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Tories to propose MP expenses audit

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MPs from all four political parties have heard an earful from constituents over a secretive parliamentary board's recent decision to reject federal Auditor General Sheila Fraser's request to conduct a performance audit of \$533 million in annual spending by the House of Commons and the Senate.

Government House Leader Jay Hill's proposals will include an invitation to Fraser to conduct such a performance audit, also known as a "value for money" audit, of all MPs' expenses.

They also include a call for a performance audit of parliamentary administration and parliamentary officials, as well as Senate officials and senators.

The details of the terms of reference, and frequency, of these audits would be determined by the Board of Internal Economy, the all-party Commons body that initially denied Fraser's request. The proposals will be taken to the board next week.

As well, the government proposal would state that all MPs' and leaders' offices should disclose expenses proactively. It calls for an agreement to be resolved without conflict or animosity between parties.

Following the Conservatives' weekly caucus meeting, Hill said he wanted to run his proposal by the parties before disclosing details.

Liberals invite AG to Parliament

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff told reporters Wednesday his party is "entirely in favour" of Fraser making sure the financial controls are "good and right and serving Canadians."

Speaking after the weekly Liberal caucus meeting in Ottawa, Ignatieff said he has sent a letter to House Speaker Peter Milliken informing him that his party is prepared to welcome Fraser to Parliament.

"She wants to be sure and we want to be sure as well that the proper procedures are followed, that those procedures are reliable and transparent," he said.

The Board of Internal Economy sets the rules for MPs' expenses, worth about \$170 million a year, and also decides how to spend more than \$330 million on the administration of the House of Commons.

Parliament's expenses are audited by the private accounting firm KPMG, but only the broad outlines of the expenses are made public. Details aren't disclosed.

A similar audit of MPs' expenses in Britain last year triggered a scandal after dozens of politicians were caught billing taxpayers for everything from cleaning a moat around an estate to building a house for ducks.

MPs shouldn't fear audit: Fraser

While Fraser could discover inappropriate spending - as happened in Britain - the performance audit she is recommending is more focused on looking at what spending rules are in place and whether they are being followed.

Fraser said Tuesday that MPs should not be afraid to have their expenses audited if it's true that the rules and regulations in place are as good as they say they are.

Despite appeals by several MPs to reverse the Board of Internal Economy's initial decision, until now only Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe publicly endorsed Fraser's request.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said the government does not have the authority to force parliamentarians to disclose details of their expenses to Fraser.

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