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MPs deny auditor general access to expense accounts

By: Bruce Cheadle

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OTTAWA -- No moats are being cleaned at Canadian taxpayer expense, parliamentarians insisted Friday.

Nor are there any \$700 espresso-makers on the books, no \$8,000 generators being installed in MPs' homes and no constituency office parking lots being sanded. MPs from all four federal parties faced a barrage of questions Friday (albeit none from each other) after their representatives on a secretive House of Commons management committee slammed the door on auditor general Sheila Fraser.

"I think the issue of MPs' expenses has been blown out of proportion," said Gerald Keddy, a Conservative MP from Nova Scotia, where an expense scandal recently rocked the legislature.

"Every single expense that we put in as a member of Parliament is checked by an auditor. The books are then audited by an independent auditor at the end of the day. So there's nothing untoward," he told reporters.

Keddy noted Nova Scotia's government is now adopting federal rules for provincial MLA expenses.

So why not let Fraser -- the no-nonsense civil servant charged with ensuring the public's money is well spent -- do the first-ever performance audit of almost half a billion dollars annually allotted to MPs?

It's beyond her mandate, according to the Commons' all-party Board of Internal Economy. It's up to voters, not Fraser, to judge MPs' spending habits, says NDP MP Joe Comartin.

She could be fired if she said nasty things, offered Liberal Scott Andrews.

Hey, the rules are British, shrugged Pierre Paquette of the Bloc Québécois.

Fraser, for the record, issued a letter to the Commons Speaker on Friday stating her mandate doesn't apply only to certain departments and agencies, but to "the accounts of Canada."

"Those accounts include amounts received and expended by the House of Commons," Fraser wrote.

However, "given our distinct relationship with the House of Commons," she wrote, "we have adopted the practice of requesting an invitation before commencing an audit."

Fraser's request for an invitation, which she made last June, was formally denied this week.

Peter Aucoin, professor emeritus in political science and public administration at Dalhousie University, said that in light of recent political expense scandals that have included everything from moat cleaning and adult video rentals to Cadillac coffee-makers, the public deserves every window to be opened wide.

"In the context of the recent British scandal and the recent Nova Scotia scandal, it's a ludicrous proposition to suggest the auditor general shouldn't provide that public assurance," Aucoin said in an interview.

-- The Canadian Press

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