

**Mr. Lincoln M. Alexander (Hamilton West):** Madam Speaker, I am taking part in this debate because I put forward a similar bill some time ago, but not in the too distant past. I, too, registered my concern at that time about the lack of disclosure, and I am pleased to note that my hon. friend from Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) has now taken it upon himself to register the same concern—one which I am sure all hon. members share—that is to say, concern about the power which big government and big business exercise and which, for one reason or another, they believe justifies their withholding from the public information to which it is entitled.

What I like about the bill before us, Madam Speaker, is this: in drafting mine, I didn't have enough on the ball to put in the bill the exemptions which are so necessary to cover privileged records. This is where I think my bill bogged down, as was pointed out to me most emphatically by hon. members on the other side. The hon. member for Peace River has dealt in some detail with what are called privileged records in clause 4—some seven or eight areas in which the right of the public would not be applicable. This is a commendable step because, as it stands now, the government in its wisdom believes that no document, no information can be supplied to the public on request on the basis of its own determination. This is what I find wrong in terms of participatory democracy. This is what we have been hearing about particularly over the last six or seven years—participation of the public.

It is in this area that you can remove or decrease the alienation, the frustration which arises as a result of callousness, disregard, or perhaps a feeling there is too much power. As long as people believe they are part of the process they will be much more satisfied than they are right now. It is a terrible situation when we, as members of parliament, representing our constituencies, find it impossible to get information which has been gathered at the expense of the taxpayer for his benefit. This is what is wrong. This is what we are trying to correct.

As I understand it, there is some sympathy on the other side with respect to this problem. Perhaps if we sat on the other side we might have taken the same attitude as government members have taken; in particular, those who sit on the treasury benches. It is even likely we would. But now is the time to reverse this process, as was so ably pointed out by my friend from Peace River—to reverse the procedure whereby at the present time not a thing is available to the public. What we are saying is that everything should be available to the public, subject to certain reservations by way of privileged records; and if that doesn't come about, then the public has recourse to the courts. It is interesting to note that the clauses which provide that the matter may go to the courts spell it out. I would like to read the explanation which appears on page 3 of the bill:

These clauses set out the procedure by which the public right to information is enforced when the government refuses to provide it or unreasonably delays in providing it. The right is protected and enforced by the courts. The application may be made to a judge of the Superior Court of any province or to a judge of the Federal Court of Canada. There is no appeal from the judge's decision and there are no costs or fees. The court orders are produced and formally served upon the Clerk of the Privy Council and the government must appoint a minister or other public official to answer for the government before the court.

#### *Public Information*

The government has a right to refuse, but its refusal is subject to appeal to the courts. Madam Speaker, as I think of what we are attempting to do here, I can find no fault with it. I hope that government members will see some merit in the proposition that the public is entitled to information which has been gathered on their behalf by the government, subject to one thing, and that is classified matters which should not be revealed. This is one way we can remove the frustration. This is one way we can remove that impression of distance which so many people encounter in terms of themselves and government whether municipal, provincial or federal.

We happen to be talking in the federal parliament at this particular time, but I feel so distant at times and so hopelessly frustrated when I read the questions on the order paper, particularly in terms of production of documents where invariably the answer is no, it is privileged information or it is against the public interest. Surely, there are many matters on the order paper in respect of which such a conclusion should not be reached. But right now we have no right of appeal to determine whether disclosure is against the public interest or whether the government is just playing footsie. Is the government deliberately hiding things? This, of course, is an extremely important question. We should have the right to look behind the government because, surely, whatever they are doing it is for the benefit of the public. If it is for their own benefit, then I think we should have the right to determine whether in fact they are honest. I am not implying that the government is dishonest. I may call them inept, sloppy or a lot of things, but I would not dare to say they are dishonest. But there is always the chance that something is going on over there that we should know about.

● (1720)

**Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton):** Chance?

**Mr. Alexander:** Well, I want to be as kind as possible. It is always possible there is something going on over there that they do not want us to know about.

**Mr. Turner (London East):** You know that is wrong.

**Mr. Alexander:** I hear my hon. friend from London, a marvellous chap. He will very likely take my words out of context, send them back to his riding and say, "This is what the hon. member thinks of me". I have seen that done, too. But he is a man who has a feeling for the people and he knows that on this subject we are right. I know he would say "hurrah" for the hon. member for Peace River and the hon. member for Hamilton West because they are bringing to the notice of the Canadian people the fact that we are concerned about a practice that is bad and with which we can all find some fault. We should make the attempt now to give full disclosure of all facts. If you have anything to hide, then that is something else. But surely, Madam Speaker, if you have nothing to hide, then all the more reason to vote for the bill holus-bolus.

**Mr. Turner (London East):** Give us a chance.

**Mr. Alexander:** My hon. friend says, "give us a chance". Since I hear that coming from the parliamentary secre-