



CANADA

House of Commons Debates

THE HON. JOE VOLPE, P.C., M.P.
SPEECH ON BILL C-7, AN ACT TO AMEND THE MARINE LIABILITY ACT
SECOND READING
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to join in this debate today.

On behalf of my party, the official opposition, we will be taking a very close look at Bill C-7 because we think it has some valuable elements that need to be studied in greater detail in committee.

Before I carry on with my debate, I want to note that the parliamentary secretary is always irrepensible in his desire to make mountains out of molehills, even if molehills are important for the moles that inhabit them and for the people who rely on them, but he will make a great deal out of very little. Bill C-7, although very important, has given him a launching pad to talk about the economy and the environment even though it has very little to do with both.

He is right about the fact that the act may be inadequate, especially as it pertains to those issues which he outlined. This is, after all, a correction of and an adjustment to those issues that relate to liability under the marine act. For those who are unfamiliar with the terms, it has to do with who has to pay in the event of a transgression that Canadians would find absolutely unacceptable, whether they find it unacceptable on the personal liability side, or whether they find it unacceptable on the side of damage to the environment, to the geography, to those assets that Canadians have come to view as part of their standard of living and quality of life.

The parliamentary secretary is right. The bill is about that, but it is only about that. It is an important issue, and as I said, we will study it in detail in committee.

I want to outline for the House that the bill says that those who pollute will have the responsibility for the pollution itself and therefore, will suffer the liabilities in court because that is what we are going to do. We are going to harmonize our expectations with those of others in the world. We have not done that before. That is why the bill is inept. That is why the law as it stands has been adequate. That is why the parliamentary secretary, after three years in government, has finally awakened to that fact. Now we are going to harmonize the expectations of Canadians with the expectations and the practices of the world. That is what this legislation purports to do. We will see if in fact it does that.

It is encouraging that polluters would go from the current liability of \$545 million to about \$1.5 billion. It is encouraging as well that those who one might view simply as passengers or erstwhile in their association with activities and vessels that engage in activities--I hate to use the same word twice as I am beginning to sound like the parliamentary secretary and some of the Conservatives when they talk about getting the job done, but if the word fits, then I guess I may as well use it once or twice--but the important thing to keep in mind is that those who engage in cruises or some of the adventure tours should not be held responsible for those who bring them into those places and who, unbeknownst to them, shift off some of the liabilities for any of the pollution that they may create or the degradation that they may cause.

That is what the bill purports to do. It would do those two things. It does not say nor is there a mechanism for it to ensure that there is not going to be any pollution. It says that if the owners of those enterprises or those vessels do pollute, they will suffer more severely, potentially in a court of law. Why? Because we are going to raise the premiums and we are going to give greater access and greater application to those conventions already existing on a world scale and in which we have been lagging.

If this is a piece of legislation that brings us up to snuff, as people say, and allows us to meet a standard that is appropriate for everybody else and thereby hopefully builds a greater sense of responsibility on the part of the owners of those vessels or those who arrange activities, then that is good. That is why we are going to be positive as we address this legislation.

When I said earlier that the parliamentary secretary catapults from that into other things, he invites us to take a look at other issues that are related both to the economy and to the environment, but the government is engaged more and more in what we do with the jurisdiction that is provided.

For example, they become management issues, and the management issue of the day is associated with the way the economy is performing. I think the parliamentary secretary and some of his colleagues on the government side have said that the economy is not performing very well, that they are going to stimulate it and engage in a stimulus package that is going to spend dozens of billions of dollars in order to get the economy going. Because the parliamentary secretary invited us to peek through that window, I am going to ask him how this relates to the main agenda of the day, the main agenda of governments everywhere, and I would imagine it should be even this one. It certainly is seized by parliamentarians on this side of the House. I might give a rather gratuitous compliment to the members of the other opposition parties who are also seized with the issue of stimulating the economy. With what means? It is the topic of the day every day. We see it in every headline.

The Minister of Finance says that the government is going to stimulate, and then in the fine print, the government is going to sell off crown assets. Every crown corporation apparently is now up for grabs because the Minister of Finance needs the money in order to pay for the stimulus package, none of which is already on the table, none of which is focused on building an infrastructure for tomorrow's prosperity, none of which is focused on establishing a vision for tomorrow. What will Canadians get for the billions of dollars that this House will authorize the government to spend?

The parliamentary secretary invited that kind of observation when he talked about this bill, the marine liability bill, as being an economic bill and an environmental bill. I ask him, why would we invest additional moneys in some of the projects that he and his finance minister are proposing?

I do not want to pick on poor VIA Rail, but it seems it is one of the ones the Conservatives want to get rid of and dump very quickly. VIA Rail carries about 8,000 passengers a day. It receives \$212 million in government subsidies per year. That is about 45% of all of its operating costs, and the Conservatives are going to dump another \$300 million into VIA Rail before they put it on the block, for how much? Where is the vision? Where is the economic plan to spend all these stimulus dollars, to see that more people ride these trains and save on the environmental costs associated with train travel, assuming that they believe that that actually happens?

I think they believe it almost happens, because just last week they joined with the province of Ontario in giving about \$500 million to build parking lots for potential passengers on GO trains and GO buses. Imagine, about \$500 million is going toward that. That is anywhere between \$25,000 and \$75,000 per parking spot, depending on what the operational costs were by way of contribution of any of the parties.

They are going to spend about \$300 million to improve VIA Rail. We do not know how they are going to do that, but they are not going to increase ridership and they do not know whether they are going to dump it. They want to get rid of it.

They want to get rid of other assets, such as Canada Post, for example. It is a revenue generating business. It raises about \$7.3 billion per annum, but apparently it is up for sale because the Minister of Finance needs money to build this economic engine that he says will function, and which the parliamentary secretary says is resident in Bill C-7. I do not know; I did not see that in Bill C-7, but I hope to find all the things associated with marine liabilities.

