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# **Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Thursday, May 9, 2019**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Dan Ruimy**



## Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology

Thursday, May 9, 2019

• (0950)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Dan Ruimy (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, Lib.)):** We're moving on to the second portion of our committee today. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we're going to do a study of the subject matter of private member's motion 208 on rural digital infrastructure.

Today we have with us the mover of that private member's motion, William Amos, MP from Pontiac.

Sir, you have 10 minutes. You have the floor.

**Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

I appreciate the speed with which you and our colleagues here have agreed to address this issue. I want to thank the members, both of the party I belong to but also members opposite for their unanimous support yesterday. I think that puts Parliament in a good light, and I think this is obviously a crucial issue for Canadians coast to coast. Whether you live in urban or rural Canada, you care that rural Canada is connected.

The exclamation point was placed on this issue in the Pontiac context by the tornado last year and the floods this year. I don't want to wax poetic about that stuff. People who are suffering from floods currently, who have basements underwater, want us to get down to brass tacks, so I'll try to do that today.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this before you and I appreciate also that you organized as a committee to get to this quickly.

[Translation]

I know that the people in my riding of Pontiac are grateful to you, as well as all of those who live in Canada's rural regions.

Of course the digital infrastructure is an important issue that includes various aspects touching on regulation, finances and the private sector, and the influence of federal, provincial and municipal governments is not always clear.

Since last November, that is to say since I tabled the motion, the situation has changed somewhat because of Budget 2019. We have to be very honest and very clear about that. When a government makes promises and plans for large budgets of approximately \$5 billion, it is because, in my opinion, it recognizes the importance of this issue.

[English]

Since this motion was first brought forward, the government, with its 2019 budget, has really taken a major step forward. Major steps were taken prior. In the 2016 budget, there was \$500 million over five years for connect to innovate. That money has been brought forward in a variety of ridings, my own included, where 20 million dollars' worth of projects have been announced as compared with \$1.2 million to \$1.3 million in the riding of Pontiac in the decade prior. Major steps are being taken already, but this new budgetary investment is really important.

Where do we go from here? How does the study that would move forward through INDU advance this? I think we need to look to the new Minister of Rural Economic Development. I think we need to appreciate the fact that the government has seen fit to establish this new institution, which is great news for rural Canada, and recognize the responsibility of Minister Bernadette Jordan to develop that strategy and incorporate the issue of digital infrastructure. When one reads the text of the motion, which goes specifically to cellular infrastructure, it's there that we find the first nexus of interest between where this Liberal government is going and where this unanimous motion brings us.

The connection is the following. Such significant investments are planned to be made for the next several years, over \$5 billion in a decade, including a new universal broadband fund of \$1.7 billion and the CRTC's fund of \$750 million over five years that is on the cusp of opening. These are such significant funds that Canadians have reason to be optimistic, but there needs to be greater clarity, in my mind, as to how cellular infrastructure is enabled through this.

Like most Canadians, I'm not a technical expert. I don't know how fibre-to-home infrastructure outlay can enable cellphone service, but I am led to believe that it does. I think that what we need to see is clarity so that the Canadian public has confidence that these investments that are forthcoming will deliver not just high-speed Internet results on the ground for rural Canada, but also cellphone results. Obviously, both are crucial for economic development reasons, for community preservation and development reasons, and also for public safety reasons, as has been discussed in the House during the course of debate around M-208.

I think that it would be a valuable contribution on the part of this committee to discuss how cellular infrastructure can be accelerated through the government's own plans and to also draw upon witness testimony to secure the best ideas possible for achieving this.

I note that this committee has done very good work in relation to Internet in rural Canada. I appreciate that. I applaud that.

• (0955)

[Translation]

However, the specific issue of mobile or cellular telephony infrastructure has not been discussed in a complete manner. It would be essential to do so. About ten mayors in the Pontiac believe that this is one of three priorities in the region, and I know that this is also true in other regions of Canada.

