

Employment Support Bill

I have here the last report of the Economic Council of Canada "Design for Decision-Making". One of the strongest and most useful recommendations contained in that report appears on page 231, and I quote part of it. I concur in it, and I offer it as an additional reason to hon. members opposite who may see the light and support this motion. It reads:

In chapter 5, we emphasized the need for a more open approach by all governments, and public boards and agencies—

Which is what we will have here, a public board and agency, particularly public because it will be dominated by appointees of the government.

—particularly in relation to information about government policy issues. This point was made by the Task Force on Government Information which asked for new government policies reflecting "the right of Canadians to full, objective and timely information and the obligation of the State to provide such information about its programs and policies—"

• (5:00 p.m.)

On this particular issue, Mr. Speaker, in relation to this bill the government waffles and procrastinates in the House, and waffles and procrastinates outside the House. Representatives of the media have no more success than we have in getting the minister, the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) or any member of the government to tell us what they are going to do, how they are going to do it, and why.

The need for a means by which this information can be secured is essential to the effective operation of this bill. The hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert) very ingeniously has fashioned at least one means of securing that information. I continue with the quotation from the Economic Council Report:

One of the important considerations reinforcing "the right of the people to know"—

I would like that to be engraven on the hearts of the members opposite.

—is that many Canadians, singly and in groups, are making it clear that they want to play a larger, more active and direct role in influencing the decisions made by their governments.

If the minister were to adopt the very useful and very valid motion put forward by the hon. member for Edmonton West for the establishment of this means of securing information, this would be a way by which Canadians, acting through their representatives in this House, would be able to play a larger and more direct role in influencing the decisions made by their government with regard to the difficulties of our trading community in Canada brought about as a result of the action which has been initiated in the United States.

As governments at all levels become increasingly sensitive and responsive to this development in the democratic process, the need for more factual and analytical information as a basis for constructive and relevant public comment becomes more urgent. In past years, the timely publication of commission and task force reports, the use of "White Papers", and studies containing factual and analytical appraisals of alternative policy options have contributed to the quality of discussion about public policy. Much more can be done, however, at every level of government to use published official documents.

I ask Your Honour to cast your mind ahead to what would happen if the motion proposed by my hon. friend were accepted. There would be an inquiry in this House,

and the government would have to initiate a debate in the House. The onus would be upon the government, as it always must be, to justify the passage of the order in council in question. In order to do that it is essential that it should have adequate public support. The government would then be compelled to release the facts and information in order to secure that form of support. Without this the government operates secretly, in darkest holes. No knowledge is made available until the matter has become a *fait accompli*. I suggest that that is not good enough in this day and age.

I will now conclude because I understand there are many other hon. members who wish to speak. I am also sure that the minister will want to make a defence, although he will have great trouble doing so. It will take him at least the amount of time allotted to him to start a defence. Finally, I quote the last paragraph in the recommendations from the Economic Council Report:

The Task Force discussed practices in a number of countries. They did not, and we do not wish to, make specific legislative recommendations in this regard. We would, however, endorse their conclusion that "Canada must devise some federal-provincial means to guarantee that the citizens get unvarnished facts about the activities of their governments (and) . . . clarify rules for fast and efficient access to government information." This is clearly a difficult and delicate subject, but one to which governments must give increased attention. We therefore recommend:

—that governments proceed as quickly as is prudently possible to clarify the rights (and limitations) of the public to access to government information, and to ensure that bureaucratic or political constraints do not operate so as to inhibit such access.

I have been after the Minister of Justice (Mr. Turner). I have been after the Prime Minister. I have made a lot of suggestions, and I even placed before the House a private member's public bill, based to some extent upon the Right to Information Bill of the United States, and based to some extent on the practice in effect in Sweden and other European countries. I admit that it is not perfect. Not being a member of the government I am prepared to admit imperfections, and I am perfectly prepared to see the bill improved. But it is a start.

It is about time that, with respect to matters of this kind and the whole gamut of government activities, the public was told what is happening. The secrecy, the hiding from people, the refusal to divulge information all are making people cynical and suspicious about the whole processes of government. It is for that reason, as well as the others I have advanced, that I would urge hon. members opposite to support this particular motion standing in the name of the hon. member for Edmonton West.

Hon. Jean-Luc Pepin (Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce): Mr. Speaker, one of the conditions for a good debate is that there should be good arguments on both sides. I am not willing to say that the arguments presented by the opposition this afternoon were not responsible ones. As a matter of fact, members of the opposition have a great advantage over me in that they can afford to be more eloquent, more passionate, being on the side of Caesar's wife. I, too, would prefer to be on the side of Caesar's wife rather than to be on Caesar's side.

This motion has given the opposition a nice occasion to talk about the sanctity of the law, the rights of Parliament, and the dangers of strong government. It also gave them a chance even to talk about the government's arro-