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OTTAWA—Cracks are beginning to show in the wall of solidarity from Canada's MPs, who have blocked Auditor-General Sheila Fraser from probing their spending.

In the wake of the latest chapter in a spending scandal in Nova Scotia – which came hard on the heels of similar scandals in Newfoundland and Britain – Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff and two prominent New Democrats came forward, saying they understand Canadians want transparency.

"I'm talking to my caucus about that ... I understand what Canadians are saying. They want accountability and transparency," Ignatieff said during a stop in Calgary Wednesday.

MPs can't defend the indefensible, Winnipeg Centre New Democrat Pat Martin says.

He said the public has every right to be outraged over the House of Commons' refusal to let Auditor General Sheila Fraser audit the tens of millions MPs spend every year.

"My next call is to our party office and find out how the hell we get out from under this, because we're getting the s--t kicked out of us all over the country," Martin told the *Star* in an interview from Winnipeg Wednesday.

The outspoken Martin said the last thing he wants to do is "be in charge of upholding an indefensible position,"

"This is not the hill you want to die on, for God's sake. What possible justification could there be?" he said, adding it's certainly not the kind of transparency the Conservatives promised when they came to power.

He was joined by Nova Scotia New Democrat Peter Stoffer, who represents a riding in the shadow of the provincial legislature where an RCMP investigation has begun into the spending of four former members and one sitting member.

"My constituents are telling me point blank 'Let the auditor general do her job,' and I agree with them," Stoffer told the *Star*.

"We must always strive to be open and transparent as humanly possible."

The board of internal economy, a secretive, all-party committee of MPs that controls Commons spending, refused Fraser's request to vet the \$503.5 million annual budget, which includes \$235 million for administrative expenses and \$248 million for MPs and officers of the Commons.

Liberal MP Martha Hall-Findlay (Willowdale) says she can't square asking everyone else to be accountable and then not do it herself.



Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe, shown with Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, is the only federal leader to publicly support an audit by the auditor general of MPs' and senators' parliamentary budgets.

SEAN KILPATRICK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

"Canadians rightly believe that MPs should be held to no less of a standard," she said.

But there are those on all sides of the House who defend the decision to block Fraser, arguing there are already outside audits done. However, they fall far short of probing individual MP spending.

Expenses for the Canada's 308 MPs totalled \$127,850,218 for the year ending March 31, 2008, representing an increase of almost 42 per cent since the 2000-01 fiscal year, when 301 MPs spent \$90,174,779.

The controversial decision to block Fraser was compounded when the late day decision was made last week, allowing the politicians responsible time to high-tail it out of Ottawa just before this week's break in the House of Commons calendar.

Nova Scotia auditor general Jacques Lapointe released a bombshell review earlier this year revealing inappropriate and excessive spending, including the purchase of custom-made furniture, big-screen TVs, cameras, a model boat, patio furniture, a video game, electric generators and a \$738 espresso maker.

A similar spending scandal rocked Newfoundland and Labrador in 2006.

Last year the mother of all Parliaments was enveloped in the mother of all spending scandals when 20 British cabinet ministers and backbenchers either resigned or retired after a newspaper reported on leaked expense claims on everything from a moat-cleaning service to the rental of a dirty movie.

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff told reporters in Calgary Wednesday that all four federal parties may have to revisit the decision to give Fraser the brush off.

No Conservative MPs returned calls from the *Star*.

Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe was the only leader to publicly support Fraser's request to investigate the parliamentary budgets of all MPs and senators.

According to the board of internal documents, effective April 1, 2008, the basic annual MP's office budget for all constituencies is \$280,500. Among other things, this is to cover staff, office expenses, hospitality expenses and gifts, travel and transportation and advertising.

Supporters routinely point to the KPMG audit of the House of Commons spending, which turns out a 25-page report that does little more than endorse global spending and comes nowhere near drilling down into individual MP spending.

Kevin Gaudet, national director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, said nothing makes the public angrier than politicians telling them to mind their own business,

"People are pissed off with all of them (MPs) but they are especially upset with the Harper government," he said.