



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 115

Thursday, April 11, 2024

Chair: The Honourable Hedy Fry



Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage

Thursday, April 11, 2024

• (1535)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, all.

I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 115 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage.

I would like to acknowledge that this meeting is taking place on the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

You know the rules, but I'll quickly tell them to you.

Although the parties have not mandated us to wear masks, it's always advisable that you do so to prevent infection and respiratory illnesses. Second, I want you to remember that you are not allowed to take photographs of the screen or any pictures at all during the meeting, but it will be available on the website later on. I want to remind you of a very important thing. The interpreters can sometimes have a lot of harm done to their ears, so if you have a device, do not put it next to your microphone and make sure that it doesn't interfere with static or crackling so that we don't assault the ears of our interpreters.

Today we are meeting with BCE Inc. We have two witnesses here today. We have Mirko Bibic, president and chief executive officer, here by video conference. We also have Robert Malcolmson, executive vice-president and chief legal and regulatory officer, who is also here by video conference.

The rules are basically that you have five minutes, Mr. Bibic, to make your opening statement, and then we will follow up with questions and answers from the floor. I will give you a 30-second shout-out so that you can have 30 seconds to wrap up. Remember, even if you cannot make your full statement in that five minutes, you're going to be able to expand on your statement when the question and answer period comes.

I shall begin—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas (Lethbridge, CPC): Madam Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Thomas.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Thank you.

Very quickly before we jump in, I just want to confirm something.

Ms. Catherine Tait has been asked to come to this committee and testify. She's been putting us off for a little while now. I'm just curious if there's a confirmed date as to when Ms. Tait will be appearing here.

The Chair: Yes, I think there is. The clerk will tell us.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Geneviève Desjardins): It is May 7.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bibic, you have five minutes. Please begin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mirko Bibic (President and Chief Executive Officer, BCE Inc.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and members of the committee.

[*English*]

I had hoped to join you last month prior to the committee rescheduling our meeting, so I'm glad we're having this important conversation today.

Since Bell acquired CTV in 2011, the global media industry has drastically changed. The industry is in flux due to technological disruption, changing viewer habits, shifting advertiser demand and vigorous competition from foreign web giants that are not subject to the same costly regulations as Canadian broadcasters.

Half of all households will not subscribe to traditional TV in 2026. Meanwhile, streaming revenues, already in the billions, rose 14% last year and will increase by an additional \$500 million this year, disproportionately benefiting foreign web giants. Audiences now expect around-the-clock access to news, and media companies have had to adjust.

Some have sought to distort the facts about Bell's restructuring. We should all agree that facts matter, so here are some important facts.

First, Bell continues to invest in news and media. Since I became CEO in 2020, Bell Media has invested more than \$1 billion in capital to better serve our viewers, not to mention the additional \$22 billion invested in world-leading wireless and fibre Internet networks among other customer enhancements. This is on top of the almost \$1.7 billion a year we invest in content. Despite these massive investments, CTV conventional stations lost more than \$180 million last year, and Bell Media loses more than \$40 million a year on news alone.

Second, Bell Media far exceeds all its regulatory obligations for local news. We air more than 25,000 hours of local news per year, and that's 150% more than the CRTC requires.

Third, CTV News Channel, CP24 and BNN, air 20,000 hours of news per year, and that's 300% more than the CRTC requires.

Fourth, CTV publishes approximately three times more digital news stories on an average day than when Bell acquired it 13 years ago.

Fifth, CTV now airs more original national newscasts than at any point in the network's 60-plus year history.

Sixth, for the first time ever, *CTV National News* will soon have dedicated journalists telling stories from all 10 provinces and 35% more correspondents than prior to 2023.

[Translation]

Seven: We are investing more than ever in francophone content. In 2021, we launched Noovo Info. Think about this: During a challenging time, Bell Media built a newsroom from the ground up. We hired a team of francophone journalists to broadcast news in five markets across Québec. Since then, the newsroom has grown 25%.

And finally, eight: Our Crave streaming platform offers almost 11,000 hours of French-language content. What's more, our Rouge FM program *Véronique et les Fantastiques* recently announced that it would play only French-language music.

No other Canadian media company has made investments of this scale, but it is not enough to overcome the challenges facing our industry.

[English]

As a result, Bell made the difficult decision to implement workforce reductions through departures and the elimination of vacant positions. Less than 10%, or 440 positions, were at Bell Media. We know this is difficult for those affected, and we're supporting them with fair severance packages, career transition services and continued access to health benefits. We have also met all our obligations under collective bargaining agreements.

Bell is not alone. In the past year, the CBC announced it will cut 800 positions, TVA has eliminated close to 550 positions and Corus has reduced its workforce by at least 15%. Last year, Telus announced 6,000 job reductions, and Rogers has also restructured. The list is long and includes Shopify, Canada Goose, Lightspeed, Postmedia, Metroland, SaltWire, Paramount, Disney, Microsoft, Apple and Meta, as well as others in the U.S.

Let me be clear that we're not asking for special protections. We're asking for a level playing field with global web media giants. The regulatory framework has been too slow to adjust to the massive challenges we're seeing. The Online Streaming Act took three years to develop, and it has still not been implemented.

Bell pays almost \$2 billion a year in federal regulatory fees and contributions. In contrast, Amazon, Disney, Netflix and others, each many times larger than Bell, have not paid anything despite the billions of dollars in revenue they earn from Canadians.

I hope to use our two hours together to discuss constructive solutions so that future generations have access to stories that reflect them and our country.

Thank you.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bibic. You're right on time.

I want to remind everyone, before we go to the question-and-answer segment, that you are to address your questions and answers through the chair. Thank you very much.

We will begin with the Conservatives for six minutes. That is six minutes for questions and answers, not six minutes for each. Please remember that, and try to be as concise as you can in your answers.

For the Conservatives, we have Rachael Thomas.

Please go ahead for six minutes, Rachael.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Thank you.

Mr. Bibic, Bell has received a pile of money from the government through enhanced media funds, spectrum subsidies and COVID paycheques, and, of course, various tax credits have been added to that as well.

I am just wondering what the exact dollar figure is...since 2015.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I wouldn't have the exact figure since 2015 at my immediate disposal.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Would you be able to tell us the amount for the last five years?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I couldn't tell you that either.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: What about for the last year?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: For which components? There would have been no wage subsidy dollars in the last year, because we're well past COVID.

In terms of the Canada Media Fund, Robert, do you have that information?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson (Executive Vice-President, Chief Legal and Regulatory Officer, BCE Inc.): I don't have that at my fingertips, but we can certainly provide it to the committee, if you wish.

The Chair: We would appreciate that. Please send it to the clerk, and we will distribute it.

Thank you.

Go ahead, Mrs. Thomas.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Just to clarify, I'm asking for the total dollar amount that has been received from the Government of Canada since 2015, and that it be tabled with the committee.

I'll highlight a few figures that I found. Not everything is disclosed online, but I did discover, through poring over documents, that Bell has received over \$260 million through spectrum projects, \$122 million in pandemic subsidies—even though Bell performed at its best during that time—and a healthy portion of the \$600-million media bailout. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been given to Bell.

Regardless, here we are discussing the cutting of 6,100 jobs between June 2023 and February 2024. I find that rather rich.

Can you tell me how much Bell Media is worth?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: There is no current valuation of Bell Media as a separate entity within all of BCE now. In terms of—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: I'll just clarify, Mr. Bibic—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Let me address some of these issues. I'd like to clarify—

The Chair: Excuse me, please. Order.

Do you want to clarify your question, Mrs. Thomas? Go ahead.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Yes, I'll just clarify that I wasn't asking about Bell Media. I was just asking about Bell. How much is Bell worth?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We could look at the market cap of Bell today, if you're asking about the market cap. I'm sure while we talk, Robert can dig that up in 10 seconds.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: I'm sure he can. I'm sure he has it right now.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Yes. That's a function of the share price at any given minute, so the market capitalization of Bell is different now than it was an hour ago.

The Chair: Mr. Malcolmson, would you please answer the question?

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Do you think that it's in the range of, like, \$10 billion?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: The market capitalization is significantly higher than that. Again, it has decreased significantly, unfortunately, in the last couple of months given the share price. Rob will have the number.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Do you think it's \$20 billion?

I'm just curious. Maybe you can just tell me if I'm getting warmer. Is it \$20 billion?

• (1545)

The Chair: Mr. Malcolmson.

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: I'm sorry. I was having trouble with my microphone.

The current market cap of Bell is about \$40 billion.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Thank you so much.

Bell, then, has a worth of about \$40 billion—with a “b”. This is a company that is worth \$40 billion and has received hundreds of millions of dollars in government handouts, which, let's be reminded, are taxpayer dollars, yet this is a company that just laid off 6,100 of those taxpayers. Is that justified?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: May I now answer all these questions? There were several there.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Mr. Bibic, there's just one question.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Having strong Canadian companies is a fundamentally good thing—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Mr. Bibic, there's just one question.

The Chair: Mr. Bibic, please, I think Mrs. Thomas is right to clarify the question.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Chair, I've not yet had an opportunity to even provide one sentence of an answer, so I'd like an opportunity to comment—

The Chair: She's asking you just one question, she said, and not three.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Mr. Bibic, you're right. You actually have answered with a few sentences. You said you didn't know maybe six different times.

I'm hoping perhaps you'll know the answer to this question: Is it justified that you just laid off 6,100 employees in the last eight months when you have received hundreds of millions of dollars from the federal government and it is a company worth \$40 billion?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I would think that we'd want a strong Canadian company that can continue to employ tens of thousands of Canadians. We employ 40,000 Canadians with good-paying jobs. We are right now faced with an economy where we have difficult foreign exchange with the U.S. Most of our inputs are in U.S. dollars. The costs of inputs are increasing. Inflation is rampant in Canada. Unemployment was at 6.1% in March alone—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Mr. Bibic, I'm going to go to my next question—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Our content costs at Bell Media are increasing. We have a—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: I don't know that you have an answer.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We have a massive productivity issue in Canada, so these are the macroeconomic factors that all Canadian companies, including Bell, are dealing with. We're trying to adapt and adjust so we can continue to grow, which is a very good thing, and so we can continue to hire, retain and employ 40,000 Canadians.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Mr. Bibic, I'll just take a moment here to remind you about this committee.

As a duly elected member of Parliament, I sit here at this table able to ask any question that I wish. Your job is to answer those questions, not in the way that you wish to answer or to make the spiel that you wish to put out there, but rather in a factual manner. If you fail to do so, we have every ability to bring you back in a summons.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Chair, I fully respect the committee's work and my role in answering the questions of the committee. In fact, I welcome public policy discussions. Over my 20-year career in this industry, I've appeared before many committees and regulatory proceedings and industry round tables, and I will always treat this committee and the process with the utmost respect. It's a fundamental part of what my career has been about.

The Chair: We've now ended the six-minute question and answer time.

We'll go now to Mr. Noormohamed for six minutes.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed (Vancouver Granville, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Bibic, for being here.

Today's conversation is a direct result of a decision that Bell made in eliminating jobs after, as you've heard from Mrs. Thomas, receiving large government subsidies. In particular, you received a break on approximately \$40 million in fees as a result of an amendment passed by the Conservatives and the NDP.

Your response to that was to fire Canadians, to let them go from their jobs.

