

He has already demonstrated a great interest in the issues and is seriously addressing them. He follows in the steps of two distinguished predecessors, the hon. member for Port Moody—Coquitlam and Lynn MacDonald, who was a member of this previous House and who made a real contribution towards the bill that we have before us.

I would like to ask the hon. member, with reference to the cable industry, an industry which, incidentally, I hold no brief for, because I was a conventional broadcaster. Back in those days, we considered them to be newcomers, and that was the kindest thing we could say about them. He is quite correct that they do enjoy a territorial monopoly and that they do not have the kind of rate regulation that public utilities have which, I understand, is the position his party is advocating.

• (1900)

I just wanted to reflect and pose a question to the hon. member. Is he aware that there are a great many very small cable companies in the country, as well as some giants? Is he aware of the efforts that cable companies have made in recent years with community channels and the preparations that they are having to make in allocating capital budget for upgrading of systems and preparations for HDTV?

I am familiar myself with a situation of a system in Hinton, Alberta where the regulator, in good faith, ordered the independent operator of a cable system there to wire four subdivisions with underground cable in anticipation of the growth of that community. The growth never came and that load had to be carried. Eventually, the operator had to sell to a larger cable company, a good operator, albeit, but it had to get out of the business.

I think it is, perhaps, unfair to generalize and the CRTC recognizes the situation that there are variations within cable companies. That is why it is so healthy to have an independent regulator so that it can distinguish between the situation of a very profitable, large operator and that of a small operator.

I am sure that the hon. member, coming from where he does, is aware of the contribution that small cable operators make to the broadcasting system as a whole.

Government Orders

Mr. MacWilliam: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for his very kind comments.

Understandably, he has recognized that, as a newcomer in this very complex area of legislation, it is difficult to be completely up to speed in all aspects of the industry. If I appear to stumble about somewhat from time to time, it is simply a matter of coming to terms with the many intricate details that the member has already pointed out.

To answer the member's question, first, yes, I am aware, of course, of the smaller cable companies whose profit margins may not be anywhere near the larger monopolies that we have such as Rogers Cable and what-not.

The bottom line criteria has to be fairness to the public. I am particularly concerned, as I mentioned, about the lower income Canadians who do not have the option of going out to see a movie or to a theatrical production simply because they cannot afford it.

What we have seen demonstrated by the industry, on average—and I am not pointing any fingers to any particular company or entity—are some very hefty price hikes. Perhaps some of those price increases have been justified. I do not question that, and there has to be flexibility allowed for justified price increases in terms of expansion of service and the upgrading of the technologies, et cetera.

I think the member would agree with me that, if the industry fails to demonstrate a sensitivity to the economic aspects of our Canadian life-style and to the fact that our lower income Canadians may not be able to afford those price increases, then it comes time for the government, through some mechanism—I am not sure exactly what mechanism would be provided—to be able to influence that price structuring to some small degree.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jim Edwards (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to participate in tonight's debate—

[*English*]

It is a wonderful opportunity. To me, it is closing the circle. When I first had the privilege of speaking in the House in November, 1984 I drew to the House's attention the need for a new broadcasting bill, one which would contain, among other elements, the power of direction of the government of the day to the CRTC, with appropriate safeguards.