

Conflict of Interest

Before I wrap up my speech I wish to refer to my experience in my business career prior to becoming a Member of Parliament. I want to suggest that no one should enter public life with the idea that there is a great deal of money to be made unjustly, or that there is an influence to be used unjustly. I think it is fair to say that we all seek to serve the public and hope that during our years of service we will emerge with our reputations unscathed. Unfortunately, that is not always possible, whether by reason of human frailties, unfortunate circumstances or a lack of knowledge of the rules. The rules of conflict of interest are, unfortunately, not always as clear as one might think. Errors in judgment can be made in good faith which, examined in retrospect, indicate a potential conflict of interest which was not there on the first examination.

As a lawyer in a small city I was often faced in business with potential conflicts of interest. Usually, they were easy to determine and we could avoid the conflict. We might get into an action, a proceeding or a transaction on behalf of a client and find that the lawyer on the other side was a partner. That would be an immediate conflict of interest, no difficulty in determining it. So we would have to resolve it, whether by advising all concerned of the conflict of interest and securing agreement to go ahead, or in the alternative by saying: "Look, someone has to seek advice from another source". Occasionally, we even started out knowing that there was a conflict of interest but had the agreement of the clients on all sides for us to act on both sides because they wanted either me or my firm to put the deal together.

Those were situations in which we knew what the conflict was. It was evident at the start, or it became evident. I say to you, Madam Speaker, that when I practised law I knew where the conflicts of interest were. But I say to you, Madam Speaker, at the same time, that in politics, acting as an elected representative, it is not always that easy to determine at the start. I have compared it, if one looks for a comparison which can be understood, to playing football on a field where the goal-lines are easy to determine but the sidelines are either indistinct or continually being redrawn.

Everybody who enters public life and runs for office seeks to reach the goal-line at the end of one's career. That goal-line is to end up one's career without any conflicts of interest, without besmirching one's reputation. But often we find that the sidelines are either disappearing on us or being redrawn. I think it is fair to say that in the past four years of my life as a Member of Parliament there has been more found out about conflict of interest and potential conflicts of interests than in the first five years because we are learning. We are learning how to protect ourselves and how to see those sidelines while still seeking the goal-line. We all do. But we are learning more about how to draw the sidelines so that we protect ourselves and do not go out of bounds. I suggest that that is what we are going to do with this Bill. Nobody would suggest it is perfect. However, it is an effort.

The other personal thing I want to say is that there may be even yet other areas that we should look at, not within this Bill but I want to go back to my days as the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee when we examined the report of

the Auditor General with respect to Canadair. Members from all sides on the committee found that there were some potential conflicts of interest which did not even involve money or influence. This is where public servants were appointed to the boards of Crown corporations and there was a very definite conflict of duties, not with any compensation, not with any intention that anybody do anything incorrect or favour one rather than the other. Public servants were being placed in untenable positions. I suggest that we are still learning about conflict of interest.

There are some who think that these new requirements will discourage Canadians from seeking public office because maybe the regime we propose is too rigorous. I am confident that that will not be the case. My conclusion is that after the conflict of interest regulations and requirements are put in place people will become familiar with the regime, it will be accepted and be welcomed as a necessary part of political life. There are sacrifices to be made, but I think there are many men and women of good will and dedication who will accept these discomforts as part of what one has to do in order to serve the interests of Canada.

I think that we have managed to strike a sensible balance between the public need for openness and the politician's acceptable right to some privacy in their private and financial affairs. I believe that the record of this Government will show, with our acknowledged imperfections and human failings, that we have made good beginnings in this important area of political reform. We understand and we appreciate that there is more to be done. But we expect that this Act will address the expectations of all Members of Parliament. We invite discussion in committee as to how it might be improved. We also hope that Canadians will put these reforms in perspective and appreciate the efforts which our Government has made over the course of the last four years.

We have made these efforts to fulfil our commitments and to respond to the concerns of the public. We believe that we have listened to the hopes and wishes and the criticisms of Canadians. In doing so we will continue the reform process of the political system, a commitment made by the Prime Minister prior to his being elected, a commitment which I think has distinguished this Government from its first days in office.

We do not suggest for a minute that all of the work is done. But with the support of Canadians our Government will continue to make effective political reform a reality for Parliament and for Canada.

Mr. Don Boudria (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell): Madam Speaker, it is with mixed emotion that I speak today on Bill C-114. In a way I am happy to say that the Government is proposing in a certain measure some of the things that I have been advocating for some time. The Bill, of course, is not complete, and I will get into the details of how it is deficient later.