

Adjournment Debate

when has cash minted at the Canadian Mint been unacceptable payment for Canadian goods and services? I question the legality of such a resolution. Second, Bell subscribers were not given adequate warning of this policy change. One morning my constituency office was inundated with phone calls from citizens who had made the trip to the Bell office. These citizens were following their normal practice of paying their bills in person with cash. I cannot accept that the powers that be at Bell would be so remiss as to forget to notify their customers of such an important change. Yet there were an awful lot of constituents who were not aware of this new regulation. I would be remiss if I did not suggest that, in this matter, Bell was just not trying very hard.

● (1820)

My third protest against this regulation is that many of my constituents must now pay a charge to their banks for the processing of cheques and money orders required for bill payment. One constituent calculated that this will cost him an extra \$24 a year. This is hardly fair when Canadian legal tender can be used without service charge. I have a dollar bill here and it states on it: "This note is legal tender".

Fourth, the Bell Canada office in question in my riding will not accept cash payment for bills, but it will accept cash for the purchase of phones and equipment. I cannot wait for an explanation of Bell Canada's convoluted reasoning on this one! Worst of all is the fact that residents of nearby Toronto can still pay their phone bills in cash. I bear no ill will toward Torontonians, but this is a clear case of discrimination against citizens of the eighth largest and fastest growing city in the country.

My final worry is the relationship between the CRTC and Bell Canada. When this problem first came to my attention, I phoned the CRTC. I was informed that the Commission was looking into the situation. However, I sensed a certain reluctance by the CRTC to become involved. Personnel at the CRTC explained that it was not normal policy to interfere with internal administrative issues at Bell, that rates were the matter of greatest concern. What this means is that the CRTC is taking a long time to look into a situation, but in the final analysis no action will be taken. This is not good enough.

Of course, the role of Bell Canada cannot be overlooked. I have nothing in principle against Bell Canada. Bell does an extremely efficient job in allowing Canadians to communicate across this vast land and around the world. Yet Bell is a monopoly, one that makes a great deal of money. In looking over Bell's financial statements, we find that for the nine months ended September 30, 1985, Bell's net income increased 15 per cent from the corresponding period in the previous year. We find that total revenues rose by 28 per cent. For the year ended December 31, 1984, total revenues were up by 19 per cent. During 1984, Bell's acquisitions included new interests and remaining interests in several large corporations.

At the time of the drafting of this speech, Bell had not responded in the news media to complaints about this action,

although I understand that a statement may be forthcoming. I have ascertained that Bell has taken this action in the name of cost-cutting and efficiency, and because Bell believes this action will keep phone rates at a reasonable level. Bell also suggested that this policy was justified because it was no different from that of other large utility companies. I am 100 per cent in favour of efficiency, cost-cutting and reasonable phone rates, but Bell's action promotes none of these goals.

What is efficient about a Phonecentre which accepts cash for equipment, but which will not accept cash for telephone bill payment on the very same premises? How does this policy help to keep phone rates reasonable when consumers must pay a service charge on the cheques required to pay bills? For those who make few long distance calls, service charges mean that the total amount paid for phone bills could even increase.

After phoning both Ottawa Hydro and Mississauga Hydro in my riding, I was informed that it is standard policy to accept cash payment for bills. In the matter of cost-cutting, I would be very interested in seeing Bell's figures on how much this action will save. To my knowledge, Bell staff has not been let go, nor have Bell offices closed as a result of this. What and where are the savings? More important, is this action justified? Even if Bell Canada saves a few dollars, can this decision really be condoned? It is discriminatory. It causes inconvenience and expense to the consumer. It represents a unilateral decision made by a powerful monopoly. It may be illegal.

It has been said that the Progressive Conservative Party is the Party of big business. I have always found this view to be unfounded and uninformed. Especially in this matter, I have no intention of siding with the big guy, nor do the other members of this Progressive Conservative Government who have spoken out against Bell Canada's action.

● (1825)

I urge Bell Canada to waste no time in reversing this ill-advised policy. Barring this, I expect the CRTC to perform its duty in ordering a reversal of this policy. If all else fails, the Government should do everything in its power to have this decision revoked.

Mr. Bernard Valcourt (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Revenue): Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Member for Mississauga North (Mr. Horner) has raised a very important issue, one that is of concern to his constituents and, indeed, to all Bell Canada subscribers. As I understand it, Last November Bell Canada started to phase out its teller facilities in its Phonecentres and teleboutiques. This means subscribers will no longer be able to pay their telephone bills with cash. While by far the majority of subscribers, 90 per cent, pay their bills by mail or at banks, some customers have been accustomed to visiting a Bell office and paying cash.

Bell Canada has indicated that it has taken this action because the role of the Phonecentres has changed in recent years. Phonecentres were originally set up to display phones