

Financial Administration Act

The Canada Council itself, in summarizing its concerns about Bill C-24, said this:

● (1200)

It is difficult to predict how the powers in the Bill would be used, but the following are controls which are possible under the provisions of the Bill:

Within the broad definition of the arts in the Canada Council Act, the government could determine which art forms the Council will and will not support.

The government could control the allocation of the Council's budget to particular disciplines, to theatre as opposed to visual arts, music as opposed to literature, et cetera. It could specify what types of artistic activity in each art form will be funded and in what amounts.

The Liberal Government has been treating the Canada Council in a way that we find unacceptable. The report of the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee—the Applebaum-Hébert Committee—stated:

Public policy should facilitate self-expression, not control or organize it.

The Applebaum-Hébert report studied this issue and judged its importance to be so fundamental to its purpose that it set out as its first recommendation the unique and sensitive nature of the cultural agencies. The first recommendation read:

The status of federal cultural agencies should be defined in a new Cultural Agencies Act, in recognition of the fact that government activity in culture and the arts is subject to special considerations requiring a distinctive measure of autonomy. The provisions of this statute should prevail wherever they may conflict with those of the Financial Administration Act or the proposed Government Organization Act.

The Applebaum-Hébert report went on to state the opinion that, due to the sensitive functions of the cultural agencies, they should also be exempt from political direction in the form of ministerial directives of either a general or a specific nature.

It should be pointed out that the Liberal Government has rejected these ideas. It did not even consider how to deal with the cultural agencies except through the blanket legislation which was drafted to ensure accountability of Crown corporations such as de Havilland, Canadair, AECL and the Canada Sports Pool Corporation. The Government simply added the Canada Council to the list as if it was in the same category. It is not.

The Canada Council is presently accountable to Parliament. It provides detailed reports on how and why its funds are disbursed to the cultural and artistic community. Its representatives are available to come before committees of the House to give explanations for their judgments and expenditures and to defend them. Under Section 22 of the Canada Council Act, the Auditor General has the authority to audit the accounts and financial transactions of the Council. This Government is not interested in accountability. It is interested in politicizing the process of the distribution of cultural funds to a greater extent, in the same way as it has politicized the funds provided to assist those Canadians who are unemployed. The Government will politicize anything it can get its hands on. To give it the legislative approval to do so would be foolhardy and wrong. The arts community recognizes this and has voiced its disapproval.

If the Government is truly interested in not controlling the funds allocated to cultural agencies and the political abuse which is attached to that, then let it introduce a Cultural Agencies Act, as was recommended by Applebaum-Hébert, which will set out procedures and guidelines for these sensitive agencies. Let the Government recognize, in proper statute, the rights and independence of all the agencies so that they cannot be tampered with in the way this Bill enables the Government to do so.

At the very least, I hope the Government will seriously consider the advisability of amending the schedule to delete reference to the Canada Council. As it stands now, Bill C-24 is inappropriate for the Canada Council. It should be amended to ensure that the independence of the Council and the arm's length principle which is so fundamental to our democracy are not compromised or infringed upon. The Canada Council should not be covered by Bill C-24.

In conclusion, I would like to refer to a commentary which was given on CBC-FM radio by my friend, Sarah Jennings, in which she pointed out:

—the Tories are generally in support of the objectives of this Bill in terms of the larger issue, which is financial accountability for these federal Crown agencies.

She indicated that the Bill must come to grips with the cultural issue. She continued:

—they're trying to pull their cultural policy together, and honestly I don't think they've even addressed themselves to the issue.

As far as Bill C-24 and the Canada Council are concerned, we most certainly are addressing ourselves to this issue.

Mr. Lorne McCuish (Prince George-Bulkley Valley): Mr. Speaker, it is a privilege to speak on Bill C-24 and on the suggested amendment by my colleague, the Hon. Member for St. John's West (Mr. Crosbie), that it be hoisted for a six-month period.

Bill C-24 purports to be a Bill which will enhance the control of government and Parliament over Crown corporations. Certainly, that in itself is laudable, given the proliferation and the record of Crown corporations to date. It is obvious that control mechanisms are sorely needed. However, the legislation which has been presented to the House does not represent an improvement to an entirely offensive situation. What we have before us is a toothless piece of legislation which will do little to bring Crown corporations under parliamentary scrutiny and control.

Given the scandalous performance of Crown corporations, it is difficult to understand why this Government does not want to make Crown corporations accountable. It is obvious that they need assistance. The de Havilland and Canadair fiascos are typical examples of why Parliament should be able to scrutinize this whimsical abuse of the public purse. When the money of the people who elected us to serve them is given to well-paid executives in the form of bonuses, something has gone awry, especially when the bonuses are given to executives of a company which has suffered catastrophic losses—losses to the taxpayers of Canada.