

It is Friday afternoon, so I will be kind. This is nevertheless an unsupported attack. The hon. member was the official critic. She could have provided us with concrete examples showing where she saw a lack of openness. But she did not do it, she just attacked the department without backing up her allegations.

Mrs. Monique Guay (Laurentides): Mr. Speaker, the day Public Works and Government Services Canada becomes really open, really very clear and transparent will be a day of celebration for me.

I am very pleased to take part in this debate on Bill C-52, an act to establish the Department of Public works and Government Services. As I said earlier, until just recently I had the privilege of being the Official Opposition critic for this department and as such I had the opportunity to discuss matters with its hon. minister.

I would like to share with you today what I know about this department and what changes should be made to make it more transparent, more open and more accessible to all taxpayers who wish either to receive information on its activities or do business with it.

I understand, when one is in opposition one tends to exaggerate—I was there, and maybe I did exaggerate a few times. I will try not to do it now. I will give my total, sincere and deep commitment to do my best to improve the openness of this department. I understand that there is room for improvement, but I intend to do everything I can to increase the degree of openness and try to answer honestly the question of my colleagues, including the hon. member who just spoke.

All of us in this House will agree that, either way, these are legitimate demands on the part of the taxpayers and they should not be ignored in a cavalier fashion. This bill should ensure that the various demands of the taxpayers can be met, but this is not the case. The only thing the enactment does is to merge two former departments—a process which incidentally was initiated by the Conservatives—as well as various government agencies.

• (1320)

Section 5 of the bill states that this new department shall operate as a common service agency for the Government of Canada, and its activities as a common service agency shall be directed mainly toward providing the departments, boards and agencies of the Government of Canada with services in support of their programs.

Basically, this department is responsible for the acquisition and provision of goods and services for all departments of the Government of Canada. It negotiates, buys and rents an impressive number of goods and services for other departments. Last year it negotiated 170,000 public contracts. That is rather impressive.

As the member of Parliament for Laurentides and parliamentarian responsible for taxpayers' money as well as a taxpayer myself, I want to know everything there is to know—and I mean everything—about the tens of thousands of government contracts negotiated by this department every year. It is the

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taxpayers' money that the government spends; it is therefore accountable to them for its use.

Unfortunately, there is nothing in this bill about how these contracts should be accounted for in all the relevant information made available to the public. The government sticks to its old ways and continues to be secretive. This government refuses to make information readily available. That is very clear, but also quite sad. It shows mainly that the government is scared to death, scared of getting caught spending the taxpayers' money improperly.

By leaving out of this bill a provision to divulge automatically all information in contracts, the government perpetuates the widespread opinion that the department still indulges in patronage, and awards thousands of contracts under the pressure of lobbyists, friends of the government, or people who contribute to the funding of the old parties. Failure to take action to change this general opinion could prove in part that it is well founded.

To leave the minister and bureaucrats free to conceal or to divulge information clearly indicates that the system does not meet the basic expectations of a democratic society. Letting the minister decide whether Canadians should know how their tax dollars are spent seems contrary to the transparent and open government that Liberals have been promising since they crossed the floor.

The Liberal government is no better than its Conservative predecessor, that it once denounced so vehemently. Members opposite are backing down. They have lost the backbone that made them so brave when they formed the official opposition and during the election. The members opposite are going back on the commitments they made in their red bible. Transparency and openness no longer figure in their vocabulary. First it was the red bible, now they dress in red and follow their great leader, the Minister of Public Works, Santa Claus personified, the main purveyor of government contracts who keeps his secrets to himself and silences his little elves gathered round him, across the aisle.

This bill is nothing but a formality, an insipid document which again hands taxpayers over to the minister and those in high places under his control. With this bill, the government is saying to taxpayers: "The minister spends your money but this is none of your business". To use an expression made famous by our illustrious Minister of Transport: "If you taxpayers want to know to whom, and how, contracts are awarded, use the Access to Information Act".

Why make it so difficult to have access to that information? In recent months, I have tried to pressure the minister into setting up a rational system to disclose contracts awarded. I even tabled a motion asking the minister to disclose, on a monthly basis, all government contracts awarded. Such a system could even be established for all departments awarding numerous contracts. The minister replied that this monthly disclosure was unnecessary, since all the information is already available and ordinary citizens can find out anything they want about government contracts. How insulting from the minister! This answer shows that the minister has no respect for us. It is wrong to claim that