

Postal Rates

I think the minister should be given credit for bringing this bill before the House because it gives us an opportunity here to debate postal rate increases so that the public can have an idea of why they may be justified. Often the public is simply told that the postal rates are going to go up by two cents on first class mail, and really we in the House of Commons do not have an opportunity to debate the reasons for that increase nor to give the public, through the House, a justification for it.

I think other ministers in the new government can also take note of the direction which the Postmaster General (Mr. Fraser) has given in the House. I think in particular of the area to which I have been assigned as critic, namely fisheries and oceans, and the amount of regulation that comes out of that department for people in the industry who are immediately affected by the regulations and who have no notification of them. Certainly any changes in the regulations do not receive great publicity. The Post Office Department is therefore setting an example to all other government departments.

Our party is in favour and supports the principle of bringing these postal rate increases before Parliament. We have no argument whatsoever with that and we hope that this practice will continue and that, as a result, the public will be better informed about the reasons for having to pay increased postage.

However, at a time when the public is expected to accept an increase in postal rates, they should continue to receive equal service, if not better service, for those increased rates. Unfortunately, the public is not getting that kind of service at present. The postal rates are going up but postal service does not improve.

Let me give an example. All members in the House, particularly those from the west coast, can appreciate the difficulties we have in responding to our constituents promptly when it takes seven or eight days for a letter to get from our constituencies to Ottawa. If it takes the same time for the response to reach our constituents, it takes at least a two-week period for a particular matter to be dealt with.

We hope the minister will receive the co-operation of the House when he starts negotiating with the Union of Postal Workers with the purpose of improving their morale and showing them that he is committed to improving postal service so that the public can get the same or better service.

Now I should like to deal with the concept of the privatization of some areas in the postal service. The business community is particularly concerned with getting efficient and rapid postal delivery, particularly of items that go by parcel post between businesses in this country and businesses abroad. There is an erosion of that service as a result of the inefficiency of the Canadian Post Office. The service providing delivery of packages is now being taken over by private enterprise. To some extent, it has been taken over by Air Canada and, I understand, there is an encroachment in that service by U.S. delivery firms which wish to get into the Canadian market. This party hopes that this will not be encouraged by the government.

[Mr. Miller.]

We hope that the government will use the prospectively profitable parts of the postal service to support the less profitable ones, such as advertising brochures and first class mail for which we cannot afford to charge a sufficiently high rate to make it profitable. If we do not protect the consumer, the individual who is dependent on mail for personal correspondence and for mailing bills, if we do not protect community organizations and groups that are dependent on mail service for bulletins, brochures and communication with their members, the result will be a weakening of the community spirit and of the organizations that depend so much on keeping their members informed through mail. We urge this government to maintain and improve postal services which the community finds inadequate at present.

I am sure the minister is aware of some of the problems within the Post Office. We hope he will deal with them in such a way as to restore people's confidence, because at present people do not have confidence in the Post Office for many reasons. It may be strange for a New Democrat to be speaking about the business community in this House, but we do so often. In our speeches we refer often to what we would like to see for small businessmen. The small businessman in this country is suffering because the postal service is inadequate. In my community in Parksville, British Columbia, a rapidly growing community, many small businesses are dependent on the mail service. At the present time Parksville has been faced with a situation where for over a year and a half small businessmen and the general public have been unable to obtain post office boxes. In fact they are required to pick up their mail at general delivery points. There are over 250 names on a waiting list in Parksville. These people are hoping to obtain postal boxes so that they do not have to wait in line for their mail. It would require an expansion of post office facilities. Applications have been made but no positive response has been received from the Postmaster General at the present time.

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What does this mean? It forces small businessmen to seek other ways of receiving deliveries or meeting deadlines for the delivery of mail. Small businessmen are not prepared to stand in line for 15 or 20 minutes, nor are they prepared to have their staffs do that. The postal services should meet the demands of small business and the growing public of Parksville who have been waiting very patiently for a good length of time.

An hon. Member: It has been 16 years.

Mr. Miller: It could have been a lot longer if there had not been a change of government.

Mr. Benjamin: We will see how much longer it will take.

Mr. Miller: Certainly we will look at that closely.

An hon. Member: Do you want to come over to this side?