

Opinion

No model of thrift

How would you like to earn \$60,000 a year and as much as \$25,600 extra in tax-free expense allowances? Not enough? Well, we'll throw in 64 return trips by air (first class) to anywhere in Canada (24 of which can be for your family or office staff). And for the icing on the cake—you'll be eligible to collect your pension (no matter how young you are) after contributing to your plan for just six years!

Interested? All you have to do is get yourself elected to Parliament. In the January 1990 Reader's Digest, Douglas Fisher, a political columnist and former MP himself, argues that even though the House sits longer than it used to, the cost to taxpayers has risen astronomically—and that we're not getting very good value for our money.

A 1989 Gallup poll is unequivocal: 60 per cent of Canadians consider that MPs' salaries are too high. Prime Minister Mulroney is aware of the public mood. In 1984 and again in 1986, he volunteered a modest cut in his own and his Cabinet's ministerial allowances. These gestures remained nothing more than symbolism. No ordinary MPs and no mandarins followed the Prime Minister in his clumsy show of frugality.

To understand why the public perception of our politicians is so negative, we need only to look at the rise in costs over the past 40 years, says Douglas Fisher. In the three-year period 1947-49, the House had on average 119 sitting days annually, as compared to 168 in 1986-88. Assuming a perfect attendance in the House of each and every MP, the daily costs has risen 46-fold, from \$90 in 1949, to \$3,912 in 1988!

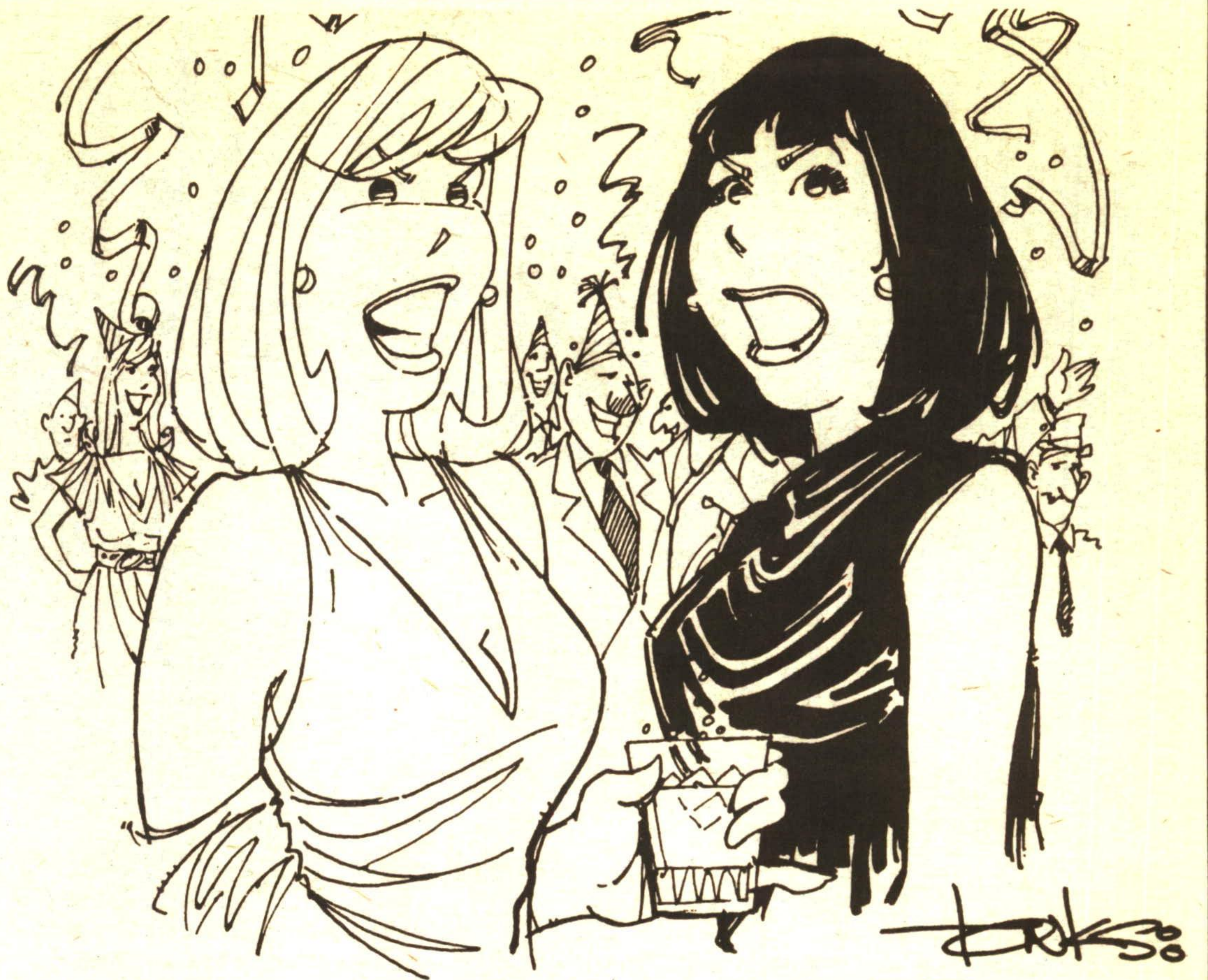
To get a rough measure of how Parliament is soaking up funds, let's compare such costs with total government expenditure. In 1949, the total federal budget was \$2.3 billion. By 1989, it had vaulted to \$103.5 billion. The budget multiple, 1949 to 1989, is 45. In the same 40 years, the House of Commons expenditures rose 71-fold.

