

Oral Questions

Mr. John Harvard (Winnipeg—St. James): Madam Speaker, I really find it interesting that on the day after a major announcement of this kind there is no agriculture minister here to speak on this issue.

If the minister responsible had not been so doctrinaire the issue could have been decided amicably and democratically. If push came to shove farmers wanted a plebiscite to decide the issue. That was a reasonable demand. After all, this is not the minister's barley and the wheat board—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Does the hon. member have a question?

Mr. Harvard: I have a question. Do I have some time?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. member will put his question now, please.

Mr. Harvard: My question is very simple and it is for the minister responsible today. Why was this matter not put through a plebiscite which was wanted by farmers? It is as simple as that. Why not a plebiscite? Let the farmers make the decision.

Hon. John McDermid (Minister of State (Finance and Privatization)): Madam Speaker, I want to make it very clear that the farmers who are opposed to it can still market their barley through the Canadian Wheat Board. That is there for them to do so. They have the choice. They can market independently in North America or they can go through the wheat board.

Those farmers who want to go through the wheat board can. There is nothing to stop them from doing that.

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PORT OF CHURCHILL

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Winnipeg South Centre): Madam Speaker, my question is for whoever is speaking for the Minister of Transport.

Yesterday a group of private investors, aboriginal leaders and residents of northern Manitoba announced the establishment of a consortium to establish the world's first commercial polar space board.

Essential to the development of this major high-tech project in western Canada is the maintenance of the railway and port facilities of Churchill. Yet for over a year the Minister of Transport has dithered and withered and done nothing about any kind of ongoing commitment for the maintenance of that port.

Can we get a commitment today that the facility, the port and railway infrastructure of Churchill will be maintained?

Hon. Shirley Martin (Minister of State (Transport)): Madam Speaker, for the last year the Department of Transport has not been dithering on Churchill. We have been working with Churchill. We have been consulting with the people involved. The port will open this year and will stay open this year.

I am pleased to hear a consortium has been put in place in order to bring more industry to Churchill which is badly needed there.

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Winnipeg South Centre): Madam Speaker, I do not think the minister understood the question. It is not a matter of the port staying open this year. It is a guarantee that the port has an ongoing, continuing future over the next several decades and not for one year. The minister has made no announcement, no statement, no declaration, to ensure the continuation of the port and railway facilities at Churchill.

Why is it that the western diversification fund rejected this project without any support whatsoever? The space agency has rejected any support and the Minister of Transport is rejecting any support. Why is the government standing in the way of a major high-tech development for western Canada?

• (1135)

Hon. Shirley Martin (Minister of State (Transport)): Madam Speaker, the government is not standing in the way of any high-tech development in western Canada or any place in the country.

This consortium has not come to the Department of Transport for any financial assistance for what it is trying to do. It is a group of private citizens who have come together to make new business.

Mr. Axworthy (Winnipeg South Centre): They were turned down by your government. You should know that, if you read your brief, they were rejected.

Mrs. Martin: I do not need the hon. member's instruction on how I do my job or how I read my briefs. I am answering for the Department of Transport to the hon. member. I am telling him that the port of Churchill is open this year. It will stay open this year. We are working with the port, with the railways and with the members up there to ensure that whatever can be done for the port will be done.