

THE HONOURABLE JOE VOLPE, P.C., M.P.
SPEECH AT THIRD READING ON C-23, AN ACT TO AMEND THE CANADA MARINE ACT,
THE CANADA TRANSPORTATION ACT, THE PILOTAGE ACT
AND OTHER ACTS IN CONSEQUENCE
MAY 5, 2008

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to take part in this debate, having worked on the committee to ensure that the Bill would provide the detail and implementable advantages that it purported to do when it was first presented. As a Member of Parliament one has to assume a certain sense of responsibility. One has to examine the intent of the legislation, question the minister, probe the bureaucracy, and then go out into the field and consult with those who are going to be first and foremost impacted by the legislation. Without undue modesty, I did all three.

As a concession to a new member of the NDP, we asked at the very last meeting dealing with Bill C-23 if we could have more detail for that new member, and I see that the member is paying attention so that is good. That member was invited to bring forward new witnesses with proposed amendments. The only people he was able to come up with were the ones we have talked about, such as people involved with Community Air who came as individuals, and a Councillor who came as an individual. As for amendments, I know that listeners cannot see, but when I put my index finger and my thumb together, it forms a zero. There were none. When the Member says that there are people who rejected amendments, I am still at a loss to understand which amendments were presented that were rejected. There were none.

I come back to the concept of what the legislation was intended to do.

I have great respect for all Members of Parliament who come here to represent the views of their citizens. They come here to address the issues that are germane to the growth of Canada. A parliamentarian of great note thanked his constituents for voting him in as their representative but he also said that he was now a Member of the Parliament of Canada.

As a Member of the Parliament of Canada, each and every one of the members on that committee looked at all the port authorities to see what they needed in order to become viable commercial entities capable of meeting the challenges of the economies of tomorrow.

As a member of the former government, I said that at least from its intent the legislation was worthy of consideration. We will see if it is worthy of support. I said it and I might have been selfish, but indulge me for a moment. When I was in government with my cabinet colleagues and my caucus colleagues, we fashioned a policy that we thought would enhance the future of Canada and all Canadians. Whether they lived in downtown Toronto, Yukon or Atlantic Canada, it did not matter. The policy was designed to ensure that we would have gateways of access and success in the west, in central Canada and in Atlantic Canada. We thought we were all-encompassing.

We had provisions in place for all of those ports that some might say are northern ports, those which the coastal areas of Atlantic Canada and British Columbia might think of as secondary ports, but they are very important ports. More important for all of Canada, we wanted to position the port authorities such that they would be able to meet the challenges of the economies that were beginning to develop everywhere around the world.

At the very first instance we asked if these ports were commercially viable. Some ports are bigger than others. We divided them into two tiers. It is no secret that the first three are Vancouver, Montreal and Halifax. We put in a cut-off of \$25 million. Those ports do that amount of business. They are the ports that will be the fulcrum for transportation around the world.

There are other ports, tier two, which are equally significant, perhaps locally, but they are not the hubs around which spokes will be developed. We recognize that. However, that does not mean they should not be prepared to take advantage of the vagaries of commerce. We could dispense with them, move them over to one side, eliminate them, say they have no value and then watch as their communities languish while commerce takes a look someplace else. We thought that would not be responsible for Canadians and so we said that we needed to make sure that some of these ports can amalgamate.

Quite frankly, the ports in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia needed to have one authority for efficiency and effectiveness purposes. They needed to be able to make the investments in their infrastructure so that they could receive commerce from the interior of Canada, the interior of the continent, and make sure that it could be expeditiously shipped to those ports and those markets in the Orient and southeast Asia and along the western coast of Canada and down along, I guess we would call it, the eastern Pacific rim.

In order to do that, we had to give those ports the legislative authority to amalgamate; to ensure that they could borrow on the open market commensurate with their commercial ability; and to be like other corporate entities, capable of accessing government advantages through infrastructure programs as an example, or through other programs that would give them the advantage that all Canadians would expect of any of their organizations that would be directed to enhancing the Canadian livelihood, the standard of living and the quality of life. That is what we all intended to do.

We sought witnesses from all sectors of the economy and society, and indeed governments, as my colleague from Yukon said, from all orders of government, one might say from all levels of government, but all governments interested. We sought their advice. We sought the advice of those in the industry and the businesses, the port authorities that came before us. We asked them where the deficiencies were in the legislation, what they needed to do. We invited everyone. It may be that others might not have heeded the call. It is rather unfortunate. But we took that extra step; we went out and sought the advice of those who would be impacted.

It is interesting. For example, the former speaker concentrated everything on Toronto. I am a citizen of Toronto. I have lived all of my life there. I am a specialist. I went there and got all of my education over and over again so that I could say, yes, I am from Toronto. I hold no place higher than anyone else, but I will not take a second position to anyone else about how my city has developed, should develop and what is important for its citizens whom I have been proud to represent for these last almost 20 years. I have learned in those 20 years that somebody can make a distinction between the spin indicated for a particular purpose and good sound public policy.

Here I am as the Transport Critic for the Official Opposition supporting a piece of government legislation that has gone through all of the appropriate filters, examinations and critiques. As I indicated, I avowed very early it is because it was generated by the former government of which I was a Member.