Mr. Bibic, was not the board's response to your work in 2023 a strategic imperative to "engage and invest in our people and create a sustainable future"? If your mandate from your board was to invest in your people, can you explain to me how cutting 6,300 jobs is investing in your people?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: If you take the 6,300, about 500 or 550 of that total number were in media, and the part II fees issue that you raised in the opening of your question relates to media, not to the broader Bell.

We have invested in the broadcasting industry, and we have invested in our people. I mentioned in my opening statement investments of \$22 billion in world-leading networks since I became CEO. The fact that we've built so much fibre Internet to so many homes has allowed us to hire more field technicians. We've grown the unionized workforce of field technicians by 14%, which is a big number. Those are high-paying union jobs.

• (1550)

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Mr. Bibic, if they are high-paying union jobs, then I wonder why Unifor is so concerned, because they've written to every member of this committee expressing their disappointment in your decision.

Mr. Bibic, I'd like to talk a little about—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Mr. Chair, if I may on that one—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: That wasn't a question.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Bibic. Mr. Noormohamed has the floor.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: According to your own corporate filings, your compensation package last year was approximately \$13 million. Is that correct?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: That is correct.

I would clarify that, according to Unifor, we employ 19,000—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Mr. Bibic, my question was about your compensation package, and you've answered that, in fact, it was approximately \$13 million.

What does the average journalist working in your newsrooms earn?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I wouldn't have that precise number at my fingertips.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Do you think it's more or less than \$100,000?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I wouldn't know.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: You talk about making investments in news. You talk about the importance of a news ecosystem in this country, but you don't know how much your journalists make.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I do know that we spend almost \$300 million a year on news in this country at Bell Media alone. That's a lot of investment.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: That is a lot of investment, but when talking about investing in people, clearly Bell has invested well in you.

Mr. Bibic, when you look at your opportunity to act as a leader, did you ever consider forgoing your bonuses, your equity package or some portion of your salary to save some of the important jobs, particularly of journalists, in this country?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: As it comes to reduction, we've grown news correspondence by 35% since prior to 2023, and we started a newsroom in the French language in the province of Quebec from scratch in 2021. No one has done this. I can't think of anyone in North America, probably the world, that has done this.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: I'll take that as a no.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: No, in terms of the direct question, we've implemented reductions across the entire company for our vice-presidents and higher. There are 23% fewer vice-presidents at Bell since I became CEO and 40% fewer—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Mr. Bibic, my question is a specific one.

Did you or any of your executives choose or consider forgoing your bonuses to save the jobs of average Canadians who are working in your newsrooms and in other parts of your organization? That's a simple yes or no. If the answer is no, that's okay.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We dramatically reduced the executive ranks so that we could retain as many jobs across the company as possible. That's what we did.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: I'd like to talk about news, because one thing that we have a dearth of in this country is the ability for small communities, rural communities and indigenous communities to have their stories told.

How do you expect journalists to maintain the quality of local news from local communities if they're sitting in newsrooms in Toronto and not in the field? When you eliminate jobs across this country, particularly of journalists in small communities, how do you expect the voices of those communities to be heard?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Thank you for the question; it's a very good question.

The question doesn't acknowledge the facts that I've shared with you today. We have 35% more news correspondents today than in 2023, so we are investing in news. The question doesn't recognize that we've built a newsroom in Quebec from the ground up, from scratch. It doesn't recognize the other fact that I shared with the committee this morning, that we now, for the first time in CTV's history, have journalists in every single province. That's a first. That's how we're covering news locally and nationally and serving our viewers, because our viewers are number one. They want to have more news.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Mr. Bibic, as somebody who used to watch *W5*, I'm really disappointed that my views were not considered when you cut that program.

I come to politics having worked in the corporate sector. I have to say that one thing that I remember being taught by somebody I respected tremendously is that, as an executive and as a leader, you have an obligation to take care of your people if you want to build a strong organization. I have to say, the idea that you and your executive team saw fit—and I think building strong Canadian businesses is important—to take substantial bonuses and equity packages at a time when your workers, your employees and your journalists could have had their jobs saved is a bit disappointing.

I will leave that with you, Mr. Bibic. You have to run the company the way you believe is best, but I think that it is more important to think about Canadians, particularly those who have subsidized your company for so very long.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Noormohamed.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: May I—

The Chair: I'll now go to the Bloc Québécois.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Champoux, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all, I would like to say to Mr. Bibic that I am pleased that he is here with us today.

I would also like to point out to the committee that we had issued a summons to Mr. Bibic to appear, because we believed he was refusing to provide us with information. We subsequently learned that this was not the case; rather, it was a question of incompatibility be-

tween the committee's schedule and that of Mr. Bibic. I think the summons was a little heavy-handed, and I want the committee to think about that in the future.

Mr. Bibic, thank you for being here today. I recognize your willingness to come and answer members' questions, despite the fact that I don't think these are pleasant topics to discuss. The cuts that Bell has made over the past year are very worrisome, particularly in terms of regional news. This is a subject that is of particular interest to me: in Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean, for example, Bell newsrooms and radio stations are no longer able to cover what is happening at city halls, city councils and local events, because television newscasts are now broadcast from Quebec City and Montreal, depending on the region.

How do you explain that you say you are investing massively in news production, and particularly in local news, when, in fact, when we look at what is happening in the regions of Quebec, people are complaining about a situation that is the polar opposite? People are bemoaning the fact that Bell has gutted or reorganized its newsrooms, which has caused a dearth of regional coverage.

What do you have to say to that, Mr. Bibic?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Thank you for your excellent question.

Without question, journalism plays an important role in our society. In 2021, I made the decision to build Noovo Info's newsroom from the ground up, to serve Quebecers. We are present in Montreal, Quebec City, Saguenay, Mauricie, the Eastern Townships—

Mr. Martin Champoux: Mr. Bibic, you say you built it from the ground up, but you nevertheless acquired TV channel V, which provided you with some infrastructure. It's not as if you had to buy consoles, cameras and all that. You set up a system, a new news service, but you acquired some equipment when you bought channel V. You launched a news channel. In the beginning, you covered the regions fairly adequately, I agree, but, for some time now, we have been seeing cuts in terms of jobs and regional service, specifically in the regions of Quebec, despite the regulatory relief provided by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. People are concerned about that.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Noovo Info broadcasts more than 3,000 hours of news a year, of which 1,300 hours are devoted to local news. We take it seriously. Noovo Info now employs 80 people, which is 25% more than when we launched the service. The newsroom is getting bigger. Our journalists are given a mandate to remain relevant to the audience and to reflect the regions that are covered. That is how we will serve Quebecers across the province.

Mr. Martin Champoux: Nevertheless, I urge you to listen carefully to what people in the regions are saying. It's all well and good to devote hours to news production, but having regional news broadcast from a city is not really providing regional coverage.

I urge you to pay attention to these regional concerns, because they are real. We need local news; it's crucial. We are in the process of losing it. I would go so far as to say that democracy is suffering. It is very important that you remember that in your investments.

I would like to come back to the more recent cuts that were made at the beginning of the year. I know that Bell made cuts in a number of areas, but I would like to know how many of those affected customer service.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I don't have the exact numbers in front of me for the client service positions, but I can say that we have made tremendous progress in terms of improving client service. In fact, I am extremely proud of the team.

According to data from the Commission for Complaints for Telecom-Television Services, Bell is improving the most from one year to the next, which is due to the phenomenal work done by the team across the country.

In Quebec, the Bell team, which is made up of 12,000 employees, is very proud of that fact.

• (1600)

Mr. Martin Champoux: Can you reassure people who are afraid that the jobs cut from client services will be sent offshore where those services are offered at a lower cost, to put it politely? Are the employees who have been laid off at Bell right in fearing this?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: There have been no positions cut recently that have been sent offshore.

Mr. Martin Champoux: How did you replace those positions if they are customer service positions? Is it because they were surplus to requirements?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We're becoming more efficient. We can reduce the number of callouts, because the service itself is better than it was before. With the construction of the fibre network, the network is performing better: There are fewer outages and fewer callouts, so we don't have to send a truck or a technician to repair the network as often. I can give you several examples, if you wish. People contact us with the MyBell app, which allows subscribers to repair their service themselves or run diagnostics.

We do that by investing in the grid and the applications and improving them.

Mr. Martin Champoux: Thank you, Mr. Bibic.

[English]

The Chair: We now go to the New Democrats.

Jagmeet Singh, you have six minutes.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh (Burnaby South, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

First, it's pretty clear that things are going well at Bell if you're a shareholder and a CEO but not if you're a worker or a consumer. Bell reported a whopping \$2.3 billion in profit last year. As CEO, you, the chair, profited or pocketed \$13.43 million in compensation. However, Canadians are paying some of the highest cellphone and Internet fees in the world. You laid off, in nine months, over 6,000 employees.

How does a profitable company justify these layoffs, particularly in light of the hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies from the government? How do you justify that? Is it just about making even more profits? You're already profitable. What is the justification, then?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: When we make our decisions, we have our consumers front of mind and, in terms of media, our viewers front of mind, as well as the investments we need to make to better serve consumers and viewers. We're doing this in an environment with—as I said earlier in the appearance—increasing costs, bad foreign exchange, high inflation and increased competition, which is fundamentally a good thing. We have to manage all of that.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Bibic, I think I missed something you said. Just to understand, did you say that your justification for laying off workers is that you had the consumers in mind? I must have misheard that because that does not make any sense at all to me, sir.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: It makes very good sense because what we're trying to do is continue to grow.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: You're saying you fired 6,000 workers because you're worried about consumers.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: If I may, we want to continue—

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Sir, I'm having a hard time understanding that. I thought I must have misheard you, sir, but go on then.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: No, I'll explain.

What we need to do is to continue to invest in our networks, in our content and in our services to better serve consumers and viewers, and in order to continue to invest, we need to continue to grow our revenue—

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: I'm sorry, sir. Are you saying “invest” and not “divest”? You're firing workers, and you're saying that's an investment.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We need to adjust to the macroeconomic environment around us. In Canada, we have one of the most poorly performing economies in the industrialized world. We have a massive productivity problem, which the Bank of Canada has identified as a crisis.

We have to adjust to the macroeconomic environment around us so that we can continue to grow our revenues, and so that shareholders and lenders will continue to give us capital so that we can continue to invest to better serve consumers. That's how it all ties together.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Okay. Thank you for explaining that.

I want to point out something and ask you to kind of look in the mirror. You tried to blame the government by saying that the government didn't act fast enough and didn't help your company fast enough. I want to outline some of the choices you made, because I think this is really a choice. I don't agree that this is something you had to do. You chose to give \$3.71 billion in dividends to shareholders. You chose to buy back stocks for \$140 million in 2023. You pocketed a staggering 42% pay increase from 2020 to 2023.

You could have chosen to prioritize workers with that money. You could have chosen to give consumers a break and make it more affordable for cellphone and Internet fees, particularly at a time when people are struggling with the cost of living. However, you chose greed. How do you justify that? Those are the choices you made.

• (1605)

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Thank you for the question.

I would start by saying we are continuing to lower wireless prices each and every day, to the point where our prices are fundamentally lower than they are in the U.S. In fact, I appeared on March 18 in front of INDU, and we established all those facts. I'm sure the transcript is available.

