

in attitudes and accountability which we face. We have to face the fact that the committee is controlled by the government, with membership based on the seats held by parties in the House of Commons. There are 11 government members, seven members of the official opposition, one member of the New Democratic party, and one member of the Social Credit party.

● (1722)

The steering committee has become a very important arm in the effective operation of the main committee as it deals with planning, study, and report writing.

The committee has a tremendous load with which to cope. It handles the Auditor General's report and has only been able to get to the public accounts of Canada on one occasion. It has to fight for its blocs within the bloc system of this House. That is an annoyance that the committee could do without, particularly when dealing with matters of the magnitude outlined in the 1978 report.

There are ways in which the committee should be strengthened, and I hope I will have time to put some suggestions on the record, Mr. Speaker.

A permanent research staff should be assigned to this committee under the direction of the chairman, free and clear of redirection by the director of research of the Library of Parliament. Recently I was trying to get research material ready for a meeting and found that our staff had been given assignments by the Library of Parliament. This was unknown to me when I was trying to get ready for the meeting.

Professional people should be assigned to the committee from time to time from the Auditor General's office on the basis of need. I think this is essential if we are to handle the subject in which the committee is now involved.

The committee should have a budget to cover investigational needs which occur from time to time. I offer the example of the AECL report and the committee's inability to complete its investigation into that important matter.

The official opposition should assign a research officer to serve the specific needs of members of the opposition who really carry the initiative within the committee.

Members of the public accounts committee have a tremendous burden of low-profile work. This causes some attendance problems and these must be dealt with. A high degree of dedication is required of the members who serve on that committee. I think we should find ways of improving the prestige of those hard-working members either through more public exposure, television coverage of the proceedings, or pay for the work.

The alternative would be for members to sit as a jury and allow experts, such as counsel and other highly qualified people, to examine the professional witnesses from the various departments who appear at the committee. Members of the jury should have the right to ask supplementary questions posed by counsel.

There are basically two approaches, Mr. Speaker. First, increase the research facilities for members participating in

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the committee and give them the incentive to serve, or second, put in place highly professional counsel to handle the detailed subject matter and allow hon. members to sit as a jury responsible for writing or approving the report prepared by staff.

I have said before, in the presence of the Auditor General, the Comptroller General, and to the Niagara Institute, that if we cannot turn around this "don't give a damn" attitude to the nation's tax resource, and impose accountability on the system, then I believe this form of government will become unstuck. This is too great a threat to our freedom for us to allow it to happen. That is why I implore parliament to make an all-out effort to strengthen the resources of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and put in place a committee equally well-armed to examine the expenditure part of the process.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I should like to pay tribute to my colleagues who have worked so many hours in the performance of their duties on the steering committee. The hon. member for Ottawa West (Mr. Francis) has been a stalwart member from the government side, the hon. member for Pontiac (Mr. Lefebvre) has been a very strong member, the hon. member for Trinity (Miss Nicholson) brought her abilities, and there were my colleagues, the hon. member for Vancouver Quadra (Mr. Clarke) and the hon. member for Red Deer (Mr. Towers). I think the House should note the long hours of work they contributed to that committee.

**Mr. Thomas H. Lefebvre (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Treasury Board):** Mr. Speaker, in rising to take part in this debate on the motion of the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen), I appreciate that the order of speaking gives me the opportunity to follow the hon. member for Capilano (Mr. Huntington), who has been a very credible chairman of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

**Some hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Mr. Lefebvre:** I agree with a lot of the things he said. I believe that this debate has taken a vein which is rather surprising. Members who have spoken have avoided going after or for scare headlines. We all know the importance of this motion, and we must congratulate the hon. member for Yukon for bringing it to the attention of parliament. I shall limit my remarks to those aspects of the motion which relate to parliamentary examination and control of public expenditures.

There is no doubt that we, as parliamentarians, have a duty to examine the expenditures of the federal government on behalf of our constituents, but we sometimes question how a private member can accomplish this awesome task. Some of the members who have already spoken have touched on the points that I shall address, but I believe they are worth repeating.

In the time that I have been a member of this House—that is not 54 years as indicated by a member of the NDP but a mere 13 years—there is no doubt that major changes have occurred in government expenditures, legislation and programs. An even heavier burden has been placed on members of