

MPs must share blame for costs, Auditor says

Officials never called to justify funds for Firearms Registry

Bill Curry

National Post

Monday, December 09, 2002

OTTAWA - Members of Parliament are partly to blame for poorly managed programs such as the Firearms Registry, says Sheila Fraser, the Auditor-General, calling for tougher scrutiny of how tax dollars are spent.

Instead of rubber-stamping requests for more money, parliamentary committees should require officials to explain their actions and prove programs are getting results efficiently, she said.

"To be quite blunt about it, if the members of Parliament don't take on that responsibility and don't do it, I mean, no one else is going to," she said. "The review of estimates and the approval of funding and of spending is one of the basic duties of Parliament and it's important that Parliament review these reports."

Government departments regularly publish lists of spending, but MPs rarely review the stacks of documents. Billions of dollars in government spending are routinely approved each year without explanations from officials as to why the money is needed.

MPs can deny or reduce a department's request for money, but last week's denial of \$72-million for the Canadian Firearms Registry marked the first use of that power since 1973. In the United States, Congressional committees routinely reject or cap program spending if officials are not able to justify the need for more money.

While the Justice Department request for \$72-million was brought to light last week after the Auditor-General's criticism of the gun registry, the document requesting the money had been released in October. However, Justice officials were never called before any House committee to explain the request for funds.

MPs often say the reason they do not study spending estimates is because departments only provide positive information about government programs. Meanwhile, some bureaucrats fear releasing negative information will set themselves up for superficial political attacks. Ms. Fraser said if MPs spent more time learning about departments, bureaucrats would be more co-operative.

"I know that information can be used against [public servants] unfairly at times or can be distorted," she said. "To be honest, it can be distorted by parliamentarians, but also by the media. And it's a question, I think, of somebody has to take the first step to start talking about these things and hopefully there won't be those terrible, negative consequences that they fear. And I really think that if you hold back on the information, it's always worse in the long run than if you are just actually up front about it from the very beginning," she said.

Ms. Fraser's office is developing a list of suggested questions for MPs to ask, such as: "How could the program be managed more efficiently?"

"I don't view accountability as just being punishment, if you will, or negative consequences. Parliament should be aware and should have the information to know what's going on so that they can make reasoned decisions about programs, about funding allocations and about the consequences of what is going on in government," she said.

Tony Valeri, a Liberal MP, said he agreed with Ms. Fraser's criticism, but pointed to the new House committee on the estimates as a sign MPs are starting to take an interest in spending decisions.

"I'm happy that Parliament did reverse that estimate [on the registry]. I think that asking Parliamentarians to vote additional funds without having answers to what had actually occurred, I think, is not proper. I think Parliament needs to step back and get some answers," he said.

Mr. Valeri said he would like to see the new estimates committee, of which he is a member, ask officials from the Justice Department to explain what went wrong.

Martin Ulrich, a former senior federal official who is now with the Parliamentary Centre, an Ottawa-based lobby group, said he agrees MPs could do a lot more and predicted the rejection of additional gun-registry funding will encourage them to pay more attention to spending requests from departments.

"There's lots of money flowing through the system where Parliament isn't even coming close to doing its job," he said, adding department officials must realize releasing negative information is a better public-relations strategy than suppressing it.

"If [the media] find out ... in some way that it looks like the government is hiding the information, then it's front-page stuff. So self-interest on the part of departments would say publish this stuff. Don't hide it. I mean, you're going to take a hit, but hell, it's not going to be the kind of hit you're going to take if you try to hide this stuff. Well, that's an argument that I think is very powerful, but only a few Ministers and deputy Ministers seem to have the confidence to use it."

Mr. Ulrich said he has heard of several cases where bureaucrats have written reports that included negative information, only to have those aspects removed by the Minister's or deputy minister's office.

John Williams, an Alliance MP who is chairman of the House Public Accounts committee and regularly publishes a report on wasteful government spending, said part of the problem is the way Jean Chrétien, the Prime Minister, has handled the Liberal caucus.

"The PM has had this policy of moving people around from one committee to another," he said. "This means MPs have no expertise and no motivation. Parliament has to start saying, 'Don't look after us, we'll look after you.' "

bcurry@nationalpost.com

© Copyright 2002 National Post

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2002 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest Global Communications Corp. All rights reserved.
Optimized for browser versions 4.0 and higher.

