

control supply. We put in rules which state that as of midnight at the end of May the estimates are deemed to have been reported to the House.

What does a minister have to do when he goes before a standing committee of the House with his estimates? All he has to do is turn up his collar and hang tough because he knows it is just a question of stonewalling long enough and his estimates will be passed anyway. What a stupid exercise. Is it any wonder we are faced with the situation today of having a bill before the House to set up the office of comptroller general, which arises from a report by the present Auditor General in 1976, and referred to in his 1977 report from which I quote as follows:

In my 1976 Annual Report, I wrote of my concern that Parliament—and indeed the Government—had lost, or was close to losing, effective control of the public purse. I said also that the full results of my Office's two-year study of financial management and control across Government had led me inescapably to the opinion that:

Based on the study of the systems of departments, agencies and Crown corporations audited by the Auditor General, financial management and control in the Government of Canada is grossly inadequate. Furthermore, it is likely to remain so until the Government takes strong, appropriate and effective measures to rectify this critically serious situation.

It is all well and good that we have this bill before us. Indeed, the government had no choice but to respond positively to the recommendations of the Auditor General and bring in this bill. I want to make this point, and we as a parliament should not lose sight of it, that the office of the Comptroller General of Canada will not be effective until we put our own house in order; until we change our own rules and until we get rid of this totally ineffective system we have now in which we as representatives of the people no longer have any control over government expenditures and cannot in fact hold the government accountable for its spending.

One suggestion that has been made time and time again, and I think it is a good one which will ultimately have to be accepted, is that the House, represented by the opposition, which has the principal role in this regard, should have the right to call at least one, preferably three, departments, and for the purposes of the rules this rule would be suspended in respect of those departments. Those departments would have to come before the House in Committee of the Whole and be accountable for their expenditures, without the imposition of the guillotine, as presently expressed in the rules, whereby all estimates are deemed to have been passed by the end of May. That would impose a discipline on government departments which does not now exist.

How can we possibly carry out this principal function of parliament when we have ministers who stonewall the committee and will not allow their officials to answer questions, hiding behind the excuse that the questions are ones of policy? Then when we are given the opportunity to probe and direct questions to officials of departments we really do not have the kind of back-up support necessary to take on these huge departments of government with the tremendous back-up and expertise they possess. We are just not a match for them, and it is that simple. I believe very strongly that the rules have to be changed.

Financial Administration Act

Just a few days ago in the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs we were examining the estimates of the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs. Included in the estimates of the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs was a vote for Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, a Crown corporation. We have always had the right to examine Crown corporations separately from the government ministers who answer for those Crown corporations in the House, for the very simple and logical reason that Crown corporations are not represented here, hence they cannot be accounted for. We have always had the right in committee to examine the executive officers of those Crown corporations. We examine the estimates of CN, even though they come under the Ministry of Transport. They are examined separately from the Department of Transport without the minister being present, although there are cases when he might be there; but usually he is not and we are able to direct our questions directly to the management of CN. The same applies with Air Canada, whenever we can get them, and that is not very often. It also applies to the CBC which comes under the estimates of the Secretary of State (Mr. Roberts).

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However, on this particular occasion I as a member of the committee had some very important questions relating to the way that the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs had been using CMHC in a partisan way as a political instrument of the government by having government members hand out cheques on behalf of this independent Crown corporation to municipalities, an improper procedure which was using the corporation in a political way. It was making announcements on behalf of the corporation. I wanted to pose these questions to the chairman of CMHC, who was present as he should have been because vote 10, the administrative vote of the corporation, was called, but I was denied that right. I was told by the chairman of the committee that I could not direct questions to the minister's officials, and that included, of course, the chairman of CMHC as one of the minister's officials. He said I would have to direct my questions to the minister. That is a dangerous precedent because that considerably weakens what is already an inadequate system. It considerably undermines a system that is at best barely functioning, and it is already the subject of a point of order which I have raised in the House.

If we do not have the right to examine Crown corporations, then how can we pursue the day to day operations of these independent agencies of the government set up under their own statutes, autonomous of the government? If they are not accountable to us, who are they accountable to? It is interesting to note that the Auditor General had this to say about Crown corporations in his 1975 report:

In the majority of the Crown corporations audited by the Auditor General, financial management and control is weak and ineffective. Moreover, co-ordination and guidance by government agencies of financial management and control practices in the Crown corporations are virtually non-existent.

If they do not answer to parliament, the representatives of the people who own those Crown corporations, who are they accountable to? That, sir, is a question that I intend to pursue