

*Auditor General*

that all they have today is a government with so much power that it can just sit there until the eve of the next election and not really try to cope with the problems facing the country. I think of such problems as housing, unemployment, inflation and pensions. What attention are these problems receiving? I contend that the thrust of the motion before us today, in its argument that the government is exercising too much power and is being careless in the spending of the people's money, does reflect the thinking of many Canadians today.

● (2010)

I hope that since every month we do get a little closer to the next election—it is probably a little more than three years away right now—the government will realize that time runs out and that if the attitude of arrogance is established for two or three years, or three and a half years, it will be in vain to try to dispel that attitude during the next election campaign.

However, I said that I did not want to get into the contest between the Liberals and the Conservatives over who was the blackest but rather that I had an idea that I would like to throw into the discussion of the problem of parliamentary control of expenditures. It is a very real problem. It is a problem not just because the Liberals or sometimes the Conservatives are in power.

The problem arises from the fact that the Government of Canada is a heavy spending operation—somewhere between \$25 billion and \$35 billion a year are spent. When one considers that that amount of money has to be collected and spent with some degree of propriety, it becomes a huge operation, and the possibility of its being done with adequate checks is somewhat slight, to say the least.

Through the years of parliamentary history in the United Kingdom and in this country we have tried to cope with this problem of controlling public expenditures by means of procedures surrounding the granting of supply. Way back in this House we had the practice, which was in vogue in Britain a few hundred years ago, to the effect that before any supply could be granted, grievances could be expressed, and so on. For a long time we had in the House the practice of taking all estimates, every last dollar, into a committee of supply, which was a committee of the whole House. I think it could be said that in those committees some decades ago we did a fairly good job of questioning those items dollar by dollar. But the fact is—and nobody is to blame for this—that the operation had grown so large that it became impossible to continue to deal with all the estimates here on the floor of the House and in committee of supply.

So we tried the idea of referring estimates to committees. We tried that some years ago. We even had a committee called the committee on estimates. But that did not seem to work very well. So then we tried the idea of limiting the number of days in which the estimates could be dealt with on the floor of the House. That soon became a frustrating experience because all the ministers had to do was to just wait until time ran out and then their estimates were passed.

Then we tried again the idea of referring the estimates to committees, and in effect that is the regime that is being practised now. But we find that to be not very

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satisfactory. Those who sit on the Standing Committee on Agriculture are not sitting there as accountants trying to save money; they are sitting there with an interest in agriculture, and they want money to be spent on agriculture. Those in the Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs have the same approach, and so on. So we are really not getting a study of estimates with a view to checking or limiting expenses.

This very session we are trying an experiment to see if we can correct the situation by bringing the estimates of some of the departments back to the floor of the House for a day or two at a time. I think we have had some pretty good debates on some of these days, but again the efflux of time results in the estimates being passed. Let us be frank about it. With all the good will in the world and all the impartiality we can muster, we have not yet found a satisfactory way of controlling expenditures in any ongoing sense. Some will say that that is why we have an Auditor General.

The hon. member for Peace River is strongly in favour—and I agree with him—of the idea of strengthening the role of the Auditor General. We also have the Committee on Public Accounts. But so far as we in this House are concerned and so far as the public of Canada is concerned, the operations of the Auditor General and of the Committee on Public Accounts occur after the fact.

The Committee on Public Accounts gets as its terms of reference the public accounts after the financial year is closed, and sometimes it is a long time after the year is closed. And the report of the Auditor General is a report on mistakes that were made in the past. This has to be done and it is supposed to have a salutary effect, but in fact it does not provide for any checks on the expenditures while they are being made. I know that the Auditor General's operation is not only a *post factum* operation but that he has the authority to make ongoing checks in the departments to make sure the departments are not spending money for which there is no parliamentary authority.

What we have not come to grips with yet is the possibility of there being parliamentary control over the decisions as to how money is to be spent. We get the estimates, that Big Blue book, and by the time we get them, they are an accomplished fact. The Treasury Board has decided that these are the estimates. We can discuss them, we can try to reduce them, we can complain about them, but there they are. We in parliament have no part in deciding where that money is to be spent or how much money is to be spent.

I can imagine that some of my friends in the House who, like me, are interested in procedural matters will say that that is part of the way in which responsible government works. The government makes the decisions, it brings in bills or estimates, and then it stands or falls depending on whether the House supports what it does.

I have been around here a while; I am a traditionalist; I like the ways in which parliament is operated, and I suppose I could say, let us stick with the good old ways in which it used to be done. But I wonder if we should not do some hard thinking about this and come up with a way in which members of parliament of all parties in some appropriate committee can have a hand in the decision as to how the money will be spent before it goes into the Blue Book of estimates. Once the items are in that book, all of our