

Freedom of Information

members of that committee is the desirability of bringing about before the end of this decade a good legislation which will give all Canadians access to government documents without causing any prejudice to the smooth operation of our democratic regime. The ultimate objective is on the one side to have a reasonable and receptive government and on the other side an active and dynamic citizenry.

● (2122)
[English]

Mr. Walter Baker (Grenville-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my colleague on the statutory instruments committee, the hon. member for Bonaventure-Îles-de-la-Madeleine (Mr. Béchard). I think I caught in his words an acceptance of the idea of a great deal of openness in government beyond that which we now have. I heard him say that he would be in favour of some type of independent review procedure which I, the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) and most members of this House favour. However, I did not hear the hon. member for Bonaventure-Îles-de-la-Madeleine make a statement with regard to the last part of the motion before the House today, which reads:

—subject to a review process with ultimate appeal to the courts.

I hope that was an omission from his speech. I have been his colleague on that committee for some time. I know him to be a man of fair and open mind. I know that is not confined only to the hon. member for Bonaventure-Îles-de-la-Madeleine in terms of the other side of the House, but rests in the minds of other members both on and off the committee.

I would like the hon. member for Bonaventure-Îles-de-la-Madeleine and others who feel that way to demonstrate their commitment to openness tonight by supporting the motion. I use the word "demonstrate". I want them to demonstrate by deed that commitment to openness tonight by supporting the resolution before the House standing in the name of the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark). It will not be the first time that members of this House have done that. It was done on February 12, 1976 when a unanimous resolution was adopted by this House of Commons.

The motion before us tonight asks the members of this House to take one more step. It is a simple step, but a profound one in terms of the whole meaning of freedom of information. That is to assure the citizen, the bureaucrat, the politician, the supporter of the government and the opposition, and, most important, the members of the executive and the cabinet, that there has been a commitment in this parliament to an ultimate review of the question whether documents will be released or information will be forthcoming to an authority outside the political or bureaucratic process.

That is the important part of this resolution. I ask the hon. member for Bonaventure-Îles-de-la-Madeleine—and I will look at him when we vote in a few minutes—to stand in the affirmative on this resolution.

I listened to the speeches today. Years ago for members of parliament and members of the public the issues that affected us, moved us and caused debates in this and other legislative

[Mr. Béchard.]

chambers were relatively simple. I guess it was appropriate in those days for this House and members of the public to make judgments more or less on instinct or reach an understanding of a set of facts or technical factors which were relatively minor or uncomplicated. But as society changed, so did the relationship of the government to parliament and the relationship of the government to the people. Governments for better or for worse—and the situation we deal with is for worse— intruded into the lives of the citizens in a democratic country. Issues have become more complex.

The tools and machinery of eighteenth and nineteenth century parliamentary government are inadequate for their role today. They are inadequate for our job as parliamentarians and inadequate to supply information so that the people of our country can be informed exactly what government is doing, why it is doing it, whether something should be changed and, more important, to make government more accountable to the people and to parliament.

That is why in this day and age we talk about openness as a concept that is desirable. We can discuss the role of the ombudsman because the bureaucracy, even if it is well intentioned, tends to roll over people and push them aside. It thinks of them as statistics rather than human beings. Because of this intrusion of governments, the development of the computer and the facility of exchanging information almost as rapidly as it is created, we call for legislation for the protection of privacy.

Because of this complexity and because there is a growing need in this parliament, it is recognized that this and other parliaments are inadequate to do the job of bringing government to reasonable account—not to impede or obstruct, but to make it account.

We talk about the reform of parliamentary procedures because it is important that the power which is contained within knowledge is shared in a free society. Because that is not happening today, we talk about freedom of information laws, laws that will not impede or stop a government from governing reasonably but which will give those who are governed, the people who entrust the power of government to a group of men and women for a period of time, a sharing of power and a lessening of the concentration of the power which is contained within that knowledge.

● (2132)

There are exemptions which have been set forth in the green paper. My friend the hon. member for Bonaventure-Îles-de-la-Madeleine outlined some of those exemptions. I do not intend to deal with them all. I do not agree with them. I think the paper is far too restrictive in this the beginning of the pursuit of openness by government.

Be that as it may, a committee of this House is working on a report which I think will be a landmark in terms of providing something new and bringing part of our procedures into tune with the first part of the twentieth century, if not the last. However well intentioned a cabinet minister, deputy minister or those below him who would make a decision as to what information could be released to an inquiring member of the