



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 28th Legislature
Third Session

Standing Committee
on
Legislative Offices

Tuesday, December 16, 2014
10:03 a.m.

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Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

Jeneroux, Matt, Edmonton-South West (PC), Chair
Starke, Dr. Richard, Vermilion-Lloydminster (PC), Deputy Chair

Bikman, Gary, Cardston-Taber-Warner (W)
Blakeman, Laurie, Edmonton-Centre (AL)
Brown, Dr. Neil, QC, Calgary-Mackay-Nose Hill (PC)
DeLong, Alana, Calgary-Bow (PC)
Eggen, David, Edmonton-Calder (ND)
Leskiw, Genia, Bonnyville-Cold Lake (PC)
Quadri, Sohail, Edmonton-Mill Woods (PC)
Wilson, Jeff, Calgary-Shaw (W)
Young, Steve, Edmonton-Riverview (PC)

Legislative Officers

Jill Clayton	Information and Privacy Commissioner
Del Graff	Child and Youth Advocate
Peter Hourihan	Ombudsman, Public Interest Commissioner
Glen Resler	Chief Electoral Officer
Merwan Saher	Auditor General
Marguerite Trussler, QC	Ethics Commissioner

Support Staff

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Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
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Tuesday, December 16, 2014

[Mr. Jeneroux in the chair]

The Chair: All right. Let's get started. We'll go quickly around the room, but first I'd like to welcome all members and support staff to the meeting and ask that everyone at the table and on the phone introduce themselves for the record.

I am Matt Jeneroux, MLA, Edmonton-South West, and chair of the committee.

Dr. Starke: Richard Starke, MLA, Vermilion-Lloydminster, and vice-chair.

Dr. Brown: Neil Brown, MLA for Calgary-Mackay-Nose Hill.

Mrs. Leskiw: Genia Leskiw, MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Quadri: Sohail Quadri, MLA, Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mr. Young: Good morning. Steve Young, MLA for Edmonton-Riverview.

Mr. Eggen: Good morning. I'm David Eggen, MLA for Edmonton-Calder.

Ms Blakeman: Good morning. I'd like to welcome each and every one of you to my fabulous, a little cloudy but fabulous, constituency of Edmonton-Centre. Laurie Blakeman.

Ms DeLong: This is Alana DeLong, the MLA for Calgary-Bow.

Mrs. Sawchuk: Karen Sawchuk, committee clerk.

The Chair: Wonderful.

I think Jeff and Gary are on the phone. Maybe start with Gary.

Mr. Bikman: Yes. Gary Bikman, Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Wilson: Jeff Wilson, Calgary-Shaw.

The Chair: Perfect. For you guys on the phone just let me know, just chime in if you want on the speakers list here today.

Okay. The officers' budget documents that were posted on the internal committee website yesterday are the documents that the committee had before it during its meetings the week of December 1.

A few housekeeping items before we get started. The microphone consoles are operated by the fine folks at *Hansard*. Please keep your BlackBerrys off the table as they can interfere with the audiofeed.

Agenda. Would a member move the adoption of our agenda, please. Moved by Sohail Quadri that the agenda for the December 16, 2014, meeting of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices be approved as distributed. All in favour? Any opposed? Carried.

Okay. Moving on. Item 3, decisions on the officers of the Legislature 2015-2016 budget estimates. As members recall, the committee passed a motion to approve a revised amount for the 2015-16 budget estimate for the office of the Chief Electoral Officer at its December 5 meeting, and today the committee will be deciding on the six remaining officers' budget estimates. Committee staff are passing out draft motion sheets so that we are consistent with our wording. Everybody has them? Great. For each motion the committee's approved motion for the Chief Electoral Officer is on those sheets highlighted in blue. Jeff and

Gary, you guys got those? They're the same as last week's. Okay. Perfect.

Mr. Bikman: I don't have them. I don't have access to them from where I am.

The Chair: Do you have an e-mail, Gary? Can we e-mail them to you?

Mr. Bikman: Yes. That would be perfect. E-mail them to gary@bikman.com.

The Chair: All right. Perfect. It's now on record, Gary's personal e-mail, everybody.

