

Western Grain Stabilization

and ignores anyone who is smaller or larger than the optimum size contemplated by the bill.

I return to my first question: do we need this scheme in the first place? It could be argued that it was needed perhaps 20 years ago. It was not needed three or four years ago. Now we must ask, what are the government's priorities? Perhaps this particular grain stabilization bill is not high on the list of priorities. We have heard much talk of priorities. The minister spoke about priorities in Saskatchewan last week.

The hon. member for Vegreville (Mr. Mazankowski) said that labour disputes are among our most pressing problems and these disputes affect farmers. He was quite right. Transportation generally is in confusion: we must solve our transportation difficulties. At present the whole question of transportation is, so to speak, in a state of suspended animation. We should also consider present high levels of taxation. Farmers are concerned about this. The matter of high interest rates should be close to the top of any list of priorities. In addition, the difficulties of the beef industry should be considered. Instead of dealing with these questions, we are spending our time debating this piece of legislation.

Some people have argued—I will not argue one way or another—that we do not need the kind of grain stabilization plan proposed by the legislation; we need a plan which will take into account all the different elements, all the regional differences in that area served mainly by the Canadian Wheat Board. I am talking about differences in soil, climate, and so on. We ought to consider such matters. Some argue that this is a matter of high priority. I suggest that the grain stabilization bill presently before us does not deal with any of these aspects. It deals with the prairie economy as a whole, in total. That is where this legislation falls down.

Another danger if that the legislation may tend to shelter farmers from the marketplace. That is how it appears to many farmers in western Canada with whom I have spoken. Incidentally, almost without exception those to whom I spoke do not understand the legislation. They understand the basic concept of stabilization—it is not hard to understand—but do not understand the peculiarities of this legislation. Farmers have said to me they are afraid this will be another law which will come between the marketplace and the farmer. Whether that fear is justified may be a matter for debate. Nevertheless, farmers in some parts of western Canada have expressed that fear and it ought to be considered.

We should consider reassessing the grain stabilization program after it has been in existence for three or five years. This would help to allay fears which have been expressed by some in western Canada. Also, we should ask if farm-to-farm sales are to be excluded. Eastern grain producers are wondering about the benefits of this plan. The committee, in considering this bill, will consider whether eastern grain producers are interested in this plan. I wonder why the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) has not been making noises in this regard. Also, will feed grain on farms qualify? That is another question we must ask.

It is possible that discussions connected with this bill will have a depressing effect on transportation in western

[Mr. Murta.]

Canada. At least the bill will keep the farmers busy all summer; they will be trying to figure it out. Perhaps there will be explanations in committee. I hope that people from grain organizations and others will be made fully aware of the provisions of this bill. The bill will also ensure western members of parliament a job for some time to come—indeed, for as long as the legislation is in force. The law will be complicated and farmers will find it difficult to know how to opt in, opt out, or do whatever else may be done.

So far as I am aware, the minister in his speech opening the debate did not mention any producer pressure for moving this bill forward in a hurry. As I said before, grain stabilization is not a matter of high priority for the government. Let me digress for a moment. There are some matters which the House of Commons ought to consider. We should look at improved facilities on the Pacific seaboard and Churchill, the situation vis-à-vis strikes, the whole aspect of the protein payment on wheat, the government's grain storage program, if in fact they have one or are thinking of one, and possibly tax relief. It has already been said that it would be a good idea to have a registered retirement savings plan for farmers and ranchers. This is another area the government should be looking at from a tax point of view. We should be very much aware of these problems which are more serious than those we are dealing with at the present time.

● (1620)

I hope that some of the questions we have raised about this legislation will be sufficiently dealt with in the Standing Committee on Agriculture. I repeat, it is essential for the agriculture committee to travel in connection with this legislation. Before taking a hard and fast position on the legislation, I think it is necessary to get a reaction from those who will be affected, namely, the western grain producers.

If it can be pointed out that this is not the best kind of stabilization legislation, and it will act more as a deterrent than helping western farmers, I will have no qualms about voting against it, as was done a few years ago. I will conclude by saying I look forward to a thorough clause by clause discussion on the whole aspect of grain stabilization when the bill is before the committee.

Mr. Ray Hnatyshyn (Saskatoon-Biggar): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to at last take part in this debate. This legislation was one of the first things I heard about when I became actively involved in politics during the election campaign. A lot of publicity was given to statements by the minister responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board to the effect that the western grain stabilization bill would be brought forward within seven days of the opening of the first session of this parliament. I looked forward to that.

All of us from western Canada, especially the prairie region, realize the importance of the agricultural industry, grain in particular, to our economy. We looked forward with anticipation to the introduction of this legislation. First, we wanted to see what the minister had in mind. Second, it was to be an opportunity for western Canada to have some input into the legislation to ensure that this time it would be of the highest possible calibre and benefit