

Government Orders

I think Mr. Desautels explains himself here and will indicate the thrust of his interpretation of this bill: "In this time of downsizing and restructuring, I am concerned that the challenge presented will not be picked up". "From our experience we know that leadership, support and guidance need to be provided to departments so they can respond in a positive manner. I believe there may be expectations held by some that we alone will take on the responsibility of setting the benchmarks or criteria against which the government's overall progress can be measured. If the Office were to carry out this task without the government taking an active role, it would interject the Office into the day to day operations of the government, thus removing the traditional arms length relationship of a legislative auditor from these operations. It could also be perceived as a potential conflict of interest, since we would be put in a position of auditing something we ourselves had developed".

This is the end of the auditor general's text. I have taken the liberty of reading much of it, because it is in fact the response of the auditor general to this bill, which establishes his guidelines and determines his responsibility. In his opinion, they do not seem to correspond to people's expectations, and the auditor general himself says in fact: "I fear the challenge presented will not be picked up".

In short, the auditor general is telling us he cannot meet Parliament's expectations on the monitoring of activities of the departments covered by this bill.

• (1615)

What in fact are these expectations the auditor general refers to? During debate at second reading, the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of the Environment said the following, and I quote: "Beyond the significant powers of the office, the very existence of the office of a commissioner of environment and sustainable development sends a powerful signal not only within the government itself but beyond the government into the reaches of Canadian society. They now know there will be somebody there, a monitor, an ombudsman, who will devote his or her duties to the environment and sustainable development in making sure the government itself practices what it preaches".

The remarks by the parliamentary secretary are somewhat at odds with those of the auditor general. This is made even more worrisome by the fact that, in the same speech, the hon. member for Lachine—Lac-Saint-Louis goes on to say, "The key issue here is if this commissioner of environment and sustainable development will be truly independent and have the necessary powers, autonomy, independence to ensure that he or she is listened to and that the public feels that through this office it has a voice and a say".

The auditor general's own description clearly shows that his role depends essentially on the government's real leadership and not on his own qualifications.

But, as we heard, the auditor general did say that playing the role of ombudsman could have a negative impact on the credibility of the auditor general's office and of the sustainable environment commissioner. During the same debate, the hon. member for Davenport had this to say about Bill C-83: "This is not a minor step. It is a remarkable one. It inserts in the mandate of the auditor general the importance of monitoring sustainable development strategy and implementing the meaning, significance and the interpretation of sustainable development. That is no minor feat".

Yet, the auditor general himself went to the trouble of toning down this interpretation of the role that will be played by the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development. The auditor general himself said that the proposed amendments to the Auditor General Act contained no provisions allowing the auditor general's office to comment on the validity of policies, and that they would not do so. That is what Mr. Desautels said.

I also want to point out that, in his September 18 speech, the member for Davenport said: "The role and the funding of the commissioner must be ensured so that they do not suffer in times of budget cuts. I am certain that this matter will be taken into account fully".

Let us hope that the reassuring words of the member for Davenport, who is surely full of good intentions, will be heard by the Treasury Board Secretariat, because the auditor general expressed concern in that regard, following his discussions with TBS. Mr. Desautels said: "I want to point out that, in spite of the additional resources made necessary by the amendments to the Auditor General Act, in 1997-98, the office will have reduced its budget by some \$7 million per year". Again, there is a contradiction.

There is another provision in the bill which should be looked at, namely the requirements of responding to petitions received by the auditor general about federal environmental matters in the context of sustainable development. Clause 22 of the bill states how these petitions will be dealt with. This clause reads as follows:

(1) Where the Auditor General receives a petition in writing from a resident of Canada about an environmental matter in the context of sustainable development that is the responsibility of a category I department, the Auditor General shall make a record of the petition and forward the petition within fifteen days after the day on which it is received to the appropriate Minister for the department.

(2) Within fifteen days after the day on which the Minister receives the petition from the Auditor General, the Minister shall send to the person who made the