

Freedom of Information

to the influence of the government, and will support the motion that I have put down today.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Andrew Brewin (Greenwood): Mr. Speaker, it has been said that a well informed citizenry is the lifeblood of democracy. I believe that to be true. We cannot have a truly effective democracy unless we have at the same time a well informed group of citizens. They can only be well informed if they have access to information. That was said some time ago, yet we have an ever-growing mass of materials being gotten together, assembled by government and made available in reports. However, much of it is hidden in an aura of secrecy from the people of this country, even in those cases where they paid to have the research and the studies made which led to the production of those documents.

For this reason our party will support the freedom of information act and the motion by the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark). We will support it and we call, as he has done, on all parties to give their support to this motion. I am very glad that he has made it clear that this motion is not a party matter.

I join in paying tribute to the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin). No one has been more persistent, aggressive, and persuasive with regard to this matter of freedom of information. He has done a magnificent job.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Brewin: The Leader of the Opposition was generous and fair in pointing out that this was not the prerogative of any particular party. This concern is shared by people of all parties. In fact the first private members' bill dealing with this subject was introduced by a former colleague and present friend of mine, the then hon. member for New Westminster, Barry Mather.

Mr. Friesen: My predecessor.

Mr. Brewin: I will not make any comment on your connection, but he is the one who introduced the first bill.

I point out to all the Liberals in this House that even though there may be some incidental criticism of government as we have it, the basic principle embodied in the motion by the Leader of the Opposition is a basic principle that is fundamental to their task as parliamentarians and, indeed, as Liberals.

I sometimes wonder whether some members sitting on the government side really understand what the word "Liberal" means. If it means anything, it is a willingness to see that information is made available to the public. Information is said to be power, and power should be in the hands of the people, not of any select minority or select group. Therefore I hope that every member of the Liberal party will not feel that he is called upon to vote in this debate on any partisan or narrow basis, but on the basis of the fundamental principles which that party, to its honour I must say, has espoused, just as other parties have done.

[Mr. Clark]

If my friends need any encouragement, it should have been given to them by the Leader of the Opposition when he quoted the statement by the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) to the effect that a failure to provide true and complete information would be to give way to despotic secrecy. It is a test for this House at this time to see whether it is ready to reject that temptation by producing meaningful legislation on this question. It is not enough to say that we will have legislation. It is not enough to have green papers which produce rhetoric. What is required and what is essential is legislation.

● (1602)

I am glad to say that the motion, from my point of view, does contain the basic essentials. It also happens to be part of the Constitution of Canada in an unexpressed manner. I am looking at a printing of a declaration of the Canadian government in 1948 at the United Nations Conference on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It says this:

Canada is a democracy which cannot be maintained without a foundation of free public opinion and free discussion within the limits set by the civil and criminal laws in Canada. Freedom of information is inherent in the Canadian constitution, but it is not specifically enacted.

What is being asked in this motion is that it be specifically enacted and, as I said, in meaningful terms which can be enforced.

I found that citation in an excellent book on this subject by a professor Rankin, entitled "Freedom of Information in Canada". Professor Rankin comments on that passage regarding the Canadian government's assertion about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as follows:

Notwithstanding such assurances and despite growing public concern over administrative secrecy, the citizen's access to government records remains subject to the whims of the government of the day.

He speaks about the confused state of the law, and I will have something to say about that later. What we are asking is that what is already implicit in the Constitution of Canada be made explicit.

I suppose every member of parliament has had his own experience regarding access to government documents being denied to him. I was long involved in a practice having to do with matters of immigration, and I found out that immigration manuals and instructions to people dealing with the lives of people were not made available either to the people concerned, their lawyers, or to any member of the public. I am happy to say that my understanding is that at long last, after years of battling on that matter, that practice is being changed and that immigration manuals are now to be made public.

When I was on the Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence the committee was informed that a group of accountants had made a report, with financial suggestions and financial implications, on the operations of CIDA, a very worth-while agency, but one which has spent a great deal of Canadian funds. The committee asked to see the report because the committee was charged with responsibility for working toward an efficient system of administration of