

We have the technology and it is growing every day. The question is how to use that technology intelligently and with due regard to people's right to privacy. This is a question under study by the government on an ongoing basis. But to jump in without proper study and thought would cause hardship to employers and workers in business concerns of every size, to say nothing of the millions of Canadians who found the SIN a convenient and commonly accepted way to identify themselves in business transactions of every type.

The concern voiced in both private and public sectors about the growth in volume and complexity of information and data processing systems has been heard by the government. People speak about the threat to individual control of our lives. Again, I must turn members' attention to the many acts of parliament limiting the use of personal information filed under the social insurance number. The SIN registry, as I stated, collects information solely to establish the identity of a person so that he or she can obtain a social insurance number. That has to be done; I do not think anyone will argue with that. Any personal information about a person is not available through the SIN registry. The SIN is as confidential as its holder chooses to make it. Many people do not seem to attach great importance to this confidentiality, since the SIN has been used as the basis for newspaper lotteries. So far as the government is concerned, the privacy and anonymity of the SIN are protected in the same way as bank accounts are protected. This is a time honoured tradition in Canada. The government is committed to upholding this tradition and to protecting this public interest.

It is true, Mr. Speaker, that identifying systems seem to threaten basic human freedoms. Yet it must be recognized that, in many countries today, a number like SIN is used for a universal identifier. The record keeping systems of many European institutions are linked by the use of such individual identity numbers. These countries have successfully reduced the potential of this threat by parallel development of strict rules that give the individual control over the nature of the information recorded and the uses to which it can be put.

Canada is no different, Mr. Speaker. Although the SIN system is hardly a universal numbering system in the same sense, we do, nevertheless, have a Human Rights Act already in place to prevent abuses of information government now collects from people. The privacy laws give individuals the right to correct information on file and to appeal any abuses of their privacy to a privacy commissioner.

As we are all aware, the Canadian government, in June 1974, was party to a summary statement issued by a conference of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD. The conference discussed policy issues on data protection and privacy. It underlined consulting public opinion as the basis of any major shift in information gathering and filing systems.

I believe that the government and the public will continue to be guided by the spirit of the following extract from the OECD's summary statement:

Social Insurance Numbers

The right of public or private institutions to acquire personal data is not absolute; at some point, the need to gather information must give way to the right of the individual to maintain privacy.

But let me add here, Mr. Speaker, that we must proceed with caution.

Mr. Stuart Leggatt (New Westminster): Mr. Speaker, first of all, I should like to commend the minister for the statement which he just made which seems to me to be a useful statement of principle. But it is unfortunate that, when one examines the record of the use of the number and its institution by the government, one finds that it does not square with that statement of principle. As to the statement of principle that the right to obtain information is limited, it seems to me that the use of SIN, which has grown, has clearly eroded the right to privacy which people who live in this country expect.

Sometimes when we engage in these kinds of debates we feel a little like King Canute trying to stop the tides from coming in, because the trend toward reducing the right to privacy is overwhelming, not merely in the case of government but in terms of the use of identification numbers by private industry. There is a parallel risk. I know the hon. member for Saskatoon-Biggar (Mr. Hnatyshyn) touched on that, but he touched on it very lightly. We tend in this place to emphasize always the bureaucracy and the great risk that big government runs in terms of obtaining access to what is normally private information and abusing it. In fact, the potential for abuse of private information by the private sector is just as serious as in terms of the public sector.

I think I should like to address a few remarks to that kind of risk. Consider the use of information such as, for example, that contained in an income tax return. Remember that the use of SIN is absolutely key to the operation of the income tax department in terms of programming purchasers, of finding a category in the public which is susceptible to buying insurance or buying motor vehicles or buying products for which they have no particular need. So here lies the danger.

I agree completely with the hon. member for Saskatoon-Biggar that we need a guideline, an addition to the privacy laws of this country to set forth the right of the citizen to privacy. We cannot just look at it in terms of the potential for a draconian, totalitarian kind of society on the part of the bureaucracy. We also have to look at the increasing size of multinational corporations and the increasing sophistication of those organizations in the way they can use that private information also to erode freedom of choice and the right to privacy of citizens.

I am pleased to see that the NDP was, as usual, in the forefront in trying to protect the liberties of the subject when this system was initiated some time ago. On March 9, 1964, the hon. member for Winnipeg North (Mr. Orlikow) asked this question:

Has the registration proposed for all Canadians been considered solely for social security purposes, or is it tied up in any way with the emergency measures organization and compulsory military service?

He asked also:

Will this information be provided to other government departments and particularly the RCMP?