

Western Grain Transportation Act

Mr. Lewycky: Mr. Speaker, I certainly do not accept that kind of guarantee on the part of the CPR to enhance our western transportation. Certainly, depending on economic conditions to improve does not give me any kind of assurance that the railways will be doing anything. It sort of reminds me of the type of guarantees we receive from the Minister of Transport. I know on my own desk I have numerous letters and representations which I have made to the Minister of Transport, to which I certainly have not received any response. I have drawn this to the attention of the Parliamentary Secretary and others and I would say, outside of perhaps Revenue Canada, the Minister of Transport has to be one of the worst in terms of receiving any kind of response from him. We certainly would not be prepared, therefore, to accept any kind of loose guarantees about economic conditions improving. We cannot expect anything like that.

Mr. Benjamin: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask my colleague, the Hon. Member for Dauphin-Swan River (Mr. Lewycky), to elucidate his reference to the increased costs for grain producers in higher freight rates. He also mentioned various communities affected. I would like to ask him if he has had representations from municipalities, towns and villages in his area or anywhere else about increased costs to them in terms of maintenance, upkeep and construction of roads in order to handle larger truckloads of grain over longer distances while branch lines are being abandoned.

Mr. Lewycky: Mr. Speaker, yes, indeed I have had representations. By way of illustration I could speak about resolutions and requests from municipalities such as Mossy River, that if there is any rail line abandonment the municipalities certainly will not be able to upkeep or upgrade the particular roadways. In some of the areas of Manitoba there is a high degree of swamp or bog land and the cost of rebuilding a road or maintaining a highway is incredibly high. It certainly would be much more practical and profitable if the railways were maintained and the appropriate subsidies were given to the entire railway. We know that the railways have to be improved and we believe there are ways of doing that, but this should not be done at the expense of the farmers.

● (1510)

Mr. Althouse: The Hon. Member referred to the kind of grain transportation program that he thought was useful. He pointed out that upgrading railways is much cheaper to society than the constant maintenance of roads to haul long distance traffic such as grain. I wonder if he would be prepared to tell the House what sort of upgrading program he is proposing as an alternative or adjunct to the proposal which is before the House in the form of Bill C-155.

Mr. Lewycky: Mr. Speaker, I think that the New Democratic Party has made a very substantial proposal in terms of what could be done to upgrade the railway.

Mr. Smith: You don't know about it.

Mr. Lewycky: For the benefit of the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Smith), I will send him a complete copy of it so he can read it. In that way he can become educated and he will not open up his mouth every single time he sits down when he has nothing to say.

Mr. Smith: Send it to Vic, too. He wants to know the answer.

Mr. Malone: Mr. Speaker, I was just wondering, since an NDP Member spoke and three or four others asked questions, if the NDP caucus might consider having caucuses on Wednesday to handle those internal difficulties.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The Hon. Member for Medicine Hat (Mr. Hargrave), by agreement, will be allotted 20 minutes.

Mr. Bert Hargrave (Medicine Hat): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the Speaker and Members of the House for this indulgence in allowing me to speak for a full 20 minutes, which I greatly appreciate. I would just like to take a moment to say that I think it is simply incredible that the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) just stood up in the House and introduced closure on what I consider to be the most important piece of legislation on agriculture in the last ten years. It is an incredible insult to every farmer in western Canada that, after less than three days of debate, we should now have closure thrust upon us.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Hargrave: However, I want to get on with my remarks. I would very simply say that I have been waiting ten and a half years for an opportunity to get into this debate, that is, ever since I was first elected in 1972. I will quickly add that this should have been the most important debate in that ten-year period, certainly for western Canada and even for all of Canada. I say that because other major debates, such as the debate on the Constitution, could have been set aside for a few years. Our nation would have survived some way or another without, shall we say, the Charter of Rights for maybe another five years or ten years. However, western Canada's total agricultural industry and all the other resource-related developments cannot survive without the adequate resolution of this Crow freight rate issue.

The dramatic turnaround by the Government two weeks ago to pay all of the benefit to the railways and none to the grain producers has changed everything, including my own position on this vital issue. Let me briefly review a few of the important background developments on this Crow issue.

The statutory Crow freight rate on grain from the Prairies does indeed still exist in perpetuity at one half a cent per ton mile. Early last year it became apparent that the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) has encouraged the Minister of Transport (Mr. Pepin) to get on with the resolution of this Crow issue. I was glad to see that.

The first very important evidence which emerged was the Gilson Committee or, as I call it, the Gilson group. Gilson's