

Private Members' Business

subsidizing grain transportation in the West. We want fair treatment.

In this case, we are not asking for subsidies. I repeat, what we want is to allow the people of Lac-Saint-Jean and Chibougamau—Chapais, who have always shown considerable dynamism in their economic development, to allow these people, who are simply asking their government to show some sensitivity, to acquire this segment of the railway, which they will manage to make profitable.

Does this mean, and are we to conclude from what was said by the Liberal member, that the only way the people of Lac-Saint-Jean and Chibougamau will be able to save this rail line and obtain ownership will be when we have a sovereign Quebec and own a railway network that has been paid for many times over? That is when the people of this region will really be able to take control of the development of their area.

We are always being accused in this House of bringing up Quebec's sovereignty, but the technocratic and unfeeling response of the member from Ottawa leaves us no alternative.

In concluding, I would like to return to this government's lack of vision on the issue of railways. To paraphrase a common expression, one could well ask: Who is minding the Department of Transport?

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Bernier (Mégantic—Compton—Stanstead): Is there anyone who is capable of making decisions? In the next few months, there will be some important changes in the railway sector in eastern Canada, and I am referring to the CN-CP merger. The government is waiting for a decision from senior officials to find out whether or not to recommend the merger.

A number of decisions must be made now, including whether or not to proceed with the CN-CP merger, and to conduct studies on the viability of the rail lines, and finally to help the people of Lac-Saint-Jean and of Chibougamau—Chapais take control of the development of their economy by letting them develop this rail line.

[English]

Mr. Jim Gouk (Kootenay West—Revelstoke): Madam Speaker, I would like to raise a few points and some issues with regard to the motion by the hon. member for Roberval.

I am going to be as frank and straightforward as I can possibly be with him. Hopefully by doing so I will be able to get closer to the heart of what he is proposing.

I would welcome the opportunity to have the various doubts I have about the member's motion cleared up. First I should spell out some of the issues as I see them. To begin with let us take a good look at the Franquet—Chapais line that the member is in

favour of privatizing. Let us examine the history of this trunk line so that we can better understand what it is that is being requested.

• (1410)

The line in question, which is 97 miles long, is located in northern Quebec. This is a rather short line but it would make no difference to Canadian National which controls the line if this route were considered a profitable one. However, it is not. Let me make myself very clear about that because CN officials have stated unequivocally to me that the Franquet—Chapais line is not profitable and has not been for quite some time.

CN Rail first applied to the National Transportation Agency for abandonment of the line in 1989. At that point, to quote the railroad, there was no traffic at all on the line in question.

The NTA ruled that the line was not economical to maintain and operate and stated that there was no near term possibility for that line to become profitable. At that time the NTA also pointed out there was a reasonable possibility the line could be economically valuable at some point down the road.

As a result of this CN Rail was told to continue operating the line for a period of three more years to determine beyond a doubt whether the line had any economic potential. As it turned out, it did not.

The Franquet—Chapais line has been a drain on CN's resources ever since and traffic on that line has continued to be next to non-existent.

In 1992 the NTA reviewed the case again and ruled that all but six miles of the entire 97-mile route were uneconomical with "no possibility that it could become feasible to operate".

Since that time the line has existed in a sort of railway hinterland. It has not been abandoned outright but this is due to occur on May 31, 1994, unless a private buyer can be found for the line.

What should we make of this? I presume the hon. member for Roberval raised this motion in order to head off the unhappy destiny this trunk line is about to meet. I think that is both an honourable and just thing for him to do. After all CN has stated quite flatly it has no use for that line and no desire to keep it in service any longer.

The member has nothing to lose by putting forward his privatization motion and everything to gain.

I would like to point out a few minor things, however, which may run against what the member is trying to accomplish with his motion. Number one, allow me to say to this House that although the Franquet—Chapais line has been on the CN auction block for a good number of years not a single private or public