

Adjournment Debate

The fact of the matter is that the premier of Saskatchewan has indicated in quite specific terms that he for one regards pay television as being exclusively within the jurisdiction of the provincial government. The parliamentary secretary who is going to answer for the minister tonight will, I think, agree that this position has been taken by a number of provinces, which feel that a closed circuit, pay television type of operation is the sort of area of responsibility that would fall within provincial jurisdiction, and therefore they do not accept any licensing requirement on the part of the federal government or CRTC.

● (2220)

Indeed I think the Premier of Saskatchewan said the legislation he intended to bring forward governing cable television will establish regulations for aspects of cable over which the province feels it has control, namely, closed-circuit TV. The premier said the legislation was not intended to become part of the ongoing dispute between the Saskatchewan and federal governments over the control of communications on the basis that the province feels it has jurisdiction over closed-circuit television. The premier argued that closed-circuit systems now exist in the Toronto area that are not controlled by the CRTC and, given that precedent, he argued that Ottawa could not claim control in respect of closed-circuit systems. He said that the federal government could not set one law for Ontario and another one for Saskatchewan. I am certain that the parliamentary secretary, although he is from Ontario, would certainly agree that this latter point is valid.

What I am trying to determine from the government, and apparently the Acting Prime Minister was not aware what the policy was in this respect or was not prepared to answer last Friday, is precisely what position the government takes in respect of jurisdiction in this very important area. I was amazed that the Acting Prime Minister was not in a position or not prepared to tell me what the policy of the government was, because this is certainly something that has had a high profile in the press, and something which has been before the cabinet and before the government for some period of time. It seems to me this refusal on the part of the government to answer, and the remarks of the minister who dismissed the contention of the province of Saskatchewan arbitrarily, referring to it rather unfortunately as "crap", were unfortunate.

What is developing now in this country is a situation in which, regardless of political affiliation, there is a distrust of government on almost every facet of federal relations with the provinces. In other words, a spirit of confrontation seems to exist on the part of the federal government in respect of its dealings with the provinces.

This is a prime example of a matter which has been before the federal government, yet the federal government has apparently not indicated in any uniform manner what its policy is. It has made a special sort of contract with the province of Manitoba in respect of cable television there. If one looks at that contract he will see it does not in effect commit the provincial government to accepting the federal government's

[Mr. Hnatyshyn.]

point of view, or the federal government to accepting the provincial government's viewpoint in respect of jurisdiction. In other words this is being done on a piecemeal basis. The government refuses to make any sort of arrangement on a rational, reasonable, and uniform basis with the provinces across Canada. This is another indication of the kind of balkanization approach to federal-provincial relations which this government seems to want to adopt.

Quite frankly I was very dissatisfied with the slough-off I received to my question last Friday, that non-answer. This parliamentary secretary is, I believe, a reasonable and rational person, and I hope he will come forward tonight to let us know in no uncertain terms what position the federal government is taking in respect of this matter, the basis upon which it is taking that position, giving some indication to the provinces as to how they might approach this question of jurisdiction over paid television.

Mr. Ross Milne (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the fact that the hon. member for Saskatoon-Biggar (Mr. Hnatyshyn) has raised this in the context he has. I take it from his remarks that he is expressing a sincere concern in respect of this policy issue, and I think this underlies the fact that it is perhaps a difficult issue with no very easy resolution.

First of all, on reading the excerpt from the speech from the throne in the province of Saskatchewan I want to say it is not very clear what the province of Saskatchewan intends to do. Perhaps it would be good to put on the record the quotation from that speech:

Over the past few months, my Government has attempted to ensure access to cable television for the people of Saskatchewan. The coaxial cable now being installed by SaskTel can supply Saskatchewan communities with cable television at equitable and reasonable rates. The CRTC has insisted that those licensed to provide cable TV should own at least part of the equipment. This would result in a duplication of equipment, higher costs, and possible loss of service for smaller communities. My government wishes to provide the largest possible number of citizens with a greater range of TV programs without such wasteful duplication. You will be asked to approve legislation relating to provincial aspects of cable TV service.

I think it is fair to say that it is not terribly clear what is meant by the sentence "you will be asked to approve legislation relating to provincial aspects of cable TV service," and perhaps to be precise in responding to the hon. member's concern we will have to wait and see what those provisions might be. I do not think there is any question but that the federal jurisdiction stands for the question of cable television through licensing operators through pay TV. I am raising the point that I think in a discussion of this we must be careful to distinguish between pay TV and closed circuit TV because they are very different things.

The hon. member referred to the expression the minister used. I think she was really referring to the quality of programming on closed circuit TV rather than the process itself or anything to do with the major concern raised by the hon. member for Saskatoon-Biggar. Really I think there are two points. The hon. member raised the question of the Manitoba agreement. It really is not an agreement which deals so much