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**Official Report
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(Hansard)**

Wednesday 11 June 2008

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

Mercredi 11 juin 2008

**Standing Committee on
the Legislative Assembly**

Television broadcast system

**Comité permanent de
l'Assemblée législative**

Systeme de télédiffusion

Chair: Bas Balkissoon
Clerk: Tonia Grannum

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT DE
L'ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE**

Wednesday 11 June 2008

Mercredi 11 juin 2008

The committee met at 1304 in committee room 2.

TELEVISION BROADCAST SYSTEM

The Chair (Mr. Bas Balkissoon): I call to order the meeting of the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly. The only item we have in front of us is the television broadcast system and a report back from the Clerk. Madam Clerk, it's all yours.

The Clerk of the Assembly (Ms. Deborah Deller): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the committee coming together on such short notice. I did commit at the last meeting that I was at to reporting back to you on the issue of our satellite broadcast, and I thought it was important that I do that, given that we have moved along with it. I wanted to make sure you did have the update before the House adjourns for the summer.

In brief, Shaw broadcasting system is the company that is under contract with the assembly to provide the distribution of our Ont.Parl signal. What they do is uplink our signal to their satellite, and then it bounces back down. It's unencrypted, which makes it available free of charge to any of the cable companies across the province. That's the first thing.

The signal is currently, without getting too technical, distributed on what's called a Ku band. There is increasing stress for use of Ku band, predominantly because as we move to high-definition broadcasting, it takes up more bandwidth on the Ku band. So the companies like Shaw are under increasing pressure to give up more of their Ku band space to networks like CTV that are increasingly broadcasting in high definition. What they will be doing is transferring us to what is called the C band, which is in fact the signal that we used to be broadcast on when we first started broadcasting Ont.Parl.

The cable companies who want to keep the Ont.Parl signal will have to retune in order to grab the signal from the C band. In some cases, that will mean that they will need new equipment. We are currently working with Shaw to get in touch with the cable operators to ensure that they know of the change, first of all, and to find out if they have compatible equipment.

Shaw has agreed to work with us in terms of making sure we outfit the cable companies with the appropriate equipment, should that be necessary. What we did in 1997 when we went to C band was we contacted all of the cable companies, and we told them that the assembly

would be prepared, in some cases, to subsidize the purchase of the equipment they would need to broadcast. We did that based on the number of subscribers they had, so the smaller cable companies we subsidized for 100% of the cost of the equipment, and then the larger companies were subsidized to a lesser degree, and companies like Rogers, that didn't need any subsidy at all, were not given one. That seemed to satisfy the cable companies.

There was a cost to the assembly. There will be again, should that become necessary. Since many of the cable companies currently do broadcast other channels on C band, many of them likely will not need the new equipment.

We're currently in the process of assessing how much equipment we will need. The equipment would be, if we were to purchase it for each cable company, about \$1,200 apiece. Shaw has offered to offset that and charge us only \$1,000 apiece. The maximum cost to the assembly would be \$200,000. That would be if we were to outfit all 220 cable companies with the equipment we need, which is unlikely.

We will save about \$36,000 a year under the new contract agreement with Shaw, the reason being that because they're moving us from the Ku band to the C band, they're giving us a price break on the contract. This will largely offset any costs that we may have to make the transfer this summer.

What we did then, given that offer from Shaw, was to look at what other providers are out there that might provide us with the same kind of service at a lesser cost. The only other service provider that would be able to take our signal is Telesat. Their offer is more expensive each month. They use different equipment, which means that all the cable companies already airing Ont.Parl would have to have this other brand of equipment in order to broadcast. With Shaw, because they have compatible equipment, it minimizes the cost to the assembly in terms of providing new equipment.

Our inclination at this point is to continue our contract with Shaw at the lesser price, and they will transfer us to C band. That will be done over the summer. The House won't be sitting over the summer, so it will minimize any kind of disruption or interruption of service.

The one other piece to know about this is that TVO is also under contract with the assembly to transmit Ont.Parl to northern Ontario. They get their signal from Shaw satellite and they send it out to remote communities where it can be picked up by local cable companies. They

have 24 what are called repeaters, and some of those may need to be upgraded. Some of them they're doing as their usual maintenance work already this summer. For those, they won't charge us. Any others that need to be upgraded as a result of this change, the assembly will bear some of the cost.

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The second thing, unrelated to this particular issue but happening at the same time, is that Star Choice has notified us that they are going to discontinue providing Ont.Parl on their channel tier this summer. This is a different issue for us, a different service provider, but it's related to the same issue, which is that they're trying to free up bandwidth on their system. We have protested the decision to them, but Ont.Parl, as you recall from the last meeting, is not mandatory under CRTC regulations, so we are unable to require that it be offered. Star Choice has told us they will not reconsider. After this, we approached Bell ExpressVu, asking if they had any interest in taking Ont.Parl on and adding it to their channel tier. They have no interest in doing so.

