

of parliament too easily fall into a reflex partisan position and say yea or nay, depending on the colour of their political uniform rather than on the basis of evidence which might be made available to them.

Members of our party, including myself, have presented motions in this House calling for evaluation reports. There are many motions standing in my name similar to the one before us this afternoon. It is by no accident that in this motion I have called for the program forecast, including budgets A, B, X, in this case of Treasury Board and in other cases of other departments. I was interested in discovering how few members of parliament know what budgets A, B, X are, including some members on the government side who participated in similar debates in earlier weeks in opposition to my motion. One had the grace to admit he really did not know what he was opposing.

Budgets A, B, X is a document which contains three forms of calculations. Each department submits its budget to Treasury Board in the course of preparation of the main estimates. Budget A contains a forecast of the cost of continuing the current programs of that department for another year. Budget B contains a list of cost estimates of new programs which that department would like to introduce and for which it would like to receive permission. Budget X indicates those programs the government would be prepared to scrap or abandon if it were necessary to do so in order to clear the funds for the project outlined in Budget B. In those three straight forward calculations there lies a very interesting and informative story about the kinds of priorities and considerations that have gone into the preparation of the government's program. That kind of document symbolizes the sort of information I have in mind when I talk about parliament's need and right to know.

We need more than the estimates in the massive blue book. We need more information than is usually divulged by ministers and their officials at committee meetings. I have only been a member of this House for a year, but my experience has been that ministers are reluctant to divulge any more information than they possibly have to, and much of the committee meeting consists of dragging from a minister information that it would have been much more sensible for him to have volunteered at the beginning. Some ministers act as though they are on trial at these committee hearings. They say as little as they can. Frankly, the committees are not as informative as I would have thought.

I contrast that reality with the prospect of a committee hearing at which the members of the committee have previously been given much more background information concerning the government's decision to proceed in a particular direction. I thought the questioning would at least touch on the substance rather than the shadow of the issue and in that way, the public interest would be served. I can see that may be a forelorn and naïve viewpoint. I may lose that illusion quickly, but I think it would be a pity if that illusion were shattered.

A couple of years ago the hon. member for Selkirk (Mr. Rowland) raised a very similar matter. At that time he challenged the government's policy which requires that documents be confidential unless otherwise designated.

Forecast by Treasury Board

He suggested that policy should be reversed and that government documents should be public unless otherwise designated. I read the speech the hon. member made at that time and the rather unconvincing reply with which it was greeted. I want to summarize two or three points which he made that are worth repeating. He said, and I quote:

—there is an increasing desire on the part of the public to participate more directly in the making of the decisions which inevitably affect them.

He went on to say his challenge to the government policy arose, and I quote:

—out of the belief that the power of the legislature to control the cabinet has been diminishing and ought to be increased.

Speaking for the last parliament, that certainly would have been a valid proposition.

In our society information is power.

If democracy in this country is to be served, there is much to be said for a balance of power between the legislature and the executive.

The hon. member for Selkirk made a point which I want to reiterate, develop slightly and leave as my final thought. He said:

To permit access to government documents as a natural right would not destroy our democratic system but, rather, would enhance it. We would not be the first country to adopt such a law. For over 200 years Sweden has provided open access to official documents and provided full information to any citizen about administrative activities.

I did a little checking on that reference. Indeed, I find that the Swedish government in making a proposition, which is a reasoned argument for legislation, before the Swedish Riksdag, must provide certain information, and I quote from a text entitled "The Parliament of Sweden":

A proposition concerning a law or an important item of expenditure must provide all the necessary information about the facts; similarly it must contain the statements of opinion from administrative agencies and organizations which the government is obliged by the Instrument of Government to consult before arriving at its own attitude towards the measure.

In other words, in presenting a legislative proposal to the Swedish parliament, the government appends the working documents and evaluations which led to the creation of that proposal. I hasten to add for those members who may suspect I am promoting the socialist cause by quoting the Swedish precedent that this particular requirement or instrument of government long antedates the administration of the social democratic regime in Sweden. It is one which has been operative for many years in Sweden. The procedure is followed by the government in nearly all cases when legislation is presented, with the main exception, as hon. members might guess, of measures which involve national security.

● (1720)

I hope very much that those who are speaking on this motion from the government side today will address themselves to the substance of the argument I am making in favour of greater provision of information to members of parliament. This is the central element in the motion and others like it. I trust we shall not have recourse to debate such as has taken place in the past on similar motions