

Income Tax Act Amendment

tax purposes, persons other than authorized collectors may have access to income tax information. I can assure the hon. member that the fact that the same number is used has nothing to do with access to information. In other words an employee of the Department of National Revenue not concerned with the administration of income tax could not obtain information about a taxpayer's income simply because the taxpayer used with respect to his income tax the same number he used for the Canada Pension Plan.

I am afraid a sort of mythology has grown up around this subject. There would be no difference if instead of using numbers we could use names. If there is any concern about numbers, that concern ought to extend to names also. After all, we use identical names on different forms; why not use identical numbers, if it is the same person. The fact that information is now kept in machines does not, I am assured by officials to whom I have written and to whom I have talked, affect the availability of income tax information to anyone other than authorized persons.

Mr. Olson: I appreciate what the minister says, but he has not really answered the question. When these discs, drums, tapes or whatever they are, are used, will there be any cross-reference with respect to information. In other words, will the income tax information and other Department of National Revenue information be kept completely separate? Will the information to do with identical numbers be compared? If the information is not to be compared, identical numbers need not be used.

I am told that using identical numbers would mean a great deal of administrative convenience. Will the information to do with income tax be compared with other information? Will there be any cross-comparison of information on file? If not, I see no great advantage to having identical numbers.

Will the numbers be kept on the same discs, film, or tape, or will they be kept separately? Frankly I cannot accept the analogy the minister drew with respect to electronic files and other files. Surely information entering the Department of National Revenue, and being filed on its files, is not made available to other branches of the department. Information is kept physically separate. The question is, will information be separated in the department if income tax information and other information is listed under the same number and kept on the same tape.

[Mr. Sharp.]

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Chairman, I am no greater expert on these machines than is the hon. member for Medicine Hat, but I am assured that the files are kept quite separate and are not available to any officials other than those engaged in the collection of taxes. Indeed, the problem that he is concerned with would have arisen if the machines had been more ingenious and could read names as well as numbers. Unfortunately they cannot read names; as a result we have had to assign numbers. If names were capable of being distinguished by the machines we should not have had to resort to a numbers method. Some day perhaps machines will be able to distinguish groups of letters in such a way that we can do away altogether with numbers. We shall then have exactly the same problem that we now have. I can assure the hon. member that if this government is in office it will be as scrupulous as it has been in the past in maintaining inviolable the secrecy of the income tax return.

Mr. Olson: I have another question, Mr. Chairman. I understand that there will be a central data processing centre in which there will be stored computer memory banks. Can the minister assure me that none of these files will be compared by the machine, that the machines will not be programmed to compare, say, income tax files and other files that may be brought to some data processing centre?

• (8:30 p.m.)

Mr. Sharp: Even if all this data were to be processed on the same machines I could give an assurance that the information would not be available to any unauthorized persons. But it is my understanding that not even the same machines would be used. Special computers are being used by the Department of National Revenue and the department does not depend upon central computing devices.

Mr. MacInnis (Cape Breton South): The minister has told us why numbers are necessary. He told us that these machines can read only numbers, and that he wants to keep up to date. It is not the case that these machines can read only numbers. Is the minister aware that electronic computers are available which can work from the written word as well as from numbers? Only last night an authority from the Post Office Department stated that the department would avail itself of electronic computers capable of operating from the written word.