

Section: News

David Zussman, in his Aug. 15 column, wants to "Blame all members of Parliament for the government's failings." For Mr. Zussman to say that members of Parliament should take the blame for failures in government is like blaming parents for the actions of their teenagers. **Byline:** John Williams

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David Zussman, in his Aug. 15 column, wants to "Blame all members of Parliament for the government's failings." For Mr. Zussman to say that members of Parliament should take the blame for failures in government is like blaming parents for the actions of their teenagers.

In our democracy, where government is held accountable by Parliament, the corruption revealed in the sponsorship scandal showed a government at its worst, and Parliament at its best through exercising accountability.

When the sponsorship scandal burst upon the nation by way of the auditor general's report on Feb. 10, 2004, the country was shocked by the exposure of such blatant corruption, and Parliament was immediately seized with the issue. For the first time in Canadian history, Parliament demanded and received cabinet documents. Parliament summoned reluctant witnesses such as Alfonso Gagliano, Andre Ouellet, Jean Pelletier and others at the highest level of the Liberal party and the government. Parliament also summoned public servants such as Chuck Guite, Ranald Quail and others to explain to Parliament how rules and procedures, intended to act as checks and balances, failed to prevent a large-scale scheme of corruption by the Liberal party and the government.

Parliament was exercising its authority over government by demanding answers and accountability.

Those involved pointed at anyone but themselves. Alfonso Gagliano, minister of public works, said "Don't blame me, I was only the minister." Ranald Quail, the deputy minister, said "Don't blame me, I wasn't in the loop." Chuck Guite said "Don't blame me, I was only following orders." But somewhere in that web of deceit lay a cleverly constructed scheme that defrauded Canadian taxpayers of up to \$100 million, according to the auditor general.

In the course of the parliamentary investigation through the public accounts committee, Parliament became aware that the government had been hiding millions of dollars of advertising expenses in secret programs, such as the National Unity Fund, which had not been disclosed to Parliament. Again, the government was caught in a serious breach of the rules requiring disclosure to Parliament of spending by government.

Parliament's role in overseeing government, largely exercised by the public accounts committee, was cut short by Prime Minister Paul Martin dissolving Parliament for a general election on June 28, 2004.

Prorogation and dissolution of Parliament at the whim of the prime minister is a major weakness in the Westminster model of government. By dissolution, the prime minister cut short the investigation by the public accounts committee before the full story was uncovered.

Another fundamental flaw of Parliament is that government members immediately switch their allegiances from the voters who sent them to Ottawa to the prime minister who can keep them in Ottawa. This was amply demonstrated by many Liberal members on the public accounts committee being protective and supportive of the government, instead of demanding accountability on behalf of their constituents. Of course, a number of them paid the price of losing their seats in the election.

The public accounts committee wrapped up its hearings on the sponsorship scandal with two very substantive reports. The first, more than 100 pages in length, called for significant changes within the bureaucracy, including 29 recommendations for improved accountability.

The second report dealt with governance. This report, the first in more than 135 years of our history, recommended that Canada adopt the accounting officer concept that is well entrenched in the United Kingdom. This will require a deputy minister to advise the clerk of the Privy Council and the auditor general when asked by his minister to do anything unethical or inappropriate. If adopted by the government, never again will we accept the excuse that the deputy minister was "not in the loop."

Yes, Parliament can do better. Yes, Parliament does not scrutinize the "estimates" (line by line budgets) as well as it should. Yes, partisan politics have weakened the oversight abilities of Parliament. Nevertheless, it is thanks to our Parliament, which holds the government accountable by informing the public through our open and independent news media, that holds the government to account. And a government that is accountable to its citizens is one that serves society well.

A healthy democracy is the cornerstone of prosperity, and Parliament's role as the oversight body of government is fundamental to a democracy. For that reason, the Canadian Parliament supported the creation of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption. GOPAC's mandate is to support, educate and help parliamentarians around the world improve their oversight of their governments.

Yes, Mr. Zussman, Parliament can always do better. But don't blame Parliamentarians for flaws in our system of governance. Instead, Mr. Zussman should focus his criticism on the government and call for greater independence of Parliament, which has been dominated by Liberal governments for far too long.

John Williams is the Conservative member of Parliament for Edmonton-St. Albert, the chair of the House of Commons public accounts committee, and the chair of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC).