

Bell Canada Act

neatly confined and controlled while profits can be used in other areas and the enormous cash flow can produce expansion and great gain from which the actual users of the telephone systems in Canada will get little if any benefit is an indication of the kind of capitalism that is triumphant in this country. It is the capitalism of which both the Official Opposition and the governing Party, more or less solidly, happily support.

It is fun to examine balance sheets and to watch annual meetings take place. It is fun to see the presidents, managers and directors of this company feel very, very happy. It is not so much fun to contemplate what that particular company is about as it presses its case against Canadian users of telephone services and keeps up the perpetual drive to increase its returns.

One can focus on only one aspect of that drive, Bell Canada's endeavour to move from the current flat rate rental to charges for the amount of use that is made of the telephones. The latest item in that area is the possibility of this charge being applied to businesses using telephone lines to exchange computer information. Of course, modern technology opens up all kinds of wondrous possibilities, and one of them is the possibility of monitoring those bursts of information which are flowing over the wires by counting how many bits flow by a whatever astronomical rate it may be and sending the business that is using the service a bill reflecting how much information it received. In this way, the companies with the most advanced equipment that are able to send information in the shortest period of time will not get a cheaper ride on the system.

That is an interesting application to business, but I am more concerned about the prospect of individual subscribers to telephone systems being faced with billing according to the amount of use that is made of their telephones. If that were to be applied, then instead of having a utility that is available to all Canadians on a flat rate rental, every poor subscriber still able to maintain a telephone will be doing his or her bit in making Bell Canada as profitable as it will be allowed to be within this stable of enterprises.

I suppose Members of Parliament, who can all too easily settle into their comfortable seats and live the life of the privileged that the Parliament of Canada gives them, are all too likely to forget the plight of individual subscribers. They are all too likely to forget that people who have been unemployed and people living on social assistance who need a telephone in order to maintain their connections and to pursue job hunts will find that Bell Canada, thanks to the possible acquiescence of the CRTC, is deterring them in their basic information-seeking endeavour.

At that point, I imagine that government Members who are happy about this now, as indicated by their composure, may not be nearly as happy to respond to what their constituents will say about this. They will more or less gracefully throw up their hands and say that that is the law of the land because a Bill was passed in Parliament. They may not refer to their part in helping that Bill pass. They will do this, instead of realizing that there are points at which those eventualities begin to unfold, and this happens to be one of those points. When a

Government, in the absence of the Official Opposition, allows that to happen, it is in fact making it more difficult if not impossible for my constituents and for all of our constituents to maintain telephones and to keep in contact. It is in fact putting a hindrance in the way of the flow of information that is so important to economic life. It is in fact driving people to think of telephone use not as a right, as it is now in a country with the largest number of telephones per capita in the world, but as a privilege.

When I was in Baltimore in the United States as a graduate student 20 years ago, I experienced that kind of telephone use. My landlady was quite anxious about the number of calls I might make and was even anxious about the number of local calls I might make because she had to pay per call for the calls that I made. That eventuality is one of the possibilities that surely exists as a result of the passage of this legislation and the acquiescence of the Government in what corporate giants wish to do in order to increase their wealth at the expense of Canadian people including widows and the unemployed.

I challenge government Members to be a little less pleased about the progress that this Bill represents and a little more anxious about it all. I suppose it is impossible to move them to vote it down, but certainly these are the kinds of concerns that give us adequate reason to oppose the Bill, as did the Hon. Member for Winnipeg North (Mr. Orlikow) and as I know other members of our caucus will do as well.

● (1640)

I am pleased that I had the opportunity to speak on this Bill in defence of constituents of mine who are anxious about the ways in which Bell Canada will use its powers, and questions will arise about the way in which that power will be supported and strengthened by the Government.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Are there questions or comments?

Mr. Orlikow: Mr. Speaker, it has been estimated by the Consumers Association of Canada and other organizations that about 97 per cent of Canadians are telephone subscribers. The reason there is such a high rate of users is that the monthly rate has been kept low. What does the Hon. Member for Thunder Bay-Nipigon (Mr. Epp) think the effect would be of sharp increases in monthly telephone rates, such as have been experienced in the United States as a result of the deregulation of the telephone industry and the competition which was created by the new companies to the American Bell system for long distance rates? That has led to very sharp increases in monthly rates and many more increases are predicted. What would be the effects of such increases on the users in his constituency, many of whom live in small, isolated communities?

Mr. Epp (Thunder Bay-Nipigon): Mr. Speaker, the answer to that question must inevitably have something of conjecture about it. I do not think it takes any great amount of knowledge to realize that sharp increases in telephone rates are bound to have a detrimental effect. One of the difficulties with which my predecessors failed to deal in the Thunder Bay area with