

Employment Commission

Mr. STEVENS: Mr. Chairman, I am not particularly concerned with the brand of blank cheque that may be involved. The so-called blank cheque of previous years was without limitation, according to those who criticized it, but as a matter of fact I think a survey of the last five years will show that there was perhaps more restriction upon expenditures than would have been the case had there been specific sums named for certain specific purposes. In some instances this was, I was going to say to the detriment of the country, but perhaps I should say this was the cause of the postponement in some degree of certain measures that might have helped still further towards the solution of unemployment. That is precisely what I fear in connection with this measure, as I shall point out in a minute.

Before doing that, let me first indicate to the Prime Minister and the government that there is comparatively little difference between a blanket cheque for \$50,000,000 and a blank cheque for some unnamed amount. While there may be room for some criticism of the blank cheque in its entirety, there still remains the fact that there are in this particular bill some of the elements that existed in the other.

Mr. MACKENZIE KING: Where does my hon. friend get any authority for his reference to a cheque for \$50,000,000?

Mr. STEVENS: I think my right hon. friend said that approximately \$50,000,000 was going to be provided.

Mr. MACKENZIE KING: That is not what I said at all. I said that the total appropriation, which parliament would be asked to vote in specific amounts for various definitely specified projects, would amount to \$50,000,000. I may say to my hon. friend that the total will be considerably beyond that. That is a very different thing to asking parliament for \$50,000,000 to be spent as the government pleases on any project or projects.

Mr. STEVENS: We have no measures before us.

Mr. MACKENZIE KING: I have already told the house that particulars are to be given in a special supply bill to be brought down after this legislation is passed.

Mr. STEVENS: I am glad to have that explanation. I should like to point out a distinction between this bill and the old relief act. I am not particularly defending the old relief act, nor am I condemning it—that is a matter of history. The old relief act was limited to one year, it expired on March 31, and I recall very well the difficulties that we encountered each year in securing a renewal

[Mr. Mackenzie King.]

or extension of the act. It had to be done each year by a special act of parliament. To all intents and purposes this measure will be permanent until repealed. I am not charging the government with intent to do so, but I should like to point out how it would be possible to abuse the powers given by section 10.

Everyone who has been in parliament for any length of time knows that each year dozens of items for \$10,000, \$30,000, \$50,000 or \$100,000 appear in the estimates for specific works. The following year the government may come back and ask for another \$50,000. When asked the reason they say that a contract has been entered into for \$500,000, or for three, four or five times the amount originally voted. The contract having been signed, parliament is bound to revoke the additional money, and it is done in hundreds of cases. There is nothing in the world to prevent the government, on the advice of this commission, from entering into proposals for the carrying out of public works and other projects to the extent of hundreds of millions of dollars. It is true that they would have to come to parliament for revotes, but there would be no trouble in obtaining these revotes unless there was a complete break-up in the personnel of parliament or the allegiance of those already represented here. What parliament would deny the government a revote? There is not the remotest possibility or likelihood that it would be refused. I want to point out to the right hon. gentleman that it is inherent in this bill that all the abuses present in the previous legislation should be present in this.

I am willing to trust the government, and I do not think there is anyone who is not willing to do so. We are in committee and I may be out of order, but the Prime Minister and other hon. gentlemen have wandered from section 5, so that perhaps I may be allowed to do likewise. I should like to refer to section 6 in order to illustrate a point which has arisen in the discussion. Certain general powers are given to the commission under this section. Subsection (c) provides for the mobilizing of agencies for relief, both state and voluntary. It reads:

(c) recommend to the minister effective means of mobilizing the agencies for relief both state and voluntary, and so coordinating their work as to avoid overlapping and abuses, and to secure a proper provision and auditing of expenditures of all monies;

Subsection (d) reads:

(d) investigate and report upon proposals for the carrying out of programs of public works and other projects to aid in providing employment;