

## 'Dossier Dictatorship'

Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr. of North Carolina, that invaluable watchdog of the Constitution, has been conducting hearings on the threat of computerized information systems to political liberty. Data on the private lives of Americans are now piling up in government and private agencies to the extent that if a man does not have a file with the Federal Bureau of Investigation or one of the military intelligence offices, he has a good chance of making up for it by inclusion in the computerized information bank of the Central Intelligence Agency, one of the Congressional security committees, the Passport Office, the Justice Department's Division of Internal Security or any one of a dozen other agencies—Federal, state and local—including even the innocent-sounding Department of Health and Urban Affairs.

Small wonder that the lead-off witness, Prof. Arthur R. Miller of the Michigan University Law School, spoke darkly of the approaching "dossier dictatorship." The phrase may be strong, but obviously the more an institution can embarrass an individual, the more inhibited that individual will be about criticizing the institution. The late Senator Joseph R. McCarthy demonstrated how the skillfully vague use of raw files can smear the innocent and damn the merely indiscreet.

Senator Ervin's probe is at too early a stage to talk conclusively of legislation. But legal relief is in the wind, and should be. One bill would provide a whole set of protections for all whose names go into these dismal repositories. The more burdensome and risky it becomes for government to keep such watch on its citizens, the more it will confine its attention to essential cases—and the more prudent will be its procedures.