

• (1230)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Réginald Bélair (Cochrane—Superior): Mr. Speaker, I admit I have mixed feelings about taking part in today's debate. Of course I support my colleagues who are against this bill for a number of reasons. First of all, the bill proposes to sell 10 per cent of the shares to employees without giving them voting rights as shareholders. The tax credit is an excellent proposal, but the bill does not provide for direct participation by employees in the management and operations of Canada Post.

The idea is admirable. We must admit that. However, I would like to share a somewhat personal example with my colleagues in this House, having been actively involved when the employees of Spruce Falls Power & Paper Co. Limited in Kapuskasing, in my riding, acquired a majority interest in their company. For them it was a very significant development, because from that moment on they were in control of their own future and participated directly in the company's management decisions. Their attitude changed dramatically. They took a great deal more pride in their work, absenteeism went down and finally they had a sense of belonging and at the end of the day, when they retired, they would have something very tangible and worthwhile to call their own.

That is not what Bill C-73 does. If the government had intended to at least give these new shareholders voting rights, I would have supported the bill from the word go. Unfortunately that is not the case. And add to that the unsavoury developments of the past 10 years during which we saw a Crown corporation, which in the final analysis belongs to Canadians, gradually edge toward privatization.

There is a price to pay and it was paid by closing down many small post offices. Small, because they are located in Canada's rural areas. It is a very high price because in most cases the post office was the only place in the community that had a federal presence. It was probably the only building flying the Canadian flag.

During the debate around the referendum and the Charlottetown accord, we saw that Canadians still have this very strong desire to feel part of this Canadian

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community. Canada Post was one way to promote Canadian unity.

Those of my constituents who went to the post offices have now been closed—six were closed in my riding—felt very strongly about this presence. To them it was a sign that the federal government took them seriously, that they were important. It is something we tend to forget in our large urban centres, in Canada's largest cities, where because of the population density the federal presence is everywhere and all departments are represented.

• (1235)

In small rural post offices there was also the human factor. I have another experience I would like to share with you. My parents, and especially my mother, ran a post office in the small community of Opasatika for 37 years. I remember that when my mother died there were so many people at the funeral that our small church was full. I felt I had to mention my mother's contribution to this community. Every day she met people from the village who came to pick up their mail at the post office. She always had a friendly word for these people and that is why they liked her.

The post office was also a place to meet people, to talk and get the latest news, because we always had a bulletin board where people could put up whatever they wanted. My point is that the kind of personal contact we had before is now gradually disappearing.

We also had the supermailboxes that caused so many problems, especially in rural areas where in the winter snow removal is sometimes less than perfect. I need hardly mention the problems caused by these mailboxes when they are frozen shut. I think this is ample proof that the purpose of the bill is certainly not to improve operations, especially in rural areas.

Last year, another post office in my riding, the one in Moonbeam, was about to close. People rallied to this cause. They wanted to make sure their post office did not close, since the building as such was relatively new, in good condition and the quality of service provided was also very much appreciated by the people in Moonbeam.

We do not know what happened and probably never will, but believe it or not, we managed to keep this post office open. More power to Canada Post, which realized