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Chair

The Honourable John McKay

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.)): Colleagues, it's 3:30, and I see quorum and Mr. Amos is in his place.

Welcome to the committee, Mr. Amos.

This is a study of rural digital infrastructure under motion 208 and under the name of Mr. Amos, the honourable member for Pontiac.

If you would proceed with your presentation, Mr. Amos, you have 10 minutes.

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the members.

[Translation]

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss what represents [technical difficulties] for my fellow Pontiac residents, but also for Canadians across the country. Whether in rural or urban areas, this is a very important issue.

[English]

I believe the importance of this issue is clearly demonstrated by the unanimous vote. I thank each of you individually—and also your colleagues—for that support, because I think it was a unifying vote around motion 208.

When urban Canada recognizes the challenges that rural Canada faces with regard to what we now consider to be basic telecommunication services—good cellphone access, high-speed Internet—I think these are the things that bring Canada together when there's an appreciation of our challenges.

I think there's an appreciation at this point in time that rural Canada needs to make up for lost time with the digital divide. For too many years, private sector telecommunications companies did not invest sufficiently in that necessary digital infrastructure. Governments at that time, in the past, weren't up to the challenge of recognizing that the market needed to be corrected.

I feel fortunate, in a way, to have been able to bring this motion forward, because I feel that all I was doing was stating the obvious: that a Canadian in northern Alberta or the B.C. interior who is challenged with serious forest fires, just like a Canadian in New Brunswick, Quebec or Ontario who is dealing with floods, deserves access to the digital infrastructure that most Canadians take for granted, so as to ensure their public safety.

As your committee is well aware, the motion was divided into two follow-up components, one with respect to the economic and regulatory aspects of digital infrastructure. That process in the industry committee has been moving forward well. A number of witnesses have been brought forth. The process is proceeding apace. I'm looking forward to their conclusions. I've had an opportunity to participate, and I thank that committee for enabling that participation.

I'm particularly appreciative, Chair, that this committee has seen fit to move forward, even if only with a brief set of interactions on this subject matter, because Canadians across this country recognize that it is time to get to solutions on the public safety dimensions of digital infrastructure.

I'm constantly attempting to channel the voices of my small-town mayors, mayors such as David Rochon, the mayor of Waltham, Quebec. Waltham is about an hour and 45 minutes away from Parliament Hill. It's a straight shot down Highway 148 once you cross the Chaudière Bridge or the Portage Bridge. You get over to Gatineau and just drive straight west down Highway 148, and you can't miss it. It's just across the way from Pembroke.

In that community, they have no cellphone service. The 300-and-some souls who live there, when they're faced with flooding for the second time in three years, get extremely frustrated, and they have every right to be frustrated. I'm frustrated for them, and I'm channelling their voices as I sit before you. This is no more than me speaking on behalf of a range of small-town mayors.

I know the voices of those mayors are magnified by those of so many others across this country. That's why the Federation of Canadian Municipalities supported motion 208, because they hear those mayors' voices as well. That's why the rural caucus of the Quebec Union of Municipalities supported this motion, because they hear those same voices.

[Translation]

It is our responsibility to address this issue directly. I am very pleased to see that since motion M-208 was introduced in the House of Commons, digital infrastructure has been a major success, thanks to Budget 2019. The investments are historic, very concrete and very targeted.

The goal is to have high-speed Internet access across Canada by 2030. The target is 95% by 2025. Our government is the first to set these kinds of targets and invest these amounts. In the past, we were talking about a few hundred million dollars, but now we are talking about billions of dollars. The issue is recognized. For a government, this recognition comes first and foremost through its budget. Our government has recognized this. I really appreciate the actions of our Liberal government.

With respect to wireless and cellular communications in the context of public safety, there is agreement that, in any emergency situation, a cellular phone is required. It is very useful for managing personal emergencies, but it is also very useful for public servants, mayors, councillors who are in the field and want to help their fellow citizens. These people need access to a reliable cellular network to be able to connect with and help their fellow citizens.

• (1540)

[English]

I see that I'm being given the two-minute warning. I will conclude in advance of that simply by saying that I think it's important for us not to descend into rhetoric on this topic. Canadians deserve better than that. I read today's opposition day motion. With no disrespect intended, it didn't spend any time recognizing what our government has done but spent so much time focusing on the problems without getting to the solutions. In the Pontiac, people want solutions. They want to know how they're going to get their cellphone service, and soon. They want their high-speed Internet hookup yesterday, not two years from now. I know that every rural member of Parliament—Conservative, NDP, Liberal and otherwise—is working very hard in their own way to make sure that happens. I am as well. Right now I appreciate this opportunity to focus our attention very specifically on the public safety dimensions.

