

Emergency Telephone Number

Again, I wonder whether we can pass a piece of federal legislation and almost, in effect, wash our hands of it. Federal legislation can only apply to the two corporations that come under federal jurisdiction, Bell Canada and British Columbia Telephone. Since a universal emergency telephone number system is not feasible without the co-operation of the municipalities who must agree to consolidate emergency services, I again make the point that the system cannot be implemented by federal statute alone. This bill does have that failing. As drafted, it purports to apply to all Canadian telephone companies, whereas all the major telephone companies except Bell and B.C. Telephone are presently subject to provincial regulation. The hon. member made the point that he did not expect this particular bill to carry but it was his hope that the subject matter might be referred to committee. I think that covers my objection to that particular point.

If the concept of a universal emergency telephone number is to be legislated with reference to the federally-regulated carriers, it would appear preferable—I speak as a lawyer with some knowledge of legislation, having been a municipal councillor with responsibility of drafting legislation—to put this particular piece of legislation more appropriately into the Railway Act rather than into section 22(1) of the National Transportation Act. Section 22(1) of the National Transportation Act deals with the powers, duties and functions of the Canadian Transport Commission. Establishment of a universal emergency telephone number is not a matter of powers, duties and functions but, rather, involves the implementation of specific action by the commission.

For the reasons I have cited, I think it is premature to pass this particular bill at this time without giving it a lot more thought. However, I am sure that the publicity this debate will generate will indicate to the federal and provincial carriers the need to give serious consideration to bringing about what I feel is an excellent idea to assist the Canadian public.

Mr. Mather: Mr. Speaker, may I ask the hon. member a question? Having in mind the very valid criticisms he has made of some of the details proposed in this bill, would he still have any objection to having the subject matter of the bill, not passed but referred for further study to the appropriate committee of the House?

Mr. Cullen: Mr. Speaker, that was the point I tried to make earlier in my address. Perhaps I did not hammer it home hard enough. I did not think that a committee of the House, made up of laymen, was an appropriate tribunal for considering either the bill or the subject matter of the bill. Particularly in light of the recent report brought down by the other place, it seems to me this might be one area where our science and technology could be put to good use. It may be more appropriate to have that department do a little prodding with Bell Canada and B.C. Telephone, with a view to showing the way to the provincial carriers.

Mr. H. T. Herbert (Vaudreuil): Mr. Speaker, as has already been pointed out, the idea of a universal emergency telephone number appears, at least in theory, to be a worthy one. The problems regarding the proposed Bill C-37, an act to establish a universal emergency telephone

[Mr. Cullen.]

number, have already been gone over but they are perhaps worth repeating.

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The bill appears to be redundant in that the principal telephone carriers subject to federal jurisdiction, Bell Telephone and British Columbia Telephone, have already expressed a willingness to supply this service and to co-operate with municipalities in this regard. I propose in a moment to go over the situation as it exists at the present time.

Since a universal emergency telephone number is not feasible without the co-operation of municipalities, which must agree to consolidate emergency services, it cannot be implemented by federal statute alone. As drafted, the bill before us purports to apply to all Canadian telephone companies, whereas all major telephone companies except Bell Canada and British Columbia Telephone are presently subject to provincial regulation.

Canada's major telephone companies fully support the establishment of a universal emergency telephone number, 911. The telephone companies have met with authorities in most Canadian cities during the past three years and will continue to assist in ensuring that 911 or a temporary alternate is provided when requested. The introduction of 911 throughout Canada, however, must be the result of orderly evolution in close co-operation with the municipal agencies concerned.

The evolution should include two specific phases. The first is the centralized organization required by the municipality to bring the emergency services together under one number; for example, police, fire and ambulance. In the cities where this has been done the telephone companies have provided 911 or a suitable substitute. An example can be seen in Toronto where EM1-1111 is a type of universal number. In Winnipeg and Brandon the number 999 has been in service for some time. Edmonton, Calgary and Red Deer have 911 calling for emergencies. In those cities which have not established a centralized reporting service, effort is made to assign easily remembered numbers to the various services. These numbers are prominently displayed in the various directories. Of course, all companies have always offered operator assistance in an emergency through dialing "0".

The second phase of the evolution to a universal number across Canada is one of technical and financial feasibility. Although the technical expertise may exist to instal 911 service in all parts of the country, the cost in many areas has been such that the community is not prepared to make a firm commitment. As new equipment is installed and technology advances, there is every indication that the installation of 911 will progressively advance.

The individual status report is worthy of reference. The Newfoundland Telephone Company Limited is presently negotiating with the government of Newfoundland on behalf of the city of St. John's to provide 911 service. At the present time there are no communities in Nova Scotia using a universal emergency number system, but the Maritimes Telegraph and Telephone Company Limited is prepared to provide the number 911, subject to agreement with civic authorities. There are no communities in New Brunswick using a universal emergency number at