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Chair

The Honourable Michael Chong

Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage

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• (1530)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)): Welcome to the 45th meeting of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, this Monday, March 7, 2011. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), today we will be studying the implementation of Canada's transition to digital television.

We have with us three witnesses: Mr. Blais, Assistant Deputy Minister at Canadian Heritage, Ms. Kennedy, Deputy Director General also at Canadian Heritage, and Mr. Dupuis, Director General at Industry Canada.

Welcome to all of you. We will begin with the Assistant Deputy Minister of Canadian Heritage.

[English]

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais (Assistant Deputy Minister, Cultural Affairs, Department of Canadian Heritage): *Merci beaucoup, monsieur le président.*

In front of you, ladies and gentlemen, you should have a dark blue covered deck. I was actually not going to have speaking points, but I will just speak to the deck as we go through. It's about 10 pages. As you know, I don't usually have prepared speeches when I come before you; I just have a conversation with you.

Page 2 just sets out the context of some of the major developments in the history of broadcasting in Canada. You'll see there have been significant events. I do believe the transition to digital is akin to the transition in the sixties of the introduction of colour television, as well as the introduction of satellite distribution in the 1990s. All of this transition flows from the fact that the CRTC, in 2007, set August 31, 2011, as a transition date.

From the very beginning of the Canadian broadcasting system we've always been in analog. It began with radio being in analog, and of course a decade ago we had the transition of distribution by DTH and cable to digital distribution.

What is new here is that this will be the first time we will have over-the-air Hertzian transmission by digital in a permanent manner.

On page 3, I'd like to bring your attention to the two first percentages there: 63.3% of Canadian households subscribe to cable, and if you add to the 29.2% of Canadian households that currently subscribe to satellite, that gives you about 92.5%. That's why you've been hearing the numbers of 92% or 93% of Canadian households being completely unaffected by the upcoming transition, because it'll be completely seamless to them. It happens in the background and

they don't see it. So the issue is very much about the potential for up to 7% of the rest of Canadians. But keep in mind that you can't just do the subtraction between the 93% and the 100%, because there are people in that group who don't watch television or who are watching programming through broadband distribution or other means.

So spectrum can certainly be used more effectively, and this is what the transition is about. So many people are now relying on distribution systems, including the Internet, to get their programming choices.

[Translation]

On page 4, it basically says that we must transition to digital in order to use the spectrum more efficiently. We know this public asset, in other words, public airwaves, can be used more efficiently in order to accommodate future generations of wireless and public safety services such as police and fire departments.

It will mean a better picture for Canadian consumers. I am not sure whether anyone at the table has had a chance to watch any over-the-air TV as opposed to through a distribution system, the picture you get with digital is unparalleled. Both the picture and the sound quality are significantly better than before. It also gives you flexibility in terms of high-definition viewing. The content may not always be offered in high definition but oftentimes it is, and this gives you that option as well as other features.

Page 5 basically shows you what we are talking about.

[English]

The old broadcasting spectrum that was the old analog from channels 2 to 69 is where television broadcasting used to occur; digital allows compression. Channels 2 to 51 will now be used across the country, so it frees up the wireless and public safety in the 52 to 69 and uses the spectrum in a more efficient manner.

The conversion in Canada, on page 6, certainly puts Canada in the middle of the pack. There are countries we could have added. There is Germany, which was 2010, and Italy in 2012, but essentially the Canadian experience is right in the middle, which makes a lot of sense in light of our North American geography.

The date was set by the CRTC. Many markets, but not all markets, will have to move to an analog shutdown by August 2011.

On page 14 of the deck you'll see an annex that actually lists the various communities and what's happening in those various communities, which I think should be helpful.

•(1535)

[*Translation*]

The Canadian approach to the digital transition is a shared responsibility.

[*English*]

As I mentioned earlier, on page 7 you'll see that the CRTC set the date and created the regulatory framework for the transition. You heard from the CRTC last week.

My colleague Marc, from Industry Canada, will speak in a moment, and he will talk about the more technical and spectrum management issues around this. Canadian Heritage is responsible for the broadcasting policy.

More importantly, the Prime Minister has asked Minister Moore to have a federal lead with respect to the transition, and we in the department are happy to work with our various colleagues to do that. The overall goal is to ensure there is a smooth and predictable transition for Canadians.

On page 8, as I mentioned earlier, over 90%—actually closer to 93%—of Canadians are completely unaffected by this. And you shouldn't assume that the other 7% are necessarily going to be affected. Some don't watch TV. Some of those Canadian households get their audiovisual content through broadband. Others are part of the black or grey market for distribution of signals in Canada and are therefore off the grid, in a sense. One can't assume that the 7% equates to people who will be necessarily affected.

However, for people who potentially will be affected, which could be up to 7%, there are a lot of choices for them.

Unlike colour television, which was backward compatible—when you had a black and white set you could get colour signals onto your old TV—digital television doesn't work that way. You need a converter box or a digital set. We know a lot of people are buying these new TVs that are digital capable because they are a hot item in the consumer electronic area. And the prices of the boxes are coming down. When we were looking at this a number of years ago, they were in the \$75 to \$80 range. Here I've cited the price of \$45, and I know there are some available for as little as \$30.

