

Supply

The Leader of the New Democratic Party in his remarks acknowledged—and I give him credit—that advice from officials to Ministers should remain secret. He acknowledged that the functioning of our parliamentary system, imperfect though it is, requires that officials be able to provide advice to government and to Ministers in secret. Then he went on to say that something called “studies” should be made public. It makes one wonder just what the Leader of the NDP believes regarding the form or type of advice officials give to Ministers. Surely he recognizes that, depending upon the issue under consideration, all manner of studies, analyses, proposals, opinions, et cetera, are given to the Minister. If it were to prevail that advice which might be considered to be studies must somehow be hived off from the rest of the advice and made available, surely the Leader of the NDP must recognize that studies as such would never be committed to paper. That is the sole consequence, just as I am certain that the consequence of the Swedish experiment about which he talked is less letters and more telephone calls.

As I indicated, the Leader of the New Democratic Party recognizes that in fact it is essential for the workings of our system that advice be available to the Government on a confidential basis. He recognizes that. I applaud him for that. If he truly believes that, he would not continue this absurd charge that somehow the Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson) is not releasing information he ought to release. I believe he must be sincere in his statement that ministers should have the right to receive confidential advice from their officials prior to the formulation of policy decisions, that is in the policy formation stage, that that advice is to be kept confidential for the workings of this place, and that the Minister must then stand in his place and defend the decision taken. If so, then, in all conscience he cannot turn around and say that he has a suspicion that some of the advice the minister may have received from his officials may not entirely support his decision and then demand to be given that information so that he can stand in the House and beat him over the head with it. He cannot be on both sides. If he believes, as I do, that as the system is structured advisers must be in a position to advise the minister in confidence, then he cannot turn around in all good conscience and say that he wants some of that advice released.

As important as the confidentiality factor is in advising Ministers and government, it is equally important, in fact very important, that the Government communicate with the public in terms of its decisions, programs and activities. It is essential to the operation of our democratic system that there be that kind of openness and that kind of communication.

It is for that reason that the Prime Minister issued these guidelines. Hon. Members should read the guidelines objectively prior to reaching their decisions. The opening statement reads:

1. Communications with the public, including particularly Members of Parliament and news media representatives, are a part of the duties and responsibilities of managers in the public service.

It simply says that communicating our activities, our decisions, our programs, is an important part of the function. It is

a direction to the Public Service to be open and to communicate. It is not a restriction; it is a direction. It continues:

2. Public servants should be prepared to openly provide—

It instructs them to be prepared, and then continues:

—factual information to the public and the media within their areas of responsibility that describes or explains programs and policies that have been announced or implemented by the government.

The instruction is that public servants are to be prepared to be open on all these questions. To call that somehow a gag rule and to suggest that we are restricting openness is absurd in the extreme. It is a flight of fantasy, it is imagination. It continues:

3. Public servants should not go beyond this discussion of factual information. It is not appropriate to discuss advice or recommendations tendered to Ministers—

That is simply stating in these guidelines what the Leader of the NDP agreed to in his comments earlier this day when he said that that kind of advice must be kept confidential. He acknowledged that it is essential for the operation of our system that the advice be kept confidential. That fact is stated in point 3. How can that be viewed as a muzzle on the press, a restriction, a gag rule when it merely states in the terms of reference what everybody in the House, I believe in all honesty, agrees is absolutely necessary to the operation of our system?

● (1640)

In his remarks, the Leader of the New Democratic Party said that other jurisdictions have situations where advice is given to Ministers in a formulation. I believe he indicated that that is the situation in the United States. He is totally wrong, as he frequently is. Every democratic jurisdiction recognizes that you have to be able to have open discussions with some confidentiality, discussion with advisers of a confidential nature or you will not get the benefit of that advice. That is all these guidelines state. Discussion on policy alternatives, be they in the form of surveys, studies, opinions or whatever form, which are part of the decision-making process should be kept confidential. Everything else should be open. More than that, Departments should be in a position to provide that information, not just here in Ottawa but around the country. It is an explicit statement here in support of the commitment to openness of the Prime Minister during the election campaign.

It is absurd to have this debate today criticizing guidelines which are a declaration of our openness. It is absurd to say that they are somehow restrictive. Perhaps more absurd is to have that motion introduced by the Liberal Party. It has to be the height of absurdity that the Liberal Party with its record would introduce this kind of motion and suggest that this Government is not being open.

Perhaps the new Government is not perfect, but one area where we do not need lectures from the Liberals and in which I am totally confident is the area of communications. It is the height of hypocrisy and nerve for that Party to stand up in the House and rant and rave about secrecy, given its history. A new era started on September 4. It is an era of openness and