

breakdown in employee-employer relations, then it is our right as well as our responsibility to press the government for answers. And, Mr. Speaker, I mean answers, not excuses.

Over the past couple of years we have seen mail service in rural Canada discriminated against in favour of providing better service for the large urban centres. The urban mail service has not improved and we still suffer from a greatly downgraded service in rural communities. Rural post offices have been closed in the name of centralization. We were told this would improve rural mail service. It has not improved the service in rural Canada, Mr. Speaker: on the contrary, it is worse today than it has ever been.

● (1600)

Mail service is vital to people living in small towns and on farms, just as vital as it is to Canadians who live in large cities. In fact, Mr. Speaker, all of us who have spent our lives in small communities know that communications play a major role in our lives. At the time the government announced it was planning to close hundreds of post offices in small towns and villages across the country, it was pointed out to the Postmaster General that these post offices were more than just places to send or receive letters. These post offices, often run in conjunction with a general store, were places where people could get together socially. There are hundreds of places in rural Canada where distances between towns and farms are so great that the only time some people can see their neighbours on a regular basis is at the post office.

I know that the Postmaster General can make a good case for not being in business to provide social centres for rural Canadians, but I can make just as good a case for the government being in power at the will of the people, and these rural Canadians are people. They have every right to expect the government to provide mail service that is readily accessible and also mail service that is personal.

We have been told that the main reason, if not the only reason, for closing down rural post offices was to reduce costs so that the Post Office Department could provide better service without incurring a deficit. Well, postal service is worse than it has ever been and the deficit for this fiscal year is higher than ever. Is it any wonder that Canadians, especially rural Canadians, are not inclined to believe the government any more?

The government is now in conflict with the Canadian postmasters' union over the great disparity in the rates of pay for postmasters in different areas of the country. I think it is safe to say that the postmasters will lose this round, as they have lost others. All the government has to do is close down the rest of the rural post offices and put the postmasters out of their jobs. In that way they not only settle this dispute; they would ensure that the rural postmasters would not be around to bother them in the future.

In some areas of the country people are required to travel many miles daily just to see if there is any mail in their boxes or to mail a letter. This is one of the results of the new policies of the Post Office to increase efficiency. There are examples every day of letters being delivered two days after being mailed, over a distance that can be travelled in 30 minutes. This is commonplace today. It

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often takes two to three days for letters to be delivered in the city in which they are mailed.

The government is presently engaged in a multimillion dollar program to automate mail handling, and I am very much afraid that we are again on the verge of a major confrontation between the Post Office Department and the unions. As in everything else, the government has failed to plan properly for this major innovation. I am already hearing reports that the unions are not happy with the way negotiations are progressing with respect to issues such as job classification and job security. This is an old story, and while we should be used to it by now, we certainly should not have to take the same nonsense year after year.

I think it is time for the government to appoint a postmaster general who will take his job seriously. We have had enough of the government's policy that uses the postmaster general's portfolio to reward frontbenchers for good service, or as a means of demoting ministers without actually throwing them out of the cabinet. It is a department that requires a minister who is capable of running it; it requires a minister who is interested enough to give the job his full attention.

We have already seen how much importance the present minister attaches to the Post Office Department and to his portfolio. He would be well advised to start thinking and talking about the Post Office Department and to stop worrying about who is going to form the next government. The Canadian people will decide who forms the next government, Mr. Speaker. I can appreciate the minister's concern that my party is going to form the next government, because there is every indication that this will happen in the not too distant future. But until then the minister has a responsibility that he should start taking a bit more seriously.

The latest gimmick introduced by the Post Office Department is the postal code. We have been told that this is one of the answers to restoring adequate postal service. This new device has already cost millions of dollars and we are now told that it will be several years before it is in full operation throughout the country. We do not know yet what we will get for those millions of dollars, but we know that the mail service is still poor and that there is no reason for the Canadian people to be optimistic about the future prospects for better mail delivery.

The government appears to be determined to operate departments with the same yardstick in spite of the fact that it has been proven to be ineffective over and over again. In the case of the Unemployment Insurance Commission, the government instituted the same policy of centralization as they have in the Post Office Department. The UIC is a shambles, and last year the cost of operating that department was almost a billion dollars more than the forecast deficit.

In the case of the Post Office Department, centralization has increased costs and decreased the quality of postal service. All the post offices that were closed in rural Canada in the interest of efficiency and economy might better have been left operating. The level of service would have been better, many postmasters would still have jobs and the people would have been far happier.