

Access to Information

throughout the country, desirable though that is; it is also important to develop policies and programs to support the Canadian national identity and a sense of participation by citizens throughout the country. Of course, I commend my colleague, the Secretary of State, for his efforts in that area.

The very size of the country, its widely dispersed population, its ethnic diversity, the two official languages and the special character of the regions of our country all underline the importance of seeing the country as a whole and as more, much more, than the sum of its parts. At the same time, those differences and diversities are part of the richness of Canada and reinforce our particular identity as a nation.

In my brief time as the Minister for Multiculturalism, Mr. Speaker, I have learned a great deal about how diverse this country is. I do not think many Canadians realize that the majority of citizens living in the prairie provinces are neither Anglophone nor Francophone. Many people in other parts of the country living in communities with one large majority group of a particular origin, unfortunately, do not have the full sense of how diverse we are, except for the few who have been able to travel widely.

I want to say that it is natural for informed citizens to be skeptical of government, anxious to improve it and yet, I hope, respecting our democratic institutions. It is also an obligation upon good citizens to attempt to understand the issues facing this country, so as to judge the efforts of government, of whatever party, to resolve those issues. In turn, the government has a duty to assist its citizens in this understanding and, as well, to be mindful of its role in furthering other aspects of citizenship, not the least of which we may unashamedly call love of country.

If I may, Mr. Speaker, I simply want to address myself to several points made this afternoon by other members in the debate on this important bill.

Earlier today a member of the New Democratic Party criticized the government—I believe it was the member for Burnaby (Mr. Robinson)—because in our charter of rights and freedoms we do not have the right of access to information. I simply want to point out that the Minister of Justice (Mr. Chrétien) made it very clear in that committee—and it is on the record—that he wants the experience of this very important legislation before considering moving forward on that front. Certainly, that is possible.

Many references have been made to the Americans taking a lead in the area of access to information. I point out only that their access to information is not enshrined in their constitution. Yet, Sweden has it enshrined, and it is not as open in providing access to information as is the American government.

I would also like to comment on the remarks made a few moments ago by the hon. member for Regina East (Mr. de Jong), who seemed to have his head firmly planted in the past in all his criticisms. Surely this legislation gives recourse to the courts and ombudsmen, and neither Parliament nor govern-

ment can be supreme over the rights of the citizen in this matter.

If I could, I would like to make a point with respect to comments made by the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark) this afternoon. Mr. Speaker, the right hon. member for Yellowhead seems very critical of the exemption, at the moment, of any matter which might injure relations between the federal, or national, government and the provinces. Again, I simply point out that the government has attempted to release polls and information as requested by the opposition. But, finally, the government is answerable to the ombudsmen and the courts if matters appear to be unsatisfactory in response to demands for information.

Also this afternoon the right hon. member for Yellowhead questioned what the words "associate state" in clause 15 of the bill means. I simply suggest they have the same meaning as they had in clause 15 of his bill.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, as a journalist, temporarily retired, as someone who may return to journalism and as someone—as are all members of this House—deeply committed to trying to have Canadians better understand this country and better able to focus on issues which this Parliament debates, I believe this legislation is fundamental to the future of our country.

Hon. Elmer M. MacKay (Central Nova): Mr. Speaker, I would like to commence my remarks on a positive note. I believe this is a hopeful beginning and that this is a piece of legislation which is long overdue. I appreciate the tribute which has been paid to members of this chamber—some of whom are no longer here—who are active in this field. I commend hon. members opposite for their objectivity in giving a great deal of credit to our friend and colleague, Ged Baldwin, the former member from Peace River.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. MacKay: If anyone epitomized the spirit of freedom of information I think it was Ged Baldwin when he was carrying on a long and unremitting campaign for this piece of legislation.

● (2110)

I am sure Ged Baldwin would agree, however, that this particular piece of legislation is merely a hopeful beginning. All of us who have been in this place for very long can remember other pieces of legislation which the government opposite claimed would be very important, some of which were introduced with a lot of fanfare. I can think of the competition act, the Canada Water Act and the Railway Relocation and Crossing Act, all of which were to be landmark pieces of legislation, but which never amounted to very much.

Coming back to the existing situation, I must emphasize the very major step taken in this piece of legislation in the form of repealing section 41 of the Federal Court Act. This particular provision should be put on the record once again to emphasize exactly what an improvement it is that we as parliamentarians no longer must contend with this provision. I had almost