

*Auditor General Act*

more current items in a much more effective order for the Public Accounts Committee.

Governments of many other countries use a continuous or intermittent reporting system as suggested in this Bill. In a 1984 report to the House, the Auditor General said that the Auditor General's office had considered what its counterparts in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia had done. Each of these legislatures receive periodic reports in one form or another. The Auditor General's office is convinced that this is more cost effective, as well as allowing it to report more frequently.

He also stated that until the next legislative changes were introduced it was impossible for the Auditor General's office to report intermittently. It believed it had to retain the schedule that was established by the Act.

While one section allows the Auditor General to make special reports on particular subjects, such reports could only be made in an emergency. This Bill would allow the Auditor General to make a report at the end of each audit, rather than tabling them together in an annual report.

The Governments of the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden have continuous reports. The British Parliament has a report approximately every week. My suggestion is not new or unusual, but it is highly acceptable and a widely practised procedure. It would improve the accountability of Governments in Canada. I believe this is a possible solution to a serious problem. If this Bill could be sent to committee, we would be taking a step toward that end.

**Mr. Lawrence I. O'Neil (Cape Breton Highlands—Canso):** Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to rise and speak to Bill C-288, an Act to amend the Auditor General Act. Before commenting on the Bill, I want to reflect for a moment on the importance of this opportunity for Private Members to propose amendments to existing statutes and take initiatives that are of importance to all Members and all Canadians.

The Bill today deals with the functioning of the Auditor General's office, particularly with the frequency with which the Auditor General must make reports to the House of Commons. All Members fully appreciate the important role that the Auditor General plays for Parliament.

The Auditor General is an officer of Parliament who watches the spending habits of Departments. From time to time he calls upon Ministers to explain the spending of Departments and answer questions that pertain to the authorizations for spending and whether the Departments are functioning within the legal limits and guidelines prescribed by Cabinet and by statutes.

Members of Parliament have the services of the Auditor General and the Auditor General's office which has substantial staff and expertise pertaining to the whole question of evaluating the spending of government Departments.

I believe the amendments presented for debate today are largely redundant. The existing statute provides in Section 3(b)(i) that the Auditor General may make a special report to the House of Commons on any matter of pressing importance that in his opinion should not be deferred until the presentation of his annual report. It is very clear that the existing statute fully authorizes and gives the Auditor General total discretion with respect to a matter that should be brought by way of a special report.

I believe it is important that the discretion in these matters stay with the Auditor General. We do not wish in any way to restrict that discretion, to impair the functioning of the Auditor General, given the important role that he plays.

The Hon. Member for Prince Albert (Mr. Hovdebo) talked about the need for a special provision that would give greater guidance to the Auditor General. Clearly that is not required under the statute. The Auditor General and his staff can respond in special circumstances. It is important for the staff to know that it has an annual report to make and that the annual report will be comprehensive in providing its evaluation of the respective Departments.

• (1650)

What kind of Parliament would we have if every week a report came sliding into Parliament for parliamentarians to comment upon. One week it could be the Post Office, and the next week it could be the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources.

It is obvious that all these alternatives were considered and the decision was made that the reports should be annual. I believe it also provides the necessary focus to the public servants who work in the Auditor General's office. It is a practical thing. Most Departments, if not all, provide annual reports, and there is accountability of the Departments before the permanent committees of this House. There are other ways, such as daily Question Period, for instance, where the Ministers and Departments are held accountable for the spending within the Departments.

I believe the amendments are unnecessary. I believe they put the Auditor General in a position of perhaps responding to ongoing political climates. If there is an ongoing debate in the House, pressure mounts and demands are made by politicians of whatever Party to the Auditor General to investigate and report immediately to the House of Commons on one matter or another. Perhaps the demand might be tomorrow that the Auditor General should report on the advisability of the very ambitious Hibernia project, to which this Government has committed itself and which is welcomed by Atlantic Canadians, should that dominate Question Period this week.

Should the role of the Auditor General become totally political? Should he be at the disposal of Members of Parliament with all the political pressures that dominate the business of this House? I do not believe so. I believe we have to