

spring. I look forward to receiving comments from the public accounts committee which is doing a detailed study of this matter right now. I would, of course, wait to receive that study before making comments or suggestions.

Mr. Lincoln M. Alexander (Hamilton West): Mr. Speaker, I still want to register my concern. There is a practice, with all due respect, that the first questions come from this side, but I will not argue with Your Honour.

I want to ask the minister to elaborate on the statement he made about pilot projects being implemented by certain departments in order to bring about what I think he implied—a better form of estimates. I want to know what stage this new innovative step has reached. What departments is he talking about? What is the time-frame? In other words, just stating there are some pilot projects does not mean a thing to a minister or to any member of the House. I just want to ask that question and a couple more.

Mr. Buchanan: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated during the course of my remarks and as I suggested to the hon. member for Ottawa West (Mr. Francis), I should very much like to receive suggestions from the public accounts committee. I hope to bring these proposals forward later this spring. If general acceptance is evident, the proposal would be to select several departments at that time to present pilot projects for the new estimates format in parallel with their regular presentation for 1980-81.

Mr. Alexander: In other words, what the minister is saying is that, notwithstanding the concern that the Auditor General has registered with this parliament and the people of Canada, he has done nothing other than come to the House and say he is thinking about introducing a pilot project which will affect some departments, and which may bring about a more readable or understandable form of estimates.

This matter is extremely serious. As a matter of fact, I think it borders on the chaotic. The Auditor General says it is a gamble now—not next spring or next year—for him to certify the government is spending what it says it will spend. In other words, the Auditor General cannot do his job; it is a gamble. Surely, under the responsibilities of the minister, this matter must have been discussed with the Auditor General, so I should like to hear the minister's reply to him. This is the sort of thing that would be cleared up immediately in the private sector. I want to know whether we still have to wait until the minister understands that this is a very serious matter.

Mr. Broadbent: What are the odds of the gamble?

Mr. Buchanan: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is well aware that we have been addressing ourselves to this matter. To suggest that the Treasury Board secretariat and the Comptroller General have not looked at the matter is absolute nonsense; as the hon. member well knows, they have appeared before the public accounts committee. The Auditor General, the Comptroller General and the Treasury Board secretariat are looking very carefully at the form of the estimates. The

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Auditor General has suggested to us that he is happy with the way the arrangements are moving ahead. There is also, in parallel, the study being done by the public accounts committee.

We are certain, with all this input, that we are going to come up with improved estimates that will be of more use to members and to the public. Every bit as important, they will provide an effective means for managers within the public service to discharge their financial management responsibilities more effectively. It is totally wrong to suggest that this matter has just arisen lately and that sufficient attention is not being paid to it.

Mr. Alexander: All I know is that the Auditor General says right now that it is a gamble to certify the books. All I am saying is that this is a very serious matter. The fact that the Auditor General has indicated the government's spending documentation was so unclear and incomplete that he cannot do his job is further impetus for saying that this is a matter of a critical nature.

● (1600)

My last question is this: Will the minister kindly advise why after that delightful lunch he found that it was not possible to give the opposition parties an opportunity to read his statement? If he had done so we would have been able to look into it and have a better understanding and be better prepared to reply. Is there any excuse the minister can possibly give for that reprehensible conduct, conduct which I think is unnecessary? It is certainly not in keeping with the precedent that was set by his predecessor; he did allow us the opportunity to look at the statement so we could have some in depth study. Is there any reason why the minister did not want us to see his statement before he gave it at three o'clock?

Mr. Buchanan: Mr. Speaker, absolutely none. As I indicated to hon. members over lunch, I was not aware they had made representations in an endeavour to be involved in the press session earlier. I indicated at that time I would be quite prepared to organize a similar briefing for hon. members next year.

An hon. Member: You will not be here then.

Mr. Buchanan: The point I would like to make to the hon. member for Calgary Centre (Mr. Andre) is this. He has not learned yet that one cannot suck and blow at the same time. He spent considerable time developing the suggestion that they were cooked books, that the material was a pack of lies and it was a series of mistruths. He then went on to say that he wanted this information sooner. It seems to me that he should make up his mind. Either the material is sound, which I believe it to be, or it is not; that it is worth-while, which I believe it to be, or it is not. Hon. members are quite right in suggesting that by having access to this information earlier they could come to this question period prepared. I suggested to them when we were discussing the matter that I would be quite happy to make the arrangements. I am rather puzzled