

Prairie Farm Assistance Act

referred to the Standing Committee on Agriculture, or to some other forum for full and open inquiry. Mr. Riddell should be invited to appear with all those employees who were affected so that they can make their representations. The results of any police investigation, or other inquiries into fraudulent practices regarding expense accounts, should also be presented to the committee. Surely the minister must agree that this matter cannot be cleared up by August 1 when he wants the repeal of the Prairie Farm Assistance Act to take effect.

There are some questions which I think should be answered, Madam Speaker, and I will go over them slowly in order that the minister can make notes and reply to them when he speaks on second reading, or at a later stage in the debate we should certainly have more detailed information.

First, is an investigation being carried on regarding expense accounts or irregular practices of the staff of the Prairie Farm Assistance Act and, if so, who is conducting it? Is it being done by the Auditor General, internally by the department, or by the RCMP? Have charges been laid and convictions obtained? Are charges yet to be laid? Will the minister provide the number of permanent employees of the PFAA as of March 31, 1971, and March 31, 1975? How many permanent employees have been released, dismissed, resigned, or pensioned? How many have been transferred to other service in the federal Department of Agriculture, and how many in other branches of the federal public service? How many are still in PFAA service? How many have been retired under the age of 55, how many have been retired between the ages of 55 and 65, how many have been retired with under 30 years of service, and how many with under 35 years of service? How many casual employees did the PFAA have as of March 31, 1971, and as of March 31, 1975? How many of these casual employees have been released, dismissed, or transferred to other service with the federal Department of Agriculture or other federal departments since that time? How many casual employees remain with the PFAA?

I think the committee should also have a list of the employees of the PFAA during the last 24 months, and that the chairman of the committee should write each of those employees informing them that the inquiry is being conducted, that the subject matter of the legislation is before it, and inviting them to appear, to tell anything they wish to tell or know about the operation of the Prairie Farm Assistance Act. They should also be invited to air any grievance they may have at the failure to place them in other branches of the federal public service, about early retirement, or about their treatment in regard to superannuation.

Those are the questions I would like answered, and no doubt other hon. members will have more. I am confident that we will get from the Minister of Agriculture a full and frank response, and that he is interested and anxious for a complete and proper finalization of the Prairie Farm Assistance Act. I am sure he will agree that all these questions cannot be answered fully before August 1 at which time he wishes this repealing legislation to take effect.

[Mr. Benjamin.]

● (1640)

I want to raise a couple of other matters which are involved with this legislation. The great grain income stabilization debate of 1971 brought beneficial results for crop insurance. Those who were members of this House in 1971 will recall what was said in that debate by the then hon. member for Saskatoon-Biggar, Mr. Gleave, by myself, others in my party, members of the Conservative party including the hon. member for Mackenzie (Mr. Korchinski), the hon. member for Vegreville (Mr. Mazankowski) and others, by the then minister of agriculture, who suffered the fate ministers of agriculture of his kind suffer, and by the present minister who is in charge of the Canadian Wheat Board.

The grain stabilization bill of 1971 provided for the repeal of the Prairie Farm Assistance Act. We said in that debate that we would not accept legislation which repealed the Prairie Farm Assistance Act unless and until the Government of Canada could replace that act with something better. Since then the government has made substantial improvements in the way the present crop insurance plan is operated and financed, and I commend it. The result has been that in Saskatchewan the cost of premiums has been halved, and many more thousands of farmers can now buy crop insurance. I learned in the last day or two that about 60 per cent of all Saskatchewan farmers are now enrolled in the crop insurance scheme.

Ever since the 1940's thousands of farmers on the prairies have been waiting for this program. It is a long-cherished dream, that the day will come when farmers are covered by a universal, all-risk crop insurance program of the sort they are entitled to, which covers all forms of natural and man-made hazard. One of those latter hazards is the minister in charge of the Canadian Wheat Board. That was one of the successes flowing from our preventing the government from enacting the first grain stabilization bill. After that the government improved substantially the operation and financing of the crop insurance program. I believe it is fair to say that it involves all provinces of Canada. All are co-operating, paying their share, and administering it well. The number of farmers taking advantage of the program has increased markedly.

The hon. member for Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain mentioned that about \$7 million or \$8 million is left in the PFAA fund. I hope the minister, when he speaks, will tell us the exact amount. The hon. member for Qu'Appelle-Moose-Mountain felt that something other than what the government has proposed should be done with that money. We think so too, for the following reasons.

Those who were here when we debated the first grain stabilization bill, which had been introduced by the minister in charge of the Wheat Board, will recall that members on all sides, particularly members of opposition parties, repeatedly said that the bill should provide for pay-outs on a regional, even on a local basis. The pay-outs should be similar to those made under PFAA, because often farmers in various regions suffered from a loss of income, a loss which was often localized as a result of factors beyond their control. Factors like drought, frost, flood, wind, wild life and what-not were mentioned. The minister in charge of the Wheat Board, and the then minister of agriculture, Mr. Olson, and others on the government side repeatedly