

Social Insurance Numbers

What we have seen happen is that a program that was justified by this government on the basis that its use would be limited, and strictly limited to specific instances stated by the government, has been broadly expanded so it is used widely within the federal government, other levels of government and within the private sector. What we are finding is that without a conscious policy decision being made, without debate taking place within parliament to decide to issue social insurance numbers to all citizens, we are backing into the system through the back door and citizens are being forced of necessity to take these numbers out—not by statute but by circumstance.

What more scathing condemnation could there be of the irrelevance of parliament, or of the lack of direction being given by government, than to find that that sort of decision and that sort of circumstance takes place not by design but by accident, and by indifference on the part of the government?

When the minister spoke a few moments ago he stressed the fact that within the central index registry of social insurance numbers the sort of personal information that is included is very limited. Of course, that is correct within the central index; but what the minister did not mention was the scope of government data gathering activities in which dossiers are assembled on individual citizens which reach into every aspect of their private lives.

I think it would be useful to share with the House something of the scope of government data gathering. In 1974 I put two questions on the order paper asking what sort of computerized data banks were in existence at the time. This information is dated at this time, but I think it is useful to take a look at the answers I received.

First of all, all government employees have files kept on them, most of which are computerized. Some departments made provision for their employees to see the files; others at that time did not. The Department of National Revenue reported that a record is maintained for each individual required by law to file a T1 return. At the present time records are maintained for approximately 12.8 million employees. There are some 250,000 corporation tax returns and some 770,000 employers who are making payroll deductions from employees.

The Ministry of Transport has a computerized data bank for some 75,000 pilot licence holders.

The Department of National Health and Welfare has a computer data bank of families and children entitled to family allowances, including parents and children up to 19 years of age. There are some 3.5 million families and some 7 million children who have personal files in that data bank. There are some 1.8 million recipients of old age pensions and some 1.1 million recipients of guaranteed income supplement recorded in the computerized data bank. The department also holds files on some 10.3 million contributors to the Canada Pension Plan.

The Department of External Affairs also has a new data bank which was established in 1974, in which at that time it had only 600,000 names, but it was planned to include some 3.5 million people by its fifth year. Also, some 30,000 people

[Mr. Beatty.]

whose passports are being processed at any one time and some 20,000 people who are not to be issued passports or whose passports have been reported lost or found, are recorded in the data bank.

The Canadian Wheat Board keeps computerized files for some 240,000 producers whose names appear on Wheat Board delivery permits.

The names of some 43,000 children of up to one year of age born with birth defects in New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia since 1967 are also recorded, as is the following information: hospital number, the serial number, the name, the date of birth, the sex, the birth weight, the gestation period, the place of admission or death, the residence code, the place of residence and the types of abnormalities.

Obviously this sort of information which is being kept by the government on individual citizens and their private lives is expanded day by day. The government has finally published a list of some 1,500 data banks in which personal information is held on individual citizens by the federal government. It is not required that in this catalogue the government reveal whether or not the information that is included in the personal file of an individual includes the social insurance number. It is not required either that they indicate to the public whether the number can be used as an access number to give a person access to a computerized file. We know that in many of the instances reported in the book, if an individual even wants to see his own file he is required by the government to first supply a social insurance number.

● (1652)

Last year I put a question on the order paper asking for a complete listing of government data banks, including personally identifiable information about individuals in which the social insurance number may be used to gain access to the computerized file. I asked about the nature of the information, the number of individuals who were on file, and about what other ways, beyond using the social insurance number, that the file could be accessed. The response I received was that the government did not have that information and that perhaps they would be able to provide it by the fall. That information was not included in this index of data banks.

At this point no one in Canada knows the extent to which the social insurance number is used within government as a computerized file. The minister stressed in his comments that we have privacy legislation in this country as well as a Human Rights Commissioner. It is worth noticing, however, that some of the most scathing condemnations of the government have come from the Human Rights Commissioner, Mr. Gordon Fairweather.

Mr. Maine: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Because of the short length of time available for debate this afternoon and the number of members wishing to speak, I wonder if the hon. member for Wellington-Grey-Dufferin-Waterloo (Mr. Beatty) would be kind and generous enough to keep his