

*Export Development Act*

withholding information which the Canadian people ought to have will play a key part in electoral decisions, because no thinking Canadian can support the position this government has taken throughout its mandate.

● (1732)

As far as EDC involvement is concerned, a line of insurance worth \$430 million is being provided in this particular transaction with Bell Canada. This transaction involves modernization and expansion of that company's telephone system. In view of the fact that this transaction is supported by the Export Development Corporation to that extent, I think the minister should be in the House. He should rise in the House and tell us whether any of the \$88 million payment, if made in Canada, would violate Canadian law. That is not an idle request.

I referred to the example of AECL making kickback payments. Whenever government agencies refuse to give information with respect to payments of enormous amounts of money, such as this \$88 million, I do not think I am being overly suspicious or irresponsible in wondering what those payments are all about. Have we reached a point in government where the contract is the thing? Are we to accept the rationale of the Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce (Mr. Horner), with regard to the question of the Arab boycott, that somehow it is more important for Canadians to have this contract than to stand up for the civil rights and liberties of a large number of Canadian citizens with Jewish backgrounds?

It boggles the mind that hon. members would vote in support of this particular proposition, when information respecting this enormous amount of money is not forthcoming. This is almost a matter of right. If there is nothing to hide, and if this is a legitimate expenditure of money, why is there reluctance to make disclosure of this information? If services are to be performed by Saudi Arabian business concerns, we should receive a reasonable accounting of the reasons. We would be prepared to facilitate the transaction and be supportive of EDC if we were given the information by which we could make a reasonable, proper judgment.

What we have received is silence, a very ominous silence. On the basis of the record of the government, it is almost an axiomatic rule that where there is silence, there is a political reason for the government wanting that information concealed. There is a reason for this government veering away from having an independent arbiter making a decision concerning applications for information. Once a decision is taken as to whether information should be made available to Canadians and parliamentarians, and once it is taken out of the control of government, an awful lot of information which may not be beneficial to the government will come out. I hope I am wrong.

I did not intend to participate in this debate. On listening to the remarks of the hon. member for York-Simcoe and considering this particular transaction as an example of the incredible insolence with which EDC, other government agencies and the government have dealt with this particular matter, it is time to stand up to the government. We must let the govern-

[Mr. Hnatyshyn.]

ment know that we will press as hard as possible for a proper accounting and for freedom of information in this country.

When we form the government after the next election, under the leadership of the hon. Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark), freedom of information legislation will be brought forward and passed. It will be effective legislation and not the second class proposal the government is putting forth now. The government wants an information commissioner with powers similar to those of the Auditor General. He will be able to make recommendations but his decisions will not be binding on the government.

Perhaps we can be critical of Americans in many respects. They are our next-door neighbours. We see a lot of them, and we know what is going on there. But there is a lot in the American system respecting disclosure which we should pay particular attention to and perhaps emulate in the interests of good government, regardless of which party forms the government. I say that in a non-partisan sense. I am not suggesting that we are saints on this side and that the devils are on the other side. But unless there is a meaningful freedom of information mechanism, there will be a temptation for whatever party makes up the government to conceal in order to perpetuate its own political administration. If a different tone was set, this country would have the benefit of a better government. This is something government members should pay more attention to.

The only way members of parliament can receive information concerning Canadian activities is by operating through the freedom of information legislation in the United States. We are faced with going through the securities and exchange commission of the United States in order to determine what is happening, for example, in respect of Bell Canada. Under their regulations and legislation, they require a prospectus to be filed. Presumably they pulled teeth in order to receive information concerning the \$88 million.

I see my time is fast coming to a close. Perhaps I will pursue this matter on another occasion when this bill is discussed. I thank the House for its attention.

**Some hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Mr. Lincoln M. Alexander (Hamilton West):** Mr. Speaker, I had no intention of becoming involved in this debate, but after listening to the remarks of the hon. member for York-Simcoe (Mr. Stevens) and the hon. member for Saskatoon-Biggar (Mr. Hnatyshyn), suddenly I realized how important this bill is. Earlier I heard it was of some significance because there is a move afoot which Canadians are not fully aware of in terms of the ultimate repercussions. Of course, this has been clearly articulated by my colleagues.

We are attempting to indicate that apparently the government thinks EDC is the panacea for the ills of the world, and that it should have some \$26 billion at its disposal in order to finance, insure and guarantee loans to various countries throughout the world. Apparently the government does not understand that the Canadian private sector needs assistance as well. It is turning a deaf ear and a closed eye to the