

Financial Administration Act

proper investigation. The fact that a Member of Parliament would make the referral to the commissioner in his office of Auditor General would safeguard this office from being flooded with complaints of a nuisance character. I do not believe this would curtail the duties of the Auditor General in any way. I think it would enhance his duties. I believe that the Auditor General is one of the most important officers of this House.

Some hon. Members: Hear, Hear!

Mr. Thompson: In recent months we have seen the government attempt to curtail the powers of the Auditor General. As far as governments are concerned, the Auditor General has been embarrassing on a number of occasions. This does not only apply to this or the previous government, but to all governments since that office was established. That should be in itself evidence that such an office is necessary.

It is imperative that we have a watchdog over the expenditure of tax dollars collected from the citizens of Canada. By withdrawing the legislation that would have curtailed the powers of the Auditor General, the government recognized this fact. Tremendous pressure was brought to bear on the government, not just by members of opposition parties, but by members of the government, the public and every newspaper in this country that I have had occasion to see. It is generally recognized that **the office of Auditor General is vitally important.** I regret that at one time the government thought it was necessary to take this action, and I regret also that his position is still not clear with regard to hiring a staff which is essential for carrying on his work. I believe this additional duty would enhance his position, strengthen his authority and help him to act not only as a watchdog of government expenditure but as the guardian of the rights of individuals as they relate to administrative errors which interfere with the normal rights belonging to Canadian citizens.

• (5:10 p.m.)

The least this House could do would be to allow this bill to pass to the Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs where a study could be made of the situation in depth. The majority of hon. members with whom I speak feel as I do about this issue. They agree that it is necessary that we have the support of such an officer. The services which we ourselves attempt to render to those we represent would, in such a case, probably be more effective than they are now. In other words, the Auditor General acting as a parliamentary commissioner for administrative matters, basically financial matters, would be concerned about the rights of private citizens as they relate to grievances arising from administrative error or interference with a citizen's normal affairs.

I believe it is our responsibility to ask the Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs to consider this subject in depth and to let the Auditor General himself speak on it. Too often this issue has been passed over. On two different occasions, the prime minister of the day made a commitment to the House of Commons and to the people of Canada in Speeches from the Throne, that the office of

[Mr. Thompson.]

ombudsman would be established. The present Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) has expressed the opinion that the Minister of Justice could act as ombudsman. In my opinion, he cannot do this; the very nature of his office prevents his doing so. It is true he might handle a few major cases, but it is the minor cases, those about which the general public never hears, that are my major concern as I present this bill.

It is not enough to say we do not need such an officer. I realize that senior officers in the public service resent the making of such an appointment because they feel there would be someone looking over their shoulders in case they made mistakes.

An hon. Member: There should be.

Mr. Thompson: There should be. There are others who feel there is no need for an appointment of this nature because the courts are available to redress the grievances of Canadian citizens. The courts do serve an important role, but any one of us here who has anything to do with the problems of constituents knows it is impossible for the courts to take action in most of these cases.

The holder of the office I propose will be a protector of civil liberties. This idea has worked effectively at the federal level in a number of states. It is working effectively now in five of our own provinces. The bill before the House does not call for the establishment of a general ombudsman over the entire field, it confines the office to the area where most grievances arise, namely, in connection with administrative measures by the federal government itself. Again, I ask that the House give favourable consideration to this measure and refer it to the Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs.

Mr. Alastair Gillespie (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board): Mr. Speaker, all members of the House will agree, I think, that the hon. member for Red Deer (Mr. Thompson) is a persistent man and a man who holds the cause of justice high.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Gillespie: As he himself told us, this is perhaps the eighth occasion on which he has sought to introduce this bill or a bill similar to it. On other occasions, as he also mentioned, he has sought to introduce a companion piece or an alternative piece serving very much the same purpose as the bill we are discussing this afternoon.

In the debate which took place on October 6 of last year, he stated:

It has been my privilege to bring before this House the need for an ombudsman, a parliamentary commissioner, a man who would be concerned with the rights of the private citizen particularly as they relate to the growing power and ever-increasing dominance of the public service in the normal life and living of the individual Canadian.

It is a truism to say that government is getting bigger, and as government gets bigger there is a tendency for the individual to shrink, a feeling, which we have all experienced, of a difficulty in getting at the source of power. To this extent we can identify with the purpose