

Bell Canada Act

with the direction in which the laws of this country have been going in the last number of years.

The question of universality, universal access, is the main point of these amendments. There is a widely dispersed population in Canada. We, as most Hon. Members in the House know, tend to concentrate in a number of large cities, but for those of us in the rural parts of the country, access to that other population is extremely important in keeping the country together, in making commerce work, in keeping the political system working, tied together. We find it very difficult to imagine changing the system of universal access, to which we have grown accustomed, to one where the telephone company would have the right to increase charges for owning or using a telephone beyond the level that is currently in place.

The telephone companies have been arguing, as Your Honour is aware, that they make most of their profits on long distance charges and only a limited profit on local calls. They are therefore attempting to make a division in their incomes. That is one of the choices they propose. They have attempted several methods, all of which achieve the same result, that is, higher charges for the use of a telephone, higher charges for local use, to be tied into the telephone system. It is part of a deregulation move that is sweeping the country under this particular administration, and one that we think is fraught with many dangers, many hazards, given the nature of this country of ours, Canada.

Although the people who live in small rural and remote areas and small villages might only amount to 5 per cent to 10 per cent of the nation's population, they are an important part of this country. The original founding fathers recognized the important role that those in rural areas played in settling the country and keeping it from outsiders and intruders. That is still an important role for those in rural areas to be playing in terms of defence and political entities, and to discriminate against them by charging higher fees just for the use of telephones does not make much sense.

There are not many phone calls made from some of these rural telephones, but they are the only means of quick communication available to those people. They are important for the political unity of the country and for those people to be able to tie into the commerce of the country, to order repairs, goods and services.

Because of other policies that have been adopted by the previous Government and ones which seem to be carried on by the present Government, transportation rates to those remote areas are rising. It has become a user-pay situation and each charge has to pay its own way or the goods do not move. Therefore, goods and services are extremely expensive to the remote areas of the country as a result of this policy move away from trying to share transportation costs more or less equitably among all of the users of the country.

• (1230)

We see this as an attempt to do the same thing for communications that has been begun with transportation. We do not like it. We think that this particular amendment would take away that right from Bell Canada and leave the access to telephone sets in homes in the suburbs, in homes in rural areas and in small villages. This is something that is viewed by most of these users as a universal right that should not be priced beyond their ability to pay.

Therefore we think that there should be a clear statement within this particular reorganization of Bell Canada to the effect that the company would be required, to a small extent, to provide some cross subsidization for the very profitable long distance telephone market in order to allow as many customers as possible access to telephone sets.

Mr. Jim Edwards (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, I wish to speak to the proposed amendment to Clause 6(2) which would, as has been indicated, strike out line 3 at page 3 and make a substitution. The purpose of this amendment is to allow the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission to specify a maximum payment other than the advance payment that Bell can currently charge. This amendment will retain the six-month provision for extreme cases, while at the same time preventing Bell from demanding such advance payments arbitrarily.

In substance, this is a continuation of an existing provision in the special Act, with the exception that the Commission would be empowered to substitute its own maximum advance payment requirement in lieu of the historic maximum six-month period. The amendment retains the historical maximum of six months for dealing with extreme cases of non-payment.

Mrs. Sheila Finestone (Mount Royal): Mr. Speaker, I was pleased to hear the response of the Parliamentary Secretary with respect to the motion to amend Clause 6(2)(c), which in essence is identical to what I had recommended for revision which was ruled out. I refer to my Motion No. 4 which states:

—the request for service does not conform with the General Regulations prescribed for the Company by the Commission.

I assume that it is a technicality with respect to language that the Parliamentary Secretary has used in this instance. It makes absolutely no sense that a monopoly service and a monopoly supplier of that service should be in a position to request a six-month advance payment by any subscriber, except with due cause. There are many people in Canada, and increasingly more so as our taxes increase, who do not have the disposable income necessary to pay a lump sum for a service which should and must be provided.

In committee I asked if it was fair for the average struggling student who is finding it difficult enough to pay for his rent, his heat, his light and his tuition fee to be expected to pay a six-month advance payment. I also asked if it was fair that the sick or elderly who have to move should be expected to pay a