This is the experience in many markets. As this is coming out, the prices come down because of the market response. Alternatively, there are cable and satellite digital receivers that are also an opportunity.

It's interesting to note as well that the CRTC has made adjustments to its regulatory policy. Canadians are able to benefit from packages to get their local signals only. In fact, in the Shaw-Global transaction, there's a \$15 million amount set aside as part of the benefits package to provide receivers for some Canadians in the priority markets.

Now, on page 9, let me speak about the communication activities. I think that's where we're at in this phase right now. Our greatest challenge is that this is a national policy framework, but the impacts are very local. The communication challenge is trying to give individual Canadians the information at the local level.

Broadcasters are in the best position to inform consumers. They know of their detailed plans in their communities. We've been working closely with them, and with Industry Canada, to get that specific information.

You may have seen that we redid our website recently. The architecture of the website provides for detailed knowledge on a clickable map. We don't have the information yet, but we're working closely with the broadcasters to get exact dates of when they're converting and what channels they're converting to, so Canadians will know exactly what to do.

The CRTC has also proposed regulations for a public service announcement, which should be available on-air. The best place to reach people who watch television is through television, though PSAs. The government is also looking at options to supplement that public awareness campaign.

We and Industry Canada have been working closely for over two years, with monthly telephone calls to prepare for this transition, and more recently with the CRTC and broadcasters. We are very much in an information-sharing mode. As I mentioned, we also have a 1-800 number on the website—I don't think it's an 800 number; it's a toll-free number that people can call.

In conclusion, the transition is going to provide better quality for Canadian viewers. It's going to free up a valuable spectrum for advanced wireless and public safety.

The government objective is to make the transition as smooth and as predictable to Canadians as we can make it. Heritage is certainly working hard these days on communication outreaches to make sure that in the coming months the detailed rollout plans are well communicated to Canadians.

•(1540)

I have an annex—and if you have some questions, I can address those—with some diagrams on exactly how this is going to work and which part of the broadcasting system is impacted, as well as the various communities affected.

Those are the introductory comments I have, Mr. Chairman.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blais.

Mr. Dupuis, the floor is yours.

Mr. Marc Dupuis (Director General, Engineering, Planning and Standards Branch, Spectrum, Information Technologies and Telecommunications Sector, Industry Canada): Thank you Mr. Chair, and good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.

I am Marc Dupuis, director general responsible for spectrum engineering at Industry Canada. I am pleased to be here today to provide the committee with insight into my organization's role in the conversion of over-the-air television to digital TV.

Digital television transmission makes more efficient use of the radio spectrum. As Jean-Pierre mentioned, digital TV translates into improved picture, multi-channel audio and widescreen high-definition viewing for over-the-air viewers. It also offers other multimedia features not available in analog TV. Satellite and cable TV subscribers already enjoy these benefits, and this conversion has no impact on those viewers. Furthermore, conversion to digital will free up parts of valuable airwaves for other important services, such as those known as fourth generation services. They include smart devices, smart phones and other broadband devices, as well as public safety communications systems serving police, fire and ambulance service providers.

[English]

Under the Radiocommunication and Broadcasting Acts, Industry Canada is responsible for the technical and spectrum management aspects of the digital television transition. There are two major aspects to this role of interest today. First is our role in setting the broadcasting technical rules and the creation of the television allotment plan where each channel is given to a broadcaster in each market. Second is our role in certifying that stations can operate safely and without interference.

Let me start with the first role. The department started the investigation of digital over-the-air television in the early 1990s and published the first digital allotment plan in 1998 to allow broadcasters to simultaneously broadcast their TV programming in both digital and analog formats. This plan was developed over many years, based on technical sharing criteria, to ensure that one station would not cause interference to another station, whether in Canada or across the border in the United States. At that time, no mandatory date was imposed, and the decision was left to broadcasters to decide when to convert and when to transition, based purely on market forces.

Most countries transitioned to digital TV through a simulcast period spanning many years. In Canada, right now only about two dozen television stations currently transmit over-the-air digital television signals, and they started in about 2003. Nearby, at Camp Fortune, CBC/Radio-Canada is transmitting its programming in both analog and digital formats, in both official languages.

In 2007, the CRTC announced the DTV transition date, as Jean-Pierre mentioned earlier, of August 31, 2011, in order to generally align the shutdown date of analog TV within a North American market timeframe. Our department published the final allotment plan to provide each broadcaster a digital TV channel within channels 2 to 51, to be used after the termination of analog television. Consistent with the CRTC decision, the final plan requires stations that are currently transmitting on channels 52 to 69 in analog format to either move to a lower channel remaining in analog format or to convert to digital television within that range.

As you may be aware, the U.S. converted to all-digital TV in June 2009. The department negotiated arrangements with the United States to share the television spectrum along the international border between our countries. The importance of these arrangements is that Canadian and U.S. stations were able to transition at different times—all this, without causing interference to each other.

• (1545)

[Translation]

Industry Canada's second role is that of providing broadcast certificates to broadcasters. This is an essential requirement for the safe and interference-free operation of their TV transmitters. The CRTC licenses broadcasters to operate over the air. Industry Canada certifies, before the broadcasting licence is issued, that the station can operate according to the approved technical parameters. Industry Canada and the CRTC are currently processing applications for stations to operate new digital transmitters in compliance with the final allotment plan for August 31, 2011.

