

*Access to Information*

1964. Following that a former member of the New Democratic Party, Barry Mather, the member for Surrey-White Rock-North Delta, tabled a private member's bill which was followed in a very outstanding way by the work of Ged Baldwin who for many, many years with Mr. Mather prodded the government into finally bringing forward legislation respecting access to information. As well, the Standing Joint Committee on Regulations and other Statutory Instruments examined this question. Indeed, many organizations and individuals have urged the government to enact this legislation which is so important in a democratic society.

Other speakers have referred to a number of the organizations involved, and I want to single out just three of many. First, of course, Access, which has been the primary lobby group in this area, has done an outstanding job in ensuring that finally we do see legislation on the books in this important area. I want to single out particularly the work of Roland Gaudet of Access, who has singlehandedly been involved in extensive lobbying in this area for many years.

Also the Canadian Bar Association, and in particular Murray Rankin, the author of the definitive report on freedom of information in Canada, must in my view take a good deal of the credit for the legislation which was initially tabled in this House.

Finally, from the Civil Liberties Association, Mr. Ken Rubin, who in particular has focused on the privacy sections of the bill.

We know as well that the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton (Mr. Baker), as minister in the previous government, brought forward a bill which certainly in many instances paralleled Bill C-43 and must be recognized, I believe, to have provided an impetus to the Liberal government to move forward in this area.

Finally, I should note that at the time of the constitutional discussions I supported, as did members of the official opposition, an amendment to the Constitution of Canada which would have recognized the fundamental right in a democratic society of access to information as the basis of calling our governments to account.

We know, Mr. Speaker, there is still a great deal of work to be done in this area. The Official Secrets Act is still on the books and it must be significantly overhauled. This must be a priority in coming months. I would hope also that this government would look very seriously at the question of sunshine laws which would open up meetings at which fundamental and important decisions are being made.

Once again we have seen a situation where the U.S. is far ahead of us in bringing in legislation in a number of respects to open up all meetings at which important decisions are being made. Rather than just obtaining information after the fact, it is essential that these meetings should indeed be open to the public.

• (1610)

I note in passing that I believe at this time there is a discussion as to whether or not Members of Parliament can take part in the examination of budget documents. How ironic it is, as we discuss freedom of information and access to information today, that there is still a serious question as to whether or not Members of Parliament can have an opportunity to review this important material ahead of time.

The Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs spent many, many hours on this legislation. Of course, sometimes it appeared that the bill was dead, but in the end, despite the fact that in my view there had been some very destructive and regressive amendments to the bill, we have it before us today at third reading.

The original bill which was presented to Parliament some two years ago now has been very significantly watered down as a result of the amendments which were brought forward by the government. I intend to touch upon them in a few moments. Also, it is important to recognize that we heard from many witnesses. We received scores of written briefs and, almost without exception, witnesses pointed out that the original legislation presented to the committee, Bill C-43, was a weak bill in many respects. While they supported the broad thrust of openness and accountability, they noted many flaws. In my view, the committee did the right thing in taking its responsibilities seriously and in seeking to improve this legislation. We examined the bill clause by clause in committee.

There has been some reference made both by the minister and by the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton to delays and the responsibility for these delays has been placed at the feet of the New Democratic Party. I think the record should be set straight in this area because I do not believe the public should be unintentionally misled as to what actually took place in committee. In fact, members of the committee would be well aware that in late June I made a proposal to the committee, when there was still a good deal of time left to finish the bill before the summer, that we conclude our consideration of the bill in ten hours of debate, in a further ten hours of debate.

What was the response of the Conservative Party and of the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton? He said, "No, no, we may need more time. I am not prepared to see any kind of limitation on the debate at this point". At that point as well—and the minister has conceded this—Liberal members of the committee lost interest in the bill and were not able to show up to form a quorum. Meeting after meeting of the justice committee was cancelled because Liberal members of the committee—and I regret to say Conservative members as well, with one or two exceptions—did not even bother showing up for committee meetings in late June and July. I believe the record should be set very clear here. In fact, I proposed on behalf of the New Democratic Party a limitation at that point which was rejected by members of the official opposition.

The second point in this area is that if one looks at the record of amendments to the legislation originally presented to the committee, it must be noted that two very significant