I also want to say a thank you to our local and national media, who have taken on this issue and are recognizing that in an era of climate change and extreme weather, we're going to need our cellphones more and more; we're going to need this digital infrastructure more and more, to ensure Canadians' safety and security.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Amos.

Mr. Graham, for seven minutes.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Amos, when you brought forward M-208, it had two aspects to it. One was for the industry committee to study these services, and two, for SECU to study the public safety aspect of it. Would you like to expand a bit on how you saw the split committee approach to this.

Mr. William Amos: My feeling was that there are most certainly economic dimensions to this issue. There are questions around competition. There are questions around the nature of a return on investment that can and cannot be made in rural Canada. These are real considerations that I think merit serious consideration. The independent regulator, the CRTC, has distinct responsibilities as established under the Telecommunications Act. Those obligations

provide it, in many aspects, with a fair amount of latitude to achieve the public interest objectives of the Telecommunications Act.

I felt that those issues, both regulatory and economic, which ultimately help to frame how we will get to digital infrastructure access for rural Canada, are not the same issues necessarily, or they're not entirely the same, as the public safety issues. I felt that if the study were to be done by one committee on its own, public safety in particular might end up getting short shrift. I felt that would be inappropriate. I felt that one of the most important arguments in favour of making the massive investments that are necessary, and that our government is stepping forward to make, would be on the basis of public safety considerations.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Fair enough.

In terms of public safety considerations, both your riding and mine have experienced significant problems with dispatching emergency services at a time of emergency. You've described it at great length in the past. When tornadoes hit your riding, when floods hit your riding and my riding, emergency services have to come to city hall, coordinate, and go back out in the field. Can you speak to that? Is that the basis of the focus?

• (1545)

Mr. William Amos: I think for the average Canadian who's thinking about how their family in a certain small town is dealing with an emergency related to extreme weather, it's plain to see that when a local official needs to spend an extra 20 to 40 minutes driving from a particular location on the ground—during a fire or a flood or a tornado or otherwise—back to town hall in order to make the necessary phone calls, it's inefficient. It brings about unnecessary delays in providing proper emergency response.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: In the same vein, a lot of citizens have trouble reaching 911 because there's no service available to do so. Phone lines are no longer up. If you're in a field or in the country—our ridings have recreational areas that are tens of thousands of kilometres—there is no means for people to reach emergency services. Would you find that to be true?

Mr. William Amos: In fact, there are areas in the riding of Pontiac where a fixed wireline service is not available, or circumstances where the fixed wireline service, due to a falling tree or otherwise, has been cut off. Yes, it does create a public safety issue, because many, many seniors in my riding don't have a cellphone. Even if they wanted one, they wouldn't have access to the cellphone service.

Absolutely there are issues, and I think it's important to address these in their totality, but to my mind, the conversation is headed mostly to the access to cellular. That's how people will most often solve the predicament they may find themselves in. I can't tell you the number of times I've had constituents come to me to say, "My car broke down. I was between location X and location Y. There was no cellphone service. I thought I was going to die." That is a run-of-the-mill conversation in the Pontiac. In this day and age, I think we have a mature enough and wealthy enough society to address these issues if we focus on them.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: To your point, though, there's been a lot of confusion in the public about what motion 208 is about, because it talks about "wireless" without being too specific. In your view, this is about cellphone service, and not about broadband Internet to the same extent. This is about making sure that we can reach emergency services, that emergency services can reach each other, and that the cellphone signal we need on our back roads is available to us.

Mr. William Amos: That's correct. My greatest concern was the cellphone aspect. In M-208, where I refer to wireless, the intention is to mean cellphone, meaning mobile wireless.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: When I was younger, we had cellphone service in the Laurentians through analog. When we switched to digital, we lost a lot of that service. Did you have the same experience?

Mr. William Amos: That's going back a ways.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: We had a cellphone in the car in 1985, and it was worth as much as the car, but it worked, which is not the case today. In most of my area, there is no signal, and it's becoming a very serious problem for us. I'm very happy to encourage this, and I'm glad you brought it forward. I'm running out of time here.

Where have the market forces been? We're always hearing from some people that market forces can fix everything. Why have market forces not solved these problems for us?

Mr. William Amos: Since the advent of the Internet as a mainstream technology and wireless mobile coming in to a greater extent, the decision in the early 1990s to leave the development of this infrastructure to the private sector and not to nationalize it has had consequences.

