

post office is, among other things, one of the principal social centre of the community. It is a place where people meet their friends, and in many communities it is the only direct link between the citizens and the federal government. It is the only existing symbol as it were, that Canada is a country federal in nature with a federal government in operation. I suppose the exception to that statement would be in the annual forms which come from the minister's colleague, the Minister of National Revenue (Mr. Gray), but fortunately that is not a daily or weekly occurrence: once we as citizens get over our yearly bout with that form we tend to forget about it until the next year comes around. So I think there are good and practical reasons for this amendment to allow the decision to be made at the administrative level. It is a good suggestion on the part of the hon. member for Brandon-Souris and one which I can support.

As the hon. member has pointed out, there had been a policy of closing small, rural post offices across the country in the interest of economy. I believe this policy began in the earlier days when the present Postmaster General held this portfolio. One of the features of that policy which applied, certainly, in my area—and for this I commend the minister—was that if consideration was being given to the closing of a post office, the member was advised.

My constituency is not rural in the sense usually referred to by people like the hon. member for Brandon-Souris or other members from the great plains region. It is not a farming area. But it is one in which there are a number of small, isolated communities each of which had its own post office. One case of closing involved a post office designed to serve only employees of the federal government and their families. This is a situation which develops around some of the installations of the Department of Transport in fairly isolated places along the coast.

I cite one example because I believe one would agree it is a little different from the ordinary rural community. I refer to the post office at Estevan Point, which is a lighthouse installation of the Department of Transport on the west coast of Vancouver Island which had at one time a slightly larger population than it has now because it also included meteorological services, weather reporting services, and so on, which have since been consolidated in another area. Despite protestations from the people there and from myself, the decision was made to close that post office. Now, of course, the people working there for the Department of Transport are at the tender mercy of the department in respect of receiving their mail. This may not be a major question but it was a matter of great regret to the residents of that small community made up, as I say, of employees of the federal government, that they no longer had direct contact with the Post Office Department in the sense of being able to send and receive their mail.

● (8:30 p.m.)

Other post offices have been closed in this general region along the west coast of Vancouver Island to which

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I, after thinking the matter over, raised no objection. In fact, one of the more historic post offices on the west coast of Vancouver Island was closed some time ago, the post office of Clayoquot, where the settlement was originated by a European fur trader who set up a post office. I believe he married an Indian woman and carried on his trade there. In time a store was opened up which was a distribution centre, and I think that for some time it has been a resort hotel.

It is fairly easily accessible from another community but there are no permanent residents there, despite the fact that it was one of the more colourful post office establishments on the west coast. I know that some of the more interesting records from there were garnered and put into whatever the Post Office Department considered its archives to be. It was a matter of regret to see one of the earliest post offices on the west coast of Canada disappear. In plain, practical terms there was no justification for the continuance of such a post office in that particular spot and I as a member raised no objection to its being closed.

On the other hand, the Post Office Department decided to close another post office serving a relatively small number of families as well as some single working people. It was not far from another post office but in practical terms it meant that the community would be almost completely cut off from any regular access to mail service. Objections were raised and I looked into the facts as best I could. I was provided additional information on the kind of weather conditions that existed there and the body of water that would have to be crossed by small boats if these people were to be able to reach the nearest settlement where there was a post office. On the basis of those facts the decision was made by the Postmaster General not to close the post office. This was not a matter of political controversy between me and the Postmaster General but, as I tried to say, it was essentially a political question because it involved a decision which in my view went beyond the purely administrative area.

I spoke of the way in which some of these post offices were closed to suggest that if this proposal to delegate entirely the authority to local or regional administrators is carried out, the chances are that a post office such as this would be closed by a simple administrative decision made by someone without political responsibility. Members who are aware of what is being planned and who are able to assess the general picture could provide the Postmaster General (Mr. Côté) with additional facts on which a decision can be based in the general interest of the community.

The first that a Member of Parliament hears about the matter is if someone sends him a bomb through the mail—I mean a bomb in the sense of a letter that is hot enough to blow the roof off. By this time the decision is made. Anybody with experience in the operation of government knows that usually it is much easier to prevent a decision being made than it is to have a decision reversed once it has been made. So I feel that this amendment leaves the situation as it should be and I hope the Postmaster General will on reflection agree that