

Point of Order

In paragraph 9.84 the report states: "We think that Parliament and the public need to focus on debt issues, particularly the amount of debt we carry". The auditor general exists to help Parliament hold the government to account and not to hold Parliament to account for failing to adopt a particular policy. No company of shareholders in the private sector would accept an auditor's report that expressed an opinion about how the shareholders conducted themselves at meetings, rather than help the shareholders assess the management of the company. I contend that neither can we in the House.

The auditor general further infringes on the rights of the House when he writes in paragraph 9.107 concerning the level of public debt:

Determining a strategy to achieve that vision is something the government and Parliament need to debate and develop a consensus on.

I do not need to remind you, Mr. Speaker, that the House does not necessarily exist to create a consensus around a particular economic theory. There are different and differing political theories and different political stances in the House. Therefore I contend that the House exists to hold the government of the day accountable in a way that reflects the diversity of political opinion in the country and that this is not recognized in the auditor general's report.

The duty of the auditor general as set out in law is to aid Parliament in that task by providing technical information about the state of the public accounts to assist members of the House in their debates. It is not to preach to Parliament about what the conclusion of that debate should be.

The same criticism can be applied to paragraph 9.52 of the report which states:

The reality is that (interest rates) are not lower, and had it been a simple matter of making them lower in the 1980s and 1990s as they were in the previous 20 years, governments would have undoubtedly done so.

I would happily debate this point with anybody in the House, for it is common knowledge that the Bank of Canada under John Crow deliberately chose to dramatically increase interest rates in quest of a zero inflation rate.

My procedural point is that I cannot argue this point with the auditor general because this statement comes in the form of an ex cathedra pronouncement of an auditor who is presumed to provide objective assessments of the public accounts. Yet I can think of no principle of accounting that would allow an auditor to offer such a tendentious historical verdict on the motives of past governments, a verdict which supports a particular political position on what caused our fiscal problems and what should be done about them.

Because the auditor general like yourself, Mr. Speaker, is a servant of Parliament, he should not use the authority of his position to advance political arguments as if they were uncontested accounting principles. His reports must demonstrate the highest degree of political neutrality. He cannot perform the role of auditor as set out clearly in the Auditor General Act if he uses his position to take sides in debates that properly take place in the House. The auditor general has therefore overstepped his legal and customary duties in his latest report.

• (1510)

I ask you, Mr. Speaker, to consider two measures to defend the rights of the House to have access to an objective auditing of the public accounts. First, I ask you to rule the tabling of the October 5 report to be out of order and to have you ask that the auditor general submit an amended report that conforms to his duties as set out in the Auditor General Act. Second, I ask you to refer the matter of the terms of reference for auditor general's reports to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Mr. Elwin Hermanson (Kindersley—Lloydminster, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, I was not given prior notice of this point of order.

It strikes me as a rather serious challenge by the hon. member that the auditor general should not be independent of government, not be independent of the opinions of the House when he studies the efficiency of the government and the spending of government. Certainly if the auditor general does not have the independence to make suggestions on whether or not governments have acted prudently, we have stripped him of his power and we have stripped him of his reason for being. Therefore I disagree with the hon. member. I think his argument is very weak and should not even be considered in the House.

Mr. Peter Milliken (Parliamentary Secretary to Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Winnipeg Transcona has argued with his usual erudition but I submit that even in his wildest dreams he could not have imagined that the point he has raised is really a question of privilege.

I refer Your Honour to—

Mr. Blaikie: A point of order, I said.

Mr. Milliken: A point of order. I thought he said it breached the privileges of the House, Mr. Speaker, and that he wanted it ruled out of order because it breached the privileges of the House, because it interfered with our privilege to manage our financial affairs, the financial affairs of the country.

I turn to citation 24 of Beauchesne's sixth edition where it states: