

Post Office Act

the hon. member for Brandon-Souris has a valid point in putting forward his amendment.

I know that we are going through a period of rapid change in the functioning of the government. Generally speaking, I have been one of those who has argued in favour of the decentralization of authority so far as administration is concerned. I think it is fair to say that there has been a change in this direction which, in my experience with various departments, has worked out quite well. I emphasize this point because I would not want it to be thought that I am arguing against the general principle in supporting this amendment.

I do think that one of our functions as members is to try to assess how we can retain a happy medium between decentralization of administration and administrative authority and the need to keep things in focus as the occasion warrants, and to maintain proper responsibility and authority not only in the hands of the minister heading a department but in the hands of the elected representatives of the people.

These lines are not always easy to draw. One cannot be too dogmatic one way or the other in every situation. However, if one thinks about this situation one must agree that the hon. member for Brandon-Souris has made a wise and sound proposal in his amendment. It is one that I hope hon. members and the Postmaster General will support.

[Translation]

Mr. C.-A. Gauthier (Roberval): Mr. Speaker, I wish to speak for a few minutes in support of the amendment now under consideration.

I can say that my own constituency has been affected by the closure of post offices in many parishes that still exist, where there are churches and populations of 30, 40 or 50 families. Officials have simply decided to eliminate these post offices.

When I was informed, final action had been taken, despite protests and representations. I realized that the decision had been made by officials—mark my words, by officials—for I realized that they had been instructed to pronounce the “death sentence” of post offices in our smaller parishes, which had proved immensely useful for more than 50 years. I think that this has affected the people very much, while the Post Office Department did not save any money.

With this low level of service, the performance has declined so much that we have to increase the number of rural postmen to provide some sort of service to these villages.

Needless to say, Mr. Speaker, that the people from these communities are less than satisfied. It seems that in the Post Office Department, even more than in some others, the more you spend, the less service you get. And now for the best: when a decision has been taken, standards are set up. If the standards have been established for 50 users, they provide service to these 50 people, but this does not bring any change in the government's decisions—bureaucrats' decisions—because the sentence has been meted out it is useless to present them with request

[Mr. Barnett.]

after request and attempt to prove to the Department that these remote communities are in an unsavory situation; they just won't budge. The postal system is the only link between urban centres and villages and the practice of closing down post offices has not been accepted by the population. They pray for the day when they will get rid of a bureaucratic government and replace it by responsible men who will know how to take their responsibilities.

That is why we ask that in future the decision be up to the minister. If he makes mistakes, he will suffer the consequences. It is not a matter of knowing who made the mistakes among the many postal officials, but I would very much like to know once and for all to whom I should refer, who is to blame under such circumstances and then, we will at least know whom to see when another campaign is launched to close post offices.

● (8:40 p.m.)

[English]

Mr. Robert McCleave (Halifax-East Hants): Mr. Speaker, I desire to say a few words in support of my colleague's motion. But first may I be permitted to observe that there is an error in the report of the proceedings on this bill before the Transportation and Communications Committee, Issue No. 18, at the top of page 43, erroneously attributes remarks to me which I believe should be attributed to the hon. member for Lachine (Mr. Rock). In any event, they are not mine. I think that the problem here is one that is pretty relevant to the political process and I hope that the arguments of the last three speakers, of myself and perhaps of other hon. members will commend themselves to the Postmaster General (Mr. Coté).

So far as the closure of suburban post offices is concerned, I do not think we have a problem there at all. These offices are generally being replaced by postal boxes as the suburbs grow into the cities of Canada, and no one is greatly distressed by their disappearance. But so far as rural closures are concerned, this is an entirely different matter. I think we can say that for historical as well as business reasons some of these post offices should not be closed. A rural post office may be small, but the industry that does its mailing through it may depend for its life on having that postal service. Then, there are the larger reasons, the social reasons some of these rural post offices should not be closed.

I think these argument have been pushed on the Postmaster General in the past and upon his predecessor, so I do not scout them at any great length. In fact I am going to be brief, almost laconic in my contribution tonight, but I would suggest to the Postmaster General that the criterion for closing post offices should not be strictly determined by a business motive. In this respect I think the minister and his predecessor have been pretty good. They will listen. Sometimes they harden their hearts to you but, as I say, at other times they are inclined to listen. I prefer it to be that way.

May I point out two things in this area to the Postmaster General that I think are very important. The first is that he is politically accountable to all the rest of us in