In 1949, direct expenditures—covering salaries and allowances for MPs, political officers, members' staff and related office expenses, salaries and service costs of caucus research staff, and contributions to members' retirement plans—were \$1.6 million, or an average of \$6,107 per MP. In 1989, these expenditures hit \$113.7 million. That's \$385,424 for each MP—a staggering 6,211 per cent increase in 40 years! But our dollar is worth much less today, you say? Yes, but note that inflation has been far less ravaging. In the same 40-year period the consumer price index increased only 525 per cent.

The latest commission, led by former MPs Gerry St. Germain and Francis Fox, has decided that MPs' salaries should be increased by four per cent and be fully indexed against inflation. No one, not even the auditors general with their formulas for getting "value for money," could be utterly objective and certain of the worth we as taxpayers get from the grandiosity in public funding for Parliament.

While Fisher thinks today's MPs are as dedicated to work as those in the past, all the lavishness in services, comforts, pay and allowances is not sustaining any better a parliamentary performance. If anything, Fisher contends, today the House—in Question Period, in debate on legislation, on "grievance" days—does not do as well. And, aside from Question Period, fewer MPs are keenly interested in the House.

To be blunt, says Fisher, the St. Germain-Fox commission should have fitted on slashing—not increasing—parliamentary costs and going after inefficiencies. Parliament is no model for the rest of the country in these days of debt and deficits.



"ANOTHER YEAR PASSES AND WE STILL HAVENT LEARNED ENOUGH TO STAY AWAY FROM THESE STUPID OFFICE NEW YEARS PARTIES!"

Boarding the oat bran bandwagon

The oat bran phenomenon is nothing short of incredible. In a matter of a few months, dozens of new oat bran products have appeared on supermarket shelves and consumers are gobbling it up!

Is oat bran really all it is cracked up to be? To help you sort out the barrage of products and claims, here are the answers to questions most commonly asked.

What Can Oat Bran Do For You?

Oat bran can help to reduce blood cholesterol levels, a major risk factor in heart disease. Specifically, it seems to target LDL (low density lipoprotein) or so called "bad cholesterol" without affecting HDL (high density lipoprotein) or so called "good cholesterol." It's a soluble fibre in the oats that seems to do the trick.

How Much Oat Bran Do I Have to Eat?

You need about 30 to 35 grams of oat bran (2 grams of soluble fibre) each day to lower your blood cholesterol levels by 3 per cent. Two-thirds of a cup of cooked oat bran or oatmeal cereal provides this amount. Some experts suggest that 75 grams of oat bran (5 grams of soluble fibre) is a reasonable quantity which will significantly lower blood cholesterol levels.

How Long Will It Take?

Most of the cholesterol-lowering effects of soluble fibre will be apparent within a month. There is little further reduction beyond this point.

How Much Oat Bran Am I Getting From Commercial Products?

It is not always easy to tell! Some products disclose the amount of oat bran per serving on the label. Look for 20 grams or more per serving. Some will make a claim regarding "soluble fibre." Look for at least 2 grams per serving. Claims regarding "dietary fibre" are less useful as this term refers to total fibre content including both soluble and insoluble fibre. If no claims are made regarding the quantity of oat bran or soluble fibre per serving, check the ingredient list.

Oat bran or another soluble fibre source should be at or near the top of the list. Also check for the presence of blood cholesterol raisers such as saturated fats (i.e. coconut and palm oil, butter, shortening, etc.) or eggs. These foods could cancel out any benefits that the oat bran would provide.

Are There Other Foods Rich In Soluble Fibre?

Certainly! There are several types of legumes, vegetables and fruits that contain appreciable quantities of soluble fibre. All- bran cereal, rolled oats, kidney, pinto and white beans, canned pork and beans, brussels sprouts, broccoli, carrots, oranges and apples are all good sources.

Manufacturers are also busy trying to discover a soluble fibre product that could be even more effective than oat bran. The principal candidates at present include rice bran, corn bran and psyllium. Psyllium is a type of mucilage derived from husks of the psyllium seed. It is found primarily in laxatives such as Metamucil and Fiberall. These products look promising, but until further studies are completed, we should all sit tight.

Should I Take A Fibre Pill?

No! It is better to get your fibre from food. There are several reasons for this. First, we are not 100 per cent sure that there isn't something else present in the food that is contributing to the beneficial effects of fibre.

Supplements can also lead to problems. They can inhibit nutrient absorption and create a "dependency" in order to maintain regularity. Finally, we don't know the long term effects of using such supplements. So for now, stick with food.

Can I Eat Too Much Fibre?

Yes! Too much fibre can interfere with nutrient absorption. It can also cause some gastrointestinal disturbances such as abdominal pain, gas and diarrhea when large amounts are introduced suddenly. You can avoid these problems by increasing your fibre intake gradually.

Should I Change My Diet In Any Other Way?

Yes. Include a wide variety of nutritious foods including plenty of whole grain breads and cereals and fresh fruits and vegetables. Decrease your intake of fat to not more than 30 per cent of total calories by cutting back on saturated fats found mainly in animal foods.

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Week End

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