I am concerned that what we ought to be doing is looking at the suggestion of the parliamentary secretary of the kinds of investments the government will make for improving the infrastructure of tomorrow. What grand vision do the Conservatives have for the country?

For example, I find some of these ideas from virtually everywhere, and if members will permit me, I will borrow shamelessly from a Canadian resident in Quebec.

Mr. Renaud wrote to me on the subject of Canada, a bridge between Asia and Europe. He said we have billions of dollars to spend and now is the time to spend it. He added that we have the political will, the authority, the support of the people, and also the money—money to do what?

I would like to read just one sentence: “Prime Minister Laurier was convinced that a second rail line further away from the American border was essential to Canada's economic prosperity.”

Let us think about this for a moment. Here is an ordinary Canadian who looked back through our history and found an example of a politician who had neither the money nor the political ability to undertake a project in which Canada's development as a whole was the focus of the legislation.

And now this man, this Canadian, Mr. Renaud, tells us that, 100 years later, the Canadian railway system has wasted away.

It got smaller.

Mr. Renaud also says:

The technology has not changed much. Operating costs are not competitive and Canadian economic development is overly concentrated on the north-south axis.

This government claims that it will protect and contribute to the growth of our country and boasts about doing it with a bill such as Bill C-7. Just imagine! This bill deals with insurance and legal accountability. And they want us to believe that this bill will move the country forward.

Mr. Renaud continues:

Western oil does not make it to the east coast of Canada but is readily available to Americans.

Just think about that a little. It is available to Americans.

The electrical resources of Quebec and Labrador are more readily available to the U.S. than to the other Canadian provinces, including mine. We are speaking of Quebec's north. The member opposite spoke of a plan for the north, a great plan for all of Canada, in C-7. We have to laugh. Northern Quebec and Labrador are rich in electricity and natural resources that must be transported by waterways to the heart of the continent. Resources from Abitibi and north of Lac-Saint-Jean must necessarily be transported to Quebec City or Montreal, resulting in the development of those cities. It is a praiseworthy objective but it is not the development of the north.

Before looking to the centre of the continent or to Asia, the Government of Canada should propose developing fast transportation arteries on land from one ocean to another, a sort of transcontinental economic bridge between Europe and Asia. That bridge, according to Mr. Renaud, should be less expensive to operate and compatible with Canada's commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The parliamentary secretary says that Bill C-7 is an environmental bill. Here is what Mr. Renaud says. He raises a practical idea:

If it is more energy efficient, the advent of energy transportation will likely generate profit and prosperity for all of Canada. Using hydroelectric power, it will certainly be less harmful to the environment. Strong regions make for a strong Canada, and the federal government should therefore seize the opportunity to get involved in Premier Jean Charest's plan to develop northern Quebec. The northern plan will be cost-effective only if it is supported by east-west transportation arteries.

This is an idea that speaks of collaboration, cooperation and vision in partnership with other governments that have plans to develop the country. The corridor should follow the 51st parallel, a line that runs along the southern edge of Labrador and passes north of the Manicouagan reservoir and Lake Mistassini and along James Bay, reaching the Pacific Ocean north of Vancouver.

That is a pan-Canadian vision. I could keep on reading other people's ideas, but my point is that there are ideas all across this country about what to do with the billions of dollars the government has today, thanks to the opposition. What is their plan? To address gaps in the commercial courts. These are good ideas, but it is shameful to pass them off as economic and environmental plans.

It is also shameful considering the other bills we began studying in committee yesterday.

I get carried away in French. Not being bilingual, I try to do the best I can. I hope members will forgive me for this.

We were talking about Bill C-9. The parliamentary secretary enjoys the greatest support in the House from members of opposition parties as he puts bills before the committee. There is no other parliamentary secretary that enjoys such co-operation. He is going to talk about the transport of dangerous goods. We are talking about technical things. We understand, according to the minister, that everything is already okay, that everything is already being done. Therefore, we will use Bill C-9 to develop the economy.

That is great. Tell us how that happens. We want to be co-operative. We want to ensure he gets the money, the jurisdiction and the support. All these things are important. What do we do? We make this suggestion. Why not take advantage of the fact that now he talks about the need for security in the country? It has nothing to do with the Olympics in Vancouver, but any excuse is a good excuse at this time. What we need are projects on the table to get the moneys rolling.

One of them might be that we take a look at the security of transmission of goods across the country. I talked for a few moments about passenger rail and about commercial. We talked about moving goods and materials across the country. However, we have another mode as well. Mr. Renaud says that as soon as we build this railway, we will find that we will spend lots of money to build roadways as well because surely development will follow.

It has followed. One of the biggest industries in our country is the trucking industry. There has always been a shortage of truckers because it is a tough job. It might be well paying, but it is a tough job. The parliamentary secretary and his minister said that we needed to ensure that everybody was absolutely secure, that everybody was okay and that they would have to be acceptable by the Americans. If they are not acceptable by the Americans, those trucks will roll up to the border, especially in British Columbia, and the American truckers on the other side will say that those guys are not safe and that they will take over from there. Goodbye Canadian business.

There are vehicle immobilization technologies and there are six companies in Canada that can do this job and do it well. Some of the companies are already familiar with this. They slow down vehicles or completely immobilize them.

I mentioned to the minister, his officials and the parliamentary secretary that we should get some of these people here so we could look at building in regulations that would ensure our trucking industry was fully seized of the importance of putting these into their system and making it part of the carriage of commerce and people. This would suggest that there is at least a minimum bit of a thought in terms of building for an infrastructure for tomorrow.

I know members will want to hear more about this and I will be delighted if they ask me to say more.