

Access to information—who gets it?

By ALF STONG
MPP — YORK CENTRE
 From September 12 to 16, the Canadian Conference of Legislative Ombudsmen was held at the Sheraton Centre in Toronto, on the initiative of Arthur Maloney, the Provincial Ombudsman for Ontario.

Former Canadian Finance Minister John Turner chaired the session of the Conference which was concerned with "The Ombudsman and Access to Information".

It was his belief that the ultimate adjudicative authority in this connection should rest with the courts, that the Ombudsman's function

was quite distinct, although there is considerable overlap.

Gerald Baldwin, M.P., a long-term proponent of freedom of information, expressed the view that secrecy led to incompetence, indecision and scandal. He favoured the idea of the Ombudsman intervening to secure documents which had been denied.

Donald MacDonald, M.P.P. maintained that the parliamentary system cannot be truly democratic unless there is freedom of information. He believes that freedom of information will lead to genuinely responsible government and reduce the alienation of people from government.

Margaret Campbell,

M.P.P., dealt directly with freedom of information available to the public through the Legislature, one of her concerns being the right of the individual to see his or her own file.

She also dealt in specific terms with the right of the citizen to know what the government is doing, citing experience in the provincial legislature.

For example, she mentioned an 11-page document reporting on efforts to obtain information from the government, particularly the Ministry of Health, on a private enterprise which receives some seven million dollars annually from the Province.

Oral questions and



queen's park

Order Paper questions failed to obtain the information, and we resurrected a little known procedure called "A Notice of Motion for Production of Papers", in addition to letters to the Minister. All to no avail.

Then there is the matter of the Toronto Island Airport, and its possible use for STOL (Short Take-Off and Landing) planes.

In April 1974, we learned of the existence of a Committee meeting

behind closed doors to review "technical information" on this matter. (Incidentally, not all the members serving on this Committee had technical expertise.)

Originally, we sought membership of the Committee. Subsequently observer status was requested. This too was denied, although it was resolved that the minutes of meetings be made available.

However, the minutes we received were con-

siderably less than complete. The matter was referred to the Attorney General on the basis of an investigation into the falsification of public documents, but he ruled the Chairman of the Committee had prepared a summary of proceedings which contained "All the essential and basic points that were discussed".

The Minister stated: "In creating this summary there was no attempt to distort the facts or mislead people as to the Committee's considerations".

It is interesting to note that among those matters deleted from our minutes were the numbers of passengers which might be expected to use a STOL airport, alternative

airport sites, the full name of a provincial government study and a statement regarding provincial policy towards introduction of air service in Southern Ontario.

Experience with government information offices is equally discouraging. Earlier this summer we requested reports from the Ministry of Health, one on ambulance services, the other on allegations by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association that people had been improperly detained in mental hospitals.

To date neither report has been received from the Government, although the report on ambulance services has been sent to us "in a brown paper envelope"

from an unknown source.

Replying to questions in the House from the Liberal Leader, the Premier said, July 7, this year that his "experience has been that there has been very little that hasn't been made public in one form or another."

This may be true if one searches the archives, but hardly answers the present burning problems. It has been suggested that creation of the Office of Provincial Ombudsman is a big step forward; this may well be true as far as individuals are concerned.

However, one flaw in the legislation is the question of the confidentiality of the Ombudsman's Office.

For example, a Select Committee wrestled for

some time with problems in correctional institutions, as a result of a report of the Ombudsman, and discussions were deferred because his office was preparing a comprehensive report on the subject.

Finally, he concluded that he could not introduce the report, either to the Speaker or to the Committee, although it had been received by the Ministry.

Other problems have arisen from the practice of tabling "interim" answers to questions and from questions which have died on the Order Paper, as well as the habit of Ministries resorting to the device of Cabinet confidentiality in refusing to release reports.

Antique auction Oct. 25

Dick Piller of "The Country Shop" Antiques in Victoria Square is holding an auction of Antiques and Collectables on Tuesday, October 25 at 8 p.m. in the Blue Flame Room, Consumers' Gas Company, 500 Elgin Mills Road East in Richmond Hill.

There will also be a door prize and a plant sale.

The Richmond Hill-Thornhill Area Family Services Volunteers are asking for any donations of antiques, collectables and plants for this event.

If you have any please contact Doris Todd at 884-1273 or Betty Wallbanks at 881-0573.

Block parents garage sale big success

The Thornhill Block Parents' Garage Sale held last week at Thornhill United Church was a tremendous success, said Linda Wadsworth, Co-Chairman of the Thornhill Central Committee.

"We were all sold out by noon," she said, although the sale was slated to run from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Paper back and hard cover books, priced at 5 and 10 cents each were gone in an hour.

Other items included a mantle piece taken out of a living room, an old solid brass chandelier lamp with five globes, skis and ski boots, drapes, bed spreads and baby equipment.

The Block Parents had a special booth from which they distributed posters, many done by local school children.

Orange drinks from McDonalds and coffee donated by Ron's Catering Service were available.

It was a triumph for the many volunteers from the Thornhill Block Parent Central Committee and local block parent groups.

Taxi committee will be formed

Vaughan council agreed to form a taxi committee last week, involving drivers and councillors, and town staff.

The committee requested by Richmond Hill taxi driver Joan Kennedy was called "a step in the right direction" by Councillor Dave Fraser.

Mrs. Kennedy of Avenue Taxi had asked for the committee to see that cabs are properly licenced, "cars clean and drivers half-way decent."

She returned to council Monday, despite suffering from a severe cold, and said that she wanted a number of companies involved, not just Avenue. Mrs. Kennedy owns her own car but works through Avenue.

The town will recommend that someone from Thornhill or Olympus taxi companies join the committee, as well as Avenue, but it wants the drivers to come up with names.

All drivers on the committee would have to have Vaughan plates.

Mike Sharma, proprietor of Avenue Taxi, said he had talked to Markham's bylaw enforcement officer, Bill Walker, and the idea of a taxi committee would be put to the bylaws committee of Markham council.



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