

constituents as opposed to one's engagement as a member of a board or commission.

Conflict of interest can be looked at in another way. A member of parliament might well become enmeshed in the day-to-day operations of the board on which he sits. In consequence, he not only loses his independence, or at any rate is in danger of losing it, but, of equal importance, he may well appear to lose it, as a result of which his position as a member of parliament becomes very difficult. In this regard he would be placed in the position of a lawyer or an accountant who must attempt to represent two parties at the same time in any matter over which there could be controversy or difference of opinion.

I suggest to the hon. member that however laudable his motives—and I believe his motives are laudable; I can understand them—the method he is proposing is not the best. He told us that some provinces, some jurisdictions have followed this approach. I cannot think of any jurisdiction which has not been criticized for appointing legislators to positions on such boards. He and I are both aware of instances in this province and others where the practice has been criticized because, it is said, it is a way of imposing policy direction in cases where such direction ought not to be exercised; it is an attempt to do indirectly what a government would not dare to do directly. And the members of parliament who serve on those boards are criticized from time to time because they are accepting remuneration from a second job, so to speak. So although the motive may be laudable, the practice is dangerous and I do not believe it is one which parliament or the government should approve.

I suggest there are other ways of doing exactly what the hon. member has in mind, namely, of bringing these commissions, boards and Crown corporations to better account in parliament and hence to the people who provide much of the funds for their operation. The whole issue, it seems to me, revolves around making these boards and commissions more directly accountable to the public. First, we should remember that the most important servant which parliament has is the Auditor General of Canada. I believe that beefing-up the Auditor General's office in terms of personnel, the scope of his authority and the manner in which he can report to parliament, would be one way of bringing public attention to bear on the inconsistencies and improprieties of actions taken by various boards and commissions. Second, the House must as a matter of priority look at the whole system by which estimates are dealt with. We discussed this question at some length a week or so ago.

I am a member of certain standing committees which have dealt with estimates, and I am not the least bit satisfied with what we found in that regard. The hon. member for Cochrane is similarly dissatisfied. I think the government should be required to place the estimates of all boards, commissions and Crown corporations before a special committee which would deal specifically with them. This is not the case at present. As the hon. member said, millions of dollars slide through the supply procedures without proper scrutiny, and the budgets of these corporations and agencies are wrapped up in these huge amounts. This is not to say that something is necessarily wrong with what happens on boards and commissions

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merely because they are boards or commissions, but so much public business is carried on by them that the House, unfettered by any involvement in the internal workings of the board concerned, should be given the machinery with which to properly operate.

● (1640)

Next, I suggest that a special committee of the House of Commons, be it a standing committee or an augmented public accounts committee, should be given on a continuing basis more research staff responsible to the committee for reviewing the estimates of all departments and examining the programs of all departments. This staff would be the servant of the committee and would advise its members, assist the chairman, and so on, to do their job.

I am very much impressed with the operation of the committee system in the United States. We have many things to say about the Congress of the United States and how it operates, but one of the operations that works very well from the point of view of staffing and providing experts to assist legislators make the examinations they have to make is the back-up that is given to those legislators, something we do not have. I am sure this applies to members on the government side as well as to members on our side. I think each party in the House of Commons owes a great debt of gratitude to the research officers that each of us has.

Mr. Knight: And to the *Globe and Mail*.

Mr. Baker: The hon. member mentions the *Globe and Mail*. I suppose he is talking about that newspaper's scrutiny of the public accounts, and to that extent I agree with him. In spite of the excellent efforts made by our research staff, they are really only touching the surface of things that ought to interest them from the point of view of what the hon. member is proposing here.

In the United States, the legislative process has become so complicated that members of Congress tend to specialize in certain areas. I see the beginnings of this happening here. I suggest it would be better to have members who specialize in certain branches of the operation of government, backed up by research staff, that adopt the method proposed by the hon. member. Because I see in his method there being placed on the member of parliament, not just the physical burden of becoming involved but a new kind of burden, that of being engaged in the administrative process, I am fearful of that kind of engagement because in the end it can lead to the kind of conflict of interest that a member of parliament ought not to have thrust upon him.

In closing, I commend the hon. member for his interest in making these bodies more responsible. Although I do not agree with the method he chooses, none the less I commend him for being the public spirited person I have known him to be since I came here.

Mr. Bill Knight (Assiniboia): Mr. Speaker, I seldom get the chance to make more than one speech in the same afternoon. I am usually a quiet member in the House who, as the House leader or whip knows, seldom takes part in debates. However, I am aroused to speak on this subject