

tion bill of that time was introduced in this House. He said that the starting point for a freedom of information law is a freedom of information attitude. We can all take a lesson from those words, and realize that free information and free access to information is not something that can be written on a piece of paper. It must exist in the spirit of the government of the day. As the Leader of the Opposition said, the government must have a freedom of information attitude.

The history of freedom of information in British Commonwealth nations is relatively recent and evolving. Some provinces of Canada have enacted freedom of information legislation, but it is still in the very beginnings of its development. Members ought to view the bill now before us in that light. We cannot expect it to be a perfect document, but we hope it evidences a proper attitude on the part of the government. We hope that in committee and in future years in this House of Commons and elsewhere the government will move to remedy any defects in this bill which are bound to show up in the future as it is administered and applied.

I should, as others have done, pay tribute to the work done in the past by members of this House with respect to freedom of information. Of course, the person who first comes to mind is the former member for Peace River, Ged Baldwin, who served in this House for many years. His major concern was freedom of information.

Let me quote very briefly one of the remarks he made with respect to the need for freedom of information legislation. He said it was necessary to break the long and encrusted tradition of secrecy which has been the ruling fashion of the bureaucracy since the first day.

I also want to pay tribute to the hon. member for Nepean-Carleton (Mr. Baker), who stood in this House in the fall of 1979 and introduced Bill C-15, which was a true freedom of information bill. I want to note for the record that his efforts and those of his colleagues at that time were lauded by the Canadian Bar Association. I quote from what was said about the efforts with respect to Bill C-15:

The strength of the legislation lies in its recognition of the principle that government information should be available to the public, that exemptions should be limited and specific, and that the exceptions should be reviewed independently of government.

That is the pith and substance of freedom of information legislation. With that in mind, I want to note the subtle difference between the legislation I have been describing and the legislation now before us, which by its name merely provides for access to information. There is a real difference in the philosophy involved in the two terms.

Freedom of information represents a commitment to the right of members of Parliament and citizens generally to have access to government information. It is in the nature of a right. Access to information, on the other hand, merely provides a mechanism by which citizens, members of Parliament and others can get at the information they seek within the very limited framework of the access to information legislation. We should be careful to note the difference in philosophy. We hope that the government during the course of this debate, in

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committee or at some subsequent time, will recognize there is a very substantive difference between merely granting access to information as opposed to establishing and enshrining the principle of freedom of information.

What is at stake in this matter for the public? Information is the lifeblood of knowledge. It has been said many times that it is knowledge which sets society free. We ought not to take lightly this type of legislation because it does not have an immediate effect on the economic or other aspects of our national life with which we are perhaps more concerned on a day to day basis.

Another important feature of broad interest to the public is the right to privacy. Under English common law and the common law which prevails in most of the provinces of Canada, the right to privacy has not been as well developed as it is in many national jurisdictions. We look forward to greater recognition of that kind of right and the enshrinement of that kind of right to privacy in legislation which applies across this land. I believe it is the right of every person to keep his or her own personal records and information, and only in very limited circumstances should other persons, government agencies, corporations and the like have that personal information.

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Not everyone believes in this concept of freedom of information, nor does everybody believe in this right to privacy. In particular, governments that seek more to enslave than to liberate their populations are opposed to this kind of legislation. This has extended even beyond those government which perhaps do not have the democratic way that has evolved in Canada through our long association with the traditions of Great Britain and the British Commonwealth; this principle has also been neglected by some of our democratic states. They seek to keep in the hands of government and government officials information which ought to be disclosed to the public. I think we need only look at the unfortunate Watergate matter. Fortunately it did not occur in this country. It occurred in the United States. Just that kind of thinking was involved. There was a tendency among government officers involved in that case to cover up, smarm over the events that took place and keep information from the public. That is why in some cases governments, even of a democratic kind, are inclined not to allow the right of access to information because that could cause to be disclosed the kinds of improper activities which were prevalent in the Watergate matter. Before we look askance at our great neighbour to the south, let us remind ourselves that this very kind of thing occurs in Canada. It would not be proper to take a superior attitude, but to learn from their experience.

May I just briefly review some of the details of this legislation in order to indicate the kinds of concerns I have and I think the kind all members of this House and all Canadians ought to consider in respect of this measure. First of all, it does provide the right of access to government information, but that information is in the form of records kept by government institutions. While this appears at first blush to be very broad,