

Auditor General Act

Messrs.

Pelletier	Roberts	Stewart
Pinard	Robinson	(Cochrane)
Portelance	Rooney	Stollery
Poulin	Roy	Tessier
Prud'homme	(Laval)	Turner
Railton	Savard	Watson
Raines	Sharp	Yanakis
Reid	Smith	Young—101.
	(Saint-Jean)	

● (1650)

Mr. Speaker: I therefore declare motion No. 7 lost.

Hon. Robert K. Andras (President of the Treasury Board) moved that Bill C-20, respecting the office of the Auditor General of Canada and matters related or incidental thereto, as reported (with amendments) from the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, be concurred in.

Motion agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: When shall the bill be read the third time?

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): By leave, now.

Mr. Andras moved that the bill be read the third time and do pass.

Mr. Don Mazankowski (Vegreville): Mr. Speaker—

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Mazankowski:—I remind my colleagues that I am not rising to speak on the metric bill. I shall speak on legislation just as important as that. I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak on third reading of this important piece of legislation, particularly since it will soon become law. All of us, I think, have waited a long time for this bill. We waited for it to be introduced, it has been debated and we hope it will soon become law.

The bill has had a long gestation period, and the years of government indifference to the office of the auditor general should not be forgotten, even at this time. It is fair to say that the public outcry, the work of the opposition and the work of the auditing profession exerted pressure on the government, a government insensitive to how taxpayers' money has been spent and managed these last number of years. We are, therefore, pleased to see in the final stages of passage the legislation which seeks to clarify the terms of reference under which the auditor general will work and more clearly establish his authority and powers.

Without doubt, Bill C-20 is a significant improvement over existing provisions of the Financial Administration Act which set out the terms of reference, duties and objectives of the auditor general. Our present Auditor General, Mr. Jim Macdonell, has expressed pleasure with this bill, calling it the Magna Carta of his office. That shows, I think, his acceptance of this legislation. But there are certain dangers with which I wish to deal.

● (1700)

One of the great dangers as we consider the legislation is that more importance has been placed on this piece of legislation than is warranted, in my view. Any attempt to pass off this legislation as a panacea for restoring financial control within the government of Canada would be misleading and deceitful, to say the least. I am sure my colleagues will agree with me that there are many things that still go unanswered, ignored and undone in terms of restoring parliamentary control, financial management, control and accountability.

In that connection, I want to deal today not so much with what is in the bill but with what is not in the bill. The omissions and what these omissions imply are, to me, more crucial to the return of the over-all control of taxpayers' funds than any clause contained in the bill. Of course, the true test of this legislation, as it is of any other legislation, is how it stands the test of time. In that regard, I believe it is somewhat unfortunate that Bill C-20 is being considered at the same time as the Royal Commission on Financial Management and Accountability is getting into the meat of its work. It is still conducting its studies and we are not sure as yet when it will be reporting.

Also, I think it is rather unfortunate that we are considering legislation at a time when we know the government is preparing new legislation on Crown corporations of which members of this chamber have not yet been made aware. It is a piece of legislation that is being drafted in secret. It seems to me that at least some of the content of the legislation, and indeed the recommendations of the royal commission, would have been most useful in dealing with legislation as important as the bill before us.

While indicating to the House that we on this side support the principal thrust of Bill C-20, we must make that support conditional pending the outcome of the two factors which I have just mentioned, namely, the new legislation which will be introduced at some later date, and the recommendations of the Lambert commission. It is our feeling that changes to the bill may very well be needed at that time, so we want to reserve the option to press the government for the needed changes to the Auditor General Act pending the outcome of these two matters.

The debate during the committee stage showed that there was a great deal of concern among members from all parties with respect to the auditor general's relationship with Crown corporations. The President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Andras) refused to allow any amendments which would have strengthened the legislation in that regard, because he claimed that new amendments to the Financial Administration Act were the proper vehicle to deal with such matters. It is our feeling that in terms of the auditor general's relationship and association with Crown corporations he might not have adequate tools and safeguards built into the legislation to deal with matters relating to the financial control and management of Crown corporations. He can only rely on the President of Treasury Board in that respect and deal with it at some unspecified date in the future.