

Radio and Television

Mr. D. M. Fisher (Port Arthur): Perhaps I can set a certain tone in what I am going to say by acknowledging that the reason I reached the House of Commons was partly through a private television station; it was a private television station which partly opened up the opportunity, so I am quite aware of the advantages which television and broadcasting bring to many parts of the country.

I feel that neither the amendment nor the subamendment is intended to be a backhanded or nasty slap at the government, but rather a gentle but firm prod to the government along the way we are sure it is going to follow. The government's intentions, as far as we know, were spelled out in the speech which has been referred to before, made by the Minister of National Revenue on June 3, and his subsequent announcement that the C.B.C. was to go ahead and plan the building of a certain number of television stations which would provide coverage in some of the more remote parts of the country—parts, that is, which are remote from present television coverage.

This announcement was very welcome, but in our district, though we were pleased that Kenora would receive some benefit, there was a certain disappointment that those further north and east of Kenora were going to be missed out according to present plans. Certainly it is our general view that the fact that the minister should stand up and indicate that the C.B.C. should go ahead with its planning was support for the view that the government was going ahead with the backing of the C.B.C. which would enable it to do this job.

The financing of the C.B.C. is one of the toughest questions in terms of fairness that I think a government will face. It seems there are three different ways in which the C.B.C. has been financed in the past, and I cannot see any other possible ways to finance it in the future. Most of you will remember that the licence system proved a very unpopular means of supporting the old C.B.C. radio system; yet in essence a licence fee is the only absolutely fair way of supporting the operation of a national system if you look at it from the point of view of straight economic justice. It means, of course, that the people who are actually enjoying the programs or who have the ability to receive the programs are the ones who are paying for them; and certainly if a licence set-up should be part of the government's plan it would save a great deal of criticism that comes from areas which have not adequate coverage from the national system at the present time. They will certainly not have the complaint that as general taxpayers they are paying for a service which they are not receiving.

The system presently being used in part to support the C.B.C., that of the special excise tax, has been declared discriminatory and unfair—I think those were his words—by the minister concerned in this house; and whether or not one agrees with that, it is perfectly obvious that an excise tax levied upon the instrument through which a program is received is quite inadequate to provide any sound financial basis for the future. At the beginning, when television sets were being bought in great numbers, it provided a source of revenue; but now there has been a saturation point reached in most areas of Canada of somewhere between 70 and 80 per cent, the income from this tax will not come near to meeting the requirements of the C.B.C. in the present or in the future.

That brings us to the third possible means of supporting the C.B.C. It is the one that is likely to be followed, yet in many ways it is very unfair; that is to take the money directly out of the consolidated revenue fund, or make some sort of arrangement with that fund and have the C.B.C. operate on a year to year budget from a demand placed before the government as to what its needs are going to be in the coming year.

If the money comes out of the consolidated revenue fund it means in effect that every taxpayer in the country is contributing to the cost. It is obvious from the distribution of population in the country and the varying nature of the markets in which the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation must compete that a portion of the country is never going to receive the full benefit of this expenditure. From that point of view it is unfair.

As a politician amongst 264 other politicians I think we all have to recognize that the licence system is extremely unpopular. I do not care what party you belong to, you have to recognize that the licence system, which is perhaps the fairest, is so unpopular that it is going to require a very strong and courageous government and minister to bring it in. I would tend to support the third means, that is taking money out of the consolidated revenue fund, but I think we need to be aware that if we follow that course it will result in an annual spree within the House of Commons and the committee on broadcasting over ways and means to jimmy down what the C.B.C. may estimate it needs, and it will not place that organization on the long-term planning basis that one would gather from the chairman is really needed.

The argument that has gone on for a number of years led by the C.A.R.T.B.—the Canadian association of radio and television broadcasters—in essence has centred around something concerning which the Winnipeg