I can attest that Industry Canada is capable of processing all the demand for broadcast certificates in a timely fashion, well ahead of the planned shutdown date.

[English]

Of course, Industry Canada will also be responsible for licensing the 700 MHz band, which is the spectrum where TV will be removed, for advanced communications services while also making it available to public safety organizations. In this regard, last December the department issued a comprehensive public consultation to determine the process for awarding these licences. Close to 90 submissions were received from interested parties. We will make recommendations to our minister after the reply comment period closes on March 30 of this year. This will then be followed by a second consultation on the licensing framework. We expect licensing, via some auction process, at least for the commercial spectrum, to take place in late 2012.

[Translation]

In closing, I would like to underline the continued collaboration of my department with broadcasters and officials at the CRTC and Canadian Heritage. We are working closely with the CRTC to issue the broadcast certificates and licences. As broadcasters transition to DTV in the coming months, we will do our utmost to ensure a smooth conversion process.

I would be happy to answer any questions that the committee may have. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dupuis.

We now have 50 minutes for questions and comments.

Mr. Rodriguez.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, and thank you for being here.

Last week, we talked about the importance of an educational campaign. Who would be responsible for that campaign? Would it be Canadian Heritage?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: The campaign would be a joint effort. Everyone has a role to play. Broadcasters have a share of the responsibility, and the Government of Canada as a whole will also undertake—

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Who is doing the coordinating?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: It is a joint effort.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: So no one is in the driver's seat as it were.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: Our department is in the driver's seat. I bring all the parties together for discussion.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: So discussions are in progress?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: Precisely.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Will the campaign get under way soon?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: It will be done in steps. We already have a 1-800 line and a Web site. In the next few weeks, we should be launching an advertising campaign.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Do you know the 1-800 number?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: From memory, it is 1-777—

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: You just proved my point. No one knows it. It is good to have, but you have to tell people.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: There is one, but we had to create it.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: What is the Web site?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: We will find it, because it would be a good thing to have in the public record.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: What is the Web site?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: The English site is www.digitaltelevision.info.gc.ca. The French site is www.televisionnumerique.info.gc.ca. The 1-800 number I mentioned earlier is actually not a 1-800 number, it is 855-DTV-5050 or 855-TVN-5050.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: That proves my point. It is good to have a telephone line and a Web site, but you have to tell people.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I completely agree.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: How do you intend to get the word out, a TV campaign?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: There will be an ad campaign. The details have not yet been finalized, but there will be a multimedia campaign. I would give you more information, but we did not want to do the campaign before getting a final decision from the CRTC on the public service announcements.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Do it before August 31.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: Yes, of course. As for the public process undertaken by the CRTC regarding the public announcements, if you read the comments, you will notice that most of the participants said that starting the campaign too early was risky. I know you have questions for me, but if we start getting the message out too soon, people will forget about it.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: That is debatable. You may be right, you may be wrong, I am not sure. The fact remains, though, that no one knows about it. We talk about it here in our little bubble, but aside from that, what your average person knows about the conversion—

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: You need to know the information in order to get it out there. We have Web sites, we have the 1-800 number. Broadcasters still do not know exactly when they will be transitioning. It may not necessarily be August 31. That is when analog over-the-air broadcasting will end in certain markets. The conversion may, however, happen before then.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: It can happen any time, but that is the deadline. We are about five months away from that, are we not?

• (1550)

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: Indeed.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: What is too early? You might be right, you might not. It is happening in five months, and nothing has been announced. That does not seem too early to me. Regardless, you are going to have to start telling people.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: We still do not know exactly when broadcasters will convert.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Are they dragging their feet?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: No, but it is extremely complex. As my colleague mentioned, you need a licence from the CRTC and a permit under the Radiocommunication Act.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: You said the converter would cost around \$45. I thought the CRTC had said it would be around \$30.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: Sometimes there are remote controls, and those cost a bit more. The price we give is an average.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: And what is it?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: Some cost as little as \$30.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: So it is somewhere between \$30 and \$45.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I have also seen some for \$75.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Seriously, how sure can you be that it will cost around that much and not \$100? Do you know?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: We know the prices have a tendency to drop, if we go by what we have seen in the U.S. As I said, in the beginning, it was \$75; at one point, it was \$45, and now it is closer to \$30.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: I have one last question, and I will keep it brief. Mr. Dupuis, if we free up part of the spectrum, how much would those licences fetch at auction?

Mr. Marc Dupuis: We are not in the habit of saying how much money we can make through auction, because it can vary tremendously. It can be less than a billion up to several billions, or even a few hundred million. It has a lot to do with the economic situation.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: It is a big chunk.

Mr. Marc Dupuis: It is a big chunk, but just how big? That depends a lot on the economic conditions and who wants a piece of the spectrum. So we do not make any forecasts about how much money we can raise through auction.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dupuis.

