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Michael Ignatieff wants auditor to meet with MPs in expense dispute

By Jane Taber
Globe and Mail Update

Liberals backtrack on refusal to allow Sheila Fraser a look at House of Commons books, but leader warns 'there is accountability that is in itself a waste of public money'

The Liberals are backtracking on allowing the Auditor-General to look at MP expenses, with Michael Ignatieff now saying he wants Sheila Fraser to sit down with members of all parties to discuss what she wants to do.

"I understand what Canadians are saying," the Liberal Leader told reporters Wednesday after an event in Calgary. "They want accountability and transparency. We are going to find a way ... we have to work out a way to move forward on this."

Last week, the Liberals were not defending Ms. Fraser's request to scrutinize House of Commons expenses. Mr. Ignatieff and his MPs, however, have likely heard criticism from Canadians since Ms. Fraser was denied [<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/mps-refuse-to-let-auditor-general-review-their-expenses/article1568131>] permission for an audit by the all-party Board of Internal Economy that oversees MP budgets and expenses.

While the board meets in camera, the Bloc Québécois has said it supported Ms. Fraser's request but was overruled by the other parties. Now Mr. Ignatieff is weighing in with a more nuanced tale.

"What I support is Sheila Fraser, the Auditor General, coming to the Board of Internal Economy," he said, "and talking about what she wants to do and then taking it from there."

This has been a difficult issue for politicians to justify, especially amid spending scandals in Britain and Nova Scotia. Indeed, MPs are usually attracted to microphones and cameras like moths to a flame but were fleeing [<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/mps-dodge-questions-about-barring-auditor-from-reviewing-expenses/article1569438>] from them last week, not wanting to defend or talk about the board's decision to keep the Auditor-General out.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Ignatieff was picking his words carefully today - at one point getting himself in a little trouble. The Liberal Leader said that although Canadians want transparency he didn't think "they want us to be going

through our receipts for this meal and that meal."

Why not, a reporter asked.

Mr. Ignatieff replied that "there is accountability that is in itself a waste of public money. Do you understand what I am saying?"

And then he added: "It is important that Canadians know that the money that we spend is honestly accounted for and that's the kind of solution that we need to look for."

The Liberal Leader also cautioned that the issues isn't just "my problem." The other three parties have to be onside, too.

Several of Mr. Ignatieff's MPs - including Martha Hall Findlay [<http://teammhf.blogspot.com/2010/05/yes-to-auditor-generals-review-of-mps.html>] and Siobhan Coady [<http://www.thetelegram.com/index.cfm?sid=340331&sc=79>] - have publicly stated they have no problem allowing Ms. Fraser to look at their books. And Nova Scotia New Democrat Peter Stoffer is also publicly calling for the Auditor-General to review the House of Commons books.

The Sackville-Eastern Shore MP says he is receiving about 15 to 20 emails a day from constituents who don't realize that he has been saying that for the past few months. "I have no problems at all with the Auditor-General doing a performance audit through the Board of Internal Economy on our books," he told The Globe.

MPs and senators manage a combined budget of \$544-million a year, which includes individual office budgets and central services such as the library and security. The budget also includes perks such as the services of a tailor for free clothing repair and pressing, and free language training for themselves and their spouses. MPs can also receive free training in media relations.

A senior Ignatieff official, meanwhile, told The Globe the change in Liberal tune wasn't spurred by complaints from Canadians. "The push back (and there is some) is not the key point here," the official said. "The need for greater transparency is."

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