

Government Spending

Another new approach adopted by the audit office has been to recommend changes to government departments following wasteful ways, and to report the results. The audit staff will be returning to these departments to ensure that the recommended changes have been put into practice.

As previously mentioned, a third important innovation recently introduced has been the creation of a special audit branch within the audit office for the conduct of special studies. Using private sector professional accountants on the public service executive interchange program, the Auditor General has sent highly qualified staff into Crown corporations, government departments and agencies, to investigate their internal financial management control systems.

The adoption of this private sector approach has been the main theme of the independent review committee whose recommendations, we have seen, are practical, logical, and necessary if the office of the Auditor General is to increase its effectiveness and efficiency in its examination of public spending.

Reports so far indicate that the government favours introducing legislation to redefine the role and responsibilities of the office of the Auditor General, but so far there is no indication when it will appear on the legislative timetable. One thing is certain. Any legislation introduced may well be non-controversial, which suggests that the "value for money" concept might not be included. I hope that in this regard my assumption is incorrect. Notwithstanding this provision the Auditor General, now supported by the Wilson report, has an opportunity to do Canada an enormous service while serving as watchdog of the public treasury. That, obviously, is an important duty, especially in light of the financial revelations we have received from the Auditor General.

● (1750)

The Auditor General can also help to increase the degree of public acceptance of decisions reached under our existing parliamentary system. We must do our level best to eliminate waste and extravagance, not only to make this government credible but to make the present parliamentary system credible to the Canadian people. Judging from the unrest we see portrayed on national television and in our daily newspapers, we have a long way to go if we want to win this particular battle.

[Translation]

Mr. Fernand E. Leblanc (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Labour): Mr. Speaker, opposition members who rose this afternoon seemed to resent the kind of answer they got from the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Chrétien), but I am not surprised at all, because the terms of the motion undeniably may lead to some confusion. It is a threefold motion, which reads as follows: First, That in the view of this House, the government should set an example to other Canadians by forthwith indicating the nature and extent of the restraints on government spending—

Second,

—and should also introduce without further delay measures to implement the Wilson Report on the office of the Auditor General—

[Mr. Crouse.]

Which has nothing to do with the foregoing. And third—
—as an indication of its willingness to eliminate waste and extravagance.

And while the leader of the opposition (Mr. Stanfield) indicated it was a test for the Liberal party regarding anti-inflation measures, I do not think there is any indication of a test in the motion, especially as opposition members themselves seem to be somewhat confused, since the previous speaker mentioned only the Wilson report a few minutes ago. He made absolutely no mention of the other two points of that motion which in my opinion are nevertheless quite important.

Therefore, it cannot be said that this is a test respecting anti-inflation measures which the government intends to take. It can be said that it is a waste of energy on the part of this House to discuss such a blurry motion, a motion of strictly political meaning which, in my opinion, is demagogic since no particular subject can be dealt with and since the motion bears on three very important elements. It is clear, however, that the Wilson report is very important, that the restraints announced are very important, that the measures to eliminate waste and extravagance also are very important, all of which is written in the motion.

I feel that, considering the 25 days allotted to it, the opposition could surely have found something more appropriate to discuss and it could perhaps have separated the motion into three parts. Today we could have discussed a test for the anti-inflation program. The motion could have stopped after the words—

—the restraints on government spending—

Then, the President of the Treasury Board would surely have replied differently because the motion before him would have indicated some restrictions on government spending.

But that is not the case; at one and the same time the Wilson report and the question of waste are also introduced.

So, Mr. Speaker, if we are to try to discuss all that, the time at our disposal is obviously too short; that would take at least three to four days of debate.

To my mind, the opposition muffed it with regard to its motion. To my mind, it is in no way a test of our restriction program. This motion was not thought out before being placed on the order paper and, of course, this creates problems when we, of the government party, wish to make a contribution and reply to the objections made either by the members of the official opposition, or by the NDP members or by the members of the Social Credit.

I especially liked one of the contributions of the Social Credit explaining the difference between expenditures and wasteful spending. These are obviously not the same thing, and this is why I said a while ago that I do not see how you can in the same motion talk about expenditures and wasteful spending because the government and Parliament have absolute authority as concerns expenditures through the estimates which are submitted to the House and to the various committees where opposition members spend many hours discussing government expenses and voting for them most of the time. When they have objections about expenditures, they make them during the review of the estimates, and that is when I believe they