

Western Grain Transportation Act

● (1530)

In striking out lines 20 to 25 of the trucking subsidy, we are trying to stand up for the small towns of our areas. If a trucking subsidy is provided by way of inducement or encouragement for the movement of grain by trucking companies, we can rest assured that there will be a greater degree of branch line abandonment. It would then become somewhat more economic for trucks to compete with the shipment of grain on branch lines. When the western division of the Canadian Transport Commission looks at branch line abandonment, it does not look at branch line abandonment, it does not look at the viability of small towns. In fact, I have never found any economic impact assessment in any of the CTC hearings. I have always been concerned that in any branch line abandonment induced by trucking subsidies there has never been any mention of the community-wide impact.

Small towns such as Fork River and others in my constituency at this stage have perhaps only one general store. The people of the area should not have to travel 30 miles or 40 miles to shop. The viability of many of these small towns is maintained when they have elevators in their communities. With branch line abandonment there is also the abandonment of elevators. As the Hon. Member for Yorkton-Melville (Mr. Nystrom) mentioned earlier, many pools have established elevators and, if there were a continuation of branch line abandonment, the pool elevators would be disproportionately affected. It would also affect farmers because they are the people who co-operate and work together to build and maintain these elevators. It, as a result of branch line abandonment and trucking subsidies, many more inland terminals were to be developed, the pools would have to invest inordinate amount of moneys to build new elevators when they already have existing ones which they could maintain if the branch lines were kept. In addition, there is a disproportionate impact in terms of highway costs. The Government is not prepared to pick up the cost of maintaining highways in these areas. In many areas where there is branch line abandonment, the highways are of poor quality and do not have the necessary strength to accommodate heavy trucks such as the highways in the ridings of the Hon. Member for Provencher (Mr. Epp) or the Hon. Member for Lisgar (Mr. Murta).

I would like to give an indication of why people in constituencies such as mine are concerned. For example, I received a letter from the former Minister of Transport after I wrote to him concerning highway costs. He wrote:

Dear Mr. Lewycky:

Thank you for your letter of June 1, 1981, concerning financial assistance for road upgrading which might be necessary as a consequence of rail line abandonment.

As former Minister of Transport surely he knew that it would be necessary, not might be necessary. He went on to indicate:

At the present time I am not contemplating the provision of such assistance.

His letter was dated July 22, 1981. He continued:

As you know the federal Government is faced with very limited resources for the purpose of initiating new assistance programs. In the case of road and

highway construction, this is principally a provincial and municipal responsibility... I would find it very difficult at the present time to consider initiating new programs of the type you have suggested.

Yours sincerely,

Jean-Luc Pepin.

I have it in black and white. The Government clearly indicated that it would be unable and unwilling to look after the added road costs. He should travel to constituencies such as mine and ask the municipalities, some of which are poor, whether they can afford additional road costs that would result if elevators were not functioning in their areas. If we take a look at the 1981 census results, we find constituencies such as Dauphin-Swan River have average incomes that are almost two-thirds the national average. How can we ask these farmers to face the added burden of higher costs for transporting grain? They cannot afford to purchase new trucks. They cannot afford to do what would be necessary to haul grain to a larger area. Their land values have dropped in light of possible rail line abandonment. These farmers are in dire straits and would be seriously jeopardized if there were further rail line abandonments. Some of these areas are not even full-fledged municipalities. They are local government districts. They do not even have the base to support or sustain a municipal structure.

It is on behalf of such areas that we plead when we fight this piece of legislation or certain clauses in Bill C-155. I know it might be difficult for Members with different situations. I empathize somewhat with them and understand why they cannot experientially feel for these smaller areas because in their situation it might be beneficial to take the angle they are taking. When pools such as these are disproportionately affected, when there is a potential for elevators to close down and for communities to die, I think the House will understand why I support the motion of my colleague the Hon. Member for Regina West. I thank the House for the opportunity to share our concerns on behalf of constituents—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I regret to interrupt the Hon. Member, but his allotted time has expired.

Mr. Bill McKnight (Kindersley-Lloydminster): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise to take part in the debate. The amendment put forward by the New Democratic Party is typical of what it has been trying to do in this Bill. Whenever anything is put forward, regardless of what we in the Conservative Party see as being wrong with it—and they are too numerous to go into in ten minutes—our job is to try as hard as possible to amend a bad Bill. It is to this that we have devoted the last three months, to trying to point out what is wrong with the Bill. There are still many glaring errors in the draftsmanship in the way it affects producers in western Canada. Therefore, it is impossible for anyone on this side of the House to support this Bill.

● (1540)

In coming to that conclusion, we started from a different place than the NDP. The Bill was put forward. We in the