

No commission in the history of Canada has been so subject to influence as the War Purchasing Commission.

Mr. ROWELL: I have no knowledge of the work of the commission prior to the last year and a half; but during this latter period, so far as I have been able to discover, the commission has discharged its duties fairly and impartially, with a high degree of efficiency, and in a manner that has given satisfaction to the business people of this country, and I believe the same may be said of the commission during the whole period of its existence.

Sir SAM HUGHES: But not without personal influence.

Mr. ROWELL: And I believe without any personal influence.

Sir SAM HUGHES: No, not at all.

Mr. ROWELL: I have never heard of any personal influence that operated upon the members of the commission.

Mr. J. H. SINCLAIR: Was this commission responsible for the purchase of the materials used during the war in the construction of ships?

Mr. ROWELL: Up to February 5, 1918, the commission was responsible for recommending the acceptance of tenders for all supplies purchased under the war vote since that date for the purchase of supplies for all departments.

Mr. J. H. SINCLAIR: It appeared from a certain investigation before the Public Accounts Committee that extortionate prices were paid for material, and if the commission was responsible for those purchases, I do not think there is any good reason why it should be continued.

Mr. ROWELL: I have no knowledge of the particular transaction my hon. friend refers to. But I do know the commission has been at great pains to ascertain that the tenders accepted represented good value for the prices paid. Of course, it cannot make tenders come in; all it can do is to require that tenders shall be presented, and it proceeds on the basis of accepting the lowest tender. There may have been some cases where the commission called for further tenders or endeavoured to get lower prices by reason of the first tender being excessive. I am sure that any member who looks into the work of the commission will be satisfied that it has rendered a very conspicuous piece of public service ever since it was inaugurated.

Mr. W. F. COCKSHUTT (Brantford): Is it the intention that local buying in all the towns and cities of Canada is to be entirely cut out? For instance, if half a dozen brooms are required in Peterborough, Brantford and Hamilton, are those to be shipped from Ottawa, or are they to be bought on the spot, where no freight charges will be payable and no time lost in getting them? It appears to me the Bill is not very clear in that regard.

Mr. ROWELL: The Bill does not affect that question at all. It provides for the purchasing through one central commission.

Mr. COCKSHUTT: By tender?

Mr. ROWELL: And the principal of tender will apply. Does my hon. friend object to that principle?

Mr. COCKSHUTT: For very small quantities.

Sir SAM HUGHES: To whom is this commission to be responsible?

Mr. ROWELL: Just a moment while I answer one question at a time.

Mr. COCKSHUTT: I think tenders for a small number of brooms or anything of that kind is entirely unnecessary.

Mr. ROWELL: I have already explained that. Under the powers given by this Bill there is authority in the commission to authorize—and the War Purchasing Commission has authorized in the past, and the new commission will undoubtedly authorize in the future—the purchase of small quantities of local supplies by the person in charge, just as any purchasing agent in any organization would do.

Mr. BURNHAM: Will the minister compare this system with the old system? Because if that is all there is in it we will be able to understand it better.

Mr. ROWELL: The great bulk of the purchasing for the various departments is not covered by the small local purchases to which my hon. friend refers; that is a very small percentage of the total purchases. The main difference will be that instead of the purchasing being done by all the departments, it will be done by this one central commission. My hon. friend from Victoria (Sir Sam Hughes) asked who was responsible. The commission reports direct to the Prime Minister.

Sir SAM HUGHES: They will be directly under the Prime Minister?