

● (1722)

Just recently much attention has been given to the Bell Canada contract with Saudi Arabia. I suppose it is appropriate that we talk about Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian oil minister is here visiting our Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources (Mr. Gillespie). They are in Alberta now. I do not know what the Saudi Arabian minister is here for. Perhaps he is going to buy the Alberta tar sands, for all we know. We get no information from this government. It is a closed shop. We have absolutely no information with respect to the operation of Bell's contract with Saudi Arabia. We have been denied access to the contract, even though it has been called for by an independent commission set up by this parliament for the people of Canada. The Human Rights Commission has asked for access to that contract, but that request was denied. An application to the CRTC was also denied.

This contract has been the subject of much public attention regarding boycott provisions and an apparent undertaking by Bell that it has no existing or outstanding contracts with the Israelis. The contract is also interesting because of other provisions which have come to light, not through any disclosure on the part of the Government of Canada or EDC which is, in effect, providing insurance, and not through any disclosure by the CRTC, which is a regulatory agency now considering an application by Bell for a substantial rate increase which will bring something in the vicinity of \$171 million to the company in revenue this year, and another \$398 million next year.

The information we get about this contract comes through the securities and exchange commission of the United States. What information do we get about this contract, which is being insured by the EDC? We find that Bell Canada, through this contract, is paying \$88 million to Saudi Arabian business interests. Let us do some simple mathematics. I believe \$88 million is about 8 per cent of the total contract. That is a round figure, but it amounts to about one half what Bell Canada is asking for in increased fees. It is a little less than one half the \$171 million. We find this out, not through any of our own government agencies and not through disclosure requested by as important a body as the Human Rights Commission, but through the American Securities and Exchange Commission.

What is the next step? Mr. Ben Tierney of Southam News in Washington thought this was rather vague. We are paying \$88 million to Saudi Arabian business interests. The president of Bell Canada was asked what this is all about. The response was a flat no, that there would be no information forthcoming as to the nature of the payments, nor to whom these payments will be made. The point here is that the EDC is involved, and the whole question of accountability is very much on the minds of parliamentarians who are participating in this debate, and of Canadians generally. We are not talking about an \$8,000 sofa, as expensive as that may be, in the Prime Minister's office. We are talking about \$88 million. Perhaps that does not impress hon. members opposite. Perhaps they would ask, "What's \$88 million", to paraphrase a famous statement made

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by one of their predecessors. However, I find this to be endemic of the attitude which this government takes with respect to disclosure. It is also endemic of the attitude the government takes with respect to the operation of the EDC.

The chairman of the EDC was questioned in committee with respect to the Bell contract. He gave general responses with respect to the boycott provision, but what about this \$88 million? Are we to assume that these are payments similar to the payments which have been made by AECL and which have come under some criticism by thoughtful people, and certainly by taxpayers who wonder what is happening to their money?

What kind of system are we living in when the EDC can take the attitude, as has been outlined by my colleagues, the hon. member for St. John's West (Mr. Crosbie), the hon. member for York-Simcoe (Mr. Stevens) and other speakers on this side of the House, that it has absolutely no responsibility for reporting its activities or for accounting for them to the representatives of the people of Canada? What kind of rationale is there on the part of a government which now asks us to increase vastly the amount the EDC should have available to it when we have clear indications, as the hon. member for York-Simcoe has pointed out, that until there is any default—and even then I do not know whether the EDC will be subject to being asked questions or giving answers—there is a lack of accountability? The government and its supporters seem to want to force this bill through.

The facts surrounding this contract between Bell Canada and the Saudi Arabian government are an example of the kind of attitude the EDC has brought into its affairs. It accounts only to itself. It feels it has no responsibility for accounting to parliament. Who is to say that there is any accounting to the minister? What controls are we going to have—or can we look forward to in the future—on the basis of what has apparently transpired in the past and the record of the EDC as far as legitimate requests for information are concerned?

We have been spending much time debating the question of freedom of information. The question here is whether we should have a meaningful freedom of information bill brought forward. One after another hon. members opposite rise in their places and talk about how much they believe in freedom of information. In open convention the Liberal party passes resolutions supporting the concept of freedom of information and of independent reviews of applications for information, yet every time we come forward with requests for information concerning the operations of Crown agencies and the government itself, the argument of the government seems consistently to be that our parliamentary system dictates that the government should make the decisions in these matters and that every few years—four conventionally, but with this government perhaps five and a half or longer, whenever the Prime Minister has the courage to call an election—the people of Canada will speak.

The argument is that the people of Canada will speak as to whether the government has been withholding information. Well, I hope and trust that in the next election the question of