

**editorial**

# **Secrets should be bared before select committee**

If the select committee on defence set up by the Liberal Government is really going to achieve anything there has to be some changes in the ground rules. And first-priority is the breaking down of the security screen which exists at present.

A government defence committee that does not have access to classified information is worse than useless. It wastes time and money and gets nowhere fast. I can see no reason why the candidates put forward by the various political parties for membership of the committee should not be screened by the RCMP like any other citizens embarking on a vital defence function. The members of parliament selected should then be accepted as safe and responsible individuals who can share defence secrets with high ranking service and Department of National Defence officials. This is the only way they can contribute materially to the vital and far-reaching decisions that have to be made.

On the other hand, if this is not done the committee will find itself hamstrung by genuine security barriers and hoodwinked by artificial secrecy screens laid down to cover up inadequacies or inefficiencies.

The security blanket is a popular device for obscuring the truth — and it is

not only used in totalitarian countries. It was used in Canada during the recent Bomarc controversy. There were frequent press and public tours of the North Bay facilities until the warhead question arose and became a hot political potato. Then the tours were cut off — and have only recently been resumed. Needless to say, the interest in the Bomarc base has dwindled, and certainly at no time during the controversy was the Bomarc particularly secret.

This is a fairly harmless instance, but the word “classified” has been used to cover a multitude of sins.

In proposing the plan of baring our defence secrets to the select committee I have frequently met the argument that politicians could never be “safe and responsible”. The examples of budget leaks and instances where details of secret meetings of M.P.s have appeared mysteriously in the newspapers next morning, reinforce these arguments. But one would hope that in matters of defence, these carefully selected representatives of our nation could keep “mum,” particularly if they are reminded of the grim penalties available for violations of the Official Secrets Act.

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