

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, October 16, 1995

The House met at 11 a.m.

Prayers

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT

Mr. Bob Mills (Red Deer, Ref.) moved that Bill C-309, an act to amend the Access to Information Act (disclosure of results of public opinion polls), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, most Canadians believe that this is the best country in the world. However, that does not mean they agree with the status quo and do not want changes. Canadians want constructive change and near the top of every list is the desire for a more open and accountable government.

Open government means a free flow of information between the government and its citizens. It means that government informs the public rather than manipulating them. Open government means that when tax dollars are used to commission polls about the thoughts and opinions of Canadians, everyone has the right to assess the results of these polls in a timely manner.

Canadians who want access to poll results should not have to jump through bureaucratic hoops in order to get the answers. Unlike the last Parliament which was very secretive this Parliament must change the system. Never again should Canadians be faced with the situation where the information commissioner has to take the Prime Minister to court to force him to release publicly funded poll results as happened in the Mulroney regime.

The kind of backroom government that has been so common here in Ottawa must change and it must change quickly. The Canadian public will not accept that sort of secrecy any more. They will not put blind faith in their politicians. They have learned through experience that left to its own devices, government will take advantage of the situation.

Government will selectively release important information to manipulate the public and advance its own agenda. In fact, we recently witnessed a perfect example of just this type of behaviour by the Parizeau government in Quebec. While this example did not involve polls, it did involve a series of publicly funded studies that examined the consequences of separation.

As all members are probably aware, the Parizeau government realized that some of the studies cast serious doubts on the viability of a separate Quebec. These studies responsibly pointed out the economic pitfalls that would invariably be associated with separation and the Parizeau government did not like it. Instead of releasing all of the taxpayer funded studies, Mr. Parizeau only released those that reinforced his own position.

• (1105)

The point therefore is to make all polls public in a timely manner. Not only was this manipulation by the Parizeau government dishonest, it also was an example of the need for legislation that specifically prevents this kind of behaviour.

The current government has not been as secretive as the previous one. If the Liberals truly believe in the concept of open government, then they should not be afraid to put their money where their mouths are. By making open government the law of the land, Parliament can show all Canadians that times have changed and that the rights of citizens to know what their government is doing is a fundamental one. If Parliament is really serious about open government, then all members should give their consent to make Bill C-309 votable and then we should pass it.

The bill would amend the Access to Information Act to ensure that all federal departments, boards or agencies that commission public opinion polls gave notice to the designated minister and the Speaker of the House of Commons. The designated minister would then be obliged to submit to the House of Commons the results of the polls and report the following: a description of the nature of the poll; a copy of the questions asked and a summary of the responses given; the period when the poll was conducted; and the cost of the poll. The minister would be required to lay this report before the House no later than 15 days after the poll was completed. If the House is not sitting, the report would be deposited with the information commissioner within the same deadline, published in the *Canada Gazette* and then presented to