

Disclosure of Government Information

be told. They have a desperate urge to find out what the facts are and then to see what might be done about them. In that sense the views expressed by the hon. member for Surrey have my complete support.

I am not going to take much more time, Mr. Speaker. This is a large subject: I would like at some time to introduce a bill or private member's notice of motion dealing with it. Looking at hon. members opposite, I am sure they agree that there is a need to explore this subject. I am sure they would not disagree with me if I said to them that surely there must be many occasions when in their view the type of information, the extent of the information and the manner in which it has been made available has been unsatisfactory. Surely they have talked about this to members of the press whose duty it is to find out what the facts are and to report them efficiently and effectively.

I would say that in private conversation with hon. members opposite none of them would disagree with my assessment of the situation with respect to trying to secure information from the government and government departments. It is part of the process that government departments become large monoliths. Administrators are not evil or corrupt men, but there is a tendency to hide mistakes, to cover up errors that are made. There is a tendency to try to put the best face forward in any matter which has been the subject of government intervention. They are simply being human beings when they act in that way. But it is our job, on behalf of the people of Canada, to press the government for more information.

We are not getting all the information we require. I think there should be such a declaration by the House in the form of acceptance of this bill. The subject matter of the bill should be sent to a committee. Surely hon. members opposite agree that it would be a very useful exercise to have a committee formed to study this whole aspect of public information. Some years ago the United States passed what was called the freedom of information bill. That bill has had some effect, but I have talked to friends of mine in the United States Senate and Congress and they say substantial changes will have to be made to it. I have talked to members of the press over there who agree with this. There is some movement in the United Kingdom to improve matters in this respect. They have made slight progress there. But this country, this government has done nothing.

Mr. Gibson: What about Information Canada?

Mr. Baldwin: Nonsense. There is one other aspect about the matter, Mr. Speaker, and that is that if we decide to send the hon. member's bill to committee, we ought to have a bill with teeth in it. In the United States there is a provision that anyone who seeks information and is not granted it has the right of access to a court. However, I am told this is highly unsatisfactory and it is something that we would have to look into here.

After listening to the comments of backbenchers on the other side, I am not too hopeful, but surely they have a vested interest in acquiring this information and seeing

[Mr. Baldwin.]

that pressure is put upon the government to make it available. Their comments would seem to indicate that they are quite happy with the present situation. If that is their view, we can expect that the government is not inclined to go along with the changes we want.

• (4:30 p.m.)

I would therefore suggest, Mr. Speaker, that hon. members ponder, reflect and review their thinking. Failure to take action at this time to compel the government to make available facts and information which are required, within reasonable limits, will bring about a further deterioration of the limited democracy we now enjoy.

Mr. Jack Cullen (Sarnia-Lambton): Mr. Speaker, there is not much time left so I shall not spend too long on this bill. I was somewhat surprised at the comments of the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) about backbenchers failing to get information. When Liberal backbenchers want information they go to the source. Sometimes it can be secured merely by picking up the telephone. The information can then be passed back to the constituent in the riding. This method does not get much publicity but it does not cost as much to get it that way as it does by putting it on the Order Paper.

It was demonstrated in the question period today that Liberal backbenchers take second place to no one—

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Cullen: —in the calibre and quality of questions asked to get the kind of information that people in Canada want.

Mr. Baldwin: Will the hon. member permit a question?

Mr. Cullen: I would prefer the hon. member to listen. I had expected to be speaking today on the Sir John A. Macdonald Day bill.

Mr. Baldwin: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker, in no way had I intended to challenge the calibre and nature of the questioning. It is the calibre and nature of the answers that has always worried me.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Cullen: I do not think that Liberal backbenchers can be blamed for that. Back in the lobby after the question period I did not hear any complaints from them about the quality of the answers they received. I am afraid the fact is that opposition members do not listen to the answers. The hon. member who introduced Bill C-15 stated that this is the third time he has brought it forward. It seems to me that having lost out on two former occasions he should not quit, although he seems to follow eighteenth or nineteenth century motto, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." I would suggest, instead, that if at first you don't succeed, try another method.