In addition to the technical and economic aspects, I would like to see this committee discuss the public safety aspect. The mayor of Waltham, Mr. David Rochon, told me that he would like us to send carrier pigeons to his community so that people can communicate better. He does not think that there will be a mobile telephony system to respond to emergencies, such as when people ask for sandbags or more precise information about water levels.

If the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security does not have time to consider this matter, it would be important for this committee to do so.

[English]

I think I'll conclude by requesting that a critical eye be brought, with regard to the role of the CRTC and its regulatory and incentive-creating functions, to help generate a greater impetus towards Internet and cellphone infrastructure development. The 2016 report, "Let's Talk Broadband", brought some significant advances in terms of establishing standard upload and download rates, defining what high speed is, identifying this as a crucial issue and enabling the creation of a fund. That \$750 million over five years I'm sure will be put to good use. I think, though, that we as parliamentarians need to engage in a dialogue with the CRTC to explore what more can be done, and this committee, I believe, is the ideal organ for that dialogue.

We now have before us the CRTC's preferred approach. Does Parliament believe this is adequate?

I for one don't believe that \$750 million over five years is sufficient. I believe that the CRTC can go further, and I would like to also explore the Telecommunications Act, which is presently being reviewed. I would like to see how the act enables the deployment of cellphone and Internet infrastructure, and how it could be augmented to better enable it.

With those comments, colleagues, I appreciate the opportunity. Thank you also for the support. I think this motion is demonstrating some positive collegiality, and that's appreciated.

• (1000)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We're going to rush right into questions, starting off with Mr. Graham.

You have seven minutes.

[Translation]

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Amos, for guiding us in the right direction on the matter of cellular services.

At 7:00 a.m. this morning I took part in an interview with Ghislain Plourde, from CIME FM, to discuss your motion. I think it's extremely important.

Since our meeting in the beginning of 2016, we have worked very hard on telecommunications. Together we made presentations to the CRTC in 2016 to move this file forward. We had some major successes with Internet services. We studied the Internet services file in this committee, but we aren't making much headway on the cellular services file.

We have experienced problems in connection with this in our respective ridings, in the context of the current disasters.

Can you give us a picture of what is happening with cellular services in your riding?

In Amherst, in my riding, people from various services have to meet at city hall to discuss the situation and then go back out into the field, precisely because they are unable to communicate on the ground.

Is the situation the same in your riding?

**Mr. William Amos:** Thank you for your very relevant question. I commend your efforts on this issue since you were elected. I know that your fellow citizens in the Laurentides—Labelle riding are really grateful to you for the way you have focused on these issues, not only Internet services, but also cellular telephone services.

As to public safety, it's clear that we could imagine extremely serious consequences for people who happen to be in regions where there is no signal, but it's also a matter of effectiveness, as you mentioned.

It's not only about the mayors, councillors, municipal employees or first responders who are on the ground. Clearly, all of these individuals whose responsibility it is to respond to emergencies must be able to communicate. However, there are also neighbours helping each other out and communities that get together to support each other, as is the case at present. We see that these people are much less effective without cell services.

We also know that members of communities like Waltham will no longer be able to use the pager service as of June.

The lack of technological capability to allow for a proper response to emergencies is another aspect of this issue.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** Should we be looking for regulatory solutions, and not just financial ones?

We will not have access to the paging system either after June 30. It will no longer exist. We will no longer be able to call our first responders to have them respond to emergencies on the ground. This is very serious.

Are there regulatory solutions we could look at?

When we ask Bell what it's doing to re-establish or extend the paging service, it replies that it is not obliged to do so. When we ask the CRTC if it is obligatory to provide a paging service, it answers no, there is no obligation to provide that service, which is nevertheless essential in our regions.

Do you see any regulatory solutions?

**Mr. William Amos:** With regard to regulations, I would say that what is essential is the way in which the CRTC interprets its mandate under the Telecommunications Act.

The act sets out public policy priorities, priorities as regards competition or the promotion of competition, or the advancement of access to services. There are a whole series of objectives described in the law. However, these objectives are not classified in order of priority.

Some years ago, in 2007 or 2008, I believe, Mr. Bernier, who was the minister at that time, sent a directive wherein he asked the CRTC to put the emphasis on competition. In my opinion, we should find a way to send the CRTC a clear message and even perhaps a directive on the overriding importance of access.

I do believe the CRTC understands the issue, but there is a need to provide direction to it about this.

• (1005)

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** It has to be guided in the right direction.

If furthering competition is the main objective, but there is no access to the service, we have accomplished nothing. Zero is still zero. We can't support competition until there are at least two service providers. Even if there were only one, we wouldn't be any further ahead.

Do you agree with that opinion?

**Mr. William Amos:** Absolutely. We have to set objectives, and the CRTC must take all the needed legislative, regulatory and financial measures to enable complete access. The budget set an objective of access for 100% of households by 2030. In order to reach that, we have to take all of the necessary regulatory and financial means.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** There are steps before we reach the 100% target; we are aiming for 90% by 2022, and 95% by 2026. The last segment of 5% by 2030 will probably be the most difficult to attain. Is that correct?

**Mr. William Amos:** Yes.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** Fine.

Thank you for working so hard on this file, Mr. Amos.

I will give the minute I have left to Mr. Longfield.

[*English*]

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.):** I have less than a minute, but I'd like to, first of all, thank you for bringing this forward.

The committee here has studied broadband. We talked about it in 2017 and 2018. We've gone to Washington to talk about connectivity, the north-south satellite network and the opportunity that might provide us.

We talked about 5G, but you're talking about areas that don't have 3G or 4G. You're talking about carrier pigeons now. I know it was a bit of a joke from the mayor, but some way or another we have to connect, whether it's via satellite or via towers. Is it a 5G play that you're looking at, or is it just getting some basic 3G service?

**Mr. William Amos:** I must admit that I'm not a technical expert. As regards the particular technology that would be brought to bear, I would have to say I'm agnostic. I just wouldn't be able to provide a sufficiently informed opinion.

What I would suggest though on cellular is just any access. There are just dead zones. If one drives from Parliament Hill directly west down Highway 148 on the north side of the Ottawa River, the phone will cut off about five or six times between here and the end of my riding, which is about a two and a half hour drive. Those are just the dead zones. There are black holes, entire communities, that aren't served.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** Thank you.

Thanks, William.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Masse, you have seven minutes.

**Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Amos, for being here and congratulations on your bill being passed in the House. It's a motion, really. There's a big difference between a bill and a motion, and I've passed both, but it's good that it's a subject that continues to rise.

You're aware that the committee had an extensive review on this. What was missing out of the committee's report that you'd like to have on another review? What specifically did we miss out or not adequately cover in our report?

**Mr. William Amos:** I think that's an important question. Specifically what was missing in my estimation was a comprehensive treatment of the cellular issue, and the linkage between the provision of high-speed Internet—whether that's through fibre to the home, satellite technology or otherwise—and the advancement of cellular infrastructure and coverage across rural Canada.

It's one thing to have access to high-speed Internet—and every Canadian deserves it, absolutely—but it's another thing to go into the regulatory and fiscal measures that would enable better cellphone coverage. They are similar problems that we have throughout rural Canada, but it's not obvious that the two have identical solutions.

• (1010)

**Mr. Brian Masse:** Is there any other part, other than just the cellular, in the report? Did you agree with all the recommendations of the report? I don't have time to go through them, but is that something I'm assuming is correct? Is there anything else you thought was missing that we could enhance?

**Mr. William Amos:** What I would like to see treated more comprehensively is the issue of how the CRTC in its regulatory function, and how the Telecommunications Act as it currently stands, could be augmented to better enable both regulatory and fiscal solutions. There may be limitations that—

**Mr. Brian Masse:** I don't disagree with that.

I'm going to move on to another quick question, if I can. You mentioned the tornadoes and their affect on Ottawa. What were the failings of the cellular service at that time?

