

First, let me underline that when we are elected to this House we come here as representatives of the people to look after their interests, and particularly to look after their interests as they relate to the spending of public funds. Every day we hear complaints not only from members of opposition parties but from members of parliament in general about our having very little say as to how government money is spent. We have little knowledge as to how it is being spent. If that is the case when we consider the estimates of departments of government, how much more is this true when we consider Crown corporations, which are practically independent of government control and for whom even ministers cannot answer adequately.

How many times have we asked in this House specific questions about the CBC, the Film Board, museums, or any Crown corporation—the CNR is a good example—only to hear the minister say, “I will raise it with the Crown corporation, because it is an independent body.”

Mr. Muir: The Cape Breton Development Corporation is another example.

Mr. Stewart (Cochrane): Yes, the Cape Breton Development Corporation is a good example. I do not mind people in this House arguing against my proposition if they have an alternative suggestion to make. However, simply arguing against it for the purpose of arguing does not really accomplish much.

Is there any better way of exercising more control over the spending of these bodies? Is there any better way for members of parliament to be given the opportunity of knowing what is going on in Crown corporations which are spending the money of the government, the money of the people? If there is a better way, I am anxious to hear about it. Although hon. members suggest that we must improve this situation, up to now I have not heard any argument which is better than the proposition I am putting forward. I can see no other possible avenue by which hon. members can make themselves aware of exactly what is going on within Crown corporations.

Recently we voted billions of dollars of expenditures under supplementary estimates. We automatically voted billions of dollars, not only for departments of government but for Crown corporations as well, without really knowing how that money is to be spent and what has been going on. True, there are committees. As you know, Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to be chairman of an important committee, the broadcasting committee, through which a number of corporations report.

The members of that committee often complain that it is not possible to examine in depth the spending of these corporations. Of course it is not, because although some of them come before us perhaps once a year or once every two years, and we spend two or three days examining them, we still cannot go into all their spending. We can look at some specific matter and if, by some accident, we happen to hear about some money being misspent, or about money that could have been spent in a better way, we can zero in on that question. But even in cases like that we really cannot look in depth at the problem.

The other day the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) placed on the order paper a motion for reducing the salary

Crown Corporations

of the president of the CBC. That was an example showing the frustration which members experience. Personally, I think that kind of action accomplishes nothing, and attempting to reduce the salary of the president of the corporation simply because we are not happy with all aspects of the corporation is not necessary. If anyone has done a tremendous job in the short time that he has been there, it is the president of the CBC. Certainly, most of us in this House criticize the CBC. There are various things about it we do not like, but I do not think the way to go about curing them is by reducing the salary of the president.

If one or two members of parliament could sit on the board of such a large corporation, they would provide the necessary input that comes from knowing what is going on at the grass roots. The people in the corporation stand aside, as it were. They go into their ivory tower. I am not trying to deride them. They are good people, doing a good job; but they cannot possibly know what the public is saying. We, as members of parliament, are in constant touch with the grass roots of this country. We know what is going on at the level of the ordinary people. We are the ones who provide the kind of input that is necessary for the corporation. I have used as an example the CBC but I could refer to many others.

It has been said that members of parliament are simply too busy to take on additional chores. Of course we are busy. Most of us are here 14 hours a day and must be available until 10.30 at night. Certainly, we all have an ever increasing amount of work to do. Yet it seems to me we always find time for the important things. The thing to do is to arrange one's work so as to look after priorities, and I think nothing is more important than keeping an eye on the taxpayers' money. As far as being busy is concerned, all of us who have worked in community affairs know that if you want to get something done, you do not ask the fellow to do it who has nothing to do; you ask the busiest guy in town, because he is the one who will do it for you. The argument of being busy is not really a good argument in this case.

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It has also been suggested that perhaps there would be too much control on the part of politicians. If a board consists of 18 or 20 members and one or even two are members of parliament, I can see no way the members of parliament could control the outcome of the decisions of that board. That is not my purpose for wanting to have members there: it is not to take over these corporations in any way. The idea is to have a representative voice there, to keep an eye on it and to act as a watchdog on the spending of the taxpayers' money. That is basically the reason.

I could go on and give any number of reasons why I think members should be included on these boards. However, I do not want to be too lengthy today. As it is, part of our time has already been taken up. I would like to see this notice of motion passed today. It is not a question of passing a law or passing a bill; it is simply a notice of motion which recommends that the government consider the advisability of this course of action. That is all it intends to do. I ask hon. members to give this motion a chance to be considered in depth. Let it pass so that the