

participatory democracy, both words, unless the people are informed. If you are going to have the people receive only approved versions, you are going to have participatory something else. It won't be participatory democracy. The danger is that it will be neither.

I make the point—I emphasize it—that it is not just members of this House who suffer from the prejudice which is illustrated in the refusal to publish the letter which gave rise to this debate, it is also the people of Canada generally, and our very system, because as my colleague from Peace River said earlier, the system of democratic and parliamentary government is suffering seriously from the cynicism which has been engendered across this land in part by the feeling that you cannot trust politicians to tell the truth. They will give a partial truth, or if there is some information which is important for them to keep they will stamp “secret” on it and refuse to let you have it. That is a very serious, cancerous cynicism and it has directly to do, among other causes, with the insistence on secrecy of the government we have today.

• (1740)

As a member of parliament who comes from outside central Canada, as one who comes from a rural constituency not particularly well represented in the public service, with views, attitudes and even prejudices which are perhaps not replicated in the senior public service or treasury benches, I want to talk for a moment about the danger of basing decisions upon wrong information. What we have here is not simply a refusal to publish information and to let members of parliament know. What we have here is a situation that ensures that decisions are taken by a tight little group whose practices of secrecy allow no ventilation. There is no certainty that they are acting on premises that are shared in northern Quebec or western Alberta, or in any other part of Canada that is some distance, be it in miles, ideas or views, from the cabinet or senior public service.

That, in a country of such diversity and fragility as ours, is a highly dangerous situation, one that I hope my colleagues on the other side, who I believe are worried about unity and the future of this country, will seriously consider, because this insistence on secrecy leads to decisions that do not reflect the needs and requirements of this country, and it can serve to disunify us, perhaps drastically.

My colleague from Welland, and the parliamentary secretary who spoke before him earlier in this debate, referred to this letter as being a legal opinion. That happens to be the dodge, or the excuse, in this case. In other cases when there are legitimate demands for information that should be in the public domain other excuses are given for not making the information available. There is always some reason why the practice is not to make the information available to the public.

I think the question that we should face is not: is it the practice? Because of course it is. The government has set the practice. It is a practice designed to keep as much information as confidential as possible. Rather the question here is: why are we slaves to that practice? Why do we have it? Clearly it is wrong to keep information from

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the people of Canada, from the democratically elected representatives of the people. As a general principle I think we would all agree it is wrong. Yet it is the practice. And so the members on the government side of the House allow themselves to be lulled to sleep by the incantation that the wrong that we are committing is a wrong that it is the practice to commit. I say that that is not good enough.

Clearly we need a society—certainly we need a parliament—where as much information as possible is known. I think others want to participate in this debate, Madam Speaker, so I will stop now by asking the representatives of the government here today: why fear an informed parliament? Why do they fear an informed public? Why insist on a practice of holding back information that would allow the public and parliament to be informed about the facts on which decisions are based?

Mr. W. Kenneth Robinson (Toronto-Lakeshore): Madam Speaker, may I first congratulate that last speaker, the hon. member for Rocky Mountain (Mr. Clark), and the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) who preceded, him, for their eloquent speeches. Much of what they said made a great deal of sense. Hopefully in the not too distant future some changes will take place which will mean more information will be made available.

However, on the particular issue before us today it is with reluctance that I oppose the motion of the hon. member for Fundy-Royal (Mr. Fairweather). I am sure all members would like to see as much information made available as could be made available. We on this side of the House are faced with the same limitations in this regard as those across the way and, as our duties and obligations to those we represent are similar, we share the same frustrations when unable to obtain a certain document or piece of information which we may deem pertinent in carrying out these duties. However, representatives from all parties in past debate on this subject have agreed that free and unlimited access to all information and documents was impossible, or certainly unwise.

In order to clarify the situation, guidelines were established indicating several categories of restrictions for the production of government papers or documents. I think we are all aware of what these guidelines are; they were made public and consist of some 16 different items. The purpose of the guidelines is to ensure required confidentiality for the effective functioning of government while at the same time guaranteeing access to all government papers not meeting the specific restrictions. However, many opposition members feel that the application of these guidelines leaves too much power of discretion in the hands of the government, and obviously this motion is a case in point. The motion of the hon. member was refused because it was classified “legal opinion or advice provided for the use of the government”, the very first restriction listed in the guidelines for exempting documents from publication.

This motion is quite unique in that the hon. member is requesting a document, most of which he admits has been made available by the media, and the minister has refused to release a copy of the letter in question although he, too, knows that its unauthorized release took place months ago. Therefore the actual production of this particular letter is irrelevant; the question is simply should or should not this document, or more broadly this type of document,