

Post Office

The hon. member for Brandon-Souris was speaking of industrial democracy a while ago. I fully agree with him. I am attempting to get our feet under a table together with CUPW, not necessarily for negotiations but for finding solutions to some of the problems which are making us more vulnerable to electronic means of communication.

Mr. Rodriguez: Mr. Speaker, I am always very interested in the speeches of the Postmaster General, but he is cancelling out the speeches he made in Sault Ste. Marie and Nickel Belt. I want to assure the minister that I have spoken with my friends in CUPW, and I say to the minister quite honestly and frankly that if he is prepared to honour the agreement he signed with CUPW, CUPW is prepared to sit down at the table and negotiate a new contract.

● (1622)

In view of the fact that he has correctly identified the major problem in the Post Office as being one of management-worker relationships, is he prepared to have management stop harassment of this one group of workers, CUPW, in terms of posting on their bulletin boards material which is already public knowledge? Why does he persist in having management interfere with the rights of workers on the job, creating friction which is not necessary, at the time they are attempting to negotiate a new contract? That is the first question. Will he assure the House that management has been instructed not to interfere with the communication rights of the leadership of CUPW with its members?

Second, now that first-class and other postal rates are being increased, will he assure the House and the people of Canada that the Post Office management will honour the contractual agreement signed by his predecessor with regard to technological change and the required notice when changes come into effect, and stop trying to run around the end of the agreement?

Mr. Blais: Mr. Speaker, with regard to the question of the first undertaking, I wrote to the president of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers. I agreed that it had always been Post Office policy to permit communication between union representatives and the members. I think the hon. member is a bit exercised about one instance in Winnipeg—one instance in 8,600 postal establishments. I suggest that the exception proves the rule. If all that hon. member can call to my attention is one instance in the more than two months since I made that declaration, I think we are doing very well indeed.

In terms of the second undertaking, the collective agreement that is now in force and which, in effect, was supposed to have come to an end on June 30, as the hon. member knows, we have honoured that collective agreement, although there has been some difficulty in interpretation. Now, when parties are negotiating a new collective agreement, is the time, to try to iron out any disagreements that arise as a result of difficulties in interpretation. That is exactly our intention. Indeed, I point out to the hon. member that, in the negotiations with the letter carriers we not only negotiated the contract, but in order to

avoid any misunderstanding we also negotiated interpretative guidelines for that particular contract. Indeed, there is no danger, with the letter carriers, that we can have any sort of difference in terms of how to interpret the various clauses.

What we are attempting to do during these negotiations is to improve the labour-management climate with CUPW in the hope of smoothing out any differences there may be in interpretation. We are having some success. It is slow, but, as I indicated to the hon. member, we are eminently patient. The union seems to be patient as well. Our own postal negotiators, not Treasury Board negotiators—because the Post Office is delegated to negotiate all its collective agreements—are meeting with the union as often as possible in order to sign as many articles as possible. To date, save for a few exceptions, the attitude and the atmosphere of the negotiations have markedly improved. We are going through this Christmas period without any threat of strikes. I am hopeful that by very early in the new year we will have a collective agreement signed with the Canadian Union of Postal Workers.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I think we ought to conclude questioning with the hon. member for Villeneuve, the hon. member for Brandon-Souris and the hon. member for Gatineau.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Armand Caouette (Villeneuve): Mr. Speaker, I have one or two questions for the Postmaster General.

First, given the fact that he has asked for an increase in postal rates, can he tell us if once and for all he is going to satisfy the claims of citizens of remote areas such as northwestern Quebec where the post offices have become inadequate or obsolete due to the demographic increase or the rising volume of mail produced there.

My second question is as follows: Is the Postmaster General going to yield to the demands of some postmasters who, for eight, nine or ten years now have signed long term leases, and have asked for an adjustment of the lease prices since they are doing all they can to give better service to the public?

Mr. Blais: I am very pleased to be able to give an answer to the hon. member for he has mentioned areas of Canada which, as he identifies them, truly demonstrate the national character of the postal service. As you know, Mr. Speaker, what happens is that our competitors are looking for revenue in each of the big urban centres and in so doing compete with the Post Office while our national postal service is trying its best to provide services for the whole of the Canadian population.

Last Friday, I participated in the first issue of a new stamp and I had meetings with Inuit people in the northeastern Arctic region, which is an area administered by the postal region of the province of Quebec. The hon. member is certainly well aware of how difficult it is to provide a service to the northern regions such as those located north of the 60th parallel. However, the same principles as elsewhere apply regarding the postal service that we provide in areas such as Témiscamingue, Abitibi and the whole northwestern part of