

Government Information

Mr. Baldwin: I think my hon. friend is applauding because he agrees with me. I hope he will agree with me when the opportunity comes to put into effect provisions in this House which will make the Prime Minister's words before he came into the House conform with the rules of the House. The Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner), then the minister of justice, in an address made at the annual meeting of the Canadian Bar Association in September, 1969, made a very strong statement. I will not read it all but just a couple of sentences as follows:

Government secrecy is sometimes legitimated as the state's right to privacy, but may well be a denial of the public right to know. If individual privacy is a foundation of democracy, the citizen's right to know is fundamental to any participatory democracy.

The final sentences uttered by the then minister of justice in discussing whether, in the case of trials where the government is a litigant, the executive should have the right to deny the court information which is part of the essential evidence, were as follows:

—I should perhaps add that I personally favour the view that the judiciary rather than the executive should, to the greatest possible extent, be left to determine whether documents should be produced and to balance the various conflicting public interests that may be involved—

At a later date the then minister of justice, at the conference on computers in May of 1970, said the following:

In other words, government secrecy is sometimes legitimated as the need for a government's right to privacy but which may well be a denial of the public right to know—

He was repeating what he had said earlier. He ended with the following statement:

—what is necessary, then, is a freedom of information act entitling the individual to information which the government authority has arbitrarily seen fit to withhold—

I will quote very briefly from the recommendations of the task force on government information. Several prominent members of the public service today were involved in that: Mr. Bernard Ostry, Mr. Tom Ford and Mr. D'Iberville Fortier. Their final recommendation in this task force, which was surveying the entire question of information, the need of the public to know and the compulsion on the government to inform, was in the following terms:

The right of Canadians to full, objective and timely information and the obligation of the state to provide such information about its programs and policies be publicly declared and stand as the foundation for the development of new government policies in this field. This right and obligation might be comprehended within a new constitution in the context of freedom of expression.

In another paragraph, which I think is extremely pertinent and bears out what I said before, that the feeling that people in government must appear to the public always to be right, rather than any deep-seated, instinctive compulsion for corruption, the following appears—and this was a task force which travelled through this country and spoke to many people:

Many felt that the government information services aim primarily to please the ministers and to gild departmental escutcheons; that the public on occasion had to force information out of them; that the information was given in scraps and dribbles and, often, only when its release suited someone's idea of political expediency. Certain departments were said to deliberately withhold information of public interest if there was a chance it might tarnish the departmental image. It was argued that the failure of departments to reveal the flaws in their

programs could conceivably have the unfortunate effect of hiding from the government itself important changes in the very conditions under which such programs were taking place. One group insisted there were cases in which departments had suppressed research because the results might have discredited previously enunciated departmental theories.

I could go on in detail but I will not. I will simply refer to a report made by the Economic Council of Canada in its eighth annual review in September of 1971 which, in its final paragraph, made a comparable recommendation. In June, 1971, the Science Council of Canada which was undertaking a special study dealing with fishery and wild-life resources, surveyed people in this field all across the country and made similar observations.

● (1710)

I deduce from all this that people in government—and I think it is probably more true of people in government service than of elected people in government—have this fear of being caught in an error. They are anxious to avoid the appearance that the propositions and the advice they give to their minister or department may, in the light of future events, turn out to be incorrect. This is the main cause of so much of the secrecy in government, and I do not see why it should be so. We all make mistakes. Even Mr. Speaker makes mistakes occasionally. The problem there, however, is that we are not allowed to challenge him in this House. I think the distinguished occupant of the chair at the moment is prepared to admit that some of the decisions he has made during the course of his career in the chair might, upon reflection, have been changed. I see a smile which I take to mean assent.

I make mistakes. Amiable and distinguished members of the government party opposite make mistakes. Why in the name of heaven should people in government service and the government ministers feel that they are different? The public would have a great deal more respect for the processes of government and those engaged in it if occupants of the seats of the mighty would admit from time to time that they were wrong. There would then be a greater measure of candor, less cynicism and much more respect—and today this government needs the respect of the people it governs, the people for whom it legislates. Instead, people in this House, people in government in particular and people in the public service are reluctant to admit they have ever been wrong.

Some months ago the Minister of Finance brought down a budget in which there were errors and miscalculations. They were probably quite honestly based on information given to him by his public servants. I think he would have greater respect from the people of the country today if he would stand up and say, "I was wrong. I made a mistake and because of errors and misjudgments, many of which were the result of advice tendered by people in my department, and economists. We have got into a mess; I admit that, and now we are going to try to come up with some new ideas." I suggest that if any minister of finance had the courage to do that, he would gain a greater degree of respect and admiration from the people of the country. In this House we need the support and respect of the people, and we do not have it today.

I am not concerned about Gallup polls, Mr. Speaker. When you cross this country from the east coast to the