Just this week we launched a new service at very low prices called No Name Mobile. It is going to better serve customers who are in the market for lower-priced cellphone plans.

As it relates to dividends, there's an important fact that gets lost when we have a discussion on Bell dividends. We're very unique. Forty-six per cent of our shareholders are individuals who rely on that dividend. About 70% of employees at Bell are also shareholders. That's very unique. The individual shareholders who invest in Bell, the individual Canadians who invest in Bell, like the dividend, and we're supporting them as well along the way.

Fundamentally, we need to come to grips with the fact that, if we don't have Canadian companies that grow, that invest in critical infrastructure like ours and that create jobs, we're going to have a massive problem in the country. That goes for media as well. We should be having a discussion broadly speaking—because we have the right forum for this and the right individuals here—on how we can fix Canadian media. Without a Canadian broadcasting system, there will be no news, except for maybe the CBC. We need to—

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Thank you.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: —figure out how to keep Canadian news alive.

I'd love to have that conversation as well with the honourable members.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Thank you, Mr. Bibic.

Again, I'm pointing out the choices you made. The choices could have been to keep the jobs. The choices could have been to not have such massive dividends, massive stock buybacks or massive pay increases to your own compensation. The choice could have been to keep more workers.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: I'll just end with my final question.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We're always managing for the short term and the long term, because if we don't make—

The Chair: Mr. Bibic—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We are also trying to preserve 40,000 jobs.

The Chair: Mr. Bibic, I'm sorry. Mr. Singh has the floor.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Through you, Madam Chair, this is my final question.

Canadians for Tax Fairness indicated that over a four-year period of time, by using tax evasion tactics, including tax loopholes, Bell as a company was able to avoid paying \$1 billion in taxes.

I'm wondering how much you plan to avoid paying this year in taxes.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Chair, if the honourable member could kindly provide that report, we'd be happy to provide a response to the clerk. I'm not aware of that report.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Absolutely. It's publicly available. It's by Canadians for Tax Fairness. I'm sure they have a public website as well. We can absolutely make that available to you.

I'm curious about how much you're trying to avoid paying in taxes again this year.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We will take a look at the report and file an answer, so we can give a considered answer to the very good question.

Thank you.

The Chair: We look forward to that answer being sent to the clerk of the committee, Mr. Bibic.

Now we're going to our second round. It's a five-minute round. Once again, I stress that the five minutes are for questions and answers.

I'm going to the Conservatives and Rachael Thomas.

You have five minutes, please, Mrs. Thomas.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Thank you.

Mr. Bibic, in the last eight months you have cut a total of 6,100 jobs. In February, just a couple of months ago, there were 4,800 jobs cut.

According to legislation, the federal labour standards, Bell was required to give the government 16 weeks' notice of these layoffs. I'm curious as to whether or not that was given.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We complied with all legislation as it relates to the actions that were taken with respect to the positions in question.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: I want to confirm then that you gave 16 weeks' notice that these layoffs were going to take place in February.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We complied with all requirements as they relate to the process by which we were permitted to reduce the positions in question.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: I understand, so according to the federal labour standards, you were supposed to give 16 weeks' notice or seek an exemption. Which one was it?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We complied with all the requirements with respect to federal labour laws in this respect.

• (1610)

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Right. I'm curious. Did you seek the exemption or did you give the 16 weeks' notice to the government?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We complied with all requirements that were imposed under federal law.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Mr. Bibic, is there a reason why you're evading the question?

There are only two choices here. You either had to seek an exemption based on the code, or you had to give 16 weeks' notice. Which one was it?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Robert, do you have a precise answer to that?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: Thank you for the question.

The Chair: Mr. Malcolmson, go ahead.

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: The question has been asked and answered now, I think, four times. We have complied with applicable federal legislation. If you require more detail, we're happy to provide it. We've fully complied with our labour legislation requirements in implementing this workforce reduction.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: I'm sorry. I'm baffled as to why a straight answer is not being granted.

There are two options here. Either 16 weeks' notice had to be given to the Government of Canada that these layoffs were taking place, or an exemption had to be granted by the Government of Canada. It is one of these two options.

Which one did Bell take?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: I think we've answered the question—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: No, sir, with all due respect, I don't think you have. I think you continue to evade the question, which looks rather shady and as if Bell has something to hide.

What are you hiding?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: In the short time we're being given to answer your questions, we are telling you that—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: The short time...? You know that either you provided notice or you sought an exemption. That's not difficult. You two lead the company. Why do you not have answers to these questions?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: What we know is that we complied—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: You laid off 6,100 people, and you don't know the process that you followed to do that.

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: We know the process, and we complied with—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Mr. Bibic, did you receive \$13 million? This is what you get paid \$13 million for?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: To the hon. member, we've answered the question. There's actually—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Mr. Bibic, you have not been able to answer a single one of my questions directly today.

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: Mrs. Thomas, we complied with labour legislation. We gave the requisite notice, and we complied. You asked the question. We gave the notice. We're compliant.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: You have two choices. Either you gave 16 weeks' notice, or you sought an exemption.

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: We gave notice, as I just said.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: You gave notice 16 weeks ahead of time?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: We gave the requisite notice, yes.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Sixteen weeks ahead of time, you gave notice to the government that you were going to lay off 4,800 people?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: I've answered the question. We gave the requisite required notice in connection with the restructuring, yes.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: What was the requisite notice?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: The requisite notice was the notice that we gave, depending on which element of the workforce was affected.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: How far ahead of time did you have to give that?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: It may have varied. That is why I have offered to provide complete details in terms of who we notified and when, in compliance with our requirements.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Okay. Did the government know about these layoffs?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: Well, we provided notice.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: You provided notice to the government.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We gave notice and provided the minimum salary of 16 weeks, so we were fully compliant.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Why did it take me five minutes to get a straight answer?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: The answer hasn't changed, which is that we were compliant.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: No, it absolutely has. You evaded for the first four and a half minutes, and then finally, in the last 30 seconds, I got an answer. Why?

Do you think this is a joke? Do you enjoy wasting my time?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: These are technical issues—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: There's nothing technical about it. Either you know the legislation, or you don't. You either followed it or you didn't, and you said you did. Therefore, you must know what was carried out.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: There were specific details and requirements under the legislation that I knew we complied with. I didn't have the specific details at my fingertips when you first asked the question, but I knew that we were fully compliant, which is why I answered as such. The answer has not changed.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mrs. Thomas. The time is up. In fact, we're a little over time.

I want to go now to Ms. Anju Dhillon, from the Liberals.

Ms. Dhillon.

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here.

I have some follow-up questions. First of all, was it 16 weeks' notice or 16 weeks—

• (1615)

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Champoux: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

Could I ask my colleague to move her earphones away from her microphone to avoid acoustic feedback, for the sake of the interpreters?

Ms. Anju Dhillon: I'll take them off. Is that better now?

[English]

Were 16 weeks of notice or 16 weeks of severance provided?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We gave notice, and all employees are therefore paid during the full 16 weeks, at minimum.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: They were all fired at the same time. Can you talk to us a little about their personal situations when it came to that?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Chair, just for clarification, I believe that question would be in respect of the unionized team members, because it depends. If you were management or union or non-management, we had a different process.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: What is the division of the roles of all the talented team members who were cut?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: There would be about 850 of the 4,800 that were vacant positions. Those positions were eliminated.

About 800 of the positions were unionized team members, and 60% of those chose a voluntary separation package. They identified themselves as being willing to depart the company. Then there were management team members. Across the board, all 4,800, less the vacant positions, of course, where there was no individual attached to the position.... It's very difficult for them in particular. It's a very difficult decision to make, but more fundamentally it's difficult for each of those individuals affected.

We acknowledge their vast contributions to Bell. That's why we made sure to follow the legislative requirement to provide separation packages, career transition packages and continued benefits.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: What means—

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Dhillon. There is feedback from your microphone. We're hearing it from the interpreters. If you have a device close to the microphone, could you move it away? Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Ms. Dhillon should speak, Madam Chair.

[English]

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Do you hear any feedback right now?

The Chair: No, there is no feedback.

You may continue now, Ms. Dhillon.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you, Madam Chair.

What means were given to give notice at the time of firing?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Again, I'll just clarify, because I do want to properly answer the honourable member's questions. With respect to the unionized team members and the management members, there are different processes.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Was it email, text message, Zoom?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: No. Generally speaking, the individuals affected had individual meetings, either in person or by video, so that we could communicate the news and details around the separation packages, continued benefits and career transition services where applicable.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Can you please clarify, after Bell got all this money, why these layoffs, firings, still happened? It's quite mind-boggling, and a lot of my colleagues, pretty much all of them, have asked that question without any answer.

What was the justification?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Let's focus first on Bell Media. There are massive losses in conventional TV of \$180 million. Our news service loses \$40 million a year. Advertising revenues declined \$140 million in 2023 over 2022. We need to adjust to those circumstances.

The Canadian economy is not faring very well.

In terms of advertising, advertising has shifted to digital channels. Even 70% of the federal government's advertising budget has gone to digital. That's \$48 million. That's just an example to show you that even the federal government is driving its advertising dollars to digital. We've had to adjust, and we've had to pivot towards digital as well.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Bell is a telecom and media conglomerate that generates in Canada 15 times the annual revenue of Netflix, which, unlike Bell, can't use its streaming services to sell home and mobile Internet.

I'm sorry, but with all due respect, your argument so far has not made any sense throughout the entire testimony.

• (1620)

Mr. Mirko Bibic: If the macroeconomic circumstances that we operate in are extremely difficult, if the regulatory environment is particularly difficult, if competition has increased—which is a great thing for consumers, but that also means that prices are going down—every company will have to adjust to that kind of environment.

Netflix is eight times bigger than Bell. Disney is seven times bigger than Bell. Amazon is 63 times bigger than Bell. They compete directly against us and generate more revenues in Canada in streaming than we do, and they have to contribute nothing to the Canadian media industry. That's what we should be talking about, actually.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: We don't give money to those companies; we give money to Bell. It seems like Bell expects Ottawa to go back to the old bargain of protecting them from competition, tilting the rules in their favour and just continuing with that monopoly.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: No, not at all. We welcome competition and, because we compete against Disney, Netflix, Amazon and Apple and because those companies derive billions of dollars in revenue in Canada, we say that they, too, should be required to contribute to the same extent as Canadian media companies are. I mean, if we don't confront this reality, there will be no Canadian media industry in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you. We are over time.

I'm going to go to Mr. Champoux now.

Martin, you have two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Bibic, since I only have two and a half minutes, I will try to be quick and clear with my questions.

Bell received regulatory relief from the CRTC that resulted in savings—correct me if I'm wrong—to the tune of \$40 million. During the same year, nearly 6,100 positions were cut at Bell in various departments. I know it's a big company, but still.

Bell says it's investing in news. However, we see that in some regions of Quebec, particularly in Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean, Trois-Rivières and Sherbrooke, the quality of local news is much lower than it was a few years ago.

And yet Bell continues to ask for regulatory relief to create a level playing field with the web giants.

Given your recent decisions, how can you guarantee that this relief will not serve, once again, to weaken journalistic coverage in the regions of Quebec and the dissemination of Quebec culture in French in Quebec?