Okay. Now we'll go through looking at the motions. If it's okay with everybody, I would suggest that we will kind of go in the order of the way they came to our committee, so that would be starting with the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner. I'll start making a list here for those folks that would like to talk. Any on the phone? No? Okay.

We'll get started. Laurie, go ahead.

Ms Blakeman: Did you previously ask about the additional money for additional professional staff and their professional development budget? That was one of the increases in there. I just wondered if anyone had asked if the professional development was part of the contract.

The Chair: It's in *Hansard*. Yeah. I personally remember that being a bit of the discussion. I'm not sure how much in the weeds we got on that.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. That's the only specific question that's still left over from me going through all of this. It's interesting to me. I wonder how many of us anticipated that the additional staff last year was going to then become – that we would have to do catch-up, and the additional COLA and merit increases and professional development were now going to carry forward for quite a long time. I don't think I anticipated that, but fair enough. Okay. Done.

The Chair: Okay. All right. Jeff, not to put you on the spot, but did you have anything you wanted to bring forward at the time?

Mr. Wilson: Thanks, Matt. I believe that, you know, my suggestion of doing a 5.9 per cent increase over last year would remain true. As I'm driving, unfortunately, I don't have exactly what that total is. I'm hoping someone on the committee still may as per our last meeting, but I'd be happy to make a motion to adjust that budget accordingly.

The Chair: Okay. Sorry; are you putting the motion on the floor?

Mr. Wilson: Without the total in front of me, Matt, I think maybe someone else might be better off to do it. If I had the number of what we had discussed, I'd be happy to do it.

The Chair: We have the number if you're prepared to make the motion. It's up to you.

10:10

Mr. Wilson: I'd be happy to make the motion based on the number that we discussed last.

The Chair: Okay. The number that we have from you is \$7,395,000, and that, if memory serves me right, was population plus inflation, so 5.9 per cent, correct?

Mr. Wilson: Correct.

The Chair: Okay. There's the motion. Discussion on any of that?

Ms DeLong: I do believe that that motion really doesn't take into consideration the current price of oil, the current situation. Essentially, it just doesn't fit with the realities that we're dealing with right now. You know, we can give this kind of an increase here to the Privacy Commissioner, but then we're going to have to find money for children's services, we're going to have find money for health, and we're going to have find money for education. In this situation – I don't think that it's a very good situation, where we give them an increase and then possibly have to cut from education or cut from children's services. I think it's just not realistic in any way.

The Chair: Okay. We'll continue on with the process we've done currently. We'll do government member, opposition member, government member, opposition member, if that's good.

Laurie, did you want on the list?

Ms Blakeman: Yeah.

The Chair: Okay. So Laurie and then Genia.

Ms Blakeman: Well, the government members on the committee kind of have the rest of us at a disadvantage because you know the numbers that the government is working with and likely, based on the past, you've probably been sent in here with a percentage number. We don't quite know what that is, so you kind of left me at a disadvantage.

But there are two observations that I want to make about these budgets. One is that for the most part, I would argue, perhaps not for the Ombudsman but the others, that budgets are about public trust, and in many ways they're about watching us. I think we have to be very, very careful that we don't impair their ability to do that or impair the number of cases that they can process because this is our one big way of saying to the public that we are accountable and that these people are making sure we're accountable for the children, for how much is spent by us.

Point two is a rebuttal, I guess, a comment on Alana's point. I have to say: remember that these are really small budgets. If you put all of the increases of all of them together, we wouldn't even have pocket fluff in a sofa in children's affairs. They are just so small. I mean, we're looking at maybe a couple of million dollars total for increase across all of these offices. I understand that you guys are looking for big money, but frankly you're not going to find the big money in these offices that have such small budgets to begin with.

The other thing is, having run very small nonprofits, that a percentage cut has a bigger effect on a small budget than on a ginormous budget. If you're running a \$10 million organization and you get cut by a million bucks, you can still find enough money for paper clips, but if you're running a hundred thousand dollar organization and you get cut by 10 per cent, it's harder to find paper clip money because there just are no cracks for anything to fall through. None of these budgets are particularly large except for the Auditor General, and he isn't asking for much of an improvement.

