

Private Members' Business

It is in the best interests of this House and of the Canadian taxpayers to make sure the mandate and resources of the Auditor General are right for the job which we want him to carry out. In my opinion these issues are interrelated. I would prefer that this House deal with all of these issues as a package and not on a one by one basis.

In conclusion I agree with the hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier that it is time to review how the Auditor General reports to this House. However we should look at all related issues and not just the frequency of reporting to make sure the Canadian taxpayer gets the most out of the work of the Office of the Auditor General at the lowest cost.

Thanks to the member for Ottawa—Vanier for making this debate relevant to this House and bringing it forward so we can all do a better job for the taxpayers of this great nation.

Mr. Tony Valeri (Lincoln): Mr. Speaker, I speak with great pleasure on this bill to amend the Auditor General Act, introduced by the hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier.

The issue of whether the Auditor General Act should be amended to allow the Auditor General to report the findings of his audits as often as he deems necessary or when he has completed each audit rather than just annually has been discussed in this House on many occasions over the last 10 years.

The hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier has been a long time supporter of this notion. His experience as a former chairman of the public accounts committee has undoubtedly given him good reason to propose such an amendment to such a significant piece of legislation. It is important that we have this debate today.

As I understand it the primary reason for introducing such a change is to ensure that Parliament and the public accounts committee receive and have the opportunity to discuss the important findings of the Auditor General on a more timely basis. This implies that corrective action could be taken on a more timely basis and that Parliament would be in a better position to influence that action.

I also understand this approach to reporting may lead to certain efficiencies within the Office of the Auditor General. These are admirable goals.

I also note as has been argued that other countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States have a system of periodic reporting. This does not mean, however, that we should jump on the bandwagon without serious debate and consideration of the issues.

• (1440)

The United States of course has a system that is quite different from our own and even the United Kingdom has different needs and traditions.

The issue of reporting was discussed fully when the Auditor General Act was first introduced in 1977. It was the considered opinion of the experts at that time that annual reporting best suited the needs of the Canadian Parliament. It was felt that annual reporting was appropriate because it relates to the annual issue of public accounts. It facilitates consideration by Parliament which operates on an annual expenditure cycle. It introduces a note of regularity into the report process and it makes it possible to compare from one year to the next.

It is interesting to note also that the provinces have similar reporting requirements to those of our Auditor General. There must be some reason why, although there seems to have been general consensus in previous debates on the purposes of these proposed amendments, no government to date has taken action to amend the act.

There are several possibilities for this lack of action. One reason may be that the Auditor General already has the authority to make special reports to Parliament. Section 8 of the current act allows him to make a special report to the House of Commons on any matter of pressing importance or urgency that in his opinion should not be deferred until the presentation of his annual report. This provision ensures that Parliament can be informed of major issues as determined by the Auditor General on a timely basis.

Another reason may be that there was concern that allowing the Auditor General to report more often during the year would lead to a loss of focus by both parliamentarians and Canadians at large on the results of the Auditor General's work.

The annual focus on the Auditor General's report is most important. As we well know, it is this attention, this potential to effect change through public scrutiny, that makes the work of the Auditor General so valuable.

I think, however, that the real issue here is what would be the impact of the proposed changes on the independence of the Auditor General. We would not want to support changes that would in any way put at risk the effectiveness of the Auditor General. I am sure the hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier concurs.

The Auditor General is held in such high esteem by parliamentarians and Canadians and his findings are given such credence primarily because he is seen as being independent from government and above the politics of Parliament.

If the Auditor General were put in the position of bearing the sole responsibility for choosing the timing of his reports, as suggested by this bill, he might be faced with the dilemma of presenting a report on a subject currently being hotly debated in the House. There is real risk that one or the other side of this House would perceive that as being in some way partisan.