

*Government Orders*

I wish to speak to one section of the amendments before us today, and that is the merit principle. I have risen before in this House to speak to this bill and I am rising again mainly to express in the strongest terms my opposition to the proposed changes to the merit principle of the Public Service act.

As a member for Parliament for a constituency that has a large number of public servants I obviously have received many telephone calls and many letters expressing concerns to me. There is a deep sense of despair among public servants in Canada. There are so many problems with Bill C-26 that it strikes at the very fundamental principles of our Public Service. The merit principle probably is foremost in the minds of those who oppose the bill.

Bill C-26 erodes the merit principle. It would do away with the principle that was established to stop rampant political administrative patronage and assure Canadians of a non-partisan Public Service in which employment and opportunities were open to all, based on competence, not favouritism. The merit principle also ensured that only the best qualified and most competent persons would get appointed to positions within the Public Service.

This has been the cornerstone of the Public Service for many years. Scholars have talked of the benefits credited to the merit principle. It is a principle that has been awarded with high praise. It has become a sacred institution within Canada, admired both at home and abroad. Yet this bill would change this principle from a sacred cow to a sacrificial lamb.

What is at stake here is the quality and efficiency of our Public Service. No longer will the Public Service settle for the best qualified person to fill a position, instead a minimum set of standards or qualifications can be set, and all a person needs to do is meet those minimum qualifications.

What sort of standards are we setting to do this? What sort of people are we going to attract to the Public Service? With this new bill we will cease to have the very best representing us and caring for our country here in Canada. Our Public Service is still recovering from its first strike in Canadian history. Morale is low within the Public Service right now. Imagine how low it will be once its employees have to work with or under people who are only second or third best for that position.

In fact, Bill C-26 will act as a deterrent to the best qualified people, the cream of the crop. It certainly was the cream of the crop that we have been able to get for this good many years. Why would the best want to work in an organization in which mediocrity was promoted.

Bill C-26 opens up the opportunity for political patronage. I can see no other reason for it. Why else would the federal government want to do away with the merit principle? Does the federal government place such little faith and importance in the Public Service? Does it really want to put all its friends and cronies into the Public Service for the little favours they have done? Does the present government plan to be around long enough to implement the patronage plans? I certainly hope not.

Bill C-26 leaves all but the original hiring and limited promotions to the discretion of managers who set those minimum standards. Hiring and promotions therefore are open to the whims, likes, dislikes, favouritism and personal biases of the manager. This creates a dangerous potential barrier for women in the Public Service in particular. It is human nature for the person doing the hiring to look for similar characteristics in the potential employee.

This fact, along with the fact that most managers are men, allows for the likelihood that women will find it even tougher to find promotion within the Public Service.

*Beneath the Veneer*, the report on the task force on barriers to women in the Public Service, documented that attitudes are the main barrier to equality of opportunity. These attitudes often unconsciously keep women, as well as visible minorities, persons with disabilities and aboriginal Canadians, at the lower echelons of the Public Service. Is the federal government prepared to add to this problem? It sure looks that way to me.

Further to the merit issue is the issue of deployment. Clause 22 of this bill gives deputy heads the exclusive right to permanently transfer staff without competition. This transfer or deployment cannot be appealed. The only recourse is to complain to the same deputy head, and ask for an investigation, making that person both the judge and the jury.

On January 30, 1992 the Federal Court of Canada struck down an Order in Council giving deputy ministers the freedom to transfer any employee because "it departs substantially from the merit principle".