Where the return on investment for the private sector is insufficient in a large area where the density of population is low, it's clear that's going to bring about a particular result. We see it all across rural Canada: patchiness, portions where there's coverage, and portions where there's not. That unreliability of coverage has serious impacts, both on the public security side but also on the economic development side.

Nowadays, prospective homebuyers in your riding, as well as mine and so many others, will make decisions premised on a full range of factors, including whether there is good Internet and cellphone coverage. It has serious ramifications both on a public safety and an economic and sustainable growth basis. I think we need to address those.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Graham.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul-Hus, you have the floor for seven minutes.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Amos, thank you for being here.

We also consider it important to establish a better connectivity system in Canada. This is a major problem for many regions,

particularly in rural areas. I am glad a Liberal member is concerned about rural areas. The receptivity was not the same when we did a study on another subject. This current receptivity will please my colleagues who live in very remote rural areas and who are facing the same problem.

You must have met with the Canadian Communication Systems Alliance, which represents telephone companies and Internet service providers in the regions. Every year, they come to us and remind us that they have to use Bell Canada or Telus towers to transmit their signals and that this is a problem. In the end, it is always about revenues, complications and agreements.

Has this factor been assessed in order to facilitate things for those companies that are already in place?

Mr. William Amos: Thank you for the question.

In fact, the executive director of the CCSA, Mr. Jay Thomson, is a Pontiac citizen. I met him several times.

This question has been important for some years now. All regulation and competition between large and smaller companies that would like to enter the market remains a challenge. Indeed, large companies have made significant investments and want to ensure their performance. Smaller players, on the other hand, have the right to access these infrastructures, under the Telecommunications Act, and want to use them. Ensuring competition and access as objectives in the act remains a challenge for the CRTC.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: If we start at the beginning, the motion raises important questions. I don't know anything about your meetings with the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology, but have you ever considered the possibility of deregulating or regulating the sector otherwise? If companies are already established across the country and are just waiting for the opportunity to connect, this may be the first effort to make before going any further and saying that the government should invest hundreds of millions of dollars.

Mr. William Amos: There are several aspects to be assessed, starting with the success of the Telecommunications Act in achieving its objectives of competition and access, among others. There is also a need to assess the investments and tax incentives put in place in this area by successive federal governments. It would be worthwhile to focus on these two elements in all cases.

I would like to mention, however, that the investments that were made by the previous Conservative government—your government—in successive budgets were not enough to solve the problem.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Fine.

With regard to public safety, have you assessed the current situation in Canada? Police and ambulance services already have autonomous communication systems and can therefore remain in contact during an emergency. Have you taken this into account? I believe your goal is to allow all citizens to use their phones anywhere. However, when it comes to public safety, do you know if we are well equipped?

•(1555)

Mr. William Amos: In general, these emergency services are well equipped, but there are still gaps. I had discussions again this year with the Gracefield Fire Department, which was having communication difficulties. However, when I spoke to the Canadian Armed Forces in the aftermath of the 2019 floods, they told me that their system was very functional.

What we are seeing more and more in the age of digital infrastructure, social media and technology is that anyone can help anyone. Public safety is increasingly managed by individuals and their neighbours, in collaboration with public services. It is therefore essential that everyone have access to a cellular signal.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Have you done any research on satellite communications? The satellite phone already exists, although its use is very expensive. Have any companies already suggested ways to reduce these user costs and focus on satellite calls in some areas where 3G or LTE networks are not available? Has this possibility already been evaluated?

Mr. William Amos: I invite the Parliamentary Secretary, Mr. Serré, to fill any gaps I may have in my answer.

Our investments in satellite communications in Budget 2019 are very significant and this approach could prove to be one of the best solutions for remote and other communities that are hard to reach using fibre optics or cellular towers.

In terms of costs and whether this is the best way to cover the whole country, I am not an expert in this field. That is why I initiated this discussion both in the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology and in this committee. I can tell you that Telesat Canada appeared before the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology last week and its testimony was greatly appreciated.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Paul-Hus.

Mr. Dubé, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Beloeil—Chambly, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Amos, thank you for being here and for bringing this motion forward.

So long as we're talking about the content of different motions, I'd like to know something, because I'm intrigued. Why was a study commissioned at the outset? I listened to the discussions with Mr. Graham and Mr. Paul-Hus. For your part, you talked about the work of mayors, councillors or political leaders in your community. So there seems to be a clear consensus on the problem.

Rather than asking for further study by a parliamentary committee, why not introduce a motion or bill requiring the government to make changes and take action on this issue? Such a motion would have identified the problem and the House would have asked the government to do something about it. This would have had more impact, especially since there are only about ten days left in the current parliamentary session.

Mr. William Amos: First, the motion was introduced in November 2018, before the 2019 budget. The Connect to Innovate program, the largest rural Internet investment program in Canadian history, was already in place. The motion and other political factors have put very constructive pressure on our government and have led to several new investments. As I mentioned, it plans to invest \$1.7 billion in the Universal Broadband Fund, and make other investments in satellite technology and spectrum-related public policy measures. A whole series of measures have been taken. Given the slowness of the parliamentary process—

•(1600)

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Allow me to interrupt you.

Regarding the municipal actors in our ridings, I regularly speak with Mr. Jacques Ladouceur, who is the mayor of Richelieu as well as the reeve of the Rouville RCM. If there is not much traffic, it will take you 35 or 40 minutes to get from Richelieu to Montreal. It's not very far away. It is a constituency with rural areas, but it is not necessarily a rural constituency.

M. Ladouceur told me that you can throw all the money you want out the window, but—you recognize this in part in your motion—the CRTC relies on certain rules to assess the quality of the Internet connection. I am not an expert in this field and I rely, as we all do, on local actors who know about it. The CRTC measures the quality of the Internet connection in a certain way. If there is a place on the map where there is a certain band quality, the area is not considered a priority. Thirty-five minutes from Montreal, it is conceivable that we could find a house on one range that has a good quality band, but this is not the case for the other houses, and all of them are penalized.

I thank the minister for demonstrating an openness to speak to municipal officials in my riding. The mayors in my riding recognize the problem and I have no doubt that it is the same in yours.

Why limit ourselves to saying that the government has made investments and that we will look into the matter? Why didn't you approach this more forcefully? Money is all well and good, but you need something else. You and the elected municipal officials in your riding have identified the problem. Why don't you send a message to the House that something more needs to be done, such as changing the CRTC rules?

Mr. William Amos: I believe that the process leading to these changes—whether legislative, regulatory or fiscal—has begun. The Telecommunications Act is being reformed. I am sure that this will be the subject of important discussions during this election period and following the election. This is the right time to present concrete solutions.

Yes, we can go directly to the CRTC, and that's what we did last week. Commission representatives appeared before the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology to discuss regulatory issues and its investments. Indeed, the CRTC has a \$750 million fund that comes solely from telecommunications companies and not directly from taxpayers. All these discussions are taking place right now, but there is no easy solution. That is the issue. That is why I asked for these two studies. We cannot take certain things for granted. As a voter, I would like a political party to propose not one solution, but a range of solutions, whether it involves the spectrum, the tax aspect, investments or regulation.

Do we now have all the solutions to these problems? I don't think so. That is why I am opening the discussion. I believe in the potential of 338 members of Parliament who care about rural Canada.

Mr. Matthew Dubé: My last question is similar to the one Mr. Graham asked earlier. Two studies in tandem, we don't often see that. As for public safety, I appreciate that you don't want it to be an afterthought.

That being said, are there any specific actors we should talk to? We are talking about floods, and, in particular, various equipment. What could the committee focus on to be useful in this regard? The preamble largely deals with economic and regulatory aspects, but what do you see for us?

• (1605)

The Chair: May I ask you to answer quickly, please?

Mr. William Amos: I am thinking here of firefighters' associations, police departments, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and other municipal groups, as well as mayors of small communities across Canada. We must listen to Canadians. To know their stories and experiences is to know the reality. I find that Parliament sometimes lacks representation from small communities. I am also thinking of the security services across the country. These were some suggestions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dubé.

Mr. Picard, you have the floor for seven minutes.

Mr. Michel Picard (Montarville, Lib.): Mr. Amos, you said that your fellow citizens were eager to see the establishment of a cellular telephony infrastructure. We can understand them.

How realistic are your fellow citizens about how long it will take to set up this system? This will not happen in a day or a week.

Mr. William Amos: Honestly, this is the most difficult aspect of our work and, in this case, of mine. I know that by advocating for digital infrastructure solutions, I am open to criticism. That's for sure. People want solutions, but would have wanted them yesterday. It is not in two or three months and even less in two or three years that they want an Internet connection. They would have wanted it yesterday, and rightly so. It will be very difficult for me to get my electorate to fully consider how long it will take. However, we must start at the beginning and address this problem. For this reason, I am very pleased with the investments our government is making. With more than \$5 billion over a decade, this is a serious investment.

Mr. Michel Picard: Beyond the need, there is also the question of social acceptability. People want to have the infrastructure as soon as possible, but suffer from the "not in my backyard" syndrome.

