

*Freedom of Information*

Stated in that way, that is an attitude of openness. It is a recognition that information in the hands of the government is public information. Not only does the government have a duty to provide that information to the public, but the public has a right to access to it.

The minister, unfortunately, is not operating from that presumption of openness. If he were, he would not have drawn up a list of exemptions which was so broad as to encompass anything the government wants to put in it. Nor would he be so eager to keep the review process within the control of ministers. I find it somewhat ironic that the minister justifies that position by trotting out a concept so often ignored by this government, the concept of ministerial responsibility. No, sir, the minister is operating from a presumption of secrecy. His green paper is just an extension of the present policy whereby the government decides what the public should know and what it should not know. It makes these decisions, we are told, in the public interest or for reasons of national security. These nebulous terms, "public interest" and "national security", turn out, more often than not, to mean the interest of the government.

A stunning example of this penchant for secrecy in the interest of the government is a reply of the Postmaster General (Mr. Lamontagne) in the House of Commons on June 8, just a couple of weeks ago. When asked to table a report on the operations of the Post Office, the 1975 Hay report, the minister replied with these words:

If that confidential document were made public it might embarrass some components of the Post Office Department that did not operate properly at the time, for various reasons.

It seems to me that whether or not certain components of the Post Office operate properly is a matter of public interest, and the public interest would best be served by making the report available. It is the government's interest that is being served by withholding it.

This example reaches absurd proportions when one reads in a Canada Post bulletin called "Com Team" that, and I quote:

We must remember that, in spite of what the press may say, these studies are not secret . . . It's true they are not made public, but there are good reasons for this.

What that bulletin said was that the documents are not secret, they are just not available.

This morning's newspaper gives another glaring example of where this attitude of secrecy has taken us. Last year in this parliament we enacted human rights legislation with a provision to allow individuals access to personal information about them which is contained in government files. This was a much needed and much heralded step toward countering the growing interest of government in the personal lives of citizens.

This morning we read about a case which illustrates a complete distortion of the intent of that legislation. A person was permitted to see government files about himself only on condition that he sign a pledge never to divulge what he saw. In addition to that, he was warned, if newspaper stories are correct, that if he violated that pledge he could be charged under the Official Secrets Act. This man was fired from his job for unspecified security reasons. He has been effectively

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blacklisted in his occupation, and he cannot clear his name because he cannot divulge what information the government has about him, whether it is true or not.

Given the possibility of similar occurrences and given the broad categories of exemption in the green paper, I do not have much faith in this government's commitment to freedom of information. If the government were to have the final discretion in a dispute over releasing such documents, what would be its decision? What would be the decision of the minister?

Much as I welcome freedom of information legislation, I would welcome it more if I was convinced that it would allow for independent judicial review and if I could be certain that the final decision in cases of dispute would rest in the courts. I would not welcome freedom of information legislation which left the final decision in the hands of a paternalistic government minister who thought he or she knew best what was in the public's interest to know or not know, or in the hands of a protective minister who would protect the interests of a department over those of the public.

Open government does not have to be a threat to those in power. An informed public is able to rationalize the information it receives and come to intelligent conclusions about the workings of government. Access to reports on the operations of the Post Office, for example, might serve to make the public more aware of the difficulties which are involved in such a gigantic department. It might make citizens more confident that something is being done about them and that someone really does care about their mail delivery.

Similarly, with regard to nuclear safety, a matter of critical significance to all of us which is very much in the news these days, the public might be more trusting of the government if it could be made aware of all the facts and information rather than getting bits and pieces of alarming information through leaked sources and leaked documents. People would be less apt to jump to conclusions or to offer simplistic solutions if they could be certain that the government was levelling with them and treating them with trust and respect, no matter how difficult, dangerous or technical the subject matter and the situation.

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Ignorance, contrary to the popular aphorism, is not bliss and the people who live in Pickering or Douglas Point do not rest easier knowing that there are any number of facts about nuclear safety that are being withheld from them, and they are told that it is presumably for their own good. They might, however, feel more secure knowing all the facts instead of leaving so much to imagination.

Knowledge is power, and unless a citizenry has knowledge, it is powerless. In order to assert themselves, in order to take part in a democratic process, individual citizens and organizations must have access to the information they need. Without adequate information, citizens are alienated from the decision-making process.