

Prairie Farm Assistance Act

● (1730)

An hon. member on the other side laughs, but let me tell him that those are farmers who have experienced a crop disaster and who have received assistance. He comes from an area where crop disasters take place occasionally, and I am sure that he would not expect other people to laugh at the plight of farmers in his constituency. I am sure he will not laugh to the extent of supporting the action of the Minister of Justice who wishes to eliminate this.

As I said, awards were given to 14,257 farmers in 1972 amounting to over \$4 million. This is not a laughing matter. In my opinion it was of great significance to those 14,000 farmers in western Canada. Although they did not collect any money in 1972, there were awards, and I suggest that the minister should seriously consider whether or not he should drop the Prairie Farm Assistance Act and substitute crop insurance which is supported by the provinces and the federal government. He should consider whether he is not relinquishing his obligations and responsibilities to farmers in western Canada and transferring them to his colleague who is responsible for another portfolio. If that is what he is doing then I have little respect for him, as little as I have for the other minister who, I think, has played politics at a time when most of us thought that type of backwoods politics had disappeared.

It may be that the minister will want to add this money to a contingency plan as part of the crop insurance program. If he does that he will be substituting prairie farm assistance to farmers in Canada, and I give him full credit for making the effort to reduce premiums so as to enable a larger number of farmers to benefit from crop insurance. However, that will not be a satisfactory solution for farmers in any part of Canada until it is applied universally, and it cannot be applied universally until farmers can afford the payments, and in many areas that is not yet possible.

Other hon. members not representing western Canada are well aware of difficulties that farmers experience when various types of crops are destroyed by hail, frost and other weather conditions. Because of the diversification in Quebec and Ontario, farmers in those two provinces will not be able to take full advantage of crop insurance. Therefore it will not be available to many farmers in eastern Canada until this program is applied universally and until the levy is collected in the same way that it was originally collected under PFAA. I suggest that we are not really being fair to the people who impose this levy if we put the money into a stabilization fund because not only will a limited number of people be able to participate in the program on a voluntary basis but the program will be limited in its application.

A number of questions have been put to the minister which I hope he will answer. The minister has had dealings with labour and I know he has not been unsympathetic with regard to that sector of our working population, but I am shocked when I hear colleagues in both opposition parties indicate that there are a number of people whom we have employed under the act for up to 30 or 40 years who are being told to go on early retirement simply because we have not made the effort to provide them with other employment.

[Mr. Peters.]

When it comes to dealing with the grasslands program which is under the Minister of Justice, we understand that casual labour is employed because it is expected that they will spend their time working in his election campaign and therefore that is all right. I am certainly concerned about some of the other programs under which we have employed people over a long period of time, for example, under PFAA, particularly in senior positions, and gave them no protection under the public service act. In fact I would be surprised if any one employed under the Grain Stabilization Act was ever given the protection given by the public service act because, if that were the case, they could not be pushed around politically and that would not be the way to re-establish the Gardiner machine. I certainly hope that the minister will consider the point that I am making and that he will not play that game because it would not be in the national interest.

I have here the report by order in council, PC1963-1896 of December 21, 1963. An investigation was carried out by Mr. Justice Pope in which the names of the 12 or 14 people referred to by the hon. member for Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain and the hon. member for Regina Lake Centre are mentioned. If you read the report carefully you will find that with one exception very little patronage was involved and few political shenanigans. One gets the impression that, except for some political interference, most of the employees under PFAA have been doing an excellent job and have put up a strong resistance to political interference. The report indicates that most of the employees are competent, diligent, and deserve to be employed in the public service until their normal retirement age.

The PFAA has been around for a considerable period of time. If my memory serves me right, about \$15 million was involved when the grain stabilization idea was originally put forward. That amount was to go into the new fund which was to include several other funds as well. The carrot was added back in 1971, I believe.

Mr. Horner: It seems like a long time ago.

Mr. Peters: It appears that one has to fight the same fight continually for a long time to establish a reasonable and justifiable position. Back in 1969 a payment had not been made. Farmers had received out of the fund pretty close to \$20 million. There has been no payment since 1971, and yet I understand that in winding up this act \$7 million to \$8 million remains to be disbursed.

● (1740)

I am not convinced that the transfer of this money to the stabilization act will be equitable, serve the purpose we intend, or provide the protection for which the levy originally created this money. I would much rather see the minister put it into a fund. I would much rather see the minister put it into an emergency fund which would be for use in the type of emergency we now have. I would like to see it related either directly or indirectly to the operation of crop insurance.

But I wonder how long it will be before we can really accomplish the things we wish to accomplish in terms of insurance for crops in Canada, particularly in various parts of Canada where the administration is different.