

National Transportation Act, 1986

For many years the governments of the Maritime Provinces have advocated that the National Transportation Act endorse the following two regional development principles:

- (i) transportation is recognized as a key to regional economic development; and
- (ii) where there is a conflict between regional economic development objectives and commercial viability, regional economic development must take precedence.

Without the commitment to the second principle, that development objectives take precedence, the first principle may have very little meaning.

I think my colleague is quite right. He has introduced this amendment to ensure that the two principles are there and they have some meaning. The Minister of Transport representing the Province of New Brunswick stated, and I quote:

This is why New Brunswick is adamant that sub-section 3(1)(d) of Bill C-18 recognizing transportation as a key to regional economic development be expanded to include the statement that regional economic development objectives will take precedence over commercial viability objectives when the two conflict.

The Government of Prince Edward Island said the same thing, and I quote:

—that it be enshrined and specifically defined in Section 3 of the National Transportation Act in the following words:

- 1) Transportation is recognized as a vital instrument of regional economic development;
- 2) Where the objectives of commercial viability or cost recovery are in conflict with regional economic development objectives, the latter shall take precedence.

The Atlantic Provinces Transportation Commission said the same thing. It said it was important to add after the “development” the following:

—and regional economic development objectives take precedence over commercial viability objectives of the transportation system when the two conflict.

It is quite clear. The Leader of the Opposition in New Brunswick, Mr. Frank McKenna, appeared before our committee. He spoke very vocally on behalf of the people of New Brunswick. I might say, Mr. Speaker, that in a very short while he may be the Premier of New Brunswick and, therefore, what he is saying should be taken into account. He said, and I quote:

It is essential that Bill C-18 be amended to ensure that economic development objectives will take precedence over commercial viability when the two objectives conflict.

It is interesting to remember that Mr. McKenna was questioned before the Standing Committee on Transport by the Hon. Member for Moncton (Mr. Cochrane) who tried to get him to accept that the word “balance” be in the legislation and be accepted. The Hon. Member for Moncton said:

Now, I guess the wording we have in most cases is that when looking at the commercial viability, it should be balanced in light of regional development objectives.

Mr. McKenna replied, and I quote:

With respect, I do not think so. The wording from Newfoundland is that, but I believe all three Maritime Premiers are unanimous as well as the Atlantic Provinces Transportation Committee, I believe, in saying that it should take precedence. I do not want to make that mistake. I am not endorsing the word “balance”; I am endorsing the word “precedence”.

I think Mr. McKenna was certainly quite clear in this regard and the Hon. Member for Moncton was wrong in believing that the word “balance” would satisfy the people of the Maritimes. It will not satisfy the people of the Maritimes. What is needed is a crystal-clear commitment from the Government that in these circumstances, as suggested by my colleague, the Hon. Member for Westmorland—Kent, the precedence should prevail, and that economic development is paramount to any commercial viability and, therefore, it gives a direct mandate to the federal Government, who has a responsibility to sustain the efforts of the regions, to ensure that in the field of transportation, indeed, regional development is paramount and should be sustained through appropriate national transportation policy.

I would like to say in closing that Transport 2000 from the Atlantic Provinces also appeared before the committee. We can say that politicians have their own points of view, but here is a totally independent association, Transport 2000, which is known to be sometimes on the side of the Government and sometimes against it, depending on whether the Government is doing things well or not. Therefore, no one could say that Transport 2000 is a biased organization. Transport 2000 recommended, and I quote:

Specifically, we seek assurances that regional development and public interest considerations will take precedence over strict cost recovery criteria in the maintenance of transportation services to economically depressed areas.

This is what my colleague, in introducing his amendment, wants to accomplish. This is what we in the Liberal Party want to see in this legislation. We have never changed our view in this regard. I have here a press release which is dated February 7, 1977. It is a joint press release by the then Transport Minister, the Hon. Otto Lang, and the then Minister of Transportation and Communications of Newfoundland, Mr. James Morgan. They met and after their meeting they issued the press release which read in part, and I quote:

Mr. Lang, and the Maritime Premiers and Mr. Morgan agreed that where economic development objectives required it, those objectives would take precedence over the commercial viability of the services concerned. Mr. Lang further indicated that following further consultation with the Atlantic Provinces, he would propose an amendment to Bill C-33 now before Parliament to reflect that agreement.

Parliament was subsequently dissolved and this legislation never came to life and Mr. Lang is now doing other things. However, many years later we have the occasion to review and readdress this question through the National Transportation Act. I think we have to accept the amendment proposed by my colleague, the Hon. Member for Westmorland—Kent.

Mr. Iain Angus (Thunder Bay—Atikokan): Mr. Speaker, I want to enter into the discussion of the amendment put forward by the Hon. Member for Westmorland—Kent (Mr. Robichaud). It is an amendment which my Party supports. I want to take you back in time, Mr. Speaker, because I think it is important that we understand the changes which have occurred in this whole area throughout the process of the move toward deregulation by the Government.