

Income Tax Act Amendment

in the government or anybody else to get information from income tax files.

We now understand computers or electronic devices are going to store these files. If it is true that there is no advantage in having the same number on a person's income tax file as on his social security file, unless it is for purposes of comparison, then I would ask the minister why the same number is retained.

The hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre went on to make a great case that we have numbers attached to us for all sorts of purposes—drivers' licences, marriage certificates, and he even included the numbers on the various credit cards hon. members have. I am not opposed to a number being attached to income tax files. What I am concerned about is that we keep the same number, and therefore presumably the same file, for income tax purposes as for all other accounts in respect to social security.

Therefore, Mr. Chairman, I should like the minister to give the assurance that there is absolutely no intention of using information contained in these files for purposes of comparison with other files. If this is the intention, Mr. Chairman, the minister is violating the income tax law of this country, and I hope that he is not.

Along with this, Mr. Chairman, we must also be given the assurance—I think this we must demand—that the filing system is such that people seeking information by means of the social security number for purposes of old age security, the Canada Pension Plan and for other purposes, will not be able to gain access to information filed in income tax returns. As I say, the problem bothering me is the insistence of the minister on retaining the same number.

An other matter I want to raise is this. I understand a definite pattern is emerging in the assignation of social security numbers at the present time. In other words, by using various combinations of these nine numbers which form your social security number a great deal of information about a particular individual can be gleaned from the way the number is put together. That is what I have been told and I am prepared to verify that statement. This is why I should like to ask the minister whether there is some code or pattern which has been worked out in assigning numbers to various individuals.

● (8:20 p.m.)

Will there be any sequence to things when the applications arrive? Will these nine digits,

these three groups of three numbers that have been assigned to individuals, be arranged in such a way that much information can be gleaned from their arrangement by computing devices? The people of Canada ought to know about this.

I do not suggest that there is anything wrong or sinister about this arrangement; but I do think the minister should answer questions which have been raised. Will these numbers be used in such a way that income tax files will no longer be confidential. Will that confidence be broken?

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Chairman, the hon. member for Medicine Hat has raised a legitimate question, one that I think the committee has every reason to seek reassurance about.

In the interval, since we were last discussing this bill, I have been in touch with officials of the Department of National Revenue and have asked them to assure me that the records of income of taxpayers are maintained as confidentially as they are required to be maintained, and that they are not available through any electronic devices or otherwise to people other than those concerned with the administration of the tax laws. I have this assurance; I will read what the deputy minister of national revenue has advised me. I then propose to discuss one or two questions raised by the hon. member.

The deputy minister of taxation for the Department of National Revenue advises me as follows:

All of a taxpayer's data on the records and files of the taxation division are protected by the secrecy provisions of the Income Tax Act. Any requirement on taxpayers to obtain a social insurance number does not affect the confidentiality of his affairs or the secrecy rules which protect them.

It is untrue to say that tax or other information obtained from any taxpayer would be passed to other departments of government for other purposes if that taxpayer obtains a social insurance number.

My understanding of the reason for having the same number is that it enables one to identify the taxpayer much more accurately than he otherwise might be identified, and that it saves a great deal of administrative trouble.

The social insurance number gives a continuity that is not otherwise available as to the identity of individuals. The hon. member has said he is concerned that, because the same department polices the Canada Pension Plan provisions and the Income Tax Act, and because the same number might be used, say, for the Canada Pension Plan as for income