

local level of municipal or school administration, they also exist at the federal level.

That is why I support the bill, in order that we the people's representatives be not always in a difficult position where we are asked information by our electors and we cannot always answer their request because we ourselves have not been provided with information which should be available to us.

We must submit motions for papers which are sometimes satisfied reluctantly by ministers; these papers are often absolutely essential to ensure good administration in the areas of particular concern to us.

Mr. Speaker, I examined the bill with pleasure. It is very short but significant.

I support it wholeheartedly because I think it is a step towards true democracy.

• (1740)

[English]

Mr. Jim Fleming (York West): Mr. Speaker, in discussing the private member's bill before us I would like to refer to the comments of the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) on the entire role of private members' bills. Of course, not having been here as long as the hon. member I cannot approach this matter with the same depth of knowledge and authority as him. However, I would like the opportunity of sponsoring something that would in time become legislation. Surely this is the practice we carry on every day through caucus and other activities; either supporting or opposing government legislation. To have bills sponsored by members of the opposition passed, and the type of information referred to made known to the public, would take away a basic responsibility of the government, upon which it will be judged in the next election.

With regard to the bill put forward by the hon. member for Surrey-White Rock (Mr. Mather), in principle I support it. I think any member of the House would find it difficult to oppose the principle of access to public documents and information about government administration so that people can better understand just what the government is doing and how well or how badly it is handling its affairs.

In these times when bureaucracy has grown so large it is especially important for people to be secure in the knowledge that they have access to information from and about the government, as well as information referred to in the bill of the hon. member for Surrey-White Rock. He said that the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) had made a move in this direction back in 1969 when some research was made available for the years prior to 1939. While it is frustrating when one hopes for much more, there should be some satisfaction in knowing that a move has been made in this direction.

Historically, there can be some tracing of what stood behind government moves, and a better understanding of what powers and pressures brought about legislation or the direction of events which the government controlled at the time. However, I do have very serious reservations about this bill because it is not a simple matter when you start to deal with the various types of information available to the government.

Access to Administrative Documents

The hon. member asked us not to be too specific and not to argue too long or hard on particular points in the legislation. I appreciate what he means by that. I am worried that when you say some information may be released by the government in order to give people confidence and an understanding of what is happening, you are still left with a judgment decision as to what shall or shall not be made public. There is an element of censorship that remains. I am worried about the constitutionality of such action without agreement from other levels of government, because so many of our records are duplicated by them and are shared records, not ours alone.

In the private sector the provinces have more control than we do. I know the province of Ontario has taken some initiative, or at least has expressed a desire to do so, by suggesting legislation in order to provide public protection in areas where private information about individuals can be very misleading and wrong but the individual concerned is not aware of it.

We talk about government making this kind of information available. I think, for instance, that where the Department of External Affairs is concerned there should be limitations on disclosure. The hon. member who sponsored this bill agreed that there should be limitations. However, in discussions also there are new angles, leanings and particular postures taken in order to bargain for a position internationally. Much of our style and the approach of the Department of External Affairs, which I believe has quite a high reputation in the world, might be damaged if it were possible to trace a particular stance and approach by having access to all the records, even though it might not be a matter of endangering national security. So there is this danger.

This comment would apply also to national defence. I am sure the other parties would love the opportunity to have information on such fiascos as the *Bonaventure*; that certainly is an embarrassment to me as a member on this side. But that type of thing does happen, and if we have warning we can take action and avoid it happening in the future. What the hon. member proposes would give us further power in checking out the possibility of such fiascos and ensuring that they do not take place. But wanting a particular piece of information at a particular time and demanding that it be made public, when you put all the pieces together some information might be divulged that would be damaging to our security.

I think we must be very precise in the information that we divulge about businesses because of the competition which exists between one business and another. In making certain statistics public, we must be careful that damage to another company does not result.

People are very frustrated when they have to deal with the massive bureaucracy which exists today. Of course, the great majority of civil servants are well meaning, talented people. Nevertheless, they form a massive wall which many people find hard to penetrate. It is important for people to know that they can obtain knowledge and information, find out about government action and what is going on so as to have a better understanding of what the government is doing. This would make the House a better place; it would give us better understanding and would give the opposition greater ability to criticize and to