

research for the government and are able to put a particular viewpoint across by making speeches on behalf of the government across Canada. The government has access to computers and other research facilities which allow it information which the average citizen just does not have. Finally and most important, all too often governments in Canada have the ability to operate in secrecy without public scrutiny, without giving the average citizen an opportunity to know how decisions are made which affect his life and affect the way in which his tax dollars are spent.

The brief to the Joint Standing Committee on Regulations and other Statutory Instruments which was presented by the Canadian Bar Association makes the point that today in Canada there is no statutory right that Canadians have to freedom of information. There is no principle involved there that is enshrined in the law which allows Canadians to know how their money is being spent and how decisions affecting public policy are being made. Today, the principle seems to be that information about how the taxpayer's money is being spent and how public policy is being made is the private property of the government. The principle seems to be that the onus is upon the citizen to prove that he should be entitled to know how his life is being affected by government decisions, and not upon government to justify withholding that information from the average citizen.

The Canadian Bar Association summarizes the problems which are inherent in the present situation and the difficulty that there is for the average citizen to have proper access to information, in the following way. They make this statement, "In short, therefore, the legal obstacles to disclosure reinforced by the civil servant's tradition of secrecy have created a climate of secrecy which surrounds even the lower ranks of the bureaucracy." That is the way it is for the average Canadian today. When a person is faced with decisions made by government on a daily basis which impact on his life, he finds that he is not allowed access to the information which is absolutely essential if he is to discharge his responsibility as a citizen properly.

In 1965 the first bill was presented in the House of Commons to provide for a legal right for citizens to have access to public information. It was in 1969 that my colleague, the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin), first introduced his private member's bill on freedom of information. Today, 13 years later, after the first bill was introduced in parliament, parliament is still reduced to the position where we are led to debate the principle of freedom of information, and the government has yet to come back to parliament to place before it comprehensive legislation which will protect the rights of our citizens to have access to this information.

It is the Secretary of State (Mr. Roberts), who spoke just before me, who has the responsibility for freedom of information. He indicated that the Liberal party would not support the motion that was moved today by the Leader of the Opposition in an attempt to gain all-party support for the principle of freedom of information and for the principle of ensuring that

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where decisions are made by a minister in which he is one of the parties to a dispute, an impartial arbitrator should have the right to determine what the citizen's rights should be and whether the minister acted properly or not. The minister indicated he has yet to make up his mind as to what the principle involved really is, and as to which side he will choose to support in this particular question. He has indicated his party will rise tonight to vote against this motion which would give citizens of Canada this right.

The minister has indicated that in the next session of parliament he intends to introduce and to pass a freedom of information act. I do not expect, and I think that most members of this House and most Canadians do not honestly expect, that this government will pass a freedom of information act before the next election. If it were his priority to do so, the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) had ten years to bring before parliament a tough and comprehensive freedom of information act. He has not done that. We know from the attitude of this government that its members see it is in their partisan interest to put themselves on the side of the angels by claiming they support the principle of freedom of information without actually having to come forward to parliament and pass legislation. That is essential. It is not introducing a green paper or even a bill to parliament that is essential, but passing legislation which would enshrine the rights of Canadians to have access to information.

● (1702)

The green paper which was tabled by the Secretary of State a year ago outlines very well the concerns of this government. It describes at great length some of the difficulties the government sees that are inherent in the concept of freedom of information. I quote one statement from page four of the report:

As well, advice contained in such documents might be construed in the press and parliament as embarrassing to a minister or be used to try to break down the unity of the governing party, even though such advice did not represent government policy or a course of action acceptable to the minister.

Where are we in Canada today if it is acceptable to withhold information because the government is afraid it might be potentially embarrassing to it? That is the record of this government. There are many instances where, if the government had only levelled with the Canadian people, let the facts be known, and given them the opportunity to make sound and informed judgments about the activities of the government, the government simply refused to let that happen because of potential embarrassment of partisan disadvantage that might accrue to it.

My leader made it clear that a first priority of a Progressive Conservative government led by him after the next election will be to introduce a tough and comprehensive freedom of information act. It will enshrine this right in law for all Canadians, and will ensure that cover-ups do not take place.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Beatty: It has to be a priority item. I think my leader feels the same way. Any government which, irrespective of