

I agree with the remark the hon. member made about Mr. Howard Riddell. For the first time in the history of the PFAA it was headed up by someone with integrity and honesty, and who would not put up with the kind of hanky-panky the Gardiner machine organized and maintained. That is all history, but I think it is only proper for hon. members to bring these matters to the attention of the House in order to try to persuade the government that it would be somewhat unseemly, to say the least, to repeal the legislation before all the administrative details are cleaned up satisfactorily.

I would like to submit to the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) that this mess he has inherited will not be cleaned up by August 1 when he wants the repeal of the Prairie Farm Assistance Act to take effect. To support the remarks made by the hon. member for Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain, I submit that in the areas of expenditures, particularly travel expenditures, I have received reports similar to those received by other hon. members from different parts of the prairie provinces, and there can be no doubt that a full and thorough investigation is needed. I have no doubt that it will result in some criminal charges.

There is one other area the minister became responsible for when he became minister. He became responsible for the treatment afforded permanent employees under the Prairie Farm Assistance Act. My information is that of the approximately 18 permanent employees in the PFAA office in Regina most, if not all, have now been let go, but casual employees have been retained.

Some, if not all of the employees who are presently running the PFAA office in Regina, were out in the field on expense accounts. Most of the work which has been going on in PFAA offices over the past year and a half or so had to do with the Grasslands Incentive Act. There have been very few PFAA matters to clean up, except for the odd farmer's estate or something of that nature. These people have been operating on expense accounts from Regina up to the Peace River country and into Manitoba. It seems that it has been a very cosy operation, and perhaps even lucrative for those travelling on mileage expenses and per diem allowances for meals and rooms, considering the distances involved. This should also be part of the full inquiry and investigation.

Why have permanent staff, some who have worked in excess of 30 years, not been placed in other areas of the federal public service? Mr. Riddell is now working for the department of municipal affairs of the province of Saskatchewan. I would have thought that a person of that calibre would have been eagerly sought by the Minister of Agriculture to work in some part of his department, or at least in some part of the federal government. There is a list of male and female permanent employees who have not been placed.

On December 17 I wrote to the minister, and I quote from that letter:

It has been brought to my attention that you are closing the PFAA offices in Regina and that no action has been taken to ensure that long-term employees are found suitable alternative employment.

A number of these people have served the Department of Agriculture in the Prairie Farm Assistance Branch up to 32 years. If they retire and go on pension they will only receive 64 per cent of the average of the highest six consecutive years salary.

#### *Prairie Farm Assistance Act*

In my letter to the minister I also wrote the following:

... because these people are not 55 years of age they are penalized further under the Superannuation Act by going on pension prior to the age of 55 years.

I believe something should be done for the 18 permanent staff members in the Regina office and the 12 field supervisors. The 18 staff members I understand are to be let out at March 31, 1975. I would appreciate any assistance you can give to protect these people.

● (1630)

I wrote to the Minister on December 17. He replied on January 31, 1975, and said:

With the phasing out of the PFAA offices in Regina, the department is making every effort to find alternate employment for the employees affected.

We have contacted other departments in the federal government, employment agencies of provincial governments and municipal governments. In addition, every effort is made to ensure that these employees are aware of vacancies in the department so that they can indicate interest in any position for which they may qualify.

Yours sincerely,  
Eugene Whelan,  
Minister of Agriculture.

My information is that of those 18 permanent office employees of the PFAA in Regina only one is presently an employee in the federal public service, and that is because prior to going to the PFAA he had already served with the crop insurance branch and so had public service status. None of the other permanent employees were placed in the federal public service, however. In fact the minister has not done what he said he would do in his letter of January 31, that is, make every effort to find alternative employment for the people effected.

It would seem to me, Madam Speaker, that it is incumbent upon the minister to do something for an employee who has 32 years of service and has not yet reached the age of 55. Surely such a person should automatically get a position in the minister's department. There was one woman in the Regina office who was competent to run it and supervise the staff, but it is my understanding that she is no longer in the federal public service and, as a result, has been penalized in respect of her pension plan. This sort of callous treatment of people who have spent years and years in loyal, dedicated, permanent employment is not good enough.

**An hon. Member:** There just were not good Liberals.

**Mr. Benjamin:** I think many of them were, but some have said they are not any more.

It appears that it is the casual staff of PFAA that has been retained. Surely casuals should be let go before permanent staff. I would have bet money that this sort of thing could not have occurred under the present Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) although I would not have bet money on any of his predecessors, with the possible exception of the hon. member for Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain (Mr. Hamilton). I am anxious to hear from the minister how this action can be justified and, if I am wrong, of course he will correct me.

I agree with the hon. member for Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain that the subject matter of this bill should be