

Parliament

An hon. Member: Flattery will get you everywhere.

Mr. Francis: Thank you. I am quite capable of speaking my mind forthrightly whether in complimentary or uncomplimentary terms, as the situation dictates.

To those members of this House who say that the government has stifled committees, that parliament can no longer be meaningful, and that there is no way we can control estimates and the expenditure of \$50 billion a year, I say, why do they not just show up occasionally at the public accounts committee and try to do a job? Because that is a committee which is begging for participation from members. Those who say they do not have the opportunity to control expenditures have the obligation to show up and do the day to day, week to week work of a committee that sits many hours a week with a heavy schedule, because it is making an effort to try to understand and control how the money is spent, if that is humanly possible within an elected, democratic, parliamentary institution.

The document which was tabled just a matter of two weeks ago or less is only about one quarter of the document with the traditional horror stories. They are there: the money that was spent on an icebreaker that should not have been spent; the escalation of the costs of a building; and the failure to pursue commitments. All of those stories are still there. In an operation as large as that of the Government of Canada with \$50 billion a year in expenditures, there are bound to be some places where things are not well handled, and there are bound to be some mistakes.

However, three-quarters of the Auditor General's report deals with something else. It deals with the attempt to ascertain what is value for money. I think I would summarize the new concept of his role by saying that the Auditor General has become something of a super management consultant. He is concerned with putting the systems in place and seeing that they are put in place, in order that the right information is fed to the managers at the right time and that there is a maximum possibility of making the right decisions.

It is not just a matter of saying the money was spent for a harbour here, a wharf there or a public building somewhere else, but it was misspent. The question is: how do you make sure you are getting value for your money? One thing members on the other side have not complained about is that they have not said there is any effort to stifle the Auditor General; and when one looks at the 1600 per cent increase in his budget in the last three or four years, no one could suggest he has been denied the resources he requested to do the job. He has been given the resources with the unanimous consent of members of this House, who know that an investment in that function is money well spent, a function which we are proud to support.

The Auditor General is going to be caught in the period ahead in a wide-ranging series of investigations. As a member of this House I found it interesting when he told me that the estimates are not in a form in which we can really get much information from them, that he thinks they should be presented in a different way. Then we heard the Treasury Board

[Mr. Francis.]

response regarding the difficulties in complying with the request. Maybe it can be done and maybe it cannot be done, but it is the members of the committee who listened to the testimony from both sides, the members of the committee who joined in the report of that committee and made recommendations to this House, who act as a guide to the Auditor General in the carrying out of his job.

There was no golden age and there is no golden age in the handling of such immense sums of money. There is, however, a disposition on the part of the government and on the part of all hon. members to make sure we resolve these problems with the very best resources at our disposal.

The Auditor General is making a study of special procedures in cost effectiveness. The acronym is "SPICE". The special procedures in cost effectiveness are the beginning of a series of extensive examinations, of breaking new ground, and there is no doubt that some of the decisions the Auditor General is going to take will really push and stretch his mandate.

In the informal discussions we had with the province of Ontario public accounts committee someone put the problem this way. If someone in the province decided to build a road costing \$200,000, the Auditor General would look at the road and say the province got good value for the \$200,000 as the road was built to the specifications in the contract and there was full use of resources. Someone then has to ask whether the road should have been built in that place originally. Maybe the road was not built where it should have been built. When you ask that question you are bordering on the limits of the potential responsibility of the government of the day. There will be many instances and situations in which, in search for the procedures and systems to put in place, the Auditor General is bound to push the limits of the mandate given to him under the new legislation.

If hon. members of this House do nothing more than show up on opposition days to lambaste the government for not controlling expenditures, for letting everything get out of hand, and complain that they do not have the chance to do anything, they are ignoring the opportunity to do a job by participating in committees such as the public accounts committee. I do not say that that is the only committee, but it is the one which I personally have followed. Our problem is getting members out to do their jobs.

I cannot support this motion. I have my reasons when I am dissatisfied with various aspects of government policy, and I am sure that hon. members here have no difficulty counting the odd examples; but the current accusation that the government is attempting to stifle the committee system is a very false, shallow and wrong accusation. I will not vote for the motion.

● (2032)

Mr. Perrin Beatty (Wellington-Grey-Dufferin-Waterloo): I would like to indicate at the outset, Mr. Speaker, that I intend to support this motion when it comes to a vote later this evening. I would like to commend my colleague for Yukon