Those are my cautions overall on whatever it is. Why don't you tell us what your number is or what you've been asked to cut, and then we would all know.

The Chair: Well, we'll deal with the motion here on the floor first. I don't know if we actually read it into the – go ahead, Karen.

Mrs. Sawchuk: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The motion by Mr. Wilson is that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2015-2016 budget estimates of the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner in the amount of \$7,395,000 as revised.

The Chair: Okay. So that's the motion on the floor.

Ms Blakeman: That's specific to OIPC, right?

The Chair: Yeah. That's the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner. So we'll go through all of them individually right now.

Genia, you're on.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you. I see where Laurie's coming from, but I also see where Alana's coming from. It may be a drop in the bucket, but a drop here, a drop here, a drop there: it ends up becoming a bigger drop. When things are tough, things like professional development – and I'll give an example. When I was a teacher, when things were tough, the school cancelled all out-of-province and all international professional development because times were tough, and we did internal professional development. It was a little bit here, a little bit here, a little here. If these officers could convince me that they were actually looking at the – because I asked them: "What if you had a zero per cent increase? What would you change in your budget?" The Chief Electoral Officer said: well, we'd get rid of the Senate. The Ethics Commissioner said, "Maybe the extra travel," that they would reduce that.

Ms Blakeman: She took it out.

Mrs. Leskiw: She took it out, I know, but at the time of the discussion.

So I look at this budget, and there are things here that – do you really, really need it? Is it a need, or is it a nice want? I really think that they have some nice wants here and not a reality of what actually they need to function in their office, and if they could convince me of that, then I might be – but right now, 5.6 per cent, I have difficulty with that.

The Chair: We have David and then Neil.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you. Certainly, it's not easy to scrutinize each of these offices and presume to look for places where they would take out expenditures. Certainly, it's necessary to look very hard, but it's also very important to bring certain larger principles to bear on the importance of these offices and their function. I would venture to say that at this juncture, especially for the public and, I think, for the sake of democracy, it's very important to have strong, independent public institutions that can provide scrutiny and a sense of security and a different set of eyes on the government. I mean, everyone's very concerned about the state of democracy here in this province right now. Would it be any worse of a thing to go after and cut the budgets of the independent offices that are meant to scrutinize the conduct of the government here now, especially at this juncture where we're at in this province? I just really don't see it.

You know, if anything, you just don't say that it's from year to year and, oh, well, the Privacy Commissioner – it's not like it's a static thing. Many of these offices have just been created fairly recently, and they are in a dynamic upswing in their capacity to fully do their jobs. With the Child and Youth Advocate, for example, it's only been about three to four years maybe, and they're just filling into that place that's been required to do that job.

I am just exercising, you know, some caution here to remind people of the importance of these offices and how they perform scrutiny of how the government conducts itself, so I am not prepared to make a cut to the Privacy Commissioner here at this time.

The Chair: All right. Neil.

Dr. Brown: Thanks, Chair. I am unable to support Mr. Wilson's motion. I feel, as has been mentioned by a couple of my colleagues, that it's not appropriate in the present circumstances.

I want to start by saying that each of these legislative offices has an important role to play and does important work on behalf of our Legislature and on behalf of the people of Alberta. However, we have to deal with the budget realities of today.

10:20

I've been on this committee for several years now, and we have always acted in a nonpartisan way. I think, notwithstanding Mr. Eggen's comments, that we all agree that these offices act on behalf of all Albertans and all parties regardless of their affiliation. In my capacity as a member of this committee over the last several years I've got to say that we have given, in every instance that I can recall, one hundred per cent of what has been asked for to each and every one of these legislative offices. We have never cut a dime out of what they've asked for.

But these circumstances are different. We are facing a budgetary dilemma in the province of Alberta right now which is without precedent. I am very mindful of that when we're making these budgets. I think that no matter how small the budget, we have to deal with everybody equitably and fairly, but I cannot support this budget. I'm prepared, depending on what happens with Mr. Wilson's motion, to make an alternate motion. I'm opposed, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay. Do we want to move ahead and vote on Mr. Wilson's motion now?