This is a happy confluence of two different parties, two different governments, recognizing the importance of this Bill for all of Canada. In fact, even the Bloc Québécois on that committee said that this Bill was good for transportation policy, irrespective of the colour of the party in power. Surely that has to be the test of good legislation. I do not think the government can take full credit for it. Nor am I reaching back into the past to say that it is ours and that is why we are doing it. Nor do our colleagues in the Bloc say that it is their legislation and they will put their brand on it.

This is something where, collectively, Members of Parliament came from the various regions of the country. As I indicated at the beginning of my discussion, they were elected as representatives of their people, but they came here to become Members of Parliament. That meant they assumed the obligation to see everything from the prism of the public good.

Three of the four parties in the House support this legislation, wholeheartedly, after having gone through the appropriate examination and underscoring the fact that we were talking about strengthening the commercial viability, the ability to borrow and the governance models of all these ports. I harken to point out that each and every one of these ports has representatives from the communities in which they are located, representatives who are suggested and recommended by the municipalities in which they are located.

Yes, they must finally receive the stamp of approval of the then Minister of Transport, but even in my own city, that port authority has representatives from the municipality, the province and the federal authority. All three orders of government are represented in a port authority, which number one objective must be to ensure that if there are advantages to be gained from commerce to be shipped through the Great Lakes, some of it be resident in the area of Toronto.

One might ask how big a port is it. Despite all the criticisms, it ranks, according to Transport Canada and according to the volume of operating revenue, number eight in the country. It is not bad for a port that is not supposed to be doing anything. Only 10 other significant ports rank below it. What we have seen over the course of this last little while is the ebb and flow of commerce, the value of commodities that are shipped from the interior of our great country to other parts of the world, is making its way through a transportation system in which various ports are key.

For example, I think of the great port of Thunder Bay, which at one time was the second most important inland port in all of Canada, second only to Montreal. It has suffered some decline partly because a lot of the materials, a lot of the commodities, minerals as well as lumber has been shipped out west through the port of Vancouver, now Prince Rupert.

This does not mean that all the investment Canadian governments before us made in building a seaway to ensure all the products were produced in the centre of Canada, my province being most significant in this regard, would come through a St. Lawrence Seaway system, of which the port of Toronto is a very important element. However, it is not the only port in the Great Lakes Seaway system. We have seen more and more investments in the port of Montreal. It has begun to flourish in a way that people had not anticipated.

One can be morose, critical or shortsighted and say that we should forget all those 19 major ports throughout the country because those people in one port city of the country might be interested only in the land development side of the port authority. Therefore, we should forget about the flow of commerce, transportation and goods from the markets, which are particularly Canadian, out to an export environment where they will enhance the standard of living of all Canadians.

Happily, the majority of Members of Parliament in the House do not have that same disposition. Happily, Members of Parliament recognize their obligation to the Canadian common wealth. Happily, we have saner minds in the House that are prepared to take a look at what must be done.

What must be done includes not only those gateways to central and western Canada, but to all those ports that provide the world with an avenue into Canada, coming from the Atlantic ports, of which Halifax is the largest and is the most commercially viable. However, it is not the only one.

We have a tendency to focus on all those that are of great interest to us. I have a particular soft spot in my heart for the port of Halifax. It is the port which received me when I first came to this country. It is a wonderful place. I am surprised we have not made much more of Halifax than it currently is, but it ranks as either the best or the second best. It is among the top three natural ports, natural harbours in the entire world.

The port of Halifax is a gateway for everything that could come from Europe and Africa. The most logical place for all that commerce to come in through is either Halifax or Saint John. In fact, there are others, but Halifax is by far the biggest. Through it, we could build that kind of an infrastructure, that kind of a network, which would enhance the economic viabilities of so many communities throughout all of Canada.

Bill C-23 speaks to the importance of marine ports. The fact is, Mr. Speaker, and you know this better than others because of where you come from, all those marine ports are tied to a road and rail infrastructure that spreads out in a network through the rest of the marketplace, which is North America. There are none that are better positioned to do that, in my view, than Halifax or mainland Vancouver, Nanaimo, Prince Rupert, Fraser River Valley and Montreal.

There are other ports, but those hubs ought to give Canada the advantage that other countries naturally cannot enjoy. Therefore, we have been gifted by the bounty of geography and the good Lord, some might say, and we should take advantage of it.

I come from a city that is one of the most advantaged in the world. I am not anxious to see us lose one of those elements that give us this great advantage, even if, over the course of the last several years, we have allowed it to slip into an inferior position relative to others. However, such is the competition among Canadians that the competition among these port cities and port societies all enhance the livelihood of the citizens they serve. They might serve most directly those with which they are adjacent, but they serve the larger Canadian advantage that all of us share and advocate when we run for office.

Members in the House sometimes might put partisan advantage and partisan diatribe ahead of our obligation as Members of Parliament. While I am capable of engaging in that kind of dialogue and would reserve it for fun moments, for serious moments like this one, I call on all Members of Parliament to do what I know my caucus will do, and that is support a Bill that is absolutely focused on ensuring the Canadian advantage is maintained by giving port authorities good governance and access to loans and an opportunity to enhance the infrastructure for greater commercial viability down the road.

My colleagues on the committee all felt that way. Those who did the work, appreciate this most. Those who appreciate this most, will support it. Those who support it, know that its intent is good. This is what the Liberal Party will do and it will vote for it.