

DEPOPULATION OF RURAL DISTRICTS UNDER DEBATE

Resolution and Amendment of Nelson Parliament Voted Down and Motion Praising the Government is Passed

Representatives of rural constituencies and a few others, of all shades of political color—Conservatives, Liberals and United Farmers—had a field day in the Legislature yesterday. Mr. Nelson Parliament, the Liberal member for Prince Edward, started the ball rolling when he moved a resolution expressing the opinion of the House that a non-partisan committee should be appointed by the Government to inquire into the conditions which account for the continuous diminution of rural population in the Province. The debate commenced about four o'clock in the afternoon; it continued until almost midnight. Hon. George S. Henry, Minister of Agriculture, replied to Mr. Parliament, and introduced an amendment congratulating the farmers upon their splendid services during the last few years, and expressing the opinion that a Commission during these abnormal times was not necessary. Mr. T. H. Regan of South Wentworth introduced an amendment to the amendment, congratulating the Government on its record and encouraging it in its efforts to deal with the rural community.

About midnight Mr. A. E. Donovan of Brockville concluded the debate from the Government benches. During the course of the evening there were only a handful of members in attendance. At one time the House almost adjourned automatically. At the conclusion of an address by Mr. G. Evanturel Mr. Allan Studholme drew attention to the fact that there was no quorum. Hon. G. Howard Ferguson replied that there were the necessary twenty members present. Mr. Studholme doubted it, but just then two members sauntered in and the debate proceeded.

On division the amendment to the amendment was carried by the Government supporters, likewise the amendment.

Rural Depopulation.

Mr. Parliament, in speaking to his resolution, quoted extensively from the Government blue book of the Bureau of Industries and the Dominion Royal Commission report of some time ago to substantiate his claim that there had been depopulation in the rural districts. He explained that he did not intend to criticize the Department of Agriculture for the expenditures it had made. The decline in rural population in recent years was most alarming. From 1901 to 1911 the rural population in Ontario had decreased by about 152,000. During the same period urban population increased by about 92,000. The population of rural Ontario is to-day more than 110,000 less than it was 40 years ago. These were some of the reasons he argued that a Commission should be appointed to make an investigation.

Great care should be taken in the matter of immigration into the Province. Efforts should be made to secure the very best class of people. The depopulation is more serious than is generally thought, declared the member for Prince Ed-

ward. He also referred to the fewer pupils attending rural schools. In 1881 in Prince Edward county country schools there were 4,331 pupils in attendance; in 1918 the number has decreased to 1,996. He believed that the principal reason for the fewer people being in the country was that the young men and women were migrating to the urban centres and not that the families were smaller. He believed there should be one agricultural school in each county which would be a demonstration farm. Instead of having one well-qualified district representative, there would then be 200 or 300 young persons well qualified in farm matters. In Ontario there are 50,000,000 acres of arable land, 23,000,000 acres occupied and only 14,000,000 acres unoccupied.

Mr. Henry Replies.

Hon. George S. Henry, Minister of Agriculture, replied to the Prince Edward member. A number of years ago a South Oxford Opposition member had asked for a Commission. His constituents did not agree with him and he had not returned to the House. The Minister wondered if a similar fate was waiting Mr. Parliament. All but one of the Ontario counties had district representatives. It had been said that there should be a Commission to investigate immigration matters. That was not necessary. There was a well-defined policy that the Dominion Government had evolved, with which the Provincial Department was in accord. As soon as the soldiers were repatriated from overseas it would be carried out.

The previous speaker would have the House believe the country was in the decline. Figures prepared by an official of his department showed this was not the case. During four years of the war 560,000 acres had been taken under crop. "We are not going backward; we are going forward," declared the Minister of Agriculture.

Mr. Parliament interjected to say that he had quoted the figures of population from the official Government reports.

During the last year there had been a record yield in the grain crops. "There has not at any time in the history of the Province been a more progressive and intelligent cultivation of the soil than we have at the present time," declared the Minister.

The country was still on a war basis so far as conditions were concerned. "Our prices are going to stay up and the price of labor will stay up. The cost of production is going to stay up. It can't come down immediately."

Conditions Abnormal.

Hon. Mr. Henry said he was glad the farmers were doing better, as previously one of the handicaps had been the shortage of capital. If a report were made by a Commission at present it should show that conditions are abnormal, which will not be permanent. If a Commission were of any use it would be in normal times.

The speaker, in conclusion, moved an amendment expressing the satisfaction of the House that over 560,000 more acres were cropped by the farmers during the war period than in a like period before the war; also expressing thanks to the farmers for their splendid work, and expressing the opinion that an examination in the present abnormal times by a Commission would not prove of any great value.

Mr. T. H. Regan, Conservative member for South Wentworth, followed the Minister. He believed that conditions would readjust themselves when the high wages paid in the city became a thing of