

Private Members' Business

We must always see that the people of our country have confidence in those of us who are in this place and all of us, including those who are members of the Public Service, must carry out our duties in accordance with the public interest.

The issue, I would submit, is not whether a conflict of interest arises. Show me an individual who never has a conflict of interest and I will show you a one-dimensional person perhaps living in the outskirts of Frobisher Bay as a hermit. In our complex society it is inevitable that we have conflicts of interest.

The issue is not that they arise, but that when conflicts do arise, they be resolved in the public interest. That is what this bill is all about. That is what our committee is discussing; the mechanisms, the procedures, the rules that can permit all of us in public office to see that there is a way of resolving conflicts.

There are different ways that that can happen. It is by no means sufficient for those persons who hold public office in Canada to act within the law. There is a further obligation to act in a manner that will bear the closest public scrutiny.

On this point I join with the member for Nickel Belt in favouring full public disclosure. I want that to be a fundamental principle of any legislation that we enact, and then to the extent necessary to find balance and to protect the rights of privacy to which the member for York South—Weston has referred.

There can be reasonable and proper exceptions and limits, just in the same way that we have passed the Freedom of Information Act which states as a fundamental principle that all Canadians have a right to information about the public programs of our country. We make some reasonable exceptions for matters that pertain to national security, matters that pertain to sensitive commercial transactions currently under way, matters that pertain to rights of privacy of individuals and so forth, just as we do with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

We have established fundamental rights of Canadian citizens and then make some restrictions and limitations according to what can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society. That is the approach that I hope we can see the legislation proceed on.

The member spoke about the committee report that was prepared by the task force on conflict of interest. I was very pleased to serve as executive director of that task force, appointed by former Prime Minister Trudeau and to work with two outstanding Canadians, the Hon. Mitchell Sharp and the Hon. Michael Starr, both former cabinet ministers, both long-time members of this House. I believe that this report stands us in very good stead.

Out of the 10 principles that were recommended for inclusion in any legislation, there is one I would refer to. It states as follows: "Any conflict between the private interests of public office holders and their official duties must be resolved in favour of the public interest."

Upon appointment to office or election to office, and thereafter, public office holders are expected to arrange their private affairs in a manner that will prevent such conflicts of interest from arising".

As my time is concluding, I want to simply make these final two points. We have before us this legislation. Simultaneously, another committee on which I am serving is looking at election finance legislation and reforming the election laws of the country. We also have the Lobbyist Registration Act due for a comprehensive review later this year.

It is time for the Parliament of Canada to look at all of these different statutory regimes and recognize that they are woven out of a single fabric. We must have a common approach in all of these legal regimes that govern ethical conduct in the Public Service of Canada.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. DeBlois): The time provided for the consideration of Private Members' Business has now expired.

Pursuant to Standing Order 96(1), the order is dropped from the Order Paper.

[*Translation*]

It being 9 p.m., this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at ten o'clock, pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

The House adjourned at 9 p.m.