

Committee on Railways and Shipping

I should also like to refer to the present plans for discontinuance of branch railway lines. I have been given to understand that this is the first year that extensive plans have been made for the discontinuance of many such lines. While there have been some discontinuances out west in past years, this is the first time that wholesale plans have been made. In my constituency it was necessary to give notice of intention to abandon two small branch lines. The board of transport commissioners naturally were involved in the matter, and I think it is fair to say that they conducted a reasonably impartial and extensive inquiry.

It was my good fortune to be able to attend the hearings for part of the time, and two things came out of them upon which I feel the committee must give some direction with respect to future abandonment plans. The first concerns the policy of considering the entire revenue of the region in these matters. Second, there is the part that the future development of the area is to play in these abandonment plans. The hearing I attended was weak in so far as both these matters were concerned. I feel, Mr. Speaker, that these two matters should receive extra consideration this year.

Mr. Marler: Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: May I remind hon. members that if the minister speaks now he will conclude the debate.

Hon. George C. Marler (Minister of Transport): I should like to review as completely as possible, but at the same time as quickly as possible, the principal points which have come up during the course of the discussion of this motion. The first topic I have noted relates to the information given to parliament concerning railway matters. The first thing I should like to say is that there is certainly no desire on my part or upon the part of the government to conceal the facts relating to the management of the Canadian National Railways. If we had no responsibility whatever with regard to the management of the railways, then it would be very easy for us to respond to all inquiries without regard for the consequences.

However, Mr. Speaker, since we have responsibility for the Canadian National Railways there are certain rules we must observe, and it is for that reason that, though very often the correspondence between the Department of Transport or the minister and the Canadian National Railways has no particular implication, it has been the custom followed by the government, both when the Conservatives and when the Liberals were in

power, to look upon this kind of correspondence as privileged. It is for that reason that, since I have been minister, I have opposed the adoption of motions requesting the production of such correspondence. It was not particularly because I wished to frustrate members of the opposition in their attempts to obtain the correspondence they wished to have, but merely because that has been the tradition.

I feel there are good reasons for it. I believe one of the obvious reasons is the fact that very often the information requested would prejudice the position of Canadian National Railways vis-à-vis its competitor. It is not, I believe, in the interests of the railway itself that it should be called upon to make public certain matters which have been the subject of questions or the subject of motions. There is another aspect of that too, Mr. Speaker, and that is that there are very often occasions when customers of the railway are dealing with it and when, in turn, the railway is dealing with suppliers, contractors and others, when clearly it would not be to the advantage of the railway that the details should be made public or that a customer should feel that all his affairs and all his dealings with the railway are subject to publication at any time.

I am quite sure that if hon. members had for a moment the responsibility of deciding whether or not information concerning the railways should always be made public, they would realize there are many instances in which it would not be in the interests of the railway that such information should be made known and thus given to its competitor, the Canadian Pacific Railway. No one, I think, would suggest that the same information would be made public by the Canadian Pacific Railway, either normally or during the course of a shareholders' meeting.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I feel the same remarks are pertinent to replies to questions that have been asked during the course of this session. Certainly so far as I am concerned I have sought to obtain the information when questions have been asked and I have believed it proper to reveal the information to parliament. I believe I should say a word about the answers that have been given. First of all, I should like to say that none of the information I have given has had any other origin than the Canadian National Railways. In other words, though it has been implied on one or two occasions that perhaps I was providing the facts, I want to assure hon. members that such is not the case.

[Mr. Bell.]