

Financial Administration Act

estimates are in omnibus form. If a member wants any particular detail, it may be filed at a subsequent meeting if it is not available when first requested. The net result is that remarkably little information is brought out, and absolutely nothing is available to members from either side of the House.

The estimates are equally important to members on either side of the House. It is not a case of them against us, or of members of parliament against public servants. Public servants do not sit in the witness chairs behind six-foot fences with their heads up above waiting for us to shy coconuts at them, but one almost gets the feeling that they are afraid to say anything because we might criticize them.

Most things the government does are for the benefit of the people. There are some things one might perhaps do differently, and some things are wrong-headed to start with, but that is the essence of a human being. We are not perfect. Human programs are not perfect either but, goodness gracious, would it not be far better if assessment reports or evaluation reports based upon zero budgeting were available to hon. members in this House? Our work on estimates would be not only more pleasant but also immeasurably more intelligent.

I have not been here as long as the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles), but I have spent 20 years looking at estimates, and I think I would match my knowledge with his when it comes to getting around the Blue Book. However, I feel a sense of personal insufficiency when I try to discuss intelligently with able public servants the philosophies of programs or their effectiveness. Are they over the hill? Should we terminate them in the foreseeable future? How should they be amended, if they need to be? If we could deal with these matters more effectively, we, as members of parliament, could function much better.

I discussed this with the Comptroller General. That was the nature of the discussion I had with him in the brief time that I was able to question him. I spent most of my time stating my philosophy in this regard. I think the Comptroller General was very well disposed to the idea.

I anticipate being back in this House after the next election, either on this side or on the side opposite, and I can tell hon. members that I will continue to press and press for the presentation of these reports. My colleague, the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin), is conducting a campaign on the right to know. Well, this is part of it. I think members of parliament have not only the right, but the duty, to know on what they are basing their judgment in order to accept, modify, or reject the government's spending programs outlined in the estimates.

● (1632)

I hope that after two years' experience we will be able to assess better the role of the comptroller general and the rules or the guidelines under which he operates, and that we will be ever vigilant, because I know the government will not accept this amendment, to ensure that the duties are not changed to suit the government's temporary views should the reports of the comptroller general prove embarrassing. We remember the

[Mr. Lambert (Edmonton West).]

time some four or five years ago when certain government ministers really wanted to move in on the auditor general—not the present one but his predecessor—because he dared to criticize bad government programs and their bad administration. To his credit, the present Auditor General took up the cudgels with regard to the administration of programs and the financial controls, and this has culminated in the creation of the office of the comptroller general.

I had hoped that in committee and at the present time the government would have been disposed to accept the amendment of my colleague, the hon. member for Calgary Centre (Mr. Andre), because I think it makes eminent sense. But even if amendments make eminent sense, there is a strange disposition in this place for the government to close its mind to opposition amendments. I hope that, if there is a turnaround, that bad habit will not apply, but I have seen it. It is a sort of malady around here. I think it is part of our system. I know that in the British system ministers are much more inclined to accept amendments in committee. Their position is not quite so fixed. It is not as though by accepting an amendment you confess a weakness. It is just that perhaps somebody has a better way of expressing the same ideas, or perhaps a little more strongly.

I had hoped that the government could have seen fit to accept this amendment, but it does not. So I hope that I have exposed this problem—and certainly this amendment has served me with a vehicle to put forward my views with regard to making available evaluation reports on government programs from the Treasury Board and the comptroller general.

I will close these remarks with a plea that even now the government should accept this amendment. Strangely enough, the ministers responsible for this bill are not the House.

Mr. Lefebvre: I am.

Mr. Lambert (Edmonton West): The parliamentary secretary is present, but unfortunately he cannot determine government policy, and even though he might be the man most disposed in the House to accept my arguments in favour of the amendment, he cannot do anything about it. Seeing that the parliamentary secretary is in charge of the debate at this stage, it is quite clear that the government has closed its mind to accepting any amendment. That is a real pity. With that, I think, we will call it a day on this amendment, but I hope that hon. members will remember much of what I have said this afternoon.

Mr. Thomas H. Lefebvre (Parliamentary Secretary to President of Treasury Board): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert) has repeated essentially the same arguments that had been made previously on this bill in describing the duties of the comptroller general. They had been answered by the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Andras) and by myself many times, both in the House during debate and at the committee hearings which were held to study Bill C-10. I do not intend to repeat them again, and I wish to refer any member interested in the office of the