

Great Slave Lake Railway

ment in 1961 and 1962 and watched ministers of the Crown respond to questions. I watched the dissemination of information in response to notices to produce. Disclosure was a lot fuller and freer than today.

I admit there are abuses in the practice of seeking information and the production of documents. There are abuses on both sides of the House. However, that does not alter the fact that the primary responsibility rests upon the government to disclose, to the fullest extent, facts and information in its possession. These are limits. I have said that. I supported a bill proposed by the hon. member for Souris-White Rock (Mr. Mather) attempting to secure approval of this House on second reading of a bill for freedom of information. I said then, and I repeat now, there are certain areas of national security. There are also criminal offences which may be under investigation and cases involving confidential information gathered by the government with regard to such matters as income tax. However, the government shows no reticence.

A businessman sitting in his office or store day after day receives a voluminous amount of questionnaires from the government which demand, not ask that he fill in the information requested with the penalty of prosecution if he fails. Governments are never hesitant when it comes to demanding information, but it is a horse of a different colour when they are requested to make known facts in their possession. You will never have a free, open and good society when you have a government that is secretive, hides facts that should be made public and refuses to allow the dissemination of that information to the press, Members of Parliament and the citizens of this country. That is the major reason that I want to support the hon. member in his quest for the very reasonable production he has asked for in this case.

Mr. John M. Reid (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, I was rather surprised to hear the speeches of the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) and the hon. member for Regina-Lake Centre (Mr. Benjamin). I feel they have done the House a disservice. Neither of these members bothered to read to the House the report of the Standing Committee on Transport and Communications which recommended the establishment of this inquiry. What exactly does that say, Mr. Speaker? Let me read the first recommendation from that report. I quote:

That the Minister of Transport establish a one man enquiry to consider the merits of the claims submitted to this Committee by the Great Slave Railway contractors. The person nominated to conduct the enquiry should be acceptable to both the contractors and the Canadian National Railways—

I want to emphasize the next part of the sentence.

—and should report to the minister in confidence so as not to prejudice any future court hearing.

Mr. Benjamin: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I do not know whether the hon. member for Kenora-Rainy River (Mr. Reid) was here and asleep or out of the chamber, but that is exactly the part I read in my speech a few minutes ago.

Mr. Reid: Mr. Speaker, I was in the House listening to the hon. member. If he did read it, I am surprised that he did not understand it. If he did understand it, he would

[Mr. Baldwin.]

never have made the ridiculous argument that the government was trying to prevent information coming to the House of Commons. What the government is doing is accepting a recommendation of a standing committee of this House and keeping the report confidential. There is no question of withholding information from members of this House. It is obeying a recommendation of the committee to the House of Commons. If the government had taken the attitude that this information should be permitted to come forward, the government would have been in default and should have been condemned.

Mr. Baldwin: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I listened to the hon. member in whose name the motion stands. I heard him make that statement. I did not repeat it. I heard him say that, because one condition was breached, the condition that both parties would be consulted with regard to the appointment of the commissioner, there was not the same degree of validity in the other condition. That is the statement made by the hon. member. I accepted that statement.

Mr. Reid: Mr. Speaker, I was closely involved in the negotiations that led to this particular matter being referred to the Standing Committee on Transport and Communications. I was not involved in the selection of a commissioner. From my conversation with the contractors, I know there was a great deal of difficulty and, in the end, there was no particular agreement on who should be commissioner. In point of fact, when the two parties were unable to agree, they went to the minister and said if he would appoint someone who was reputable, they would accept him. Because the two parties were not able to agree on a person, they agreed on a different procedure being used. The point about the confidentiality of the document has nothing to do with the former point. The point was that a report was to be made by a reputable investigator. The report was to be made confidential in order to protect the rights both of the contractors and the CNR.

• (1730)

The only point I want to make is that the government is obeying resolutions and motions which were accepted by the committee, whose report was later adopted by the House of Commons. Were the government to do otherwise, it would be derelict in its duty. Had the government done what the hon. member wants it to do, it certainly would not have followed the recommendations made by a committee of this House and adopted by the House.

Mr. Joseph-Philippe Guay (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, I wish to participate in the debate of motion No. 47. I believe it might be a good thing to place on the record some of the events that have taken place in this regard, since I believe it important to do so.

The construction of the Great Slave Lake Railway gave rise to a number of disputes between the contractors responsible for the clearing and preparation of certain segments of the land, and the CNR. The disputes led to litigation which was eventually settled with each claimant and a release obtained from each party by the CNR.