

public functions which must be looked at very closely is the postal services. It seems to me the government has failed to do this. It has failed to deal with the problems affecting the post office in the past few years.

I wish to acknowledge that one of the first actions, possibly the first, of the present minister responsible for the post office was to place a moratorium on further post office closures in Canada. I was happy to see this action because it at least brought about a temporary reprieve in respect of the havoc wreaked by his predecessor who closed hundreds of post offices across Canada. I think all of us will recognize that some adjustments and changes had to take place. Of course, many of the problems now facing the post office are the direct result of the political patronage practices of the past. I know the former Postmaster General at least tried to take some of the politics out of post office matters. I want to say I hope the present minister in charge of the post office is following and will continue to follow such a policy. I hope he will take partisan politics out of post office matters.

I acknowledge that some progress has been made in this field in recent years. Of course, the political patronage system is responsible for some of the problems with which the post office department has been wrestling. I heard of a case involving three post offices in a rural area which were within five miles of each other. The three postmasters concerned were not all Liberals. The two on either side, at the extremities, were Liberals and the man in the centre was a Conservative. The two Liberals were appointed when the Liberal government was in power and the Conservative was appointed when the Conservative government was in power. The post office situation in that area was studied and it was found that there was room for one post office. A decision was made to keep the one in the centre, which happened to be the one held by a Conservative supporter. Were the Liberal supporters of that area angry! They knew that some of their privileges of the past had been foreclosed. This is the type of thing which has bedevilled the post office too often in past years.

I have had some experience with the closing of some rural post offices in my constituency. I had no argument in respect of some of them. In a few cases I made inquiries and found there were no objections in the communities, therefore I entered no objections to the closures which were being proposed. However, there were some others the services of which I felt were essential and should be retained. One such case I discussed in this House on a previous occasion. I refer to the post office at Serath, Saskatchewan, located about 60 miles north of the city of Regina on highway 6, and on the boundary between Regina East and Regina Lake Centre constituencies.

Serath is a small rural community removed from the railway lines. It is some 20 miles distant from the nearest railway line to the south and almost 20 miles from the nearest railway line to the north. Also, it is 20 miles from the nearest railway line and post office point to the west. This is a large rural area in which there were a number of small post offices. All these post offices have been closed in recent years, and I have no argument in respect

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of some of these closures. It would seem to me, however, that there is room for this one last post office located not in some farmhouse or small isolated store, but in a community which has been built up and centered around the post office and a number of other services in the immediate vicinity. Not a very large number of householders were involved—some 48 in number—but once the Serath post office was closed some of them would have to go a distance of 25 miles or more to obtain postal service. Lo and behold, the Postmaster General decided to close the Serath post office along with one other post office in that rural area. The hon. member for Regina-Lake Centre (Mr. Benjamin) and I made representations. We discussed the matter with the people in the local community who made it very clear that they wanted to have that post office retained in preference to having the rural route service which was offered as an alternative. In spite of all the representations we made and the interviews we had with the minister responsible, our representations and appeals were turned down.

This seemed to be a strange decision, so I put down a motion for the production of papers asking for all correspondence in connection with this post office closure. I found that the Liberal members for Saskatchewan had become very much interested in this little post office at Serath. Serath had not received as much attention throughout its entire life span. I have, for example, a letter which came from the office of the Hon. Otto Lang, now Minister of Manpower and Immigration. I might say the Minister of Manpower and Immigration is responsible for piloting a bill through the House of Commons, which is now being considered by the Agricultural Committee, and which he claims will be the salvation of the western grain industry and the prairie agricultural economy. What was the role the minister played in connection with this particular rural community? I should like to quote from a letter that came from a research assistant in the office of that particular minister. He was dealing with two post offices, one happened to be close to the Minister's constituency. The one Post Office served only about 40 householders, while the Serath post office served 48 householders, a larger number. He said:

● (4:30 p.m.)

However, there is a proviso and that is that the same people who would prefer the Serath post office to close would firmly support the maintenance of the Esk post office.

This, I suggest, is a sleazy bit of political business.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Burton: Here we have an example of political patronage at its worst in the Post Office. This letter is dated January, 1970, and the minister could go to his files and find this correspondence. This letter shows the role that was played by one of his colleagues in closing out a service that was vital to the people in that rural community. I suggest there are other cases similar to that to be found in the files.

So, this study went on and eventually a letter came from the office of the minister of communications inform-