

Statements by Ministers

General's statement. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Minister for providing the Opposition with a copy of his remarks in advance of his statement in the House. It is a courtesy which members of the Opposition appreciate and indeed require if they are to comment in an informed manner on various Government initiatives. I would only hope that the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) will in future extend the same courtesy to the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Turner) before he goes on national television to make statements about free trade.

We in the Opposition welcome the initiative which the Solicitor General has taken regarding reforming the Government's security policies. My colleague from York Centre, a former Solicitor General, has commented on a number of occasions on the need to revise the Government's security policies. Indeed, it can probably be said that the Hon. Member for York Centre (Mr. Kaplan) got the ball rolling toward setting in motion the review and reform we now have before us. The reforms we have before us today are in some respect the culmination of significant reforms initiated earlier in this decade by the previous Liberal Government. For instance, the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service Act, which reformed the security service in this country, gave us a much more precise definition of what, in fact, constitutes a threat to the security of Canada.

● (1510)

This is defined as follows: one, espionage or sabotage that is against Canada or is detrimental to the interests of Canada or activities directed toward or in support of such espionage or sabotage; second, foreign influenced activities within or relating to Canada that are detrimental to the interests of Canada and are clandestine or deceptive or involve a threat to any person; third, activities within or relating to Canada directed toward or in support of the threat or use of acts of serious violence against persons or property for the purpose of achieving a political objective within Canada or a foreign state; and fourth, activities directed toward undermining, by covert unlawful acts, or directed toward or intended ultimately to lead to the destruction or overthrow by violence of the constitutionally established system of government in Canada.

Another piece of Liberal reform legislation which has a significant bearing on these new security policies is the access to information and privacy legislation passed by the Trudeau Government in 1983, and currently undergoing a thorough review by the Committee on Justice and Solicitor General. In fact, the access to information legislation forms the basis of this new policy by adopting the same definition of information subject to security classification.

Under this policy announced by the Solicitor General (Mr. Beatty) information will be security classified if it falls into one of the following areas: national defence, international affairs, national security, confidences of Cabinet, federal-provincial affairs, and selected economic interests of Canada.

Of course, the major piece of reform legislation implemented by the former Liberal Government was the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The new security policy has had to take the Charter into account in so far as it respects the rights of the people affected. It has had to take into account that Canadians now have freedom of conscience and religion; freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication; freedom of peaceful assembly; and freedom of association. I am informed by officials in the Department of the Solicitor General that they believe this new policy is in accord with the Charter, and with the equality rights committee's report. Certainly we in the Opposition will follow closely the administration of this policy.

As the Solicitor General pointed out, the policy on security classification is almost as old as I am, going back to 1956. Cabinet Directive 35, which governs the security screening process, dates back to 1963. Indeed, the 1956 policy, which will be replaced under these new initiatives, talks about sealing wax to protect secret papers in transit. In an age when high speed coded electronic messages are, in most cases, standard operating procedures, it is clear that the old security policies are just about as antiquated as the Minister of Justice's new pornography legislation relating to the general definition of pornography.

It is clear that the old procedures had simply broken down. The volume of information being classified is staggering, and the number of security clearances for public servants and contract employees with the federal Government was getting completely out of control. In 1982 there were 76,000 security checks conducted on public servants. In the last fiscal year this number was reduced to 69,000. Officials in the Solicitor General's Department have said that these new policies could reduce the number of security clearances in most Departments by about 25 to 30 per cent. In some Departments, I am told, the figures could even be higher. If that is the case, then it is a welcome development.

In terms of cost alone the old policies placed a heavy burden on the federal treasury. I am told that a standard field investigation for an individual security clearance could cost anywhere between \$1500 and \$4000. With the number of people requiring clearances under the old policies it is evident that not only was it ineffective, it was also costly.

Again, with respect to the reduction in the number of security clearances required, we in the Official Opposition will be watching the numbers carefully in the future to ensure that the new policy is, in fact, having the desired effect.

In conclusion, once again I would like to thank the Solicitor General for providing me with an advanced copy of his policy. We welcome the initiative taken by the Solicitor General. It is the culmination of an effort that began a number of years ago. We all agree that the present system is not adequate and we anxiously await the implementation of this new policy which the Solicitor General has introduced today.