

Access to Information

Finally we have a letter from Mr. Humphrys to the Ontario Securities Commission. I mention this in particular because when I tried to get information about this matter through questions to the Minister of State for Finance, he tried to tell us there is just no connection at all between Astra Trust and Re-Mor and that they are not connected in any way. I have been saying that if we had a freedom of information act, perhaps this would have come forward and the investigation in the Ontario legislature would not have been necessary. This letter is quite straightforward, it is not at all derogatory, but it does show the connection. It is addressed to the chairman of the Ontario Securities Commission, Mr. J. C. Baillie. It reads:

Dear Mr. Baillie: Re: Astra Trust: I am pleased to be able to inform you that the second instalment under the agreement whereby Messrs. Montemurro, Luciani and Vasko are buying the Spanish property was received by Astra Trust on January 15. The next instalment of \$500,000 is due on March 31. We have renewed the company's licence to March 31, the normal expiry day of our licences, and will renew it quarter by quarter as further instalments are paid in the absence of any other problems. I was pleased that the January instalment has been paid since we now have a total of \$500,000 put up by these directors, a considerable improvement in the position of the agency funds.

The agency fund is now accumulating a considerable amount of cash and short-term deposits. I think it is important that these funds be invested with a good yield in order to permit the fund to meet the interest payments required under outstanding contracts. Also, a good yield is needed to build up a reserve against possible losses under other investments that are in the portfolio.

Now we come to a very interesting part. The letter goes on to say:

I think at some point it would be appropriate for the commission to release the fund from its control—

The commission he is referring to is the Ontario Securities Commission. The letter continues:

—and I am suggesting that this might be considered after the March 31 instalment is paid. In the meantime, I think the company might be given general authority to invest funds received pursuant to the purchase agreement or as the consequence of maturing assets. I think it would be appropriate for the commission to give blanket authority to the company to invest such funds in short-term government securities or corporate papers of good quality.

Mr. Fox: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I do not want to limit in any way the hon. member's right to participate in this debate, but I must say that over the past few minutes, although he has been very generous in mentioning the words "freedom of information" once or twice, it seems to me that we are talking about a matter which has been the subject of questions during question period.

Mr. Nielsen: Unanswered.

● (2140)

Mr. Fox: It is beyond me, and I have tried to follow the hon. member very closely, to see how it really fits in with Bill C-43.

Mr. Kempling: It certainly does fit in. We have asked numerous questions on this matter about the connection between Astra Trust and Re-Mor. We have been told by the minister that there is no connection, that one is a provincial company and the other is a federal company.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Blaker): Order, please. I may have done the hon. member and the minister a disservice in

this case, when he rose to point out the problem of relevancy, by not speaking. In actual fact, the Chair has recognized that the hon. member is pursuing a matter of some particular interest to him. As it happens, I was in the chair the other evening when the hon. member pursued this matter during the adjournment motion. The fact is that simply relating it verbally to the bill under debate now does not necessarily mean it is relevant. The hon. member has a problem with relevancy. If he could bring the matter he wants discussed closer to the principles of the bill under debate, that would fall more within the rules of the House.

Mr. Kempling: I listened very carefully. I do not want to belabour your point, Mr. Speaker. I accept your words. However, I listened very carefully to the Minister of State for Multiculturalism (Mr. Fleming), and I did not find too much relevance in his comments. I have nearly completed my remarks. I have only a few minutes left. I will just finish reading this letter and make some concluding remarks. I quote:

I think it would be appropriate for the commission to give blanket authority to the company to invest such funds in short-term government securities or corporate papers of good quality.

After March 31, if the instalment then due is paid, investment authority might be widened somewhat, but with a continuing attention to the maturity dates of the contracts—

I would be happy to discuss this suggestion with you on the telephone or otherwise at your convenience. I expect to be talking with Mr. David Anderson who seems to have been the catalyst in getting this thing moving.

This was only six months before Astra Trust went into bankruptcy. The Superintendent of Insurance was saying they were renewing their licence every 90 days. In the meantime, innocent people were investing thousands, if not millions, of dollars into Astra Trust. They were eventually bilked out of that money. If that is not a clear case for freedom of information, I do not know what is.

We want some importance attached to these matters. We hope this bill will be amended in committee. I am going to watch to see whether it will be amended to allow more free information to pass back and forth between provincial and federal authorities. Looking at the massive evidence that has been gathered in this one instance, had there been more openness and more forthright information passed between the two levels of government, a large number of the people who have been victimized by this unfortunate affair would not have lost their funds. In fact, they probably would have been investing in other areas. The reality today is that 320 people, most of whom are in very dire straits as a result of this mammoth fraud, are in a situation which could have been considerably alleviated by a good passage of information back and forth and less restriction between federal and provincial authorities.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Blaker): Does the hon. member seek the floor?

Mr. Nielsen: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I am not just standing to pass the time of day.