

Should politicians play a role in procurement

The immediate response is “duh – of course not – scandal, nepotism, graft and corruption” – what do you think this is: a third world dictatorship – the 19th century? Is this Prime Minister Mackenzie’s old third floor office in the West Block – the one in the famous picture of all the supplicants seated in chairs waiting for patronage to be doled out? Our system has evolved to the point where elected officials are not supposed to be in a position to play favourites, even if they wanted to. The watchwords for government procurement in Canada in this century are fairness, equity, transparency, openness, accountability, competition, best value, and level playing fields.

But think about it. Who ultimately sets the rules to make sure contracting is fair? Who ultimately approves needs and requirements? Who approves the rules, watches over them? Who announces the awarding of major contracts? Who votes the money that pays the bills? There are more aspects to this simple question than may appear at first blush. And the answers, like those to many questions, depend on who you are and what you do. This column is therefore the first of several that will delve into this issue from different perspectives. Who better to kick it off than a couple of prominent and well-informed elected officials?

Summit is very fortunate to have the benefit of the views of two respected federal Parliamentarians: Tony Valeri and John Williams, Liberal and Alliance members respectively and active performers in two of the government’s most influential committees. We also offered NDP MP Pat Martin and PC MP Scott Brison a chance to participate, but they declined. Their loss! We are grateful to Mr. Williams and Mr. Valeri for their interest – so, let’s chat!

Sit down, take a deep breath, sip a beverage, open your mind and stay awhile



Tony Valeri
Liberal Member of Parliament for Stony Creek, Ontario and Vice-Chair of the new House of Commons Government Operations Committee



John Williams
Canadian Alliance Member of Parliament for St. Albert, Alberta and Chair of the powerful House of Commons Public Accounts Committee

All in the line of duty

Valeri: Government will need to acquire the proper tools, as they become available, to best serve Canadians. Current procurement practices are often criticized as slow and poorly structured to match the pace of technological innovation. In the ongoing movement to provide more and more information and services online, a key government procurement issue will center on how best to build a suitable information technology infrastructure for the future. This is true not just within traditional line departments, but also across [the federal] government as a whole in terms of the ability to implement cross-departmental

or horizontal initiatives. By definition, both public servants and elected officials have a stake in the outcomes of government programs, so it is important that each is involved in both developing the procurement policy and ensuring program objectives are met.

Williams: [Federal] elected officials have the same role as they have everywhere else. Parliament is not an institution of management. Parliament is an institution of accountability. We are here to ensure that the rules are followed and to get the system back on track if it falls off the rails. The government, the Cabinet and



officials develop the rules and the Auditor General audits the rules. When things are reported to Parliament as not running well, be it in procurement or anywhere else, then Parliament gets involved to determine why not, what’s going on here, cracks the whip, heads can roll and the system smartens up and starts to work again. But it is not for us to decide this supplier or that supplier. It is up to us to set out the rules of the game. The government plays the game and it comes back to Parliament for the stewardship.

Why’d you have to go and make things so complicated?

Williams: As an institution of accountability, far too often we fail because the majority just do lip service and deliver what the government wants. Unfortunately we have allowed the government, which is the Cabinet – the front bench – to dictate to Parliament what Parliament will give to them. For example, Parliament is supposed to examine the estimates in detail. Unfortunately, we do not examine in detail the individual spending of each department, which contains the procurement [activity] and we just gloss over the billions of dollars a year in such expenditures. Then we have to rely on the Auditor General to bring to Parliament’s attention any failures in procurement. Parliament should, in my opinion, pay more attention to procurement because it is such a large part of government spending and because everyone knows that procurement is the easiest place for corruption to creep in,

for poor value-for-money and buying things that we don't need. That's why Parliament needs to scrutinize procurement. As another example, Parliament says contracting has to be a competitive bidding process. I see a lot of use of ACANs [Advance Contracting Award Notice] that I don't consider a competitive bidding process, but the government does. That is an ongoing disagreement where we have to have competitive bids to conduct an open and transparent process.

Valeri: Technological change also raises substantial issues around governance. There is now the real potential to engage citizens through consultation and other e-democracy initiatives. Bringing citizens closer to the decision-making process will inevitably put pressure on traditional notions of governance, as well as raising questions for elected officials. For instance, how does the role of an elected official change if citizens can communicate their views on a particular issue directly to public servants? The kinds of technology governments choose will shape the answers to this and other related questions. Choosing new technologies cannot be simply the responsibility of public servants. These choices have an important political component. It's about developing the kind of government that will best serve Canadians in the future, and elected officials must work cooperatively with public servants on behalf of these interests. If left to public servants alone, procurement choices may lead to increased efficiencies and cost-savings, but may miss broader opportunities to improve the way government relates to citizens, and vice versa.

On the straight and narrow

Valeri: Going forward, we expect large-scale technology procurement in the next few years as we come to better understand the benefits to government in terms of new programs and better outcomes. Given the

expected size and value of these acquisitions, there will be an important scrutiny role for elected officials – both as ministers and parliamentarians – to ensure transparency and accountability in each transaction. Elected officials will also hold departments accountable for meeting these objectives. Should any legislative changes be required to adapt to the procurement needs of the future, this would also occur through Parliament.

Williams: Parliament sets the rules of the game for public policy – whether we are going to recognize green or Aboriginal set asides or whatever it is going to be. These broad concepts on public policy are set by Parliament, or come to Parliament for approval, and then the government exercises their legitimate authority to run the country within those rules. But, when Parliament finds that [the rules] may not have been followed, then the accountability kicks in. Then we have committee reports that investigate, say do this or that, and ensure the follow-up to make sure that Parliament is being listened to. However many of us note that we never seem to see opposition MPs making contract award announcements. Usually you will see the government announce who has won a contract through a minister or their delegate. To me, that smacks of improper use of their authority. If the supplier won the bid through an open and fair process with no political connection whatsoever, then what is the need for the minister or member of Parliament to be standing there saying we have awarded the contract to my good friend, ABC company?

Next Chatroom:
continues on the role
of elected officials
in procurement