



AG to examine MP expenses after deal reached

CTV.ca News Staff

After much fuss, members of Parliament have decided to let Auditor General Sheila Fraser go through their books.

The deal was announced by Conservative House leader Jay Hill, Liberal Marcel Proulx and Fraser on Tuesday, just before the House of Commons goes into its summer recess.

MPs from all political parties have been hurt in public opinion polls for their unwillingness to allow the auditor general to examine their \$500 million in annual parliamentary spending.

The powerful Board of Internal Economy -- an all-party committee -- had rejected Fraser's request to audit their budget.

The public outcry appears to have led to them to change their minds.

"The House of Commons spends over \$500 million a year," Fraser told CTV's Power Play in an interview Tuesday evening. "It has been 20 years since an audit was done, and we think it's important that all sectors of government and Parliament be subject to audit eventually."

Fraser said that with one year left in her term as auditor general, the final report will be issued by her successor.

Fraser was adamant Tuesday that the performance audit is not, and was never intended to be, a probe of MPs' expenses. However, some expenses will be included in the audit as part of her overall examination of management processes and administrative systems and practices.

"It really is an audit of the administration of the House of Commons, so basically the work done by the clerk and her staff," Fraser said. "So issues like human resource management, security here on the Hill and of course financial management and control."

Though he appeared with Fraser to announce the agreement, Hill maintained that his party still believes the measure is unnecessary.

"It has always been our position ... that the checks and balances and reporting mechanism -- the audit that already takes place, the ongoing efforts of our public servants in financial services -- perform the necessary tasks of ensuring the protection of Canadian tax dollars," he said. "Our position has not changed."

He also expressed the legal opinion that the auditor general does not have the mandate to audit the House of Commons, which Fraser has disputed.

"We still believe that," said Hill.

"(But) in the interest of public interest, we're going to take this extra step."

Hill also seemed to think that political forces were behind the public's anger on the issue.

"What we saw was an increased campaign of misinformation that we've all referred to at different times," he said.

"We felt it important to clear up that misinformation and get the facts before Canadians."

A recent poll suggested four out of five Canadians believe MPs are breaking the rules on expenses.

It comes following political spending scandals in the U.K, Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia.

Fraser said it was "unfortunate" that the performance audit was misinterpreted as a probe of MPs' expenses. But she did point out that she will ensure that systems and practices that govern expenses are being followed. And if they are not, she expects to discuss her concerns with the MP or MPs in question, as well as the clerk, who oversees spending.

"If there was widespread disregard of the rules, then obviously we would go much further," Fraser said.

"There would be more of a forensic-type audit and go into a great deal of detail to see if things have been done improperly."

And if she found something very serious?

"If we thought that it was potentially criminal wrongdoing, yes absolutely we would call in the cops."

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