

Auditor General Act

maintain the professionalism that has prevailed in the functioning of the Auditor General's office. It is clear that the system is working, and the Auditor General is obviously very pleased with the improved accountability of our Government. His latest report was very supportive of the efforts of this Government to improve the accountability and spending habits of government.

That is not to say that any Government is perfect. No Government can be perfect. However, the Auditor General has certainly given this Government high marks. We want to continue to give the Auditor General that flexibility. The Auditor General's office must know that over a period of a year it has the responsibility to do audits and provide substantial reports on all these Departments, but not to give passing commentaries or short-term analyses about one project or another.

Surely we can understand how in any given week the spending of the Government could become a political and partisan issue. The Auditor General's office could then be put in a position where it might become an agency of partisanship. We do not want that and we do not need it. One week the Opposition might want an audit of the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources or the Department of Agriculture. It might want an audit of land claims. The list is endless. We do not want the Auditor General's office subjected to that kind of political pressure.

It was clear today in Question Period how the Opposition is particularly perturbed about the great step forward the Government has taken in Hibernia. There is a substantial commitment by the Government of Canada to the people of Atlantic Canada with respect to developing the Hibernia oil field. We in Atlantic Canada welcome that. We do not want it politicized and made part of a political issue in this House.

Today we saw the Opposition really attempting to make the issue other than a very sound economic decision by the Government of Canada. We do not need the Auditor General pulled in this week perhaps to slow down the process of economic development in Hibernia. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter. I congratulate the Hon. Member on his initiative, but on reflection I find that the changes he proposes are constraining on the Auditor General, are unnecessary, would really place the Auditor General's office in a difficult position and perhaps, in the long term, compromise the professionalism of that office.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Robert Gauthier (Ottawa—Vanier): Mr. Speaker, I welcome this opportunity to speak to Bill C-288, an Act to amend the Auditor General Act. This is the third time the Hon. Member has tabled in the House an amendment to the Act which would allow the Auditor General to report to the House more than once per year. The purpose of the Bill, according to the explanatory notes accompanying the Bill, is as follows:

At present the *Auditor General Act* requires the Auditor General to report to the House of Commons annually. The purpose of this Bill is to allow the Auditor General to report annually and as often as he deems necessary.

I was listening to the Hon. Member for Cape Breton Highlands—Canso (Mr. O'Neil) who said that it was not a good idea because the Auditor General would go too far and table a stack of reports that might be embarrassing to the Government and make Government operations excessively transparent. Mr. Speaker, I cannot agree with this position, because we know perfectly well that the Auditor General, who is a reliable person, who is accountable to Parliament and an agent of Parliament, would never abuse the powers conferred on him by Bill C-288, namely to report once or several times a year.

I can inform the Hon. Member for Prince Albert (Mr. Hovdebo) who sponsored this Bill, and who also sponsored Bill C-250 in October 1985, and Bill C-262 in October 1987, and who today is sponsoring Bill C-288, that the idea is a good one. In fact, in the spring of 1984, the principle was approved by the Liberal Government at the time, by the Official Opposition and even by the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, who in his report to the House of Commons had suggested that this initiative be approved by parliamentarians. Mr. Speaker, the Chairman of the Committee at the time was none other than the Minister of State (Treasury Board) (Mr. Lewis), and Government House Leader in the House of Commons. In his report, and I will read it word for word, because it is rather interesting, and considering that today he is a Minister, one would have thought he would be able to convince his Cabinet colleagues of the excellent motives for introducing this Bill and the need for such a measure.

In the Fifth Report to the House of the Public Accounts Committee chaired by the eminently qualified Minister of State and Minister of State (Treasury Board) and Deputy House Leader, we read as follows:

Your Committee favours the reporting of comprehensive and other audits on a completion-date basis. This will enable your Committee to deal with the Auditor General's findings in a timely manner and to exert its remedial influence as soon as possible after the audit is completed. The Auditor General endorses this approach because it provides for greater efficiency and flexibility in his reporting to Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, it's fairly simple and it is actually a good idea for the Auditor General to occasionally report more than once a year. It seems to me when one is in the important and complex business of administering a country with \$120 or \$125 billion annually, one should from time to time ask someone who is objective and independent, and who is accountable to Parliament, whether this business is properly managed. It seems to me that a Cabinet that is thorough and competent would be able to live with this kind of open government and with regular scrutiny by Parliament.

• (1700)

Mr. Speaker, I remember that at the time the Member for Simcoe-North (Mr. Lewis), the Chairman of the Committee, now a cabinet Minister, had attempted to obtain the consent