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Speaker: The Honourable Geoff Regan

Air Canada Public Participation Act

Ms. Dianne L. Watts (South Surrey—White Rock, CPC):

Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Perth—Wellington.

I am pleased to speak to Bill C-10, an act to amend the Air Canada Public Participation Act and to provide for certain other measures.

This bill would amend the articles of the Air Canada Public Participation Act that stipulate that the carrier undertake operational and overhaul maintenance in Ontario, Quebec, and Manitoba. For all intents and purposes, these articles would be removed. This would allow Air Canada to fulfill its maintenance needs outside of Canada and presumably at a lower cost. Consequently, Air Canada would no longer have to employ approximately 3,000 heavy maintenance workers in Quebec, Ontario, and Manitoba.

The language that is used in Bill C-10 states:

...while not eliminating those activities in any of those provinces, change the type or volume of any or all of those activities in each of those provinces, as well as the level of employment in any or all of those activities.

I challenge any Liberal member to inform the House what he or she believes are the minimum number of Canadian jobs that article would protect.

Every member knows that all airlines do some maintenance work in every airport out of which they operate. This is called line maintenance, the routine checks that ensure that the planes are in good order and safe for passengers on a day-to-day basis.

Heavy or overhaul maintenance is the work that takes several days. It involves high skill because the mechanics are performing tasks such as replacing an engine or airframe upkeep. These are all high-end jobs, vital to Canada's aviation sector because of how skill-intensive these tasks are. By not specifying the type of maintenance work that needs to be done in Canada, as

Bill C-10 proposes, Air Canada would be able to fulfill its legal obligation without having a single heavy maintenance person on staff.

While all Air Canada overall maintenance work would continue to be done in facilities that are certified by Transport Canada, the Liberal member for Scarborough—Guildwood made the following point a few years ago. He stated:

By keeping Air Canada's maintenance in Canada, we ensured a superior level of safety with tight regulations and a highly skilled aerospace workforce. By shuttering Canadian overhaul centres, Canada is losing its ability to ensure that our aircraft meet safety regulations.

While the government should be commended for looking at ways to make Air Canada more competitive, and we agree with that, it cannot be commended for introducing a measure that would lead to job losses in Canada before even considering anything else.

Earlier this year, the Minister of Transport tabled a statutory review of the Canada Transportation Act, and the review looked forward 20 to 30 years to identify priorities and potential actions in transportation that would support Canada's long-term economic well-being. The report makes a number of recommendations concerning the aviation sector that stem from many months of analytical work, significant public consultation, and experience from eminent Canadians, including the Hon. David Emerson, who actually chaired that review.

Some of the examples of these recommendations include establishing a set of principles to guide all airports in Canada when determining fees, tying all airport improvement fees to specific projects with explicit sunset provisions, and overhauling the regulator, financing, and delivery models for security.

None of these initiatives would have cost the taxpayers any dollars, and considering the size of the Liberals' budget deficit, this would be especially important and, for the context of this debate, lead to job losses in Canada.

This legislation can and should be modernized without removing one of its key provisions. Air Canada has important heavy maintenance operations in Richmond, B.C., that should be considered by this act, but it is not even mentioned.

Canadians benefit from the efficient, affordable aviation sector. As Canada's largest carrier, having carried 40 million passengers last year, ensuring that Air Canada can provide affordable service to Canadians is extremely important. However, the government should always exhaust all measures available to it to achieve its objective, before picking the one that could cost Canadian workers their jobs.

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.):

Madam Speaker, the hon. member did not sit with her colleagues in the last government, but that government was saddled with the distinction of making changes to regulations in the tax structure that allowed 400,000 well-paying jobs to leave Canada. The Conservatives' idea was light touch regulation or deregulation.

Now I hear the hon. member talking about holding on to regulation to hold somebody's feet to the fire in order to make it potentially uncompetitive and less able to sustain itself and good Canadian jobs.

How does the member reconcile those two?

Ms. Dianne L. Watts:

Madam Speaker, the previous government was very proud of the 51 trade deals that it signed. They were negotiated in good faith, and they were signed by all parties.

With respect to this, there is an issue with amending the legislation and not looking at other options. These are the issues that the Conservative Party has. We have no issue with modernizing legislation and with making companies more competitive, because that is what we do. However, it cannot come at the loss of Canadian jobs when other opportunities have not been realized fully.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP):

Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for her speech.

I am wondering whether she believes, as I do, that the government should be encouraging the creation of new jobs in Canada rather than introducing legislation that will legalize something that until now has been illegal. In addition, we know why those jobs were in the agreement that was signed. Air Canada wanted to take advantage of taxpayers' money when the transfer took place and the company was privatized.

Does my colleague believe that the government should instead be encouraging job creation, or at least preserving the jobs we already have in this sector and at Air Canada? Should we at least be ensuring that Air Canada will keep a minimum number of jobs here in Canada, instead of encouraging the outsourcing of jobs to other countries?

Ms. Dianne L. Watts:

Madam Speaker, that is precisely the point. This was embedded within the agreement in 1988 because significant concessions were given by Canadian taxpayers. We want to ensure that Air Canada is viable, that it has opportunities in the market. It is our firm belief that there are many other options for doing that, not losing these Canadian jobs. As well, a fundamental piece of the agreement was to keep those jobs in Canada.

As a free enterpriser, it is important to maintain that undertaking as well as look at opportunities for expansion in trade and opportunities to expand business.

Ms. Kate Young (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Lib.):

Madam Speaker, would the hon. member agree that this issue should be debated at the committee level so we can hear from witnesses and hear more of the discussion we need to have on this issue?

Ms. Dianne L. Watts:

Madam Speaker, I always believe open discussion is a good thing to have when we look to amend any bill. However, extracting fundamental components out of it prior to having those conversations is backward. We should maintain the fundamental components of the agreement and the deal that was put in place in 1988, but the committee can still come forward with additional amendments that look at other options, other than losing Canadian jobs.