
Thoughts on Public Service Accountability

by Marlene Catterall, MP

The topic of accountability goes to the very essence of the role of Parliament – to grant money to the Crown and determine how it is to be spent. The budget put forward by the government and approved by Parliament is the nation's prime policy document. It determines the strength of our economy, the kind of society in which we live and the future we are creating for the generations to come. This article considers some ways the accountability process may be improved.

Fifteen years ago when the Canadian Comprehensive Auditing Foundation was holding its founding meeting, I was invited to sit on a panel about the information needs of elected representatives for decision making. A decade and a half later, with the advancement of technology and access to information virtually unlimited, the question is still a difficult one. It is a question that can only be answered based on how politicians define their role and responsibility for decision-making and accountability.

My first experience of parliamentary committees was a shocker. Coming from municipal government where council committees played a significant role in reviewing the past performance, current circumstances and future directions of departments, I was astounded to find that consideration of the federal government's Estimates was more like a shooting gallery. Members tended to identify their personal hobby horse or zero in on that one little detail in the Estimates and largely ignore their responsibility to hold the government and the Public Service accountable for how well they were carrying out their obligations on behalf of Canadians.

The essence of accountability is how well Members of Parliaments carry out their responsibility to the public to ensure the best use of their resources in the public interest. But Canadians are no longer content to simply



Marlene Catterall

Marlene Catterall is the Member of Parliament for Ottawa West. She is Deputy Government Whip and Chair of the Sub-Committee on the Business of Supply. This article is adapted from a speech to the Canadian Study of Parliament Group on November 4, 1995.

trust their politicians and their government to manage the affairs of the nation. They want increased public scrutiny and public involvement in the decision-making process.

To address these concerns, two of the essential commitments of the Liberal Party's Red Book for the 1993 election were to restore integrity and the confidence of the public in their institutions. An important part of that

commitment was to more open government and to giving Members of Parliament a more significant role in decision-making on behalf of Canadians.

In that election year, a caucus working group also produced a document called "Reviving Parliamentary Democracy". Two recommendations in that report are especially relevant to accountability. The first was that political parties in the House must have ample opportunity to place down their alternatives for free and open debate and decision-making without artificial application of the no-confidence doctrine. A second was that elected representatives must be permitted more influence on decisions regarding expenditure priorities with meaningful involvement in the process before the government's actual spending Estimates are formally prepared.

Some measures have been implemented related to the budget process and accountability, and other initiatives are underway. For the very first time, open public consultations were held early in our government's mandate in preparation for its first budget. There was very little time for this process as the budget cycle was well under way. We recognized the inadequacies but also the benefits of consulting a cross-section of Canadians.

This process served two purposes. It engaged a large cross-section of Canadians in dialogue on the major economic issues confronting the nation and the government. Equally importantly, it started the process of generating greater public understanding of the budget process, of the fundamental issues and of the basic choices to be made. Public awareness and understanding are fundamental to effective consultation and to meaningful public influence on government actions.

A second major step forward was to amend the *Standing Orders* to allow committees of Parliament to consider future spending priorities, to report to Parliament and to advise government on the next budget, allowing Members of Parliament to play a larger role in influencing budgetary directions.

In preparation for last year's budget and again this year, the Finance Committee was given the mandate to seek the views of Canadians on the preparation of the coming budget and report to Parliament. Last spring, departments produced outlook documents for consideration by the Standing Committees. The purpose of these documents was to allow Standing Committees to have a broader understanding of past spending and future plans, to consider trends, and to provide input to the next year's budget. This is an initiative which in my view has great potential but has a long way to go.

Two processes are under way currently to further develop the ability of parliamentarians through Standing Committees to have a constructive role in influencing

future budgets and in accountability: the work being done by the Sub-Committee on the Business of Supply of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs and the changes being developed by Treasury Board to the information to be provided to Parliament.

For the second process, a working group has been established of parliamentarians from all parties to meet with Treasury Board officials and the Minister's Parliamentary Secretary to review and comment on proposed changes. Without going into great detail, the purpose is to provide Members of Parliament with information to assist them to better determine what results have been achieved, to have access to information in a more manageable way and to see more clearly the broader priorities of departments without sacrificing access to the details.

