Access of Administrative Documents

or Parliament, or yet a small group of officials or a study commission, are in favour of such or such idea. I think it is extremely dangerous—and this is the point I want to make—to seek to publish everything that is done in departments.

You remember when newspapermen published a few details on the famous Gray report which however was not a government policy. What happened is that everybody imagined that it was government policy.

Indeed, whether the government or the opposition are concerned, such things are prejudicial to the administration and are apt to prevent civil servants from dealing with the public weal or to voice such or such view liable to influence a decision.

I think that when we ask the officials to express their views, the security of the state is perhaps not implicated. It would be advisable to allow public employees to state their opinions, without running the risk of annoying the government or the opposition members. I believe this is exceedingly dangerous.

We already have a tremendous apparatus in the public service and if we intend to publish every study made in a department, we might reduce the efficiency of the public servants and this, in my opinion, will not serve the public interest.

I should like to quote an excerpt from a manifesto entitled "Freedom of Information" which gave rise to lots of criticism. It was signed by reporter Claude-Jean de Virieux who was commenting on accessibility to information—information per se being an intellectual approach—as follows:

To get information, one must first of all long for it, and therefore the information must draw attention and rouse interest. Information must be attractive.

If public servants prepare a study, they need not add comments to make information attractive. Now, the public will get acquainted with lots of information on which they will pass judgment and which they will not necessarily find attractive, and that information will not either necessarily help understand the position taken by a government or a political party.

I resume the quotation:

In Spoken news, information will be made attractive by broadcasting, by music used, by audio or visual presentations ...

One must also realize that if information is to be made public, a whole procedure is at stake. Is it to be made public in the current style or recorded on a sound track in order, if necessary, to make it available to people, especially if questions deemed important are involved?

However, if it is a case of communications between departments, for instance about the construction of a sewer in a parish or a constituency, or else about deals between a municipality and a department, then, no doubt the documents can be said to be public, according to the provisions of the bill now before the House. I see no useful purpose in treating such documents as confidential.

I believe there should be a selection of the type of information intended for publication. First of all, it is extremely difficult to decide what is actually information. The type of information the public expects should be

[Mr. Olivier.]

determined. Does the public expect to receive the tons of documents published day after day by public servants? Are the documents intended for publication of interest to one particular province or to Canada as a whole?

If information is geared to Canada as a whole, people in Quebec, for instance, will say: Look here, you publish piles of documents, but we in Quebec are not necessarily concerned with what is happening in Nova Scotia. And Newfoundlanders will probably say the same.

The potential danger of the bill lies in its adverse effect on initiative. I come back to this time and again and I am referring to the initiative of public servants in their quest for ideas, in their effort to help the government to operate. In future, such people, for fear of being quoted on radio or television, will no longer readily express working hypotheses which might well some day become the law of the land. I rather feel that giving too much information at that stage, as called for in the bill, would be extremely dangerous.

I suggest, Mr. Speaker, that a careful assessment of the public's information requirements be made. What do the people want to be informed of? This could be done through various channels. Information Canada has a definite function and it would be interesting to have the statistical data related to requests for information received by the agency from the Canadian public.

I suggest, Mr. Speaker, that before passing such legislation we should seek the answers to several questions. In my opinion, the final goal of this bill would not be achieved. On the contrary, it could be harmful because objective information would no longer exist. Whenever departmental officers would be asked to write something, they would say: Sir, I must think twice about it because this will be published. Then, we shall no longer have real objectivity from our public servants. And what are they going to do? They will use only the telephone and at worst, there will be no more correspondence.

I suggest, Mr. Speaker, that this kind of thing is extremely dangerous. It is essential—and I agree with the sponsor of this bill—that some documents be made public because the Canadian people have elected us. If the people wish to examine certain documents, hon. members must rise in the House and ask: Could you table such document? I do not know whether it would be a service rendered to the public if everything were to be published.

I call the attention of this House to the fact that one should be cautious as regards the secrecy of information, and above all to be careful not to put an end to personal initiatives in this area.

That is all I had to say, Mr. Speaker.

● (1720)

[*English*]

Mr. G. W. Baldwin (Peace River): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the hon. member for Longueuil (Mr. Olivier). I do not agree with him but think he said the best that could be said against the bill proposed by the hon. member for Surrey-White Rock (Mr. Mather). He disagrees, and he spoke eloquently. I disagree with him. I do not know