usually right.

The Hon. Member for Brandon-Souris (Mr. Clark).

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Lee Clark (Brandon-Souris): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to have this initial opportunity to rise to participate in the debates of this House and I wish to begin by thanking the electorate of Brandon-Souris for their support in the recent by-election.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Clark (Brandon-Souris): I look forward to serving my constituents in the remaining days of this Parliament and, I hope, in many Parliaments to come.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Clark (Brandon-Souris): I am particularly pleased to speak on this amendment as the question of the Crow was much debated during the course of my by-election campaign. I would like, therefore, to share with you, Mr. Speaker, and the House, the views of the farmers of my constituency, views which they often expressed over the course of the last four months.

Let me begin by recognizing that there are many diverging viewpoints on this proposal but those viewpoints, in my opinion, differ more in terms of detail than they do in substance. The vast majority of farmers in my constituency are opposed to the Government's transportation policy in its present form. As a result, I rise to speak in strong support of this amendment to postpone consideration of this Bill for six months because I am of the opinion that additional time is required for consideration of this very important and very detailed proposal.

Half of my constituents reside in the so-called rural portion of Brandon-Souris, and even those who live within the city of Brandon understand fully that agriculture is the backbone of the economy of my constituency. Furthermore, all members of my constituency recognize that the agricultural industry is equally vital to the economy of all of western Canada.

Unfortunately, prairie farmers have been suffering for several years from a financial crisis which has been caused by a combination of factors, many of which are direct results of the Government's energy and economic policies. On the one hand, rising interest rates, combined with excessively high fuel and fertilizer costs, have caused the farmers' costs to rise to unequalled levels. Tragically, those costs have been escalating

at the very time farmers' incomes have been falling as a result of declining world prices for grain. Western Canadian farmers, as a result, find themselves in an extremely dangerous financial crisis at this moment. Therefore the Government's proposal to abolish the Crow and to increase the farmers' transportation costs has been put forward at an extremely unfortunate time in the history of western agriculture.

The majority of farmers with whom I have spoken are painfully aware of the need for an improved transportation system, and they are prepared to pay a reasonable share of the cost to provide that system. They very legitimately argue, however, that there are very real limits to what they can afford to pay. For that reason I proposed during the course of the by-election, and as I suggested in this House last week, that the farmers' share of their transportation costs must be regulated in such a manner that their farming operations will remain viable.

What is required, therefore, is the creation by statute of a ceiling price which will protect the farmer from the possibility that his costs will rise on the one hand, while the value of his produce declines on the other. I propose, therefore, that a ceiling of approximately 7 per cent of the initial price for grain, or 7 per cent of the average price for non-board grains, be established. That percentage corresponds to the farmers' average transportation costs during the past quarter century. If this proposal is accepted, farmers will know that their transportation costs will not escalate beyond reason nor beyond their capability to pay.

The creation of such a ceiling, a ceiling that would be significantly lower than the Government's proposed safety net of 10 per cent of the weighted average price for grains, would require, of course, that the federal Government would have to contribute more than it is currently proposing to the cost of improving the country's rail system. Members on this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, believe very strongly that such money would be better spent on improving the farmers' transportation system than on other projects, such as the \$1.4 billion which has been recently extended to cover the losses of Canadair.

● (1150)

In addition to being assured that the farmers' share of transportation costs will be regulated by statute, prairie grain producers need the guarantee that these reduced rates should apply to all the grain which farmers can produce. Any proposal to charge the full commercial rates on that portion of the farmers' crop exceeding 31.3 million tonnes would only discourage increased productivity.

I would like to conclude by noting that many western grain producers wish further time to examine this very detailed proposal, as the Government's proposal could have a devastating impact upon western agricultural industry if it is implemented in its present form. Those individuals and the various farm organizations to which they belong require more time in