

*Estimates*

question: If not Information Canada—and perhaps that is an unfortunate name—what agency should fulfil this function? I am confident it is the feeling of the House that such a function needs to be fulfilled.

The publishing and distribution of government publications alone takes up about two-thirds of Information Canada's budget. Let me talk about the other things which the agency is trying to do, in particular the citizens' inquiry service, one of the new services. Six of these centres have been set up; they are established at Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, Halifax, Winnipeg and Vancouver. I believe all these cities wanted these centres set up. There have been requests received from many other cities urgently asking that these inquiry centres be established there. As a result, five new centres are planned for cities in Alberta, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland.

Our records show that inquiries are now being received and dealt with at a rate of more than 500,000 a year. This rate will increase as the five additional centres are set up. This year, we calculate that the increase in the volume of inquiries amounts to some 20 per cent. Fifty-five per cent of all the inquiries are handled by Information Canada without referral to other departments. It can be said, then, that the departments are being relieved of about 275,000 inquiries a year. As more information retrieval systems become operational, Information Canada will be able to answer each inquiry in less than two minutes, on average, and the percentage of referrals will be greatly reduced. This is what has happened already in connection with the citizens' inquiry centres; 500,000 inquiries a year are being handled.

As hon. members know, there has been some talk about opening constituency offices by individual members of parliament. If this should come to pass, a great many requests for detailed information about government programs would no doubt be received at the grass roots level, and I am sure all hon. members will agree that the service provided by the inquiry centres would prove most useful in dealing with these requests. Let me use the Vancouver citizens' inquiry centre as an example. Many of the other information services are run by groups of volunteers and are of great benefit to citizens in the lower income brackets who wish to take advantage—sometimes urgently—of government program designed to assist them. These services count heavily on Information Canada inquiry centres. This calls upon them to have answers to questions for particulars as to what it takes to qualify under various government programs.

● (2100)

The Information Canada inquiry centres back up this whole network of information centres and information inquiry services provided by volunteer groups and other agencies. So I do not think this is a light matter: when one talks about disbanding Information Canada, one talks about disbanding a very necessary service that has been of tangible and positive benefit to many Canadians whom I would argue urgently require this service.

I should like to go into another new function over and above the functions that Information Canada took over from other departments, namely, the consolidating of

[Mr. Munro (Hamilton East).]

information dissemination services of other government departments at the regional level. Members of parliament are all very aware of the information services being provided by all government departments in Ottawa. Of all the government departments, only six out of the 44 major departments have information dissemination services at the regional level. Yet it is at the regional level, the grass roots level, that people urgently require information about governmental services.

As I indicated in the committee, one of the primary functions of Information Canada is to do away with what could very well be a proliferation of regional departmental information services for all 44 departments. By Information Canada setting up these centres in all major areas in the provinces, they can consolidate this service and make the information that the public has a right to, emanating from all departments, available through one agency at the regional level, Information Canada. I suggest this would be of positive assistance to the citizens of Canada, to say nothing of the ancillary benefit of establishing a positive federal presence with respect to the services provided by the federal government to the citizens of Canada.

A third new function that Information Canada is just embarking upon and, hopefully, will get under way in a more constructive and concrete fashion in the fall, is making the whole information dissemination apparatus in Ottawa a more complete one. There has often been talk in parliament and in the media about an excessive preoccupation with secrecy on the part of the federal government, that information is being accumulated by competent people in the various departments and ministries which is not being made available to the Canadian people as it should be. It is said it should be made available to parliamentarians, and through parliamentarians to the media, and so on.

In keeping with its original mandate to which I referred, Information Canada is prepared to collaborate with the Privy Council in an endeavour to find new guidelines. It is prepared to analyse all of the material and information presently with the confines of the various departments which has not been made public, and to produce new guidelines which will, hopefully, make more information available to the public. It also hopes to have a more open system and to develop an impartial monitoring system of judgments rendered with respect to keeping certain information from public knowledge. I think members of parliament would agree that if Information Canada did nothing else in its many other useful functions, some of which I have elaborated upon, this would be a highly worth-while function indeed. I think it was on that basis that Information Canada receive the support it did in committee.

I have touched, Mr. Speaker, on three of the new endeavours that Information Canada is embarking upon, namely, the inquiry centres, the consolidation and dissemination of information from all departments at the regional level rather than each department doing the task itself, and thirdly getting under way with a new set of rules to help us develop a more open system of making information available to the public.

I should now like to remind hon. members that if they were tempted to deal with these estimates in a way that would, in effect, totally incapacitate Information Canada,