

issue was greater accessibility to governmental information or, more pointedly, secrecy in government.

I stated at the outset that I was somewhat reluctant to oppose the motion because I was sympathetic to the objective of greater accessibility to information and less secrecy in government. However, we must proceed carefully in this direction. It would not do simply to throw away the guidelines governing the production of papers and open the flood gates to free access to information.

I believe that most members would agree that the positive benefits accrued by such action would be heavily outweighed by the damage done to the effective operation of our democratic government. Furthermore, whatever weaknesses and criticisms members may see in the guidelines, they serve an important role; first of underlining the acceptance of the principle that government has to justify its withholding of facts, and second, of providing a focus where constructive criticisms and suggestions for a greater flow of information can take place. Even those members who have been strong critics of the scope and application of the guidelines have conceded that their introduction was a very considerable step forward in that it indicated a realization that there was a need to deal with public access to governmental information.

The Standing Joint Committee on Regulations and Other Statutory Instruments, of which the hon. member for Fundy-Royal was former joint chairman, and of which I am now a member, is indeed dealing with this subject at the present time. I am grateful to the hon. member for having initiated this debate which will be helpful to me in those deliberations, as I am sure it will be to other members of the committee.

However, I am unable to accept the motion, for to do so would be to render useless the very first criterion for exempting government papers from production, and would seriously undermine the guidelines as a whole. I am not arguing that the guidelines are perfect, for I feel many of the criticisms against them are valid and means must be found to open up much more information to the public. However, until these means are found and other alternatives put forward, the guidelines must remain. At the present time, for better or for worse, they are all we have.

Mr. Perrin Beatty (Wellington-Grey-Dufferin-Waterloo): Mr. Speaker, in the few minutes there are left I should like to make a few brief comments and to associate myself completely with my colleague, the hon. member for Fundy-Royal (Mr. Fairweather), in his request that the government be more forthcoming with information that should properly be in the public domain.

It is one of the facts of life that many people who have been watching governments have noticed that they are very quick to classify information which can be potentially embarrassing to government. Having heard the speech of the hon. member for Welland (Mr. Railton), I can only say that if the government is anxious to classify information which could be potentially embarrassing to it, it should first have considered the hon. member's speech.

The particular case before us graphically illustrates the tendency of government to treat information about the activities of public officials, in their public responsibility in respect of the dispensation of public funds, as its pri-

vate property. It is interesting to note that the document it is classifying as secret has already in fact been released to the press and is public property. This says something about a government that would take this attitude toward information which is already public and should properly be public. Governments by their very nature tend to be more protective in respect of information in the public sector and more contemptuous of the right to privacy of information in the private sector.

I was interested, when doing some research for the debate today, to read the following from an excellent book by David Wise, entitled "The Politics of Lying";

... when information which properly belongs to the public is systematically withheld by those in power, the people soon become ignorant of their own affairs, distrustful of those who manage them, and—eventually—incapable of determining their own destinies.

The irony of that statement is that the author was former President Nixon of the United States. This is one of the facts of life, and the speech of the hon. member for Welland has made former President Nixon look extremely progressive in his viewpoint.

We had an experience just yesterday of the government House leader, the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Sharp), specifically refusing a motion proposed by my colleague, the hon. member for Rocky Mountain (Mr. Clark), seconded by myself, which would have given parliament the opportunity to have some parliamentary over-view of information which is classified as secret by the government. The government refused to have the House leaders get together to consider a mechanism for parliamentary over-view. Later in the day the Acting Prime Minister, the same man, had the gall to tell the House of Commons that it was improper then for the House of Commons to debate matters like this in a public forum. In other words, it could not be debated in private because the government refused to set up the mechanism to consider this, and it could not be debated in public because the government felt this information should not be made public. Certainly from my point of view that graphically illustrates the attitude of the government toward secrecy. Mr. Speaker, I see that it is six o'clock.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hour appointed for the consideration of private members' business has now expired. It being six o'clock, I do now leave the chair until eight o'clock this evening.

At six o'clock the House took recess.

AFTER RECESS

The House resumed at 8 p.m.

NORTHERN CANADA POWER COMMISSION ACT AMENDMENTS TO CONSTITUTION AND POWERS OF COMMISSION

The House resumed consideration of Bill C-13, to amend the Northern Canada Power Commission Act, as reported (without amendment) from the Standing Committee on