

Conflict of Interest

On the contrary. I have practiced law for 20 years and I can testify that justice in Canada is in good hands, that we have judges who are responsible and at all times aware of their obligations. That being said, the situation must also be perceived as being such; citizens must be certain that the judges appointment process creates the widest possible range of options. We must put an end to the practice of appointing judges because they happen to be members of a Party. We could keep on appointing the best judicial minds within a party and they would prove to be very good judges. However, people would not like a criterion based on partisan politics. The judges appointment process must be diversified. I will not name any names; I do not want to hark back to the past. I believe that we must keep improving the system.

This Government is the first Government in the history of Canada, the first Government in the history of this democracy that has enacted regulations stipulating that eligibility lists must be made up without any intervention by the Government in order to allow a better selection.

An Hon. Member: Not true!

Mr. Bouchard (Lac-Saint-Jean): It is also this Government, Madam Speaker, which introduced the very important bill on lobbyists registration, in an attempt to deal with a phenomenon common to all democracies in the world, which is the fact that powerful interests can afford to be represented in the national capital by people who are well acquainted with the government machinery, who often know decision makers personally and can therefore sometimes have more influence on a decision, good or bad, than ordinary citizens in the course of their daily occupations who, of course, have no such influence.

It is therefore very important. We cannot prevent people from being represented here, from promoting their points of view. It is a fundamental rule of our democracy that everyone must have freedom of expression. But those whose interests can be represented on a systematic basis must at least be forced to identify themselves. People must know who is lobbying here, and for what interests and the extent to which they can influence decision making. Here is a government that, for the first time in the history of Canada, has accomplished that. And now this Government wants to go one step further and pass this bill, as I hope it will, with the unanimous support of all Members of this House who can hardly object to legislation so beneficial for democracy.

There was a code of conduct, a code of ethics referred to as a conflict of interest code, but it was not backed by legislation. In a society like ours, there is no substitute for the rule of law. The rule of law is democracy at its best, because it is lasting, because it can be supervised by the courts and because it provides all the necessary guarantees that the desired goals will be reached.

What is being proposed to the House and the citizens of Canada is a set of very important restrictions that this country's elected representatives who are here today will apply to themselves and, through this legislation, to subsequent governments and parliamentarians. I believe it is a measure whose time has come. I do not believe it will make things any easier for people, but we need it just the same. Not just because we think people are dishonest, but there are always exceptions, and we must keep those exceptions to a minimum. The parties themselves must be very vigilant with respect to their own members, each individual must be personally vigilant. We must realize that people have to protect themselves. We have to protect the public, of course, but we must also protect their elective representatives.

We are living at a time, and I have seen this in the four months I have been here . . . I have done a number of things in my life. I have been involved in the private sector, where I practised law for a number of years. I was in Paris, where I had the privilege of representing Canada as its Ambassador to France. I know what it's like to be under pressure and to be rushed all the time, but I never imagined, Madam Speaker, that political life could be as stressful, as arduous and as disruptive as it is. Major decisions are made daily in Cabinet and in the House, fundamental decisions that affect Canada's future. They are sometimes taken very quickly, and there are all kinds of priorities that intervene in the life of a man or a woman who is involved in politics. It is very easy to overlook something. And it is very easy to forget the importance of how we are perceived. In politics, perception is far more than just that.

Some people think politics have become a matter of image. I agree that the emphasis on image has been increasing. Yesterday, for instance, we saw people who took advantage of the visual aspect of our proceedings to show the Canadian flag and to wave it as if it were their personal flag and as if Members who did not have a flag in their hands, in front of the camera, were excluded from that national identity. No, I agree the emphasis on image has increased. However, in politics image is far more than that, just as perception is more than perception. In politics, perception is one aspect of reality. When Canadians see the Government at work and when they see all the inner workings of that Government which are so complicated and so difficult to control, they must have the assurance that there are controls and guidelines to which men and women in public life, to which politicians can refer in their daily decision-making.

That is why I believe we must vote in favour of this legislation which will protect us, which will give us control, and which seeks to strike a balance with a concept that is equally delicate: the concept of privacy.