

Government Orders

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Bellehumeur (Berthier—Montcalm): Mr. Speaker, it gives me pleasure today to speak to Bill C-52, an act to establish the Department of Public Works and Government Services and to amend and repeal certain acts. My colleagues and I in the Bloc Québécois think that the Liberal government has missed yet another golden opportunity to honour its pontifical promise to make our political institutions transparent.

After the Pearson affair—I think you would do well to listen—and Bill C-43 on registration of lobbyists, now the Liberal government confirms its lack of transparency with Bill C-52.

I have a problem with the bill not because I am against the principle of integrating two departments, but because the bill does not go far enough. Although I have been sitting in this House less than a year, I have enough parliamentary experience to see that such a bill should really go further. Allow me to explain.

● (1710)

It is important that our legislation in this area be stringent. About two weeks ago, I received from the Minister of Public Works a reply to a letter I had written, asking him for information on his department's activities in Berthier—Montcalm. Having been elected in this riding, I wanted to know what was going on there, who was being awarded contracts, whether there was waste, news on buildings and so on.

This request for information from a member of Parliament was entirely legitimate. I will simply read you a short paragraph from the minister's reply. He wrote: "Unfortunately, the information you are looking for is not contained in any one document". To provide you with an answer would require intensive research in the many and varied branches of my department as well as in multiple data banks, the number of which has increased considerably since four separate entities have been merged to form the new Department of Public Works and Government Services Canada. Moreover, the costs associated with information retrieval and the preparation of reports for members of Parliament could exceed \$168,000, and a large part of the work is not computerized. All in all, this task would put an excessive load on the operation of our department".

I wonder, and would it not be ironic if it were the case, if the minister based his calculations on his own hourly rate and add on computer time to get this \$168,000 figure. The acme of this department's inconsistency was reached on April 18, when my hon. colleague the member for Laval East received her response to a letter she had sent to the same department asking for a list of names, addresses and phone numbers of businesses located in

her riding. In response to that letter, the minister made no reference to the fact that her inquiry would cost \$168,000 or some other amount to the taxpayers. He did not say that answering her inquiry would prove impossible because of the number of documents that would need to be analyzed before an answer could be provided to the hon. member.

Nothing of the sort. The minister wrote back stating that the information she had requested was attached. I asked myself whether his department had double standards. Information considered as not overly compromising and of no consequence is released, while the rest is not. I sure hope this is not the case. At any rate, the hon. members opposite who sit on the industry sub-committee on Bill C-43, the lobbyists registration bill, tell me that members of Parliament make the best lobbyists when it comes to obtaining this kind of information.

I note however that this statement does not apply to ministers. I wonder if Government Policy Consultants would not charge less than \$168,000 to provide me with an answer to my question. Moreover, I think that an in-depth analysis of certain aspects of the answer received from the department on September 21 is essential. The minister responsible for Supply and Services Canada says that the information I am requesting does not appear in a document per se. Where can the information be found then?

I will give you a few hints. These answers may be in the data bank of some lobby groups very familiar with Parliament Hill. These lobbyists make thousands of dollars a day—up to \$10,000 a day in some cases—to advise companies hoping for government contracts. As my colleague from Québec—Est proposed a few days ago, if Public Works and Government Services Canada were to issue monthly reports guaranteeing the federal government's openness in awarding contracts, we could probably, in the long term, save a lot of money and eliminate patronage in that department.

If lobby groups make so much money giving advice and explaining how the system and its institutions work, it is because the system is very complex and not open enough. The members opposite and the minister himself will tell me that merging the Department of Public Works with Supply and Services will simplify things, but I say that Bill C-52 does not provide for any mechanism that would open up that department. Furthermore, this bill will not encourage public servants to denounce cases of shameless waste at the future Department of Public Works and Government Services.

● (1715)

It is not normal that, in 1994, people and the members who represent them are not informed of that department's contracting-out activities in their own ridings. Openness in that depart-