If I'm not mistaken, that is an important mandate for Bell, which operates radio and television stations in Quebec.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: First of all, our main objective is to provide service to our audience and consumers, and that's what we do. We are producing more and more news, much more than the regulatory minimums imposed by the CRTC. That should give you some confidence.

We're producing 150% more news than we're required to. Our specialty stations, such as BNN Bloomberg and CP24, also produce more, 300% more than what is required. As I mentioned earlier, we built the Noovo Info service in Quebec from the ground up and we've turned the Crave platform into a bilingual service.

Mr. Martin Champoux: I understand what you are telling me and I am aware of all your achievements. That's great.

However, when you tell me that you are doing more than what the regulations require, the results we actually see give me the impression that, on the contrary, the regulations should be tightened up even more in order to make you better serve the regions, which are currently being neglected.

What I would like to hear you say is while it is true that, in the regions where you have cut journalist positions for various reasons, such as the sale of a radio station, you will start investing and hiring journalists, because regional media coverage should not be broadcast from a big city.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: The media ecosystem is in a state of upheaval in Canada, Quebec and across North America.

To ensure the sustainability of news broadcasting, the regulatory playing field must be levelled and web giants operating in Canada must be required to contribute to the Quebec and Canadian media ecosystem. That is how we will ensure long-term news coverage in the regions.

• (1625)

[*English*]

The Chair: I now go to Niki Ashton for the NDP for two and a half minutes, please.

Please go ahead, Niki.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think we've seen on full display here the extent to which corporate Canada is disconnected and, frankly, arrogant. The sheer audacity to come before this committee, complain that refusing to show up until the end of May isn't avoiding accountability and then insist that more support from government is necessary, while millions of Canadians are struggling and thousands of your workers are laid off, boggles the mind.

Let's take a moment to combat fake news and look at the facts, and not the ones on the "Facts matter" page of your website. I have a copy here. Point number 10 is directed at us members of the committee, clarifying why you told us it would take almost three months for you to show up here. The reality is that government regulates your industry, both in terms of broadcasting and telecommunications, and this committee oversees that work. We were clear and we have been clear that you needed to be here much sooner.

Let's get to the main issues. Over an eight-month period, Bell eliminated 6,000 jobs, including February's announcement of 4,800 job cuts. At the same time, you announced an increase in dividend cheques for shareholders. You claimed that Bell was forced into the decision to fire so many workers because the federal government has been slow to deliver help. You've been quoted as saying, "we continue to face a difficult economy and government and regulatory decisions that undermine investment in our networks [and] fail to support our media business in a time of crisis".

Where I come from, a crisis is wildfires. It is thousands of people losing their jobs, kind of like the ones who used to work for Bell Media, whom you fired. Who is in crisis, Mr. Bibic? Is it you with your millions of dollars of compensation or the workers you just fired?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Chair, it is my pleasure to answer those questions. I keenly wanted to be before this committee on March 19, and I had committed to that. In fact, I had been in front of the industry committee on March 18. It was the committee who rescheduled my appearance. I'm here, and I always am eager to have a public policy discourse, as I mentioned earlier.

Again, with respect to dividends, these dividends benefit ordinary—

Ms. Niki Ashton: My question is about the crisis. Who is in crisis? Is it you or is it the thousands of workers you laid off?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: What's undeniable is that the Canadian media ecosystem is in crisis. One only need ask Postmedia and SaltWire and print journalism in the country and our direct traditional media competitors—

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you, Mr. Bibic.

We've all heard from Bell Media workers who have lost their jobs. I think it's pretty clear that they're the ones facing the crisis.

Your board recently gave you a 20% raise. If you truly feel for the thousands of workers you laid off, would you consider taking a 9% reduction in your own salary?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: As I mentioned earlier, the—

Ms. Niki Ashton: Yes or no.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: —executive ranks have been thinned out significantly since I became CEO, because we are always vigilant around costs and around the number of executives we have. That's resulted in a 40% decrease in compensation for the direct reports of the CEO.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'll take that as a no.

The Chair: Thank you. We're over time.

Now I will go to the Conservatives for five minutes.

Go ahead, Mrs. Thomas.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Thank you.

Mr. Bibic, I just want to be really clear here. My question is with regard to the federal labour standards having to do with termination, layoff or dismissal. My question is not whether or not you gave the employees adequate notice, but whether or not you gave the government adequate notice.

According to the group termination clause, you must give 16 weeks' notice before the termination of employment takes effect, and you must give that notice to the labour program's head of compliance and enforcement and immediately send a written copy to the Government of Canada.

I am curious if that was done.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: The legislative requirements also allow for the giving of notice combined with guaranteed 16 weeks' salary continuance. If we give 16 weeks' salary continuance as well as notice, we are in compliance with the federal legislative requirements.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: I just want to be clear. You gave notice to the Government of Canada 16 weeks before terminating.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: If we give notice to the Government of Canada before the implementation of the job reductions but combine that with a guaranteed 16 weeks of salary continuance to all employees, even those who may not otherwise have been eligible for a full 16 weeks, then we are compliant.

● (1630)

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Again, I am just looking for clarification. You are confirming one way or the other, just yes or no. Did you give the Government of Canada 16 weeks' notice before terminating the employment of the 4,800 individuals in February?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: It is not required that the federal government get 16 weeks' advance notice if the federal government gets advance notice and each employee is otherwise guaranteed 16 weeks of salary continuance, even in cases where they otherwise would not be.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Mr. Bibic, I have the federal labour standards in front of me, and that is not what I'm reading. You are required to give the government 16 weeks' notice or apply for an exemption.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I've provided the full answer to the process that we adopted, which is in full compliance with federal legislative requirements.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Mr. Bibic, when did you tell the government that you would be laying off these employees?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: That, I don't know.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: You just said that you are in full compliance. How can you be sure of that?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Because I know we gave the government notice, and I know that we guaranteed each employee 16 weeks of salary continuance, even in cases where they otherwise would not have been eligible for it.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Mr. Bibic, I understand that you're treating this as a bit of a game and mincing your words. I'm just looking for a straight answer.

You said that you gave the government notice. Perhaps you can call on your colleague if you need some assistance here. When was that notice given?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: If we may, Madam Chair, why don't we undertake to provide that information to the committee in writing so that you have the fulsome explanation in front of you.

Your questions are important, but in the time permitted it's difficult to answer them.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: With all due respect, you're welcome to table a lengthy reply and nuance your words, but in this moment I'm just asking for a yes or no.

Was 16 weeks' notice given to the government? You seem to be indicating yes, so I'm curious. On what date was that 16 weeks' notice given?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: That's not what I said. I said that, if an employer commits to providing 16 weeks' salary continuance, then the 16-week advance notice to the government.... You can follow a different path than the one that the honourable member has outlined, but we did give notice to the federal government. I just don't have the specific date at my fingertips.

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: We gave notice on February 8, Madam Chair.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Thank you. That didn't seem so hard—bravo.

On February 8, the government was given advance notice that you would be laying off 4,800 people from Bell Canada. Thank you. I very much appreciate that.

You're telling me, then, that notice was given on the exact same day that the public found out, but again, according to the labour standards, notice is supposed to be in advance. Why was it done the day of?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: There were two things.

Go ahead, Rob.

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: I'm sorry. We've given the answer. We provided the notice in compliance with the legislation. We're happy to provide more details if you require more details, but the question's been asked and answered repeatedly.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: It hasn't actually.

I just found out less than a minute ago that you gave notice on February 8. That's the same day that it was publicly declared that these 4,800 individuals would be fired. That's not exactly advance notice, which is what's required under the federal labour standards.

Why wasn't advance notice given?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We've provided the answer to that. There is a path that if you guarantee salary continuance for 16 weeks.... That is a path, even where the employees would not otherwise be entitled to 16 weeks.

The second point is that, while we gave notice to the government on February 8, those job reductions didn't all take place on February 8, all at the same time.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We're over time, Mrs. Thomas, and I now go to the Liberals' Patricia Lattanzio.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My questions will be with regard to the fees—the part II fees, to be specific.

For how long did Bell pay the part II fees to the CRTC, Mr. Bibic?

• (1635)

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: I'll answer that, if you don't mind.

We paid part II fees from the date upon which we first acquired CTV, which was 2011-12. Over the period of time that we paid those part II fees, Bell remitted approximately \$400 million in part II licence fees. It's important to recognize that those fees were a tax that was collected by the CRTC and then remitted to the Government of Canada's consolidated revenue fund.

It's also important to note that those fees were never paid by the foreign OTT streamers like Netflix, which we operate in competition with.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Okay. When did Bell stop paying these fees?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: When the Online Streaming Act came into effect, one of the provisions was to enable the private broadcasters who had been paying that tax to no longer have to pay that tax in order to partially level the playing field between—

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Can you give us a date and a year?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: The Online Streaming Act came into effect last year.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: In 2023...?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: Yes.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Okay. What savings does this represent for Bell over the next 10 years?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: The tax has been eliminated. Our share of the tax when it was payable was \$40 million.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: It was \$40 million per year. Is that correct?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: That's what we were remitting.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Okay, so for the next 10 years, that would represent \$400 million, give or take. Is that correct?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: It depends on how the tax is calculated in any given year.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: For the sake of maintaining some sort of logic here, if it's \$40 million in 2022, in 10 years we're looking at an easy \$400 million.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: None of us has a crystal ball as to how the world will unfold over the next period of time.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Okay. In the last, say, three or four years, has it been around \$40 million per year? Has that been the average?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: In the most recently completed year in which we paid the tax, it was \$40 million.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: What was it in 2021?

Mr. Robert Malcolmson: I don't have that number sitting in front of me.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Okay. My point is the following: Why didn't Bell reinvest these savings into its newsrooms and local journalists?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We've invested massively in the delivery of news. We're actually delivering more news than we ever have in more ways than—

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: My question was about local journalists and newsrooms.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We did. We invested significantly more. That's why we have 35% more news correspondents today than we did in 2023. That's why we launched Noovo Info to serve the francophone viewer in the province of Quebec and elsewhere. That's why we now have journalists in 10 provinces, all 10 provinces, whereas before we didn't, and we spent close to \$300 million producing news—significantly more than the requirements. It's how we're doing it that's different.

We're generating efficiencies behind the camera—

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: How much did you reinvest?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: —so that we can deliver more news in front of the camera because the viewer matters the most.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: How much did you reinvest?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We invested \$1.7 billion in content. Close to \$300 million was in news, local and national news across the country. As I mentioned in my opening statement, we also invested over a billion dollars since I became CEO to improve our infrastructure and our platforms and to launch digital platforms like CTV News and CP24 online, and then the web and the apps, so that we can better serve viewers.

Viewers today want news as it happens all the time. Appointment viewing is no longer nearly as relevant as it was before, so we've invested massively to change how we deliver the news so that the viewer can be served all day long.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: How does Bell anticipate using its portion of the Google media fund?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We haven't negotiated that. It will be a very small number in the end for Bell, so we'll continue driving forward. We're making sure that as much investment as possible is in the production of news, driving efficiencies in our infrastructure so that we can invest in creating digital platforms so that there is news at all times of the day for our viewers.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Couldn't these funds be used to offset the revenue losses cited in B.C.'s restructuring announcement of February 2024 and thus reduce the impacts on jobs and programming?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We are driving as many efficiencies as we possibly can in terms of common infrastructure, common equipment or having journalists file stories on all our CTV platforms rather than being dedicated to only one show. That's how we're going to ensure that we deliver news at every point in time as it breaks, as it happens, on whatever platform the consumer wants. If they want digital, it's there. If they want online, it's there. If they want to go on YouTube, we'll make sure that CP24 is there. If they want to sit down in front of the TV and watch Sandie Rinaldo at 5:30—she's an amazing talent—we have news there.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bibic. We've run out of time.

