

*Public Information*

tary, the hon. member for Sarnia (Mr. Cullen), and others from the class of '68, I will sit down on this note: this is an excellent bill, we commend it for acceptance by the House, and I hope that on the eve of Christmas hon. members will show that charity which is in their hearts. We have had a few disappointments around here of late.

**An hon. Member:** Let's not go into that.

**Mr. Alexander:** No. Let me just say that He who looks after all has been smiling upon us today. I do not know whether He is smiling on certain people to my left, but let us hope that He will understand what they have done. In all seriousness, Madam Speaker, I hope hon. members will take the suggestion made by the hon. member for Peace River and send this matter to committee to look into the principle of it, so we can at least say that we have tried.

**Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre):** Madam Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to say a few words in support of the bill that has been introduced by the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin). I suppose there will be some who will find fault with certain of the details of the bill, and I have yet to see a bill that could not be improved here and there. But the principle put forward in this bill is one that I strongly believe the House should support. We seem to have a government that acts on the maxim of "Don't produce it unless you have to". We think that should be reversed and that the rule should be that all government documents should be produced unless it can be proved that such production is really against the public interest.

There are jurisdictions where this more open rule is practised. In some jurisdictions, indeed, the press is even invited in to see the correspondence of the prime minister himself. I strongly believe that democratic government has nothing to fear from an open policy of that kind. Therefore, I am glad to know that under this new regime that is now in effect in private members' hour, this bill, at least, is not going to be talked out. It used to be that we did not quite know what was going to happen to a bill when it was called for private members' hour, but hon. members have now learned that there have to be 20 members here during private members' hour.

**Mr. Turner (London East):** We have a good example today.

**Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre):** Yes, I notice there are more than 20 Liberals here today.

**Mr. Guay (St. Boniface):** There is only one from your party.

**Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre):** I also understand that at the end of the debate, along with the reference of the subject matter of this bill to a standing committee, the guidelines for the production of papers which were tabled today by the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Sharp) will also be referred to committee. The committee in question is the joint committee on statutory regulations.

The question of what documents are produced in parliament is, of course, only one aspect of the whole question of the right of the public to information. But it is a pretty

[Mr. Alexander.]

important aspect of that right. What has bothered me about these guidelines that the government has promulgated is that they have been produced unilaterally; there was no input from us into these guidelines at all. They have been produced, modified and brought down on two or three occasions. But having been produced, they are then referred to as though they were authoritative in themselves.

As I say, these are just guidelines that the government has produced for its own purposes, so that if there are documents the government does not want to produce, the guidelines provide for that non-production. Therefore, it is a good idea to have these guidelines examined by a committee, the joint committee on statutory regulations, which of course has a membership component from this House along with a few members of the other place.

We are glad that these two matters, namely, the subject matter of Bill C-225 and the actual guidelines for the production of papers which were tabled today, are to be referred to that committee. The committee has shown itself to be an efficient and able one in its treatment thus far of its terms of reference having to do with regulations and other instruments of that kind. We believe that given this job, the committee will do a good job of it as well. We hope it will bring back a report to the House of Commons that will put us a few steps further along the road to the kind of democratic government that is open and that really practises the principle that the people have the right to know.

**Mr. Perrin Beatty (Wellington-Grey-Dufferin-Waterloo):** Madam Speaker, I want to speak very briefly on this bill before allowing the parliamentary secretary to make his remarks. May I say at the outset that I am extremely pleased that my colleague was able to present the bill and that the government apparently seems amenable to allowing it to go to committee. I think the principle involved here is broader than simply that of the ability of the public to know the basis on which decisions are made. The principle is perhaps far more important than that.

I think the question that has concerned me more than anything else in the two years that I have been in Ottawa is the deteriorating perception of government and politics in general that the public has. When I first ran for office in 1972, a great many of the people I met—as was the case with so many other members of the House—stressed the fact that they did not trust any politicians, that they thought they were all basically dishonest, secretive and out to further their own ends.

• (1730)

I think that inevitably in a democratic society there is going to be a certain measure of skepticism with which politics is viewed. What has concerned me is that over the course of the last few years, in large part perhaps as a result of experiences of immorality among public officials, which has reached almost epidemic proportions in the United States, the opinion of the public as to the quality of people involved in public life and as to the worth of the democratic process in trying to find solutions to our problems has fallen enormously.