

*Cost Overruns*

terms of what the opposition is attempting to do by placing the word "ongoing" where it is proposed. I hope the President of the Treasury Board will come into the House so that I can discuss the matter with him in detail, because what really concerns me in regard to the work of this committee, given the terms of reference with which the President of the Treasury Board dealt, is that members of the opposition in this House who were members of the former government are very skilfully and artfully attempting to draw a curtain over several major government projects and contracts which can be defined as those involving expenditures in excess of \$1 million. This would put them beyond the purview of the committee for consideration as undertakings or expenses of the government in relation to ongoing overruns. This is a very artful attempt, in my judgment, subject to the judgment of the President of the Treasury Board, to draw down a curtain. If that is in fact what is happening, under the guise of suggesting that this would contravene or interfere with the work of the committee on public accounts, I am really quite surprised.

In terms of these contracts or arrangements, I do not think we can say with precision what is the sense of the word "ongoing". When the President of the Treasury Board comes into the House he may be able to satisfy me regarding that matter, but I am concerned that the inclusion of the word "ongoing" will limit the ability of the committee of this House to inquire into a whole host of rather large projects which are now generally regarded as a problem for the Government of Canada. These projects may have been regarded as a problem for the former government. If they were not so regarded, they should have been.

I listened to what the hon. member had to say, and I certainly would not want to put a bad face on it, but I am not certain what the significance is of that word "ongoing" and its positioning, unless it is an attempt to draw a curtain over certain classes of contracts in respect of which this committee will not be allowed to deal.

Quite frankly, I had hoped there would not be an attempt by this House to limit the work of parliamentary committees. We are concerned with what is generally recognized as a very important consideration to the operation of government, namely, why millions and millions of dollars seem to be underestimated in relation to a host of government contracts. Was there something wrong with the estimating procedures? There is a whole host of similar questions that were supposed to be dealt with by this committee.

I am surprised at what the official opposition is really attempting by this amendment. The only purpose I can see is to limit the right of a committee of the House to examine these matters, and to limit the mandate of that committee as granted to it by the government's motion No. 5. Government motion No. 5 asks the House of Commons to appoint a special committee:

● (1630)

—to inquire fully into the measures necessary to prevent recurring cost overruns on major government projects—

[Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton).]

How can there be any serious objection to such a motion? Quite frankly, it was not clear in the speech made by the hon. member for Saint-Henri-Westmount why the amendment was proposed. It is the first time in my experience in this House that I have heard of the opposition attempting to limit the work of a parliamentary committee investigating the matter of government expenditures, cost overruns, and what have you. I am quite startled by such a move. I can only conclude that this amendment came off the top of the hon. member's head, because he did not have it prepared in writing. I hope that someone in that party will answer that question.

Is there something which the former government is attempting to cover up? I do not know. If there is nothing they want to hide, I think that the amendment should be withdrawn so that the fullest of consideration can be given to the motion by the government. The motion was proposed because there is a problem. If one has followed the awarding of tenders on government contracts for certain fixed amounts of money, or if hon. members have followed the proceedings of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts or other committees of the House, they will know that there are always applications for more money for extras on all contracts. The question is, why does that happen? What is wrong with the practice and where should it be changed to ensure that the tender system and the estimating system are appropriate? Are there new methods of arrangements for the letting of contracts that ought to be employed, both to expedite contracts and to ensure that the contractors get their fair amount? Why is it that these things occur? Is there some experience from the past that we can draw on that will help us chart a course for the future?

Is it the intention of the official opposition, for the first time in my history here, to limit an inquiry that, if they are on their toes, will be carried by the opposition anyway? That is the position in which we find ourselves, and I hope that debate will continue with respect to that one question. I am prepared to give the hon. member for Saint-Henri-Westmount an opportunity to explain why he would like to limit that inquiry, because I would certainly like to know. It is not our wish to precipitate or lengthen debate with respect to the matter.

I would like to know the opposition's position. Certainly the explanation given by the hon. member for Saint-Henri-Westmount does not satisfy me and, as he knows, I tried to follow his speech very closely. I thought that the President of the Treasury Board, both in answer to his question and in the House earlier today, explained well why he felt that the motion should be framed in the way it is. The minister referred to many projects which would now be considered old projects. The hon. member for Saint-Henri-Westmount ought not to muzzle the work of the committee. When the committee gets into the discussion of how it will interpret its terms of reference, it may very well decide that it will look at certain projects in certain ways. I do not think we should fetter the work of the committee in advance.

With respect to the foreign investment review committee, hon. members will recall that on Friday there was an explanation asked of the government by the hon. member for Win-