



MPs' refusal of expense audit prompts the question: 'What are they hiding?'

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If federal politicians have nothing to hide, why won't they submit to an audit of their expenses?

That question lingers and stands to damage the reputations of MPs who, through their secretive management agency, the Commons Board of Internal Economy, this week delivered a final "no" to Auditor-General Sheila Fraser who has requested access to their books.

"Following careful consideration, the auditor-general will not be invited to conduct a performance audit of the House of Commons," says a board statement released Thursday afternoon.

On Friday, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation posted on its website a photo of three corpulent hogs, branded with logos from the Conservative, Liberal and New Democratic parties.

Along with the photo appears a statement: "Every other penny of government spending is subject to audit; so should the expenses racked up by our MPs and senators." The federation is calling on Canadians to sign its online petition asking politicians to open their books.

The Board of Internal Economy insists an audit would go beyond Fraser's mandate; that while she may audit government departments and various Crown agencies, no reference is made in audit legislation to the legislative branch.

This of course will appear as so much twaddle to taxpayers given that the AG has carried out past audits of Parliament, in 1980 and 1991.

We're not talking about chump change here; MPs and senators spend about \$500 million annually. While the board's decision relates to MPs only, senators are expected to similarly nix an expenses review.

Fraser believes she can save the public some money, not a bad objective at a time when the government is trying to reduce spending to eliminate a large deficit.

MPs are defending their position by noting that spending sums are publicly available. While that's true, numbers are not broken down so that taxpayers can know, for example, exactly what trips were

taken through the year that account for travel spending of, say, \$60,000.

Also, MPs are not called upon to show receipts. And should they have money left over at the end of the year, there's no incentive for them to return the cash to government coffers because their constituents never get to review their budgets.

Liberal Michelle Simpson (Scarborough Southwest), newly elected in 2008, is believed by the Canadian Taxpayers Federation to be the only federal MP to post online a complete breakdown of her parliamentary spending.

As part of that effort, she noted that her office returned unspent funds amounting to \$27,766.46 at the end of the October 2008 to March 2009 period.

Now, you can bet few other MPs are doing something similar, or else they'd be banging down Fraser's door inviting her to have a look-see so they could gain the political credit.

So, what exactly is happening to any unspent cash at the end of a budget period? Why should taxpayers who foot the bill, and have to ante up to Ottawa all manner of receipts when they pay their taxes, not be permitted to find out?

Simpson told a reporter in Ottawa this week: "People just don't believe politicians any more."

She's got that right. Indeed, the Harper government introduced the Accountability Act in 2006 as a way of showing voters that Conservatives intend to respond to their demands for transparency.

Where is the prime minister now? Why doesn't Stephen Harper instruct his caucus to show respect for taxpayers by recording a full breakdown of expenses online and have Conservative rep Jay Hill, on the Board of Internal Economy, push for the audit?

And how interesting is it that all parties are onside on this matter? Parties usually cannot agree on anything. Yet, with the exception of the Bloc Quebecois, they have found common cause when it comes to protecting their backsides.

There's near certainty that an audit would prove embarrassing and lead to tighter budgetary controls. A similar audit in Britain last year uncovered scandalous spending by politicians, on personal items such as chandeliers, pornography and moat upkeep on country estates.

Canadian MPs' refusal to open their books leaves the public wondering whether we have a few "moats" of our own.

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