I'll give you an example. I live 25 minutes from Montreal, between Montreal and my colleague Mr. Dubé's riding. Past the mountain, where I live, in what is an urban suburb, the cellular signal is weak or non-existent. So people who come to my house can't use their cell phones. Steps have been taken to address this very real problem, and cell phone towers will be erected in my riding and in Mr. Dubé's riding. Obviously, there will always be cases where the tower will not be in the right place, but these towers are needed. People want solutions, but they don't want the equipment they require.

What is the perception of people in your riding?

Mr. William Amos: This kind of debate will always be ongoing. In rural areas, the discussion may be less difficult because the vast majority of my fellow citizens are in favour of these towers and accept this kind of compromise.

This question is not a new one. This is a concern that both the CRTC and Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada have been trying to manage for years. The whole dynamic of "not in my backyard" is important and you have to manage these aspects.

The vast majority of public safety concerns arising from the lack of mobile phone services are raised in small communities far from large urban centres. Therefore, the question of not wanting a tower in your backyard is less relevant. This concern certainly remains, but it is less important.

• (1610)

Mr. Michel Picard: When it comes to infrastructure planning, setting the right priorities is key. In terms of economic drivers, cell phone and Internet service is a priority. It enables economic growth. In fact, it's a must-have. In order to do business, people need a cell phone and Internet access, without which, success is merely wishful thinking. This priority benefits the community as a whole.

We are talking about public safety, however, and the issue is whether the infrastructure to address the social, business and economic concerns raised should include bandwidth for the exclusive use of first responders in the event of a disaster, such as in the north. I remember what happened with the Fort McMurray fires. Police and firefighters weren't using the same bandwidth to communicate with one another, and, in some cases, they weren't able to communicate at all. In situations like that, having dedicated lines and matching infrastructure is necessary.

How, then, should requirements be prioritized when implementing the infrastructure?

Mr. William Amos: That's a great question, and it's precisely why I'd like the committee to conduct a detailed study. I can tell you how I think the available spectrum should be divvied up between emergency responders and the public, but, as the member for Pontiac, I'm no expert. Although very pertinent, it's not a question I'm qualified to answer.

Mr. Michel Picard: Do we have the means, the capacity and the authority to make companies invest in expanding their networks? Eventually, it comes down to the return on investment. In all likelihood, companies haven't set up infrastructure in rural areas because the critical mass needed to generate a return on investment isn't there.

Mr. William Amos: Through the CRTC, the government requires telecommunications companies to invest in digital infrastructure. Two years ago, the government announced \$750 million in funding over five years for that purpose, and the CRTC began receiving the first applications a week ago. The funding comes directly from the telecommunications companies.

There's a central question that needs answering, and I certainly hope the CRTC gives it some thought. Is \$750 million over five years sufficient? Should it be more? The fund was announced in December 2016. Following the 2019 budget, investments in the area have gone up considerably.

[English]

The Chair: It works better when the witness pays attention to the chair.

Mr. Motz, you have five minutes.

Mr. Glen Motz (Medicine Hat—Cardston—Warner, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Amos, for being here today.

You won't get any argument from me or anyone in my riding about the need for rural infrastructure and connectivity. My riding is about 30,000 square kilometres and most of it is a rural area that struggles with connectivity issues from end to end.

As one example, one of the counties had asked for \$2 million from the connect to innovate funding stream that came out a year and a half or so ago, for the beginning sections of a broadband plan for their region to provide a lot of necessary services to their constituents. They got \$200,000 of their \$2-million ask out of the \$500 million that was rolled out across the country. That was a disappointment to them and to me, but it also put them in the very tough spot of how to move forward with one-tenth of what their ask was. How do you get things done?

I know you weren't here for this, but if you compare that with the rural crime study we just did, one of the things we looked at through this rural crime study was.... It was all about public safety and there are many areas where people couldn't access law enforcement through telephone service, 911, because there wasn't the infrastructure in place to do that.

Right now some of the people in rural Canada whom I've chatted with since that study on rural crime are wondering whether.... Now we're talking about doing digital infrastructure for rural Canada, but we couldn't give the same attention to crime and it's about public safety. They're wondering about how credible the ability to roll this out actually is.

I guess my question for you, sir, is this. Beyond the connect to innovate money that's been set aside for this and has been rolled out, is there any thought to or do you have any idea of whether the

infrastructure bank that's been set up by this government...or how much of that has been rolled out to rural Internet projects?