**Mr. William Amos:** In September of 2018, I was on the ground in the small community of Breckenridge in the municipality of Pontiac the day after the tornado. The Premier of Quebec; the Minister of Transport at the time, André Fortin; and Mayor Joanne Labadie were there. We were on the ground—

**Mr. Brian Masse:** What was missing though?

**Mr. William Amos:** We would be 500 metres away from each other at different homes asking what we could bring—if they needed water, or what support did they needed right then—and we weren't able to relay the message to the emergency response officials or to each other. If the mayor needed to come to meet with an individual I had just encountered, I would have to go and meet up with her personally.

**Mr. Brian Masse:** Are you aware that this committee turned down an opportunity to study that—by your members from the Liberal Party? Why do you think this was not an appropriate body then to study it, if you agreed or disagreed with them?

**Mr. William Amos:** I don't have comments to make on the decisions made previously by this committee. I would say that members of this committee have treated motion 208 with all of the seriousness that it—

**Mr. Brian Masse:** It's not about motion 208. It's about whether or not we actually had an opportunity to study the situation in Ottawa with the tornadoes, which was turned down by this committee. There was a particular motion moved and it was a study. Do you think that should be studied here at this committee, or why do you think that was turned down?

**Mr. William Amos:** As I said, I won't speculate on motives for any—

**The Chair:** If I could interject for a moment....

**Mr. Brian Masse:** It's a fair question. It was raised by the witness here.

**The Chair:** Hold on.

The witness is not a part of the committee and can't really speak to why something was turned down in committee, especially as we might have been in camera at the time.

**Mr. Brian Masse:** No, we weren't.

**The Chair:** I don't see how the witness can speak to why the committee as a whole turned something down.

**Mr. Brian Masse:** It's a part of your caucus. I expect those conversations might have taken place, given the fact that the member raised it as a serious issue as part of something here. I think that would have brought some light to it.

**Mr. William Amos:** I'm happy to answer. As the chair indicates, I'm not going to speculate on decisions made in meetings where I wasn't present.

The focus today ought not to be on what might have been in the past. Who is to say if the wording of the motion that was previously brought was adequate or if the study that would have been proposed was going to be comprehensive?

What is proposed here in motion 208 enables both the public security and the economic development aspects of both Internet and cellphones and the connection between the two. Perhaps it was a

missed opportunity at that point, but maybe this is a more comprehensive opportunity right now.

**Mr. Brian Masse:** Those are my questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Chong.

**Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks for introducing this motion. I'm looking forward to the committee's study.

I just want to make a point on this, Mr. Chair. I think this lack of access to Internet is certainly a problem in rural and remote Canada, but I think there's another thing that we also need to focus on. I think the bigger problem is less about accessibility to Internet services and more about the unaffordability of Internet in rural and remote areas. I'm going to give you one example to highlight what I'm talking about.

If you live in a city in this country, or in an urban area, you can get 100 gigabytes of Internet for \$49.99 a month. You can get unlimited Internet access for about \$69.99. Those are the latest pricing plans on the big telecoms' websites. If you wanted 200 gigabytes of access in a rural or remote area over a wireless Internet, which is often the only option available, you can get that wireless Internet, but that 200 gigabytes would cost you somewhere between \$800 and \$1,000 a month.

I have constituents in my riding who have this issue. It's not that they can't get the Internet access. It's that they can't afford to pay upwards of \$500 a month for that access. I put that in front of the committee as something to consider.

You can look at products such as Rogers' Rocket Hub and Bell's Turbo Hub. That covers most rural and remote areas, and even if it doesn't, for about \$500 as a one-time installation charge, you can get somebody to install a Yagi antenna to boost the signal to get the Internet. I think most rural residents would be prepared to pay \$500 for installation costs. The problem is that the ongoing monthly costs can be well upwards of \$500 a month for pretty moderate Internet usage.

That's an issue that as a committee we need to consider when we're drafting our report: It's not only access to the Internet, but it's the cost of that Internet for rural and remote households, many of which are actually in the exurban areas of some of the country's largest city regions. My riding is in the greater Toronto area, and large parts of the north part of Halton region and the southern part of Wellington county have access to Internet, but most people don't have it because it's just so expensive to have.

