

The Hon. the Speaker pro tem: There have been too many questions asked of the honourable senator. The Leader of the Government should not be interrupted so often so that we might have an orderly debate.

Hon. Mr. Flynn: It will be much duller.

Hon. Mr. Martin: But it will be more orderly. It will reflect that the Leader of the Opposition is capable of making a speech as well as always trying to penetrate an observation in order to try to destroy what is being said by whoever happens to be speaking.

In the same category follows recommendation 6, which has to do with the mobile information program mentioned a moment ago by Senator O'Leary.

● (1440)

The mobile information officer program has proven that it does not require vast funding to communicate. This is where Information Canada takes issue with the report itself.

Hon. Mr. O'Leary: May I ask the Leader of the Government a question? What does the committee mean when it says:

The Mobile Information Officer program appears to the committee to have developed into a social welfare service.

What were they doing?

Hon. Mr. Martin: That is the argument I am dealing with now. I am saying that this is another recommendation of the committee with which the government does not agree. The information officers in charge of these mobile information units in Nova Scotia and Manitoba have handled inquiries from individuals who were, for a long time, without this type of federal service. But beyond the economics of the one-on-one contacts of these information officers, which appears to be the primary concern of the committee, these mobile officers have worked with more than 300 groups and thus were in contact with many times this number of individuals each time. Also, they have had free access to local news media of all kinds, thus reaching thousands of people. They have participated in fairs and exhibits, representing many departments, and they have given those departments access to, and feedback from, regions of those provinces that were virtually beyond the reach of traditional information techniques.

Information Canada does not only produce the information and pamphlets which we receive. This very program that is criticized in the report of the committee, and inferentially by Senator O'Leary, is, I think, one of the positive achievements of Information Canada.

Hon. Mr. O'Leary: What about the term "social welfare service?" What is meant by that?

Hon. Mr. Martin: Well, I do not agree that it is a social welfare service.

Hon. Mr. O'Leary: Does the government have no control at all over these people?

Hon. Mr. Martin: The committee has the right, in criticizing Information Canada, to use the language that it has. The mobile officer costs on an individual contact basis over a six-month period were approximately \$2.75 per contact. I am now dealing with the alleged cost of this

[Hon. Mr. Flynn.]

program. The report states that the number of mobile information officers would proliferate. Estimates are that not more than 60 are required on a national scale, since they are used on a priority basis and not on a province-wide basis. In fact, the number of mobile information officers in Manitoba has already been reduced. So that there is not a disposition, as is suggested by Senator O'Leary, to multiply the costs of these units, the value of which he greatly questions.

The expenditure for this service is minimal when one looks at its dividends. Its clients, for example, are more than 90 per cent in favour of its continuance. Go to Manitoba or Saskatchewan and ask the recipients of this service whether they wish to have it abandoned. I do not think any service of Information Canada has been more strongly approved than has this mobile information program. The clients of this service, of course, are the public and the federal departments. It can be further suggested that the mobile officers more than recover their costs through savings to other federal departments for whom the mobile service functions. This mobile information service, in my judgment, should continue.

Dealing with recommendation 7, the regional offices of Information Canada perform a much larger role than the committee thought useful. These regional offices provide, for example, communications assistance and feedback to federal departments on request. To eliminate this role would clearly necessitate an increase in the regional staffs of other federal departments and duplication of effort. Since this larger role was undertaken with the support of the departments themselves, realizing its worth and economies, it seems to me that a strong case for its continuance has been made.

With regard to recommendation 8, the committee has kind words for the inquiry service. However, it recommends that it be limited to 11 centres. This recommendation, I would suggest, should not be inflexible. Strong continuing demand for the service from one part or another of the country should at least be a matter for argument, should at least be open to consideration.

Then there is the question of increased telephone contacts through the use of special lines such as Zenith. This is worthy of considerable attention. However, these phone lines should not be regarded as constituting an entire system, nor as a replacement for mobile officers but rather as a supplementary tool.

There are many unresolved questions concerning such lines, among them being the cost. The figures in the report show a cost in excess of \$8 per call, with extra staff included, versus \$2.75 per contact under the mobile service previously mentioned.

It might be more reasonable to utilize community resources such as community information centres. Information Canada is identifying these centres and supplying them with federal information. One by one they are being tied into community networks, and the tying has been done, to a large part, by the mobile information officers.

Senator O'Leary says he does not like Information Canada. That is his position. There are many people in Canada who, because we have not been trained to have such a branch of the public service, find it difficult to