

Bell Canada Act

• (1110)

Mr. Nelson A. Riis (Kamloops-Shuswap): Mr. Speaker, I do not plan to take a lot of time discussing Bill C-19 today, but I have a few thoughts which I would like to put on the record. Obviously this specific legislation is extremely important in terms of the Government's legislative timetable. However, I believe there is a great deal more associated with the points of this Bill than perhaps meets the eye at first glance.

The way I see it, Bell Canada has been operating in a monopolistic situation for some time. It is highly regulated by Government. Government hears representations on a regular and frequent basis by which Bell makes the case that a certain profit is necessary for the continuation of its service. We appreciate that. We understand the need for that general approach. However, when Bell Canada indicates that it must have a return of 15 per cent, 18 per cent or 20 per cent on its investment, then we begin to have some concerns. During these difficult economic times, many sectors of the economy do not have such returns on their investments. Perhaps they are fortunate if they have any return at all in certain sectors. But that is not the issue.

Over the years Bell Canada has operated within a highly regulated environment and has been guaranteed a profit. After years and years of that particular approach, we see quite a radical and substantial departure from that process. While Bell Canada expects to receive its profits in terms of the telephone system and the service it provides, it now wants to take those substantial profits and invest them into other enterprises.

I ask the House to give some thought to this notion. On the one hand we are saying to Canadians that we will permit this corporation to be guaranteed a profit from its provision of telephone services, a substantial and decent profit at that. On the other hand, rather than seeing that profit reinvested into new telecommunications research and development programs, into better ways to provide service to Canadians, or seeing those profits returned to its shareholders, we are saying that Bell can take the profit and put it into some other venture at its discretion or choosing.

I remember another corporation which went through a similar process over the years, and that is our friend, Canadian Pacific.

Mr. Blackburn (Brant): Friend?

Mr. Riis: I use that term loosely. Canadian Pacific, again a highly regulated corporation providing in a sense a monopoly service in vast parts of the land and guaranteed profits, has been allowed over the years to take the profits from that monopolistic situation and reinvest them in a variety of economic pursuits.

The people of Canada are providing those profits. Is it unrealistic to expect at least a certain portion of those profits to be either reinvested in research and development in the telephone service or to provide a lowering of rates? We are here as parliamentarians not to find ways and means for Bell

Canada to make more profits. That is not our role. Our role involves a multitude of purposes, one of which is to ensure that the people receiving a service from Bell Canada and paying a particular rate for that service are getting a reasonable deal.

• (1115)

When I hear a request from the new Government to allow those profits which accumulate year after year not to be reinvested for improved service or be used for decreasing rates, but to be used for Bell Canada to get involved in a number of economic pursuits, I wonder if we are doing our job. I wonder if the taxpayers of Canada are requiring us to support this kind of legislation which is here for no other purpose than to allow Bell Canada to invest in a variety of other areas.

This is taking place because we as a country have no over-all telecommunications policy. One area in which we take some pride is in fact the telecommunications area. We say that Canada is on the leading edge of a number of technologies in the telecommunications area, yet we are absolutely vacant of any over-all telecommunications policy. We are the second largest country in the world with people strung out along the southern boundary. There are hundreds of thousands of kilometres across this country. To have no telecommunications policy seems to be a real shortcoming.

To be introducing legislation like Bill C-19 in the absence of this over-all, blanket, long-term telecommunications policy seems to really be a case of the cart before the horse. In what context are we to make our decision? What is it we are attempting to do with this Bill? When it was introduced, this Bill simply said that all of the changes had been made and now they have to be legalized. The Government has made all of the changes. Bell Canada came to it with a number of requests and it has now met every request that it raised before it. The Government then said: "Oh my gosh, there were other requests, other groups making comments. The CRTC, the Restrictive Trade Practices Commission, the Bureau of Competition Policy and many other intervenors were concerned". The Government ignored all of those folks and all of those groups as well as all of the representations they made and listened carefully to what Bell Canada wanted. It has given Bell everything it requested.

I ask Hon. Members who are assembled here today on our first day back from the short recess whether we are doing our job if we simply put into practice all of the requests made by a corporation in Canada and ignore the representations made by so many individuals, groups and agencies. If we pass this Bill, that is essentially what we are doing. One could raise the point as to whether we are doing our job if we allow this legislation to pass with very little discussion and debate as it moves to committee stage.

I appreciate that this is simply a discussion of the principle of the Bill. We will have an opportunity as soon as it leaves this House and goes to committee to look at some of the particulars. However, this is the time when the particulars at least have to be flagged. We want to hear from Hon. Members on the Government side that they are concerned about A, B, C