

Adjournment Debate

• (2210)

POST OFFICE—NEW POSTAL CODE—PROVISION OF
PRINTED STICKERS TO PUBLIC

Mr. Dan McKenzie (Winnipeg South Centre): Mr. Speaker, first I should like to congratulate the minister on the new arrival in his household.

I wish to speak on the matter of the postal code that soon will be used across this nation. There are some serious defects in this system and there is a question concerning exactly how successful the code will be. The introduction of a Canadian postal code and the proposed investment of \$100 million for a mechanization program in the Canada Post Office are causing considerable waves in public opinion and the postal unions in particular. A much simpler coding system could have been adopted. The possible error factor is too high and will create confusion. Machine sorting will be done only for coded mail, and therefore hand sorting could not be eliminated. The desired rate of 50 per cent to 60 per cent coded mail will definitely not achieve a cost reduction, for the obvious reasons.

I do not agree with the objections of the postal unions that the proposed mechanization will reduce the labour force. The opposite is more likely. It is the investment of \$100 million which should be the main concern. Once the equipment is installed, it has to be maintained. Repairs, occasional breakdowns and improvement of the sophisticated equipment will be an additional cost factor and also more reason to keep the old hand-sorting method alive. It will be no surprise if the present postal deficit of \$77 million to \$105 million per year doubles in the near future. As a result, the total deficit for the next decade could reach \$1,500 million to \$2,000 million. We will have to make unpopular decisions to cover the enormous money demand of the civil service, which in turn is influenced by so-called experts. The Canadian taxpayer will have to pay again for experiments, as he has so often in the past 20 years.

Since the Canada Post Office is on the road of no return with the introduction of the postal code, it would appear that a complimentary label system will be required. I have further information on the label system which I have presented to the Postmaster General (Mr. Ouellet).

It seems to be a fact that the rising prosperity of nations is leading to inflated costs of their services. One of the most affected is the postal service. While the West German postal deficit in 1970-71 was over \$120 million, the Canadian postal service was operated in the past decade with close to a \$600 million deficit, with \$77 million for 1971-72. The mail sorting operations represent a key problem, also, for the slowly decreasing efficiency. Therefore, the Canadian postal service is in the process of introducing an area coding system with an investment of \$70 million for mail sorting equipment.

The record shows that in Great Britain, where the coding system was introduced three years ago, only very few people use it. There is no doubt that the coding system, with its sophisticated equipment, depends solely on the participation of the public. In order to utilize the sorting equipment, the code system must be extensively used, otherwise it will create considerable confusion and

will make the equipment obsolete. The label system is designed to solve this problem by creating many personal advantages for the participant so that he will be more inclined to use the code.

I have further comments in respect of the postal code. Postal codes as complicated as those pressed by the Post Office upon Canadian postal users were introduced in Britain more than two years ago. With the exception of a few firms, practically nobody uses them. They do not appear on the letterheads of reputable newspapers. A large number of private citizens are not even aware they exist. I asked friends in London for their postal code, hoping to speed up my mail. "What postal code?" was their astonished reply. This is in stark contrast to the use of zip codes in the United States or postal codes in most of continental Europe. Further, Britain and Canada seem to be the only countries in which the Post Office has been persevering in respect of fully automatic sorting.

All other industrialized countries, including the United States, have come to the conclusion that this is impractical since it would presuppose every letter writer knowing the complicated codes of all his or her correspondents. Most countries use a simple code of figures or letters denoting districts. This means that detailed sorting has to be done by hand. But British experience has shown that after five years a vast majority of people never use the complicated code, and sorting then has to be done by hand. The very expensive machinery thus lies idle. And there are not enough skilled sorters available and mail is subjected to endless delays.

Automation is not the answer to every problem; there are many occasions when human skill is both superior and faster. If the Post Office had invested all the money that has been poured into the sophisticated machinery in human relations, we might have had a faster service and perhaps even contented personnel.

As you can see, Mr. Speaker, there are serious doubts as to the success of the postal code. Over half a million dollars has been spent to advertise the code system but the question is: Will it do the job? I am sure the country will be most interested in the Postmaster General's comments.

Hon. André Ouellet (Postmaster General): Mr. Speaker, first I want to thank the hon. member and to assure him that both the mother and the son are doing well. Judging by the way my boy arrived on earth, crying, I would be surprised if very soon he were not in politics and in the House of Commons.

I would like to say first, in reply to the hon. member, that three minutes is very little time in which to answer all the questions that he has put tonight. The response to the code, based on the experience in the province where the code has been launched, has so far been excellent and it is continuing to be good. We hope to complete coding in Canada by the end of this year and then we will be able to cope with the problems in sorting the mail.

The reason this code uses letters and figures is that we want to have a code which would allow us to fulfil our requirements not only at present but for the 20 years ahead. The other reason we have such a code is that it is