

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, September 19, 1949

The house met at three o'clock.

S.S. "NORONIC"

DESTRUCTION BY FIRE ON SEPTEMBER 17—STATEMENT AS TO INVESTIGATIONS

Hon. Lionel Chevrier (Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, I should like to refer to the very unfortunate disaster which occurred in Toronto on Saturday morning, September 17, when the Canada Steamship Lines S.S. *Noronic* took fire at her berth, with a loss of life reaching well over 125, according to latest reports. I understand that all the passengers have not been accounted for, and the list of persons missing over and above those whose bodies have been recovered stands at approximately 70. I am sure that all the members of this house will join with me in extending to the families and relatives of those who have lost their dear ones our most sincere sympathy in their hour of grief.

The passenger list of S.S. *Noronic* was made up of nearly 500 United States citizens and some 20 Canadian citizens. It is deplorable that such an accident should have occurred where loss of life affects so many families of our friends in the United States, and I am fully conscious of their sorrow and tribulation in the fate of their next of kin. I would like to pay tribute to the authorities of the city of Toronto for the magnificent way in which they marshalled their various emergency organizations to give assistance in connection with this tragedy and to alleviate, as far as is possible in such circumstances, the physical and mental burden of those afflicted.

As soon as the extent of the tragedy became known, I immediately appointed Captain W. N. Morrison, supervising examiner of masters and mates, Toronto, to hold a preliminary inquiry under the provisions of the Canada Shipping Act. He will be assisted in his duties by Captain G. L. C. Johnson, assistant to the supervisor of the nautical division here in Ottawa. The inquiry was started this morning in Toronto. Also under the provisions of the Canada Shipping Act I have appointed Hon. Mr. Justice R. L. Kellock, of the Supreme Court of Canada, to act as commissioner in a formal investigation which will be proceeded with as soon as it is humanly possible to get it under way.

I would like to inform the public in both the United States and Canada that I examined the report of the steamship inspection of S.S. *Noronic* and found that the vessel had complied with the steamship requirements of the Canada Shipping Act. On April 23 the master of the ship was given his certificate authorizing him to operate the vessel on the great lakes and connecting waters, carrying up to 600 passengers and 200 of a crew. This certificate is issued after it has been found that the engines, boilers, fire extinguishing equipment and life saving apparatus are operating efficiently and in accordance with the act. The report also indicated that the owners had installed a new fire alarm system. The certificate issued by the steamship inspection service of the Department of Transport is recognized by the United States coastguard service. I am also advised that when the S.S. *Noronic* called at a United States port early in the navigation season, a representative of the United States coastguard inspected the ship, and as he was satisfied with the condition of the ship, he likewise issued a certificate under the provisions of the United States act. I think I should state that the owners of the vessel had complied with the requirements of the Canada Shipping Act and of the United States coastguard inspection service in so far as it applied to Canadian ships.

This terrible disaster is of such gravity that it has been considered advisable to appoint a justice of the Supreme Court of Canada to hold an inquiry. As the investigation will be proceeding immediately, it would be improper for me to make any further statement at this time. However, the inquiry will be a public one at which all the facts will be fully disclosed, and if there is any blame or negligence on the part of anyone, it will be brought to light.

Mr. T. L. Church (Broadview): I should like to ask the minister one question. Why is not the inquiry into this terrible disaster in one of our harbours, to a guest ship which had rights and privileges not allowed to our Canadian shipping, being held under the Inquiries Act rather than by officials of the department?—because that is what it is. It is in the public interest that the investigation should be under the federal Inquiries Act.