

Disclosure of Government Information

recent public information figures, close to \$150 million a year is being expended on circulating the type of information which the government wants placed in the hands of the public.

Many motions are put on the Order Paper of the House by private members representing many thousands of Canadians, calling in vain for the production of the type of information which the government from time to time denies and which the public wants. I would point out in passing that we have established a new agency called Information Canada, and in my opinion this new agency is about to add to the cost of circulating what is basically pro-federal government information by setting up a considerable number of information centres across Canada.

I wonder if instead of placing this additional cost on the taxpayers of establishing new information centres for the public, thought should not be given to integrating Information Canada centres with those already long established, that is, the public libraries in Canada. Considerable expenditure could be reduced, and efficiency improved, by adding a desk or two and a telephone to existing public libraries in order to meet additional services provided to the public by Information Canada.

A great deal has been published over recent years on the general subject of the public right to know and to obtain information in the possession of the government and its agencies. I would quote one article on that subject from the *Toronto Globe and Mail*. It is an editorial written in support of the bill that I am putting forward. I think it was written about two years ago when the bill was up for discussion the second time. I think the situation has not changed since the editorial was written. It reads in part as follows:

One bad side effect of the prodigious growth of government in this century is that it has become exceedingly difficult to keep track of. Not only are governments themselves much more deeply and widely involved in the life of the people, but their tasks have become so numerous that they have had to delegate much of their authority to boards and commissions. Accompanying this governmental growth has been a disinclination on the part of governments and their creatures to keep the public informed about what they are doing.

A private bill—

That is the bill we are now going to discuss

—has been presented to the House of Commons which could do much to open these many closed doors and keep the public informed about what is, after all, its own business.

The editorial goes on to quote what I have already read from the bill in regard to its aims and restrictions. I have no wish to take up the time of the House unnecessarily by further speaking on this measure. I believe that the general principle of the bill, which is simply that the public should have better and quicker access to public information at the federal level, has a considerable measure of support among all parties in the House. I hope that as we earlier agreed to send other bills to a committee, we will consider sending the subject matter of this proposal to an appropriate committee for detailed consideration. If so, I think the most appropriate would be the Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs.

[Mr. Mather.]

If the subject matter of the bill becomes law, the enforcing agency should be the Exchequer Court, which is now the new Federal Court of Canada. I think that urging that action be taken on this proposal is pretty well in line with the sentiments expressed by government leaders, by opposition members and by the press in different sections of the community.

Mr. G. W. Baldwin (Peace River): Mr. Speaker, I will say just a few words in support of the motion to send this bill to a committee. I hope that before five o'clock has arrived the leaders of the government side, having in mind the very generous disposition we have already made of the bills of the hon. member for Cochrane (Mr. Stewart), will think of this as being the first opportunity—I think I can say this, not being a member of the party of the hon. member for Surrey (Mr. Mather)—and an excellent example with which to start that form of reciprocity which we need here.

First I want to comment on what the hon. member for Surrey said about Information Canada, because it seems to me that if we are to get this form of freedom to information, the right of the public to know, we have to establish it firmly and decisively before Information Canada reaches its full growth. It is now pretty young in terms of years but it is assuming rather gargantuan and very alarming proportions.

I was told during the course of a discussion within the last two days that all the problems which Members of Parliament are having in securing replies to written questions on the Order Paper will soon pass because it will be possible to secure within 24 hours answers from Information Canada to any questions. I was told that this information came from a very reliable authority, directly from Information Canada. This is the kind of Frankenstein which we may well be building here.

This means that if the kind of freedom that we need for the public of Canada, in respect of information which the government has, is not secured in the form of this bill or other proposals before Information Canada reaches its full growth, it will be too late because we will be in a situation where there will be an orchestration of information, and ministerial and departmental discretion as to what information is made available. We will then be in a lot of trouble. There will then be a form of despotism which now exists with regard to other matters of information. The right to know is the basis of any democratic process. Without that knowledge being available to the public and the members of this House, where are we?

I have some very strong authorities for my view. I am very sorry to see the Minister of Justice (Mr. Turner) has left. However, his Parliamentary Secretary is here. I quote the words of the Minister of Justice, which I do not often do. The Parliamentary Secretary may pass this information on to the minister. On September 2, 1969, the Minister of Justice made a speech on twin freedoms—the right to privacy and the right to know, both of which