

*Government Orders*

In order to put this country on a solid footing, accountability on the part of government is extremely important. We had a recent example in this House, and it was raised again today, and I was very much interested in that subject when it was raised in the House today because I had it in my notes to mention it here this afternoon. We had a recent example where the government actually referred the Supplementary Estimates which contained the estimates for the Spicer commission to a parliamentary committee that had not had a chairperson since last September. As you know, this led to a great confrontation in this House.

It also had implications for the public accounts committee, which I have the privilege of chairing because, as you recall, some members in this House wanted to refer the matter to the public accounts committee. That could not happen because I had to reply to a letter that I received requesting this, and I know it was brought to the Prime Minister's attention as well. I must point out that there are serious procedural limitations contained in the mandate of the public accounts committee to carry out such an inquiry in this House at that time. Standing Order 108(3) defines the mandate of the public accounts committees as follows:

The mandate of the Standing Committee on

(e) Public Accounts shall include, among other matters, review of and report on the Public Accounts of Canada and all reports of the Auditor General of Canada, which shall be severally deemed, permanently referred to the Committee immediately they are laid upon the Table;

and any other matter which the House shall from time to time refer to the standing committee.

The term "among other matters" refers to an order of reference from the House of Commons.

• (1610)

The most recent public accounts tabled in October 1990, before the establishment of the Spicer commission, are a comprehensive record of government expenditures for the fiscal year ended March 31, 1990. Expenditures after that date would not be shown in the 1989-90 public accounts and, therefore, we had no estimates from the Spicer commission.

Similarly, the last report of the Auditor General of Canada covers the period ended March 31, 1990. The Spicer commission was brought in after that, so it was not included in that report either.

I regretfully had to say that our existing mandate of the public accounts committee does not permit us to carry out the relevant enquiry. The committee would need an order of reference from this House. However, it is important to note that all commissions of inquiry are accountable to Parliament for the expenditure of public funds. Treasury Board policies govern these expenditures, including the guidance given to all departments and agencies in matters of financial administration by the Office of the Comptroller General.

In addition, financial controls are exercised by the Receiver General's department in the disbursement of moneys. Of course, these expenditures are subject to audit by Parliament's auditor, the Auditor General of Canada.

As members are aware, Supplementary Estimates C, 1990-91, relating to the Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future, have been referred to the Standing Committee on Consumer and Corporate Affairs and Government Operations. Because this committee does not have a chairperson, it has not been meeting. Failure to take steps to appoint a chairperson and activate the committee in question will simply indicate a lack of will on the part of Parliament to control the public purse effectively and credibly.

I am glad to see today that Parliament is grappling with that question and I hope it will soon be settled.

The other item I wanted to bring to the attention of the House is a letter that was written to me by the President of the Treasury Board, and it gives me great concern. It does deal very specifically with public accountability.

He said:

In response to the concerns expressed in your previous letter about the participation of my officials at a meeting that was held on November 28, and in the future I would like to make my position clear.

We had requested certain officials to be there to reply and that did not occur. There were officials there, but they were sitting back against the wall.