

*The Disabled*

I cannot emphasize enough that while the impact of the CRTC decision is most severe on the present hearing impaired population, it will become even more so in a few years' time. As Hon. Members are aware, all indicators show that Canada, as well as other nations, is faced with the fact that our population is aging very rapidly. Hearing problems will increase in number rather than diminish as we go through the process. I cannot conceive of a better time to prepare for that than right now.

It is to this large group of Canadians that my motion addresses itself. The telephone is often a much more important device to the hearing impaired than it is to a person who does not have this disability. In cases of emergency, it may be the only way a person can call for help if that person has impaired hearing. This can often be the case if one is elderly and housebound, or if one has multiple disabilities or happens to live in a rural or isolated community. The telephone is also a very important device in a number of work places. Being able to use the telephone can mean the difference between keeping a job or losing it and, indeed, even in securing employment. A major problem for people with hearing impairment is in finding suitable and reasonably well paying employment.

Witnesses were heard before the Special Committee on the Disabled and the Handicapped. I saw an estimate not too long ago which indicated that the unemployment rate within the hearing impaired community was in excess of 40 per cent, and I believe more in the area of 50 per cent, of the unemployed within that population group in our society. That spells out the size of the problem, Mr. Speaker, because to the hearing impaired an inaccessible telephone is a major obstacle toward achieving the right to independent living. I would even say that it flies in the face of the spirit of the amendments which this House recently made to the Canadian Human Rights Act. If the federal Cabinet fails to overturn the decision of the CRTC, it would be doing a great disservice to those Canadians who looked on the International Year of the Disabled Persons as a starting point for greater future achievements.

The telephone has become a part of daily living in our society, whether it be in business, social contact or in communicating information quickly. Yet for most hearing impaired Canadians, the telephone is only of use when special attachments are available. The CRTC in its decision, to which I referred, has refused to prescribe technical standards which would ensure that all telephones are compatible with hearing aids and are equipped with a device known as a telecoil. In the face of that refusal, this motion asks the Government to consider introducing legislation which will require all telephones which are produced or imported into Canada to be accessible to the hearing impaired.

On occasion, Mr. Speaker, I and other members in my Party have been severely critical of Bell Canada in the way it conducts its business with the public at large. However, in this case, Bell Canada has played an excellent role and has been a good corporate citizen in recognizing its responsibility in this area. It has been fitting its equipment with the necessary devices. Unfortunately, a number of other producers have not

followed suit. By not doing so, it has been argued that Bell has been placed in a position which makes it less competitive with other producers. In my view, Mr. Speaker, the only real long-term solution is to put all telephone equipment producers on the same competitive basis. All of them should be required to provide telephone terminals which are magnetically compatible with hearing aids. All telephones manufactured in Canada or imported should be required to generate enough electromagnetic flux to be compatible with hearing aids. This requirement should apply to all telephones, residential, public, those used in business. Existing incompatible public telephones should be retrofitted where that is required. It is essential that all new telephones imported into the Canadian market also be required to be compatible.

● (1610)

It has been argued by some that if the federal Government did overturn the CRTC decision, which I would like to see, the whole question should be referred to the Standing Committee on Communications and Culture for further examination. It is my recollection, after speaking with some of the consumer groups representing hearing impaired Canadians, that some of the evidence presented to the CRTC hearings, from which it made its decision, was clearly erroneous. In fact, I have some correspondence from B.C. Tel and others disputing the information that the CRTC received in making its decision. Short of referring the whole question back to the CRTC for proper examination, a perhaps more productive way of dealing with it would be to place it before a committee, such as that on Communications and Culture, where elected representatives of the people in this country could ensure that the hearing impaired in Canada were being dealt with equitably. I am quite sure there is not one Member in the House who has not received correspondence from hearing impaired groups about this very question. I am sure that concern is shared by all Members, and not just by myself or people in my Party. It is something that requires more examination.

I know that my colleague, the Hon. Member for Burnaby (Mr. Robinson), worked extremely closely with groups such as the Western Institute for the Deaf. He has made many representations to the Minister of Communications (Mr. Fox) on this matter. Unfortunately, the response from the Minister's Department has not been as productive or useful as we had hoped. The Minister himself, I must say, is one of the more concerned Members in the Cabinet when it comes to enacting recommendations that have emanated from the Special Committee on the Disabled and the Handicapped, of which I am a member. The Minister has been one of the most caring Ministers. I hope that he uses his persuasive powers to convince the Cabinet, which presently has an appeal before it right now, not to dismiss it lightly but, rather, to have the question referred right up to the Standing Committee or back to the CRTC for proper examination.

There are many misunderstood aspects of this particular case. I have in my hand a letter from one of the Members of the House who had written to the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association. He argued thus in the letter: