

Disclosure of Government Information

Mr. James Hugh Faulkner (Parliamentary Secretary to Secretary of State): Mr. Speaker, like the hon. member for Sarnia (Mr. Cullen), I came here primarily prepared to discuss the merits or demerits of Sir John A. Macdonald Day. I think it demonstrates the tremendous flexibility hon. members on this side of the House possess, that changes in the matters to be discussed as listed on the Order Paper do not interfere with the speeches we make.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Faulkner: Our interest in Sir John A. Macdonald demonstrates the rather non-partisan approach that we have taken to politics on this side of the House.

I was interested in the comments of the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) and the hon. member for Surrey (Mr. Mather). It seems to me that where I would essentially disagree with the hon. member for Peace River is that his concern is almost exclusively a concern for more information or greater access to information for Members of Parliament. It seems to me that we are a very small group, and that if there is a problem in this area, and I think there is, it is not a problem of any magnitude or seriousness. The problem really is a matter of access to information at the general public's level. In so far as I can understand the purport of this bill—I share the view of the hon. member for Sarnia—I think the explanatory note is probably the clearest part because it seems to attempt to deal with this particular problem.

Even if we accept this as being something that we can usefully do in this House, that is, make information more generally available to the public, it does not go far enough. The greatest improvement regarding the general problem of public participation in public affairs can best be brought about by providing enough information to enable intelligent participation on the part of the public. If that is to take place, far more radical changes than this bill offers will have to take place, and far more radical developments will have to be undertaken involving public financing of experimental organizations for citizen groups. When that happens and we get the response, when there are citizens groups so formed, with the federal government involved in financing some of these projects, we shall see the true measure of concern shared by this House with regard to meaningful participation by citizens of our country in the political process.

Mr. Reid: Pure hogwash.

Mr. Faulkner: The hon. member for Kenora-Rainy River (Mr. Reid) says it is hogwash.

Mr. Baldwin: He took the words out of my mouth.

Mr. Faulkner: Probably that is the finest contribution the hon. member has made for a long time in this House.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[Mr. Cullen.]

Mr. Faulkner: I contend that if before now citizens groups have not developed in Kenora-Rainy River, after hearing the hon. member's remark they will.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Reid: More hogwash.

Mr. Faulkner: At least the hon. member is consistent. The traditional pattern in this country and in almost all other countries has been that the electoral system has sort of thrown up a group of individuals through the electoral process who, somehow, feel themselves charged with governing this country but really, without reference except in a most cursory and superficial way, to the public at large. These individuals operate with the technocrats who have made their way through the public service through the various examination processes and, together, as a sort of elite operation things are run. That is going to change.

Mr. Reid: We do not do it very well.

Mr. Faulkner: The hon. member for Kenora-Rainy River who is making a speech by way of asides now has added that we do not do it very well. I disagree. In terms of making this concept operate, we have been successful. The problem with the system is that it does not involve the public in a meaningful way in the decision-making process. I will deal with that matter. This bill is inadequate in that way as well as being inadequate in ways in which hon. members have discussed. Its inadequacies lie in the fact that it does not deal with this fundamental problem. It does not go far enough.

There is, first of all, the right to know. I think Information Canada, despite the rather cynical reception it has been given by the opposition, is an important step in the right direction and no doubt will make a contribution and constitute an improvement.

Mr. Baldwin: It is not a step in the right direction; it is a plunge.

Mr. Faulkner: I submit it is an important step in the right direction. I am prepared to watch it carefully, because I think everyone on this side of the House will agree that it is the type of operation which can be open to abuse.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Faulkner: Yet I think the concept is right. I do not know how many hon. members have been to see the new offices on Slater Street. Information facilities are available there, and what is being attempted is a constructive and positive step in providing the public with information so that the public can intelligently respond to the political problems confronting it. A characteristic of