●(1015)

**The Chair:** Mr. Oliver.

**Mr. John Oliver (Oakville, Lib.):** Thanks very much for bringing forward motion 208 and for the discussion on it. Congratulations on how quickly it went through the House and the all-party support for it.

Like Mr. Chong, I live in Halton. I live in Oakville. We have great coverage down there, but I drive up to Guelph and along the way I lose cellphone access and I'm out of touch. That's almost something that you expect to have with you all the time, and I'm out of touch for about 15 to 20 minutes. I'm driving by farms and houses knowing that all those people are living without wireless. They probably have fixed service, but they don't have that wireless service. It is a real issue and it's closer to home than I think many people think it is. When I think about how reliant we are on our wireless communications, it's a really important issue.

I'm also aware that you've brought the motion forward and there's limited time left in this sitting. There are three areas that you targeted for INDU. One was looking at the causes of and solutions to the gaps in infrastructure for wireless. The second was fiscal and regulatory approaches to improve investments in wireless infrastructure. The third was the regulatory role of the CRTC.

Of those three, what is the priority? When you were speaking to Mr. Masse, I kind of heard that it would be the CRTC regulatory role, or do you think it's incentivizing more investment? What do you think the priority would be for the committee in the time that we might have to look at this?

**Mr. William Amos:** Thanks for that question. I really appreciate it, because I did want to provide, in a respectful manner, that kind of prioritization. I do think the CRTC ought to be the focus, and that's just simply because we are legislators and we have the opportunity to review the Telecommunications Act. That is ongoing.

I think it would be important to appreciate that major aspects of the fiscal component have been addressed. The CRTC is providing a degree of financing. The federal government has provided financing over the past several years and is looking to provide even more.

I think the question is, what more can be done? How can the telecommunications sector and the private sector be further stimulated? What options—

**Mr. John Oliver:** Could you give us some examples? You've looked at this, obviously, and thought about it quite carefully. Like you, I'm a non-technical guy. Other than net neutrality, I haven't ventured too far into the CRTC space. What specific recommendations would you have to improve the regulatory role, in terms of the provision of wireless infrastructure?

**Mr. William Amos:** If I were in the seats of members of this committee, I would want to ask the CRTC what options there are, in terms of legislative reform, to better enable the institution of the CRTC, as regulator, to generate superior access outcomes. That's what we're talking about in this motion: access. I do appreciate Member Chong's comment about affordability. It's important to all Canadians. In the areas that are most affected in my riding, just in the past couple of weeks, we're talking about a region that has a median income of \$22,500 per capita. These are individuals who can ill afford to pay the exorbitant amounts being charged right now.

The CRTC has been challenged with the affordability question, as well. Indeed, previous governments have had the opportunity to address that affordability question. It continues to bedevil both regulators and governments.

I think we need to be asking the CRTC about the access question. As Member Graham pointed out, if you don't have access, the affordability question is moot. We need to get to that access question.

With respect to, for example, the objectives of the Telecommunications Act, when the regulator is balancing affordability and access, how is that being done? Are there opportunities to change how that's done?

I do note that the Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development recently brought forward a directive to go to that issue of affordability. There's clearly a willingness on the part of our government to address that question. I think Canadians do understand that our government is very strong on the affordability question, but could there not be consideration given to a directive around access? I would ask this question of the CRTC as well. What would best enable them, or what is limiting them right now, from achieving access as an outcome they have identified themselves?

• (1020)

**Mr. John Oliver:** Again, I'm a bit new to this, but the committee has done a study on broadband connectivity in rural Canada. This is the linking of spectrum and breadth of spectrum to infrastructure. The committee heard from witnesses that they felt one licence was often too broad and covered both rural and urban areas. The rural areas then got insufficient attention when the company that owned the spectrum divvied it up.

Is there an issue with connecting infrastructure investment to licensing for spectrum? Have you thought that through, or am I off the mark on that one?

