

*Dollar Items*

those same major issues. It is surely some kind of verbal chicanery when they blame the opposition, particularly the Official Opposition, for not bringing forward matters of major importance on their opposition days, when the government has the opportunity to present legislation every day to deal with unemployment, housing, pensions, and a host of other matters.

The Minister of Transport should have had the courage to bring forward legislation to deal with major items of policy change and direction. They are all major. However, he did not have that kind of courage. At least he did not have that kind of muscle in his own Cabinet and caucus. I call the activities and conduct of the Minister of Transport at best rude or insensitive to parliament and, at worst, sheer cowardice.

The minister at least could have made a statement on motions in this House as to what he wanted to do about the St. Lawrence Seaway, but no. He could have made a statement on motions about Via Rail, the rail passenger corporation, but no. In fact he had the discourtesy, to put it mildly, to make that announcement in Vancouver.

On the day of the announcement with regard to the St. Lawrence Seaway, the minister made that announcement across the street from this chamber at a press conference. Instead of making that announcement in this chamber, he went across the street to a press conference to make what in effect was a major announcement.

Those two announcements appear as \$1 items in the supplementary estimates which Your Honour has ruled are not out of order legally. That is correct. There is legislation in the statutes which allows the minister to make significant changes in policy and direction vis-à-vis a rail passenger corporation or the St. Lawrence Seaway.

● (2030)

A week ago or so the minister made a statement to the effect that he made so many announcements he could not always be getting up to make statements on motions. He would have to do it every day on ongoing and continuing items. I should like to know, since when is a railway passenger corporation, a Crown corporation, a branch of another Crown corporation, an ongoing item? I know it has been ongoing in terms of Liberal promises for several years, but since when is that an ongoing item? Since when is it an insignificant, minor matter? The minister was not making an announcement about outhouses behind the railway station in some little town. This has to do with a railway passenger corporation.

Since when is the transfer of \$842 million of capital debt and interest debt on the St. Lawrence Seaway a minor ongoing item? I happen to agree, and so does my party, that that kind of debt should be a public debt and a public charge because it is a public work. We agree that that kind of debt should be transferred from the St. Lawrence Seaway books to the books of the Government and of the people of Canada. But you can hardly call that a minor ongoing item. Surely the minister will not make those kinds of transfers once a week, 52 weeks a year.

**An hon. Member:** Don't be surprised if he does.

**Mr. Benjamin:** It is only important enough in his terms to get a press conference across the street and to put it as a \$1 item in supplementary estimates. He lacked the courage either to present legislation or at least make a statement on motions so that members of the other parties in the House could respond to that statement. I call that cowardice.

When the minister says that he will revitalize the rail passenger system in Canada, his version of revitalizing it is not only to set up a Crown corporation or a subsidiary of a Crown corporation or a rail passenger corporation which, by the way, I agree with as being second best—the entire railway system should be a Crown corporation, but this is second best, and I happen to agree that it should be a Crown owned passenger corporation—but the minister treats it as an insignificant item not worthy of presentation to parliament. It is only good for shooting off his mouth in Vancouver and for appearing as a \$1 item in the supplementary estimates. Surely that is some kind of perversion of parliament.

Surely when the Minister of Transport complains, and the previous three Liberal speakers complain about the opposition delaying bills, they should not wonder about the intransigence of the opposition on a number of items before the House. They brought it on themselves. The government has the entire say as to what occurs in this House on each given day. If the Minister of Transport cannot persuade his colleagues to accept legislation—and I suspect he cannot get the agreement of his own caucus on some of the things he is trying to do—these back door methods he is using are as much due to difficulties within his caucus and the Liberal party in different parts of Canada as to any excuses he might have about trying to evade presenting his policies and his ideas to the House.

I think the minister and most government members do not realize how important parliament is. They complain that the Tories are dealing with minor legal items. The government and particularly the Minister of Transport, have ignored the important issues which they blame the Official Opposition for not bringing forward. It is they who have ignored them. They cannot get off the hook that easily. When the Minister of Transport wants to bring in a \$1 item on supplementary estimates to establish a Crown corporation which will involve hundreds of millions of dollars, that does not tell parliament, let alone the people of Canada, how it will be constituted, who will direct it, how much money will have to be borrowed, whether or not CPR will be able to hold us up for a king's ransom for the use of equipment, and whether or not the railways will update the rail bed so that passenger trains can operate at high speeds. None of that can be debated in parliament. That is a \$1 item on supplementary estimates, it is a minor detail, a sort of regular ongoing item, according to the Minister of Transport.

This was a major item in the 1974 election campaign. It was major enough to warrant an announcement by the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) on the hustings. Now it is only worth \$1. I suspect—I hope I am wrong and that subsequent events will prove me wrong—that that rail passenger corporation