

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, April 13, 1970

The House met at 2 p.m.

PRIVILEGE

MR. DOUGLAS (NANAIMO-COWICHAN-THE ISLANDS)—STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS RESPECTING AUDITOR GENERAL

Mr. T. C. Douglas (Nanaimo-Cowichan-The Islands): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege affecting the rights and prerogatives of Parliament. My question of privilege has to do with the statements which have recently been made by ministers of the Crown respecting the Auditor General of Canada.

On March 25, on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation national news, the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Macdonald) said:—we don't regard it as being his responsibility to criticize the underlying policy involved in certain decisions. It is Parliament's responsibility and the government as approved by Parliament for deciding on the policy. We don't think it is the Auditor General's prerogative to comment on that.

More recently, on the CBC program "Encounter" on April 11, 1970, the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Drury), referring to the Auditor General, said:

He has expressed his view as to the appropriateness of some government policies. Now, in this sense he is pitting his judgment as to sound business practice, sound governmental policy, against the government, and not unnaturally you would not expect a government in every instance to agree with his judgment. I wonder myself whether the Auditor General should cast himself in this role or whether we should look for really another kind of person to be Auditor General—

No one needs to remind the House that the Auditor General is an officer of Parliament, that it is his duty to report to Parliament any improprieties or wasteful expenditures which he encounters in the pursuance of his duties. Naturally there will be times when the members of the government will disagree with the opinions expressed by the Auditor General in his report. If they disagree they have two courses of action open to them. First, if the government finds that the criticisms of the Auditor General are uncalled for and unjustified, it can place its case before the Public Accounts Committee. That is the place for the

government to argue that the Auditor General has exceeded his responsibilities and has dealt with policy matters rather than expenditures. The government at that time is in a position to explain any extenuating circumstances as to why the government made expenditures which were not authorized by Parliament and not made on the basis of statutes.

• (2:10 p.m.)

The government has a second remedy open to it. If it believes that the Auditor General is incompetent and that he is incapable of interpreting his responsibilities accurately, the government can introduce a motion into both Houses of Parliament calling for his dismissal. The House at that time would have an opportunity to hear the government state its case and to make a decision on the basis of all the facts presented. These are two things the government can do.

I submit to you, Sir, that what it cannot do is harass and intimidate the Auditor General, nor bludgeon him into silence.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Douglas (Nanaimo-Cowichan-The Islands): It seems to me very clear that the government has two choices. If it is dissatisfied with the services of the Auditor General it should introduce a motion into this House to fire him. If it does not care to do that it should contain itself, let us argue the question out before the Public Accounts Committee, and allow the Auditor General to continue his work of being the watchdog of Parliament and the protector of the public purse.

My question of privilege is that an officer of Parliament in the pursuance of his duty is being intimidated and harassed in such a manner as to interfere with the proper pursuance of his responsibilities as the Auditor General. If Your Honour finds that there is a prima facie case of privilege, I am prepared to move a motion to that effect.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. member for Nanaimo-Cowichan-The Islands has given the required notice to the Chair of his intention to raise this very important matter by way of a question of privilege. During the last few hours I have had occasion to reflect very seri-