Ms. Lavallée, it is over to you.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Blais, unfortunately, despite all the explanations we got from the CRTC, there are still many unknowns, in my opinion. For instance, when it comes to how many Canadians and Quebecers will be affected, I have seen various figures in various documents. I have seen 7% for the proportion of Canadians who will be affected, but we know that figure will be higher in Quebec. I have seen 9% for Canadians, in 2006, and 14% for Quebecers. True, those figures go back a few years, but the fact remains that more people will be affected in Quebec than anywhere else. So the situation is more critical there.

I still do not understand the makeup of these groups. What are the solutions? We heard it will be 900,000 Canadians, but if there are more Quebecers, what do we do about the digital transition? What should each person expect, based on the type of TV they have and their geographic location? How many people will be affected? Let's say that of those 900,000 Canadians we heard about last week, 200,000 are Quebecers. Is that 200,000 individuals or 200,000 homes? How many are in Montreal? Do people in Montreal have to buy a converter? Is there a solution for them? I do not understand where everything stands, things are still foggy.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: You are right. Our figures are closer to 850,000, as opposed to 900,000. You said that more people watched off-air television in Quebec than anywhere else in the country. And you are right, but that includes the Montreal area, where that rate is higher. In the Saguenay region, 1% of people use off-air television. In Rouyn-Noranda, it is 4%. In Quebec's more French-speaking communities, people seem to make greater use of cable or satellite television service. That is to be expected, they are farther away from the border.

In many parts of Montreal, the cable and satellite penetration rate is lower because people can access many signals for free, including American ones. That has been the case for the past 30 or 40 years.

• (1555)

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Let's look for some solutions. What will happen on August 31 or September 1? I hope your 1-800 number will still be in service after August 31, because my feeling is you will be getting quite a few calls.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: We are talking about homes, not individual people.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Okay, so we are talking about 850,000 homes.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: It is about that, yes. Let's stick with 850,000.

Some people get their TV satellite service through what is known as the grey or black market, in other words, the underground market. We do not know who they are, they are really outside our knowledge. I do not know how many there are, but the number may be higher in some neighbourhoods than others.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: The fact remains you cannot base your ad campaign telling people about the August 31 deadline on the fact that some people—

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I was trying to tell you, Ms. Lavallée, people who are basically.... Some of those people do have service, but through unknown systems. Some people in that 7% do not watch TV. Some people have recently purchased a television, so it is

already equipped for digital signals. These TVs have been for sale for a number of years now.

The next category is especially significant in the Montreal area, English speakers. Certain parts of Montreal have large anglophone communities. Since the American conversion has already happened, if people in those communities wanted to keep their free off-air TV service, they had to buy a converter to receive the signals, so they already have one.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: American TV signals.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: The signals for American television, which converted to digital a few years ago. Those who have not already bought one, because they are French-speakers, for example, can buy the box for \$30 to \$45.

Others will choose to watch TOU.TV more and more, or other such sites—you are very familiar with the TOU.TV model. They do not even watch television anymore.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Yes, but it is very expensive.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: You may find it expensive, but it provides another option to someone who chooses to have only Internet service, and not TV service.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: It is very expensive. I know everyone is talking about it. I know that it is possible, that it is feasible, but first you have to pay for the monthly Internet access, which is somewhere between \$40 and \$45. In addition, as soon as you exceed the terms of your service, you have to pay more.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lavallée.

Mr. Blais.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I just want to finish.

The other choice is obviously to subscribe to a cable or satellite provider for service. As I said earlier, a package of approximately \$15 million is available, a tangible benefit of a transaction recently approved by the CRTC.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Angus.

[English]

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

When is the ad going to roll out and what is it going to say?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I'm not in a position today to tell you exactly. Those decisions are still being finalized.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Have you seen the ad?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I have seen certain mock-ups of the advertising products and some of the PSAs being provided by the broadcasters themselves.

Mr. Charlie Angus: And what is the website again?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: It's www.digitaltelevision.info.gc.ca.

Mr. Charlie Angus: My concern is that I hear from the broadcasters that “Of course, it's in our interests to make sure that our people follow us, yes”, but if CTV tells you they have a box and CBC says you can still go on the rabbit ears, it's not in their interests to tell you, “Well, the other guy's saying to use rabbit ears and we're telling you to use a box.” Who's going to tell the overall public what's available in certain regions?

To go to a “.gc.ca” site, to me, that's like expecting that people are already paying attention to government websites. For a hundred bucks you could get “digitaltv.ca”. People could just type in “digital TV” and it would take you.... I don't understand why you would go through this complex website without having something that's really easy and accessible, because people who use over-the-air signals tend to be people who are probably less likely to be using Internet and other means.

• (1600)

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: We agree that the Internet is not the only solution, because in fact there's probably a large percentage of the population that is not already covered by the 93%, that would not necessarily be connected to the Internet. That's why the proposed campaign, which I can't give you any details on right now because it's not fully approved, will be a multi-platform approach to reach Canadians, keeping in mind that the PSAs required by the CRTC are probably the most efficient use.

In terms of consistent messages across, that is what we are coordinating, to make sure that we all have the same messages, that we're all pointing to the same 1-800 number, and that we're all saying the same thing in terms of choices that Canadians will have.