That brings me to my third and final comment, and that is that at the last meeting I did tell you I was going to canvass the other jurisdictions across the country to see if any of the others are encountering the same situation, and if there would be an appetite for us to all, as a collective, to approach the CRTC and make a request for them to consider mandatory airing of legislative and parliamentary channels on satellite and cable channels.

I have done that and I have received a response from most of the other jurisdictions. None of them is encountering, at this moment, the exact situation we find ourselves in, but others have been in the situation before or are going to be. For example, British Columbia is currently carried on Star Choice. They have just signed a five-year contract with their satellite provider, so they're set for the next five years to be on the Ku band. That does not mean that at some point, without warning, Star Choice may not approach them and remove them from their channel tier as well. So the appetite for approaching the CRTC with this concern and the recommendation to make these channels mandatory is high. Most of the other jurisdictions said they would absolutely join with Ontario in whatever submission we determine to make to the CRTC.

What I would recommend then to the committee, or at least ask for the committee's endorsement on, is that we will beaver away over the next several weeks and months to put together such a submission for you to take a look at, which could go to the CRTC with the signature of the Chair of this committee and the Speaker, and we would share with other jurisdictions and have the same signatures added as well.

The Chair (Mr. Bas Balkissoon): Comments?

The Clerk of the Assembly (Ms. Deborah Deller): Sorry, one other thing I should add is that there is a little bit of serendipity at play in that we did start the webcast of the assembly proceedings, so those are now available for anyone who has access to the Internet.

Mr. Kevin Daniel Flynn: I support the request. If you need a motion to support it, I'd be happy to move that.

But just a question for Deb: Is it an indication, from a commercial perspective, that there's not a whole lot of people watching? Should we interpret it that way?

The Clerk of the Assembly (Ms. Deborah Deller): I think that's what Star Choice is banking on, that they're not going to upset too many of their customers if they take it off their channel tier.

I should tell you that Star Choice has done this across the country, not with legislative channels necessarily. As an example, one of the broadcasts they cut was CBC Saskatchewan, which one would think would be a fairly significant broadcast to cut from their channel tier.

Mr. Kevin Daniel Flynn: We need American Idol.

Mrs. Julia Munro: I would just like to add my voice in terms of supporting you on the issue of making a submission to the CRTC. I think being able to provide this in the province is very important, quite frankly. The kind of opportunity we have through the media generally is fairly selective in terms of who happens to be in the press gallery and what happens there.

When you contrast what we deal with today in terms of the kind of media coverage over what would have happened even 25 or 30 years ago, it would seem to me that there's a really strong argument to support this being something that is mandatory. We don't have 30 small-town newspaper people sitting in the press gallery every day now. Communications is a very different kind of animal than it was in those days. So I think going with Ontario leadership on this issue and getting the support of the other provinces is key to providing that.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I agree. In a democracy, people need access to this information. The reality is that the means of communication are these cable companies. They have a responsibility to the society as a whole. So I think moving forward with this request makes sense.

Mr. Bob Delaney: To add to the last two comments, at the last meeting I think it was Norm Miller who mentioned Star Choice in his area. I had to file my notice to have a motion to debate. I think I'm up in the fall. In the Orders and Notices paper I think you will find exactly what Julia and Peter referred to. We sat down and drafted it. Essentially, the notice asks the House to support the idea of making it mandatory if you're planning to get or renew a licence.

Mr. Kevin Daniel Flynn: Just one final point: I guess the short-term aim is to keep it on the air. You would think the long-term aim, though, would be to make it a channel that Star Choice would want to pick up in some way.

The Chair (Mr. Bas Balkissoon): I think that's the suggestion, to make the mandatory request.

Mr. Kevin Daniel Flynn: Right, but I mean in the long run. That's making them carry it because you're forcing them to. It would be nice to have ourselves in a situation where the channel—I get a lot of good comments about C-SPAN, is it? It's not just the House of Commons, it's some of the other programming that's on C-SPAN that seems to add to the attraction of the channel. If we were able to do something along those

lines here—I'm talking about in the long term—I think we'd be doing well there.

The Chair (Mr. Bas Balkissoon): Since there's no one else, I'm told that we really don't need a motion. As long as the consent of the committee is there, the Speaker and myself can sign the letter that goes out for that mandatory request, as the initial step.

The Clerk of the Assembly (Ms. Deborah Deller): We'll put together a proposal and make sure the members of this committee have a look at it before we send it anywhere.

The Chair (Mr. Bas Balkissoon): Everybody agrees to that? Okay. Meeting adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1317.

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