

*Branch Railway Lines*

Now, Mr. Chairman, turning to this matter of what is called the rationalization of branch lines or railway line abandonment as it used to be called, I should like to say, without going into too much detail, that I do not believe there has been any single commission report that created so much stir in western Canada as the MacPherson report, which contained some recommendations respecting railway line abandonment. In fact, the governments of the three prairie provinces have held a number of meetings during the past year and a half trying to work out some concerted presentation to make to the federal government respecting this matter. In addition to that, there were a number of meetings held in Regina at which there were representatives from almost every provincial and national organization in the provinces of Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba.

I do not want to spend the time of the committee tonight dealing with many of the submissions that were made. However, there certainly seem to be unanimity in at least one area and that was that before there is any progress from this point on in allowing the board of transport commissioners to authorize the abandonment of any more railway lines, there should be a minimum grid system set up. In other words, there should be an orderly process for the abandonment of these particular branch lines that do not serve a useful purpose. In so far as we are concerned, we take the position that there should not be blanket opposition to all abandonments but rather that each case should be considered on its merits. Even these individual cases, however, should not be presented to the railway commissioners, parliament should not even allow such presentations, until we know what the plan is for the over-all rearrangement of railways, particularly in western Canada. We think, too, that those lines which are resulting in substantial deficits being loaded into the freight rate structure should not be abandoned unless local transportation requirements can be provided satisfactorily by some other form of carrier.

We believe that the first essential is that the railways should prepare a projected program for proposed abandonments which should be extended over a period of time to afford the communities affected an opportunity of knowing in advance what is proposed, in order that they can satisfy themselves as to whether or not the abandonments are justified, and if so adjust their local transportation programs to other forms of transport such as highway transport. I did not hear the Minister of Transport say this afternoon

[Mr. Olson.]

whether or not the government has accepted that principle. He has talked about a 15 year period. He has talked about a fund that may be required for this length of time. But I did not hear him say that the government was prepared to insist that the railways come forward with a projected program of proposed railway abandonments. Along with that projection, the government and the railways should indicate what they consider to be a minimum grid system, particularly over the three western provinces. If he did say that and I missed it, I am sorry. It seems to me, after all the representations that have been made to the federal government, they ought to have accepted this principle as a first requirement before going into railway abandonment of any kind, and even before accepting responsibility for setting up a fund to provide for some of the adjustments that will obviously be necessary.

When I say that in so far as we are concerned we do not take blanket opposition to all abandonments, I should like the minister to know that we do not believe that any community should be abandoned to the point of isolation. This is so obvious it hardly needs to be said. There may be places, in fact I know of places, where highway transportation is far more economical. It is far more convenient. The proof of this statement is that highway transport is being used to such a degree there is little or no use being made of the railways, in spite of the fact they are there and there is a schedule of trains provided. I know, for example, in my own constituency of a branch line that serves two or three small towns. A few years ago the railway services into these towns were very important, particularly in the wintertime. Until a few years ago, there was no other way of getting the grain out of these towns, and they are grain growing communities. During the past two or three years all the mail and all the l.c.l. or local freight, all the passengers moving in and out of these communities, as well as all the grain, has been moved by highway transport to the mills in Medicine Hat.

It seems to me obvious, Mr. Chairman, that in such a case where the railway is not being used at all for any of these railway services that were so essential a few years ago, it would be stupid on our part to insist that they be maintained, that the right of way be maintained and that they maintain regular train service into and out of these places. However, when the minister accepts the concept that the government is prepared to pay