Mr. Charlie Angus: What came up the other day from one of the community groups was this dog's breakfast of options out there. Sure, in every area there might be an option or three options or four options, but there is not necessarily going to be a coherent option. People aren't going to be able to phone their broadcaster to find out why they're suddenly not getting CTV.

How are they going to get a coherent message?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: This is why we set up our coordinating function, which will be reflected, in part, on our website, where we're trying to get the detailed information.

I don't know if you were in the room, because I noticed that you arrived a little bit late, when I was saying that one of the challenges with this national initiative is that the impact is very local. In other words, what is happening in your community depends on what your local broadcaster is doing and on when they're switching. That's the information we're trying to gather right now from the various broadcasters so that we can have a consistent message across the—

Mr. Charlie Angus: I fully understand that. I mean, I look at the United States, where the government took a strong lead role. I know you're saying that people will forget, but people don't know, whereas in the United States they made a decision long in advance to work with regions and local groups.

Did you look at that experience and decide that it didn't work? Why was the decision made to just wait until the last minute?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: Well, it wasn't a decision to wait until the last minute. I wouldn't put it that way. It was a decision to enter the

marketplace when the communication opportunities were at a maximum. Remember that just a few months ago broadcasters were still fighting the possibility of going to digital. It was only a few months ago that they turned the corner on that, I think, and accepted that it is happening. Now we are putting pressure on them to give us the exact dates of the transition, which channels they're moving, and at what time, and that is what we need to do. The government can't communicate without that information.

The U.S. case is actually quite interesting. Down there, the broadcasters—not the government but the broadcasters themselves—spent nearly \$1 billion to communicate.

It is very much a cooperative approach we need. The government has a certain role, but the broadcasters have a role as well. That's what we're coordinating.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

Mr. Dupuis, we're looking at the sell-off of channels 52 to 69. What is the percentage, roughly, you're thinking of setting aside for public safety? Do you have any plans to set aside the white spaces at this point for any kind of future public use?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Dupuis.

Mr. Marc Dupuis: Thank you.

At this point in time, if you look at our consultation, we've set aside four channels for public safety in the 52 to 69 range. That represents four out of about 18 channels—I don't have the exact number here—or whatever that adds up to.

If you look at our consultation, there are two extra channels being contemplated as well for public safety applications. That is the subject of debate. Whether those would be public safety or commercial spectrum will depend on the results of our consultation and the reply comment period, which as I said, closes March 30.

With regard to the white space, the white space devices in the U.S. will operate below channel 52, in the channel 2 to 51 range. Those devices are short-range devices mostly used for Internet-type access in the home or in what we would call Wi-Fi hotspots. At this point in time there is no plan to put anything aside in those white spaces. The white spaces will become a first come, first served, or all come, all served, if you prefer, opportunistic type of use of the spectrum, the way Wi-Fi is today. We do not set aside any spectrum in the Wi-Fi bands. Everybody can use them. They are subject to interference. If you can operate, good for you. If you're in the interference zone, you change channels.

• (1605)

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Angus.

We'll go to Mr. Del Mastro.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Peterborough, CPC): Thank you very much, and thank you to the witnesses for a very good presentation today.

I guess I'll start with you, Mr. Blais. I said the other day, and somebody blogged about it after, that I didn't see that we had a big problem here that we were trying to deal with. I thought the CRTC was actually doing a good job managing. I thought the concessions they were able to garner from Shaw or that Shaw put forward when they purchased Global—I would anticipate that they will seek similar concessions from CTV—to make sure that anyone within this mythical 7% who may or may not be watching television, who may or may not have U.S. satellite dishes, or who may or may not have electricity in the first place.... The reality is that we seem to be really concerned about a group that, frankly, most people have a hard time putting their fingers on.

I don't know too many people who are not currently capable of accepting the free satellite dish that would be extended to them, in the case of the Shaw deal or the potential Bell deal, and who would be left without television after this change occurs. Can you comment on that?

How many people do you think we're talking about? CRTC whittled it down to about 30,000 people who they think will actually be left in the lurch, ultimately, which is not very many.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I don't think I can add much to the CRTC's own number, other than to say that any time you do change, people are very apprehensive before the change occurs. My experience has shown that Canadians are far more resilient than we give them credit for, and they adapt. Keep in mind that the policy in Canada has always been to "lag behind the United States". The advantage of that has been that costs have come down, but also we are sort of on their coattails in terms of all the publicity that has occurred in the United States.

Most Canadians live within a close range of the U.S. border. If people had been over-the-air consumers, they would have lost most of the U.S. services—which a lot of Canadians value—when that occurred. We didn't hear a noise; we were actually getting ready at that point because we thought there would be some noise. What I think has occurred is Canadians have adapted; they've gone on to buy the converter boxes or otherwise dealt with all the options that I outlined earlier.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro: Or, alternatively, they were no longer using those signals. Even though those analog signals were still being pushed out, very few Canadians were still receiving them via conventional antenna—

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: Oh, absolutely.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro: —and weren't caught up in the transition at all.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: The vast majority are not touched.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro: I think everyone around the table understands that as elected officials we have responsibilities to our constituents; we've talked about communicating this. I agree that the most effective way to push this communication out is over the channels that people could lose, and I think they also have a vested interest. They want you watching their channel because they need to sell advertising—that's how they pay for it—and if nobody was watching they'd have a hard time selling advertising, so they have a vested interest in pushing this message out. I think that's the most effective means.