I'm going to a third round. Again we have five minutes with the Conservatives.

Go ahead, Jamil Jivani.

Mr. Jamil Jivani (Durham, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Bibic, let's talk, shall we?

In recent years, several of Bell Media's female employees have left your company amid accusations of discrimination. Patricia Jagernauth left CP24, claiming she had been tokenized as a black woman. Danielle Graham left CTV Etalk, claiming that it was in part due to sexism. Of course, you've also seen multiple media reports suggesting that Lisa Laflamme was pushed out of CTV News due to ageism. Now, of course, Bell celebrates its supposed commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.

It is all over your website, Mr. Bibic, but I am curious to know if you can clarify to Canadians whether they should be concerned about a pattern of deplorable employment practices at Bell Media.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We thank you for the question.

The issue that is being surfaced is very important, and we do take it very seriously. I am very proud of the very talented group of diverse journalists that we have across the country. The job reductions were kind of difficult and unfortunate. A smaller number of the broader number affected Bell Media directly, but we have the same percentage of diverse journalists now as before, and we have a lot of phenomenal accomplishments and success stories, like Sandie Rinaldo, who celebrated 50 years on air.

TSN would be a great example. We have incredibly talented women broadcasters. We were the first to have an all-women NBA broadcast, for example. If you take the broader Bell, and if you look at the CEO and the direct reports—that's me and the people who directly report to me—before I became CEO, 15% were women. Now it's 30%. At one level below that, the senior vice-president layer of BCE, in 2019, 20% were women. Now it's double that.

We take it seriously. There is more work to do, of course. We have to do more.

Mr. Jamil Jivani: Mr. Bibic, if I could just suggest.... It sounds to me like you may be proving some of the allegations correct in your response, given that you are engaging in tokenism in your answer. None of this hiring of people based on quotas or percentages, as you seem to be indicating, would necessarily make Bell immune to the allegations made of tokenism, racism, sexism and ageism.

Do you have a response to those concerns, and whether Canadians should be worried that one of the largest media companies in the country has a pattern of deplorable employment practices?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: No. I would think it is an issue that we take very seriously. If there are incidents, we will investigate them and make sure they are addressed, but, more broadly, we seek to do better each and every year. We want to have as diverse a workforce as possible at all levels of the company—men, women, and, of course, talent and employees who are Black, indigenous and people of colour. We want those communities as well.

It's a very important issue. Thank you for raising it.

Mr. Jamil Jivani: When you laid off 5,000 workers—and if you could refrain from evading this time, I'd appreciate it—what percentage of them were Black or indigenous?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I don't have the specific numbers at my fingertips, but we could file that with the clerk.

Mr. Jamil Jivani: Yes, it would be great if you could file that because I'd be curious to know what role diversity, equity and inclusion policies play when deciding to fire 5,000 Canadian workers. For example, do you have separate Zoom calls for the Black workers and the white workers? How do you approach that?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Are you referring to, again, the unionized, non-management employees, or the management groups? The management groups would have had individual—

Mr. Jamil Jivani: You've given us a word salad, so far, about how important DEI is to your company, yet it doesn't seem that you thought about DEI when firing 5,000 Canadian workers. I'd like some clarity on the role that DEI plays when firing 5,000 people.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Madam Chair, I'm not sure why the honourable member phrases the question in that manner.

I did indicate that, as it relates to Bell Media, we have the same percentage of diverse journalists now as we did prior to the restructuring. As it relates to how we communicate with employees, there were individual meetings. There was a separate process with respect to the unionized employees that we discussed in advance with Unifor, the union in question, which fully endorsed the process that we adopted, which I would be happy to go into if we have the time.

• (1645)

The Chair: No, you don't actually. There is only one second left, so I'm going to move to the next speaker, which is Mr. Noormohamed for the Liberals.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Bibic, I want to clear up something that a number of my colleagues have tried to get answers for. I just want to be crystal clear. This should respond to the question that Mrs. Thomas, Ms. Dhillon and others have asked.

Does it sound familiar to you that the Government of Canada received notice of the layoffs at or around the same time the public did?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Yes, the notice was given on February 8.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: When were the layoffs done?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: They proceeded thereafter, but it's not—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: That week, that month, that hour...?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: There were 4,800, so it was staged over several weeks.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: When did they begin?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: That, I don't have the exact data for—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: They began that day.

Just so you know, they began that day. You did point out that you gave 16 weeks' working notice. It's important to clarify for every single person in this room and watching this that 16 weeks' working notice does not mean that you gave the Government of Canada 16 weeks' notice. You gave the Government of Canada zero days' notice and you gave your workers zero days' notice, but you paid them for 16 weeks thereafter from the day that they were terminated.

Does that sound correct?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: In some cases, the employees had their individual meetings and were given specific notice on days and weeks after February 8. In that respect, for those employees, the information would have been shared with them days or weeks later.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: For the avoidance of doubt, you did not provide 16 weeks' advance notice to the Government of Canada that you were doing these layoffs. Is that correct?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: That's correct. That's what I specifically answered in respect of the prior question, which is that we gave notice to the Government of Canada but also 16 weeks' salary continuance to all employees who were affected, even those otherwise would not have had—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Right. What I don't want is people leaving this room with the misapprehension that somehow the Government of Canada knew for 16 weeks before a single person was laid off. I want to thank you for clarifying that, in fact, that was not the case.

With that done, with that said, I do want to go back, Mr. Bibic, to a conversation we had earlier, when you talked about the importance of building “strong Canadian companies”. I agree with you. I think building strong Canadian companies is important. Those Canadian companies should provide good jobs, and those employees should have certainty that the companies for which they work, that they give everything to, are going to take care of them, respect them and ensure they have a strong trajectory for their careers.

I don't know how that worked for the 6,000 people you laid off, but I know how it worked when we talked about the executive bonuses. What I want to talk about a bit is your newsrooms. Newsrooms are a big part of this country's ability to tell its stories, and they're about providing good, quality information. Can you tell us, since you did these layoffs, how much you have expanded—if you've expanded—the size of your news team and specifically where?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We continue to deliver more news than we ever have before. We have 35% more national news correspondents than when we began the 2023 restructuring, which has been referred to throughout our time together.

We've grown Noovo Info in Quebec by 25% since we launched it in 2021. We, for the first time, will have, as I've mentioned, journalists in all 10 provinces, whereas before we did not. They will be covering New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Saskatchewan and another province. We're—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Ten covers all of them. I appreciate what you're saying—

• (1650)

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Yes, but I'm giving you a sense of which ones are new.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: In small communities and rural communities, in underserved communities, are you increasing or decreasing your footprint? This is not where you say that in every major city across the country you have reporters.

What are you doing to put reporters into smaller communities, rural communities, indigenous communities and so on and so forth?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We have the journalists that we have, and that has grown to the extent that I've shared with you. Their mandate is to cover news stories as they break, where the news happens, and to make sure those stories are filed and delivered the way consumers and/or viewers want to engage with that news. More and more, that's on digital platforms. We've lost \$40 million a year on news, and we should be talking about that as well—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Let's talk about that—absolutely.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: It's an industry that's under tremendous stress—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: I am so pleased that you raised that. You mentioned that you took a \$40-million loss in your newsroom, but you got a \$40-million waiver of fees in order to make sure that you did not have to worry too much about your newsroom.

I know we've run out of time, but perhaps one of my other colleagues might like to ask this question: How on earth do you justify saying, on the one hand, that you took a \$40-million loss and come to us...?

Thanks to the Conservatives and the NDP, you got that \$40 million back, but then you still proceeded to gut your newsroom.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: The news division is operated under CTV Network, and the CTV conventional stations lose \$185 million a year. Our advertising revenues declined \$140 million from 2023 compared to 2022.

There's only one revenue stream, and it's advertising. When the federal Government of Canada, which is one of the massive advertisers in the country, spends 70% of its advertising budget on digital platforms, which predominantly goes to Meta and Google, it creates massive stress on the entire media ecosystem.

We need to have a conversation around how we fix Canadian media, because otherwise there will be no Canadian broadcasting system, news or otherwise. Then there will be no Canadian stories being told to Canadians. There will be no news, national or local, being delivered to Canadians, except maybe by Radio-Canada and CBC, which is an altogether different debate.

The Chair: Thank you. The time is now well over. I'm sorry.

I'm going to go to Martin Champoux for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Madam Chair, I am pleased that we are talking about regional news coverage.

Mr. Bibic, I understand that the entire media ecosystem is in crisis. People have been saying it for years, and successive governments have been too slow to react. The fact remains that Bell is a major player in the industry in Canada, and that comes with responsibilities. One of those responsibilities, a moral and social responsibility, is to ensure that its role is fulfilled in the best possible way.

I looked at the figures and, as far as I can see, Bell still isn't in the red. It might very well be that profits have declined over the years, but Bell is still a going concern. So the company still has some leeway whether its shareholders like it or not.

However, media coverage in eastern Quebec has been in a critical situation for years, and Bell is withdrawing its operations there, as a result of which media coverage is declining in that part of Quebec.

I spoke to you earlier about media coverage in Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean. This winter, there was an extremely worrisome situation. People were stuck on the river and needed help. The event may have been trivial for the people of Montreal and Toronto, but for residents in the region, this news was of vital importance. However, no one from Bell was there to cover the event, because the regional newscast was produced in Quebec City. So, Mr. Bibic, how can you tell the committee here that Bell has invested in news and that it has correspondents in all the provinces of Canada, when it is abandoning regional news coverage, thinking that Radio-Canada and the CBC will stay behind to do the job?

I am aware that there is a problem in terms of market fairness. I realize that the web giants have to do their part, but they won't be involved in journalism. The responsibility for journalism rests, once again, with broadcasting companies, and Bell is probably the largest in Canada.

Mr. Bibic, I am making a heartfelt plea. Are you able to tell Quebecers today that once we have succeeded in restoring equity in this market between the web giants, who are abusing the system, and the broadcasting companies, which are under an extremely heavy regulatory burden—we are all aware of that—Bell is committed to reinvesting in the jobs that have been cut and in Quebec's regional media coverage, which is lacking?

Are you able to tell Quebecers today that once equity with the web giants is restored and Bell has the leeway it needs to operate in the broadcasting sector in Canada, it will start reinvesting in regional news?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

I need a very short answer to that question, please.

• (1655)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mirko Bibic: The playing field must be levelled to ensure the viability of the Canadian media ecosystem and news production. Web platforms should be required to contribute. The federal government should invest more in traditional Canadian media so that they can evolve. That would allow us to reinvest—

Mr. Martin Champoux: Are you going to reinvest in regional journalism, Mr. Bibic?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I'm here in good faith, and that's what we're doing: We launched Noovo Info. I would like to do more—

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bibic. The time is now up. I'm sorry.

I'm cutting you off 56 seconds later, so I'm giving you enough time, Martin.

