

Freedom of Information

the genuine intention of making a contribution, not only for our own constituencies and provinces, but for the people of Canada. Many of us have had the opportunity of taking up causes which others have initiated, taking up the torch and carrying it forward, and perhaps handing it on to someone else. I have had that privilege. Many of my friends sitting on both sides of the House have had the same opportunity; and I pay tribute to all those who preceded me, including Mr. Barry Mather and others, who supported this cause and made a genuine impact in parliament with the first legislation.

I also want to pay tribute to the Joint Standing Committee on Regulations and Other Statutory Instruments. That is an example of a committee where members of this House and the other place of all parties have worked together zealously and will produce a report shortly. In a way this will inhibit my speech today. I have the honour to be one of the co-chairmen of that committee, and a report has been drafted by the steering committee and will be presented shortly to the main committee. With knowledge of what is in that report I think I should restrict my remarks to matters not dealing with what might be the content of the legislation. I pay great tribute to that committee and all its members, because not only have we had that task, we have had the other very onerous responsibility of dealing with statutory instruments and regulations.

As a simple indication of that, I say to the House through you, sir, that since February 1 we have examined almost 1,000 regulations and statutory instruments. We had five, six or seven people sitting in a dusty little room down in the basement once a week. Just today we examined 75 or 80 of these statutory instruments. The very fact that this committee exists is an indication that if there are good people who believe in a cause, it is possible for members, and not necessarily members of the government, to promote it and bring it to fruition.

● (2052)

The gestation period of reform is always lengthy, and with regard to statutory instruments it was probably 23 years from the time we first debated this in the House until the late Lester Pearson first established a committee under the chairmanship of the hon. member for Windsor-Walkerville (Mr. MacGuigan). That committee reported and legislation was introduced—imperfect legislation, but legislation. A committee was established, counsel were finally persuaded to come to the committee to lend their services—excellent counsel—and at the present time this is an effective working committee which protects the people of this country by examining in detail and challenging, where necessary, orders in council and regulations which form by far the great mass of laws that have an impact on the people of Canada. And so it will be with freedom of information. I want to extend my gratitude to the members of that committee for the services they have performed.

Sometimes I wish that there was sitting up in the gallery tonight some familiar names, Walter Rudnicki, Dr. Treu, Bernard Maguire and other people who have suffered from inability to obtain information or government transgressions, but people who have had the intestinal fortitude and capacity

[Mr. Baldwin.]

to fight back. But for every Dr. Treu, for every Bernard Maguire, how many hundreds are there who have suffered from this inability to find out information, to secure facts which have had an adverse impact upon them, and to fight the battle to try and secure a remedy? How many people are there who say, "We can't beat city hall, we can't challenge it," who meekly accept the facts, submit to the indignities, the loss of reputation, and the loss of money or jobs? How many hundreds and thousands are there in that category in this country?

It is only now that we are beginning to find out, through the experiences of the last few months, what the situation really is. It is a dangerous one and we have to do something about it. For example, the other day when I was speaking in the House the right hon. Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) said to me that I should go and plead the case of Dr. Treu in the courts of Quebec. He was being facetious. But I seek no allowance from the Prime Minister in this House to speak up for what I think are the requirements of justice and equity for any man.

I would suggest to the right hon. gentleman if he were here that it is not Dr. Treu who is on trial so much as this parliament that is on trial. It is on trial in the minds of the people of Canada. We cannot wait because time does not wait, because there is present in the minds of many people in this country today the feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration that the government is no longer there. They talk about "we and they"; there is a lack of understanding, sympathy and co-operation, all of which must exist if the government wishes to produce the kind of rules, laws, equity and decency essential today in this very difficult world that we live in.

I literally shudder, Mr. Speaker, when I think that this party will be called upon to form a government after the next election, with the problems and the limited tools which exist. For that reason, I was gratified to hear the leader of our party say today that it would be a matter of urgent priority to undertake to bring before this House a freedom of information bill to make it possible for this House and the people of Canada to know what is going on. I was gratified, not only because of the idea itself, but because it is in earnest. It is an understanding, a beginning and a sign to the people of this country that there is at long last a government which understands that it governs by and with the consent of the people of Canada.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Baldwin: When that happens there will, at long last, return to this House the essential element of confidence which is lacking in this country today. There is money in the banks, there is talent, there is knowledge, there is experience, there are resources; but there is a lack of confidence in the mind of the average person in Canada in the capacity of this government and this parliament to operate for and on their behalf, to pass the rules of conduct which will make it possible for them to live the life they should. It is a simple thing and yet a very precious and important thing. If that confidence is brought back, I have no hesitation at all about what will happen in this country.