Will you work with MPs' offices that could be impacted, to tell them what the impact will be in their riding, so that they can have responses? I do anticipate that some of us, myself included, may receive some calls at our constituency office. Is there a plan to make those MPs aware of the impacts in their own ridings?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: In addition to a more traditional advertising campaign, our outreach strategy certainly included reaching out to provincial and territorial governments, consumer associations, as well as MPs. As I said, the impact is local. We're working on a kit that actually drills down, for the respective ridings of all members here, exactly what would happen in that riding, so that you're in a position to answer those questions. Officials from the department are willing to meet with you or your staff to go through that as we roll that out.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro: Mr. Dupuis, can you unpack something a little bit for me? What is the 700 spectrum? Why are we transitioning, just for the benefit of the report? Why are we transitioning, and what's in it for Canadians by making this transition?

• (1610)

Mr. Marc Dupuis: If you don't mind, let me start with the last question first: why are we transitioning? We're transitioning so that Canadians who want to receive TV over the air can receive a better quality signal. They can actually receive HDTV signals like people can right now in the U.S. Right now, if you look at over-the-air TV, you're getting a poor quality signal compared to what you can get on digital cable. If you convert the over-the-air TV from analog to digital, as Jean-Pierre was saying earlier, you're actually going to get a much better signal than you would get over cable or satellite because you're getting the true HD experience.

The second part is, why are we then reducing the number of channels available to TV? Well, we live in a North American marketplace, whether or not we like it. The U.S. has already converted; they've managed to squeeze all the television signals below channel 52. We've demonstrated that we can do that quite easily here in Canada, and by doing that, we're giving benefit to Canadians for the advanced wireless services that everybody wants on their cellphone, Blackberry devices, as well as PC sticks, etc.

Also, we can give capacity for public safety. I think we all want public safety to be interoperable, and 700 megahertz provides that. Just for those who are technically inclined, 700 megahertz are those channels from 52 to 69, and over-the-air covers the range of 698 megahertz to 806 megahertz.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Del Mastro and Mr. Dupuis.

Madame Crombie.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Blais. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Blais, what is your budget for the education awareness program? How much do you anticipate spending for the education awareness program?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I don't think I'm at liberty...because decisions haven't been finally made on that. But we are using existing resources of the department as well to do outreach, like the MP kits—

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: You only have five months to go, so I anticipate you'll have to make the media buys soon. Are you doing public service announcements solely, or will there be media focus?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: The public service announcements are the responsibility of the broadcasters.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Of each broadcaster. What about yourselves? Will you also have public service announcements, and where will they appear?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: The draft proposal I saw is not so much public service announcements, although I guess one could put them as public service announcements, but it could include media buys.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: From what I'm hearing, the onus is really on the industry for awareness, even though it's part of the recommendations the CRTC made that you take the lead and coordinate the education awareness program.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: That's not what I said. What I said is that it was a cooperative approach. Everybody has a responsibility. The broadcasters have an important responsibility to actually give us the information as to when they're transitioning so we can actually communicate and coordinate. But we are working together; it's everybody's responsibility together.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: With five months to go, I'm surprised that there isn't some sort of plan or strategy document so that you could share with us a little more on what the plan specifically is to make all the public—800,000 households, or 30,000, or whatever the magic number is—aware of the transition.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: The fact that I'm not at liberty to show it to you doesn't suggest there isn't a plan or a strategy that exists.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Okay, I'll let that one go.

In your report you say that the CRTC came to the same conclusion, that a converter box program like the one implemented in the U.S. is unnecessary in Canada. Why is that?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I don't want to speak on behalf of the CRTC—it was here last week—but I believe, from reading its policy decision, that it looked at the number of people affected, and the cost associated with it would have been considerable. If you took a per capita approach of what they spent in the States and just converted to the size of the Canadian population, it would be a program of over \$200 million in Canada. I would fear that the administrative costs would be even higher, because we do not have the sort of food stamp process the American government has, to deliver the coupons.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: There are different costings out here right now. CRTC told us it thought the converter boxes would be as low as \$30, and you've stated today they're about \$45. What's the real number?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: There are various prices. Not all converter boxes are made the same. Some of them have remote controls, some are very basic, and some aren't the same quality as others. This is a wide range; it's a very competitive market out there.

What I can tell you is that the U.K. had speculated that its boxes would be closer to the \$100 range when it started. At the end of the program, they became an impulse item at the checkout counter. That's what market force is.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: And it cost how much?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I can't remember the U.K. price.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Your price is \$45, you suggested today.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: A few months ago, in June or July, the CRTC thought it was up to \$75.

• (1615)

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: So where can I purchase a \$45 converter box? I'm going to need one.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I would suggest you look around on several sites. You might want to go to The Source, which has a very rich site that tells you the options there. You can go on eBay. Somebody mentioned to me that some of them were available at Loblaws. They're available in just about every place. I don't know if you have cable or satellite, but most Canadians aren't in that market.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: We called The Source and they're \$89. Then we called Sears and they were \$69.99. So I don't know where the CRTC gets a number of \$30 or where you get \$45. But they're considerably more, so the impact on the consumer is going to be a little greater than you're estimating.