The Sub-Committee on the Business of Supply was established as a result of a motion of the House of Commons which instructed the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to, "undertake a comprehensive review of the business of supply, with particular attention to the reform of the Estimates and the processes and mechanisms by which the House and its committees may consider and dispose of them."

The Sub-Committee will have to assess whether the current procedures of Parliament, the information provided to it and the way in which Parliament and its committees make use of the processes and information are adequate to ensure the public that we are carrying out that responsibility.

We need to assess whether there is enough public scrutiny to assure Canadians that we are adequately fulfilling that responsibility on their behalf.

One of the key issues to be considered is whether Parliament wants to achieve better accountability or better control of expenditures. In my view we need to do both. They are interlinked and tied as well to enhancing the policy-making and legislative role of Parliament and its members.

Exercising accountability well, consistently and publicly, improves responsibility and performance by government and the Public Service. But we are not bookkeepers and accountants. Our responsibility is not only to ensure that money was spent as intended, but that the expected results are being achieved.

The Business of Supply days in the House of Commons is one area we will have to address. It is telling that these

twenty days allotted for the Opposition to put forward and debate subjects of their choice have come to be known as Opposition days. In reality, they seldom are used as intended: to hold the government accountable for its use and management of public funds. Would the public interest be better served if these days were specifically used for matters of expenditure?

The issue of confidence will be another challenging topic. The confidence instrument is central to accountability. It allows the House at any time to indicate that the government no longer enjoys sufficient support in the House to continue governing. Yet Opposition parties complain that confidence is over used, stifles debate, and limits Parliament's freedom to consider options other than those put forward by the government.

Confidence applies not only to Parliament's accountability role, but also to its control role. The argument is that the confidence convention prevents serious consideration of the Estimates. Without the ability to change the Estimates, there is little incentive for parliamentarians or committees to spend the time to examine and report on the Estimates. And few of them do.

It is necessary, however, to put the issue of control in a broader context than simply the ability to change a thousand dollars here, or ten thousand there, after the Estimates have been tabled. Accountability, and even tinkering with the Estimates, are backward looking.

Our role as parliamentarians is to anticipate and plan for the future.

Control should mean Parliament being involved, and therefore having the public involved at the beginning of the budget cycle, and influencing beforehand the future directions and priorities of government.

One of the challenges the Sub-Committee will have to address is whether and how the Business of Supply, the Estimates and the budget can be made more relevant to Members of Parliament, so that parliamentary committees are prepared to give the time and attention needed to enhance their role both for holding government accountable and for affecting future spending priorities.

Most committees of Parliament are primarily interested in policy issues. They spend the majority of their time and effort on producing policy reports to which the government must respond in a defined period of time. There is considerable frustration that much of this policy work does not achieve results.

Would parliamentarians' approach to the Estimates change if they could begin to see their accountability role as integrated with their role in developing policy? Under such a scenario, committees could begin to look at the Estimates as a policy document, to examine the spending proposals of government for their congruence with policies and programs that they as Members of Parliament felt were the priorities to meet the needs of today and the emerging needs of tomorrow. Would such an approach more quickly identify programs that are no longer a priority and should be discontinued? Would it ensure that the spending plans of government are anticipating future trends, and preparing to meet them? Would it not bring greater relevance to the whole concept of accountability and focus it where it belongs, on the results being achieved? And would it not give committees substantial relevance in contributing to the development of the budget to come?

Or do we need one centralized Budget/Estimates committee? One proposal is that such a committee, well-staffed, would develop the expertise to provide on-going review of the Estimates of all departments. Perhaps such a committee is needed to focus on the details of spending while the policy committees concentrate on the policy implications of expenditure patterns.

What I envision is a year-round process that would involve Parliament in developing an understanding of the priorities and resources of departments through the Estimates. Committees would then have the knowledge base on which to hold the government accountable for the results its programs are achieving, to consider future trends and to make recommendations on the coming year's budget. In the autumn, information on performance and results achieved could be used to assess how well departments are fulfilling their mandates and this could lead to more perceptive examination of the following year's Estimates. Throughout, the Committees' considerations would be enlightened by the policy work they undertake.

Through the public consultations that parliamentary committees regularly undertake, the priorities and concerns of a wide cross-section of the public interest could be brought to bear on those all-important decisions about spending priorities. Perhaps then, Canadians would see their views having significant impact, their Members of Parliament being more effective, and the Parliament, itself, being more accountable and relevant to their needs and priorities.