

Private Members' Business

calls and so on. That to me is the way the place ought to operate. I think it is fair and reasonable.

The question is: How much of that do we then report? Once members are on the same basis it is reasonable to expect that some reporting mechanism would follow so that people could see roughly how members spend their budgets. The total amount ought to be disclosed. The breakdown into various categories could be discussed, settled upon and made a subject of disclosure.

It is a matter for the Board of Internal Economy to deal with and pass a bylaw concerning, and members will then be bound by it. I do not think it is necessary to do it by amendment to the Parliament of Canada Act which is what the hon. member is proposing in this bill.

Some say with some justification that it would hardly be fair that a member who lives in Yellowknife, Whitehorse or Vancouver would have the same budget as somebody who lives in Ottawa or in Kingston. Fair enough. The budgets will clearly differ because the travel component has to reflect the difference in travel costs for these members.

Every member could be granted a base of travel amount to cover exceptional trips and then be allowed a reasonable amount for trips to and from the constituency. That could take up the bulk of the trips that are now given. As it is, members are encouraged to book their trip at any time they feel like, at whatever ticket price they can get, and there is no incentive imposed on members to take trips at the lowest possible rate or to seek to get an economy fare at any time. There is no advantage in doing so because the member does not have to account for the money and it is not charged to his or her operating budget.

If it were part of the budget and the member was spending the money and having to account for it, there would be a much greater incentive for saving. It makes sense that the Board of Internal Economy looks very carefully at such a proposal.

There are lots of ways the administration of the members' budgets could be cleaned up. I am not sure the proposal put forward by the hon. member goes far enough or anywhere near far enough in solving that problem, because there are so many expenses that are not reported now and would not be reported under this bill unless the changes that I have mentioned and that

were recommended by the Auditor General were implemented at the same time.

I feel this bill is a little premature. I do not think it is worth proceeding with at this stage for the reasons I have outlined. It is appropriate that the member raised the issue here. I am glad it has been discussed in the House today. I support the principle of the bill, to the extent that I believe reporting is important for members of Parliament. I think the public has a right to know more about the way we spend our money. It is public money and I am quite happy to account for it.

Mr. Jim Edwards (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of State and Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to participate. I rise today to speak on this bill because I believe it raises the important concept of accountability to our constituents, to those who elect us to represent their views in the House and Parliament.

The purpose of the bill before us today is to require a disclosure of expenses made by members of the House of Commons in connection with their parliamentary functions. It would require that twice a year members of Parliament publicly declare their expenses.

This is a laudatory objective but one which at the moment I cannot support. I cannot support this bill at this time for two fundamental reasons. The first is because, as explained by the Auditor General, there are not the accounting systems yet in place to allow each member of Parliament to determine with any accuracy his or her expenses. Second, because it will lead to an unjust comparison between the ways in which each MP decides to fulfil his or her role as a member of Parliament.

As the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands has just suggested, he might choose to put out more householders and do less travel to the riding or vice versa. That point was recognized by the Auditor General in his report of the audit to the House of Commons administration, a piece of bed-time reading with which I know Your Honour is very familiar. At page 2 the Auditor General under point 1.9 says: "A new approach to members' expenditures is needed. The House like all legislatures has a difficult balancing act. It must provide support to members to facilitate their work but yet do so with fixed resources. One of the simplest ways is to