

Public and bureaucracies

Decision-making process questioned

by Phil Hurcomb
Canadian University Press

As we move towards the end of this decade a visible trend is developing among the North American electorate to question the right of government bureaucracies to make important policy decisions in complete isolation of the voting populus.

As governments become larger and more distant, the electorate is beginning to demand more day to day involvement in, and information about, decisions that greatly affect their lives.

In California, this disenchantment resulted in the initiation of Proposition 13, which questioned the right of a seemingly self-perpetuating bureaucracy to set tax levels without consulting the voters.

In Canada this mistrust is manifesting itself on two distinct levels. As in California, citizens groups demanding income and property tax reforms have surfaced from coast to coast and provincial governments have embarked on budget balancing plans partially in response to this trend.

The remote nature of federal government and federal agency decision making has also prompted reaction from concerned groups, primarily those questioning government involvement in the nuclear industry and our financial support of third world dictatorships.

This public dissatisfaction with governmental collection of information and the secrecy with which they handle it has not been totally lost on our elected representatives.

In 1977, the Liberal government passed the "Privacy

Act" which ensured the right of Canadians to see any government document that dealt with them personally.

Before the May federal election the Liberal Party was working on a very mild form of freedom of information legislation but it never reached the floor of the House of Commons.

In that May election, one of the major planks in the successful Conservative Party election platform was a promise of strong freedom of information legislation early in the fall term aimed at opening up the sprawling federal bureaucracy.

All three major political parties now agree that some sort of legislation is necessary.

Federal government agencies such as the Atomic Energy Control Board, the National Energy Board, the Unemployment Insurance Commission, and the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission have no consistent rules governing what types of information must be released to involved organizations and members of the general public are effectively excluded from access to background information.

Within government ministries there are poorly defined channels by which the public can gain access to printed material and in the past this lack of definition has been used to cut the flow of information to the press and the public at large.

According to Tim Ralfe, a Privy Council specialist on freedom of information currently on loan to the Conservative Party the specifics of the proposed legislation have

not been ironed out, but it will be based on the principle that all government information should be made available to the public with the exception of material in a few protected areas.

The effectiveness of the legislation will of course depend on the types of information that will fall into these protected areas, and there is concern, even among sitting Conservative members, that the legislation being drafted will include too many protected areas by the time it reaches the House of Commons.

The most vocal pessimist within the Conservative Party is Gerald Baldwin, a veteran P.C. member who is generally recognized as an expert in the area of freedom of information. Baldwin has publically voiced his fear that Ottawa's powerful bureaucracy and some overly protective politicians will render Canada's first freedom of information legislation, something that he has worked towards for fifteen years, too weak to have any real effect on secrecy in the federal government.

During the summer Baldwin drafted his own freedom of information bill in the hope that it would be adopted by or at least influence, his party's final decision.

In Baldwin's proposed legislation there are only six general areas where exemptions to complete disclosure could be made:

*Cabinet and agency documents which contain opinions and advice (as opposed to factual information) submitted

before the formulation of a policy. Such an exemption would only be in effect until the final policy decision is made.

*Personal files on individual citizens "including but not limited to medical history, personnel, criminal and employment files, education records, financial transactions and the identifying number, symbol or other particular assigned to the individual".

*Commercial and financial information which if made public would disadvantage a financial enterprise in the competitive economy i.e. proposed acquisitions of land and property or in the governmental sphere, changes in zoning laws etc.

*Records, which, if exposed, would have an adverse effect on the enforcement of the law i.e. disclosing the identify of confidential sources, interfering with an enforcement proceeding or revealing in-

vestigative techniques or procedures proposed or currently in use.

*Records which, if made public, could be shown would create unacceptable damage to the ability of the government to conduct its legitimate foreign policy.

*Any record relating to present and future tactical military operations by the armed forces of Canada but not including documents or other records relating to the policies on which those procedures are based. Also information prohibited from disclosure in the national Defence Act and intelligence operations specifically authorized by an appropriate minister.

Within these exemption areas Baldwin is calling for time limits to the confidentiality of information to ensure that all possible information will be accessible. Baldwin also emphasized the need for

continued on page 9

Book costs rise

by Nancy Ross

While tuition climbs, and the quality of education suffers, yet another problem faces most students. Canadian students are justly complaining about the high prices of their text books. Mr. Irving Kirk, manager of the Dalhousie University bookstore said, frankly, he didn't know how some students could afford to buy the books.

Distribution costs is one contributing factor to higher prices. (These costs have risen as the price of oil has.) The price of paper has gone up tremendously. Approximately 40% of the text books are manufactured in the U.S., and due to the exchange rate of the Canadian dollar and Custom Duties, Canadians pay more. Mr. Kirk guesses that even the books which are purchased from some Canadian companies have probably been manufactured in the U.S.

Text books are never on the best sellers list. A popular text book might sell 30,000 copies, so the cost of producing this smaller number of books is greater per book.

Through inflation alone, prices of books will go up by 10½%. Coupling this with all the other factors should give students an idea why the prices of books are so high. Mr. Kirk says the university owned bookstore is not out to 'rip off' the students. Books are sold at the list retail price, actually giving the students a 20% discount.

Seeming discrepancies in the text book prices are usually the result of books left over from last year at last year's prices, while others pay this year's price, which is higher. Seemingly the prices of books are high this year. They have been high every year and will probably continue to inflate in price.

If this fact upsets students, perhaps they should think of alternative ways they could create to purchase some of their books rather than buying every one of them new. For example a good second hand bookstore.

Maybe the student council could look into this matter and come up with other ideas.

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