

MP wants to probe Ouellet's expenses

Canada Post chief should be grilled like Radwanski, says committee member

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The lead Canadian Alliance MP on the committee that investigated the expenses of former privacy commissioner George Radwanski says MPs should call Canada Post CEO André Ouellet before them for a similar review.

B.C. Alliance MP Paul Forseth is setting his sights on Mr. Ouellet after Canada Post refused to answer an Alliance question on the Commons Order Paper requesting Mr. Ouellet's expense accounts from his appointment in 1996 to the present.

Mr. Forseth said he's looking for support from MPs across party lines to summon Mr. Ouellet before a committee to provide expense accounts, salaries, compensation packages and travel expenses for the top executives at Canada Post.

A new government pay scale has boosted the salary and bonuses for the Canada Post CEO to nearly \$500,000, making it the highest paid federal public service job.

As a Crown corporation, Canada Post is exempt from the Access to Information Act, as are officers of Parliament such as the privacy commissioner, but MPs on the government operations and estimates committee successfully invoked its rarely used power to summon witnesses and call for government documents during their investigation of Mr. Radwanski. Although Mr. Radwanski accused MPs of broadening the access law via the back door, the documents he produced revealed the lavish lunches and trips, as well as apparent contradictions from his earlier testimony, that ultimately led to his resignation.

In addition to Canada Post's refusal to answer the question on the Order Paper, Mr. Forseth said the fact that Mr. Ouellet preceded Alfonso Gagliano as the Liberals' political minister for Quebec prior to his appointment to the Crown corporation also makes him an interesting public servant for a committee to review. Mr. Ouellet was first elected to the House of Commons in 1967 and took over as chief political organizer for the party in Quebec in 1977. He held several cabinet posts under Pierre Trudeau and served as Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's foreign affairs minister from 1993 to 1996.

In replying to the Alliance question in the House, which was originally asked by Kelowna MP Werner Schmidt, the Crown Corporation stated that Canada Post has operated without government funding since 1989 and all its expenses are self-funded.

"The details of the Corporation's activities are considered privileged and commercially sensitive and cannot be specified," it states.

Mr. Forseth said Canada Post's reasoning doesn't hold water because Canada Post is a government-regulated monopoly and Mr. Ouellet is a government appointee.

"Any company has an annual report and the shareholders get the documents. As far as Canada Post is concerned, Canadians are the shareholders and it's been operating out there for some time without, I don't think, acceptable transparency," he said.

Canada Post spokesman John Cains would not respond to Mr. Forseth's reference to Mr.

Ouellet's tenure as the Liberals' Quebec organizer, but pointed out that the Crown corporation CEO has willingly appeared before many committees in the past.

"I can't tell you how (Mr. Ouellet) would personally respond, but we've appeared before many committees in the past," he said. "Any time that we have been asked to appear, we have appeared, so I don't know why he would not appear if he is requested, but so far there's been no request from the committee to appear so really there's nothing for us to say on it right now."

Liberal MP John Bryden, who made the original request in the government operations committee for Mr. Radwanski's expenses, said he supports Mr. Forseth's push to obtain Mr. Ouellet's expenses by repeating the procedural motion. Mr. Bryden pointed out that he had never heard of an MP successfully requesting the production of expenses from a witness prior to his attempt and only thought of the idea because he had been browsing the Parliament of Canada Act moments before the meeting and stumbled upon the obscure power.

Mr. Bryden has long advocated that all officers of Parliament and Crown corporations should be subject to access laws, which he said would be more efficient than using individual requests during committee meetings.

"I'm sure Mr. Ouellet will have perfectly fine expense accounts as far as we can determine them, always allowing for the fact that he has to do some entertaining and he has to have a certain degree of confidentiality as to who he's entertaining, but to spare the committee going on search missions on expense accounts, people should be automatically under the Access to Information Act," he said. "Then there would be ongoing scrutiny by the media or any other person. As far as I'm concerned, this is the type of information that should be online."

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