

Parliament

General's department and the government as to what exactly is the role of the Auditor General.

The supporters of the government today argue that this government has been particularly generous with the Auditor General, that they have provided him with the resources that he needs to do his job and that they have provided every assistance necessary to him. All hon. members know that many auditor generals have complained about being hamstrung. It was not because the government volunteered to establish that office or because they thought that it was a great idea that we have an Auditor General today. It was because of public pressure and because feelings in parliament itself ran so high that the government was forced to bow and to make those very fundamental reforms.

● (2042)

I was intrigued to find that in the first auditor general's report in 1879 there was a major debate over whether he should be allowed to report to parliament on whether the government has spent money without authorization. Included in that report is a letter from the then deputy minister of justice with a concurring opinion from the then minister of justice, saying that the auditor general should recognize his role was very limited and that perhaps he did not have authority to look into this aspect. It concludes by saying that he may hitherto have been under the impression that his duties and responsibilities were greater and that he would be glad to find that they were defined within the limits the letter explained. It noted that he would be grateful to discover that the government would not allow him to do the job that he felt he had to do on behalf of parliament.

That auditor general made his response in exactly the same way that successive auditors general have. He said he felt that the auditor general had the responsibility to parliament to point out instances where money was not wisely spent, where it was spent illegally, improperly, or where value was not received. This is a common thread running through 100 years of parliament dealing with the question of how to ensure proper control of expenditures.

There are other areas that are very different in the present report compared with the situation in 1879. Looking over the accounts listed in the first auditor general's report, I was interested to find that he pointed out in one department after another not that more money was spent than had been appropriated, but that departments were handing back money they had not spent. This is very different from the situation today when it appears there is a law to the effect that governments can consume all their revenue. Someone once said that we should all live within our means even if we have to borrow in order to do so. If that is so, the federal government has certainly recognized the truth of that saying.

It is worth noting that in 100 years the federal budget has increased about one thousand times and the intrusion of government into the everyday lives of Canadians has shown a concomitant increase. In Canada today expenditure at all three levels of government comprises about 40 per cent of the

[Mr. Beatty.]

gross national product. The average Canadian finds he has to work from January to mid-May approximately in order to pay the taxes he owes to various levels of government. Only after that is he working to support himself and his family.

If Canadians are to be asked to carry this heavy burden, surely they have the right to expect us as their representatives to do everything we can to make sure that their money is spent wisely. I do not think it is being spent wisely. Every member of parliament and many members of the public are aware of the statement made by the auditor general in 1976 in his annual report. At that time he said:

I am deeply concerned that parliament—and indeed the government—has lost, or is close to losing, effective control of the public purse.

The auditor general was saying that not only we in this chamber but the government—Treasury Board and the treasury benches—had come close to losing control over public expenditures. There can be no more scathing condemnation of the way the system works than for the auditor general, after studying the situation, to say that parliament and the government are no longer in control. The taxpayer has no basis for confidence that his money is being wisely cared for by those who hold public trust.

Members of all parties have detailed their concern for the rules of the House of Commons and its committees which make it difficult for us to ensure that requests for funds by the government and spending by the government are properly scrutinized. Consideration of the estimates by the various standing committees is a mockery. None of us can honestly say that parliament does an adequate job of scrutinizing the expenditure of tens of billions of dollars every year. We know that estimates in the hundreds of millions of dollars are often approved by the standing committees without intensive scrutiny. They are approved because of a rule that provides that if they have not been voted on by a certain date they will automatically be reported back to the House as if every single item had been closely checked and approved by the committee. Who can study the way in which parliamentary committees discharge their responsibilities and be confident that parliament is doing its job as guardian of its public purse?

During question period today I tried to get information from the government about the cost of the abortive Lotto Select program. There was a report—

Mrs. Campagnolo: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I want to point out to the hon. member opposite—I know he would not want to put a mistake on the record—while he is addressing himself to tax issues and the spending of tax dollars, that no tax dollars are in any way involved in Loto Select or in Loto Canada.

Mr. Beatty: Mr. Speaker, I welcome the Minister's intervention. She is much more forthcoming this evening than in question period. Of course, the minister did not indicate that I had said tax money was spent in the case of Loto Select. One thing that is clear, however, is that Loto Select was a government program run by a Crown corporation. It was a program for which this minister was responsible to parliament.