

Auditor General

missioner has resigned because of charges of conflict of interest and another member of the commission has been so closely linked to cabinet as a deputy minister in one of the worst run ministries that his credentials are questionable.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, there appears at the outset to be a major difference of understanding between the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) and the recently appointed head of the royal commission with respect to the establishment as recommended by the Auditor General of the office of comptroller general to oversee government expenditures on a regular basis. The Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance (Mr. Macdonald) and the President of the Treasury Board feel that a comptroller general may further remove parliamentary control over government expenditures. But the Auditor General recommended that the comptroller general be responsible, as is the secretary of the Treasury Board, directly to the government through the President of the Treasury Board. So what is the problem? Nothing new; nothing innovative; nothing to break tradition. Moreover, the chairman of the newly, but only partly formed royal commission, was quoted in the *Toronto Star* on November 27, 1976, as follows:

The royal commission would not be affronted, nor its work hampered in any way if any and all of the Auditor General's recommendations, including that for a comptroller general were implemented immediately.

So there is somewhat of a conflict of understanding between the chairman of the royal commission, two cabinet ministers, and the Prime Minister, who are also involved. I suggest, Mr. Speaker, this is a very damaging statement for the government. In the first place, the Auditor General recommended the establishment of the office of comptroller general to scrutinize government expenditures and financial control on a regular basis. The government has refused to accept this on the grounds that such an office might even further reduce parliamentary responsibility on government spending, which is a farce because we have no effective control now. The government also said it needed a royal commission to investigate, among other things, the need for a comptroller general. Yet, Mr. Speaker, the head of the royal commission has stated that the immediate appointment of a comptroller general would not interfere in the commission's work. Who is trying to kid whom in this chamber?

Nor was the head of the royal commission the only one to state that the government should immediately establish the office of comptroller general. As I stated, the Auditor General had said in his report that the comptroller general would be, as is the secretary of the Treasury Board, responsible to the government through the President of the Treasury Board. It is no wonder that in Vancouver last Wednesday the Auditor General said he was amazed that the government has appeared to misunderstand his recommendation to appoint a chief financial officer to oversee government spending. He went further by saying that it was inaccurate for anyone who has read the report to suggest that a constitutional problem stands in the way of appointing such a financial officer. Quoting directly from the Auditor General's statement, he said:

[Mr. Blackburn.]

The officials of the departments and agencies know that I have never suggested at any time that this person should be responsible to parliament, he would be directly responsible to government.

He concluded by saying that he could not "see how the Prime Minister and the President of the Treasury Board could have possibly misread my report". That last statement was rather kind to this government. I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, that the government did not misread the report and its specific recommendations. Rather, having read the report in advance of its release and knowing how devastating it would be, they chose a route which they had hoped would put off having to deal with this most serious problem: they shoved the whole thing onto a royal commission.

Mr. Speaker, my party asks for the immediate establishment of the office of comptroller general so that millions of taxpayers' dollars will no longer continue to be wasted and lost because of financial mismanagement on the part of government departments and agencies. The government's first line of defence for rejecting the proposal to establish the office of comptroller general has steadily broken down in the past week and a half. The issue of ministerial responsibility has effectively been put to rest by successive statements made by the Auditor General and the chairman of the newly appointed royal commission, and as well as by members of the opposition, the press and the public.

I quote as follows from the President of the Treasury Board's statement on November 22, 1976:

—basic tenets of our parliamentary system of government, it is the relationship between senior bureaucrats and the governments they serve. We know for instance that the terms of reference of the royal commission will not be to concern itself with financial control, but with the fundamental question of how the government should be organized to manage its operations.

This is a far cry from what the Auditor General wanted looked into, but nevertheless the question still arises: what kind of objectivity can we expect from this commission when one of its members did a study on the history of the public service from 1867 to 1970 and concluded: "The aggrandizement of the powers of the public service may be viewed as a reflection of the superior ability of this institution". That, of course, was stated by Professor Ted Hodgetts, one of the commissioners. If that is not in favour of civil servants as opposed to the House of Commons, I do not know what is. I repeat, what we in this party want and what most Canadians would like to see is the establishment of an office which would scrutinize government expenditures on a periodic basis. This is what the Auditor General recommended; it is what we are demanding and it is what the concerned citizens of this country deserve.

● (1740)

The other part of the motion which I wish to discuss calls on this government to provide the Standing Committee on Public Accounts with adequate staff so that it may do its job thoroughly. I point out that when Harold Wilson was chairman, several years ago, of the public accounts committee of Great Britain, that committee was supported by 532 back-up personnel. My party and I do not suggest that we should have 532 researchers, legal staff and other personnel to assist our com-