

Access to Information

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Blaker): Others do.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Erik Nielsen (Yukon): Mr. Speaker, the bill is entitled a bill to provide access to information. I am reminded of the bill which provided for wiretapping and electronic surveillance, which was called the protection of privacy act. Now we have an access to information act. It does reveal how many hurdles one will have to get over before getting even close to information, if they get it at all. I am very skeptical. I am very cynical that the attitude spoken of by the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark) and the hon. member for Halifax West (Mr. Crosby) is simply not there with the people across the way.

The treasury benches have no interest in providing information to members of Parliament, let alone providing information to other individuals who are entitled to it. My prediction is we will see precious little information released under the provisions of this bill. All one has to do is look at some of the questions on the order paper to examine that attitude. Those members who spoke of attitude were quite right. When the freedom of information bill was introduced for the first time, the prime minister of the day said, and it is quite true, that it is as much a matter of attitude as anything else.

One question has been on the order paper for some three and a half years. It is on page 170 of the latest order paper, question No. 1,705, which reads as follows:

Did the government receive any funds for payment of the swimming pool at the official residence of the Prime Minister at 24 Sussex Drive and, if so, in what manner?

It is a very simple question to answer. The government may want to answer it under the provisions of this bill. The answer may be that because it endangers national security, it will not provide the answer. They may wish for a number of reasons to refuse the information. However, the question is at least deserving of an answer. No answer has been forthcoming, and the question is perennial on the order paper, every single order paper that is printed.

At page 158 of the order paper, there is a question which was asked last October by the hon. member for York-Sunbury (Mr. Howie). It is a very simple question. Having performed for a short time responsibilities on the treasury benches, I know the answer is easily obtainable. It simply asks:

What amount of government funds has been allocated for research into the causes and treatments of cancer?

The Ministry of National Health and Welfare together with Treasury Board should be able to provide that information within a week.

Speaking of attitude with regard to providing information, at page 130 of the order paper there is a question which was placed on June 27 last, over six months ago, which simply asks:

Is Mr. Kenneth Backwell employed by the Department of Public Works and, if so (a) in what capacity (b) what is his annual salary (c) is he connected with the property management division?

When I was minister of that department, questions were answered immediately, forthrightly, fully, correctly and hon-

estly. The question simply asks if a certain individual is employed by the Department of Public Works, in what capacity and at what salary. That is the attitude of this government, which is going to administer this bill it is asking us to pass, presumably without amendment. At page 129, there is another question which has been on the order paper since last June:

Did the Minister of Supply and Services order an investigation of Madame Claudette Nadeau, President and General Manager of Crown Assets Disposal Corporation and, if so, is it anticipated that there will be a change in Madame Nadeau's status and, if so, would such a change have any significance in connection with any present investigation?

That question could be answered in the negative if the government wished, but at least it could be answered. If members of Parliament in this place cannot get information to simple questions such as that, what hope has the ordinary citizen of obtaining information under the bill before us? I suggest there is very precious little hope because the attitude is not there. The attitude of this government is an attitude of preservation of secrets.

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Another question which my friend, the hon. member for Central Nova (Mr. MacKay) put on the order paper on May 14, over eight months ago, requires an equally simple answer. He asked:

What was the expenditure by the Privy Council Office for the fiscal year (a) 1977-78 (b) 1978-79 (c) 1979-80, for the commission of inquiry concerning certain activities of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police?

What more simple a task is there than looking at the books of account of the government to answer that simple question? His second question was:

What was expended for (a) legal counsel (b) non-legal investigative services?

Again a question requiring a very simple answer and one which is quickly and easily compiled by Treasury Board officials, if not in the ministry responsible. Again this is a question of attitude. If the answer to a question is going to be embarrassing to the government, the information is not produced. Believe me, being the cynic I am, if a request for information under this bill is going to provide embarrassing exposure or answers or information that will embarrass the government the information will not be produced, and there are enough barriers, loopholes, nooks and crannies in the provisions of this bill to allow the government to duck the production of information asked for.

An hon. Member: Crooks and nannies.

Mr. Nielsen: Crooks and nannies, yes.

Another example of the attitude and failure of this government to provide information is to be found on the order paper at page 108 as follows:

Did Mr. Michael Pitfield pay back to the Receiver General of Canada any portion of the moneys paid to him at the time he ceased to be Secretary to the Cabinet and Clerk of the Privy Council following the general election of May 22, 1979 and, if so (a) on what date (b) what was the amount returned and how was it arrived at?