

What I hope can be done today is that we take this first step as one part of a mosaic of programs which will help to open up democratic government and ensure that the public realizes the government is not something outside and mysterious, but belongs to the people. I hope it will help to make us more responsive to the needs of the people.

During the time I have been involved in government, both here and at the provincial level, I have detected what I think is a very normal human trait among people in government, to view information as being the right of the bureaucracy or of the governors, and that it is up to them to exercise their discretion as to whether the public will have the privilege of getting access to particular information.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): Information that belongs to the public.

Mr. Beatty: This information, as my colleague, the hon. member for Grenville-Carleton (Mr. Baker) states, belongs to the public. It forms the basis for decisions made on public matters, and forms the basis for decisions which affect tax money. It forms the basis for decisions which affect the public on a day to day basis. I think we should put ourselves on record today as categorically rejecting the concept that this information is the property of the government. That is not so, it is the property of the people.

What particularly concerns me about this is that there is a natural inclination on the part of government to try to suppress information which can be embarrassing to the government. In a democracy I simply do not believe we can allow this to continue to happen. I am not suggesting that this is a phenomenon which is peculiar to this particular government, it is unfortunately a phenomenon which is widespread throughout democratic society, and one which we should simply not tolerate.

From my vantage point as a backbench member of the opposition it strikes me that the opposition, or the individual member of parliament, is at a severe disadvantage in trying to make a point of view heard against the point of view of the government. I have asked myself since coming here, as have so many of my colleagues, what our role is as members of parliament, what it is that we are supposed to be doing as members of the opposition, and how best can we fulfil our responsibility?

I think a large part of our responsibility is to point out the cost, in social and financial terms, of decisions and actions the government takes or proposes to take. I think it is important that we point out the disadvantages of virtually any program to government suggests, so that at least before a decision is made there is a fair hearing on all sides of the issue, and so that the public can take a look at the actions of the government, and is able to look at both the pros and cons of any piece of legislation or action by the government.

I am not saying it is our responsibility, and I stress this very strongly, to oppose for the sake of opposing. I think it is our responsibility to ensure that all information relevant to any particular matter under consideration is brought out, and that the public is made aware of it.

Public Information

When you consider the enormous weaponry of the government to propagandize its particular point of view in order to get that point of view across, you realize that the government has literally battalions of flakmen hired at public expense to advance its point of view, to explain, rationalize and to justify decisions that have been made by the government. When you realize that, you will realize that the average member of parliament, on both the government and opposition sides, is incapable of doing the job he would like to do, of keeping the government in check by properly scrutinizing the government's activities. The average member simply does not have the resources to investigate the government's activities in the way he would like to investigate them. We then realize that in fact our democratic system relies to a very great extent upon chance to keep the government in check and to prevent abuses of executive power.

In a very real sense in most western democracies in the last few years, it is the press, and not parliament, that has played the role of keeping the government in check and making sure that abuses of government power have not existed. Because of the enormous disparity of resources between members of the government and members of the opposition, or between the executive and parliament as a whole, the press has in a sense formed the real opposition in Canada and in many other democracies as well. This is simply because it has, the resources which we do not have to do the work. I do not think we can allow our democracies to continue on this basis.

Today we have been discussing a piece of legislation which deals with the ability of a member of parliament to serve his constituents. I want to stress that what is far more important, than that piece of legislation we will be discussing again later, is the need for the individual member of parliament and the public to have freedom of access to information, and the resources necessary to scrutinize properly what the government is doing.

I have had, at the request of my leader, the responsibility for viewing the other side of this coin, or the other aspect of this particular problem. He has asked me to look at the question of computers and privacy.

To me the question of freedom of information and protecting the ability of the public to know what is going on, and the question of having its own privacy protected, are parts of the same problem. We have to ensure, as the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) has tried to do, that information which is made available is not made available in such a way as to damage unnecessarily the personal private life of the individual. For example, it is obvious that information dealing with people's tax returns should not be made a part of the freedom of information act. Obviously that is privileged and private information.

What I should like to propose the government give consideration to when this matter goes to the committee, instead of the plan of action the government has presented in dealing with the question of protection of the privacy of individuals—this will be covered in respect of the federal government by the introduction of legislation dealing with a human rights commissioner who will ostensibly be charged with the responsibility for protecting personal privacy,—is the bringing in a bill that would deal with information per se, and thus deal with both aspects of the