

Freedom of Information

Some hon. Members: Agreed.

Mr. Speaker: Before proceeding with orders of the day, I would remind hon. members that, since this is the final allotted day in this period, the House will go through the usual supply procedures this evening. In the past we have established a practice which, I think, has been welcomed by members on all sides of the House, and that is the practice of introducing the supply bill early in the day in order to give members an opportunity to read it, and to take away some of the grievance that exists when there is a last minute introduction of such an important bill, even though its contents are well known in advance.

May I assume that the House is disposed to proceed in the same way as in the past with respect to this supply bill?

Some hon. Members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

ALLOTTED DAY S.O. 58—FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Mr. Joe Clark (Leader of the Opposition) moved:

That this House re-affirms its support for the principle of freedom of information as a prerequisite to open and responsible government, as endorsed unanimously by the House on February 12, 1976, and urges the early introduction of appropriate legislation providing for certain precise and limited exceptions subject to a review process with ultimate appeal to the courts.

Mr. Speaker: Members are reminded that at 9.45 o'clock this evening every question necessary to dispose of the proceedings on this motion shall be put pursuant to Standing Order 58(10).

● (1532)

[Translation]

Mr. Clark: Mr. Speaker, I must say at the outset that the in-depth changes you suggested before have not been made.

[English]

There are many purposes to allotted days in this chamber. Certainly they are frequently occasions for active partisan debate. I hope there will not be that tone of partisanship to this debate today, because we have introduced this motion with the explicit intention of allowing members of parliament on all sides of this House of Commons to advance a principle which has already been debated extensively by members of parliament, and indeed a principle which many of us believe to be essential to restoring the reality of democracy in this country.

Before beginning the substance of my remarks I want to pay particular tribute to some members of this House and of the other place, and to former members of this House, who have taken an interest in the question of freedom of information for a long time. I think the House will agree that the primary tribute in this regard must go to my colleague, the hon.

[Mr. Speaker.]

member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin), who has carried out and adopted this issue personally in the House of Commons and in committee for a long time. In addition, there are members such as the hon. member for Greenwood (Mr. Brewin) and his former associate in that party, Mr. Mather, as well as on the government side the hon. member for Windsor-Walkerville (Mr. MacGuigan), the hon. member for Ottawa West (Mr. Francis), the hon. member for Maisonneuve-Rosemont (Mr. Joyal), and Senator Godfrey of the other place, who have demonstrated a sincere and determined commitment to the principles of freedom of information.

Because we want to ensure that there would not be a partisan tone to this debate we made it very clear in introducing the subject matter that, as far as we are concerned in the official opposition—and I think in this matter I speak for the other opposition parties as well—we want to waive any connotation of lack of confidence associated with the vote that will come tonight. We want members of parliament to feel free to vote with their conscience on the principle of this question without any fear at all for the life of the government. We want to have applied to this debate the freedom to vote that was suggested by the parliamentary committee for the resolution of the matter in its substance. We hope that determination to deal with a principle and not with partisanship will inform this whole debate and the contributions of members from all sides.

There are, naturally, a number of matters on which members of the House will disagree, that is in the nature of democracy. One matter on which we all should agree, and most of us do agree, is the importance of ensuring that any government is kept accountable to the people of Canada through parliament. That accountability cannot occur if the Canadian people and the Canadian parliament do not know what the government is doing. Unfortunately, and for reasons that I for the moment I am prepared to attribute more to habit than malice, the Canadian people and the Canadian parliament today do not know enough about what the government is doing to hold that government accountable in any meaningful way.

There are a number of reforms that we have to contemplate in this House of Commons. One of them has to do with the power of parliamentary committees, and another, in my judgment, has to do with the capacity of individual private members to introduce private members' bills and legislation that will be considered seriously by this House.

The third matter that we have to consider is the excessive power of party leaders in our parliamentary system as it has evolved. I intend personally, as leader of this party, to act upon these reforms as quickly as it is within my power.

The most urgent and basic of these reforms is to stop the secrecy which denies public access to public documents. This parliament cannot control what it does not know. Indeed, I find it hard to understand how ministers can command the variety of information they require to run their departments when there is such an overwhelming atmosphere of secrecy as we have in this matter. It is entirely conceivable to me that a government which distrusts parliament could come quickly to