

*Peace River Railway Outlet*

involving the expenditure of many millions of dollars upon a new railway, much as I should like to oblige one who has been a persistent advocate of what is from his standpoint at least a very worthy object. I appreciate, as I am sure the house does, his courage and persistence, but I am afraid that the best I can say in reply to his remarks to-day is that the matter will have to be given consideration when conditions improve; for the present, as I said last year, the question will have to stand in abeyance.

Mr. J. A. FRASER (Cariboo): I am sorry that the Minister of Railways (Mr. Manion) has been unable to give a more satisfactory answer to the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Kennedy). I quite understand the situation so far as the railways and the finances of the country are concerned, but I think a few words can be usefully added to what my hon. friend from Peace River has said with regard to the situation in the Peace River country.

I am speaking particularly of the British Columbia portion of the Peace River country, because after all it is a substantial part of the Peace River country containing the largest area of contiguous farm lands that there is in British Columbia, and the construction of a western outlet is very important to their development and the prosperity of our province.

I went through that area last fall, travelling a thousand miles in a motor car over roads where three years before there were no roads at all. The British Columbia government is entitled to a great deal of credit for the construction of the roads which they have built in that area, and of course that is their responsibility. I found scattered over the area through which these roads had been built a population in the British Columbia portion of the Peace River area of some 10,000 people, where in the year 1915 there were only about 1,000. They are settled on both sides of the river, and the difficulty in crossing it is certainly a very great one. North of the Peace river itself there are about 4,000 people, located sixty-five miles from the present end of steel, and they have to transport their wheat by trucks over that sixty-five miles to reach the end of steel at Dawson Creek. At the time I was there, for No. 1 Northern wheat they were receiving only 24½ cents a bushel. Since then the price has declined, so it can be easily imagined what the farmer on the north side of the Peace river, who has to haul his grain at least sixty-five miles, was receiving in return for his labour in planting and harvesting his crop.

[Mr. Manion.]

I found in that area on the north side of the Peace river a class of people such as have been described by the hon. member for Peace River, farmers who had been dried out or hauled out in the prairie provinces and had moved in there. A great many of them had taken in what effects they had left, and you will find settlers there now with a couple of cows, some chickens and hogs, and implements of one kind and another to carry on their operations. They are men who have been accustomed to all kinds of railway construction work, and as the hon. member has mentioned they are anxious to get work instead of relief. They have not been in the country long enough to bring their farms into production, and practically all of them are at present on relief, and there is no better prospect than that they will remain on relief unless work of some kind is provided for them.

As I said, these men are accustomed to construction work of all kinds. I spoke to numbers of them who had done all kinds of railway construction work. They are capable of doing it, and are anxious to engage in that work. I think that there is in that country a sufficient number of men, or nearly sufficient, without bringing in any help from outside, to construct the western outlet. When you have that situation, with the men there able and anxious to do this work, and when you find the government under the necessity of providing them with relief for which the country gets nothing in return, it does seem peculiar that this railway construction work should not be provided during these times. I am speaking not only of this government but of all governments when I say that.

The engineers, as the Minister of Railways has stated, said that the question of the construction of a western outlet would be further reviewed when it was a practical one. Well, Mr. Speaker, I do not know when it ever will be a practical question if it is not one at the present time. You have a population there who are capable of doing this work, people who are anxious to work and who at the present time are receiving relief. Then as to the cost of construction, I do not know a time in the history of this country when materials of all kinds were at lower prices than they are now. These people, I repeat, have to be provided with relief in order to keep them from starving to death, and in these circumstances it does seem to me that some government should be able to take some step towards starting the construction of a western outlet from the Peace River country.