**Mr. William Amos:** Again, I acknowledge my technical limitations. If spectrum auctions—and I understand that specific spectrum auctions are in the offing—can be focused on particular rural-access outcomes, I believe that would be the appropriate policy approach to adopt.

**Mr. John Oliver:** Exactly, yes. Do you think part of the awarding of that would be evidence of willingness to invest in infrastructure, in terms of incentivizing that investment?

**Mr. William Amos:** Exactly. In some cases, a fiscal tool is required to stimulate. In other cases, a regulatory mechanism is required to force. In other situations, such as the spectrum auction circumstance, I think it's a question of directing the auction to achieve that policy outcome.

Again, an all-of-the-above strategy is required. I look forward to that kind of issue being addressed in the rural economic development strategy, when it's prepared.

**Mr. John Oliver:** Absolutely. That's good.

**The Chair:** We're going back to Michael Chong. Go ahead.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to go back to this issue of affordability. I represent a rural riding. We don't often get a lot of... Rural Canada often is overlooked just because it's a lower and lower percentage of the overall population as the country increasingly urbanizes.

However, the example that I'm going to give you next reflects the reality of rural residents not just in Ontario, but also in Quebec and the Maritimes, as well as in Newfoundland and Labrador. I'm just going to use a very local example to Wellington county to really draw to the attention of the committee what I'm talking about.

The monthly cost of Internet and heat for a resident of the City of Guelph in Ontario is about \$150 a month. Because residents are on natural gas, they'll pay about \$100 a month maximum to the local gas company to heat their homes in the winter, and their Internet bills are about \$50 a month. That gives them about 100 gigabytes of high-speed Internet access.

A resident who literally lives two miles outside of the City of Guelph in rural Wellington county will be paying \$1,300 a month to get the same service for heat and Internet access. It is \$1,000 for heat because there is no access to natural gas. Most rural residents are on oil heat and that costs about \$1,000 a month. Most rural residents spend \$4,000 to \$6,000 a winter to heat their homes through oil heat. Internet access for 100 gigabytes is about \$300 a month.

I bring those figures to the attention of the committee. That's very similar to residents of rural Pontiac and rural Gatineau where there is no access to natural gas and where there is no access to affordable high-speed Internet. When you drive through much of the countryside in eastern Canada and see homes being torn down, there's a reason for that. They're just too expensive to carry because the regulators, both federally and provincially, over many decades did not roll out rural natural gas or rural Internet the way that we rolled out rural electricity and rural, plain old telephone service.

As a result, we are now struggling to keep up to try to fix this problem with regard to the heating of homes and access to the modern information highway. Like I said, the example that I've given is the reality of rural Canadians throughout much of central and eastern Canada. It's \$1,300 a month to heat your home and to get high-speed Internet access, versus somebody literally a mile away in a built-up urban area who is paying \$150 a month. That's one of the things that I think our committee needs to look at.

• (1025)

**Mr. William Amos:** Could I comment on that, Chair?

• (1030)

**The Chair:** Go ahead.

**Mr. William Amos:** Again, I agree 100% with regard to affordability being a crucial issue for every single family and every household in Canada. We are all confronted with this reality, and in rural Canada, it's often even more acute because there is less competition.

I would pose this question to the honourable member: What lessons should be drawn from a decade in government where a directive was issued by the then-minister of industry to the CRTC around the prioritization of competition? I think the results speak for

themselves. That directive did not work. That effort on the part of the Conservative government of the time did not achieve affordability outcomes that Canadians can appreciate now. We are still suffering from unaffordable plans in comparison with other jurisdictions.

On top of that affordability problem, we have major rural access problems, which is what motion 208 goes to. The amounts of fiscal stimulus applied by the previous government were by any measure inadequate, as you point out, to roll out Internet in rural Canada in any manner that provides for equity in digital infrastructure. That seems clear to me.

