

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS—REDUCTION OF PASSENGER SERVICE IN NORTHERN ONTARIO—SUGGESTED HOLDING OF PUBLIC HEARINGS BY TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Mr. Doug Rowland (Selkirk): Mr. Speaker, on February 12, as recorded at page 3329 of *Hansard*, I asked the Minister of Transport (Mr. Jamieson) whether it was his intention to make representations to Canadian National Railways in order to have them change their decision to cancel the service provided by trains Nos. 7 and 8. The minister's reply—which I must say in all fairness was uncharacteristic—was a non-reply. I am not prepared to let the issue die in that fashion.

The cancellation of trains 7 and 8 by the CNR demonstrates that the publicly-owned company, without having made a policy statement to the same effect, intends to follow the same path as the CPR. That policy is to abandon on a piecemeal basis every unprofitable service without regard to the public interest. Moreover, it is apparent under the present regulations governing rail line and service abandonment that no one can win an argument with the railroads in respect of the profitability or lack of profitability of a service, because the railroads are permitted to isolate that service for consideration whereas the only real way one can calculate profitability is in relation to the entire system, the entire network.

The obvious next step in this process of abandonment of passenger service by the CNR is the downgrading of trains 1 and 2, making them make more stops in order to service communities which would otherwise be cut off due to the abandonment of trains 7 and 8, thereby increasing the running time of trains 1 and 2, thereby making the service less attractive for long distance passengers, thereby decreasing the number of passengers, thereby decreasing the profitability of the service and thereby making an application for its abandonment inevitable.

The minister's silence on this question is, I believe, eloquent, especially in light of the fact that he is not often so, as I mentioned earlier. His silence signifies his willingness to acquiesce in the decision of the CNR to abandon its service, his willingness to see rail passenger service in Canada become a thing of the past. If this is not the case, I wish he or his representative would tell us so in plain language, and at the same time tell us what specific actions the department intends to take in order to stop the process.

At this point in any argument it is customary for a minister to retire behind the screen of the independence of the CNR and the CTC. This stand is completely unacceptable to me and it is entirely indefensible. If the government is not satisfied with the actions of a board or a Crown corporation, it has the power to replace the people running it. Therefore, inaction by the government in the final analysis indicates acceptance. Moreover, such boards, commissions and corporations, their methods of operation, their terms of reference are established by acts of Parliament and can be changed by similar acts if they are found to be unacceptable. I am not saying that doing this would be easy; I am saying it is possible if the government is really in disagreement with the policies.

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Finally, I find the whole process of placing the power to make decisions—and it is being done increasingly—in key areas of public policy into the hands of quasi-independent boards and commissions highly distasteful. The fact that this government and others have pursued such a process is one of the major reasons why the institution of Parliament has fallen into public disrepute. The proliferation of boards and commissions is one of the reasons why this House so infrequently deals with questions of moment, questions directly relating to the concern of the people. All such questions have been placed in the hands of boards and commissions by politicians afraid to exercise the powers and to assume the responsibilities they have been elected to exercise and to assume.

The boards and commissions, as the current mess in transportation serves well to indicate, add nothing to our governmental process. Indeed, they detract by making our elected institutions less relevant, our elected officials less responsive and our public policies less coherent. Indeed, public policies are no longer worthy of the name; they are rather a pot-pourri of ad hockery. Nowhere is this more true than in the realm of public transportation. Nowhere is the situation in more urgent need of remedy.

I call upon the government to meet its responsibilities squarely, to stop hiding behind the CTC and the CNR and to give this country the national transportation policy for which it is crying. So doing will involve making, from time to time, unpopular and difficult decisions—but that is what we were elected to do. We certainly were not elected to appoint people to make those decisions for us. We were not elected to remove important decisions from the political arena, but to make those decisions ourselves as best we can and then to stand before the electorate and be judged.

It is within that context that I again ask through you, Mr. Speaker, the minister or the person designated to respond for him what he intends to do about the cancellation of trains 7 and 8 and the policy of the railroads to abandon passenger service. Does he intend to protest, to use his authority, or does he agree? If he agrees with such a policy, why? Those are the questions we all want answered. At least we want to be told that the government will no longer permit the railroads to continue their policy of retrenchment. At least tell us that the government is insisting that the railroads engage in research, in co-operation with the government, into ways of improving public transportation in an effort to combat the congestion and the pollution which has resulted from overdependence upon the automobile. I hope that in the reply to be given there will be an answer to some of my questions.

• (10:10 p.m.)

Mr. Gérard Duquet (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to respond to the question raised by the hon. member for Selkirk (Mr. Rowland). The manner in which subsidies are considered for rail service in various parts of the country is of concern to a goodly number of hon. members. The hon. member raised his question initially on February 12. It