

cratic principles to the relationship between citizens and their national government. The spirit of co-operation exhibited here today in allowing consideration of this legislation to proceed is evidence of the basically non-partisan nature of the movement toward more open government in our country.

I should like to add, as others have in the debate, to the tribute which is due a former member of this House from Peace River, my friend, Ged Baldwin, who devoted to this endeavour so much of his wisdom, energy and concern for the public good. Community leaders, including parliamentarians of all political persuasions, have added their voices to the cause. It would also be remiss to neglect the contribution of the media in ensuring that this issue has remained high on the public agenda.

As I indicated briefly a few moments ago, my first involvement in this issue was as a journalist in the 1960s when the proposals we are now considering were usually described as "right to know" laws. The concept was initiated and tested in other jurisdictions, and we have enjoyed the benefit of that experience in designing Bill C-43.

● (2100)

Under the title "access to information" Bill C-43 encompasses both what I prefer to think of as freedom of information and also the protection of personal information, involving the rights of an individual to privacy. Both are vitally important, but I will concentrate my remarks this evening on the question of freedom of information.

It is a fundamental belief that citizens are entitled to information about their government so that they can participate fully in the democratic process. Correspondingly, it is a duty of government to inform the public. This means, of course, that government has an obligation to provide information about its policies and about the legislation and programs approved by Parliament. Clearly, citizens must be aware of the laws which affect them in their daily lives and the programs which have been designed to serve them. More than that, it is also critically important that information be available to them about the policies and issues on which they make judgments, if they are to exercise their rights of citizenship. I do not deny that there is also an obligation upon the people to make some effort to seek the information they require to make those informed judgments. That is a duty of citizenship. Nevertheless, it is a duty which government, in its attitude toward communicating with people, can render either easier or more difficult.

The access to information bill before this House forcefully demonstrates the desire of this government to assist citizens in obtaining information, by conferring upon them the right to have it, with clearly delineated exceptions. The legislation reflects, in its design, the intention to make it easy for citizens to avail themselves of their rights under Canadian law.

I would not be satisfied, however, if we went no further; or worse, if the government and its public servants conducted themselves so as to observe only the letter of the law, narrowly interpreting its intent. The objective is surely not only to give

citizens legal rights which they may invoke; the objective must also be to provide to them information freely, as and when they can use it, so that it will be unnecessary for them to invoke those legal rights.

A spirit of openness must prevail. As the minister in this government who is charged with particular responsibilities for communicating with the public, I have given high priority to encouraging that spirit of openness. One of the first steps taken in this regard was approval by the government, in April, of formal guidelines encouraging public servants to communicate fully with the public within the bounds of their responsibilities. Communications with the public, including particularly members of Parliament and the news media, are part of the responsibility of managers in the public service. They are expected to discuss frankly information within their areas of responsibility, information which describes or explains programs and policies which have been announced or implemented by the government.

I would like to add a thought which must go along with our expectation that public service managers will communicate openly with the public. Members of this House will surely agree that public servants should not be asked to speculate about future policy decisions, or to go beyond factual information and into areas of policy deliberations and advice. In fact, these areas are the responsibility of ministers, not their public servants. Nor, of course, would we expect them to disclose information specifically prohibited by law. Public servants acting in good faith under these guidelines will not be considered as having violated their oaths of secrecy. However, we must seek to ensure that they are not subjected to criticism within government or drawn into the political forum for speaking openly, fully in compliance with government policy.

Efforts are under way within the government to advise departments and agencies of the importance the government attaches to its belief in openness. Public servants at all levels have much to learn and do to give effect to the access to information provisions, and steps are under way to communicate the spirit in which they should be administered.

There will be administrative challenges in adjusting to the requirements of the legislation, which are being attended to under the direction of my colleague, the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Johnston). Other measures are in train, under the direction of my colleague, the Minister of Supply and Services (Mr. Blais), to facilitate access by Canadians to the services of the government. And that is very important in conjunction with this bill.

In espousing a freely open spirit in the provision of information by government, I am also mindful of the opportunities for the government to assist Canadians in learning, not only of government activities, but also of the nature of the country and of the things which make us proud to be Canadians—our heritage, our diversity and the endowments of nature.

It is a fundamental priority of this government to reinforce the national identity. This is far more than a matter of distinguishing the activities of the federal government and its institutions through identification of the federal presence