

● (2100)

POST OFFICE

POSSIBLE DISRUPTION OF SERVICE

Hon. Ernest C. Manning: Honourable senators, I would like to raise a question with the Leader of the Government in the Senate on a matter that may be of serious public importance in the next few weeks. I am sure we have all seen the rather disturbing reports in the last few days to the effect that the inside postal workers are moving to a position where we may see the mail service of Canada tied up by the end of this month. I am sure we all hope that that will not happen, but my reason for raising this question now is the timetable that has been mentioned here with regard to the adjournment of Parliament. Past experience has indicated that those who engineer these disruptions make a habit of having them start just after Parliament has adjourned, so that Parliament is not in a position to deal with a situation that can become very serious for the public unless Parliament is recalled.

I would ask, honourable senators, first of all, whether the government is giving consideration to this possible disruption and what it will mean to the Canadian people. Secondly, does the government now have the legislative power necessary to deal with the situation, should it arise, without having to recall Parliament? In view of the summit conference coming up, I think the recalling of Parliament would be extremely difficult. Honourable senators will surely agree that, in light of the difficulties facing, in particular, small business people in this country today in terms of financial problems, high interest costs and all of those things, it would be absolutely disastrous—in my view, at least—for the government to permit the essential mail services of this country to be disrupted for any period of time. Even a matter of a week would be extremely serious.

My question really is: Is the government aware of the possibilities? Particularly, does the government now possess all the legislative authority necessary to deal with such an emergency if it should arise? If the government does not possess that power, and in view of the timetable that has been announced, it seems to me that it would have to be addressed immediately in order for that authority to be obtained before Parliament adjourns. This would seem to me the logical thing to do, rather than to take a chance on the disruption not occurring and then having to recall Parliament to head off a serious national emergency.

Hon. Raymond J. Perrault (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, the government is monitoring the situation very closely. However, I will take the question as notice. Certainly, there is no power held by the government which would enable it, in some unilateral fashion, to forestall a work stoppage of the kind described. However, we will await detailed information from the Minister of Labour.

Senator Manning: May I ask one supplementary question? In view of past experience, not just with regard to the Post Office but also with regard to those occasional serious disruptions that occur in other vital public services, would it not be

[Senator Smith.]

desirable for the government to consider some form of emergency legislation which could be invoked in situations of this kind to prevent serious public harm being done, without having to recall Parliament and incurring the costs and the inevitable delay before that long process could be gone through?

I raise this second point because, if the government is going to look at this in connection with a threatened postal strike, I would suggest that any examination might be broadened to see whether, as a general principle, there should be some authority of that kind to take care of this type of national situation between the time Parliament adjourns and it reconvenes.

Senator Perrault: Certainly, the Honourable Senator Manning advances an interesting proposal. The question of strikes and lockouts in relation to the public interest has attracted a great deal of attention, not only from all of Canada's political parties but also from individual senators and members of Parliament who serve in the House of Commons. The government would welcome the views of any honourable senator on this important subject.

As I am sure the Honourable Senator Manning is aware, a great many work stoppages occur in sectors which are not within federal jurisdiction. Certainly, the Post Office is within federal jurisdiction, but such incidents as the police strike which occurred in Halifax or in the maritime provinces are under provincial jurisdiction.

This is an important question and it may well be that at some point a committee of the Senate should focus its attention on what has become a vital issue for many Canadians.

Hon. Robert Muir: I have listened with great interest to the distinguished and Honourable Senator Manning. To clarify something in my mind, may I ask the government leader this question? Is it not correct that it is the law of the land that the Government of Canada, in the other place and in this place, gave those in government employment the right to strike after due negotiations? I realize there are many problems and inconveniences involved in recalling Parliament during an adjournment. However, we have the law to consider. As the Leader of the Government has said, quite a number of other disruptions—lockouts, wildcat strikes and so on—have nothing to do with federal government employees. Therefore, the federal government has no jurisdiction over such disputes.

Simply to affirm my own understanding, didn't the government of the day and, I presume, this Senate pass that law?

Senator Perrault: Honourable senators, the Honourable Senator Muir has made a valid point. As I recall, when the right to collective bargaining was extended to federal employees it had the support of all of Canada's political parties. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to have machinery in place which would remove the right to collective bargaining should some public inconvenience be caused. Of course, situations arise where the public interest is affected so gravely that governments must take extraordinary action. Indeed, the Senate has assisted in the resolution of such problems, as all of us are aware.