

Private Members' Business

An amendment that provides that no exemptions apply to the release of public information opinion research would have been sufficient for members' purposes. The media, citizens and parliamentarians are quite familiar with the relatively easy process of filing access requests. In any event the Treasury Board policy calls for informal dissemination public opinion research. New and duplicated reporting requirements merely add red tape and cost, which we can ill afford at this time.

Another problem I have with Bill C-309 is that it would apply to any department, branch, office, board, agency, commission, corporation or other body established by or pursuant to any act of Parliament or established by or pursuant to any proclamation, order in council or other instrument made or issued by or under the authority of the governor in council.

By defining which institutions are covered by this proposed amendment in this way the proposed amendment goes entirely against the way the rest of the Access to Information Act is structured. The act applies to all government institutions listed in the schedule, approximately 140. The purpose of listing the institutions is to make it clear to everyone which institutions are covered by the act. Going away from a list approach creates the possibility of confusing the issue of whether the act applies to a particular institution. It may mean having to go to court to find out whether the act applies to a particular institution in a given circumstance.

As a result of Bill C-309 some institutions not currently subject to the act will be subject to the specific amendment. For example, Canada Post is not subject to the act but will be subject to the proposed clause 5(1).

I am also concerned about the definition of public opinion poll, which I find extremely broad. It could include quantitative and qualitative research conducted among members of the public using a prepared questionnaire or interview schedule. A good proportion of this research would be of very limited public interest.

I do not believe Bill C-309 is needed. There is already a right of access to public opinion poll research under the Access to Information Act. There is recent case law that provides guidance to the government in disclosing such polls. There is a government policy on disclosing poll results. The Minister of Justice has stated his intention to reform the Access to Information Act.

Given all this, I do not think it is appropriate or necessary to proceed with an ad hoc amendment on the specific issue of public opinion polls. I have problems also with the fact the bill would introduce significant new bureaucratic reporting requirements, deviate from the way the rest of the act defines government institutions and potentially could apply to research of very

limited public interest. For all these reasons, I cannot support the bill.

[Translation]

Mr. Osvaldo Nunez (Bourassa, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the purpose of Bill C-309 tabled on February 22, 1995 by the hon. member for Red Deer is to amend the Access to Information Act. Its main objective is to oblige the government to disclose results obtained and methods used in public opinion polls commissioned by the government through various agencies.

The proposed legislation provides that the government shall lay before this House a report of the results of public opinion polls it has commissioned.

We support this initiative because it encourages openness and the democratic exercise of power. The debate on public opinion polls and the need for making this tool more transparent is mainly about whether these polls undermine the democratic process by influencing the behaviour of society in general.

Recent studies have shown that publication of these polls can have an impact on a close race, especially towards the end of the campaign. The publication of public opinion polls can have a positive or negative impact on the morale of volunteer campaign workers and donors.

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Party strategists complain that it is hard to retrieve lost ground when the media have decided, on the basis of public opinion polls, that a party is no longer in the running. Opinion polls may be purposely misinterpreted, if the technical information provided is too incomplete to assess the validity of the results.

Clearly, the secret use of this powerful instrument is a first step towards arbitrary use of power and a practice that is a threat to democracy. What seems to be a highly scientific instrument that confers a certain authority becomes, in the hands of unscrupulous politicians, a tool for political propaganda and manipulation. I am thinking, for instance, of the group for Canadian unity, a special unit of the Privy Council of this government.

Working on behalf of the no coalition, the intergovernmental affairs office, located in an office tower in downtown Ottawa, attempts to implement the vision of the no forces, the status quo, which will make debtors and paupers of all Quebecers and even Canadians. This anti-referendum unit funded with public money has a budget of more than three million dollars. Part of this money is spent to commission public opinion polls whose methods and results are used to influence the democratic process in the Quebec referendum.

This Canadian unity group, more obscure and secretive by far than the centre for Canadian unity was during the 1980 campaign, commissions public opinion polls on a weekly basis and uses them to manipulate public opinion in a democratic society.