

Cost Overruns

be properly controlled". Finally, "Completed projects should be reviewed". I am only touching upon the headings, not what follows from those basic criteria.

In the public accounts committee we in turn are endeavouring to determine, by working with and by questioning the Comptroller General, the staff of the Treasury Board, the Auditor General and the various departments, whether these criteria are acceptable and effective. And, complementary with that, the Comptroller General, as many members of this House know, has been conducting, basically, studies on improving the practices and controls within the various departments. With this study called "IMPAC", the Comptroller General in turn has a mandate to determine that each one of these departments is going to meet the criteria with respect to planning capital acquisitions which are set forth in the report of the Auditor General.

What we are hearing from the President of the Treasury Board is all very well, but it is a complete duplication of effort. I cannot see how any special committee charged with the mandate which the minister hopes to give it can avoid dealing specifically with the same audit criteria we are dealing with in the public accounts committee. In turn, what kind of image is it to portray to the Canadian public to get committee upon committee to examine what the Auditor General has proposed to us and what we have already undertaken to test?

I would not want to estimate the cost of that exercise and, in addition to that, I am particularly concerned because this will clearly draw upon the expertise of the office of the Auditor General which we need in the public accounts committee. It will probably draw upon the time of members of the committee who should be concerned about what is being done in public accounts. Also it should do no more than confirm the very report which we in the Standing Committee on Public Accounts will make to Parliament on the planning of capital acquisitions. So the whole thing to me is senseless in that context. It suggests to me that the President of the Treasury Board does not really know what the report of the Auditor General contained or what is going on in the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, because he insists on referring to this committee as a committee which is dealing with skeletons of the past, instead of one which is looking forward to the future and trying to establish proper management controls in every department of government.

● (1610)

An hon. Member: It is a Tory witch hunt.

Mr. Johnston: I am afraid there is a complete misconception in the mind of the President of the Treasury Board on this particular point.

Great accent was placed by the President of the Treasury Board on the fact that he was not dealing with the past. Yet in one of the very examples he cited, Mirabel airport, we are committee? When I look at the terms of the motion contained in today's order paper, I see nothing which suggests that this talking about a completed project. What is the mandate of this

[Mr. Johnston.]

committee is to look at ongoing projects only, as was suggested by the President of the Treasury Board, both in his remarks and also in response to questions which I put to him this afternoon. The only departure from the consistent position he took was with regard to Mirabel. As I pointed out, it is a project in the past which, it would seem to me, would fall clearly outside the mandate that he indicated he intends to confer upon this particular committee.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, I am somewhat nonplussed. This may be because I chair the committee, but it seems to me that if we are going to be efficient in the management of government business, responsibility should lie squarely with the standing committee of the House that has the mandate. There is another aspect to this problem. It was decided in 1957 by a Progressive Conservative government to have an opposition member chair the committee. That Progressive Conservative tradition has always been followed since. It is a very important tradition because it gives the committee an objective perception, with the chairman coming from the opposition. The same tradition now exists in England. And it seems to me that the proposal to have a government member as committee chairman reduces that committee's objectivity.

I submit that if we accept the principle that there should be an opposition member to chair the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, it follows that the chairman of the proposed committee should also be chosen from this side of the House. Otherwise, there is the risk of creating a political forum rather than a committee with a genuine concern for the responsibility of managing public funds.

[English]

As Mr. Speaker might gather from my remarks, I for one am not happy with the possibility of the creation of another committee to duplicate the work of a respected committee of the House. I am very proud of the work of that committee, as I think other members will be, particularly when the session finishes. It distresses me to think that perhaps we may be drawn into some kind of political witch hunt in a special committee which the President of the Treasury Board wishes to initiate.

An hon. Member: That is the purpose.

Mr. Johnston: That being said, if members of this House—

[Translation]

They are laughing Mr. Speaker, I wonder why. Let them laugh, I shall be laughing in turn. Anyway, Mr. Speaker, if the House insists on the establishment of this committee, I would propose an amendment, an amendment to the terms of the motion.

[English]

Specifically, I would suggest that this motion be amended to reflect the mandate which the President of the Treasury Board