

Social Insurance Numbers

Privacy, like many of the other attributes of freedom, can be easiest appreciated when it no longer exists. A complacent citizenry only becomes outraged about its loss of integrity and individuality when the aggrandizement of power in the government becomes excessive. By then, it may be too late.

Yet, Mr. Speaker, as I rise today to speak on the need for public debate on a matter of great significance for personal privacy, namely, the use and extension of social insurance numbers, I cannot help but feel that the complacency does not lie so much with the citizenry but rather with the government and its unwillingness to engage the Canadian people in such a debate.

Traditionally, Mr. Speaker, the recourse for the citizen, if he felt abused or contraried, was parliament. As the scene of a continuing electoral battle, parliament was the privileged spot for debates on all major issues and trends. Furthermore, parliament guaranteed the citizen the opportunity to bring his grievances to the attention of the Crown. Indeed, one of the major precepts of parliamentary tradition states "grievance before supply".

In recent years, however, especially the administration in the Trudeau years, there has been a growing public awareness that the role of parliament has been downplayed. The attitude of the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) to the decorum of the House, both in his many linguistic profanities and in his opinions of members; the scandalous consideration of estimates; the increasing size of the Prime Minister's office; the lack of attention and abandonment of any attempt to revitalize the committee system; the refusal to introduce freedom of information laws, all these factors have tended to downplay the role of parliament.

It is no wonder, Mr. Speaker, that the ordinary citizen has little faith in seeing his grievances solved, or in hoping to stop trends which are disconcerting to him. In the case of social insurance numbers, this has been obvious.

● (1552)

The extension of SIN has occurred without parliamentary debate or a full examination of the merits and consequences. Despite government guarantees to limit the use of SIN, successive Liberal governments have forged ahead, surreptitiously but purposefully, to promote the extension of SIN within the government. This expansion within the federal government has been paralleled with increasing use of the SIN within provincial governments and in the private sector, partly due to its convenience and economy.

Yet parliament, the traditional scene for debate and examination, has never been seized with the issue. Liberal governments have refused to make the extension of SIN an issue to discuss. Part of the problem arises from the long reign of power by Liberal governments. The present government has become insensitive and complacent to the needs of the Canadian people. The government does not see the dangers or understand the issues involved with the extension of SIN.

The response of this government to our parliamentary inquiries on the use and extension of SIN has been typical of this

[Mr. Hnatyshyn.]

government's insensitivity to real worries expressed by concerned citizens and by the opposition. I have some examples.

On October 27, 1978, I asked the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Miss Bégin) what was the government's policy on the extension of social insurance numbers. She replied, and I quote:

Mr. Speaker, that question is very bizarre . . . It is quite in order that in the future social insurance numbers will be used more and more. More computers are being used in every department, whether provincial or federal.

Obviously, only a minister totally unaware of the ordinary citizen's concern could qualify such a question as bizarre. Furthermore, like many Canadians, I do not recall authorizing the government to expand the use of social insurance numbers.

On November 2, 1978, in response to a question from the hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath), the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Mr. Cullen) replied:

—a program can be better administered as a result of using numbers, whether it is for income tax, bank accounts or whatever. I indicated in my answer that as far as the use of SIN numbers is concerned, we do not encourage their use outside the federal government.

While admitting the dangers of extended use, he did not feel it necessary to limit the use of social insurance numbers in the federal government.

On November 3, 1978, when it was pointed out to the Minister of Employment and Immigration by the hon. member for Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain (Mr. Hamilton) that SIN was used beyond the three fields to which parliament has given legislative authority and was used by the Solicitor General (Mr. Blais) in connection with firearms acquisition, the minister did not deny it.

On the same day, the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker) raised a question of privilege. He contended that, by forcing Canadians to present social insurance numbers in order to cash their savings bonds, a form of intimidation was being used to force Canadians to get a SIN number. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance (Mr. Martin) answered that Canadians had ample warning by means of a press release dated June 2, 1977. This government, Mr. Speaker, acts so smugly that it presumes that its press releases supersede the importance of parliamentary debate.

Furthermore, on October 31, the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert) introduced a private member's bill to remove the necessity of presenting a social insurance number in order to cash Canada Savings Bonds. Once again, the government's attitude reflected its smug insensitivity. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance summed up the government's feeling on the subject as follows:

We are living in a computer age whether we like it or not . . . Everybody works by means of identification of accounts through a number system. This is simply done to ease administration, to facilitate the handling of thousands and thousands of accounts, and to simply make things easier in terms of administration of many thousands of documents.

For this government, accustomed to the bureaucratic routine and insulated from the concerns of individuals, the issue is seen solely in terms of administrative convenience. They do not