

Dennis Bevington, MP Western Arctic : Statement on Bill C-27 in the House of Commons

November 20, 2012

Mr. Speaker, I thank everyone here who is supporting my speech. I speak to a very difficult bill that the government has brought forward, Bill C-27, ostensibly called a “transparency act”, but really it is another colonial act. That is what the bill is about. We have a bill that speaks to a very small segment of society that considers first nations to have extreme problems with accountability. It demands a system of accountability that is really unacceptable, that would not meet the needs of first nations and that would impose a burden that would, in some cases, put first nations at a disadvantage with other Canadians.

The bill would force first nations who are still under the Indian Act to publicly post their financial statements of any moneys provided to chiefs and band councillors regardless of where it is earned, including reimbursements for out-of-pocket expenses, its auditors' reports on financial statements and its auditors' reports on moneys paid to chiefs and council, and to make these available on a website for a period of 10 years. All this information is already accessible to band members through the Department of Aboriginal Affairs by request. This information is available to those who want it and they make use of that service, from what we were told, upwards of 150 to 200 times a year. I do not know if that is every year or in particular years, but out of the 600 or so bands, that is the volume of requests put forward.

Once we took the bill to committee, even those who supported it said that there needed to be amendments. There were a few major supporters within the first nations who took the position of the government and said they wanted it. They made that choice. However, by and large, the majority of first nations people understood and recognized that this was not the way to do business and that this was not government to government. When the minister was in front of us I asked him whether he considers the relationship between the federal government and the band councils in Canada to be government to government. He agreed with me. He said that it is. Hence, the hypocrisy of the bill, which would treat first nations people as wards of the state.

In the Northwest Territories, another government that is set up by a bill of this Parliament, the NWT Act, the NWT government gets to choose how it discloses information. That applies to Nunavut as well as to the Yukon. We have a situation here where the government agrees it is a government to government relationship, yet it will not treat the first nations in the same fashion that it treats others. We have equality in this country. We have equality as a guiding principle of this country and the Conservatives seem to take that and ignore it.

There is a hypocrisy issue here as well because quite clearly the current government has been one of the most secretive governments in the history of Canada. International agencies that monitor access to information have taken us from fourth place in the world

to 52nd place in our ability to access information from the government. In terms of the information that is given, when the Conservative government came to power, the average redaction of information was 15%. Fifteen per cent of the items that the government released to the public was redacted. It is now 47%. Why? Has the nature of government changed so much? Has secrecy become so important?

If it is so important for the Conservatives, why would they insist that first nation governments would have to show everything to everyone in this country on a website for every nitpicker in the country to look at. Everyone with a grudge against first nations could go there and go through their dirty laundry to look for something. That is what the government wants to do to first nations. That is what it is doing with the bill. What a shame.

The government could have, through incentives to first nations, enabled them to develop their own information systems. Many have. Many of the first nations that came in front of us said, "Look, here is the work that we have done. Here is how we disclose our information. We are proud of it. We did this ourselves".

What does the government do? It slaps it on everyone. How is that government to government? Shame on the government. Shame on it for not treating first nations in a respectful fashion. That is the problem we had in Canada for 100 years. I thought we were trying to get over this problem of treating First Nations with little respect. After signing treaties with them, after taking over their land, when are we going to treat them with respect?

Let us talk about the Conservative government for a while, because the bill is going to pass and we are going to end up in a situation where the first nations are going to have wait three years to get this fixed. Right now, the government has done very bad things with respect to accountability and transparency.

One of the first acts by the government was to create the office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, saying this would make the government more accountable. Since that day, the government has denied information, delayed the release of information and demeaned the PBO. Most recently, the PBO has had to threaten court action to get the information he needs to provide parliamentarians with the facts we need to properly review Conservative budgets and other financial statements. This is a public government, open to every citizen of the country, unlike first nations, which are governments for specific groups of people in this country. We have a responsibility as a public government to release information to all and sundry.

When it comes to the environment, the Conservative government has shut down investigation into climate change, taken out the Experimental Lakes Area, closed Arctic research centres and has muzzled scientists from speaking in public. What is going on? What is it about science that Conservatives feel the rest of the Canadians should not know? What is it about science that the government wants to hide from us?

That is a question that perhaps we will get in the next election. That is when the Canadian public will actually decide what information they want. There is the F-35 auditor's report and the handling of the Auditor General's report. In his first report as Auditor General, Michael Ferguson said the Department of National Defence gambled on the F-35 fighter jet without running a fair competition, while lacking cost certainty or any guarantee the plane could replace the current fleet of CF-18s by the end of the decade. He went on to talk about business conducted in an uncoordinated fashion by federal departments.

What did the government do? First it said his information was all wrong, after refusing to release the information he requested. Then it tried to shut committee meetings in this boondoggle. The final attempt by the Conservative government to hide the truth has been to delay the release of the public accounts committee report looking into the debacle. These are hardly the actions of a government that supports accountability and transparency.

I could go on for quite a long time about the inadequacy of the government when it comes to accountability and transparency. The Canadian public would probably enjoy hearing about all the issues we have with that. I could talk about robocalls, the impact of the health care transfer cuts to the provinces, the cost of the ideological prison agenda or election financing schemes, but I would be here all day and I only have 30 seconds. For the Conservatives to say that the single biggest issue for first nations people, many of whom live in third world poverty, is the need for accountability beyond what they do already is real hypocrisy.