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## **WIRELESS TELEGRAPHY BILL**

### ***The silent seven lost in the web in a red wood?***

The Wireless Telegraphy Bill is making rapid progress through its Parliamentary stage in the Commons.

On 29 October, it received its Second Reading under a sustained and vitriolic attack by the shadow Secretary of State for Trade & Industry, John Redwood. Neatly side-stepping criticisms that his party had drafted the Bill, that it was included in the Conservative manifesto (though ironically not in the Labour one), and ignoring previous positive responses by members of his own party, Mr Redwood cited the measure as “the 18<sup>th</sup> tax increase from new Labour”, introduced by DTI – “The Department of Total Incompetence”. He stated that DTI officials had tried to persuade him to introduce the legislation when he was Telecommunications Minister, but that he and his successors had turned it down. He claimed that the new administration had fallen straight into this civil service “elephant trap”.

There was some discussion of issues of importance to utilities – but not much. Accordingly, we set to work rapidly with help from others to ensure the Committee Stage did not overlook aspects of importance to us.

Committee Stage took place on 11 and 13 November, carefully timed to clash with JRC Operations and Strategy Advisory Group meetings. However, this time we fared better, with some 22 columns of Hansard recording debate specifically relating to issues of importance to the utilities.

“The safe use of gas is, of course, crucially dependent on the rapid response of the gas emergency services ...” opened Michael Fallon for the opposition. “The safe and continuous delivery of electricity is now considered essential to daily domestic life” he continued.

Responding for the Government, the Minister Barbara Roche stated “I entirely agree that the utilities, emergency services and the Environment Agency all perform vital safety of life services on which quality of life, and even safety of life, may depend. I also fully understand their dependence on radio for efficient communications, and that that is essential to the prompt and effective execution of their duties.”

She continued, “I therefore agree that it is right – indeed essential – that those services should continue to have access to the frequencies that they need to carry out their functions; I say that clearly and plainly. I am happy to repeat the assurance that the introduction of spectrum pricing should not affect the access of essential services to the radio spectrum they require.”

Later on, there was confusion with honourable members waving copies of the JRC briefing and claiming to have a more up-to-date version than the other side, but that did not detract from the overall message.

***And the silent seven?*** To speed up the process in the Committee, the whips had insisted that the seven Labour members not part of the front bench team remain silent. Asking MPs to sit for some eight hours without saying a word was obviously excruciatingly painful, particularly against some of the jibes of the opposition.

***And the web?*** The Minister rebuffed opposition criticism about undue haste and lack of information with the retort that all the consultation information was available on the internet. But unfortunately, little did she know that the gremlins were about and the Agency’s web site was down. “Error 404 was the culprit, and the RA employee who apparently described himself as “the Web Master” and told the honourable member that restoration of the web server was “a low priority”. He may now be ‘engaged on other duties’.

For those who would like to read the exchanges in more detail, copies of the Second Reading and the Committee stage are available from JRC, or you may be able to track them down on the House of Commons web site <http://www.parliament.uk>.

### ***What’s in store for ’98?***

The Radiocommunications Agency now does not expect to get parliamentary time for the Report Stage and Third Reading until early 1998. We also hear that OFTEL may be submitting a powerful contribution to the third reading which may prolong proceedings a little. Thus the Agency considers that the implementation date of the first set of new regulations will slip to 1 July 1998. It is now unlikely that the utilities will be included in the ‘first wave’, hence 1 April 1999 is now the most probable date for spectrum pricing to impact on the utilities.

1998 will also bring a fresh raft of Consultative Documents on ownership and trading of spectrum licences, an Office of Communications (OFCOM), and the extension of spectrum pricing to cover other users.

### ***No Taxation without Representation***

Early in 1998, we expect DTI to announce the Chairman of the new Spectrum Management Advisory Group which will provide strategic advice to Ministers and the RA on management of the radio spectrum. This is a much welcomed formal mechanism to enable industry and users to provide a high level input into the spectrum management process.

At working level, JRC continues to support seven RA Committees and Advisory Groups working on detailed implementation of spectrum pricing for microwave links and mobile radio. This is a major constraint on JRC resources, but essential to ensure that the pricing regime is fair and equitable. We will keep you informed.