I need to let the people answering the questions know to try to be as concise in your answers as possible. Thank you.

I now go to Niki Ashton.

Niki, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Oligopolies like Bell's are hurting Canadians. Nowhere is that more evident than in my province of Manitoba.

In 2017, we were told that Bell buying out MTS would bring in better rates and service. With the Liberals' approval, you spent \$3.9 billion to purchase Manitoba Telecom Services, a company that was at one time proudly publicly owned. Not only have our rates gone up, but the quality of the service has gone down, no doubt linked to the fact that you cut over 45% of the Manitoba workforce. This reality is clear in our region.

I have a picture here shared by my constituent, Susann Sinclair, who lives in Dallas. She's forced to use a walkie-talkie to commu-

nicate with her 89-year-old veteran father who lives down the road because Bell-MTS's land lines don't work in their community. Why? Because Bell-MTS refuses to do the maintenance required: land lines that belong to Bell-MTS in Canada in 2024.

Perhaps the most egregious example of the way in which Bell-MTS has taken Manitobans for granted is Bloodvein First Nation, which was in communication with Bell-MTS for a number of months, starting in 2020, about setting up and operating a cellphone tower. A year later, when the wildfires of 2021 hit the region, the first nation asked to work with Bell urgently. At this point, they had built a cellphone tower. They had the equipment set up. All they needed from Bell was for it to turn on a switch and get the cellphones working.

As the wildfires raged and multiple communities were evacuating, including theirs, the smoke engulfed Winnipeg and reached southern Ontario. Bell-MTS told Bloodvein that they had to pay \$652,000 to turn on a switch and get cell service to a community that was eight miles from a burning wildfire—cell service that could help save lives.

Oligopolies like yours have failed Manitobans, first nations, workers and Canadians across the board. Do you find it acceptable that your company rejected Bloodvein's requests at a time of real crisis? Will you work with them to get them cell service?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Madam Chair, I will communicate with the clerk to get the information as it relates to that specific situation, as well as the customer to which the honourable member referred.

As for Bell's investments in Manitoba, we made a commitment when we acquired MTS to invest at least a billion dollars, and I'm proud to say that we've invested well above that. That has allowed us to build fibre to the home networks in Churchill, Flin Flon and La Salle, in Morden and other communities, in Winkler and in many more—

Ms. Niki Ashton: Mr. Bibic, I think the questions we've raised here are ones of real crisis—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We have heard them.

Ms. Niki Ashton: —and I'm disappointed that I haven't heard your intent to work with Bloodvein and get them cell service.

Let me move to the question on cellphone rates. Canadians pay some of the highest cellphone rates in the world. What will you do to cut down cellphone rates at a time when you and your fellow CEOs are making \$62 million in profits?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Madam Chair, very quickly on that, I'd encourage all members to review the transcripts of our appearance at INDU on March 18. We categorically laid out the facts showing that our pricing is very competitive. It has declined dramatically. The premise of the question no longer holds. It may have, perhaps, at some point in time many years ago. Our wireless pricing is lower than in the United States.

The Chair: Mr. Bibic, thank you.

I now go to the Conservatives and Kevin Waugh.

You have five minutes, please, Kevin.

Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Bibic, it takes decades to establish trust in Canadian newsrooms, something that CTV has taken pride in over the time that Bell Media has owned CTV—twice in the last 40 years. Local news has always been the staple for the CTV network. Anybody can buy American programming, and we'll get to that in a moment, but it takes investment into newsrooms to solidify the integrity of the entire network.

You have eliminated noon newscasts. You've eliminated late night newscasts. You've eliminated weekend newscasts, giving many outlets in Saskatchewan, in western Canada and, in fact, all over this country little say. You have destroyed what has taken decades to build as the CTV network. I know, because I was one of them for four decades. I worked three o'clock to midnight. I worked weekends. I worked holidays. I cherish those times. Why? Because I gave back to the community.

You have gutted local newsrooms in this country. Don't tell me you've added. We're down to one hour a day live in Saskatoon. Regina does everything. In Saskatoon, we have only one newscast now, from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. We had six and a half hours of local news every day until you made your decision in the spring.

You and your organization have destroyed local news in this country. You should be ashamed. I'm telling you right now, as a 40-year employee of CTV, that I've watched you and your network absolutely destroy 216 First Avenue North. You've destroyed Vancouver. You've destroyed Edmonton, Calgary and Saskatoon, and I can go on.

What have you done in the boardroom to say that you've invested in news when I have the other facts that say you have pulled absolutely every available person in every newsroom in this country that belonged to Bell Media?

• (1700)

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Madam Chair, I do need a little bit of time to respond to some serious allegations here. There are serious issues that are being raised. I would like a bit of time. I won't take too long.

We are making sure that we deliver more stories to Canadian viewers. As far as it relates to the noon hour newscasts that were cancelled, the ratings have been down by 43%. Canadians have shifted to watch and engage with our news digitally.

I'll give you one very good example: the solar eclipse on Monday. It happened at about 3:28 or 3:26 eastern time. People weren't going to wait until noon the next day or 5:30 p.m. that day. However, the engagement with CP24 online and on YouTube was at a record high. Never before have Canadians engaged with us to such a degree: because we covered the story as it happened. That's how we're delivering more news.

We're investing in news. We're just doing it differently. The way that consumers are engaging—

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Oh, you're not investing in news. Come on. Give me a break. You're bringing numbers like you've lost \$185 million for Bell Media—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: There's \$300 million invested in news every year.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Let me say this, then. How much are you spending on American programs? You've just said in committee that you spend \$1.7 million on content. What is that content? Is it American football? Is it the NFL?

I can go through American programming here. Do you want *Bob Hearts*, *The Amazing Race*, *The Masked Singer*, *The Conners*, *The Voice*, *The Good Doctor* or *The Rookie*?

You spend \$1.7 million in content, you said. How much of that is American programming that you're putting on CTV stations in prime time from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m? Give me the number. You've said that you invest \$1.7 million, Bell Media: What are you spending on American programming?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Thank you. It's \$1.7 billion that we invest—

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Of course—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: —and the investments that we make in U.S. programming or foreign programming generate significant advertising revenue that we can then use to fund programming: Canadian programming like *Sullivan's Crossing*, *Sight Unseen*, *Children Ruin Everything*, *Acting Good*, *Little Bird*, *The Trades*, *Late Bloomer*, *Shoresey*, *Letterkenny*—

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Mr. Bibic, that's not local news. How about investing in local news?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: —*Amazing Race Canada*, *Highway Thru Hell*, *Timber Titans*—

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Why am I down to one hour?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: —*Roast Battle Canada*, *Slaycation*, *Thunder Bay*—

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Why am I down to one hour? Can you invest in local news? Why do we have no news now in Saskatoon? I've got one hour.

Why was Vancouver cut back? Why was Calgary? Why was Edmonton?

You're investing, all right: You're investing in American programming. Take some of the \$1.7 billion and put it in newsrooms in Canadian cities in this country. That's what people want.

CTV built up a loyal audience. You have destroyed it since you became CEO in January 2020. I am so happy that I left Bell Media and CTV when I did in 2015, because when you arrived on the scene, you've been a disgrace, and Bell Media has not been the same since then.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I want to thank the honourable member for his significant contributions to CTV over the decades. It's acknowledged and appreciated.

We deliver news: 20,000 hours of local news to Canadians every year, and 25,000 hours of news on CP24, BNN and CTV News Channel.

• (1705)

Mr. Kevin Waugh: I have one hour now of local news a day. That's a total of five hours in Saskatoon of live coverage from six to seven all week.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I encourage—

The Chair: I'm sorry. We've gone well over time here. Thank you.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Madam Chair, may I have one more quick one?

An hon. member: No—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I'd just encourage all the honourable members to engage with the CTV News app, where there is news at all times of the day.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bibic.

I think the question that Mr. Waugh was asking was clear. He talked about local news. Not everyone can go to streaming. A lot of people with low incomes cannot afford to go to streaming. They have to depend on the television. He asked a simple question, and I think you gave him the answer.

I'm going to the Liberals now, with Ms. Gainey.

You have five minutes, Anna.

Ms. Anna Gainey (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I think I heard earlier, Mr. Bibic, that the union was comfortable with, in agreement with or onside with your cuts, or the reorganization, as you've called it. Did I hear that correctly?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: That's correct. We discussed the process that we would use with our unionized employees, and that process was endorsed by Unifor. I can unpack that for you, but I'm mindful of time.

Ms. Anna Gainey: Yes, I'm just curious, because we did—I think it was referenced earlier as well—receive a letter from Unifor outlining quite a different position on this situation.

There was a rally held in Ottawa on March 19. The workers took to the streets. They had a very clear message that seemed to be quite in opposition to the job cuts. Can you clarify this?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I will with pleasure.

About 800 unionized positions were removed from the Bell workforce, and 61% of those affected employees actually took a voluntary separation package. They said they were willing to go, and so that's an important factor here.

As it relates to the union process, over five weeks we had 10 days of meetings with union representatives to present the initiatives we would undertake. We obtained the union's consent to offer the voluntary separation packages, which the majority of unionized employees took.

Before proceeding with the initiative on March 20, we also conducted a three-hour meeting with the union leadership to explain the process by which we would engage with the employees. Unifor didn't raise any concerns. We did those meetings by video because most of the employees affected were working from home and were in various parts of the country. That was fully communicated to employees.

Regardless of which process we followed, clearly these had important impacts on the individuals affected, and we were very sensitive to that.

Ms. Anna Gainey: Then how do you explain the correspondence from the national president of the union to the entire committee with respect to their view of the cuts?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: You would have to ask. I can't speak for Unifor.

Ms. Anna Gainey: If I had more time I would read it all into the record for you, but it's quite an extensive piece of correspondence.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I'm sharing the facts with the committee because the facts are important. We want to treat the unionized employees with care. Unifor has indicated that we have 19,000 unionized employees, so they are an important part of our workforce. We have actually grown the unionized membership on the communication side through hiring more field technicians—which are high-paying jobs—because we have invested so much in building fibre Internet, and consumers are buying the service because it's world-leading technology. We have a massive lead over cable, so consumers come, which means we need more field technicians to connect customers to our great network. That has created a 14% increase in union membership. We're investing in that workforce.

• (1710)

Ms. Anna Gainey: Thank you.

I want to go back to the impact on Canadians with respect to the consolidation. In June 2023 you announced that you were moving to a single newsroom across all of your media brands. Have you completed this transition?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We're in the process. We're quite a long way down that path. The viewer comes first. The objective is to be able to deliver more news over all the platforms consumers engage in. In order to be able to make that work, we have had to become more efficient in many areas. One is sharing infrastructure across news teams. Another is sharing resources behind the camera, and a third one is hiring multi-skilled journalists who can file stories digitally at six o'clock or 11 o'clock on any of our networks.

That's how we have gotten more efficient to deliver more news.

Ms. Anna Gainey: Where is that newsroom located?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We have newsrooms in multiple cities.

Ms. Anna Gainey: Oh, so you haven't completed moving to a single newsroom? It sounded as though you were going to close newsrooms in order to have one major newsroom.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: No, that's not what we're—

Ms. Anna Gainey: You haven't closed any newsrooms.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: No. We're streamlining the number of newsrooms we have and making sure that journalists, for example, aren't dedicated to one show at one particular time of day. Now we have journalists who cover news as it happens and file those stories with whatever show it is, whether that's on television or on any digital platform that's the most relevant for that particular story.

