

Auditor General Act

This is a very desirable objective, but it leaves open what we have often discovered in this House in the course of the question period or parliamentary proceedings, when matters have been brought to the attention of hon. members, that demonstrate there is a state of affairs which justifies some immediate inquiry. The problem with most auditors general reports is that they are of a post-mortem nature: it is usually after the patient is dead and a fairly substantial odour is coming from the corpse that the auditor general is called upon to conduct a post-mortem examination and make a report. That is proper; that is essential; that is a condition precedent for any proper parliamentary examination. There are many occasions, however, when if something were brought to our attention by the Auditor General at the time it might prevent the loss of a very large sum of money—or even a very small sum of money—with important principles involved.

This government has rapidly increased its expenditures from \$14 billion to \$46 billion in a very few years. It has had a burgeoning bureaucracy to help with the spending and mispending of this money. In the result, sometimes situations come to the attention of members or their constituents, or even to members of the government, which require immediate attention. There is no doubt that is the reason for clause 11. The government may well discover something which in its opinion justifies immediate examination, so clause 11 was included in the bill.

I simply ask the reason for prohibiting the House of Commons from doing the same thing. We are the forum which has responsibility to the people for the expenditure of this \$46 billion. Personally, I have been frustrated on many occasions when issues have come up or circumstances have arisen and it has become apparent there is an immediate need for the auditor general to make a study. In the public accounts committee we are still engaged in the study of some issues involving Crown agencies. Questions have been asked in this House, and proposals made in committee, to the effect that the Auditor General would be justified in engaging in an immediate examination rather than waiting until the accounts of this fiscal year come under the examination of his officers, which might be a year or a year and a half from now—much too late. The very fact that this clause was included is a tacit recognition by the government that there may well be a situation when it is necessary that an immediate examination be made, rather than waiting until the usual audit is completed. It is with this situation in mind that I make this suggestion.

I go a step further, Mr. Speaker, and suggest that because of the problems faced by this House, and particularly the opposition, in so many instances in securing the adoption of suggestions, there should be a current, rather than a post-examination of a certain situation. But the government simply says no. All that can be done, then, is for a member to put a private member's motion on the order paper. It usually sinks to the bottom of the pile; but even if it were at the top, under the rules of this House there is probably one chance in a thousand that it would ever come to a vote. It seems to me if the right is to be given to the House of Commons to initiate an immediate

[Mr. Baldwin.]

study, that right should be based on a simple and expeditious motion by which the House could get a motion passed and have the auditor general seized with jurisdiction to make the examination. I have taken the figure of 50 members. In doing so, I regret it would not permit my hon. friends to my left in the New Democratic Party to be involved; but I am sure if we in this party saw that members of the NDP or the Social Credit party had become aware of a situation which cried out for examination, we would be glad to lend enough support to ensure that the desired number would be achieved.

I see my hon. friend, the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles), looking at me sympathetically. He knows I mean that. For that reason, Mr. Speaker, I offered this amendment saying, in effect, that if the governor in council can initiate a current investigation, why cannot we? And if we should have the right, why cannot we have the right to perfect it in a way that we expect it would be done, rather than go through the useless mechanism of requesting that a royal commission be established or that the auditor general be required to make a study?

I suggest my amendment in no way interferes with the government's right to make such a request. I hope when the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Andras) responds, he will tell us why the government does not trust the House of Commons to initiate the kind of request for examination which the government has allocated to itself.

Hon. Robert K. Andras (President of the Treasury Board): Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) will not be surprised when I tell him I cannot bring myself to accept his proposal although we have studied it for some time now and listened to arguments put forward by the hon. member in committee. We are not recommending adoption. I can certainly understand that from time to time the House of Commons would want matters to be referred expeditiously to the auditor general.

In view of the pressures that can be brought to bear in this chamber, however, and of the publicity, the concern—I will not use the definition that the hon. member did about the corpse and all that—there has been ample illustration over the years of the ability of this House to make that kind of suggestion and get it through. Matters can be raised under Standing Order 43 and many other avenues by hon. members can be followed and pressure can be brought to bear that way. I am afraid, however, that if it were as automatic as the amendment would seek, then the auditor general would be drawn into political matters very quickly, on many occasions. That would be regrettable. I think the Auditor General indicated in committee that he would be apprehensive about such a proposition. He would not look with favour on it, and I am almost quoting what he said before the committee.

● (1700)

Regrettably, we could not look with favour on this proposal. I might mention that we discussed 38 amendments in committee, which were consolidated into 21 amendments since some of them were variations and repetitions of other amendments.