

Canadian Trade Policy

A bill should be introduced to promote a more open attitude to freedom of information within government. Information gathered at public expense should be available for press, public, and parliament. We can no longer accept the present practice allowing the government itself to decide what can be released and what cannot. Open to secret abuse as this conduct is, it should be replaced by a legislative code establishing criteria for the release of information, and the criteria should be supported by a neutral appeal tribunal which would apply the guidelines in cases where the government withheld requested material.

If we were in government, we would implement open government.

Secrecy in government also has its humorous side. The hon. member for Eglinton was recently at a meeting in Toronto where he was on a panel with the former minister of finance, John Turner. I should like to quote from a news description of this particular meeting which reads:

It is clearly an issue whose time has come. Why else would former finance minister John Turner have chosen to appear on a panel to discuss the issue—with his one-time cabinet colleague Mitchell Sharp and U.S. consumer activist Ralph Nader—at last month's Bar Association meeting? Turner seemed well aware of the public's concern about government secrecy as he watched Sharp move uncomfortably in his seat during the CBA debate.

That is a big joke. I can remember when this man was finance minister here. You could not get a straightforward answer out of him at any time. Now he is the great proponent of freedom of information and he is going to release all government secrets. I wonder what he is up to.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. McKenzie: I understand it upset the hon. member for Eglinton to hear what Turner was saying. The article goes on to read:

Sharp and Turner sat at the opposite ends of the horseshoe, giving a visible indication of where they stand on the issue. Nader, by contrast, sat close to Turner.

It seems that we are only getting all this criticism of government from people once they resign from the cabinet. It is unfortunate that more cabinet ministers are not speaking out. It would certainly be more beneficial than the secrecy which this group is exercising right now.

Now I should like to say a few words about the Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce who is the great defender of the government today. I should like to quote a recent question which I posed to him on November 2. It was with regard to Canadair. It reads:

As Canadair is now owned by the taxpayers of Canada and as the board of directors has a majority of senior civil servants presumably representing the taxpayers' interests, will the minister table the document whereby the government authorizes the loan guarantee so that the taxpayers of this country can see what kind of deal the government is getting them into?

The minister's answer to me was:

Mr. Speaker, last Friday in Montreal I held a press conference on this matter during which I gave all the information. We guarantee a loan of \$50 million, the government of Quebec a loan of \$20 million and the balance of the program will be financed through two Canadian banks. Until now the Learstar program is extremely interesting. Fifty-three orders have already been obtained by Canadair's sale committee. I think we must all be pleased that Canadair landed such an interesting program.

Nobody could disagree with that. My supplementary question was as follows:

[Mr. McKenzie.]

Will the minister table the documents which show that Canada has firm orders for 53 Learstars and has extracted deposits from customers for this number of aircraft, who are these customers, and at what price has Canada promised to deliver these aircraft?

I believe it is a perfectly legitimate question. If the deal is finalized, why cannot the official opposition or the Canadian people see these documents? This is more government secrecy and it creates suspicion. It creates suspicion in my mind because I do not feel that governments should be in the aircraft industry at all. It is one of the most precarious businesses.

We are well aware of the situation of the aircraft industry in Manitoba. The government got into the aircraft building industry there and it ended up being an absolute, total flop. It cost the Manitoba taxpayers \$50 million. When you look at large airplane manufacturers such as Boeing and Lockheed you find that when they run into problems they lay off thousands and thousands of people and they suffer great financial losses. I think we pose perfectly legitimate questions when we ask about this government being in the airplane manufacturing business to the extent it is. This government should table all documents regarding Canadair and Learstar aircraft.

Another question comes to mind in regard to this. This is a company wholly owned by the government. Before proceeding with the design and development of a Learstar 600 jet, I think the minister should explain what the authorization means in terms of taxpayers' money and how many tax dollars the minister has committed to Canadair. That is a perfectly legitimate question which he should answer. The minister announced that market surveys show that Canadair should expect sales of between 250 and 300 aircraft in a five to seven year period. He should tell this House what the government guarantee will cost the taxpayer if Canadair fails to capture the one third to one quarter of the luxury jet business which 250 to 300 planes represents. I understand that private industry in the United States is experiencing great trouble selling these executive jet aircraft, so why is the Canadian government getting into the business? I think we deserve some concrete information. Let us have all the documents tabled. However, I certainly hope it is successful now that we are into it to the extent we are.

● (2040)

Does the government's authorization of Canadair's development of this aircraft mean that every plane surplus to any commercial requirement will have to be bought, no doubt at a grossly inflated price, by the government, and that in addition to the Falcon jets available for ministerial travel we will end up with 50 Learstars for no other reason than that the government has been sold another of Canadair's white elephants?

Mr. Epp: Otto will even have a choice of planes.

Mr. McKenzie: Even the Minister of Transport (Mr. Lang) might have to expand his fleet.

Mr. Epp: One for every week of the year.