

fully understand the major commitment we in this government have to jobs.

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AUDITOR GENERAL'S REPORT

Mr. John Williams (St. Albert): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Finance.

The Auditor General tabled his report today. In it he has pointed out that unless some real changes are made the federal debt, that is, the federal debt alone and not the national debt, will reach 100 per cent of the gross domestic product by the year 2008.

The Auditor General has red flagged the situation as being of serious concern. He has stated in his report: "Hard choices lie ahead".

The speech from the throne has focused on spending programs with no recognition of the serious fiscal situation facing this country.

Is the Minister of Finance now able to assure Canadians that deficit reduction is this country's number one priority rather than introducing more spending programs as we heard about yesterday?

Hon. Paul Martin (Minister of Finance and Minister responsible for the Federal Office of Regional Development -Quebec): Mr. Speaker, there is no doubt that deficit reduction is a major priority of this government.

There is no doubt that we share the views largely expressed by the Auditor General. We did so in a matter of weeks after taking office. There is no doubt, as well, as the Prime Minister said so well in his opening remarks that we are not going to get the deficit reduction unless we also understand that economics is about people and that this country needs jobs.

Mr. John Williams (St. Albert): Mr. Speaker, we understand that this country certainly does need jobs.

However, having looked at and read through the report, it would appear that there are many areas where this government can take charge of its own finances and ensure that money that is currently being wasted and misspent is available for Canadians.

Will the Minister of Finance assure us that he will look at the Auditor General's report and implement the recommendations there to ensure that Canadian taxpayers' money is spent for the best benefit of this country?

Hon. Paul Martin (Minister of Finance and Minister responsible for the Federal Office of Regional Development -Quebec): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member opposite and I certainly share one thing in common. When I first came to the House and was up I also forgot to ask my question.

Oral Questions

The hon. member can rest assured that we are going to take the comments of the Auditor General very seriously, especially since he is looking at us from up there. We have already begun to do so.

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● (1440)

[Translation]

MANPOWER PROGRAMS

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval): Mr. Speaker, there is a broad consensus in Quebec on eliminating costly administrative duplication in manpower programs. Unions, management, the government and hundreds of thousands of unemployed Quebecers agree. The 26,000 Quebecers waiting for occupational training, even though skilled jobs are available, also agree.

My question for the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs is as follows: Does he intend to conclude an agreement with the Government of Quebec as soon as possible on eliminating this costly duplication and thus respect the commitment which the Prime Minister made at the first ministers' summit on December 21, and the commitment which he himself made in early December?

Hon. Marcel Massé (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Public Service Renewal): Mr. Speaker, our government is in full agreement with eliminating overlap and duplication so as to reduce the cost of government. We said that in the throne speech and we obtained an agreement to that effect at the first ministers' conference.

As for an agreement on occupational training, my colleague, the Minister of Human Resources Development, has already discussed this with his colleague who is now Quebec's finance minister but who then was responsible for the manpower agreement, and he is continuing with the discussions.

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval): Mr. Speaker, since experts say that eliminating these overlaps would save at least some \$250 million a year from the moment the agreement is reached and signed, would the minister not agree that for a cash-strapped government, it is time for him, the Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues to get with it as soon as possible?

Hon. Marcel Massé (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Public Service Renewal): Mr. Speaker, I feel that we are already with it because we intend to cut government spending by much more than \$250 million by reducing overlap.