

Government Spending, Response to NDP Opposition Day Motion

April 15, 2010

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to the opposition day motion. I will be splitting my time with the brilliant member for Ajax—Pickering.

I am very happy to see this motion come before the House as it addresses some needs that Parliament has not addressed for a number of years.

First, it does go to government restraint. We are at a difficult time. We are \$56 billion in deficit. However, even when we are not in deficit, government should not be spending money wastefully. I think anybody would agree with that. In a difficult time like this, with a Conservative deficit of \$56 billion, wasteful spending is even more inappropriate than ever before.

I will preface my comments, as a Nova Scotian, speaking about what has happened in Nova Scotia over the past month or so. The auditor general of Nova Scotia did an investigation into spending by members of the Legislative Assembly, an audit of MLAs' expenses.

What was uncovered was egregious spending that nobody could justify. Generators were installed in the houses of MLAs. Multiple computers, laptops and printers were purchased. Big screen TVs were purchased, just what every politician wants in their office when a constituent comes in to talk about their day-to-day problems, just trying to raise their family. Other things that were bought were espresso makers, GPS units, briefcases, digital cameras, camcorders and duplicate expenses, payments, et cetera. The premier indicated that his bar fees were being paid by the government.

People are angry, rightfully, about this abuse of taxpayer money. There have already been resignations and there may be more to come. The people of Nova Scotia feel no differently from the rest of the people in Canada, which is that politicians, their governments and parliamentarians should spend money that is theirs the same way they would spend their own. People do not accept that it is okay for government to waste money. Drastic changes have resulted.

There is no doubt that our system in Ottawa is a better system but there is a lesson to all of us: treat the people's money as if it were our own.

The message, however, has not reached the government and it has not reached all members of this House. A \$13 million increase for the Prime Minister's own departments, spending on research and management consultants that nobody could defend. To avoid tendering contracts, money is let just under the legal limit of \$25,000 without a tender, and it seems to happen all the time. There is outrageous spending on advertising of government initiatives. Over \$100 million were spent to advertise Canada's economic action plan.

We have an enlarged cabinet. Ministers who underperform do not get moved out of cabinet. They get moved to lesser responsibilities, more in keeping with their capabilities, I suppose, but they stay in cabinet with all of the perks that go with being in cabinet.

There are a lot of examples of how the government has not been spending money wisely but I want to speak specifically to the issue of ten percenters. If there is a rotten, perverted, scandalous, ridiculously bloated, wasteful symbol of how low politics in Canada has fallen, it is ten percenters which allow members of Parliament to send virtually unlimited mailings of the most partisan nature across Canada.

As we heard from the member for Scarborough—Guildwood, perhaps the preeminent expert in this House on the history of Parliament and its procedures, there probably was an noble purpose for ten percenters. Originally, I think the idea was that members could send them to people in their constituency. As MPs we are supposed to, it is incumbent upon us to communicate with our constituents.

We are allowed to do four householders a year and most of us do all four. Those are legitimate and reasonable. When I do householders, I do not put the Liberal message all over it. , I represent all of the people in my constituency. I would challenge anybody to look at the householders I have sent out or, on occasion, the ten percenters that I sent out in my own constituency. They deal with things like the Boys and Girls Club, a local theatre group called Eastern Front Theatre, the Public Good Society, Circle of Care furniture banks and things like that. To me that is a legitimate and reasonable purpose of ten percenters.

However, in the last number of years things have changed and I understand. People say that as an MP we have a responsibility to communicate around the country, but these have become absolutely and completely political. It has gotten totally out of hand. The mailings today are largely controlled out of various leaders' offices or party offices and the messages are negative and brutally partisan. MPs often do not even know what is going out under their own names.

It is very costly, as the Taxpayers Federation singled them out last week for special attention. All parties do it. It is true, though, that the government has raised it to a high art form, or perhaps a low art form.

We heard today the members from Mount Royal and Sackville—Eastern Shore indicating how these mailings had been abused and turned into virtual hate mail, sent out at government expense, carrying a partisan message, peppering the country with vicious propaganda.

At the same time, parties are building up their mailing lists for their own political purposes. Parties all do it. I do not condone anybody using ten percenters. I do not like the fact that Liberals use ten percenters. I like the fact that we do it less than anybody else on a per capita basis.

People in my riding ask me all the time why they are getting mail from the leader of the New Democratic Party the time. Some say that their wives communicate more with the leader of the New Democratic party than they do with them. They ask me who is paying for the mail, who is paying for the stuff that goes into their mailboxes, which they do not want. People do not like it and they are at the point of saying enough is enough.

If we took all of the offensive spending of the MLAs in Nova Scotia, which has rightly enraged Nova Scotians, it would be a tiny fraction of the cost just of the ten percenters. The cost in printing is estimated at \$10 million. The cost in postage is more than twice that, \$30 million. What could we do with \$30 million?

In the Speech from the Throne last week, we heard about how the government would enhance the universal child care benefit for single-parent families. The next day in the budget we found out the total cost of that program, when it is fully implemented, would be \$5 million a year. There are \$5 million a year for Canadians most in need and \$30 million so this garbage can be sent across the country that spreads lies and hate about other parties and individuals. If there is a juxtaposition to politics today that shows how rotten this has become, it is that. There are \$5 million for those who need help and \$30 million for ten percenters.

At the same time, the Canadian Council on Learning, CCSD and KAIROS were cut. The value of that cut was \$7 million over five years from an organization that focuses on justice and peace. Yet there are \$30 million dollars a year to sustain this ridiculous policy of sending out ten percenters that every member of the House knows in his or her heart

has become completely out of hand and is a total waste of money. We could save tens of millions of dollars every year just by saying enough is enough.

I heard the members of the New Democratic Party say that they did legitimate mailings and as MPs they had to communicate with other people on specific issues. The NDP member for Vancouver East spoke sincerely about the need to deal with stakeholders.

There is not a member of Parliament in the House whose stakeholder is 10% of somebody else's riding. We have mailing lists. We already have free mailing. We have bulk mailing. We have the frank. In my case, if I want to send information to people in child care or people who deal with poverty, I do not send it to 10% of the people who live in Sackville—Eastern Shore or in Cape Breton—Canso. These are political mailings.

I have one from a New Democratic member, who I will not mention. It ticks off to send back information, "I would like to receive the NDP's email newsletter". This is for political purposes. This is taxpayers subsidizing politicians to send this stuff out.

If we want to improve Parliament and politics in Canada and have members work together the way they should, the way it was designed to be, it does not help when we come in here on Monday when the Friday before we received calls from people in our association telling us that they received hate mail about us.

It is time to stop the abuse, to save the money, to put \$30 million to a better purpose and improve the atmosphere in Parliament. Let us get rid of the ten percenters. Let us do the right thing once and for all.