• (1615)

Mr. William Amos: Maybe I'll start with the beginning of your question. You represent a riding of 30,000 square kilometres. Pontiac is 77,000 square kilometres. We're talking about big ridings here with great needs. All of our communities across rural Canada are playing catch-up. That is the simple reality. I'm not saying this to be partisan, but it is a simple fact that the previous Harper administration did not invest sufficiently in this, and that put us behind the eight ball.

We're now coming up with government programs that put carrots in front of telecommunications companies, that create incentives to invest more; and the connect to innovate program has had a number of major successes. The funding is rolling out presently, but I think there's a recognition that we need to do so much more because of situations like the one you're pointing out. I'm sure there is more than \$200,000 worth of Internet infrastructure needs in your region, and we need to get to that point. Budget 2019 is really going to help us get there.

With respect to the Infrastructure Bank, the budget was quite clear that it would be contemplated as a source of financing. I'm looking forward to Minister Bernadette Jordan, our Minister of Rural Economic Development, coming forward with a plan for a rural economic development strategy, and to her collaboration with our Minister of Infrastructure, François-Philippe Champagne, to bring forth a plan to show us how more capital can be brought to bear, because at the end of the day, it is going to be about incentivizing private sector companies or—

Mr. Glen Motz: Is that the way forward, to get more of a P3 approach to the whole concept of this?

Mr. William Amos: I think it's part of the solution, but I don't think it's the whole solution, because there are going to be circumstances where the private sector determines that it doesn't want to invest in particular corners and there are going to be little pockets that are left alone. We have to enable regional governments or non-profits to work together to fill those gaps. That's why this is going to take time, because there's going to be a process in which companies evaluate where they want to take advantage of these incentives and to invest, and then we're going to be doing gap analysis, and then going back in and doing more work. I think this is going to be an iterative process.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Motz.

Ms. Sahota, you have five minutes.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): I've given my time over to David. He has a keen interest in this subject, so I think it's only fair.

An hon. member: He has 25 more questions.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I don't have as many as normal.

The Chair: Mr. Graham, you have five minutes.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

• (1620)

[Translation]

Mr. Amos, one of the bases of Quebec's forest fire protection agency—the Société de protection des forêts contre le feu, or SOPFEU—is located in your riding, in Maniwaki. Last weekend, an event was held for aviation enthusiasts, *Rendez-vous aérien*. It was no doubt great fun. I wish I could've been there.

The SOPFEU has a low-frequency radio service across all of Quebec. It works throughout southern Quebec, at 55° or 56° north latitude. The cell phone service is entirely high-frequency, beginning at 400 MHz and even higher.

Since you've been in Parliament, have any telecommunications companies come to you with creative solutions outside the box? The focus is always on 5G and 24 GHz. You and I will agree that 24 GHz service would be tough to implement. Have any companies ever approached you with creative solutions?

Mr. William Amos: I must admit I'm not an expert. I'm not aware of any companies providing solutions like that. I agree with what you said and with the premise of your question.

Yesterday, I had a chance to meet some people from the SOPFEU. They put on the *Rendez-vous aérien* event in Maniwaki, which I was delighted to attend. In the Gatineau valley, these people are heralded as heroes. They are Canadian heroes to us. I have no doubt they'll be present in Alberta and British Columbia this summer, and certainly in Quebec.

Coming back to your question, I wonder what innovative solutions would make it possible to access the various bands of the spectrum. I don't know the answer. It goes back to what Mr. Dubé said about the reason for undertaking a study like this. It can't be assumed that politicians will have the answers to technical questions. We need engineers and entrepreneurs to come up with different options so that, together, we can recommend the most promising and cost-effective solution.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You and Mr. Dubé were discussing potential witnesses earlier. You mentioned firefighters associations as well as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, among others.

Should we be looking to telecommunications companies for creative solutions? I'm talking about non-traditional players, outside the Bells and Telus. Should we study the whole issue of spectrum, as you mentioned, to figure out whether the current system is meeting regional needs?

Mr. William Amos: Absolutely. Those are all key questions.

Yes, the telecommunications sector is home to a range of minor players. In the Pontiac, for instance, PioneerWireless holds tremendous potential, but it can be harder for small companies to access government programs. They no doubt have some ideas to suggest. I would be grateful to the committee if it were to examine the way telecommunications companies, big and small, view public safety and their role in the solutions process.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: With this Parliament drawing to a close, we are running out of time. It'll basically be over next week.

If you could tell the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security of the 43rd Parliament something, what would it be?

