

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, October 13, 1983

The House met at 11 a.m.

● (1105)

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

WESTERN GRAIN TRANSPORTATION ACT

MEASURE TO ESTABLISH

The House resumed from Tuesday, October 11, 1983 consideration of Bill C-155, an Act to facilitate the transportation, shipping and handling of western grain and to amend certain Acts in consequence thereof, as reported (with amendments) from the Standing Committee on Transport; and Motion No. 34 (Mr. Benjamin).

Miss Pauline Jewett (New Westminster-Coquitlam): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to Motion No. 34 today, a motion which, as Hon. Members know, provides for the elimination of Subclause (4) of Clause 17. This subclause in its present form provides that the Administrator:

—may enter into agreements to provide for the movement of grain by motor vehicle transport where, in his opinion, such agreements would be in the best interests of the grain producers.

I am pleased to speak to the amendment put forward by this Party, because unless the amendment is passed by this House, the economic, social and cultural effects will be devastating. I am speaking not only about farmers facing the spectre of widespread branch line abandonment, the Wheat Pools facing elevator abandonment and the heavy capital costs associated with the development of inland terminals, but also the effects we can expect on the social fabric of this country as a whole through the undermining of rural communities and the co-operative system.

● (1110)

Thus, I would submit that Clause 17(4) is not “in the best interests of the grain producers”. It is really the opening of a back door branch line abandonment policy, despite the Government’s avowed commitment to the upgrading of branch lines. The move toward trucking an increased percentage of grain now served by rail through, in many cases, branch lines threatens the viability of small communities, many of which will be crippled by the closure of these lines. This is a phenomenon we have witnessed all too often in the past, as many of my colleagues have attested. As well, the resulting longer hauls and the increased expenditures for producers,

while leading to a reduction of costs to the railways, will result in a higher total system cost to the producers.

The proposal of the Government touches upon the whole system of gathering, marketing and transporting Canadian grain. First, the decision with respect to the use of trucks and the concomitant rail line abandonment is centralized in the hands of the Administrator. One must question to what degree the Administrator’s decisions will be based on very narrowly defined economic criteria and the “fudged” facts put forth too often by the railroads, and not on full economic and social impact studies.

My colleagues have also identified the effect which the closing of branch lines will have on small businesses and rural communities. No less important than the economic impact is the social impact on the network of small and vibrant farming communities which are often held together by rail service and wheat co-operatives. These are a legacy of our past and an important part of our future Canadian mosaic, one we cannot destroy to help the railroads simply gain more money and provide less service.

As well, I wonder if the Administrator, in taking the decision to move to trucks, will consider the very important negative impact such a move will have on the consequent financial burden to municipalities and provincial governments. Of course, the burden of keeping our railways in good condition is a federal one. The burden of maintaining road services is a provincial or municipal one. Under the system proposed by the Government, in which the heavy, bulky agricultural products of concern to us here are moved by large trucks, the maintenance costs will be tremendous. Is the Government, then, proposing to keep up the roads which will be overused as a result of its policies? Of course not. The burden of paying for the trucking of grain products will be shifted to the taxpayers of the Provinces involved, increasing the tax burden on the producers. I would submit that this is not “in the best interests of the grain producers”.

There is nothing contained in the Bill to redress this problem. Cost transfers, which are provided by this clause, do nothing to reduce the total system costs. This represents simply another form of cost transfers, not cost savings.

It is primarily for these reasons, and for many of the reasons which my colleagues have given throughout the course of debate on our motion, that I would urge all Members of the House to pass Motion No. 34.

Mr. Bob Ogle (Saskatoon East): Mr. Speaker, I am glad to be able to join with my colleagues this morning in supporting Motion No. 34, put forward by my colleague, the Hon. Member for Regina West (Mr. Benjamin), because I believe