

Employment and Immigration

him on previous occasions, offering constructive criticisms of the Department of Manpower and Immigration.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): Did she send you a copy?

Mr. Blackburn: I have a copy of the letter. I am sure I am not the only one who has a copy of it. On page 3, under the heading "Public Image and Responsibilities", she refers to the advisory committees which are supposed to function. As other hon. members have pointed out, these committees are not functioning and are seldom ever called. That is the reason I am speaking on behalf of motion No. 2 put forward by the hon. member for Hamilton West (Mr. Alexander). I can assure him that our party supports his motion. Let me get to the meat of the criticisms of Dr. Hawkins by quoting from the letter, which reads as follows:

There are important lessons to be learned from the operations of these advisory bodies, from the way in which they have been used by the department and from the kind of advice which they have been able to give to the minister. First of all, they have been a totally in-house operation and the public has been completely unaware of their existence. Their role has never been referred to in the department's annual reports or in the speeches of successive ministers. None of the work they have done has ever been published. Parliament and the provinces have remained as much in the dark about their activities as the general public itself.

That is a very severe condemnation of these advisory committees, and that is why I implore the minister to accept motion No. 2. Then these advisory committees would have teeth and some input. They would have to report regularly and, as the previous speaker stressed in his remarks, they would be open to criticism, which is one of the most important aspects of government today. Government departments should be opened up for people to see what is being written and said, with the exception of what would fall under the heading of national security. This has nothing to do with national security. Bill C-27 has nothing to do with national security vis-à-vis the advisory committees. The letter continues:

In the author's view, this has been a serious mistake, particularly in a field where public knowledge and understanding has been and continues to be weak, and where the sources of information available to the general public are still very limited.

That is another serious condemnation. It is also a very valid criticism of the lack of information in that department as far as the bureaucracy itself is concerned. I suggest that is overloaded, to begin with. A couple of years ago I can recall sitting in the committee room surrounded by many bureaucrats and only two or three of them had anything to say instead of their doing what they are paid to do.

An. hon. Member: That was too many.

Mr. Blackburn: I think the hon. member should tell them. Returning to the letter, on page 4 it continues as follows:

It is worth noting here also that the chairman and members of the Canada Manpower and Immigration Council were not called as witnesses before the senate standing committee, nor were they part of the minister's group of officials which appeared before the committee on several occasions.

Those advisory committees were set up for a specific task: to advise the minister. Obviously, they have been ignored. It is my impression that the bureaucrats are afraid of these advisory

[Mr. Blackburn.]

committees and what they may advise the minister. This would embarrass them and might even lead to a few promotions out of a particular department into another.

Mr. Symes: There is never a demotion.

Mr. Blackburn: As the hon. member for Sault Ste. Marie (Mr. Symes) says, "There is never a demotion". To get rid of unwanted bureaucrats you simply promote them to another department. At this point that is all I have to say with respect to motion No. 2. Of course, the House is aware of what has been said by other hon. members who have spoken in this regard. We must have greater freedom of information. The minister has a wonderful opportunity here to provide this information through the advisory councils, with regular reports made public either through the House or directly through the press. I think this would also stimulate greater activity and confidence within the minister's department and the bureaucracy. This is why I commend motion No. 2, and also No. 3, to the minister for very serious reconsideration for inclusion in the statute when Bill C-27 is finally passed.

● (1230)

Mr. Cyril Symes (Sault Ste. Marie): Mr. Speaker, I feel moved to add a few comments on the motion standing in the name of the hon. member for Hamilton West (Mr. Alexander). I want to say how much I support motions Nos. 2 and 3, the basic objective of which is to provide more openness in the work of government and some input into how regulations are made and executed. An advisory committee which is more than just a title on paper is long overdue. We need a committee that is active, one that we, as parliamentarians, as representatives of the people of this country, are confident will indeed do the job it is required to do by statute. Therefore, it seems to me that motions Nos. 2 and 3 are most appropriate since they provide for some kind of reporting system so we can examine how these advisory councils are functioning.

The government likes to talk very much about participatory democracy and how the government is reacting to people's needs. Yet how strange it is—perhaps it is not strange in view of the history of the Liberal government—that when we get down to the fine details in terms of legislation and the bureaucracy being open and receptive to new ideas, in reality these provisions are not written into the law. Or if they are, they are worded so perfunctorily that they have no real meaning.

This is why the two amendments before the House seem to me so sensible. We want the advisory councils to make sure that they keep minutes of their meetings, and report. I think the minister will find it very difficult to argue against these two motions. If we are to believe in openness in government and that the Liberal government is not the fount of all wisdom, that there are others who can provide information as to the proper functioning of the Unemployment Insurance Act, then surely it would be hard for the minister to reject these two amendments.