Mr. William Amos: I would start by stressing how important the issue is. Then, I would point out the need for a non-partisan approach given that there is unanimous agreement on the problem. In Canada, we do better when we tackle major issues in a non-partisan way. This issue is highly complex. It's way too easy to point fingers, assign blame and get caught up in politics. That's not what the constituents in my riding or rural Canadians, in general, need. Finally, I think it would be very helpful for the committee to recommend that the next Parliament revisit the issue. That would signal the possibility of the next Parliament taking up the issue even though we may not have time to examine it in depth.

• (1625)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Graham.

Mr. Eglinski, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Mr. Jim Eglinski (Yellowhead, CPC): Thank you.

I want to thank the presenter, Mr. Amos, for presenting this. As my counterpart said here, I'm very much in favour of trying to connect this country of ours to have cell coverage.

I notice that part (iii) of the text of your motion says:

(iii) continue to work with telecommunication companies, provinces, territories, municipalities, Indigenous communities and relevant emergency response organizations

That's the part of this that kind of interests me. Most provinces have set up an emergency communications program that interconnects the ambulance service, police service and fire service. That has been in place for many years across most of the country that I'm aware of.

Have you talked to or approached the provincial governments, municipal governments or territorial counterparts to see what part they thought we should play? As I see it, it cannot be done by industry alone. It is not going to give us that connectivity on its own.

Your riding is about the same size as mine, Mr. Amos. I think I have about as much uninhabited land and about the same number of municipalities and counties. I have 11 counties and they're all fighting independently to try to get this service, but it's not profitable for industry. I think there is a need for our counties, our provinces, our federal government and industry to communicate.

I'm wondering if you have had any communications within your area as to where they think we should fit in. It's a big dollar amount. The money you mentioned—the \$750 million—is just scratching the surface if we're going to give Canada equal coverage from one end to the other. It's going to be in the billions. Industry has told us that realistically it's probably more like \$5 billion to \$7 billion to connect Canada.

I wonder if you would comment on that.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you for your question, and I would like to thank you also for being such a great colleague. We've worked together on the environment committee, and during our trip out west we had the pleasure of enjoying a little portion of your very special and very beautiful riding. I won't forget that.

You've asked about the role of the provincial governments and what my experience has been on that front as we try to amass the funding required to get to a multi-billion dollar solution. I think you're right. I've heard different numbers; I've heard the \$15 billion figure bandied about.

Regardless of that, I think one of the things that has changed since our election in 2015 is a willingness of the provinces to engage in a more serious fashion with more serious provincial investments. I can speak for the situation in Quebec, where the connect to innovate program was matched by provincial funds. In the Pontiac, I've had the opportunity to announce over \$20 million in new high-speed Internet funding. All of the federal contributions were matched by provincial contributions. I'd say roughly about a bit north of 50% of the total of that \$20 million was federal and provincial investments.

I think we're turning a bit of a corner in the sense that despite the fact that the jurisdiction around telecommunications is clearly understood to be federal, there's a recognition that the fiscal responsibility is simply too large for one level of government to bear.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: If I'm hearing you correctly, in that innovation fund, I believe we gave Quebec almost \$160 million. So did Quebec also invest \$161 million in the last four years?

• (1630)

Mr. William Amos: I believe it was at least that. It may even have invested a little more. Perhaps Mr. Graham would have exact figures by memory. I don't have those by memory, but I'm sure I could come back with them.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Do you know if any of your counties have invested? I believe you have a very similar system to what I have back home, where you have a number of large counties. Are they looking at investing? Have you talked to them about that?

Mr. William Amos: Absolutely. In fact, the riding of Pontiac has three regional municipal governments, each with roughly 15 municipalities within them. Two of those regional municipal governments partnered together and brought a submission forward and submitted it to the connect to innovate program. In the end, their project wasn't the one that was chosen, but it does go to show that this is where the projects are going to be coming from, not just from the major telecommunications companies but also from municipal governments working with small service providers, working with consultants who are advising them. This is one of the challenges that we're looking to help them with.

The Chair: Ms. Dabrusin, you have five minutes.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Thank you. I'll give my time to Mr. Graham.

The Chair: Mr. Graham, you have another five minutes.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'll take it. Yes.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In the past, private companies didn't invest in digital infrastructure without some type of federal, provincial or other source of funding. You just said that Quebec funded a large chunk of the Internet service within its borders. I believe it was much more than 50% of the federal and provincial funding that came from Quebec. The province made a tremendous contribution.

What can be done to get around companies' refusal to invest before they receive government funding? Is the answer to build digital infrastructure that is entirely publicly owned?

Mr. William Amos: Some companies would certainly argue that nationalizing the infrastructure is the way to go. I don't agree because that would be too costly for taxpayers. Taxpayers would have a very hard time covering the billions upon billions that have already been invested. However, the goal is definitely to prevent situations where investments aren't made unless government funding has been granted.

