

appropriate committee. As Senator Bolduc has said, the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance normally deals with the spending estimates, but quite often it attempts to get an overall view of some particular aspect of expenditure. Normally, it does not normally descend upon the detail of the policy which is being carried out by a particular department. In the case of Foreign Affairs, we need a committee that will review with the minister and his officials what the department is doing and do this year after year.

I agree with Senator Bolduc that this is not something that we should decide now. However, it is a proposal to which we ought to give serious consideration. Increasingly, what we do internationally is almost as important as what we do domestically. This is true in trade. It is increasingly true in international finance. It is true now in the fisheries, and I could go on. I support Senator Bolduc's proposal enthusiastically.

[Translation]

Hon. Marcel Prud'homme: Honourable senators, I would like to proceed the way they do in the House of Commons, with questions or comments regarding what was said by our esteemed colleague Senator Bolduc.

An idea I always wanted to develop with respect to the business of the Senate goes along the same lines as what was suggested by Senator Bolduc. I am not going to make a formal proposal. I am simply working on a proposal to change the way we work in the Senate.

I thought Senator Stewart was very encouraging. I appreciate that, and I am referring to the suggestion that the responsibilities of a standing committee should include more than examining the estimates which, as we know, are examined in the House of Commons —

[English]

— or are deemed to have been accepted on May 31 of each year.

[Translation]

Honourable senators, I always thought it was a rather unfortunate way to examine the estimates. I agree it would be hard to do otherwise in the House of Commons, but I think the Senate is the ideal place to engage in detailed scrutiny of programs and spending.

Not long ago, Senator Olson commented on my suggestion that the estimates should be examined under the headings of six or eight government envelopes, and that senators who were particularly interested or had particular expertise could sit on these committees the year round to engage in detailed scrutiny of each program. They would have the power to call witnesses, especially departmental officials as well as the minister.

I continue to promote this idea, and I was delighted to hear what Senator Bolduc had to say. I would appreciate hearing his comments on this.

[Senator Stewart]

If I am not mistaken, his suggestion is to have the Senate play an important role in examining bills and estimates. I am afraid I must disagree with Senator Olson, who said that we could examine anything we wanted on the Finance Committee. I think that is too much for one committee to handle.

I want to thank three senators who offered their assistance and those who urged me to persevere and to go and see them if I wanted further comments.

I would appreciate it if Senator Bolduc would comment. I know he is an expert on public affairs. He was a formidable administrator in the public service in Quebec. He knows everything there is to know. We must give everyone his due. We must also recognize a person's qualifications. I must admit that Senator Bolduc is eminently qualified in the field of government administration.

[English]

I would say the same about Senator Pitfield. If there is someone who knows the federal structure, it is Senator Pitfield.

If we could contribute more, the net effect would be a better Senate and a better understanding of the importance of the Senate. The Canadian population would see that the Senate can play a greater role. In this respect, I should like to ask —

[Translation]

— my friend Senator Bolduc if he has a few comments to make.

Senator Bolduc: If the honourable senators will permit me, I might say a few words on the subject. I would perhaps, qualify the remarks made by Senator Prud'homme.

He spoke of a detailed review of programs and votes as such. I believe we must be careful here. I would qualify this somewhat.

In terms of votes, we must remember that the role of the Senate is supposed to be more limited than that of the House of Commons. This review, which may not necessarily be of the fine details, could include a look at the policies behind the programs.

This, in my opinion, is one important role the Senate could play, given that senators have a variety of expertise. They have been here long enough, whereas, in the other place, there is a high turnover rate. Senators have practical experience in various areas. It seems to me that senators could play a role in the review — and I stress this point — of the underlying values, policies, programs and approaches of departments.

I was involved in this a little during a year I spent at the National Defence College, where we spent a lot of time looking at defence issues, but we looked at foreign policy matters as well. Public officials around the world have a lot of discretionary room. We have to see things the way they are. This is true in Ottawa as well. The minister is often away travelling, and so decisions are often left to those guarding the fort in his absence. This was my experience in the past.

It seems to me that parliamentarians should question public officials on their approach in various areas.