

Railway Act

After the hearings in that area which allowed the railways to withdraw passenger service from the area north and west of Guelph, I was particularly disturbed that the highway service to be provided, which was supposed to be commensurate with the railway service, did not prove to be adequate to meet the needs of the many communities in the area. Therefore I welcome this opportunity to speak on the matter of railways and accidents.

As I have said, I remember many tragic accidents on the railroad. As I did during the hearing before the committee, I object to the secrecy in respect of rail line abandonment hearings which allows the railways not to disclose full and complete information. The essence of the legislation before us is to correct this situation and I congratulate the hon. member for bringing it forward. We know that he has had many long years' experience in railroading at the grass-roots level, and he should be an expert in the field.

● (4:20 p.m.)

Many of us have felt that the facts of many accidents have not been divulged, and if they had been made known it is possible that further accidents could have been prevented. In his initial remarks the hon. member said that railroads have downgraded the servicing of tracks to such an extent that the possibility of accidents has increased. Even though there have been tremendous technological changes and improvements with respect to railway operation and maintenance, the human element still comes into it. People must still check lines. They must watch and look after railway lines. This is necessary if we are to prevent more serious accidents.

I think most of us are aware of new processes and programs which have been introduced by the railroads. We all know that large amounts of money have been spent. Here I am thinking of developments like the turbo train which was to operate between Toronto and Montreal and which has been so accident prone. I sometimes feel that if reports about accidents were not considered to be privileged material, members of the general public could add something to the investigations that are supposed to take place.

May I say here that when some of us appeared at inquiries held with regard to the abandonment of passenger services we were not given the opportunity to examine all the facts. We felt that relevant facts were withheld. I feel, as does the hon. member who introduced this bill, that there should be full and open disclosure by railroads and organizations such as the Canadian Transport Commission with respect to railway accidents, in order to make sure that the public knows the reasons for these accidents.

Sometimes accidents are blamed on the railway operators themselves, sometimes on track management personnel, and sometimes on those in higher-up management. It is time we were able to pinpoint the causes of accidents and lay the blame where it belongs, so that action may be taken in future to prevent the recurrence of accidents. The facts are not made public and are sometimes covered up in court proceedings. The public, therefore, is not made aware of what is going on.

[Mr. Howe.]

I agree with what the hon. member has said. The public interest would be much better served if there were full, public disclosure of all accidents. Since Canadian National operates at a considerable deficit that must be made good out of the public treasury—without this help the railway could not operate—I feel the company ought to be required to make full, public disclosure of facts surrounding accidents, to make sure that the public interest is being properly served.

Rail safety, Mr. Speaker, affects the lives of many Canadians. I feel that this type of disclosure would ensure that certain accidents would occur only once. I think that with public discussion the causes of such accidents would be eliminated much more quickly than might otherwise be possible. Some of the facts relating to accidents are kept secret. We hear that public disclosure is not possible in some instances because other, private railway lines are operating in the same area and it would not do to let competitors know the facts. That argument, I think, has been overworked. People in business know most of the time what their competitors are doing or they would not stay long in business.

I think the bogey that so many hide behind, that it is not in the public interest to make full disclosure of facts because they might assist competitors, is just that—a bogey. After all, we know that Canadian Pacific Railway does not breathe deeply without the CNR's knowledge. We ought to ignore this bogey that says there ought not to be full public disclosure because a competitor might take advantage of it. That, in my view, is a wrong attitude. I think that the facts surrounding accidents should be made public. All relevant information should be made available to those who are interested, in order that the public cause may be served.

Mr. Ray Perrault (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Labour): Mr. Speaker, in recent months the question of safety on our railroads has assumed more serious proportions, especially in western Canada where a number of lives have been lost and where a great deal of tragedy has ensued. There have been accidents which have resulted in death. Not long ago I received a letter from a Mrs. Penner. It is not marked "Personal" and I can therefore read it to the House. It reads in part:

Nothing short of rock sheds and better patrols, or re-routing of the track in the area of mile 118.9 on the Ashcroft sub. will prevent another accident such as took the life of my husband and Mr. Dougan and Mr. Barry.

I trust this will not end up a dead issue with no improvements made. It could be a passenger train as easily as wheat cars at the river bed. Lets not have such a tragedy.

The letter was signed by Mrs. Penner and her two youngsters. We must be concerned not only about letters of this kind from a lady who has lost a husband and father to her children, but about the possibility of other, similar letters of this kind coming to us in future; and they may come to us if we do not take a stand as members of the House of Commons and make sure that Canadian railroads are as safe as it is possible to make them.

The idea advanced by the hon. member who proposed the bill and who has had considerable experience as a