

Financial Administration Act

bill was being discussed. I refer to the President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Lefebvre: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. That is a remark the hon. member should regret. The President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Andras) has a very important bill for first reading on the PSSRA amendments. After waiting in this House for over an hour while another debate was going on, he was called to a conference to explain the details of that bill. I have been a member of this House for 12 years and a member of the Public Accounts committee for seven years. I believe I am quite able to represent the minister on an occasion such as this.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Andre: As the parliamentary secretary indicated, the President of the Treasury Board scheduled these events so that he could not be here this afternoon. He sets his own priorities. That is up to him. He can do what he wants.

I will repeat something for the benefit of the parliamentary secretary who, if he is as competent as he indicated, will have no trouble communicating this message. It is vital that there be a Comptroller General in place in the government apparatus to bring the serious situation, to use the words of the Auditor General, under control. It is absolutely essential that he have legislative authority to perform his function. Without that, he will be gobbled up in a huge mass of whatever. There is not one chance in ten that the necessary controls can be brought in unless he has the authority of parliament to perform his function. We will be insisting upon that. We shall be insisting upon it. I do not think it is an unreasonable request, provided the government is sincere in its desire to have a Comptroller General with muscle. There will be no difficulty in agreeing with us that legislative authority should be granted. On that basis we could get the measure through committee in half an hour, get it back before the House, and implement it in short order.

● (1722)

Mr. Lloyd Francis (Ottawa West): Mr. Speaker, the measure before us relates to one of the recommendations presented by the Auditor General to parliament in his 1976 report. Hon. members will recall the language of the 1976 report by the Auditor General. He said that expenditures were out of control. He indicted the system which had developed following the implementation of the recommendations of the Glassco Commission of a decade earlier. He drew attention to the fact that there had at one time been an office of comptroller general, one which had been abolished in a desire to decentralize government operations. The philosophy of the Glassco Commission was to let the deputy ministers manage. In the name of that philosophy, the central controls which had previously existed within the Treasury Board were substantially relaxed and the mechanism which Mr. Glassco had devised to replace them were not put into operation.

The response of the government to the serious charges made by the Auditor General took many forms. The first was a

[Mr. Andre.]

substantial improvement in the staffing of the Auditor General's department and a significant increase in its budget. The second was the presentation of special legislation relating to the Auditor General which had been a dream of his predecessors in office. This bill, introduced by government and passed by parliament, pioneered some of the concepts of the functions of an Auditor General. In addition to a post-audit of expenditures, the Auditor General was empowered to consider the question of value for money spent and to break new ground in trying to improve the efficiency of government operations. But the government's response has not been limited to these things.

In the field of Crown corporations, a special investigation is under way under Mr. Lambert. We have issued guidelines to improve the operations of Crown corporations. The Public Accounts Committee, which includes the hon. member for Calgary Centre (Mr. Andre)—I am sure he will listen to me as courteously as I listened to him—has laboured long and hard trying to deal with the precise recommendations of the Auditor General and his staff. The government has decided that the recommendation concerning the Comptroller General, and his establishment at the level of deputy minister, are acceptable.

The hon. member for Calgary Centre is a good friend, and when we meet in committee our relations are always amiable; but I wonder whether he has really represented the response of the Auditor General correctly. I quote from the record of the proceedings of the Public Accounts Committee—this is a direct quotation from the Auditor General:

I would like to speak briefly on the Comptroller General, an announcement made by the minister yesterday and confirmed this morning. I am biased, completely biased, and I declare my bias. My bias lies in the fact that I think this is a tremendous forward step for the Government of Canada . . . I think—I will put my neck out here—this is going to represent a brand new chapter in financial control by the government of funds contributed by the taxpayers.

The record is there for anyone who wants to examine it.

No one can say the Public Accounts Committee or the government took lightly the criticisms which were put forward by the Auditor General. Quite the contrary. Every single major recommendation the Auditor General has put forward has now been given legislative effect. The bill before us today creates a new office. It is important to realize that under this bill the Comptroller General will not be responsible for day-to-day decisions as to how money is to be spent. That will still be the job of the deputy ministers. But within Treasury Board there will be two deputy heads, both with the rank of deputy minister. They will be responsible on the Treasury Board side for the allocation of resources and for the implementation of those financial control procedures which have been spelled out in such detail by the Auditor General.

In addition, as the hon. member for Calgary Centre has pointed out, the Comptroller General will have the responsibility of making sure that the estimates are in a form in which they will be of maximum use to members of this place when examining the record of public accounts. This is not an easy task as estimates get bigger and bigger. When you are spending upward of \$45 billion a year it is a tough job to stay on top.