

Mr. James A. McGrath (St. John's East): Mr. Speaker, I should like to take a few moments to participate in third reading stage of Bill C-10. The hon. member who preceded me is filling an honoured tradition in this House which was inaugurated first by the government of the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker), that is, the election of an opposition member to chair the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. That tradition has served the House and the people of Canada well.

The first chairman of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts was the hon. member for Mount Royal, Mr. A. G. L. McNaughton, who subsequently became the Speaker of the House. He distinguished himself as the first chairman of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. I think of the hon. member for Capilano (Mr. Huntington) who now serves in that honoured position well and with distinction. I think of his immediate predecessor, the hon. member for South Shore (Mr. Crouse), who equally filled the role in the best traditions established by the House. Also I think of the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin), and of a former distinguished member of the House, Mr. Alf Hales, both of whom served the House well as chairmen of that Standing Committee.

I am pleased to see the right hon. member for Prince Albert has just entered the chamber. As I indicated, it was under his administration that the practice of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts being chaired by a member of the opposition was first started. I am pleased to indicate that practice continues today, and continues to serve the Parliament of Canada and Canadians well.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McGrath: The purpose of Bill C-10 is to establish the office of comptroller general. In making reference to the Standing Committee Public Accounts on third reading, I do so to emphasize the importance of this committee. The hon. member for Capilano referred to the participation of hon. members on all sides of the House in that committee. This committee works hard, and usually has a low profile. Its work receives publicity only when it reports to the House in connection with the report of the Auditor General. It is the only Standing Committee of the House which normally operates on a year-round basis.

If that committee is to continue to function and serve the House and Canada, especially when the office of comptroller general has been established, it is important for the government to give consideration to providing it with adequate support staff in order for the committee to be truly independent of the government. Although I have not served on the committee, I have been present for some of its hearings. At the present time the only support it receives, apart from the committees branch which serves all standing committees of the House, is from the Department of the Auditor General. That is a rather awkward situation in that it could pose a conflict of interest.

Mr. Cullen: That is not true.

Financial Administration Act

Mr. McGrath: I am attempting to make the argument that it is essential for that committee to be provided with support staff by the government, if its role is to be carried out effectively and well. The hon. Minister of Employment and Immigration (Mr. Cullen) was the chairman of a special standing committee on food prices. Because he is nodding, I am sure he agrees with that fact. I hope the government gets around to doing that.

Regretfully during third reading of this bill, and during part of the report stage yesterday, the President of the Treasury Board, who is the responsible minister, was not present in the House. Perhaps that minister had important official duties elsewhere, but he should have participated because it is one of his important functions as a minister carrying out his duties. Notwithstanding what may be considered as the role of a minister in the House, it shows a certain arrogance and contempt on the part of the President of the Treasury Board that he would not be present to pilot this bill through the House, as well as listen to the excellent suggestions made by all hon. members during the course of this debate. It says a lot for the attitude of this government to parliament; in fact it says it all, in my opinion.

I see the Minister of Employment and Immigration sitting opposite. He represents the government, but he cannot possibly represent the special interests of the President of the Treasury Board in connection with this bill. Only the President of the Treasury Board can do that. It is his responsibility to be present in the House today for third reading of this bill. For him to be elsewhere displays nothing but contempt for the House and its members. The absence of the President of the Treasury Board today exemplifies the attitude of this government toward parliament.

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We have in fact only one effective functioning standing committee of this House today, in my view, and that is the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. It is the only committee, or one of a few, the exceptions being the Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence and, to a lesser degree, the committee on finance, that has retained any degree of collegiality in terms of tenure of service of members of the committee. The rest of the standing committees of this House are nothing short of a farce. It is a sort of passing parade; members come and members go, and government members come in merely to vote and move out again, not even knowing for what they have voted. That spectacle goes on day after day, especially in connection with the examination of the estimates.

Mr. Francis: Mr. Speaker, would the hon. member permit a question? I have listened to the hon. member and I agree—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I would suggest that perhaps the hon. member should indicate whether he will accept a question.

Mr. McGrath: Mr. Speaker, I would be glad to entertain a question from the hon. member when I finish my speech. I