

*Social Insurance Numbers*

This "certainly not" by the then prime minister is obviously a candidate in the "Hall of Fame of Famous Last Words, along with the assurances of the present Prime Minister that "Separatism is dead" or "We have wrestled inflation to the ground".

A third example of the hollowness of the government's promises arose from an exchange between the then hon. member for Middlesex West and the minister of labour, incidentally the present government House leader, in June 1965. The member asked whether the minister's description of these cards as general purpose cards will extend for numbering purposes to the military services. The minister replied "No, Mr. Speaker".

Canadians have seen instance after instance of the government breaking its word. Little by little, the social insurance number has become more prevalent in our society. This movement has not stopped. In 1977 the cabinet passed an order in council which permitted the then minister of national revenue "to cause a social insurance number to be issued to any individual who has not earlier been assigned such a number". A similar regulation in the same year gave the Minister of National Health and Welfare the same authority.

Perhaps the final indication of the government's intentions can be glimpsed at in the testimony of Bernard Dertinger, executive director of national systems for the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission before the McDonald commission in June of this year. He said the commission had discussed with the provinces the possibility of registration of all Canadians at birth by social insurance numbers and "there was substantial agreement at the official level".

The major objection of the Conservative party to the unbridled extension of the social insurance number and its not so subtle adoption as a national identification card remains the following. On an issue so paramount to the privacy of the individual and to the future development of our society, the Canadian people should have the opportunity to debate fully the advantages and disadvantages of a national citizen identification system.

Successive Liberal governments have condoned and encouraged the expansion of the social insurance number. The review of the federal activities described previously, which do not by any means constitute an exhaustive list, makes it clear that the federal government itself has been in the forefront of extending the use of the social insurance number. All these actions have actively promoted the tendency in society to depend more and more on the social insurance number as an identifier—of workers, taxpayers, automobile drivers, students, welfare beneficiaries, civil servants, servicemen, veterans, pensioners, and The Lion Club's band in my constituency. Few people have flatly proposed a national identification card. But successive Liberal governments have made decisions which, taken collectively, are leading us to the establishment of a national identification card.

Imperviously insensitive to the concerns of the individual citizen, blinded by their long sojourn in the corridors of power, the Liberal party has placed efficiency in administration above

the protection of personal liberties. Despite general public disapproval, the party has forged ahead unilaterally to give Canadians a single identifying number, mainly in the name of administrative convenience. More seriously, Mr. Speaker, I honestly doubt if the Liberal party yet understands our concerns and citizen's concerns about the dangers inherent in the implementation of a single identifying number system. In their view, what's good for the functioning of the bureaucracy is good for Canada. Citizens move aside; personal rights abandoned; right of privacy banished.

Since the Liberal government visibly has no understanding of why concerned citizens are questioning the extension of a social insurance number, I will now explain our misgivings about such a system. First of all, Mr. Speaker, from a psychological point of view I have serious doubts about the applicability of a single identifying number system to Canada. In North America, Canadians and Americans have historically placed a great deal of value on privacy. To Canadians, the idea of a single number that would identify them "from cradle to grave" is distasteful in itself, regardless of how that number might be used and regardless of safeguards society might enact to protect the rights of privacy.

Many Canadians having fled their homelands in Europe retain bad memories about national identification cards and numbers. A Canadian travelling in continental Europe often sees his European host obliged to carry a national identification card which he must present on demand. Few Canadians envy this system. Once identifiable to the administrator in government or business by an exclusive number, such as a social insurance number, the citizen risks being identified exclusively in those terms. Few Canadians want such a system.

This is not my most serious misgiving about the extension of the social insurance number however. My real worry arises from the very real possibility that use of a single identifying number, such as SIN, in more and more computer files makes it easier and cheaper for organizations to exchange data among themselves and to merge records from files of different agencies, departments and organizations into central databanks. There arises the ultimate possibility that a person with access to the databanks will be able to compile a complete dossier on any individual covering everything from childhood illnesses, school records, psychiatric examinations, consumer habits, political activities, personal beliefs and employment record. The individual stripped of all privacy will be at the mercy of the data manipulator.

Many people argue that if one has done nothing wrong, what does he have to worry about? They do not view such a system as threatening. The only people who will have to worry, according to them, are the criminals with something to hide. Is this, in fact, true? Will the ordinary hardworking citizen have nothing to worry about? Will he not suffer any inconveniences or threats to his rights? I would argue that people who hold this view seriously underestimate the dangers of the system.

First of all, such a system poses serious problems in a political sense. Simply put, knowledge is power. An individual who has access to information on another person can use it to