

Private Members' Business

People look at this and say if you are doing the same job it seems only fair that you should be paid the same, wherever you do it in Canada. We have to respond to those common sense arguments to win back the trust and confidence of those Canadians who watch every day as we make decisions.

There was a point made that perhaps in the low wage areas a higher pay scale that would reflect the national number would have the effect of making it difficult for the local communities to compete with the public service in terms of pay packages. If 100 per cent of the employees of the public service were affected then an argument might be made for that, although I would not accept it. However, given the fact that it is only 9 per cent of the public service left, it does not strike me that they should be the people who bear the brunt of that argument.

• (1200)

I encourage my colleagues to support the motion put forward by the hon. member for Dartmouth. It is important to recognize that federal government employees are competent, efficient, hard working and deserving of the same compensation regardless of where they live.

Mr. Robert D. Nault (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise in support of the motion put forward by the hon. member for Dartmouth that in the opinion of the House the government should consider abolishing regional rates of pay. It is an important issue for the hon. member and I am glad to see it being debated in the Chamber.

As hon. members may or may not be aware, regional rates of pay have been in place in the public service since the 1950s. Under this system federal public servants performing the same jobs, with the same qualifications and the same experience, are paid different wages depending on where they live. This is clearly discriminatory.

The federal government is committed to pay equity which quite simply means equal pay for work of equal value. We rightly condemn wage discrimination based on gender, race or religion. I believe discrimination based on geography is also wrong.

In the public service we have people who are working for the same employer. Yet as of September 1994 over 23,000 federal employees were being paid lower wages than others doing the same work. In some cases the discrepancy is 25 per cent. There are two people doing the same job, with the same qualifications and seniority, but one earns 25 per cent less simply because of where he or she lives.

I will give the House an example of how different that is in the public sector from what it would be in the private sector. I come from a railway background. In the railway industry there are unions. Some are conductors, some are engineers and some are

in maintenance. We negotiate a collective agreement on a year to year basis. No matter where a conductor, an engineer or a maintenance person working for CP Rail lives, they get the same pay based on a collective agreement. Quite frankly that is the way collective agreements have always been negotiated.

I do not think it takes a leap of logic or great faith to understand that we cannot go on doing this in the public sector. Over the years the number of classifications affected by regional rates of pay have been dropping steadily. We have been moving however slowly in the right direction. Now the question is when we will take the final steps to rectify a situation that should have been rectified many years ago.

Some members will be concerned about the cost of ending regional rates of pay. I agree that this is an important consideration. Treasury Board estimates the cost of removing regional rates at around \$87 million per year. This would represent a 1 per cent increase in our total outlay for public service wages. While it may be difficult to argue for such an increase while we are cutting back in everything, at some point it will not be a discretionary expenditure.

Members of the Chamber often wonder why there are regional rates of pay. The reason for them is that the argument can be made that people should be paid less based on where they live instead of being paid the same amount. Everyone seems to think we are asking for people to be paid less when we are asking for people to be paid a reasonable rate of pay at the same level as someone else living in Montreal, Toronto, Sioux Lookout or Dartmouth.

I was in the House with the hon. member for Dartmouth when east coast ships crews went on strike in 1989 over discriminatory rates of pay. I recall the hon. member seizing the issue and holding the government of the day accountable. I remember Bill C-49, the back to work legislation, that was brought forward in this case. It established a conciliation board under the Public Service Staff Relations Act.

If members look at the report issued by the board they will see that it is quite enlightening. It clearly states that regional rates of pay are discriminatory. It orders the government to eliminate regional rates of pay in that classification.

We face another such situation. Logic and precedence state that the government will be forced to act. We will be forced to do the right thing. What would it say about this institution if we waited for another conciliation board report to tell us to act when we already know we have to act.

• (1205)

The member has put the issue before the House in very succinct terms. Either we do it as a collective in the House of Commons because it is the right thing to do, or we will have an outside body do it for us because it is discriminatory.