

content of processed foods, corporate product and merchandising practices, the on-time performance and safety records of airlines, and so forth. The department of health, education and welfare makes inspections of federally supported nursing homes. The department of agriculture has data on pesticides and the purity and quality of meat and poultry. Housing and urban development makes FHA mortgage appraisals and monitors the practices of many large housing developers. The national highway traffic safety administration has safety and efficiency information on all makes of cars. The general services administration tests a wide variety of consumer products that are used by government agencies.

The freedom of information act in the United States provides in essence that any person has the right of access to, and can receive copies of, any document, file or other record in the possession of any federal agency or department subject to nine specific exemptions. Government employees face the possibility of sanctions if they arbitrarily or capriciously withhold information. In addition the act permits agencies to disclose records, even though they fall within an exemption, when there is no compelling public interest for withholding.

I am grateful for the opportunity recently afforded me as a member of the Standing Committee on Regulations and other Statutory Instruments to spend some time in Washington where meetings were held with various government departments and agencies deeply involved in the implementation process of the freedom of information act. The American experience has identified problems and pitfalls which we would do well to avoid. However, even in the short term in which the legislation as amended has been in effect, it has had a salutary effect on bureaucratic practices and abuses previously in existence.

As a result of the freedom of information act there is a fast growing tendency in the United States on the part of the bureaucracy to declassify documents at the time of their genesis, and thus in effect get rid of the documents by consigning them to the archives where they are totally accessible to the public, in the process relieving themselves of future problems in connection with people seeking access to such documents. In one case they point to an example of a body of documents containing some 45,000 pages, all of which had originally been classified as confidential. On re-examination, however, in the face of requests for access, it was found possible almost overnight to declassify 35,000 of the 45,000 pages. That is to say, 78 per cent of what had been considered in the first instance to be confidential was found upon reconsideration not to be confidential at all and was therefore declassified. Ultimately we were told that well over 90 per cent of this particular body of information was declassified.

This demonstrates, I suggest, the tendency of the bureaucracy to treat as confidential a vast body of material that is not really confidential at all and ought to be accessible to the citizens of the country. Let us not forget that it is the taxpayers who support the bureaucracy and for whose benefit the bureaucracy exists.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would like simply to re-emphasize the need for access to information legislation. As was said by the Attorney General of the United States in 1968:

Statutory Instruments

If government is to be truly of, by and for the people, the people must know in detail the activities of government. Nothing so diminishes democracy as secrecy. Self-government, the maximum participation of the citizenry in affairs of state, is meaningful only with an informed public. How can we govern ourselves if we do not know how we govern?

Now in 1976, when government affects each individual in so many ways, it is more important than ever that the right of the people to know the actions of their governments be secure. As government secrecy grows with the size of its operations, so does public mistrust of that government. Mistrust of government by the Canadian people is seemingly at a high point and it is most important that this trend be reversed. As the situation now stands, there is nothing that guarantees members of parliament access to the information which is needed for us to carry out our responsibilities.

I would like to quote from an article written by Harrison Wellford entitled "Rights of people—the Freedom of Information Act". He wrote:

In a democratic government, information—Especially timely information is the currency of power. The relationship between free access to information and responsible government is direct. Excessive secrecy blocks the citizen's ability to hold officials accountable.

Government must be aware in its decision-making that it is accountable to the people. It is my belief that Bill C-225 would go some distance toward impressing this fact upon cabinet ministers and civil servants alike, and thus improve the quality of our Canadian democracy.

[*Translation*]

Miss Monique Bégin (Parliamentary Secretary to the Secretary of State for External Affairs): Mr. Speaker, about the same time last year, the House discussed and rejected an opposition motion which accused the government of being too secretive. This phrase impressed me from the very first time I was elected because it is one of the usual charges made in the House against the government side, and echoed by political commentators.

Therefore I wondered to what extent this accusation was justified particularly because the public at large and the people who elect us generally, whatever our political affiliation may be, mostly express their frustrations in regard to government departments and agencies by saying that they cannot cut through the red tape, that they get lost in the bureaucratic maze. Government officials are not interested in their problems and concerns. People say: They don't care, and never will: They are too secretive. It remains that—and the previous speaker just said so—we come up against so many barriers when we look for some very basic information, often to answer requests by those same constituents, that I got to accept openly the idea that many data kept under secrecy should be publicized, either at the very time when they mean something to the citizens and their elected members, or directly 20, 30, or 70 years later, according to the regulations of the Canadian Archives.

In this regard, I appreciated the declaration of the member for Fundy-Royal (Mr. Fairweather) who emphasized the continuous process of informing the citizens, as opposed to releasing information during election peaks. In other words, I can summarize this first comment by saying that this information will have a certain value at a certain time, that is when it comes off the press, not six months, three or five years after a parliamentary crisis or election