

*Auditor General*

of respect in which parliament is held by many people outside the chamber. They feel that parliament, mainly the House of Commons, is not able to grapple properly with the problems of our society. They feel we are not only wasting our time but wasting their time. They feel we are not able to provide the kind of leadership that is required because the House of Commons is impotent.

In many respects what makes the House of Commons impotent is nothing more nor less than those of us who make up its membership. We have been unwilling and unprepared to give up the mythology about this place that so many of us have had bred into us when we enter this chamber. We have been unable to face the fact that the House of Commons no longer is equipped to do the kind of work that it did 100, 200, 300 years ago when the original forerunner of this motion was run for the first time in the British House of Commons.

We have a swiftly moving society in which changes take place rapidly. Yet we in the House of Commons are profligate with our time. We do not budget our time or attempt to distinguish between what is important and what is not important. We waste our time with trivia and do not focus upon the larger issues of our day. Consequently all one has to do if one wants to find proof of this statement is to observe the debates of the House of Commons on any bill that is before it. Even on many occasions of opposition day motions like this, to look for and find intelligent debate instead of a series of monologues is almost impossible. If one looks at the record of the proceedings before committees, unless there is some very constant whipping of the committee to focus on what it should be dealing with, members go off in all directions, and we do not pay attention to the subject before us. It seems to me that is one of the grave weaknesses of the House of Commons, and there are reasons for that.

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When I go home to my constituency I am expected to know not only what is going on in every department of the federal government, but also what is going on in the provincial government and each of the municipalities. That is tremendous pressure that members of parliament have to bear. In the kind of work we do for the constituency we must deal not only with federal departments and agencies but also with other levels of government as well. Therefore it becomes very difficult for us to concentrate on one of two subjects.

Behind the reforms of 1965 and 1968 was an attempt to set up cadres of experts in committees made up of members of parliament who would stay with those committees and learn what the departments were doing and what they were about, and then be able to criticize effectively. We have few experts in the House of Commons. We have few people who have followed the operation of a committee or a department over a long period of time. So what happens is that, when a minister comes before a committee with civil servants and other outside witnesses brought in by the committee, members of parliament do not have the background necessary to ask the right questions, the tough questions to get the answers out.

In many cases the ministers and the civil servants sit there ready to provide a great deal of information, but the

[Mr. Reid.]

questions never come. Most of them are disappointed at the kind of grilling they get before a committee. This seems to be a failure not of the House of Commons but of the members who make it up, and of the lack to any attempt to focus on what really is important.

If we take a look at the way in which the House of Commons operates and read the debates in respect of any bill that you care to choose, we will find that the frightening thing is that most members do not focus on what the bill does. What they focus on is the speech that they happen to be making, and if they can attach to it a particular bill before the House, so much the better. The most fantastic reform that could be made in the House of Commons would be to force members to speak on the topic before them. That would completely destroy 95 per cent of the speeches made in the House of Commons.

One must be realistic, and one has to look at the people who make up the House of Commons and realize that we are not experts but generalists. We are not going to be able to do a job on the estimates, we are not going to be able to quarrel with the government about expenditures, because members are not interested in finding out how the government is administered. What the members of parliament are interested in is the policy of departments, what a department is doing, and in having a department expand its services, preferably in their own ridings. What they are not interested in doing is saying that we must cut back on this service which is going to affect their constituents, or we must cut back on another service because we cannot afford it.

What happens when we go into the committee is that members argue with the ministers to increase the amounts of money they are spending on programs, particularly in their ridings. I do not blame the members. I do this myself when I appear at the committees, and I make my representations to the ministers the way everybody else does.

It should be clear when we are trying to reform the House of Commons, and we should be precise in acknowledging this, that we are not interested in cutting back expenditures or in decreasing services to our constituents, but that what we are interested in is the policy of departments and the expansion of these services. That happens to be the way the House of Commons operates.

There are very few wealthy men in the House of Commons, if there are any, which means that most of us are looking for the expansion of government services rather than contractions. We are part of the average Canadian group, and that is what we are doing. When we look at reform of parliament let us take that into consideration and put together a structure that is going to make some sense.

As I said before, we are profligate with our time. It is quite true that we are taking longer to pass laws than we ever did before. We are sitting longer and producing less. The fact of the matter is, as pointed out by the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Chrétien), that we are spending more time on the estimates than parliament ever did before, yet we are accomplishing less and feel less satisfaction with the work we are doing. We are spending more time on legislation yet we feel we understand it less.