

Oral Questions

to avert the very serious misfortune of a strike which could occur as soon as next Sunday.

Mr. Lang: I think I gave the hon. member that assurance in my opening answer. Obviously, the Minister of Labour and I want to do anything we can to help. At the moment, I think that includes not trying to get into the dispute in this forum.

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POST OFFICE

DELAYS IN MAIL DELIVERY—COMMITTEE STUDY

Mr. Edward Broadbent (Oshawa-Whitby): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the Postmaster General: it concerns the report in the news last night about our troubled postal system. According to that report, the Post Office has installed \$1 billion worth of new mail handling equipment, much of which is virtually inoperative. As a result, letters mailed in Toronto and destined for locations in Toronto are now routed all the way to Cornwall for sorting. I should like to ask the Postmaster General whether he will confirm the report of this deplorable situation from the point of view of both efficiency and cost.

Hon. J.-Gilles Lamontagne (Postmaster General): Mr. Speaker, I listened very carefully last night to the CBC broadcast about the Post Office and to the information which was given in that broadcast, and I wondered where some of it came from. One item on which I can answer the hon. member is that the report of a \$1 billion investment in mechanization is absolutely false. The \$1 billion investment also went into the modernization of equipment, of our plants and our buildings. The project, in all, cost \$1 billion; it did not all go into automation. Also it is very easy to take pictures of an idle mechanization plant. Sometimes it happens that the mechanization does not work temporarily or accidentally.

● (1422)

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Lamontagne: If hon. members want to listen, I would like to explain. I listened to the CBC broadcast and I am very apprehensive about what is coming in the next few nights on the same telecast. It was part of an interview given by the United States postmaster general, myself and some of the officials of the Post Office Department. The person interviewed yesterday was the regional vice-president of CUPW. I wonder if the hon. member would like to have all the details. We are taking note of all the newscasts and will make a full report at the end of the week.

Mr. Broadbent: Mr. Speaker, the minister took an awfully long time but did not answer the question. I ask him to take another shot at answering a question about the same region. According to the same report, the reason for major delays at the Toronto terminal centres is failure of the principal computer in the Toronto postal system. Will he confirm that the cost

[Mr. Mazankowski.]

of this computer has escalated from an originally estimated figure of \$1.5 million to \$8 million? Will he confirm that the cost has gone up in that range? Also, will he tell us when Canadians can expect that computer facility to be operating and providing efficient mail service to the people of this country?

[Translation]

Mr. Lamontagne: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member of the opposition should understand in the end that a few years ago we planned a program of modernization for the Post Office. The technology we adopted then is about the best in the world. However I would like to point out to the hon. member that we are now going through an experience which is somewhat similar to that, for instance, of the Canadian National when they put the first turbo locomotive on the tracks. It did not work out the first time. It is true that the computer must be readjusted by technicians. Also, I would like to revert to the first question concerning the interview on CBC yesterday. They should broadcast the whole interview given by the postmaster general of the United States, who was interviewed at the same time I was, and not take only five or ten seconds from a four or five-minute interview, which is taken out of context and which does not present facts as they are and does not reflect the opinion of the people interviewed. As regards costs, Mr. Speaker, I would like to say to the hon. member of the opposition that it is true that costs have gone up, but even there I think it is normal. When we use new technology, we must be ready for some experimentation and those costs are practically unpredictable.

[English]

Mr. Broadbent: Mr. Speaker, while the minister is gathering experience, the mail of Canada is being gathered in postal offices and is not being delivered to the people who want it. Since he has taken some time to express his concern about short clips providing information, which he thinks distort the picture, I should like to point out that television crews were denied access to the postal facilities and, presumably, to interview people on the spot. Thus, he cannot have it both ways. They were not providing information which was requested.

In all seriousness, and in the hope of improving mail service, will the minister agree to an all-party committee of this House making a quick, serious visit to the postal facility, investigating this particular problem and reporting back within a week to the House?

[Translation]

Mr. Lamontagne: Mr. Speaker, I doubt that we have ever denied anyone a chance to visit our postal services. I believe hon. members of the opposition even sent a delegation to visit them. Last week the United States postmaster general visited them, and any citizen can do as much. I must add that we plan to open those postal services to the public in Toronto on Canada Day, July 1.