

Parliament

should not be regarded as intruders into the bureaucratic process, though I am afraid they are now, to such degree has our system fallen in esteem. Members have a constitutional responsibility which predates and is imposed upon the existence of any bureaucracy. We have tended to forget this.

I make that observation without disrespect to the public service. There has been a vacuum; we have allowed that vacuum to develop and the public service has naturally moved in. Members of this chamber who do not hold office have a duty to bring those who do hold office in the executive to account.

The Auditor General realizes that the final link in the process of financial review is that which involves responsibility to parliament. He suggests that form of estimates should be improved and that more information should be given. That is a good start, Mr. Speaker, but it might be a false gain. Notwithstanding the staff presently available to members of parliament, or the opportunities afforded by the committee system or the bureaucrats behind that system, devoted as they are, if the parliamentary research system is not augmented, if the committee secretariat system is not augmented, all that information will mean nothing at all.

The Auditor General also suggests that relevant sections of his report should go before standing committees. This is one point of disagreement between myself and the Auditor General; I do not know how the committees could handle estimates, legislation and the audit function as well. The proposal might involve a conflict of interest in any event because most of the members of committees who deal with specific items are particularly interested in them, but I do not think there is any proper audit function done by those who are interested in those programs. That is one disagreement I have with the Auditor General, though I think we are moving in the right direction. We need something new. We want a whole new committee system. My hon. friend for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) suggested we needed a new government—everyone will admit that.

It is now six o'clock and in the few minutes which are left to me after the dinner recess I would like to make a proposal I have put to the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization in the hope that it will meet with the approval of members in all quarters and make parliament more relevant and more functional.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Turner): It being six o'clock I do now leave the chair until eight o'clock p.m.

At six o'clock the House took recess.

● (2002)

AFTER RECESS

The House resumed at 8 p.m.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, when the House rose at six o'clock I had said that we might just talk

about what is wrong with our system—and indeed there is a great deal wrong with it—but that I had a proposal to put to the House as to how we might begin the process of returning this parliament to the people. I said that, bearing in mind what the leader of my party said when he was made leader in 1976. He said that the people of Canada are interested not only in those things which we are against but also in the things which we intend to propose.

This parliament needs more information with respect to estimates. It needs more time to consider the estimates. We need a completely different approach. Our present process for dealing with expenditures has no focal point or direction. The only acknowledged aim of parliament thus far is to pass each vote in the estimates. Instead of detailed examination and a report, we have a series of disjointed local questions which lead to no conclusion and no recommendations.

Committees studying estimates do not issue reports. It is possible that some members may end up knowing a bit more about departmental policies than they did before, but those members have no impact on departments or on policies. Estimates emerge from this process virtually unchanged, which is the best indication of how behind the times and how irrelevant our process is. I believe we have to reverse this emphasis in our financial procedures. Instead of trying to discuss all the estimates every year, we should work our way through them in a four or five-year cycle. Instead of concentrating on masses of vague generalities, we should investigate in depth specific departments, agencies or functions. Such investigations should not result merely in a decision to pass or not pass estimates. They should result in comprehensive reports comparing agency goals with results, and costs with benefits.

In the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization in 1976 I outlined a plan for a standing committee on policy, expenditure and programs. This proposed committee would have two purposes. First, it would study the over-all pattern of government expenditure, hearing evidence in the process from the Department of Finance, from the Treasury Board and from outside economists. I hope such a study would make it clear where, at any given time, we are heading and on what assumptions about our future economic development our course is being charted by the government of the day. We do not have that opportunity today.

Second, that committee, through subcommittees if necessary, could undertake the kind of long-term intensive study I think we need if we are to represent the people who send us here. If we were to follow the lead of the Senate finance committee, which has undertaken a number of extremely useful studies—most recently on government office accommodation policies—we would do something for the process in this parliament. The only trouble with the present arrangement is that while the Senate has the time and the expertise for this type of work, we in this House of Commons have constitutional responsibility but not the necessary machinery, even though we may have the will to carry out that responsibility.

I would like to conclude with some general observations about government spending. First, if we are to have a tight