

Broadcasting

● (1550)

I come back to my earlier question: Who is really calling the shots? In all of this there is one fundamental question: Who is really regulating the regulator? Is it the minister who looks after what the CRTC is doing and who is suggesting that in administration sometimes they are not really up to scratch? Is it right to have licence applications for cable outstanding for six to eight years, as was the case in Saint John where they waited for six years, and also in Regina and Saskatoon where they waited for eight years? Is it right that our cities should be waiting so long for the CRTC to make a determination on their cable applications? As the hon. member who represents Pembroke knows, that city has been waiting for a number of years for the CRTC to decide on microwave in that area. In many other areas there are interminable delays caused by administrative red tape.

It is obvious to me that the Minister of Communications should involve himself more—without in any way interfering with programming—in the actual administrative function of the commission, and he should be much more receptive to the complaints from coast to coast about the administrative red tape and other problems which the CRTC creates. It seems that sometimes the commission is its own worst enemy. The CRTC officials often come before the Standing Committee on Broadcasting, Films and Assistance to the Arts and they use that great escape clause or scapegoat and say, "Gentlemen, your questions are good, very interesting, penetrating, etc., but we are just trying to interpret the will of parliament under the Broadcasting Act and if you want to do anything you will have to change the act".

So what do we have? We have a brand new bill, a housekeeping bill which does not get down to any of the fundamental problems. As I have said, it creates many more problems and it does not give more authority to the Minister of Communications to regulate the regulator any more than has been the case up to the present. Many more things could be said at this stage but I know that other hon. members will want to contribute to the debate. Let me only say that one of the saddest things with regard to this bill, perhaps because of the technical and complex nature of the whole field of communications, is that while it vitally involves all Canadians in the use of cable, in the rates they pay for telephone service under this bill, or in the broadcasting signals, and while it involves the very life-style of all Canadians, it has not stimulated the type of debate either in the committee or in the House that it should have. The last real debate in the whole area of broadcasting was on the Broadcasting Act in 1968.

My colleague, the hon. member for Halifax-East Hants (Mr. McCleave), who is here in the House, is very familiar with that debate: he took a leading part in it, as did the then secretary of state, Miss Judy LaMarsh, who piloted the bill. At that time there were no obvious solutions to these fundamental problems, but members from all sides of the House contributed in trying to seek solutions in this complicated field. Since then there has been silence in the House in terms of legislation, but not outside the House. One might ask, why are we dealing with a so-called housekeeping bill when so many fundamental problems are there to be solved?

[Mr. Nowlan.]

I hope the minister will reply at some stage in this debate to some of the questions that were raised in committee and which I have asked today. I have directed my questions to him in his ministerial capacity. I believe that, after the legislation brought in in 1968 and all the studies that have been carried out, the housekeeping bill before us is a rather pathetic piece of legislation on a matter that is so fundamental, one which involves Canadians in all parts of the country. Perhaps the minister will be able to comment on that matter when he speaks later in the debate.

Mr. Cyril Symes (Sault Ste. Marie): Mr. Speaker, I did not intend to make any comments on this bill on third reading, but after I heard the hon. member for Annapolis Valley (Mr. Nowlan) I thought I would make a few points. I made many of my criticisms of this bill on second reading and in committee. To a large degree, I sympathize with the Minister of Communications (Mr. Pelletier) because of the problems that he, as federal minister, is facing in this very complex, difficult and important area of communications in the country. Indeed, there have been federal-provincial conferences to try to iron out some of the jurisdictional problems between the federal and provincial governments. Sad to say, there does not seem to have been much progress made at those conferences.

Meanwhile, we seem to be drifting, in terms of a communications policy. I believe we need a strong federal presence in communications, because often we are concerned about the economy of the country, control and ownership, but if our broadcasting system does not meet the needs of Canadians but relies on foreign programs and foreign ideas, then we are eroding the cultural and national fabric of this country.

It seems to me very important that we move speedily in the area of communications to set up a national communications policy and iron out the problems of jurisdiction. Therefore, I was disappointed in Bill C-5 which has turned out to be just a housekeeping bill—although sometimes I wonder about housekeeping bills: often they are sleepers; in other words, some of the administrative changes that are made have far reaching implications.

On the issue of jurisdiction, I would have hoped that Bill C-5 would have done more than just amalgamate the communications part of the Canadian Transport Commission with the Canadian Radio-Television Commission. I had hoped there would have been some recognition of the need for provincial input in determining policy. Again, I think ultimately the final jurisdiction must be in the hands of the federal government. The minister well knows that if he wanted to, he could take the case to court and the Supreme Court would find in favour of the federal government in a case, for example, involving jurisdiction over cable.

I commend the minister for trying the consultative approach in seeking some kind of accommodation with the provinces, but I do not know how long we can follow that route because if we cannot reach that kind of agreement and just keep postponing, meanwhile we will only be drifting in trying to find a communications policy for this country. I hope we can strike a balance—that the federal government, through its regulatory agencies, can have the power to regulate broadcasting across this country and, at the same time, that the federal government will recognize