We also called your 1-855 number, DTV-5050, this morning. I think you need an education program for the people answering the phones there, quite frankly. They tried to direct us to a website, and when we told them we didn't have one, we were left on hold listening to lovely classical music for a long period of time, and then they proceeded to read to us. I don't mean anything against classical music. But they were very unprepared to answer our questions, and they just proceeded to read the website to us over the phone. When we asked how much the converter boxes would cost, we were told they would cost in excess of \$100.

So there are a lot of numbers floating around. I think I'd like some more consistency with what we're telling consumers. We've got a million people who are going to be out there attempting to purchase a digital converter, and I don't know what to tell them—where they should go, where they should turn, and what this will cost. I don't understand the decision that the government won't try to assist these people to offset these costs.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: Thank you for the feedback from the website. Certainly I'll follow up on that, and the quality of service we're paying for from Service Canada, and make sure we're getting what we're being charged for.

The reality is that we're in quite early days in this, and, frankly in terms of numbers, I would dispute your saying there are a million people who will be affected by this. As I mentioned earlier, I'm not persuaded. And in fact the CRTC, the expert independent tribunal, is putting it at a far smaller number.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: They're probably the most vulnerable of our population who can least afford the cost of the converter. They will be new immigrants, single mothers, aboriginals, or handicapped persons—the people who will need the subsidy the most.

Let's move on to the spectrum sale. This is the Holy Grail, frankly. It will be a huge windfall for the government. What do we anticipate the government netting as a result of the spectrum sale?

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Crombie.

Mr. Dupuis.

Mr. Marc Dupuis: We do not make any predictions on how much can be raised through auction, because we have no control over what bidders will bid for the spectrum. I just can't make a prediction. I'm sorry, I wish I could. There's no number I can provide that would be accurate. Past auctions have generated large amounts of money and small amounts of money. It all depends on the spectrum and who's willing to bid for it.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Dupuis.

Madam Lavallée.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First and foremost, Mr. Blais, we tried to get an overall picture of the situation earlier, but we were not successful.

I would like you to work on that with your colleagues in the industry and then send it to the committee to help us understand what will happen, how those 850,000 homes are made up and how to address their specific problems. That is the information I want.

You mentioned the Saguenay region, and I know the government contracted out its problems to the private corporation Shaw, which will offer satellite service to those who are in remote areas, I would imagine. However, I am not sure whether you recall what happened in the fall. The CRTC held a hearing on satellite service, and the following problem was raised: many homes in Quebec, in the Saguenay region and in every region, do not have access to local television programming through their satellite provider.

In terms of Radio-Canada programming, for example, 45,000 homes in the Saguenay region do not receive their local Radio-Canada channel, but the one for Montreal. And the company responsible for that, Shaw, is your subcontractor for television distribution service. Did you not consider the possibility that this would only make the problem worse rather than better?

• (1620)

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I see you think all the government's arms are controlled by the same brain, but some decisions are made by the department while some are made by the CRTC.

The availability of local service through satellite providers—as in the situation you referenced—is a regulatory issue and one that has to do with satellite capacity. Given that there is a limited amount of

satellite space for the distribution of local signals, the CRTC determined that certain signals would be mandatory while others would not.

Unfortunately, some people, such as those you mentioned, do not have local service. I would advise you to put that question to the CRTC instead because it pertains to a regulatory issue.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: We know, having seen it recently, that whenever the government doesn't like what is happening over at the CRTC, it happily intervenes.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: My CRTC colleagues were here last Monday, and that would have been a great time to raise the question about satellite service. I cannot be held accountable for their public policy.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Did you consider the problem? The fact remains you coordinate the working group, and I am telling you there is a problem. Will you do anything about it?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: Yes. When it was here, the CRTC told the committee that it had changed its regulatory framework to allow satellite companies—Bell TV primarily—other than Shaw to provide a more affordable local signal package without making all the other signals available. So it changed its regulatory framework.

Even though Shaw put up \$15 million to help address the situation, now Bell also has the opportunity to provide a reduced local service package.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Can you believe that residents of Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean, who were used to receiving local Radio-Canada service, will, as of September 1, be able to receive only Radio-Canada programming for Montreal?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: They subscribe to—

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: People in Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean are not happy. That is no laughing matter.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: Yes, if they subscribe to a satellite provider.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: They are really unhappy.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: But you have to remember that conventional service is available—basic off-air service.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: When you did your overall analysis, with the number of people affected and the solutions for each group, how many converters did you estimate would be necessary?

You say it is too soon, but in the U.S., when everyone rushed out to buy their converters, prices doubled. That is the law of supply and demand. If you wait too long to tell people they need to buy a converter, they won't be able to afford one by the time August rolls around.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: The problem in the U.S. was made worse by the fact that the coupon system they put in place created inflation in the marketplace. The subsidy program actually caused higher prices. Canada does not have a subsidy program.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Unfortunately, I think you are underestimating what the converters will cost. Let's say it is really \$30—which I doubt; we'll see come September because I am sure it will not be \$30. You seem to be overestimating the ability of someone with a low income to buy a \$30 converter.

