

Bills of Exchange Act

Mr. James Sinclair (Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Finance): Mr. Speaker, the principal purpose of the bill is to enable the chartered banks of Canada to operate on a five-day week if they should desire to do so, that five-day week to be from Monday until Friday. There are two reasons for this action at this time. The first is that the managements of the Canadian banks have found it increasingly difficult to secure adequate and competent staffs for their offices across Canada, especially in the larger cities, because of the competition given to them by other establishments employing clerical help which are on the five-day week. More and more bank managers find that the first question asked by prospective employees, even before wages are discussed, is: Are you on the five-day week? Because of that situation the bank managements are very anxious to have the legal obstacles removed.

The second point is one which concerns the employees, and has already been raised by the hon. member for Spadina (Mr. Croll) and the hon. member for St. Paul's (Mr. Rooney) during the present session. It has also been raised by other members in correspondence. I refer to the fact that because of these legal obstacles employees of the chartered banks of Canada have not the privilege of negotiating with their employers on hours of work as have most other classes of employees in the country. The banks, as I say, up to now have regarded certain provisions not in the Bank Act but in the Bills of Exchange Act as prohibiting them from closing on Saturday morning, and the amendments in the bill, which are few in number, are designed to remove these obstacles. Perhaps I can summarize the amendments by saying that they have the effect of making Saturday a non-juridical day as far as bills of exchange, cheques and promissory notes are concerned, without actually placing Saturday on the list of legal holidays.

One other point I should mention is that although these amendments are being made at the request of the banks their effect is not confined to banking operations. Their effect of course will be felt on all bills of exchange, promissory notes and cheques. The only other thing is that since the banks asked for this legislation they of course were consulted in the drafting of it, and they have expressed themselves as being satisfied that the legislation does give them the opportunity of closing on Saturday if they should so wish.

Mr. E. D. Fulton (Kamloops): I think it can be said at once that as far as the official opposition is concerned this bill in principle is accepted. It is now a principle of our labour legislation that matters of hours of work, wages and so on should be settled by

free collective bargaining between employer and employees. As the parliamentary assistant has just said, it is not possible in the banking business, for the reasons he has given, for the employers and employees to bargain and settle this matter on the basis of free negotiation, because of the legal restrictions against working only five days, owing to the provision with respect to Saturday. Apparently this bill therefore would remove that obstacle and leave the question of whether or not the banks have a five-day week to be settled as a result of negotiation, collective bargaining, between the banks and their employees.

Since this bill is not in any sense a direction to the banks, or to the banks' employees, as to their decision in the matter, but merely permits them to arrive at a decision, I do not think we can have any objection to it. I think we must support it because it furthers that principle of collective bargaining.

I have only this to say with respect to the five-day week. It is an extremely difficult problem. There are a tremendous number of conflicting interests. In the cities and in the towns it is felt to be of overriding importance that since practically all other employees are on a five-day week it is so unfair that bank employees should not have the same privilege. That may be the overriding factor in the case of the banks in the large cities; but there are other conflicting interests, particularly in smaller cities and country towns, where Saturday has traditionally been the day on which the farmers come to town to do their shopping. In many places it is still the marketing day. In most country towns it is still the day on which the farmer and his family come to town to do their shopping for the week, and to transact their business in town which they have been waiting until Saturday to get into town to do. If the banks are to be closed on Saturday, then it is obvious there will be conflicts and difficulties. I think this is a matter where one should not express a hard and fast opinion, simply because there are so many different factors governing the decision to be made in the various centres, and by the banks also, as to whether they will close all their branches, or only some of their branches, or how they will work the thing out.

Having made these few general remarks, I want to put in a plea particularly for the country districts, and I hope that no hard and fast approach will be made. I hope there will be a willingness to bargain and concede; that in these places where it will be a matter of great inconvenience to the public if the banks are to be closed on Saturday there will be some willingness to