The Chair: The time is up, Anna. Thank you.

We have 20 minutes to go before 5:30. I'm making a suggestion that we go with five minutes for the Conservatives, five minutes for the Liberals, and two and a half and two and a half minutes. That's 20 minutes, and we can end this meeting.

I don't know if bells will start before that, but let's go with that right now.

For the Conservatives, I have Rachael Thomas.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

You just mentioned that the bells may start ringing in a few minutes, which is very likely.

If we start a round of questions, I would like to make sure that the parties are in agreement to continue—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry. I can't hear you.

I'm going to turn up my volume a little.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: I was just reminding you that the bells are probably going to start ringing in the next round. I would like to make sure that all parties agree to continue despite that, so that each party can have its turn to speak.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, we can do that.

It will be a 30-minute bell, so we could have everyone agree to add an extra 10 minutes.

Thank you.

Mrs. Thomas, you're sharing your time with Mr. Gourde.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Bibic, I'm curious. Do you support Bill C-11?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Is that the Online News Act?

No, Bill C-11 is the Online Streaming Act.

We did support the act in the sense that it was a good step towards fixing the broader issues, but it's only one step. Far more is required.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Do you support Bill C-18, the Online News Act?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Yes.

Again, that's just one step, but a broader discussion is required in terms of levelling the playing field between the Canadian broadcasters and the major Internet platforms that derive so much revenue from Canadian consumers without contributing back to the ecosystem.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Bill C-11 was created by the current government to stifle innovation and creativity. It shuts down YouTubers or digital-first creators, and it very much puts more money in the pockets of traditional broadcasters, such as Bell Media.

It's no wonder, then, that you would support this bill because, of course, it stifles competition and very much acts in your favour.

What's interesting, though, is that Bell is an incredibly profitable company and is already taking hundreds of millions of dollars from this government, yet it still stands with its hands out for more. It makes no qualms out of the fact that creativity and innovation in this country are being stifled.

Interestingly enough, one of the talking points that you keep returning to is that this is one of the big problems in this country: that creativity, innovation and productivity are being stifled. However, you're actually a part of that problem by supporting Bill C-11. You're a part of stifling that. You're a part of holding us back from going into the future, instead insisting that a broadcasting act that is incredibly antiquated in nature is applied to the Internet.

With all due respect, you are a part of the problem. It is for the sake of selfishness, and it is for the sake of lining pockets with more money that you want to be handed over, based on the creative content that is being generated by these digital-first creators and put out there. You want them to take 30% of their revenue and put it toward your antiquated model.

I find that alarming. I find it very concerning that Bell is functioning in that manner while receiving hundreds of millions of dollars from the government.

• (1715)

Mr. Mirko Bibic: That's a pretty major mis-characterization of our position.

Bell Media is in full transformation from being a traditional broadcaster to a digital media company. That would be the first point.

Second—very quickly—I'm always very surprised with positions that would so evidently favour the Disneys, the Netflixes, the Amazons and the Apples of the world against—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Mr. Bibic—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: —good Canadian companies that employ tens of thousands of Canadians.

That's where my position is.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: I'll just conclude with this: You stated yourself that people don't want cable packages anymore. They want access to online streaming. Bill C-11 pulls people back from the future into an antiquated past. It's terrible legislation.

I'm passing my time on to my colleague.

The Chair: Mr. Gourde.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Bibic, you used the same budget reduction strategy in Quebec in francophone communities. Over 1,000 regional jobs have been cut, including at regional radio stations. None of these people understand why they lost their jobs, given the huge profits made by Bell. It may have been an unfortunate coincidence, but Bell's share reached a high of over \$65 in May 2023, and then fell below \$50 in October. I think these people feel that they have been sacrificed so that shareholders can pocket some decent dividends and be reassured about the worth of their shareholdings.

Have you been pressured by your board of directors or major shareholders to increase the value of your stock?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Quebec is an extremely important market for Bell. I care about it too. I was born in Montreal and grew up on the south shore. So I am a proud Quebecker. In Quebec, 12,000 people work for Bell.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Are you under pressure from the board of directors?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We continue to invest in the province—

Mr. Jacques Gourde: You're not answering the question.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: —to better serve Quebeckers, whether it be in telecommunications, content or news.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: You didn't answer my question.

Were you pressured by the board of directors? It was the employees who paid the price to reassure Bell's shareholders.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We need to become more and more efficient, given—

[*English*]

The Chair: I need a quick answer, because we're well over time on this.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mirko Bibic: The Canadian economy is in trouble and we all have to adjust. It's not just Bell. All industries in Canada and all companies doing business in Canada have to adjust. We are becoming more efficient at serving our citizens.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll move on now. We are well over the time.

I'm giving people a lot of leeway in going over their time.

I'm going to go now to Mr. Noormohamed for five minutes.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Bibic, you can be faulted for many things, but I don't think your support for Bill C-11 or Bill C-18 can be counted among them. You talked about the importance of the transition you're making to a digital company, and I think part of the work that we're doing, as a government, is to support that.

The work our government is doing and the support we have given to news media across this country is not intended for you to pay further benefits to your shareholders and senior executives.

Mr. Bibic, do you know who Scott Roberts is?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: No, I do not.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Scott Roberts is a Jack Webster winner and a two-time Edward R. Murrow Award-winning journalist who used to do the news in Vancouver. He was laid off under your regime.

Do you know who Paul Workman is?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I don't know him personally, but I know who he is.

• (1720)

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Okay. Do you know that he no longer works for CTV?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: That's correct.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Do you know who Joyce Napier is?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Yes.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Okay. Do you know that she was also laid off by CTV?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I believe so.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Yes.

Do you know who Daniele Hamamdjian is?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Yes.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Do you know what happened to her and the entirety of your London bureau?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Yes. The foreign news bureaus were closed last year, which isn't uncommon. CBS just shut down its Tokyo news bureau after 60-plus years.

That gives you an example that the media ecosystem—news, in particular, and conventional broadcasting—no matter in which country we're talking about, is under immense stress.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: How do you plan to report the news from a G7 capital like London to Canadians without having reporters on the ground?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: In many cases, we'll use independent journalists or we'll send our own journalist to the locality as news happens. It's no different, as an example, from when we sent our correspondents from the London office to cover the war in Ukraine; now we'll send somebody from Toronto. Somebody is travelling in any case.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Let's say news was breaking at 10 Downing Street. From the moment you find out there's a crisis happening in the U.K., or, God forbid, the untimely death of a monarch, how long would it take CTV to be able to report from the ground with one of your reporters?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I'm not sure it would be a shock to anybody that it's extremely expensive to cover news like that all around the world. When a company like CBS has to shut down a long-standing news bureau, I don't think it should be a surprise that a smaller Canadian company will shut down its foreign—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Mr. Bibic, CBS doesn't go to the U.S. government with its hand out, saying, "Help us." You do that to the federal government, and we help you because we believe in ensuring that there is a strong news ecosystem in this country.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: No. All we're asking for is a level regulatory playing field against Netflix, Amazon—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: You now have that through legislation that you supported.

My question to you is—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Not at all, because those companies don't contribute to the Canadian ecosystem in any manner, shape or form in terms of content production.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: You came before government and you said, "We're going to take a \$40-million hit in our newsroom." The response was to give you a \$40-million break.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: That's not how it transpired, actually.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: That's not how it transpired? But it is—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: No, that's not at all how it transpired. We already air significantly more news than the required regulatory minimum. The—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: You keep saying you air significantly more news. I come from Vancouver. Your footprint for news in Vancouver is, to put it charitably, a shell of its former self. You eliminated 1,300 positions on Vancouver Island over the course of time. These are not insignificant impacts to communities.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We never would have had 1,300 Bell Media employees—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Well, then perhaps your own reporting is incorrect, because—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: —on Vancouver Island. Bell Media has 5,000 people.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Okay. I apologize, the number is not correct.

You've laid off people in significant numbers in small communities and in large communities on Vancouver Island. I'm asking you because this is an opportunity for you to explain to Canadians how you justify taking large bonuses and paying well-paid executives at the same time you are telling Canadians, "Thank you so much for the help you provide us. We're going to lay off the journalists who provide news from your communities." Don't tell me that it's because you're going to be able to use independent journalists from here, there and everywhere. How do you create viable opportunity for real journalists to be in the field doing the jobs they do from small communities like the ones Mr. Waugh described?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Well, we should create a level regulatory playing field on which the foreign web giants who draw so much from Canada would be required to contribute, including to the production of news, but to Canadian content. We should have major advertisers like the federal government devoting more of their advertising budget to Canadian broadcasters. We should also think of taking actions like—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: How much of your enterprise is now digital?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: —eliminating the tax deductibility of advertising on foreign platforms.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: How much of your business is now digital, Mr. Bibic?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Noormohamed, but we've run out of time. We're over time actually.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: It's getting close to 40% of revenues.

The Chair: I will now go to Mr. Champoux for two and a half minutes and then to Ms. Ashton for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Mr. Bibic, earlier I asked you a question with a long introduction. I'm going to make my introduction a little shorter and give you some answers that you gave me in response to my very simple question earlier.

Imagine if the government were to invest more in advertising on traditional media—that would already provide a big boost—and that the web giants were called on to contribute so that the market was fair for both them and traditional broadcasters, and that the regulatory burden was lighter or at the very least adapted to today's reality, as broadcasting undertakings have been asking for a long time.

Mr. Bibic, we know that news isn't profitable, but we also know that regional news shapes the identity of the regions in Quebec and Canada. We also know that when we stop talking about hyperlocal stories, our hyperlocal presence completely disappears, and phasing out the news threatens the regions' identities.

You have a responsibility in that regard. So if we balance the market to ensure that we level the playing field for everyone. Knowing that news is not profitable, many fear that the cutbacks that have already been made at this time will be irreversible and that you will decide to invest the money you recover elsewhere.

Are you prepared today, Mr. Bibic, yes or no, to assure Quebecers and Canadians that, once the current crisis's problems have been resolved, you will reinvest in regional newsrooms in Quebec and Canada and not cover news in the regions remotely, as you are currently doing?

Can you make that commitment to Quebecers and Canadians today?

• (1725)

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Thank you for your question.

Unfortunately, I don't have a crystal ball. So I can't give you a clear answer. However, the idea would be to continue investing to keep producing news like we do today.

We are investing in Quebec. We've expanded our newsroom. This is a concrete example of the spirit that drives us on this subject. However, the playing field has to be levelled in order to—

Mr. Martin Champoux: With all due respect to my Liberal colleagues, Mr. Bibic, it seems that you are answering questions like the government answers questions from the opposition these days, saying that it will continue to continue.

The question is very simple. I know that you invest in the news, but I'm telling you that the crisis is also affecting the regions in particular. Quebec's and Canada's regions need regional, local and hyperlocal news, or they will not survive.

I'm proposing that you make a very simple commitment today. If the web giants invest in the ecosystem to ensure that everyone is playing by the same rules and is subject to the same pressures, the same realities and the same profit margins, will you commit to reinvesting in newsrooms or will everything stay the same, and will we see newsrooms continue to shut down?