That said, we all realize how important the issue is. As I said in response to Mr. Eglinski's question, some competition is already happening. Municipal and regional governments, often in partnership with small companies, are competing with the major telecommunications players. I think it's important to ensure the competition is balanced when it comes to regional governments, small players and major companies. Of course, they are all looking for public money, whether it comes from the federal government, the CRTC, the province or some other source.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Under the connect to innovate program, a company receiving federal funding has to provide public access to the system. Might a similar requirement be applied to cell phone service, if the federal or provincial government helped to build towers and the system were more accessible than required by the CRTC? Conversely, would that be even more detrimental to investment?

Telecommunications companies such as Bell, Rogers and Telus have said setting up towers isn't worthwhile because a company that doesn't have a tower jumps onto their network right away.

What is the right balance between open access and a monopoly on investment?

Mr. William Amos: That's a highly complex issue that the CRTC is looking into. As a politician and someone who is by no means an expert, I'm hesitant to say how the commission should go about finding that balance. Technical and economic considerations are equally important in coming up with the answer. A balance is clearly needed. Canadians benefit from greater competition, but, at the same time, companies need incentives to invest in fixed infrastructure, in other words, towers and fibre optics.

Our government is trying to find that balance with a directive that encourages companies to lower prices. It is asking the CRTC to move in that direction, but it has to provide incentives, whether through the connect to innovate program or other initiatives. Incentives are needed to give the private sector a reason to invest capital in infrastructure.

• (1635)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Graham.

Mr. Amos, if I wanted to digitally disappear, would I move to Pontiac?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Glen Motz: Yes, we can arrange that in Ottawa.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Yes, I know. There is a certain element on this committee that would prefer that.

Mr. William Amos: Well, I think you might start by speaking to your social media adviser. He could eliminate your accounts, and that would cause a degree of disappearance.

No, in the Pontiac, you don't disappear. In fact, there are many, many areas of the riding of Pontiac that are well covered. In fact, Pontiac, as a riding, starts with the northern suburbs of Gatineau, where there is 100% coverage, as one would expect in any major city in Canada, but as soon as you go 20 minutes outside of Gatineau, that's not—

The Chair: So it is possible that I could digitally disappear 20 minutes outside of Gatineau.

Mr. William Amos: You can virtually disappear, but not within 20 minutes. You'd have to go a bit farther than that. You could—

The Chair: This is a public safety/public security committee, and what we look at are people who are not necessarily working in the public interest, shall we say. Is there any group, or are there any groups, of people who would prefer to digitally disappear, if you will, and who in turn would create a public safety issue? I'm thinking particularly of some of the people we might have heard of in our

previous study on rural crime, but is there a group that we're not thinking about that does actually create security issues?

Mr. William Amos: Just so I can be sure that I've understood the question clearly, are you asking if there's a public interest in maintaining digital obscurity to be set aside from the predominant digital culture that we should be protecting?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. William Amos: If there is one, they're not knocking at my doors regularly in the Pontiac—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. William Amos: —and the mayors and municipal councillors who represent them are not knocking on my door requesting that assistance. It is certainly quite possible in my riding to live off the grid with a reclusive lifestyle, to enjoy the benefits of the national capital and have access to an international airport and a modern transportation system and all of the amenities of urban life on a day-to-day basis and still live in the woods.

The Chair: Does anybody actively oppose your motion?

Mr. William Amos: Actually, there are certain individuals who have raised health concerns about cell tower frequencies. That issue is still the subject of scientific inquiry, and I think that should continue. It's important that we have that kind of research being done. They would be in the minority, the very small minority.

The Chair: I have a final question. A lot of these rural communities are in pretty vulnerable states. There was an article a week or two ago about Huawei offering access at an inexpensive rate. That has been a subject of this committee's study over the last number of months. Do you have any opinion with respect to Huawei's offering services at supremely discounted rates to rural communities?

• (1640)

Mr. William Amos: My sense is that there are many companies that offer the technologies that Huawei offers, such as Nokia and Ericsson, to name just a couple. The national security considerations in relation to Huawei are being undertaken by our government at the highest levels. I have every faith that it will be done appropriately. I trust that process.

No matter what transpires on that ledger, we will have access in Canada to the necessary 5G technologies to build out digital infrastructure for all of rural Canada. It's just a question of which company would provide those technologies and services.

The Chair: Okay. With that, on behalf of the committee, I want to thank you for your appearance here.

We will now adjourn.

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