

closely limited. Otherwise, and let us not fool around about it, the result will simply be a fraud, leaving the decision as to secrecy in the exclusive control of those who want to keep things secret.

There are a number of alternatives as to how that independent agency can be established. One would be to have an independent tribunal outside the government or outside the courts. Another would be to have the courts perform that function. That is the alternative preferred by the committee of this parliament and it is one which we, given the unanimous view of the committee of parliament, are certainly prepared to support and argue in this House.

I want to make it clear that there is no conflict in this matter with Canadian practice—I have made that point before—nor would there be any clogging of the Canadian courts. The experience in the United States has shown that the business of the courts does not increase appreciably because of a similar provision in the law of that land, a country which practises democracy that we only preach about here.

The basic question has to do with the willingness of this government to step out from its shroud of secrecy and let the public of Canada know the public business of Canada. The starting point for a freedom of information law and freedom of information is a freedom of information attitude. In fact, without that attitude, the law will be little more than a token.

A freedom of information attitude demands that government accept the elementary proposition that all its information belongs to the people of Canada and should be accessible to the people of Canada, unless a specific and persuasive argument can be made for confidentiality. Let me emphasize that the burden for making that argument must rest not on those who want sunshine, which must be the norm, but on those who want secrecy, which must be the exception. That is the essence of freedom of information. Any law not based on those principles is a fraud. Any government unwilling to operate according to those principles will make a mockery of the law and of its own commitment not just to freedom of information but to basic democracy.

● (1552)

I said at the outset that we did not intend this to be a partisan debate. However, it is impossible to deal frankly with this subject without raising a serious question whether this government has any commitment whatsoever to a freedom of information attitude. Its record, both its foot-dragging on introducing legislation and the lengthy list of specific situations in which it has consciously and deliberately kept information from the people of Canada, indicates a mentality which is fatal to freedom of information. In fact it is that mentality, rather than the lack of any legislation, which is the root problem. The hard truth is that there is no freedom of information attitude in our national government. The prevailing and pervasive attitude right throughout the government, from the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) on down, unfortunately is precisely the reverse.

### *Freedom of Information*

There is no commitment to the principle that all information is public unless there is a specific over-riding argument to the contrary. Instead, there is a belief and a practice that all information is, in fact, confidential, unless there is a partisan or bureaucratic advantage to be gained through publicity. That is the hard truth, Mr. Speaker, and unfortunately the deeply-rooted truth. This devotion to secrecy, this comfortable notion that scrutiny can be avoided with the indiscriminate imprint of a "confidential" stamp, did not begin yesterday or, to be fair, even in 1968. It is a part of an Ottawa tradition which this government simply has extended and imbedded even more deeply into the system.

It is essential that we now shatter that tradition. Our own credibility and effectiveness demand it. We can begin that process today by giving unanimous support to the motion I have placed before the House. Indeed this House is the place to begin. Until we make our commitment to a freedom of information attitude clear and unequivocal, we can hardly expect those who have a vested interest in secrecy to change their attitude.

If all members in this House will join with us today in making our position clear, the responsibility then will rest squarely on the shoulders of the Prime Minister. I say that not only because he must accept over-all responsibility for his government, but because this matter demands the personal leadership of the first minister of our country. He must set the standard. He must make the commitment for his ministry and for his public service.

The Prime Minister used to believe in freedom of information; at least he talked as if he did. In 1964 he said, and I quote:

Democratic progress requires the ready availability of true and complete information. In this way people can objectively evaluate their government's policies. To do otherwise is to give way to despotic secrecy.

In recent days that concern about despotic secrecy, the determination to protect the interests of the individual citizens of Canada, has appeared to take second place to an overbearing concern for secrecy and confidentiality.

I put it to the Prime Minister and his ministers; what is more fundamental than the right of a citizen to information which is his, and without which his role in our democratic process becomes almost meaningless? Here is a right as fundamental as those he wants to enshrine in a constitution. Here is a right where the Prime Minister can act now. Here is a right that we are prepared to act on well before July of 1979.

We hope that the Prime Minister of Canada and his colleagues will act on their declared interest in freedom of information in a way which ensures that the critical decisions will be made by people who are not in the control of or subject