

Control of Public Funds

challenge and scrutinize the accounts of the government generally, on a day-to-day basis; and, finally, deal with government expenditures and approve government expenditures when they are brought forward in the proper form. In my opinion, the last of these areas is the most important for us to consider.

I said that there were lots of other topics which we might have discussed today. I do not know how much attention will be paid to the present debate. I know there are stirrings across the border in Washington, in connection with certain events going on there. In the United Kingdom, the senior chamber of the United Kingdom parliament apparently is showing more activity in certain respects than is our senior chamber and is securing a great deal of attention from the press. A conference is going on in Ottawa, about which I will say something later. All the same, I suggest that we can spend our time in no better way than in discussing, for the balance of this morning and this afternoon, the tremendously important question suggested by the motion.

The other day I was at the National Arts Centre. Anyone who has been there lately will have seen the reconstructed skeleton of the dinosaur. It certainly reminded me of this government. When it was alive it must have been heavy, covered with scales, and fierce looking. It had a big mouth. It was carnivorous and had a great appetite. If we had seen it in action, no doubt we should have found it adept at concealment and deception.

An hon. Member: Like the President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Nielsen: And it probably changed colour when the occasion was right.

Mr. Baldwin: Despite the other attractions I have mentioned it is evident, from my reading of news stories and editorials printed in various newspapers across this land, that the statements made in the last report of the Auditor General have revived the interest of the people, particularly of the poor, harassed taxpayer of this country, in what this government is doing. This fact has reinforced our determination to continue to bring this matter to the attention of the government so that, at least when this government has gone and we have replaced it, we shall have our own words to contend with and there will be a new deal for the taxpayers of Canada.

Mr. Nowlan: For the forgotten majority.

Mr. Baldwin: My colleagues will be dealing with particular items of waste, extravagance, stupidity and misspending. I am particularly anxious to direct the attention of the House to what I believe to be one of the most serious issues we must face, namely, the loss or weakening of parliamentary control over government spending.

I asked the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. Sharp) about this yesterday, and in his reply he brushed the suggestion off, saying, "Why, parliament has even more control over spending than it had before." That, I say, is nonsense.

Mr. Nielsen: Sheer rubbish.

[Mr. Baldwin.]

Mr. Baldwin: The President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Drury) who has replied on behalf of the government in a number of similar debates no doubt will be trotting out the 1973 version of the rather juvenile and attenuated remarks which he has brought forward in debates of this kind. In addition, he will probably say, "You have more powers than you ever had; you have more weapons at your disposal and more means of dealing with estimates." That, I say, is wrong. I know it is wrong; my colleagues know it is wrong; parliament knows that is wrong and it is not in accordance with the facts. Something will have to be done about it.

I suggest that the minister and the Secretary of State for External Affairs are entitled to the degree, "master of obfuscation". When I thought of that word I looked it up in the dictionary and saw I was right in using it. Obfuscation means to darken, to obscure, to confuse and to stupefy. That is what the minister and his colleagues are doing with respect to this particular issue.

There are two aspects of the issues at which we should look, namely, what I call the aspects of pre-spending and of post-spending. Let us look at the issue of pre-spending and what we can do about it. The minister may say, "You may use the committees to examine estimates". The President of the Treasury Board knows as well as every member of this House that all the members of my party and, I believe, all my friends to my left have participated in parliamentary committee proceedings have done so diligently and earnestly, but in spite of this many here will agree with me when I say that, so far as being a vehicle for a reasonable examination of estimates of departments and Crown corporations before the money is spent, those proceedings are an absolute flop. They have failed.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Baldwin: True, they have provided opportunity for the cross-examination of witnesses and the basis on which facts can be gleaned. Those facts can be used at a later date, possibly in debates in this House. However, as a method of conducting a rational and sensible examination of estimates before the money is spent, those proceedings are not satisfactory. One of the things my electors in Peace River said when they sent me here was, "Go down there and do something about the government's extravagance in spending." Hon. members opposite look honest to me. They try to be honest. Sometimes they do not completely succeed, that is in a parliamentary sense. They will agree that if they talk to their constituents, they will be told to do something about this government's escalation of expenditures. This government is poised like a space satellite; all system set to go right up to the stratosphere.

● (1210)

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Baldwin: A better method must be adopted. If time permits, in spite of the discussions on the other side, I intend to do just that.

This debate is not just for the purpose of criticizing, but, in a spirit of friendly co-operation, to try to show the government what can be done. This is the last opportunity