

Transport Budget Forecast

We are not here to pick holes for the sake of picking holes. But we are here to correct mistakes before they are visited upon the public.

The hon. member for Nipissing then suggested that my proposal would be delaying the whole parliamentary process. I suggest, on the contrary, my proposal might speed it up. Because if at least part of my proposal were followed through, we could avoid hours our partisan wrangling and sparring over basic information that commonsense dictates should already be in our possession. The hon. member for Nipissing then went on to say:

When we look at the whole process of government and the way ideas are fed into the system, we can see how impossible it becomes to expect that all this information leading to government policy could be analysed, classified and fed to someone who has trouble with the blue book.

By the "blue book" I assume the hon. member is referring to the estimates. It seems to me that that comment cultivates and encourages the mystique, which in turn, leads to the obsession with secrecy that surrounds not only this government but, I suspect, all governments in this country. It cultivates the mystique that we are amateurs unable to cope with the professional and expert documentation that the government has at its disposal, that somehow we are incapable of assimilating a lot of information. If that is true of us, then surely, Mr. Speaker, it is true of the members of the cabinet themselves, some of whom are not long into their portfolios, and the behaviour of some of whom portrays at the very least a certain amateurism.

Since government supporters of recent weeks have implied that the cabinet or ministers cannot only decide on the basis of the kind of information that is made available in the estimates, then why should we be expected to be able to decide? The trouble with the estimates blue book—I mention this because this is the basic source of reference that members have available to them in considering government expenditures and proposals—is not that it contains too much information but that it contains too little real information. A sea of figures is not necessarily a sea of facts, and in no sense is it a sea of wisdom.

I suggest that the comments of the hon. member for Nipissing betray what I might call an over-all patronising tone, that somehow the complexities of government are rather beyond ordinary backbenchers and members of opposition parties, and that if we leave it to the government they will provide us with all we really need to know. I assume that the inference to be drawn from this is that the sooner we give our approval to legislation and expenditure proposals, the better.

To be fair about this, I do not suggest that this is a disease that is common only to Liberal governments. I know it to be true of the Conservative government of the province of Ontario, and I should not be at all surprised if New Democratic governments in their jurisdictions incline toward the same point of view. My concern is with a principle that I think ought to be established more fully in our parliamentary system. I emphasize this point because I am really not here to score partisan points. I am trying to assert—though I may say it is difficult in this parliament, which is nothing if not partisan—that there is an important principle here and it is a principle to which I do not think enough attention has been paid.

[Mr. Grier.]

Having taken issue with a number of the points made by the hon. member for Nipissing, I want to express my appreciation to him for the way in which he dealt with the central principle none the less. Although he does not agree with me, he at least devoted his entire speech to the basic subject, and I appreciate that.

I have one final point to make, Mr. Speaker. I want to contrast the volume of information that is available to ordinary members of the elected assembly, both nationally and in the provinces, with the amount of information that is available to ordinary elected members of council at the municipal level of government. I admit that we are dealing with a different structure when we talk about municipal decision making. But at the same time we are talking about a wide range of far-reaching decisions, decisions with great implications for the future of our society which are made by elected, rather ordinary men and women, involving the expenditure, in this country globally, of hundreds of billions of dollars a year.

I know that when members of municipal councils come to decide upon a course of action, it is not a question of one or two members of council secreting unto themselves the documentation underlying a certain proposal and telling the other members of council to take it or leave it. It is a question of each member of council having available to him or to her all the information that is available to any member, be that member the mayor or a member of board of control or a member of the executive council, depending on the precise structure of that municipal council.

I suggest there is no evidence whatever that the provision of this kind of information to the municipal councils of Canada has inhibited the proper consideration of proposals, that it has worked against the public interest, that the confidences implicit in this information have been betrayed. None of this has happened and there is no evidence that it has. On the contrary, I suggest that the decisions that are taken at municipal council meetings are probably as well informed as, and I suggest in my many cases better informed than—I speak here of the amount of knowledge shared by all of the elected members on that council—decisions that are taken either in this House or in the provincial legislatures. Whatever be the merits of the decision that is taken at the municipal level, in my experience it is most often a decision based on a very large input of information and a very substantial contribution from most members. Each member is privy to the same considerations, evaluations and documentation as the proposer of the proposition.

Without drawing too broad an analogy between the municipal levels and the provincial and federal levels of government, I suggest that we have seen the principle of maximizing information at work, particularly in recent years, most successfully in the more sophisticated councils, and it has worked well. The citizen has benefited. The citizen is better informed because his representatives are better informed, and in the end the decision itself is the better for it.

● (1730)

I think that in sessions to come—and I would hope in the next session of parliament—the government should seriously consider reviewing its procedures and criteria