I did not seek in my motion, nor am I looking today, to turn this into a partisan issue. I think that governments—present, past and prior to the Harper government—bear responsibility for these inequitable outcomes. On affordability and on access to high-speed Internet and cellphone availability in rural Canada, I think there has to be a recognition that the past policies of the Conservative government didn't work. We owe it to our constituents collectively to work in the present, live in the present and deal with the fact that all of our constituents wanted high-speed Internet yesterday and wanted cellphone coverage yesterday. My constituents wanted it two weeks ago when their houses were flooding and they were trying to put sandbags all around them.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We're going to move back to Mr. Graham.

**Mr. David de Burgh Graham:** Whatever happened with the motion last year—I looked at the record and I wasn't there for it—we are under a directive of the House. I think it's incumbent upon us to act seriously on it.

To Michael's comments before, I have a large rural riding that's quite a bit bigger than Wellington—Halton Hills, which I know quite well because I used to live in Guelph. I'm sure you're not allowed to talk on a cellphone or a CB radio when you're driving, but in my riding there are signs saying which channel of the CB radio you have to announce yourself on to pass safely through these roads. It's a very different environment that we live in. I have to go 200 kilometres at a time on dirt roads to get to events in my riding. This is the reality we have. It's channel 10 in some areas and channel 5 in some areas. You have to use them.

Enough of that. I know that Rémi and Richard both have very large rural Quebec ridings and I want them to get in on this. I'd like to give Richard a quick chance to jump in.

[Translation]

**Mr. Richard Hébert (Lac-Saint-Jean, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Graham.

Mr. Amos, thank you for being here.

We know that access to digital infrastructure is extremely important for Canadians today, to secure safety and health or economic development in our regions. This is what your motion indicates.

As stated in the pre-Budget 2019 brief I tabled, in my riding of Lac-Saint-Jean, 22 of the inhabited regions of the territory have neither cell service nor Internet. That is the case for the RCMs of Maria-Chapdelaine and Domaine-du-Roy.

In your opinion, what measures could be taken to advance and facilitate co-operation and the deployment of wireless infrastructure in our rural areas?

Can you tell us how your study of motion M-208 could help your riding and others such as mine, Lac-Saint-Jean, to obtain better digital wireless infrastructure?

**Mr. William Amos:** Let me begin, Mr. Hébert, by thanking you for your presence, as parliamentary secretary and government representative for small and medium businesses. We know very well how important it is to support SMEs in the regions with the necessary digital infrastructure, so as to ensure their success. If we want to export, be on the cutting edge and seize business opportunities, we must have this technology.

In my riding as in yours, there are reeves, mayors, councillors and municipal managers who are crying out for help, loudly. Since our election, we have seen an increase in investments and financial support.

I am thinking here particularly of Connect to Innovate, a \$500-million program over five years, which in its turn called on the financial participation of the province and the private sector. This program led to overall investments of over \$1 billion. However, the Connect to Innovate program did have one gap: cellular services. The program was focused on high-speed Internet services.

I wish the new multi-year budget investments announced by our government also included cellular services, or that the investments in high-speed Internet included improved cell services. We see the convergence of wireless and Internet technologies. However, neither I, nor the electors, the elected representatives, the reeves or mayors in my riding, are technical experts. We want to better understand the path to follow if these two components are to meet with equal success.

We also want to see various models in action. I'll give you an example. In my riding, projects of about \$13.4 million in total are being carried out by a private company, Bell Canada, in order to help about 3,200 households in 29 communities. There is also a \$7-million project, and half of the funds for that are provided by the non-profit organization 307net; financial support is also provided by the municipality of Cantley.

So, those are some examples of different models made possible by the financial measures taken by the federal government and the

support of the provincial government. I think that the discussions that will take place over the next months or years will be aimed at determining the most appropriate and affordable models, with a particular focus on non-profit organizations. Not only must these models satisfy technical requirements, they must be affordable, as the opposition member just said.

•(1035)

**Mr. Richard Hébert:** Do I still have some time?

**The Chair:** You have a few minutes left.

**Mr. Richard Hébert:** Thank you, Mr. Amos. We are very grateful to you for having introduced this motion. As you know, this important matter has been under study for some time. I myself live in an outlying region, and I can bear witness to the difficulties we have because of the lack of cell services and access to the Internet.

