

Adjournment Debate

First of all, I think we should set the record straight. All parties here in Ottawa agree in principle with the Hall Commission report. However, there are some areas of this report that we and many people question. The Hall Commission report, which was recently tabled in the House, is 555 pages long. With a report of this size, there will be areas of disagreement with some of the proposals, particularly those dealing with the closure of branch lines.

I am sure that members of the Hall Commission never felt that their report would be accepted word for word. That is why I ask what line of appeal or recourse there will be for those areas that feel they have been treated unfairly. This has certainly been the case in region 4 area where the large majority of the trackage involved is located in the federal constituency of Marquette. This area loses far more lines than most other regions in western Canada.

I might add that the people in this area of Manitoba are so concerned that they have written the Minister of Transport asking him to attend a public meeting there this month. The reason they invited the minister is not to abuse him but to find out from him at first hand what way they should turn. They hope the minister will attend. Many communities are affected, communities such as Rapid City, Oak River, Cardale, Isabella, and all communities on that line as well as many others too numerous to mention.

There are several proposals in region 4 area which I question and to which, I feel, there could be sensible alternatives. In the time allotted to me today it is impossible for me to mention all aspects of the report as it affects region 4. There are several points I want to make, though.

The fact that the commission has recommended the closure of all branch lines between the CN mainline and the CP Winnipeg-Edmonton line has come as a shock to residents of this area. Already the farmers of this area have held meetings and are preparing petitions as they feel they have a legitimate complaint. They feel that through the years the railways have deserted them as far as service is concerned and now they feel their elevator companies are letting them down.

They also feel, and I have been contacted in this regard by many farmers from the area affected, that the figures presented to the Hall Commission as to the potential movement of grain on some lines to be closed are not accurate figures. As some of these lines are recommended for closure by December 31 of this year, they naturally ask where they can appeal this decision.

Another part of the report for region 4 that concerns me is the recommendation that the CN line from Neepawa-Rossburn-Russell be transferred to the prairie rail authority. This suggestion gives me grave concern as I feel strongly that this line should be part of the basic network guaranteed to January 1 of the year 2000. By placing this line under the prairie rail authority the grain companies will then say that as there is no long-term guarantee on this line there is no need to give proper service or to upgrade elevators. Then several years down the road, when further reviews are made on this line, the grain

companies will say that, because of the condition of the facilities, it is no longer a viable operation.

Much the same has been done on the Hallboro-Beulah line that is now recommended for closure this year. These are just a few reasons why I feel there should be appeals on some of the recommendations in the report.

I cannot accept the minister's answer, and neither will the farmers of western Manitoba, that they can appeal these closures through the Canadian Transport Commission. This line of appeal has always been available to farmers ever since the CTC was formed. Not only can this be very costly to the communities involved, but they have not much faith in the CTC. The majority know that the chairman of the CTC is the Hon. Edgar Benson, a former minister of finance. They still remember Mr. Benson's white paper on taxation and they are still feeling the effects of his implementation of the capital gains tax and also the tax on recaptured depreciation on farm machinery. Most producers feel that the suggestion that they go to Mr. Benson and the CTC with their appeals is like sending them to the devil.

I am sure that if the Minister of Transport looks again at the Hall Commission report, and particularly the map showing the closures of lines in region 4, he will agree they have been far too harsh in their proposals for that area. Again I ask the minister and the government to announce a proper line of appeal and recourse for areas that sincerely feel they have a legitimate complaint in this initial report. Because of the time element involved, I would hope the minister would do this at an early date.

Mr. Ralph E. Goodale (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, at the outset I think I should stress three points about the Hall Commission report.

First, it is apparent that the Hall Commission has done a thorough, conscientious and widely respected job. Mr. Justice Emmett Hall and his co-commissioners have established for themselves a very broad and solid base of support across the prairies and credibility for their thorough work.

Second, I think it is important to note the almost unanimous chorus of support for the Hall Commission report from farmers, farm organizations, grain companies, co-operatives, municipalities, railways, provincial governments, editorial writers, western observers and commentators. In fact, I think you could look over the history of western Canada and not find a subject where there has been the degree of unanimity that there is about this report.

Third, it is important to remember the calls for swift and positive government action in response to the Hall Commission report coming from all the groups, organizations and individuals I have mentioned. The government of Canada has clearly demonstrated its intention to respond accordingly.

The hon. member makes reference to the Hall Commission recommendations for prairie rail line revitalization, and in particular to proposals which relate to region 4 of the Hall study. The Hall Commission indeed recognized the unique