[English]

The Chair: The time is up. I need a simple answer, Mr. Bibic.

[Translation]

Mr. Mirko Bibic: That would probably help us do more, but the changes would have to be sweeping and meaningful.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Ms. Ashton for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: When Canadians heard you were coming to Parliament, Mr. Bibic, we were flooded with messages. Among them, I received a heartbreaking letter from someone whose parents lost their jobs with a company that Bell recently bought after working there for over 30 years. They're in their fifties, and their financial security has been ripped apart. The young person wrote, "My parents' work supported the company's growth for years, and now they've been left with not even a minimum settlement package required by law to allow us to secure our house and our finances.

Now we are faced with financial uncertainty. I will have to delay my studies to help my family until my parents find a secure position. I hope that you will take Bell to task on their unethical business practices. We live in fear, uncertainty and anxiety while Bell gives shareholders increased dividends on profits."

Mr. Bibic, this is the human cost of your decision. This is what a real crisis looks like. This young person is watching you today. What's your message to him?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: That example just shows how, for the individuals directly affected, it's very difficult. I acknowledge his parents' contribution to Bell and to the company they worked for before that became part of the Bell family, and I thank them for that. I recognize that when you're directly affected, there is no good process. What I will say, however, is that, in terms of the separation package offered, we're being compliant with legal—

Ms. Niki Ashton: What about the packages that they're entitled to that they haven't received?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Without a doubt, every package—

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'm sure your words ring hollow without the severance, let alone with the firing.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We would be in compliance with all legal requirements related to the separation packages.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'm not sure that this was from the most recent round of layoffs, but it appears that that's not the case. Regardless, it seems that Bell could not live up to its obligations, including in terms of the buyout.

I want to move—

• (1730)

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I wouldn't say "regardless" because if that's the case, we want to fix it. So, if that could be shared with the clerk so that it could come to me so that I can look into it—

The Chair: Mr. Bibic, please—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: No, it's a very serious issue.

The Chair: Please, Mr. Bibic—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Thank you. I apologize.

The Chair: Ms. Ashton has the floor. She did not finish, and you cut her off.

Continue, Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I just want to turn to how Canadians are getting ripped off by your company. We know that, for example, in terms of cellphone service.... To put it into perspective, scrolling Instagram in France for five minutes, for example, costs about half a cent, but here in Canada, it costs 20 cents. Canadians are getting screwed. This has everything to do with the oligopoly that you and the other two major telecoms are running in our country.

Why do Canadians have to pay some of the highest cellphone rates as you sit back gaining millions of dollars off the backs of Canadian consumers and Canadian workers?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I would ask the honourable member to provide to the clerk the case she mentioned before about the separation packages because if we weren't in compliance with the requirements, we will look into it. It's very important. Every individual who departed needs to have their legal separation package, so if that happened, we will correct it.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Yes, we heard this. Let's go back to the cellphone.... My time is limited.

Why are you ripping Canadians off when it comes to cellphone costs?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We are providing phenomenal service on world-leading networks at prices that are declining significantly—

The Chair: The time is up. Give a short answer.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: —and I would encourage all committee members to look at the INDU committee transcript from March 18, where all the facts are laid out. They are very compelling.

Ms. Niki Ashton: But Canadians are being ripped off.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up. I'm going to have—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Canadians are obtaining a significant service and value.

The Chair: Thank you.

Do you have a point of order, Mr. Waugh?

Mr. Kevin Waugh: No, it's not a point of order, Madam Chair.

We have not had bells yet. Is there a chance that we could get unanimous consent to have maybe one more round, two minutes each for the Liberals, Conservatives, Bloc and NDP?

The Chair: Bells have just started, Kevin. Do you still think we could do another 10 minutes with, as you said, two minutes each for each group?

Mr. Kevin Waugh: I think we could.

The Chair: Is there agreement for 10 minutes extra?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: All right. Everybody seems to be in agreement, so we're going to have two minutes for each party, starting with the Conservatives.

Mr. Jivani.

Mr. Jamil Jivani: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Bibic, I think you made clear to us today that you are not very concerned about the allegations of tokenism, racism, sexism and ageism made against Bell Media. You have also made clear in your attempts to plug the CTV News app during your testimony here today that you want to make light of this and that you don't want to take this very seriously.

We've heard—I'm sure this is from all parties present in this process—a lot of concern from our constituents that by being customers of your Internet services and your highly priced cellphone services, they are financing a media operation that has shown a callous disregard for Canadian workers despite receiving \$40 million in regulatory relief from this Liberal government, and also an attitude of discrimination toward employees.

What would you say to consumers who are concerned that they are financing a highly questionable media operation by engaging with your cell services and your Internet services?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Unfortunately, Chair, the last part of the question broke as the mic cut off.

Mr. Jamil Jivani: It's convenient for you to pretend you couldn't hear what I'm saying, because again, you're being evasive.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: I take issue with that.

Madam Chair—

Mr. Jamil Jivani: Again, you're being evasive. You're going to offer another word salad and—

The Chair: Please repeat the last sentence, Mr. Jivani.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Madam Chair, I've come here in good faith.

Mr. Jamil Jivani: The question is very clear—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: The accusations you've made against me—

Mr. Jamil Jivani: Mr. Bibic, actually, I'm speaking. It's not you, sir—

Mr. Mirko Bibic: —challenging my integrity are inappropriate.

Mr. Jamil Jivani: I am speaking. Respect our democracy, Mr. Bibic.

The Chair: Order, Mr. Bibic and Mr. Jivani.

Mr. Jivani was repeating his question because you said you didn't hear it.

Can we get back to some order here?

Mr. Jivani, repeat your question. We've stopped the clock.

Mr. Jamil Jivani: Thank you.

For our many constituents across Canada who are concerned that by purchasing your cell services and Internet services, they are financing a highly questionable media company that has shown callous disregard for Canadian workers and an insensitivity to many allegations of discrimination.

What do you have to say to those Canadians who are concerned about financing Bell Media?

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Madam Chair, I have deep respect for Parliament and for the committee's work, and I would never pretend to have not heard a question if I'd heard it. That I take issue with, and I just wanted to make that clear. If I say something, it's because I mean it.

Now, earlier, the honourable member asked me about diversity and the importance of it, and I gave a considered answer. It's a very important issue, and we are proud of the journey we're on in that regard—

• (1735)

Mr. Jamil Jivani: Are you evading the question again after pretending you didn't hear it? I repeated it and you're still not answering it, Mr. Bibic.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: We're very proud of the services we provide to Canadians who subscribe. Millions of customers are with us, and we deliver excellent value to them.

The Chair: Thank you.

I think we have gone over the time there, so I'm now going to Mr. Coteau for two minutes, please.

Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Sir, you mentioned that Bell is a good, Canadian company and you focus on the client. The client is the focus.

It's this very Parliament that established your company over 150 years ago.

I would estimate that billions of dollars have been invested by Canadians into Bell. Not only have they invested money, but they've given you special treatment for monopolies in certain areas. They've contributed to your success, helping to develop the spectrum and helping to invest in your company to continue to build.

You have an obligation, I believe, to Canadians to do what's best for them. Therefore, when a company is making \$2.3 billion in profit and it is removing the very fabric of our news system in this country, it's a bit hard for Canadians to accept, considering the investments.

You said earlier that Unifor was on board with this process. I was really disturbed when I read a news report that quoted Unifor, saying this was a very shameful act by Bell to hand over pink slips for many years of devotion by your workforce.

In fact, Christopher Corsi, your human resources and labour relations manager, held a 10-minute meeting to fire 400 people online, using Zoom. If you're not going to protect Canadian workers and your workforce, at least respect them. When I read that you actually took that course of action to fire 400 people online together, without

even allowing them to ask questions—this is coming from Unifor; I've read the article—to me that is shameful.

Canadians have invested in your company, and they continue to invest in your company. This very Parliament established your company. I think you—

The Chair: We are now over time, Mr. Coteau.

Mr. Michael Coteau: —as a company could have done things better.

The Chair: Mr. Bibic, give a very quick answer.

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Having group video meetings with employees who found themselves in similar situations and similar positions allowed us to communicate key information to them all at the same time. While it's not a perfect process, the benefit was that it allowed all employees to find out at the same time so that we wouldn't have the situation whereby the first individual found out first and the last individual found out hours or days later, and would then have the anxiety of not knowing what was happening, other than through the rumour mill.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bibic.

I'm going to go to Martin Champoux.

Martin, you have two minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Bibic, the new president of Bell Media recently said that diversity within Bell is important, and that's a good thing. He said that the company wants half of the programs it is commissioning this year to be generated by Black, indigenous, visible minority and under-represented creators. I totally agree with him about diversity and inclusion, but I also agree on fairness.

I imagine that Bell is used to quotas, for example for franco-phone content on the radio, but don't you think it would be preferable for the company to stand out as the one that takes action to ensure that all communities, including under-represented communities, have access to the content creation and acquisition process, rather than having ratios that can lead to some discrimination in an environment where the percentage of creators from those communities may not be around 50%, for example?

Don't you think it would be better to come up with ways to make the content creation and acquisition processes accessible to as many people as possible?

• (1740)

Mr. Mirko Bibic: Thank you for your question.

We work closely with a number of independent producers, which enables us to produce and broadcast high-quality series, such as *Aller simple*, *Chouchou*, *In Memoriam*—a fantastic series—*Entre deux draps*, *L'arène*, *L'empereur*, and so on. All of this is possible because we work closely with a number of Canadian producers across the country, including Quebec, of course.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Niki, you have two minutes, please.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Just looking at today's committee.... The disconnect that we've heard from Bell is staggering. It's a company worth \$40 billion, a company with a CEO who made \$13 million last year and, at the same time, agreed to laying off thousands of workers—6,000 jobs—over an eight-month period. It has gutted local news and shut down 45 radio stations, leaving major and smaller centres in our country without the local news that they deserve. In a province like mine, on the telecom side of things, we've seen costs go up and service go down. Across the country, Canadian customers are paying some of the highest cellphone rates in the world.

How much is enough? How much profit is enough? How much in CEO paybacks and profit is enough? How much in dividends is enough?

This didn't just happen. Bell's business approach has left Canadians worse off. It is part of an oligopoly, cheered on by Liberals and Conservatives over the years, that has sought to make greater and greater profits at the expense of workers and Canadians across the board.

What we heard today, right from the desire to shut down...why we hadn't heard from Bell when we should have heard from Bell to the fact that it took forever to find out exactly what notice was given to the federal government.... I should note that we have since heard that Unifor only found out on February 8 that the layoffs were about to happen.

That is not respect. That is not a company that values the workers that work for it. Certainly, the costs that Canadians are paying show that this isn't a company that values what Canadians give to it either.

Canadian workers deserve better. First nations, rural and northern communities—like the ones I represent and those across the country—that work with Bell deserve better. Canadians who deserve local news told to them by the people based in their communities deserve better.

We hope that Bell will change course, will rehire workers it has laid off, will reinvest in local broadcasting and will bring down the rates, as Canadians deserve. Canadians deserve better.

The Chair: I would now like to thank the witnesses for being here.

I am going to adjourn the meeting, because we have to go to a vote. That's why I've been hurrying you along in the last couple of minutes.

Thank you very much to the witnesses. It was a tough meeting, but I thank everyone.

We are adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>