how the money would be spent. That complaint was continued, and today we have an entire institution based on the precedent that the government should be held accountable for its spending.

As governments spend more and more, by definition they become less and less accountable for their expenditures. We have what amounts to one vote every four years on a multitude of things, from how the Post Office works, to our foreign affairs policies, to a multitude of internal workings in Crown corporations, to transportation systems, and to everything else. What happens is that a lot of these decisions are diluted in the electoral process. Under normal circumstances a voter has only one vote every four years in which to cast judgment upon the performance of the government in all these areas.

I would argue that as opposition members we have very little say, if any, in calling into account the government's spending. We know how the committee system works. I have been here for almost two years, and that is long enough to know what it meant to take estimates out of the House and put them into committee. It gives opposition members a lot less power in terms of calling the government to order with respect to its spending. Also it has diluted considerably our jobs as members of Parliament to represent the people who elected us and to hold the government of the day accountable for the amount of money it collects in the way of taxes and the way in which it spends it.

What disturbs me and a lot of members on this side of the House is that we have now gone beyond the point of having any accountability for the way the government spends its money, yet we are being asked to blanketly approve and give the government authority to borrow money, without any real signal from the government as to what it intends to spend it on. We do not want to know down to the last cent on what the government intends to spend it, but it would be nice to have an idea as to the general direction of government spending.

I have to agree with the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain (Mr. Deans) who called into question some of the spending practices of the government. I ask them to give some priority to spending money in terms of some infrastructure or investment so the citizens of the country will be in a position where they can be more productive. In that sense it is an investment and it will show a return. We are not given any indication of this by the government.

In fact, one of the major government expenditures in the budget will be the payment of interest on past government debt. We do not see any direction in this current bill as to how that situation will be alleviated. The last estimates I saw indicated that something like $11 billion of the current budget will be used to pay interest on past government debt. I think this is an horrendous figure.

I do not think any of us can talk about millions or billions of dollars and have it mean very much. I have heard members attempting to explain it by laying dollar bills end to end and this kind of thing. But, to talk about it in terms of a percentage, it means that one out of every $4 in taxes the government collects from its citizens will be used to pay interest on past government debt. It will not be used to finance any programs. I see the Minister of Transport (Mr. Pepin) here this evening. It will not be used to help him solve the transportation problem in western Canada. It will not be used to build any new facilities for people in eastern Canada. I see the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) is also here. It will not be used to finance any research in agricultural programs in order to help the farmers of the country be more productive. I have seen some of the minister's recent speeches in which he talked about Canada becoming more self-sufficient as far as food is concerned rather than importing it. This $11 billion, which will go to pay the interest on past government debt, will not tackle any of the problems the Minister of Agriculture rightly pointed out require some attention. This is something the taxpayers of the country have a right to know. They should know what in fact the government is planning on doing with this $14 billion.

If the government had some intention of spending it on improving the productivity of the country, we would all think that worth while. Perhaps we would not agree in which areas it should be spent, but, nevertheless, we would agree in principle it was a valid expenditure in the sense that it was an investment and hopefully would return some dividends to the country. We have not been given any such indication at all. In fact, quite to the contrary, the government is asking for almost $11 billion or $10.98 billion. In addition it is asking for $3 billion as a contingency.

All of us operate small businesses in that we run our own personal affairs, operate households, balance budgets, and on occasion borrow money. If we went in to see our bankers in order to borrow some money, the banker would ask, "Why do you want to borrow this $1,400?" What would happen if we indicated we required $1,100 to meet certain commitments—and we understand some of the commitments in the budget in front of us—and that we needed $300 for contingencies, but did not say what the contingencies were for? I am not so sure the banker would be very happy, in terms of the documentation which we were giving to him to back up the need for our loan. Yet that is exactly what this government is doing. The only difference is that in this case the government is asking the taxpayers of the country to act as its banker and it is not telling us the elected Members of Parliament what, in fact, it plans on using this money for. I will get into that aspect later.

• (2120)

But there are all kinds of suggestions as to what the government could be using this money for. What would make sense to me and what would find favour—I am not saying complete favour because given the nature of the opposition I think sometimes we can oppose things for the sake of opposing them—if the government needed additional money it would see fit to have some confidence, in the members who are in this House, come back to us in eight or nine months, or whatever, and say, "We need additional money". In that case we could then talk about the specifics of the $3 billion it needed at that time. We are simply being asked at this time to approve a blanket borrowing of $14 billion, made up of $11 billion,