

*Atlantic Regional Freight Assistance Act*

We are in favour of Bill C-207. I congratulate the minister for having introduced it in the house, and I urge him to extend its application so that more people can benefit from the assistance which the government wants to offer.

[English.]

**Mr. Charles H. Thomas (Moncton):** Mr. Speaker, I welcome the introduction of this bill because at least it recognizes a principle which we on this side have been advocating for so long, namely, that some assistance should be given immediately to shippers and plants in the Atlantic provinces to enable them to compete in the Canadian market.

I am glad the minister has finally brought this bill into the house. As he has indicated, it is only an interim measure but I feel it will bring some degree of relief to those affected and it does recognize the principle we have been advocating that subsidies should be paid to all modes of transportation, not just to the railways. Our trucking industry has suffered for years as a result of inequitable competition, and I know this bill will be welcomed with some degree of relief.

Since I welcome the legislation I do not wish to impede its passage, but there are three or four questions I should like to put to the minister for clarification. First, why should it be necessary to bring in a completely new act under a new title? Those who have studied the report of the Atlantic premiers will have noted that while the premiers wanted many changes they worked on the assumption that those changes would be made to the existing Maritime Freight Rates Act. I do not think this was merely because the old name was familiar to them; there may be a good basis for the position they took. The Maritime Freight Rates Act finally, by statute, recognized not only the constitutional obligations assumed at the time of confederation but also the many commitments which have been made over the years to the Atlantic provinces—that they were entitled to certain subsidies to enable them to compete in the Canadian market, and so on. I am not a legal authority and maybe this point is not well taken, but it seems to me there is a feeling that the bringing in of a completely new act, one which does not include these commitments in the preamble, will mean these commitments may be lost in the shuffle. Yet they are the basis of the special claim for assistance advanced by the maritimes. Why could not the old act have been reopened and revised to include the word "Atlantic" if that

[Mr. Caouette.]

is considered desirable? Possibly the minister could explain this to us later.

The second point has already been mentioned by the hon. member for Halifax-East Hants (Mr. McCleave). Here again I should like to refer to the report of the four premiers. It seems to me that if we are really interested in assisting the Atlantic region we should certainly listen to the presentations and requests of those directly involved. This was always the position taken by the former Minister of Transport. Every time we questioned him as to what was being done to assist maritime transportation he told us he was awaiting the premiers' report. Now we have that report. It confirms what we heard in almost every brief submitted to us during the trip through the Atlantic provinces, first, that subsidies should be paid not to the truckers or the carriers but to the shippers. The fear was many times expressed that if the subsidies were not paid to the shippers they would not receive the full benefit.

In the second place the premiers felt that the subsidies should be administered by an agency they proposed to set up in the Atlantic provinces. As reason for this, they said the subsidy should be allocated on a selective basis; it should be used to assist industry and should be capable of adjustment as need for assistance was required. They felt this could best be arranged by an agency composed of people from the Atlantic region with an intimate knowledge of local conditions. I would therefore ask the minister to tell us why the government has decided that the subsidy should be administered by the Governor in Council rather than by a separate agency as proposed.

• (12:20 p.m.)

The third point I want to raise is in connection with the premiers' report. Running through the report one will find the distinct theme that change should not be made by the dominion government just for the sake of change or to save money. In more than one place in the report it is stated that if the government of Canada alters the Maritime Freight Rates Act it must accept responsibility for making sure that any changes that are made are for the purpose of assisting the region, not just to save money.

At page 14 of the Atlantic premiers' report appears this statement:

In fact, the modification of the Maritime Freight Rates Act proposed in this report is made by the four governments on the clear understanding that