

Adjournment Debate

House. He would assist the Chair if he would bring to an end the example and move to the point of his question.

Mr. Beatty: Gladly, Mr. Speaker, because whether the government produces the information before the committee or before Parliament is irrelevant. I would be delighted if the government were prepared to come before this House where they were asked to produce the evidence given in those polls which should be of interest to the whole Canadian public, certainly to every member of this chamber.

I have had on the order paper for up to four months a series of questions asking the government for information relating to the government's advertising campaign. To date all of those questions have gone unanswered. The government has not been prepared to come clean with the Canadian people and disclose the amount of money it is spending at the present time to promote its point of view on various issues. We know that at the present time the government is asking Parliament to appropriate a further \$17 million for the Canadian Unity Information Office, \$15 million of which appears earmarked for programs such as public opinion surveying and advertising sales campaigns, in large part for the constitution. Again, when we have asked for the breakdown of this information the government has been less than forthcoming. This is why, when we are dealing with the issue of whether or not the government is prepared to subscribe to the principle of freedom of information even prior to the passage of the legislation, it is essential that we take note of the government's policy in so many of these areas. In instance after instance the government is not prepared to level with the Canadian people and give them the information which Parliament and the people of Canada are entitled to see, particularly as it relates to the expenditure of public funds. I call upon the government this evening to reverse that policy and to recognize that the Canadian people are entitled to know how their money is being spent and how decisions are being made which affect their daily lives.

● (2205)

Mr. Peter Stollery (Parliamentary Secretary to Secretary of State and Minister of Communications): Mr. Speaker, I would bring it to the attention of the hon. member that the access to information bill to which he was presumably referring in his rather wide-ranging remarks received first reading July 17 and has not yet gone to committee. I would like to inform him that in keeping with the undertaking made to the Canadian people last July the government introduced a bill containing a package of legislative proposals concerning access to information. The scope of the bill constitutes a vast improvement over attempts of the previous government in the area of public access to information.

Once in force, the access to information legislation will create a right of access to all government records, subject to limited and defined exemptions to protect public and private interests. Government decisions will initially be reviewable by an information commissioner. Denials of access can be referred for judicial review by the Federal Court, which will

have the power to order release if it determines that the records were wrongly withheld.

The new legislation will become a central feature of our institutions. It will make them more open and more democratic. It will make decision-makers accountable for their actions and decisions, be they ministers or civil servants.

The hon. member has raised the question of the government's behaviour now that the bill has been tabled. I would remind him that it has only been tabled. The government is moving, and has been moving, on a number of fronts to provide more open government during the interim period which will lead, hopefully, to this legislation being passed by the House. Thus, the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) has asked that all ministers make special efforts to comply with the spirit of the legislation, bearing in mind the limitations which are imposed by existing legal constraints and the absence of the administrative infrastructure which will ultimately be put in place.

The government has also made public the list of cabinet committees and their composition, to which the hon. member referred in his original question, which I believe was asked on May 14. The government has also tabled the list of polls conducted, or in planning, since March, 1979. Consistent with the spirit of the access to information legislation it has made available the results of the vast majority of these polls and justified non-disclosures on the basis of specific exemptions in the access legislation. The government has undertaken to release these latter poll results when their disclosure will not go against any of the public or private interests which are protected by the exemptions. It intends to live up to this undertaking.

● (2210)

The media guidelines laying down the ground rules by which officials should abide in their dealings with parliamentarians and the media have been confirmed and are being followed.

On a more clearly administrative front, the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Johnston) and his officials are actively preparing for implementation of the legislation. They are hard at work compiling the index or register of federal government information.

I think that adequately and in full answers the question which was originally asked on May 14 last—not the question to which the hon. member referred this evening.

WATER RESOURCES—SKAGIT RIVER VALLEY—REFERENCE BY
B.C. GOVERNMENT OF U.S. PROPOSAL TO FLOOD TO
INTERNATIONAL JOINT COMMISSION

Hon. John A. Fraser (Vancouver South): Mr. Speaker, I want to address my colleagues in the House tonight on a subject of considerable importance in the province of British Columbia. I think it ought to be of considerable importance to all hon. members from whatever part of Canada they come. It concerns the proposed flooding of the Canadian Skagit Valley in British Columbia, a proposal which has been proceeded with over many years by the Seattle City Light Company in the