

Railway Lands

the Minister of Transport. Municipal associations have now been formally invited to participate in this consultative process, and the prairie governments have also been invited to lend their support to the plan. As I said, the reaction from farm and municipal organizations to the plan of attack outlined by the Minister of Transport as to how best to deal with the roadbeds which may eventually be abandoned across the prairies has been extremely positive. They see it as a method of legitimately recognizing their interests and concerns with respect to the future ownership of those roadbed rights of way.

The bill proposed by the hon. member for Okanagan-Boundary has merit in principle as far as it goes, and the government of Canada can stand generally in agreement with the intent of the bill, namely that the ownership of abandoned railway rights of way revert, at least initially or temporarily, to the federal Crown, not in terms of final ownership but, as I said earlier, only in terms of facilitating the transfer to the appropriate final owner. However, while this bill has appeared on the order paper, events across the prairies have indeed superseded the proposed item we have before us because the government has acted expeditiously and in a more effective and complete fashion than that envisaged in the general legislative approach we now have before us. The reversion of roadbeds to the federal Crown must not be an end in itself but merely a means to an end. Its objective must be to smooth the transfer of title to the logical ultimate owners in as equitable a manner as possible, and as I have said before, in most cases the most logical ultimate owners should be adjacent municipalities or adjacent farmland owners.

Mr. Jake Epp (Provencher): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour this afternoon to rise in support of Bill C-222 and the work the hon. member for Okanagan Boundary (Mr. Whittaker) has done in this vital issue. As a member representing the prairie region, I want to commend the hon. member for Okanagan Boundary for the clear vision he has not only of the problems of the region he represents but also of the prairies. What he has presented to the House is much in keeping with what we see as needed in the prairie region.

I find it interesting that the hon. member for Assiniboia (Mr. Goodale) spent his time primarily on the Hall report. He finally got to the recommendations Mr. Justice Hall made with regard to rail line abandonment. I felt he took the position of the federal government, which I suppose is fine, but he spent actually very little time on rail line abandonment. He finally did get to it. I want to touch on the matter of jurisdiction a little later on.

The hon. member for Assiniboia spoke about the alacrity with which the government has moved forward on the Hall commission recommendations. It is true that the government moved ahead on rail line abandonment, at least at the discussion stage, but we must keep in mind the fact that Mr. Justice Hall made some 96 recommendations and that the government has accepted only four or five of them. With regard to action on the others which farm groups and related organizations on the prairies have been asking for, the federal government has

[Mr. Goodale.]

been doing more studies. The federal government is creating organizations within the provinces, which is fine, but they are not moving with anything near the speed the hon. member for Assiniboia tried to impress upon us.

Just yesterday, February 27, about 15 members of the Conservative caucus who are primarily from the prairie region had a meeting with Mr. Justice Hall. The meeting was co-chaired by the hon. member for Saskatoon-Biggar (Mr. Hnatyshyn) and the hon. member for Vegreville (Mr. Mazankowski). That was the first time members of parliament have gone directly to the gentleman to discuss his report on behalf of their constituents. Liberals still have not done that, but I suppose they would have to find someone from the prairie region to go to such a meeting. I know they have a problem in that regard.

Mr. Dupras: We will fix that after the next election.

Mr. Brisco: There won't be any Liberals from the prairie provinces after the next election.

Mr. Epp: After what I heard from the lone Liberal MLA from Manitoba at the recent Liberal convention, I do not think we have to worry any further about Liberals from the prairies. In fact, Mr. Speaker, I think we will have to put them on the list of endangered species.

● (1742)

Two years ago the hon. member for Okanagan-Boundary set this bill down on the order paper, well before the Hall commission report was tabled. When the hon. member for Assiniboia says that events have preceded this bill, we should remember that the government could have accepted it two years ago and could have had at that time the very recommendations that Mr. Justice Hall made later.

I want to go into some of the practical realities now to show how this question is vital to rural municipalities and how the federal government is again not fulfilling its obligations but is in fact encroaching further on provincial rights. When a rail line is abandoned, the land still belongs to the railroads. The secretary of the railway transport committee of the Canadian Transport Commission wrote to me saying that the Canadian Transport Commission does not consider it has jurisdiction to order a railway company to take any specific steps when disposing of abandoned right-of-way property. That letter was received in my office on February 21.

In the five and a half years that I have been in this House, Mr. Speaker, I have appeared at hearings of the Canadian Transport Commission in my riding on two occasions in reference to a specific rail line which the CNR had applied to abandon. On the first application they wanted to abandon the line from Emerson to South Junction. They modified that application to abandon the line only from South Junction to Ridgeville. That left approximately nine miles on the line. Despite the objections of rural municipalities, local government district officials and the recommendation that, if the CTC gave approval of abandonment, the land should revert to