

The Prime Minister

Mr. Speaker: Is the hon. member for Ottawa West rising on a question of privilege?

Mr. Reilly: No, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I think the Chair owes an explanation to the House. The hon. member for Ottawa West and the Chair had a discussion about a possible question of privilege. That is why I took the liberty to ask the hon. member whether or not he wished to proceed.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

LABOUR, MANPOWER AND IMMIGRATION

[Translation]

Second report of Standing Committee on Labour, Manpower and Immigration—Mr. Portelance.

[Editor's Note: For text of above report, see today's Votes and Proceedings.]

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COMMUNICATIONS

BELL CANADA RATE INCREASES—ANNOUNCEMENT OF TEMPORARY SUSPENSION OF CTC'S DECISION

Hon. Gérard Pelletier (Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, in allowing a debate this Monday on the March 30 decision of the Canadian Transport Commission you recognized the urgency and the importance of the question and you also recognized the essential role that the telephone plays in the day-to-day lives of all Canadians. This decision affects hundreds of thousands of citizens.

From its very inception in April 1969, my department recognized the social impact of telecommunications and undertook a series of studies under the heading of the Telecommission. The first report—Instant World—followed by the recently tabled green paper asked the question: "How can Canadians be assured of a reasonable variety of choice in the communications services available to them, and what must be done to ensure that at least basic communications services are available to all Canadians, wherever they may live at just and reasonable rates?"

The green paper proposed answers to these and other problems. And in recognition of the impact of telecommunications on the social, cultural and economic life of the country it made concrete suggestions for a new regulatory framework. I hope that these government proposals will, in the very near future, bring about a public discussion leading to a reform of the present regulatory structures so that these social and cultural considerations may be taken into account in future rate cases.

[Mr. Trudeau.]

[English]

In the meantime, as I told the House last Monday, my department and the government are studying the decision of the Canadian Transport Commission on Bell Canada's application to increase its rates. At the time, I told the House that I would undertake to keep hon. members informed of the results as soon as possible. Even though the study is not complete, it has become apparent that there are some vital points surrounding the decision that need explanation and that the commission should be asked for clarification to that effect. The government has decided to suspend the decision pending clarification from the commission and completion of the review.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Don Mazankowski (Vegreville): Mr. Speaker, on behalf of my party I welcome the minister's statement. However, I feel that the explanation for this decision is highly irrelevant. Both in the House and in the transport committee we have expressed our concern about the effect of the decisions of the Canadian Transport Commission granting Bell Canada and CN-CP Telecommunications rate increases. This is precisely why our members on the Standing Committee on Transport and Communications moved for the tabling of all documents, reports, studies and papers relating to the Canadian Transport Commission decision, notwithstanding the reluctance of the president of the commission. This also is precisely why we moved for a 90-day postponement of the implementation of these increased rates in the transport committee yesterday.

We have been particularly concerned about the way in which the commission reached its decision under the guidance of Edgar Benson, whose financial competence is well known to the House.

An hon. Member: Incompetence.

Mr. Mazankowski: Yes, incompetence. The CTC has been given the authority to decide on matters affecting all Canadians' personal lives. The government has frequently chosen to ignore the fact that it does have power to intervene under the provisions of the National Transportation Act. We suggest that if the government does not choose to take the responsibility as representatives of the Canadian people in these matters, then the Canadian people themselves should be allowed to participate in the decision-making of the Canadian Transport Commission.

At present the procedure is heavily weighted in favour of the applicants. I believe that ways and means must be found to redress this balance.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Mazankowski: I believe that the government should seriously consider allowing greater public participation at CTC hearings, especially when they are particularly relevant to the Canadian consumer. The evidence from recent CTC decisions concerning Bell Canada, CN-CP Telecommunications, and freight rate increases shows that the consumer is bearing a heavy load of inflation. This latest decision has created a question mark in the minds of many Canadians as to the credibility of the CTC in