Let me give you some examples. In my own house, I have to stand in a particular place to be able to get a cell signal and use my phone for calls. It's impossible anywhere else in the house. In addition, if I want to download *La Presse* in the morning to read it, I have to shout to my boys to get off the Internet so that I can have access to my newspaper. There is an upside: when my boys disconnect and go and play outside, this is probably better for their health.

So this is a big concern in the regions. As you know, studies were done and our government included \$1.7 billion in the 2019 budget to ensure that necessary infrastructure is put in place.

The government has just finished auctioning off the 600-megahertz band of the spectrum. It had reserved 43% of the available spectrum for regional suppliers in order to facilitate access to the Internet in the regions.

You mentioned the directive sent to the CRTC by former minister Bernier to get that organization to encourage increased and more affordable access in its decisions.

My question is both simple and complex. In your opinion, what more must we do to ensure that, without further delay, Canadians in all regions have access to wireless or wired Internet services? What is missing in all of the measures we have put in place over the last years?

[English]

**The Chair:** A very brief answer, please.

[Translation]

**Mr. William Amos:** Thank you for your question.

I well remember that time once when I was driving toward Rivière-du-Loup for a Liberal Caucus. It was one in the morning, I was a bit lost in the Parliamentary Secretary's riding, and I could not consult my mobile phone GPS, for the reason we are discussing today. It also raises the whole issue of public safety.

Your question is indeed complex, but I will try to give you a simple answer.

In your study, aside for the opinion of private sector experts, it might be useful to find out about the academic opinion on the Telecommunications Act. For instance, it might be useful to ask ourselves whether, rather than trying to count on non-binding objectives, we should not strengthen the current legal provisions around access to the Internet, to give the CRTC a hand and obtain better results.

I'm asking the question without knowing the answer. It may be that we have to amend the act itself to enable this stricter and stronger regulation and impose solutions not only on the private sector, but also on governments.

• (1040)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Masse, you have the final two minutes.

**Mr. Brian Masse:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to follow up on that. It's a good point.

You mentioned the notice directives by Maxime Bernier and then subsequently Navdeep Bains, and the differences between the two.

If you had a directive right now, where would you focus that in terms of the CRTC, to direct the companies? I believe that the system is broken, but if a directive is what we're at right now, what would you do with that?

**Mr. William Amos:** To return to the earlier question that I just responded to, I think my starting point would be that one does have to look at the law itself. If a directive is being applied, it's to provide greater clarity to the regulator as to how certain objectives should be achieved. Perhaps if the law were more clear, and particular outcomes were sought, for example, rural access, then better outcomes could be achieved without having to provide specific direction.

Is it a good thing, generally speaking, to seek greater competition? Absolutely, for the consumer, that's a good thing. Is it proper and

appropriate to seek greater affordability? Absolutely, but I'm not sure —

**Mr. Brian Masse:** What would your directive be? What would be helpful? I guess that's what I'm looking for. Is there a special carve-out that you're looking for that the CRTC should really zero in on right away? You could send them that message now. That's what I'm trying to provide the opportunity for.

**Mr. William Amos:** Sure. I think the regulator is listening to this conversation. It's hearing the desire and has heard the desire through its own "Let's Talk Broadband" and has heard that desire for rural Canada to achieve universal access. Standards have been established. Funds have been allocated.

Of course, as a rural MP who is representing many communities that suffer from a lack of access, I would love to see greater direction provided with regard to the importance of rural access. Our government has taken such a giant leap in terms of the fiscal measures that I think there's great hope for rural Canada through the universal broadband fund, through the CRTC's fund, and potentially, through the Canada Infrastructure Bank. These mechanisms are there. I think the question is, how will this funding roll out and incentivize further behaviour?

We can also assume that the corporate sector, the telecommunications companies across Canada, are going to read this testimony. They're going to hear the voices of members from across Canada and they are going to recognize that this is a national issue that has received unanimous approval from Parliament.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

That's all the time we have left for today.

Thank you, everybody. We will see you next Tuesday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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