

Post Office Act

● (5:00 p.m.)

cost of moving mail across the continent is to be met, then of course we must expect bills such as this to appear several times a year.

Not too long ago at a meeting of the Transportation Research Forum in the United States the question of postal pricing policy was dealt with. A paragraph in the report of that forum deals with one of the problems we face in this country, and reads as follows:

Postal service is international and domestic. Postal services are not limited to the concentrated business community and the highly populated city and suburban residential areas. They are available to every rural community and farm, to every outpost no matter how isolated. Postal services are not, nor can they be, limited to those services and coverage which are economically feasible.

I am sure the minister realizes that in this country as well, postal service must be provided to people in the outposts, to the rural community as well as the densely populated urban centres.

About a year ago a statement was issued by the Post Office Department to the effect that new facilities would be built, particularly in Montreal and Toronto. I hope it is realized that the smaller centres are entitled to the same type of service and the same consideration as large urban areas. I believe that when governments engage in a business activity it is because of a desire to encourage the growth of the nation and I am sure that is the case in this instance. However, concern for the welfare of the nation must take into consideration cost increases which will affect the people directly. I think it is disgraceful that we were not able to deal more favourably with those citizens who live on a fixed income. We failed to allow for an escalator clause in the Old Age Security Act yet bills such as this make extra demands on that fixed income. True, only pennies are involved today but the welfare of the nation is affected.

I can appreciate the fact that the government would like to operate the postal service on a break-even basis, but it must be remembered that Canada is one nation from east to west, entitled to a uniform postal service. I have the highest respect for the former Postmaster General, but I believe he was used as a hatchet man by some people in the government. He was brought into the picture to make changes in the postal service but at the same time was told that it must operate on a break-even basis. If the present minister has been given the same set of instructions, he is being used as a hatchet man as well. The whole social picture requires more than this if we are concerned about people in all corners of the nation.

It is well known that in situations such as this the government hires consultants. In my opinion, these consultants often forget about the social sciences. When the minister hires consultants, I strongly urge him to hire them on the basis of competitive tenders and not on the basis of selective invitation. Also, when he hires consultants I hope he will make sure that they are social scientists and that sociologists are included among them. It seems to me that we have become primarily concerned about economics without worrying about the social consequences of our course of action.

I, personally, believe that the so-called pork barrel approach to filling post office positions across the country has come to an end in most places. People generally realize that post office vacancies must be filled according to ability, and the people in the area best suited for the jobs have filled vacancies. I hope we will never return to the pork barrel era in politics in filling these positions. If we do, without question the credibility of our post office will suffer, as it has suffered in the past. I hope the minister will have something to say about that when he responds in a few moments.

We are absolutely opposed to increasing the first class mailing rates at this time. Our position is that all types of mail, parcel post included, should share in the increased burden. Also, we do not believe that special concessions should be given to vested interests. The minister is obligated to explain to this House and the people of this country why certain vested interests have obtained special concessions with regard to postal rates. Unless he does that, he will not convince the people of this country that they are not being made to pay the shot for those vested interests outside this country that are being given great privileges to which they are not entitled. I hope that these privileges will stop and that all mail will be treated equally. In short, we do not want to hinder the ability of our people to communicate with one another across the nation. If we hinder them, it will mean the end of the road for Canada. I think we are concerned about Canada and concerned about the country's welfare. I think we want to make sure that people can communicate with one another at a reasonable price. If the incomes of people now on fixed incomes were to be increased, we might argue differently. However, on the one hand the government has stabilized the basic old age security income whereas, on the other hand, it has increased the cost of living of these people without considering that, in so doing, it is doing a disservice to them and to the people of this nation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I ought to advise the House that if the minister speaks now, he will close the debate at this stage of the proceedings.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Côté (Minister without Portfolio): Mr. Speaker, during the debate on the Post Office estimates and on the amendments to the Post Office Act, the same remarks keep recurring nearly all the time. This is probably the way things were being done one hundred years ago and the way they will be done a hundred years from now.

During such debate, the postal service is generally criticized and, very often, there is an hon. member who takes this opportunity to deal with items which are particular to his riding. This is normal. I must add that if on the one hand the Post Office Department has been criticized rather severely, on the other hand there have been attempts made both on the opposition and the government sides to be as objective as possible. Several mem-