

Government Administration

—the bill would enact “the basic parliamentary rule that public affairs must be conducted publicly.” The government should put its blessing on the bill and ensure its passage.

As a member of this assembly who has been here long enough to know that 99% of the private members' bills presented over the last seven to ten years have been talked out without any decision having been made on them, I regret this procedure, as do all hon. members. I urge upon the government the idea that private members' bills should be brought to some decision, either accepted or rejected or, what I think would be better, referred to a committee for further study. I think that the idea in this bill should be sent to the committee that has already been established to deal with the procedures of this house. I hope hon. members will see to it that this proposal does not die and that at least it is referred to a committee for further consideration.

Mr. McCleave: May I ask the hon. member a question?

Mr. Mather: Certainly.

Mr. McCleave: Does clause 1 include such emanations from parliament as the C.B.C. and the C.N.R., and in another category does it include such emanations from parliament as the National Energy Board?

Mr. Mather: The answer is yes, Mr. Speaker. The bill says that information shall be made public except for those parts of public information which are classified under national defence or where the private concern takes precedence over the public concern. In the case of the agencies which the hon. member mentioned I would certainly hope that they would be included in the over-all effect of the bill.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Forest (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, the object of this bill is certainly worthwhile and I congratulate the hon. member for Surrey (Mr. Mather) for giving us the opportunity of discussing the problem.

The matter is most important at the present time. It has been discussed in the public forum, particularly during the last election. I trust that perhaps in the near future the government can improve the present system; for there certainly is room for improvement in our present system of keeping the public informed on the various operations in the

[Mr. Mather.]

departments of the government as well as throughout its corporations and agencies.

Besides, I believe the Glassco commission had pointed out the seriousness of the problem, which was also recognized by both the former and the present governments.

The former prime minister, the right honourable Lester B. Pearson, had ordered that an inquiry be made into the matter. This was started but, unfortunately the person in charge of the committee was the victim of a fatal accident before having had time to present preliminary reports. The present Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau), also aware of the importance of improving communications between the governing and governed, appointed, shortly after he was elected, a commission or a task force composed of three competent persons who were joined by others familiar with the matter under study. This group is to report within a few months after having looked into the work and the structure of the government information services, both in Canada and abroad.

In my opinion, our government is aware that the public must be better informed beforehand, at least in general, about the government's programs and policies. The public must be able also to express his ideas, opinions to the right people before the policy is elaborated and put into force.

An active modern democracy certainly requires the best communications possible between the governments and the voters while taking into account, of course, as mentioned by the hon. member, several exceptions, in particular with regard to security, efficiency, etc. because it will always be difficult to draw a clear dividing line between a government's need to hold discussions and deliberations in a confidential manner and, on the other hand, the public's need for information.

This bill entitled: An act to better assure the public's rights to freedom of access to public documents and information about government administration is an effort to clarify, to ask or even to codify, as it were, the conditions regulating the production of documents. In my opinion, however, it is far from being precise or clear enough and it is not precise enough to be applicable.

Indeed, according to section 1 of Bill No. C-6, its scope seems very broad, for it stipulates, and I quote:

1. Every administrative or ministerial commission, power, and authority shall make its records and information concerning its doings available to any person at his request in reasonable manner and time.