

Mr. Baker: —selective vision was certainly displayed by some government members. They talked about the guidelines, saying that it is necessary to communicate with Members of Parliament and the general public and media, and then they forgot to read this:

Off-the-record background briefings will only be permitted in exceptional circumstances and must have prior Ministerial approval.

Public servants should not go beyond this discussion of factual information. It is not appropriate . . . to speculate about policy deliberations or future policy decisions.

Public employees acting in good faith under these guidelines will not be considered as having violated oaths of secrecy.

Then two Cabinet Ministers stand up in the debate and say, "Oh, we have information officers."

I want to make a few points now which have not been made here at all. They have not even been touched on. I think they are perhaps the most important points dealing with any guidelines affecting the behaviour of public servants as they communicate with Members of Parliament, the general public and the media. What if you do not have open consultation? What if you are afraid as a public servant to communicate, exchange ideas or act as a sounding board to let people know what is being considered by the Government? In other words, when you have openness, when a public servant is not afraid to talk to a Member of Parliament or a union or a representative of the people no matter what their position, then you do not have the mistakes that are sometimes made by a government in power.

The question here today should not only be concerning whether public servants are permitted complete openness with Members of Parliament. What should be debated here today is whether the public servant is aware of the decision and formulation of decisions which affect him directly and which he has to administer and answer questions about.

I will give you a couple of examples. The other day a policy was announced which would do away with the fishing vessel insurance plan for all fishermen. It was administered by the federal Government and the policy decision was that it would be privatized. That is along the lines of the policy enunciated during the election campaign by the Progressive Conservative Party. However, it does not do me or a fishermen's union or anyone else much good to phone a public servant and ask: What is the situation today? What is the policy of the Government? If will not do me much good because that public servant has to turn around and say that the policy of the Government is to privatize this insurance scheme. That does not tell you anything. You could turn around and say: Yes, but are they taking into account this and that bit of information? Are they taking into account that perhaps private insurance companies will not be willing to insure certain fishermen presently insured under the scheme? Or: Do you know that this will mean an increase in the rates to the fishermen, perhaps double or triple, which will mean in some cases an extra \$20,000 or \$30,000 out of the fishermen's pocket this year? Without openness, Mr. Speaker, the public servant answering the question will not have the information and two things will happen. The Minister can stand up here in the House and give a false answer to a

Supply

question. Given the input respecting the measure concerned, the information is not complete.

For example, when I asked the Minister of the Environment (Mrs. Blais-Grenier) a question concerning weather information, she had to say, "Well, we have not really formulated that policy yet. It is going to be done. We are going to charge Canadians for calls to the weather office but we do not know what Canadians we are going to charge". Then the question arises about who is going to make the decision. The Minister says to the media that the Government is consulting with Bell Canada and the telephone companies. Well, you can consult all you want; no telephone company can act as a collection agency for anyone, even a Department of Government. Even more important than that, the general thrust of that policy is to discourage people from calling the weather office, even though that person might be exempt from that charge. The policy is still there. In other words, in the formulation of that policy by the Government of Canada it was operating on misinformation. Someone other than even the Public Service laid that down as a policy for that Department.

● (1720)

If you ask a public servant whether a specific policy has been implemented within the Government, the public servant may say no. If you ask him when it will be implemented, he will say he does not know. If you ask him what is in the policy, he will tell you that it has not been worked out yet. That is certainly not appropriate. Members of Parliament must not be restricted to responses from public servants that this is the policy of the Government or this is the law of the land as it has been laid down.

I will give you an example of lack of co-ordination between government Departments. We often get a reply from the Public Service on what a policy is, without being given an explanation or the opportunity to discuss the matter with the person who is formulating that particular policy with the Minister. In responding to a constituent, the Department of Employment and Immigration gives a particular piece of information about a policy. A policy statement from the Department of National Revenue gives a policy position completely contrary to the first one. Then, through a decision of a judge of the Federal Court we get another interpretation of that policy.

Decisions have been made by the Government since it took power which were ill-founded and based on misinformation. Unfortunately, it is almost too late to change them because the Ministers have been backed into a corner and are not going to change their position. For example, in responding to the royal commission Report on Equality of Opportunity, the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Miss MacDonald) said that the Government is going to do this and that. A public servant could have told her that the worst examples of discrimination in hiring were in the very rules for federal job creation programs which she tabled in the House two weeks ago.

How can that be changed, Mr. Speaker? It certainly will not be changed by my questioning the Minister in the House and