

Private Members' Business

• (1135)

The whole discussion on access to information is something that would serve the government and serve the House well. What the member is saying in the bill is very much a part of our government's red book wherein we were committed to operating a much more transparent, a much more accountable, a much more open government.

Day after day the Prime Minister lives a life of transparency. We all know that these polls are being conducted and there are the results of the polls. We have nothing to hide when we conduct polls. They are done to advance public policy in a more refined and better way for all Canadians.

We on this side of the House celebrate that members of Parliament should work hard at developing and thinking some of their own ideas. This example very much fits that description. The member for Red Deer has put forward the idea that all public opinion polls should be much more accountable to Parliament and I support him in that regard.

Mr. Philip Mayfield (Cariboo—Chilcotin, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise in support of Bill C-309, an act to amend the Access to Information Act (disclosure of results of public opinion polls).

As I look through the bill it makes complete sense to me. I am sure that anyone who believes in the democratic process would agree that the bill is simply common sense. Every day public polls are conducted by media outlets, associations, academics, and especially by government departments.

There are two principal differences between the groups I have listed. First, the government is the only one funded solely by the taxpayers of Canada. Second, the government is the principal one that does not make the results of its polls easily and readily available to the Canadian public. Is there a paradox in this situation? Last year the Winnipeg *Free Press* in an editorial wrote:

During the election last fall, the Liberals made transparency and openness in government a central theme. What a difference a victory makes.

yes, what a difference a victory makes. We all know that the former Conservative government was obsessed with public polling. In 1992 the Conservative government spent an unprecedented \$140 million on public polling. Most of that money was awarded to chums of the Conservative Party, a firm called Decima polling.

How nice it would have been to be working at Decima in 1992. I see why the Liberal government criticized the Conservatives during the 1993 election campaign. Expenditures on polling prior to 1992 were about \$10 million a year. With an increase to \$140 million, who would not want to make it an election issue?

I will briefly outline the history. It is important the House knows why the Liberals are arguing against Bill C-309. Liberals will tell us that there is no problem when comparing their policy to that of the Progressive Conservatives. This may be true. Hopefully no government will ever again reach the total polling expenditures the Conservatives did in 1992.

The one key point that must be clear in the debate is that the Liberal government is doing very little to change the old style polling established by the Conservative government. The Winnipeg *Free Press* stated last year:

By tradition, advice from polling must stay locked up in a bomb-proof vault until the minister passes on to a better place or until the paper it is written on turns yellow and disintegrates.

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This tradition is still alive and well with the Liberal government. In May 1994 the Liberal government introduced what it said was an alternative to this tradition. It introduced a series of polling measures that the Minister of Public Works and Government Services said were based on "principles of transparency and openness". The only thing transparent is the Liberal commitment to tell the Canadian people what the Liberals want them to know. The only thing that is open is the Canadian taxpayer's wallet as he or she pays for the veil of secrecy created when government polls are conducted.

Bill C-309, an act to amend the Access to Information Act, prohibits the blatant manipulation of public information gathered by government departments. The bill would force any government department or unit that commissions a public opinion poll to give notice to the appropriate minister. The minister is then obliged to submit to the House of Commons the results of the poll. The minister would present four key components of the poll: first, a description of its nature; second, a copy of the questions asked and a summary of the responses given; third, the period of time when the poll was conducted; and fourth, the cost of the poll.

This seems to be a logical progression of events. Ministers of the crown should not even need legislation compelling them to submit poll results. By their very nature as chief representatives of departments in a democracy, all information gathered at the department should be open to public scrutiny. As it stands, the ministers are picking and choosing the poll results that are most beneficial to them in promoting their policies.

The government will argue that it has answered all the concerns of Canadians about access to public polls. The government will claim that in May 1994 it released guidelines to ensure that information was made public. However last December the Toronto *Star* called the guidelines "a fraudulent new access scheme". The Toronto *Star* was absolutely correct.