

PRIVATE MEMBERS' MOTIONS FOR PAPERS

[English]

URBAN AFFAIRS—REQUEST FOR COPY OF PROGRAM FORECAST OF DEPARTMENT, INCLUDING BUDGETS A, B, X

Mr. Terry Grier (Toronto-Lakeshore) moved:

That an order of the House do issue for a complete copy (including budgets A, B, X) of the program forecast (program review) by the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs for the latest year for which Parliament approved departmental expenditures.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I propose to begin by noting that I have already stood this motion on one occasion in the immediate past. Very often members are asked by the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of Privy Council (Mr. Reid) whether they are prepared to proceed with their bills and motions. To my mind, it appears a little inconvenient to be repeatedly asked at the very last minute whether we are ready to proceed and I am, therefore, glad of this opportunity to further develop a line of argument which I have sought to put forward on two previous occasions.

I found it instructive when dealing with this matter to review some of the arguments or counter-arguments put forward by spokesmen for the government in earlier debates. On September 6, the hon. member for Labelle (Mr. Dupras) enunciated certain views with respect to a motion to produce documents related to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Since the principle we are discussing today is identical with that being discussed at that time I believe it would be worth while to comment on two points he made. I may say they were the only two points he put forward on the matter of principle underlying the notice of motion. I quote from a translation the observations he made as follows:

I fail to see any such benefit for General Motors or Chrysler as well as other industries which compete against one another and which also stand to gain by keeping secret the main elements of their long-term plans.

By analogy I infer the hon. member was arguing that if it was bad business for General Motors and Chrysler to tell the public their long-term plans, it followed it was bad for the Government of Canada to advise members of parliament of the details of some of its long-term proposals.

I reject utterly that analogy and the logic which appears to underlie it. The parliament of Canada is not a private enterprise corporation, despite the best efforts of some members to turn it into one, and it does not follow that because private business would suffer if it told the world about its plans the government of Canada would suffer if the members of parliament who sustain it were advised of those programs in greater detail. In the first place, the government is not an object unto itself. It exists under sufferance of parliament and it cannot spend a cent unless members of parliament are prepared to vote it supply. I have argued consistently that in order to consider questions of supply intelligently it is necessary for members to be given more information than is available to them at the present time. It is not only fallacious reasoning but an unhealthy attitude to suggest that what is not good for General Motors is not good for the country.

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The second point the hon. member for Labelle made on September 6 when commenting on my remarks was to this effect—that each and every member of parliament had the right, or the opportunity and advantage, as he put it, to participate in the sittings of the various committees at which, for example, the estimates of all the departments were considered. Obviously, we do have this opportunity, this advantage, and even this right. But my question is: how can this opportunity best be exploited? How can a member of parliament, whatever his party, best take advantage of that opportunity to ask questions intelligently and in the public interest concerning programs which the government is contemplating? It is not good enough to say there are committees which members can attend if they wish. I am concerned about this: what material will be made available from the vast archives of government to enable members to do their job effectively, not merely in party political terms, as is often the cases now, but in terms of reaching conclusions as to the inherent wisdom, or otherwise, of programs which the government is seeking to establish? It is my conviction that these program forecasts, of some version of them, would go a long way toward giving members of parliament necessary information which they do not presently possess.

The hon. member for Labelle went on to say that long-term programs of the various departments are not announced, and the fact they were not announced did not jeopardize the interests of Canadians. Canadians, he said, did not miss anything by being unaware of these long-term projects. Mr. Speaker, they may not miss anything if it is assumed that what you don't know won't hurt you. But it is a dangerous philosophy to assume in the process of government that what the people don't know won't hurt them. It might very well hurt them grievously at some time in the future. To say Canadians are not missing anything by being unaware of long-term government plans is nonsense. It is the responsibility of members of parliament to ensure that the government does not take steps which might have deleterious results. Again I say that the information provided in the program forecasts could go a long way to enabling members to discharge this fundamental responsibility more effectively.

I have suggested on earlier occasions that governments of whatever political stripe tend to assume that almost any document prepared by the public service is confidential, unless specifically designed for public consumption, and contains information which ordinary mortals ought not to be allowed to play with. Thus when a notice of motion is presented in this House we are given the reply, as has been the case concerning my notices of motion, that these are internal documents of a confidential nature and therefore cannot be tabled. That is the end of it. Who says they are of a confidential nature? This is said by the government which does not want to release the documents. Therefore, we are engaged in a circular piece of reasoning. The government does not release the documents because it declares them to be confidential and it declares them to be confidential because it does not want them released. I say we have been given no substantive criterion for the basis on which documents prepared in the government service, or task force reports undertaken at the request of the government, should be either released or retained in private.