

Transportation Policy

trains are not run on the branch lines for three or four months. The alternate delivery points are on main or secondary lines and the farmers then, because they have run out of money, are forced to haul grain to another line, and the government and the authorities can say it can be seen that the farmers do not want to use the branch lines.

If you take a look at some of that line, Mr. Speaker, you will find that it is often the 65-pound or 85-pound rail made in 1910 or 1912 which I suspect the railways are still carrying on their books and taking depreciation on. The tracks are grown over with weeds. Snow fences are lying on the ground. There are no section men nowadays who know the tracks like the backs of their hands. They ride up and down the highway and clean the railway crossings. There are few trains, but when there is one on most of those lines it cannot haul the kind of equipment the government intends to buy. Why would hopper cars be bought if the government knows they will be used only on the main line? Hopper cars are not needed if they are to be used only on the main line. The railways have sufficient equipment for that purpose.

If there is no intention on the part of the government to require the railways to upgrade and update those branch lines and use unit trains on them, what is the point in buying hopper cars? If the intention of the government is to maintain the commercial viability of Canadian Pacific and perhaps help reduce the interest debt of Canadian National, why does it not say so? If there is nothing in this policy that would require the rebuilding of many hundreds of miles of branch lines and upgrading them so that grain can be moved on them, then we are continuing down the road that has been laid out for us over the years since 1967.

The lack of any new direction in this transportation policy statement today in the area of modernizing the grain handling system forces me to conclude it is "game over" for dozens of towns and villages in the prairie provinces, and in the Peace River country of British Columbia, which are or could be viable. We have not had one word from the minister about this. Until we have legislation from the government, I hope the minister and his colleagues will take a few more hesitant steps in the right direction.

I do not want to stir up the minister. I do not question his sincerity. From the remarks I have read and listened to over the past year, I believe the minister is sincere; but I can also only conclude that he lost the battle with his colleagues in cabinet and in his caucus and that this is a swan-song as well as a hesitation waltz. I believe the minister really means what he says about transportation in this country being in a mess and that competition does not work.

There are only two alternatives. The minister and the government can opt for private enterprise in transportation, and then we will know where the minister and the government stand and will try to deal with that accordingly. Or he can opt for a publicly owned and certainly a publicly controlled public utility transportation system in this country. The other day the minister said he disapproved of the Manitoba and Saskatchewan governments going into the airline business, although I did not hear him say a word about Alberta taking over Pacific Western

[Mr. Benjamin.]

Airlines; but he did not like Skywest running the operation. I have the clipping here. I hope it is inaccurate, but I doubt it. This area is the federal government's responsibility, but the provinces and the territories are compelled to move to fill a vacuum in regional and northern transportation left by the federal government.

I repeat to the minister that a national transportation policy must be based on a public utility concept, with public ownership and control and a public utility board answerable and accountable to the government, parliament and the public. It cannot be any other way if it is really to meet our transportation needs and if it is to grow with this country. I submit that is the only way it can be done if there is to be any chance of success.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. It was agreed earlier that the period following the finalization of speeches would be set aside for questioning the minister, and that hopefully the question period would be completed and the question put by six o'clock. I am sure it is not contemplated by any hon. member that we will use an hour and 20 minutes at this stage, but we can certainly open up questions to see how they go.

● (1650)

Mr. Mazankowski: Mr. Speaker, I welcome the minister's statement. At least it provides an opportunity for a comprehensive discussion. While I must say that it lacks specific details, I am sure it will provide Canadians with an opportunity to discuss transportation in a knowledgeable fashion. I might also thank the minister for the opportunity which he extended to some hon. members to attend a briefing session this morning. That was an excellent way for us to gain a broader insight into the thrust behind the transportation policy. I should like to ask the minister a question with reference to principle No. 4 as outlined on page 10 of the text read by the minister, which is as follows:

There should be an objective of commercial viability, including cost-recovery, both in the operation of transportation services and in the provision of facilities and services for direct support of transportation.

This principle is again referred to on page 15 of the document, in the section dealing with commercial viability and the basing of freight rates on the combination of variable and fixed costs. Can the minister explain how the Crowsnest freight rates would apply within that principle, since it has been stated that the Crowsnest freight rates are not compensatory?

Mr. Marchand (Langelier): As I mentioned—and this is reflected in the text here—we were not dealing either with the Crowsnest pass rates, the Maritime Freight Rates Act or the Atlantic Region Freight Assistance Act. These were kept outside the partial policy that was announced this afternoon. So there is no contradiction. Of course, if we had both in the statute there would be a contradiction, but the other act will cover specific cases such as grain.

Mr. Mazankowski: The minister has stated that anything in this policy would be overruled by the statutory grain rates, that is, the Crowsnest rates; is that correct?

Mr. Marchand (Langelier): Yes.