

Control of Public Funds

He says that, while he believes the Treasury Board seeks to discharge its responsibility conscientiously, he thinks, and I quote:

I question and deem it my duty to draw to the attention of the House increasing tendencies displayed by the Treasury Board and its staff to devote their energies and resources toward circumventing parliamentary control rather than toward improving the efficiency of departments and agency regulations and remedying situations which for years have demanded attention.

Those are pretty tough words from a man in an extremely responsible position, Mr. Speaker. The Auditor General goes on to point out that his annual report over the years, and also many recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee based upon his findings of waste in government, could have achieved a more efficient use of men and money and have guided departments to avoid the continued repetition of mistakes.

In his current report, which we received just the other day, there are 130 cases that need to be dealt with. In many instances—the Auditor General estimates 65 per cent—these cases could be disposed of by the Treasury Board. Yet he says that never has a President of the Treasury Board responded to the criticism of such mistakes by replying and detailing steps which should be taken or have been taken to assist the departments and agencies in improving their financial performances.

He calls for the issue of treasury minutes—that is minutes from the Treasury Board—in response to and in respect of each of the Auditor General's detailed comments on public spending in the various departments and agencies. He says, and I agree as I think others on our committee would, Mr. Speaker, that these would be helpful to all concerned—the department, the Public Accounts Committee, the House of Commons and the taxpayers of the country. He laments, as well he may, the lack of such constructive action by the Treasury Board.

On page 12 of his report he gives details of the accounts he has been unable to certify involving large sums of money. He mentions some cases where the agencies or the departments criticized in his report or in the report of the Public Accounts Committee, have taken the advice themselves and have benefitted the public thereby, but he says he has never understood why the Treasury Board would not participate in promoting efficiency in cases as serious as those he has listed.

Mr. Speaker, this is one area where there is a growing lack of parliamentary control over public money; another is the use by the government of non-lapsing balances of votes available for spending in subsequent years. There is a government contingency program with reserves of money, millions of dollars, the need for which the Auditor General states the Treasury Board has been unable to demonstrate. There is a supplementing of parliamentary appropriations and there are loans and advances representing grants. Mr. Speaker, time does not permit the cataloguing of all the Auditor General's complaints as to the handling of government funds. There is in his report—

Mr. Drury: Mr. Speaker, a point of order.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order, please. The hon. President of the Treasury Board on a point of order.

[Mr. Mather.]

● (1420)

Mr. Drury: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker, I do not think the hon. gentleman would like to mislead anyone. I am sure of that. Unfortunately, in quoting from what the Auditor General has said he has been using the present tense. At that point the Auditor General was talking about a period prior to one year ago and was not talking about the way things are, even though the present tense is used. He was talking about the way things were. The hon. gentleman is, I know aware that these non-lapsing accounts to which moneys have been granted have ceased. Not only are funds not being granted to these no longer existing accounts, but authorization for granting has also ceased.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order, please. Although the minister may be allowed to raise a point of order if he wants to clarify something, I do not think he should be allowed to go as far as he has gone. Other hon. members on his side of the House who take part in the debate may make the argument he seeks to make at this time.

Mr. Baldwin: The minister knows that the situation is much worse now than it was then.

Mr. Mather: Mr. Speaker, I am indebted to the minister for his interjection; it means that some reform has been made in recent times. It is a step forward. Nevertheless, I am going by what is contained in the Auditor General's report. I think it is substantially on the mark.

As I said, a book has been published containing many paragraphs outlining in a detailed way what the Auditor General of Canada considers as improper, wasteful or non-productive expenditures on the part of the government and government departments. Many of these items have been reported in the newspapers recently and no doubt many more will appear in the days ahead. There is no point in taking up the time of hon. members by going over these items in detail. I commend the Auditor General's report to hon. members. It ought to be one of the best sellers in this country today. Canadians in recent days have been reading about the Watergate affair in Washington. We also read that another kind of human interest story is unfolding before the House of Lords in London. In this parliament we have not been able to arouse much interest in that kind of thing since that affair which some of my friends on my right were interested in about eight or nine years ago. I think the Auditor General's report contains certain items which would be interesting to all Canadian readers, especially if they are interested in retaining Canadian content in our publications.

As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, and as one who believes in public enterprise as well as private enterprise, I support the Auditor General's report and join him and the official opposition in the concern over the lessening of parliamentary control in the expenditure of public funds. This concern is all the more valid at the very time when those expenditures are escalating. I think they have tripled in the last decade.

It is no friendship to the cause of public enterprise to close our eyes to mismanagement or to poor and wasteful management of the public business. The reverse is true,