

Access to Information

Hon. Walter Baker (Nepean-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the minister for his kind references. I do so at the beginning of the debate. I want to say to him now that if there are any references which might be deemed to be unkind, I do not want him to accept them as personal references. I believe that when the minister made his statement way back in the spring of 1981, when the announcement of the government's bill was made at the Press building, the minister was speaking not just for the government but for himself, when he put forward and brought to the Order Paper for first reading the freedom of information bill—which was much better than the one we are dealing with today. I have to say that and I want to say it.

That does not in any way forgive the government for the position it has taken on some particular things. Nor do I want to say that I agree completely that Bill C-43 was the last word on freedom of information when it was presented. It was not, but I think it was a good beginning. At that time I thought it was a particularly good beginning for a Liberal government. In fact, it was surprisingly good for a Liberal government. I went home and said to my wife that I could hardly believe my eyes when I read the bill that evening. When I heard Mr. Ged Baldwin give it a B plus, I was prepared to agree with him, until we got into it. Then the mark fell somewhat, but still it was at least a B, in my judgment. However, unfortunately, certain things occurred during the course of the committee hearings which caused me great concern. I think it also caused Canadians great concern.

• (1540)

As the minister has said, this bill is very important, and it is the end of the beginning. That is what we are dealing with in this matter.

At the outset of my speech I want to pay tribute, if I might, to the people who came before our committee and contributed so greatly to the enhancement of the bill in many ways. I must, of course, pay tribute to a group known as Access, which has been a prime motivator behind the rush for freedom of information, joining with Mr. Ged Baldwin in the course of the matter. I think their leadership in the private area brought other people into it, people who had been interested in it for many years but required a focal point. Access provided that.

We heard from the Social Science Federation of Canada, the Canadian Association of University Teachers, the Canadian Library Association, the Canadian Teachers' Federation, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, the Canadian Daily Newspaper Publishers Association, the Canadian Labour Congress, the Centre for Investigative Journalism, La Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec, the Writers Union of Canada and many, many others who were interested on all sides of the issue of freedom of information.

Each one of them should take some pride, and the members of those organizations should take some considerable pride in the fact that, squeezed as we are between last weekend and the momentous events of this evening at eight o'clock, we have

been granted, more or less on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, an opportunity to deal with report stage and third reading of a bill which turns a page in the legislative history of the country. For that small mercy, that half day which runs from 3.15 to 5.45, I want to express the grateful thanks of all Canadians who are interested in openness and freedom of information.

There is another tribute I wish to pay. I do not believe we would be dealing today with Bill C-43 or any bill on freedom of information if there had not been some leadership taken in another part of this House. I hope the House will understand and agree with me that when he was the Prime Minister of this country, the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. member for Yellowhead (Mr. Clark), advanced the cause of freedom of information to a tremendous degree. As Prime Minister and as the head of a government, he took an initiative with respect to freedom of information and the process of openness. I was the minister piloting the bill at that time, and I can attest now—and my colleagues in the then ministry can attest now—to the primacy he gave to the proposition of openness in government and freedom of information.

It is no accident that the bill advanced in the fall of 1979 was called a bill respecting freedom of information rather than a bill respecting access to information. There is just a slight difference in emphasis. I wanted to say that because quite often the contributions public men and women make when in office are forgotten after they leave office. It was the Prime Minister of that day in 1979 who put his personal *imprimatur* on that piece of legislation and gave leadership within the government with respect to that bill.

What was the result of that? The result was a good one. In the throne speech which began the first session of the Thirty-second Parliament the government under the Right Hon. Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) made reference to the bringing in of a freedom of information bill. I do not think that would even have appeared in the throne speech but for the fact that there had been a momentum generated in 1979. As a result of that this government brought forward the bill. I remember when the Minister of Communications (Mr. Fox), who was then also Secretary of State, introduced that bill at a press conference. I had the privilege of being there and speaking about the bill, after the press conference and from the back row of the theatre. I remember the minister patting himself on the back—justifiably, I think, given the traditions of his party—to the extent that he nearly broke his arm! Nonetheless, it was there, and we would not have had that day but for the fact that the government realized that there is in the Canadian public a feeling of suspicion, distrust and cynicism about government. There is a feeling that it is a closed shop and that the people who pay the bills do not have access to it. There is a feeling they do not have a way into it, and freedom of information would provide that way. I think there was a realization by the government. It obviously had done some polling, so we had the bill.

However, what happened in the course of the bill is epitomized in the amendments brought forward at the last moment.