

Canada Health Act

[English]

Mr. Blaikie: Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the Hon. Member for Gloucester on a matter in the Bill to which he did not pay a lot of attention. I would like to know his opinion with respect to the penalties. He has spent, as well as other Hon. Members, a lot of time saying why we do not like extra billing and user fees and why something must be done about them. But I would like to ask the Hon. Member whether or not, in his opinion, he thinks the penalties as they now stand in the legislation which is before us will be adequate. Does the Hon. Member think, for instance, that in the Province of Alberta where, I believe, the extra billing amounts to some \$14 million, the threat of losing \$14 million will be adequate to persuade that Province to do away with extra billing? Or does he not think we might be better off to have a combination of tougher penalties on the one hand and positive incentives on the other hand, which might have more of a chance of really bringing these provinces around? What is the Hon. Member's view of the penalties as they now stand? Is he satisfied with them?

Mr. Breau: Mr. Speaker, if the Hon. Member asks me if I am satisfied as a person, I would say no, I would rather have tougher penalties. I am frustrated by the fact that some provincial governments in this country are ideologically opposed to the kind of philosophy which is behind the Canada Health Act. Of course, I would like to have some stiffer penalties. However, I am not sure that it is reasonable for me, as a Member of Parliament, to go beyond the value of the money which is raised in user fees and extra billing to provide a penalty. I feel it would be seen to be punitive.

I am constantly frustrated, as a federal parliamentarian, when I am dealing, in the funding of a program which comes under provincial jurisdiction, with the federal-provincial tradition in this country of the federal Parliament being very careful when it uses its spending power not to go beyond a certain line. I really feel that we cannot go beyond the withholding of money, which is a rough equivalent to what is being raised in the Province under conditions which we do not like. The Hon. Member, when he was on the Task Force on Fiscal Arrangements, will recall that the only thing that we said was that some funds should be withheld. It was our judgment at the time that pressure would be sufficient. I really believe that it will be sufficient.

The Province of Alberta, for ideological reasons, may want to make a case of it, but I believe that for most of the other provinces the penalties in existence will be sufficient. One cannot look at this in isolation from the fact that the Minister and the Government have accepted one of the key recommendations of our report with regard to accountability, where a yearly report will be made to Parliament on the activities in the given province. That will bring pressure to bear on the provincial government by, first of all, making it public here, but also making it public in detail in the province, so that the electorate of the province can also pressure its own provincial government. The Hon. Member will recall that a lot of the frustration of groups which came before us was due to the fact that they did not know what the federal Government was

spending in the province. I feel that when you couple that with the accountability provisions then, yes, the penalties will be sufficient.

Mr. Blaikie: I have just a brief supplementary question with respect to the three-year period, then, Mr. Speaker. Let us for the moment accept the Government's view that there is some sort of constitutional line which it would cross if it had penalties which were more than a dollar-for-dollar. I take that to be the import.

Mr. Breau: it is a political line.

Mr. Blaikie: The Hon. Member says it is a political line. Let us call it that for now, that some line would be crossed if the Government went beyond dollar-for-dollar penalties. Would the Hon. Member then be willing to entertain the notion that perhaps the penalties could be made more effective by changing the three-year period and making it shorter or by saying to the provinces, for example that they will not get the money back if they do not stop extra-billing next year or the following year? These are ways that the Government has open to it which would not cross what I perceive to be the line the Hon. Member does not want to cross.

It would also make it more likely that provinces which did want to act quickly would be acting in concert with other provinces which may not have wanted to act quickly but which would be forced to act quickly if the penalties were changed in the way I just suggested.

Mr. Breau: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would like—

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Guilbault): Order! The period provided for questions and comments has now expired. Debate.

Mr. Lachance: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Guilbault): The Hon. Member for Rosemont on a point of order.

Mr. Lachance: With the unanimous consent of the House, the Hon. Member could at least reply to the question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Guilbault): Is there unanimous consent?

Some Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Guilbault): The Hon. Member for Gloucester (Mr. Breau).

[English]

Mr. Breau: Mr. Speaker, I repeat that I would like the penalties to be as stiff and as difficult as possible. With respect to the two questions raised by the Hon. Member with regard to the length of time and as to the reason for withholding the money, first of all, let us deal with the three years. Again, it is a question of fine political judgment as to what is reasonable. I feel that when you consider that some doctors may be in agreement with the provinces over a period of years, it would be very harsh, even if a province wanted to do away with the