

*Government of Canada*

One of the reasons the Auditor General is not impressed is the very reason I pointed out when I mentioned this annual report from the Department of National Revenue. The legislation which sets up these Departments, boards, and agencies usually provides that these bodies must file annual reports. The annual reports must deal with the fiscal year, but the bodies do not have to file their annual reports until some time after the end of the calendar year. The fiscal year ends on March 31 of each year while the calendar year ends on December 31 of each year.

It is astounding that information that is compiled as of March 31 would not get into the hands of Members of Parliament or the public until after the end of the calendar year, and in fact well into the new calendar year. It is that sort of thing that causes the Auditor General, me and I know you, Mr. Speaker, to be unimpressed by the annual reports we are receiving.

While the legislation creating these Departments, boards and commissions does specify that there must be annual reports and when they must be presented, it does not specify what is supposed to be in the annual reports. It does not identify in any way, shape or form to whom the annual reports are supposed to be addressed. Are they supposed to be addressed to you and I as Members of Parliament, Mr. Speaker? Are they supposed to be addressed to the public? Are they supposed to be addressed to the Government? Are they supposed to be addressed to the employees or the management of these organizations? Who knows?

In fact, these organizations can virtually do their own thing. They do not have to worry about it at all because there is nothing in the legislation that says that they have to do anything other than send us a piece of paper entitled annual report. They do not even have to do that until after the end of the calendar year.

As the Auditor General has said in his report, there is a good chance that the information contained in these annual reports is completely irrelevant. In fact, it can often be months and months old and sometimes we get these annual reports just a month or so before the next annual report should be compiled.

Another thing the Auditor General points out in his report is the fact that very often these Departments do not meet the statutory deadlines they are required to meet when filing reports. Sometimes, annual reports are not filed at all in some years and sometimes, as in some cases about which I have read, Departments have to go back and reconstruct the facts so that two or three years later, they can produce annual reports to comply with the requirements of the legislation that set them up.

It seems ludicrous to me that we should operate in this way. As you will recall, Mr. Speaker, because I know you read it thoroughly and probably committed it to memory, the Auditor General in his report said that the Comptroller General of Canada should re-examine the very need for these reports in

the first place, but if they are to be continued, there should be some minimum standards as to form and content.

I wonder what sort of procedure we might put in place to provide those minimum standards. Shall we leave it to the Government to put in place some new minimum standards? I would be interested in hearing, when the Government responds to this motion, if it will do that or not, but I suspect not. In fact, while inquiring around, I was enlightened by the Principal Clerk of the House of Commons, Mr. Michael Kirby, a good friend of yours, Mr. Speaker. He usually sits at the Table, but unfortunately he is not there tonight.

Michael Kirby pointed out to me that there is a better way and that there are other jurisdictions that use this better way. In fact, our sister Commonwealth country, Australia, has devised a better way of dealing with the reporting system.

Australia has guidelines or minimum standards like those spoken of by the Auditor General. It has a method for evaluating the reports that come out and it has a system of rewarding Departments, boards, committees, commissions and Crown corporations for turning out good reports. That makes a lot of sense to me.

Apparently Australia has set up a panel of judges to evaluate these reports. The panel consists of five people who come from a variety of backgrounds, and those backgrounds make sense to me. One of the members of the panel is a retired senior public servant, someone who has had some experience putting together these reports. Another is a university professor of public administration, someone who is usually critical of the way reports and other things in government are put together. A third is a member of the Press Gallery.

My gosh, no one is in the Press Gallery tonight. However, we know that members of the Press Gallery are all listening to every word of this debate on television. Whenever we ask them why they were not sitting in the Press Gallery, they tell us not to worry, they were back in their offices watching us on television. We know they are doing that tonight. I know at least one member of that illustrious Press Gallery would love to sit on a panel like this and be able to judge the information they are always critical of. They are always trying to utilize the freedom of information system to get more information. This would be their opportunity to produce quality information.

• (1710)

Another member of the Australian panel is a chartered accountant because a good deal of this information is financial. Lo and behold, another member is a politician, someone like you. Oh, no, not like you, Mr. Speaker, but like some other Members of the House. You are a little cut above that, but the rest of us fall into that category. That is not a bad perspective to bring to bear on a panel that judges the quality of these reports. That is the sort of system they have in Australia, and it makes sense to me.