

# BAY COMMENT

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## The most trusted name in Canada

Sheila Fraser, Auditor General of Canada, is the protector of taxpayer's interest in the spending of our money. She is respected, trusted, and appreciated by taxpayers across Canada. It is not a common occurrence for an auditor general to be sent flowers by adoring taxpayers – but that is exactly what Sheila Fraser has received in thanks for being focused on doing the right job for Canadians.

So what a spectacle when our members of parliament said no to Ms. Fraser's request to audit their expense accounts. What wishy-washy objections they presented – the amounts are not large, the expenses are already



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audited by the external auditors. So what if the amounts are not large? – the expenditures can be sensitive. Ordinary Canadians wonder how many steak dinners are being eaten off the backs of their hard toils. The external auditors do not take the value-for-

money perspective that the auditor general does – the external auditors only check to see if the accounts add and the receipts are attached. They don't ask if the receipts are for things the taxpayer should be paying for.

There is an assumption that some embarrassing items might show up – ask the warden from Oxford County about that United States strip club expense on his Oxford County-provided credit card. Remember the trustees for the Catholic Toronto School Board? – that wasn't even value for money – it was just plain ineligible expenses. As the press reported, the investigation team sent in by the education minister found that the trustees had given themselves benefits to which they were not entitled. Isn't that a conflict-taking action to benefit self?

I don't believe that we are not going to see a scandal of the magnitude of the recent boondoggle in Britain-- MPs charging for garden work, duplicate apartments. Luckily I don't think that many of our MPs have a moat that needs to be cleaned around their castle.

But really, given the poor spending judgement that we have seen recently, why would the MPs think that it would be appropriate to say no to our auditor general's request? This is about accountability for the use of public funds. Why would there be any objections to the expenses being audited by the very person that is put in the job to watch over how public funds are spent? Me thinks thou doth protest too much.

I have to give credit to some public officials. The City of Vaughn and the City of Toronto actually post the expenses of each of the councillors and the mayor on their websites. Now that's disclosure and shows that there is some level of accountability. Even the City of Burlington has stepped up its accountability reporting. In 2009 I was part of a citizens committee which reviewed council expense limits and staffing requirements. In October 2009 we presented our report and recommendations to council. One of the recommendations was that beginning in June 2010 a report would be posted semi-annually on the city's website that would provide a summary of the

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annual budget and actual spending by each individual member of council, as well as their compensation for the city and region.

The public understands that officials will incur expenses in performing their job. They should be reimbursed for expenses that are absolutely required and appropriate in getting the job done. A Timmy's coffee is okay, a

Starbucks latte not. The public might be willing to pay for the coffee; the elected person can use personal funds to top up the cost to get the latte. The public might

be willing to pay for a chicken dinner when the person is working a long day; the elected person can use personal funds to top up to a steak. There is a level that is acceptable and there is a level that is not.

Sheila Fraser – from my perspective and in respect of the good work (hard fought at times) that you have done since being appointed in 2001 – you have my full support to audit away. Let me know if you are going to run for office – you'll have my vote. Actually you are probably way too valuable to us as Auditor General – what are we going to do when you retire?

*Fay Booker is principal of Booker & Associates, a firm focused on promoting good governance, enterprise risk management and operational effectiveness – [www.bookerandassociates.com](http://www.bookerandassociates.com). She can be reached at [info@bookerandassociates.com](mailto:info@bookerandassociates.com).*