

Auditor-General to review MPs' expenses

BY NORMA GREENAWAY, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JUNE 15, 2010



A compromise has been reached that will allow Auditor General Sheila Fraser to examine MPs' expenses.

Photograph by: Chris Wattie/Reuters, National Post

OTTAWA — A month after slamming the door on Auditor General Sheila Fraser's request to examine Parliament's spending, MPs have decided it's in the "public interest" to open their books to her.

Ms. Fraser says she is "very pleased" by the change of heart and her office is ready get to work on a "performance" audit of parliamentary spending that would include spot checks of individual MPs' expense claims for items such as travel and housing allowances.

Ms. Fraser spoke to reporters on Tuesday after Conservative House Leader Jay Hill and Liberal MP Marcel Proulx announced a deal had been reached for her to get unfettered access to the House of Commons books. Ms. Fraser said she expects to make a formal request soon for the Senate to follow suit.

The about face on the audit followed weeks of public outrage over the decision last month by a secretive all-party Commons committee to reject Fraser's year-old request to review the \$533 million in annual parliamentary spending. Only the Bloc Quebecois opposed the decision.

Ms. Fraser, who has earned a reputation as a no-nonsense guardian of the public purse, said she's prepared to expand her initial audit of MPs' expenses if the spot checks suggest a widespread pattern of abuse.

She also said that should auditors uncover possible criminal wrongdoing, the information would be referred to police authorities.

Ms. Fraser rejected suggestions, however, she might feel pressed to conduct a more invasive audit into MPs' expenses because of the strong public backlash to the committee's original rejection of her audit bid.

"I think it's unfortunate that there seems to have been an impression created there is misspending or abuse of spending and I don't think we should . . . jump to that conclusion at all," she said.

"We plan to do this audit as we would normally do an audit."

Ms. Fraser described the audit as an assessment of how well existing management practices, controls and reporting practices are being followed. She said the audit would not examine the management of individual MPs' offices or the merits of their transactions, nor would it name names in its report, which should be completed by the fall of 2011.

Mr. Hill told a news conference the committee, known as the board of internal economy, still believes Fraser has no authority for the audit and spending by MPs and the House of Commons is already subject to sufficient scrutiny. But, he said, the board agreed to take this "extra step" after determining it was "in the public interest."

MPs have been visibly scrambling for cover since the board announced it had rejected Ms. Fraser's request on May 13. They have been swamped with emails protesting the move, as has Ms. Fraser's office.

It was a hot-button issue many wanted resolved before they headed home to their constituencies for the summer.

Ms. Fraser said the board sought and got assurances her audit of individual MP expenses would be statistically representative of all parties, and recognize the different costs associated with representing urban and rural ridings.

The *Ottawa Citizen* reported last week that Commons officials are investigating potential violations of rules that bar MPs from renting from family members. Fraser said one of the things she will be looking

at is whether rules governing use of housing allowances are being followed.

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