

Atlantic Marine Inc.

underhanded way and this is what I denounce even though I support Bill C-88.

● (1430)

[English]

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina West): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to support my colleague who is, with me, a spokesman for my Party on transportation. His responsibility is marine and the St. Lawrence Seaway. I carefully read his speech at second reading. It was magnificent.

Mr. Forrestall: Thank you very much.

Some Hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Benjamin: I am talking about the Hon. Member for Thunder Bay—Atikokan (Mr. Angus), not a Member from Halifax.

Some Hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Benjamin: It is tough to know where to begin. This is a Bill to which we have no objection in principle because it maintains a publicly owned public utility to provide ferry services in Atlantic Canada. We support that principle and always have.

There are, however, a number of things that bother us about Governments, both Liberal and Tory, that do things they do not really believe in. If they thought for one moment they could have their private enterprise friends buying this out or owning and operating it and making a buck, they would drop it tomorrow. Of course, the principle of what is an essential public service, in fact, a public utility whether roads and highways, sewer and water systems, ferry services, telephone lines, power lines and what-not which are natural monopolies, have to be publicly owned, publicly controlled and answerable to the public. Any other method has always failed. I am reminded of the time when Americans decided to privatize the telephone industry in the United States—we were dealing with the Bill concerning Bell and telephones earlier today—but I was in California and was trying to make a phone call from the airport in Los Angeles to Calgary. There were the usual circular telephone booths but I could not get anybody. I tried all five phones because there were five different phone companies. I could not get anyone to accept my international telephone credit card. So much for competition and so much for the essential public utility. I finally had to phone home to my daughter collect, which reminds me I have not yet paid her for that phone call.

The principle of a transportation facility being available to users no matter where they live in Canada has to be maintained. We must not continue as we have too often in the past and as we are proceeding to do more so now, namely to discriminate against people because of where they happen to live, where they happen to manufacture and produce their goods.

My Party has maintained for many years that ferry services should be treated exactly the same as our highway services, that they be toll free. Can you imagine the furore if you were to put up a road block on Highway 401 between Toronto and Montreal and for 18 or 20 miles which would be the equivalent between Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick stopped every vehicle and made them pay a toll?

Mr. Turner (Ottawa—Carleton): Nine miles.

Mr. Benjamin: Nine miles, fine. Put up road blocks nine miles apart and charge tolls to go the next nine miles. Can you imagine, Mr. Speaker, what the furore would be? What about the same thing on the Trans-Canada Highway between Regina and Moose Jaw or anywhere else you want to pick? Ferry services on the West Coast, the East Coast or wherever we operate them are an essential public service, are part of our national transportation system and are part of our national highway system and part of our Trans-Canada Highway. To charge extra because you have to travel from New Brunswick to Prince Edward Island or from Nova Scotia to Newfoundland means that you would charge extra to travel from Alberta to Saskatchewan and Saskatchewan to Manitoba. There is no logic, no fairness, and no sense in charging people an extra cost, people who live on islands off our Atlantic Coast, off our West Coast or who live in coastal ports that have no other service. They, like all the rest of us, pay though their income taxes, their gasoline taxes, their licence fees, their sales taxes, federal, provincial and municipal, for the cost of maintaining and operating transportation networks, be they roads, streets, sidewalks, railways, or highways. We believe that a ferry service is no different. We think it is logical for the nation as a whole to share the cost of the provision of those services. If we were to implement cost recovery or user-pay principles with the ferry service in Atlantic Canada, it would only be fair to do the same with many other things in Canada.

● (1440)

The Government has been talking about charging fees for ice-breaking, meteorological services, navigational aids, Coast Guard services and search and rescue. I suppose if there is a guy drowning in the middle of the ocean, before you pick him up out of the water you have to ask him if he can pay the fee, and if he cannot, you leave him there.

The point is that the minute you start imposing user fees, you discriminate against some people. The people who have to use the ferry service in the Atlantic provinces are being taxed at least twice and perhaps more. They pay provincial and federal taxes like everyone else in Canada and then have to pay a second time. If that is not double taxation, I have never seen it. That is not fair or proper. It is a principle of co-operative federalism that the nation as a whole shares in the cost of transportation in order that we are all treated the same and no one is discriminated against because of where they happen to live or produce their goods.