

Financial Administration Act

[English]

Mr. McGrath: Mr. Speaker, I cannot speak for my House leader but he is able to speak for himself. I can certainly say, however, that we can make such a commitment—if the hon. member can make the same commitment on behalf of the government House leader.

Mr. Leggatt: Mr. Speaker, I will not take too much of the time of the House this afternoon. As I understand this particular bill, the comptroller does not have responsibility to parliament or the House of Commons but has responsibility to the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Andras). If there is one significant change we must make in this place it is to ensure that parliament regains control over the spending of government.

Most of us who come here have had experience on school boards or municipal councils. I do not think that any municipal comptroller or school board trustee need feel inferior to a member of parliament. We all know the job they do at the local level in controlling or examining spending on behalf of the ratepayers or taxpayers of their community. A good deal of the time of locally elected officials is spent on the examination of spending. We have all had the experience, I am sure, of deciding whether to put shingles or some other kind of roof on the bicycle shed!

It is a scandal that members of parliament have so little clout when it comes to examining the massive amounts of public spending. Some of that spending cannot be objected to but there are no facilities or techniques to control it.

I listened with interest to previous speakers who had some suggestions about what could be done. I rise to make one principal suggestion only, Mr. Speaker.

One of the difficulties about our responsibilities as members of parliament, I suppose, is that a lot of us want the press to know what we are doing. Working on committees to control expenditures is not as attractive as attending question period in the House and taking one shot at an interesting subject with a full press gallery listening in. This afternoon, Mr. Speaker, you will notice there is not a great attendance in the press gallery; there are two members present and that is 100 per cent more than is usual on a Friday afternoon. I suppose we cannot kick the press around too much here.

Question period in the House is where all the attention is focussed and that is fine, but the work in committees to control expenditures is where the press should be. It is time they started to take responsibility and do that kind of work. Members of parliament have to do it.

I suggest there should not be a question period Mr. Speaker. For a period of three or four weeks we should spend our time exclusively examining expenditures. Every member of the House should be dedicated to examining the estimates in his particular area and putting questions that deal with the cost of running government. Three weeks would probably be enough to accomplish this.

I should like to give credit to the hon. member for Capilano (Mr. Huntington), Mr. Speaker. We had some discussions and this is a compromise position. We have talked about changing the rules in this place so that a member of parliament will have some influence.

Another point that bothers me is that in committee sometimes witnesses seem to have been coached to read their statements slowly and we run out of time. Our experience has been that witnesses are actually coming forward determined to take the full time of the committee so that questions cannot be asked. A member who does not happen to get in on the first round of questions can be totally frustrated.

Once in a while perhaps we should deal with a question that is not of great national import, not something that every press reporter will scribble about—perhaps the fact that there are 25 more people working on a project than is necessary, or an instance of waste somewhere in the public service. We must change the way our committees operate in any case.

We should also think about changing the rule that allows estimates to be approved automatically after a certain date. The time between when estimates are submitted and they are deemed to be approved should be extended. We should perhaps even suspend sittings of the House for a period and devote all our attention to examining government expenditures. In that way responsibility for that vital and important question would be returned to members of parliament.

Along with many other members, Mr. Speaker, I am increasingly concerned that parliament is becoming irrelevant. Government spending is not examined by the opposition in an appropriate fashion. That is not the fault of the opposition but rather of the rules we have fallen victim to over the years. We need to have a clear examination of the prime functions of a member of parliament and certainly one of them is to exercise some control over the spending of government.

This bill falls short of providing anything which would be of assistance to members in the political role constituents have assigned to us and which we are unable to carry out as a result of our failure to amend our own rules.

Mr. Jake Epp (Provencher): Mr. Speaker, I do not want to take too long. I believe it important, however, that it be put clearly on the record what is happening in regard to the examination of supply.

I appreciated the comments of the hon. member for New Westminster (Mr. Leggatt). He related to the House the frustration that I think every member has faced in committee. The public expects us to examine the estimates and see what happens to their tax dollars which are “in trust” dollars. The government has responsibility for its expenditures but we are here to ensure they use that money scrupulously and as carefully as possible.

● (1522)

The situation is such with the committee system at the present time that it does not even give lip service to the scrutiny of estimates. How many of us have been at the