

Oral Questions

REASON APPOINTMENT OF COMPTROLLER GENERAL WOULD VIOLATE PARLIAMENTARY TRADITIONS

Mr. Edward Broadbent (Oshawa-Whitby): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the Prime Minister on the same subject. I say to the minister first of all that no one has questioned his obligation to come before parliament on these matters. That is not the issue.

The question to the Prime Minister is: considering that one of the first responsibilities of cabinet in our system of government is to maintain financial control over the government's operations—

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

● (1420)

Mr. Broadbent: —and since the recommendation of the Auditor General was to appoint an official whom he called the comptroller general who would report to the President of the Treasury Board, would the Prime Minister explain to the House why this would be some kind of violation of our parliamentary tradition?

Right Hon. P. E. Trudeau (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, there would be a question of whether the deputy minister had two bosses, one being his own minister and the other being the comptroller general.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Trudeau: The question was asked in order to get an understanding of this. I am trying to elucidate it. I would add that this decision to set up a royal commission was arrived at after a very lengthy period of discussion with the Auditor General—

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Trudeau: —who recognizes the complexity of the issue, which some members of the opposition do not seem to want to see, and who agreed with the setting up of the royal commission. It is of course true that it is in conformity with his job that he would want to see the action take place sooner, but he did agree to the establishment of a royal commission because he sees the complexity of the question in terms of running parliament and running a government department.

Mr. Broadbent: Since the Treasury Board has many obligations and responsibilities in addition to the one maintaining financial control, and since other provincial governments in Canada have already seen fit to establish a position such as the one recommended by the Auditor General for the obvious reason of giving the government as a whole a supervisory control over the spending of all its departments, why does the Prime Minister not think that the sensible precedent set by other governments, which are operating well and are not wasting hundreds of millions of dollars, should not be duplicated at the federal level?

[Mr. Speaker.]

Mr. Trudeau: There is the post of deputy secretary within the Treasury Board. He fulfils part of the function which is recommended here. If, as stated by the President of the Treasury Board, we are meeting some 90 per cent or 98 per cent of the Auditor General's concerns, it seems to be reasonable for parliament to not necessarily take a partisan view on this—

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Trudeau: —but to look at the very real problem that this can pose for parliament and for its operation.

Mr. Fairweather: Don't get it mixed up. The survival of the government is not the same thing.

Mr. Trudeau: I disagree with the hon. member for Fundy-Royal. We are talking of this particular government, Mr. Speaker. I think that is relevant. If the hon. member is talking about government in the parliamentary form of democracy, then obviously he will have to do his homework and look at the implications.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Broadbent: I have one last supplementary question, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps more of us will have to do our homework.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Broadbent: Since no one is recommending the abolition of the position of the Auditor General who reports directly to this parliament but the recommendation is for an additional position which would reinforce the responsibilities of the cabinet to exercise control over its financial operations, would the Prime Minister make clear to the House what kind of violation of parliamentary rights he is concerned about in this matter?

Mr. Trudeau: Perhaps I could express the answer in another form. The Auditor General approaches these problems from the point of view of accountancy. He is a chartered accountant. He has been advised by many chartered accountants, and he is proposing ways of running the government. I respect that, but those proposals come from a professional in his particular field, and they are based on experience of how to run big corporations and how to run the private sector.

Mr. Hnatyshyn: What an insult to the Auditor General.

Mr. Trudeau: It seems to me that any parliamentarian should be able to understand that our institution does not necessarily have to be run the way accountants say it should.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

An hon. Member: It should be run honestly and efficiently.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): You should follow the rules.

Mr. Trudeau: However, there are questions here which go beyond mere accountancy; they are questions with regard to