

Statutory Instruments

have real power they must have knowledge. They must have access to all the knowledge that is accessible. Certainly if any meaning is to be given to the phrase "participatory democracy" it quite clearly is participation by people who are knowledgeable and therefore people who have access to all the knowledge available.

● (2130)

Let me make the observation that the debate today on all sides has been on a very high level, and indeed if the government reflected in its policy in regard to the dissemination of information the opinions expressed by members who spoke today, I suggest there would be no reason for this debate and no reason for the motion of the hon. member for Halifax-East Hants, which was based on the work conducted for many years by the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin). I do not mean to imply that the hon. member for Peace River is getting old. We should all be so young!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): We are all getting younger.

Mr. Andre: I hesitate to throw a partisan note into this very high level debate, but the attitude expressed by government members today is not reflected in the woolliness with which they have been dispensing information under their control. That is why this debate is necessary, and so is action on a freedom of information act. If the government were more free with information than it has been and than it is, such an act would be an aid for it, particularly now when the government is endeavouring to introduce a restraint program on the growth of public spending.

It is interesting that in the 1975 review by the C. D. Howe Research Institute, a study which dealt in large measure with inflation and the extent to which government spending contributes to inflation, a document which dealt in an even handed manner with this problem, there is a recognition that one of the major contributors to inflation is government spending. The study also acknowledged that there are tremendous pressures on the government to spend more on health, regional problems, transportation, etc. The document also pointed out that in a democracy there is only one answer to that sort of pressure, that is, full and complete information provided to the public.

I should like to quote from the 1975 review which states:

It is clear that governments will have to impose a new form of spending restraint on themselves because there are not sufficient natural restraints forcing them to assess the productivity of their spending. As a first step in this process of self-discipline the public should be given more and better information on the spending process.

So that far from a purely negative thing, giving out more information being a reduction of power which the government might hold, in fact it would be very beneficial if the government were more forthcoming with information on the spending processes. It would find it far easier to introduce the type of spending restraint that is now required if the anti-inflation program it is attempting to implement is to be successful. So I think it would be of benefit to the government if it divulged more information.

The President of the Privy Council (Mr. Sharp) indicated in his remarks that budgets nowadays are far more elaborate than they were when he was a civil servant in

[Mr. Andre.]

the Department of Finance. The fact that they are thicker and more elaborate does not mean they contain more information. The C.D. Howe Research Institute study states quite plainly that there is a difference between verbosity and communicating information, and the type of thing the minister was referring to, the production of huge documents on how our dollar is spent, in a green or a white paper, does not constitute freedom of information. What the public needs to know are the facts before the spending process, the facts before the fund raising processes, not opinions put in fancy documents primarily intended to back up the judgment of the minister.

I can give a few examples of where the government is being overly secretive. A press release was issued by the former minister of industry, trade and commerce now the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources (Mr. Gillespie) stating that Canada sold a CANDU reactor to South Korea for some \$300 million. He also indicated that this would be financed by the Export Development Bank. When we asked for the interest rates charged for this money, the minister refused to give us the information. Again today the minister refused to answer questions on this subject put by the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Stanfield). Without that information the figure of \$300 million is absolutely meaningless.

A small part of the information is sometimes worse than having no information. If my wife came home and said she spent \$10,000, I would be ready to faint, but if she told me that she spent that over a period of two or three years on groceries, that would not be so bad. So part of the information is worse than having no information, and that is what we have on this CANDU reactor. Without the figure on the interest rate, the figure on the sale of the reactor is meaningless.

I recall the time when we were discussing the bill to establish Petro-Canada. The minister was asked whether his department had undertaken a study of national petroleum companies in other jurisdictions. He indicated that such a study had been undertaken, but when we asked for that information he said it was an internal document which could not be made public. In the end we were almost forced by closure to pass the bill to set up a national petroleum company which was authorized to spend \$1.5 billion of public funds. We had to pass the bill without having the background papers which led the government to conclude that such a company was desirable.

The President of the Privy Council spoke about ministerial responsibility, and said that under our system civil servants must be free to provide frank information and opinions so that the minister can be in the best position to make decisions. We do not argue with that, and perhaps this comes from the fact that the minister has spent too little time in opposition because he forgets that in fact it is parliament which passes bill, and which takes the responsibility for the implementation of legislation. Yet time and time again parliament is asked to make these decisions without information.

● (2140)

If working papers are to be kept secret, this assumes that working papers are opinion and not fact, or that they contain more opinion than fact. I would be shocked to