

*Privilege—Mr. Stevens*

Auditor General's report, and in my case much more important, dealing with budgetary matters.

How do we treat these prior to their publication in a way that we can accept members of parliament as being qualified people who will deal on a confidential basis, if necessary, with the documents concerned and at the same time ensure there will be a meaningful discussion in this House with regard to whatever the document is, be it the Auditor General's report or a budgetary presentation in due course?

Perhaps this is the worst example I have run into to date of where ad hockery in dealing with the so-called lock-ups has led to an affront virtually of every member in this House in the sense of requiring a member to sign a declaration that I think most members would find most unusual and, I would hope in all cases, totally unnecessary, to ensure that whatever secrecy was to be preserved with respect to the publication of the Auditor General's report, would in fact be preserved.

I say this because I think we must draw a distinction between the nature of the Auditor General's report and, say, the more precarious type of report or statements that you have in a budgetary statement. After all, an Auditor General's report, while it may be embarrassing to the government and others in the country, is really after the event. It is simply the report of an Auditor General as to what he has found with respect to his examination of the accounts of government.

In a budgetary sense, where a minister of finance, inadvertently or otherwise, might make a disclosure, that would give somebody an opportunity to take advantage and make a windfall profit or in some way gain access to knowledge that he otherwise should not have. Whatever lock-up requirements are required for an Auditor General's report, they should be less severe than those generally necessary for a budget lock-up.

In the case of the November 23 situation, the actual requirements that were asked of me were the most severe I have ever encountered with regard to any lock-up since I have come to Ottawa. Certainly the budgetary lock-ups are handled on a more casual basis. We are treated as members of parliament in those lock-ups, allowed a certain freedom to leave, for example, before the minister rises in his place to deliver the budget speech. We are allowed to have some discussion with our leader concerning the budget, and that type of thing. That is totally within the context of operating properly as a member of parliament.

I feel there was a question of privilege on November 23 with regard to when I requested admission to the lock-up room to deal with the Auditor General's report. I feel there is a question of privilege as I was asked to sign a declaration with the four offensive parts in it that I have read. I say that, in order to underline the fact that I do not think the Auditor General's report is all that secret. I would point out that if you review the Auditor General's report you will find two letters at the beginning of the report, one from the then president of the treasury board, now the President of the Board of Economic Ministers (Mr. Andras), to the Auditor General, and the other from the Auditor General to the then president of the treasury board.

[Mr. Stevens.]

The interesting thing about these letters is that they point out that the contents of the Auditor General's report had been known, certainly to the then president of the treasury board and his staff. The whole point of the letters was that the President of the Treasury Board could reply to the Auditor General to what extent he felt the comments were fair and to what extent he felt he could improve or had already put in place certain mechanisms to relieve some of the problems to which the Auditor General had referred.

We have here a situation where a report is already being dealt with by members of parliament, certainly by one or more cabinet ministers and their staff. However, when it comes to the question of when can we in the opposition have access to and review the report, these harsh lock-up requirements are in effect forced upon us, or we do not see the report.

I would point out that in the letter from the then president of the treasury board to the Auditor General dated October 13, well ahead of the actual tabling of the report in this House, the then president of the treasury board stated:

—my formal response to the information which you have imparted to my senior officials and myself concerning your forthcoming audit findings and observations.

He goes on to make some comments. He stated he felt there had been major initiatives taken by both the Treasury Board secretariat and the new office of the Comptroller General with regard to comments made in the Auditor General's forthcoming report. In reply to that letter, the Auditor General stated:

Your letter of October 13 is a constructive and welcome response to the government-wide observations and recommendations that my current annual Report brings to the attention of Parliament.

He goes on to make certain other comments, and concludes by saying:

In this connection, your letter of October 13 setting out the government's position and plans with regard to the more significant recommendations will be particularly helpful. I appreciate very much your precedent-setting action in making it available to me for inclusion in the Centennial Annual Report of the Auditor General to the House of Commons.

I underline that not only is the nature of an Auditor General's report not one where there has to be a great degree of secrecy, but in this case the contents of the Auditor General's report were known to members of the government, particularly the then president of the treasury board, at least a month in advance. There were exchanges of letters. The then president of the treasury board even indicated that he felt various mechanisms had been put in place to minimize some of the difficulties which the Auditor General was detailing.

I find it most remarkable, when it comes to the day that the report is to be tabled, that not only are we given little forewarning as to what is in the report, but if we wish to go into the so-called lock-up we are required to sign the declaration to which I have referred. After that it falls on us on that day to be the critics of the government. We have to question the government with regard to various points raised in the Auditor General's report as to whether they are true or as to what steps have been taken concerning the various points raised by the Auditor General. There seems to be a very unfair advantage given to those on the government side, compared to