It might not be a big deal for you or me, we won't go hungry that week. But there are many people without cable who have trouble just paying the rent. That is a fact. They struggle to make ends meet. Thirty dollars—and I am sure it will be double that—is an enormous amount of money for them. You cannot overestimate their ability to pay \$30 for a converter.

You say people will go out and buy a converter, but how many people will need one? That is my question.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lavallée.

Mr. Blais.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I will give you the list of options available to non-subscribers who want to keep their access to television service.

As for those who do not have a lot of money, all I can say is that the government has no plans for a subsidy program.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blais.

And last on the list is Mr. Armstrong.

• (1625)
[English]

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Thank you.

We've heard a lot of numbers floating around today, and I just want some sort of clarity. I know some guesswork is always involved, but we've heard 860,000 households. With grey dishes, American signals, Internet television, having no televisions, compatible TVs that have been purchased in the last five years, and probably thousands of cottages or secondary residences with secondary TVs and rabbit ears, what do you think is the real number of people who are going to lose a service?

You can take an educated guess. I don't expect you to be totally accurate.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: I trust the work done by the CRTC. They're the expert tribunal in this. They've done the hearings. They're estimating that less than 35,000 households would lose....

In fact, just going from memory, it's 31,000. So it's a very small number of Canadians.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Okay.

I think we do have to take some responsibility to make sure that those 31,000 people are informed. We're looking forward to the advertising plan when it actually is up and ready and running. I think we'll have to trust you in the timing of that. I agree, if you start too early, people will just ignore it. August 31 is a whole summer away, and they wouldn't pay attention. You do have to ramp it up at some time, though, so we'll be looking forward to maybe your coming back and actually showing us this program.

I do believe, however, that of the 31,000 households, there will be some difficult people to reach. I actually reached one this weekend, in my riding. This lady lives out in a very rural area. She doesn't have electricity. She does have a little generator, and she watches *Coronation Street*. I actually ran into her at the grocery store and warned her that this was going to happen. I told her that it might be

time for her to upgrade. She's not a person who has no means or anything, so it would be easier for her to do it.

To reach her, to reach this type of person, I don't think the normal type of advertising plan.... We're going to have to extend something, maybe direct mail or some other things in certain areas, in rural areas. Print—in weeklies, in dailies, in some rural areas—might be something we have to look at.

I don't know what the whole plan is, because it hasn't been rolled out yet, but I would say that there will be some people in this process who'll be hard to reach just because of the nature of the people who don't have television—the very rural, elderly, and other people who might not be paying attention.

So those would be some of the suggestions.

I do want to have some more information on how the actual technical sharing of the spectrum happens at the border. That is going to be important in several ridings across the country.

Can you explain, Mr. Dupuis, a little bit about how we actually share spectrum with the U.S.?

Mr. Marc Dupuis: It's interesting, because what we call sharing is really preventing sharing. If you're using a certain frequency on one side of the border, you have to avoid that frequency close to the border on the other side. So as we do when we share within Canada, we make sure the frequency doesn't get re-used within a distance that would cause interference to users.

For example, we have channel 4—channel 9 here in Ottawa. You're not going to use those same channels within a few hundred kilometres of Ottawa.

It's the same thing with the U.S. We've negotiated what we call the allotment plan, which means every frequency is known, whether it's a U.S. frequency or a Canadian frequency, within 300 to 400 kilometres of the border.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Has there been any difficulty with those negotiations? It seems that a lot of planning and work was done before this transition took place—negotiating and working with the United States to do this effectively.

Mr. Marc Dupuis: It's never easy. I wish I could say it was easy, but negotiating with our friends south of the border is always difficult.

It took place over a period of about 15 years. So we've put a lot of work into these very technical details. If the committee's interested, we can provide you with the results of those negotiations through a copy of the understanding.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Other countries have already transitioned. As you said, we're sort of in the middle of the pack. Other than getting the information out to people who may or may not have the signal, have there been other mistakes made? Have other problems occurred that we've learned from and are prepared for? Is there anything that jumps out at you?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Blais: The way Canada is doing its transition is somewhat different from every other jurisdiction, so comparables are difficult. For instance, in France, the U.K., and Australia, they're doing a circle around the country, and they're not doing everything at once. The U.S. did a flash cut. We are doing somewhat of a hybrid in the middle of that.

We are looking at the experience in other jurisdictions. We're looking at the kinds of communications they have done and who are the more vulnerable citizens that need to be reached. So we're trying to learn from those experiences.

To answer your earlier comment, all the various potentials of platforms are under study. I'm not at liberty right now...because a final decision hasn't been made. We understand it's a very difficult

market, and my offer continues to be on the table to brief either you or your office personnel on exactly what's happening in your particular ridings. We are extending that offer to all members of Parliament.

● (1630)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Armstrong. Thank you, Mr. Blais, Monsieur Dupuis, and Madam Kennedy for your testimonies and presentations.

I've asked members to come prepared to deal with the three reports at Wednesday's meeting so we can dispose of at least one or two—or all three of them.

Without further ado, this meeting is adjourned.

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