

that is why we have attempted to give some idea as to what the responsibilities of the comptroller general should be and must be. We are not going to give this government a blank cheque.

This country has been very disturbed to discover that Treasury Board has lost control of the public purse. In the Auditor General's last report, and many other reports he has commented regarding the financial management and control by this government. I am not trying to say we are not not for the comptroller general, because we believe that this office is required in order to control public spending. The Auditor General said that the financial management of government departments, agencies, and Crown corporations is "grossly inadequate" and a "serious situation."

● (1552)

Although I support the legislation because it is surely a step in the right direction, I am concerned about the bill as drafted. The Auditor General had some ideas on what this bill should do. He spelled out quite specifically the functions and responsibilities of the comptroller general in paragraph 2.15 of his report for the fiscal year ending March, 1976, as follows:

His basic responsibilities would include the design, development, implementation, and monitoring of adequate systems and procedures to ensure that the form of estimates provides a sound basis for the government's budgetary system.

That is the plank that the Auditor General considered necessary—it is part of the criteria he wanted, and we in the opposition approved and tried to move an amendment to that effect.

In paragraph 3.10 of his report he stated:

The role of the Comptroller General of Canada should be to see that departmental systems function in this fashion, and to examine the estimates of departments, not from a resource allocation point of view, since this should remain the responsibility of the Treasury Board Secretariat, but to make sure that the underlying systems reliably reveal planned efficiency and economy and that detail is adequate enough for subsequent analysis of variations between actual and planned results.

That is what the Auditor General said, and it is he who gives us leadership. We do not have the expertise, so we have to call upon him. The government will not tell us anything because it is secretive and does not like the opposition or the people of Canada to know anything. That is why we have to call on the Auditor General to tell us. He gave us direction and we, if we are to be responsible, must follow it.

Reaction to what the Auditor General stated has been negative and vague, in my view. This legislation does not spell out the specific duties of the comptroller general at all. If the position is not given a clear, statutory mandate, it is my submission that it will be nothing more than window-dressing. It will be just a name. We will have no more assurance that he will be able to control the public purse than we had with Treasury Board, and the hon. member for Grenville-Carleton indicated how much control we have had there when he read excerpts from "A Legacy of Spending".

In his 1975 and 1976 reports the Auditor General recommended responsibilities for the form of both the estimates and the public accounts. It is noted that the responsibilities of the comptroller general as described by the government do not

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presently include the form of the estimates, except to provide advice. They just want the comptroller general to be some weakling, without power and without clout. All they want him for is to give advice, and we know what this government does with advice—it just throws it in the wastepaper basket. I cannot understand the arrogance of this government. After ten years of arrogance you would think ministers would learn a lesson but they are insensitive.

The Financial Management Institute agrees with the Auditor General that the comptroller general should have direct responsibility for both the estimates and the public accounts. One challenge for the position will be to foster public confidence in the integrity of the financial information presented by the government. This challenge will obviously be more difficult if the comptroller general is responsible for the form of the public accounts and for consistency between estimates and public accounts but can only advise on the form of the estimates. Surely these facts point to the need to spell out the mandate of the comptroller general.

I want to emphasize that, as the legislation stands, it does not establish the position in the manner that the Auditor General proposed. One almost wonders why the whole project or problem is being dumped into the lap of the new Comptroller General. The government does not want to give him any assistance—it does not want to tell him what he should be doing—it does not want him to have any legislative clout. We must go along with this bill, however, because we feel it is a step in the right direction.

This party examined the Auditor General's report thoroughly and offered a meaningful amendment to this bill which could not be called offensive. It was couched in general terms and was not offensive to the Financial Administration Act, and would have given not only the comptroller general but the public an idea of what was intended with this new office. Without the terms of reference or the mandate spelled out, it is only window-dressing. We offered an amendment which read in part as follows:

(2.2) The Comptroller General of Canada shall design, develop, implement and monitor such systems that will ensure that

(a) the form of Estimates provides a sound basis for budgetary control;

What is offensive about a simple statement like that? It gives a direction in terms of budgetary control and provides a sound basis for it.

The next thing we said about the duties of the comptroller general was this:

(b) public moneys and assets are under effective custody and control at all times;

Is that offensive to Canadians, to the government, to the comptroller general, to the Auditor General, Mr. Speaker? The only sector to find that offensive is this government, this arrogant government.

The amendment continued:

(c) accounting procedures and financial reports conform to accepted accounting principles and standards;