## World Radio Conference 1997

### *Satellites dominate the discussion*

The 1997 World Radio Conference finished in Geneva on 21 November after three weeks of deliberation. More than 2000 delegates from 142 countries attended.

Satellite technology dominated the proceedings. Teledesic's "internet in the sky" conceived by telecoms pioneer Craig McCaw and backed by Microsoft's Bill Gates and the Boeing aircraft company got the spectrum it was after, shared with Motorola's Celestri system.

At the same time, SkyBridge, backed by Alcatel won the right to share another block of spectrum with existing broadcasting and telecommunications satellites.

Teledesic's \$9 billion system is designed to operate with 288 satellites, Celestri expects to spend \$13 billion on 67 satellites and SkyBridge \$3.5 billion on 64 satellites. [These systems are additional to those currently being implemented - Iridium, GlobalStar, ICO, etc)

We do not have a full report yet, but we understand that one of these allocations is in the 40.5-42.5 GHz band allocated in Europe for digital microwave multipoint video distribution systems (MVDS or MMDS) – much to their promoters consternation!

From the JRC perspective, no further relaxations were obtained by the little LEO operators in 'our' band 148-149 MHz; and the threat to 450-470 MHz was seen off – though it will be back on the agenda at the next WRC in 1999 so we shall have to ensure in the intervening two years we prepare our defences properly.

### *No Representation without Taxation*

The UK delegation to the conference was no doubt helped in their task by leading questions from the opposition in the Wireless Telegraphy Bill Committee Stage which by quirk of fate was under way during the WRC. Satellite issues were receiving attention because of the difficulty of subjecting them to UK law, not only to levy spectrum fees but also because of their potential to by-pass UK taxation laws and regulatory safeguards.

### *Paying for microwave links you haven't got?*

In a recent survey of seven of the most congested microwave fixed link sites, RA discovered that of the hundred links in their database **for which customers are paying licence fees**, 35 could not be found. On some sites, 60% of links in RA's database were missing!

As well as making some sites congested where they should not be congested, it represents a considerable amount of wasted money. It might be worth giving that RA invoice a little closer examination just in case you are paying for one of those 35% 'phantom links'.

### *RA Consultations*

On 5 November, RA issued a consultation document on "*The future of public paging*". As this is not seen to be of particular importance to JRC members, we do not intend to respond. If members wish to see the document or think we do need to take action, please contact JRC.

Other forthcoming consultations which might be of greater impact include:

- Public Mobile Data
- Radio fixed access at 2.4 GHz
- Spectrum for Digital PMR **TETRA** systems
- Spectrum Pricing (areas not currently covered)

## *Joint Utilities Radio Forum (JURAF)*

On 18 December, the second meeting of the new Forum established in September to bring together water, gas and electricity radio interests meets. Co-operation to date on the Wireless Telegraphy Bill and Spectrum Pricing committees has been extremely effective.

The 11 man Group will take a lead in preparing for the Joint Utilities Radio Conference in June 1998. We are negotiating our way around the World Cup to ensure we don't clash with the real giants, and we are getting to grips with sponsorship to enable us to book a venue.

Future work of the Group will include stimulating a strategic communications options review. All three industries recognise that this joint approach is the key for the future.

## **REVISIONS TO THE HIGHWAY CODE**

### **Keep your eyes on the road ahead!**

Proposed revisions to the Highway Code have received much press coverage, in particular the rules relating to mobile 'phones. What has received less attention is the new rule 126 "Do not operate, adjust or view an in-vehicle driver information screen if it will take your eyes off the road. ...Find a safe place to stop first."

We intend to debate the issue of revision to the Highway Code at our next Strategy Advisory Group to see whether there is need for JRC to submit comments on behalf of the industry. If you have any views you wish to express, please let us know.

### *We wish you a Merry Christmas*

Thinking back to the ice storms in Scotland last year, we thought we would take this opportunity to wish everyone a Merry Christmas with a snowy reminder ...



### *and a Happy New Year!*

Hoping that when the snow comes down your power lines (and your communications towers) stay up!  
Happy Christmas!

*Paula*                      *Adrian*

*David*                      *Simon*

