

Government Orders

When we raised these issues in the House the phone companies were at first very hesitant about finding ways of restricting the flow of information that companies might electronically gather on people from their tele-marketing operations. After a number of questions and some anger from the population out there something has been done about that.

I could go on and list a number of other things. Suffice it to say that the age of technology and telecommunications has already made privacy of personal communications and personal information a key public policy challenge for the nineties and beyond.

Personal privacy is really under threat. I would particularly like to deal with the question of cellular telephones. I would like the audience and the members of this House to realize that there are over one million cellular telephones out there. They are not really telephones; they are really radios. There are 900,000 scanners tuning in every day, all day and during the evenings to phone calls when people believe they are speaking in confidence and privacy.

• (1725)

I think it is important to look at what Mr. Bruce Phillips, the Privacy Commissioner, has been saying recently over and over again as he talks about the number of times he has had to appear before this House and address the questions of privacy in the different forms of legislation that have been brought to our attention. It is important to note that in every one of these appearances he has underscored the seriousness of this problem. He said that it needs more than tinkering. That is the reason this bill requires much more careful examination and that at committee stage it is an issue that needs to be addressed very carefully.

I would like to quote from the very enlightened presentation that Mr. Phillips made on June 1, 1992 before the Senate to address the issues to be found in Bill C-62, the bill on telecommunication changes which still has not seen the light of day in this House. This is what he said:

I do not think there has ever been a time when ordinary people have been required to give up to other persons and organizations so much of their personal information merely to function in a complex society. Once given up, this information has itself been transformed into an item of commerce, bought and sold in a huge traffic in personal data which in the United States now surpasses \$3 billion a year.

Thus people sense—and with good reason—that they are losing control of their ability to manage the degree to which society at large penetrates and exposes their personal lives. And as you will appreciate, the very essence of personal privacy is the ability to control what others are able to know about you.

This situation has come about through an entirely benign process. No one apart from the total recluse has ever been able to claim total privacy, or particularly want it, for that matter. The simple business of human and commercial relations has always demanded some loss of privacy, merely for the purpose of existence. But until fairly recent times, and most notably the advent of the computer age, people could defend important areas of privacy, and especially the right to be left alone, with relative ease. The computer has demolished that defence. It can pull together scraps of personal information gathered from a wide variety of sources, assemble it into virtually complete personal profiles and make it all available to whomsoever is willing to pay for it—frequently without the knowledge or consent of the individuals named in those files. So new defences for personal privacy need to be erected, and this process cannot begin without increased awareness of the problem.

This issue is being addressed here in Bill C-62, if it ever comes to be alive in this House, and in general conversation out in society. I think that climate of awareness is starting to make us realize that this is a very serious matter of personal concern to each and every one of us.

We come across some very serious privacy issues that have arisen out of the rapid advances in telecommunications technology. I suggested that caller identification and cellular telephones were among the most important. We cannot deny that there is a double-edged nature to this scientific advancement.

As Mr. Phillips points out:

In each case, important benefits and conveniences were made possible by new technology, but absent some special arrangements of prevention, they both carried with them significant potential loss of personal privacy.

I think that alert came under Bill C-62, which went to the other place to be studied. The two issues occupied and preoccupied, and continues to preoccupy, the Office of the Privacy Commissioner. He was particularly addressing his attention to telecommunications and he started to examine the extent of the technical problems that were involved.

We in this House are not technical experts, neither is the privacy office, and there is a lot that takes place in research and development that is so fast and so dynamic in its change that if we were to put our minds to it we could find the answers to the technical problems. We