

Seaway and Canal Tolls

through the government for its activities. I believe it is appropriate that today should be our opportunity to make comments in this regard because, as I understood the minister, he said the hearings of the seaway authority still are in progress, although I suspect perhaps today is the last day and that the hearings on the proposed toll increases are about to conclude. So it is fitting that we should be able to give the authority the benefit of the reaction Canadians have to the proposed toll increases.

As we all know, probably no one is more sensitive to the reactions of the Canadian public than a politician; because if he is worth his salt at all he must keep in touch with people, keep his finger on the pulse and find out what they think concerning the effect of any proposed action such as this.

The applause from all sides of the house when the hon. member for Kindersley first raised this matter indicates the deep concern Canadians have about this proposal. I hope today's discussion is more than an exercise in expressing views. I hope it will have an impact upon the seaway authority and cause the authority to reverse its decision. I hope at least it will leave the toll structure as it is at the moment, and take steps to reduce the toll structure to the point where we will have a toll free system. It is my understanding that this is the only place in North America where tolls are charged for—

• (3:20 p.m.)

Mr. McIlraith: Mr. Speaker, I wonder whether the hon. member would permit a question for clarification. I understood him to say that the seaway authority would reverse its decision. My understanding is that the matter had not yet come up for decision and that the seaway authority is conducting public hearings prior to making a decision and a recommendation.

Mr. Howard: In a technical sense this may be absolutely correct, but it is a fact that officials have been making quite a number of public declarations in support of their proposal to increase tolls. In view of the manner in which this organization operates there is no question in my mind that the authority has made up its mind about this particular proposed increase and is merely going through the motions of listening to argument before it formally announces the verdict.

In this regard I should like to quote from a telegram apparently sent on May 6 to Hon.

J. W. Pickersgill, Minister of Transport. It says:

The Canadian Press on May 5, 1966, carried a Winnipeg despatch quoting Mr. Delmer E. Taylor, a member of the St. Lawrence Seaway Authority, as saying: "There has already been considerable support for the toll increases proposed by the authority". In light of the numerous assurances you have given to parliament that no decision with respect to recommended seaway tolls and Welland ship canal lockage fees will be reached by the cabinet until after the conclusion of public hearings scheduled to commence on May 25, the Great Lakes Waterways Development Association vigorously protests this reported effort of an official of the authority to influence public opinion in favour of higher tolls.

That telegram is signed by Stuart Armour, president of the Great Lakes Waterways Development Association. It was for this reason that I said the authority had made a decision, and that perhaps this discussion in the house today will help it to reverse that decision and not recommend that the proposed tolls be put into effect.

In the last couple of days numerous corporate organizations and public spirited bodies such as chambers of commerce, and the union in one instance, have appeared at the hearings of the seaway authority and presented their opposition to the proposed increase in tolls. Of the many, many briefs which were presented, some merely filed with the authority and others presented orally, there was only one which favoured the increase in tolls. That brief was from the Railway Association of Canada. I think it is significant that this one group in Canada with a particular axe to grind would favour the proposal to increase tolls.

I submit that all that one exception does is underline and underscore the virtually unanimous opposition that exists in this nation to the proposal of the seaway authority to increase the tolls. The seaway authority published a document called "Summary of future traffic estimates and toll requirements" under date April 13, 1966, with respect to toll increases. I should like to quote from page 3 of this document a sentence that appears under the heading "Traffic forecasts and their relation to the proposed tolls increase":

In order to examine as objectively as possible the tolls question prior to reporting to governments by July 1, 1966, the two seaway entities agreed that each would obtain the services of independent economic consultant firms to make estimates of traffic development on the Seaway and to assess the impact upon such development of possible increases in the existing level of tolls.

Those consultant firms carried out their studies and made reports to their respective