

Canada Council

this is an unknown quantity as far as the Canada Council is concerned. Let us hope it will change before much more damage is done.

Mr. Simon de Jong (Regina East): Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity of participating in this debate. It is ludicrous, to a large number of Canadians to see Parliament debating poetry when people are losing their jobs and their homes, and the country is in a major social and economic crisis. It will create the impression that we do not know how to use our time more effectively.

I for one do not believe that it is Parliament's function to debate the merits or otherwise of a particular poet and his poetry. I have no objection to debating whether to give cultural agencies like the Canada Council money grants to carry on cultural activities. In fact, I wish Parliament would spend more time debating that issue. But for us to discuss the merits of a particular decision or method of decision by the Canada Council is a waste of time.

However, there is a larger question involved, that of censorship. When Parliament begins to decide what is appropriate and what is not appropriate poetry, then I think we start down the road of censorship, a slippery road indeed. I remind Hon. Members that it was a Conservative Government which appointed Mr. Applebaum and Mr. Hébert to write their report. The second recommendation of that report is as follows:

To the extent that the functions of cultural agencies and offices require the exercise of impartial, critical judgment in the support of cultural activity, they should be exempt from political direction in the form of ministerial directives of either a general or specific nature.

I think that also includes Parliament. The decision as to what form of art or which artist is acceptable is a decision to be made by their peers, not by Parliament. When Parliament becomes involved it threatens academic and intellectual freedom.

Mr. Mitges: At taxpayers' expense.

Mr. de Jong: Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Member mentions the taxpayers' responsibility. I think in this sense he is right. Parliament has and should have the opportunity to debate money being spent for the arts. But, as I mentioned before, I wish we could spend more time debating the general topic of public support for the arts and not art itself.

We are debating today the question of a particular poet, Mr. Bissett. Well, I am not going to stand here and argue the merits or lack thereof of Mr. Bissett's poetry. Art, Mr. Speaker, is in the eye of the beholder. I know many people consider Mr. Bissett to be a well known and important Canadian poet, and in Canadian literature courses in most universities Mr. Bissett's poetry is mandatory reading. His poetry has been published in over 47 publications. Now, Mr. Speaker, publishers do not publish poetry unless there is a demand for it. Obviously there must be some demand for his poetry, and for Hon. Members to suggest that he is only published by disreputable publishers is inaccurate. His poetry has appeared in such publications such as "The First Encounter", "Saturday Night", and the "Paris Review". The latter two are well

known literary and intellectual publications. For us to say that they should not have printed his poetry I think is intellectual nonsense.

Certainly Mr. Bissett's poetry is difficult to read. It is part of what is called the "Black Mountain" school of poetry. Some people call it the concrete school. In my understanding of that school, the visual presentation of the words is as important as the actual meaning. The sounds that the poem creates are as important as the literal meaning. I am no expert on poetry, and I do not think that any Member of this Parliament is. Essentially, this school of poetry is another way of looking at the world, taking different aspects of reality and presenting them to us.

Some poets go out of their way to get a reaction from their readers using certain words over and over again. You know, they say it is a blow against the tyranny of words. That is their justification for using words which the previous speaker felt were offensive words. I am not outraged by them. To me they are words you hear on the street. They hold no tyranny for me. This is not my taste in poetry; but for us to try to suggest that the Canada Council should not make a grant available to any person is outrageous and not appropriate.

• (1730)

I have one other point which I should like to bring to the attention of the House. An Hon. Member has suggested that no legitimate poet or critic considers Mr. Bill Bissett's poetry of value. Again that was wrong. For example, Milton Acorn, a well-known and well-respected Canadian poet has defended Mr. Bill Bissett and his poetry. I could mention other well-established and well-known poets who have come to Mr. Bissett's defence. I ask the question again: who are we to make such judgments here?

Generally the type of words and images used by Mr. Bissett in his publications do not conform with my tastes, but I do not become as upset as have previous Conservative speakers. They called them obscene. There is mild obscenity in some of his poems, to be sure, but I would rather see Parliament debate what I really find obscene—war, nuclear weapons, hunger, torture and repression in the world. I think these are appropriate topics for discussion in Parliament. If we are to discuss obscenity, let us discuss the real obscenity which exists, not the merits or demerits of a poet.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Bill Jarvis (Perth): Mr. Speaker, I am very much indebted to the Hon. Member for Regina East (Mr. de Jong) for providing me the incentive to rise. I am not quite sure why he participated in the debate, having found it such a tragic waste of time for the House to devote one hour to cultural matters, then professing that the House should not give its blessing to censorship or sit in judgment of the works of art of fellow Canadians, and then proceeding to defend the artist.

However, I should like to deal with his points one by one. First, let me talk about the effective use of the time of the