Dr. Starke: Question.

The Chair: The question has been called.

Do you want to speak on this particular motion or in general?

Ms Blakeman: Well, I think that there was a comment earlier, that I could tell was being challenged, about new requirements in a number of these departments, and that's true. We've either assigned new legislation for them to have to deal with, or we've given them entirely new jobs. I mean, the Ombudsman is now also the Public Interest Commissioner, and we added some things to the Ombudsman but also to the Privacy Commissioner. Sorry. I'd have to think about the other one. We have asked them to do more work, which is why they had the increase in salaries last year that they're trying to complete in this particular year. But I take it that the hon. member opposite is looking for a larger percentage cut than what is presumed here. Would I be correct?

The Chair: Guys, we won't go back and forth like this.

Did you want to wrap up some of your comments? The question has been called here, so we're going to vote.

Ms Blakeman: I'm sorry. I'm not allowed to ask a question and have it answered?

The Chair: You can ask the question, but we're not going to go back and forth between two members here. If you want to put it

on, we have a speakers list, and we can come back to you afterwards.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. I guess I'll wait for the person to answer me in their turn on the list.

The Chair: Okay. Come on.

Dr. Brown: I just wanted to say that I think we're speaking to Mr. Wilson's motion right now, and I think I've articulated the fact that I can't support it. I'll leave it at that for the moment.

The Chair: Okay. Do you have any wrap-up comments that you want to make, Laurie, before we vote?

Okay. The question has been called.

Mr. Wilson: Mr. Chair, if I could.

The Chair: Yeah. You bet. Go ahead, Jeff.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you. I just wanted to put it on the record that the reason why we came to the 5.9 per cent was because it was most recently noted as the population plus inflation growth in the province. Where the 5.9 per cent increase lands, it just barely allows the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner to cover the mandated increases in salary that were negotiated by the government of Alberta, not only including the rent increases but also the senior management pay increase that was listed. Going any lower than 5.9 per cent – so that is the will of the committee – will have a direct impact on not only what they do in terms of professional development, but it will have a direct impact on whether or not that office can maintain the current level of staffing. So I just wanted to get that on the record and make sure that the committee is aware that going lower will seriously reduce the capacity of a very important independent office of this Legislature.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. All right. Appreciate it.

There are no more speakers. Again, the question has been called. All in favour of the motion? Any opposed? Okay. The motion is defeated.

All right. Neil, you said you had – I'll leave it to you.

Dr. Brown: Yes, Mr. Chair. I'm prepared to make a motion that would cut 2 per cent from last year's budgeted amount. In the circumstances I don't think we can justify an increase. I think minus 2 per cent would work out to a budget of \$6,843,000. I'm prepared to make a motion. I would move that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2015-2016 budget estimates of the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner in the amount of \$6,843,340 as revised.

The Chair: Okay. That motion's on the floor. Any discussion? No discussion? Laurie, go ahead.

Ms Blakeman: I think this will impair the ability of this office to do their work because it wouldn't be covering the increases. Unless the member can detail to me how he arrived at this, I am, frankly, loath to go through someone else's budget and nitpick line by line. I agree with the questioning on travel across the board, for example, but, you know, we're beyond going line by line and nitpicking. I think that a 2 per cent cut is going to impair their ability to do the job. It will not cover the staff. It will not cover a disaster recovery project that they were trying to do, which I think is a responsible thing to be going forward with in

this day and age, particularly in light of the two different power outages that we've seen in Calgary. I think that's extremely problematic for what's going on here, and it would certainly impair that work as well as the IT that they were looking for plus the catch-up on the backlogs, which we're still trying to do.

I mean, we're paying today for not having funded this appropriately earlier in that they are still backlogged on their investigations. Is anybody going to die because of that?

Mr. Eggen: Maybe.

Ms Blakeman: Maybe. I think that's where the problem happens.

Again, it's a smaller budget. Going through and cutting 2 per cent out of this is going to hurt a lot more than cutting 2 per cent out of Advanced Education or Infrastructure or Culture. I'm speaking in opposition to the motion because I think this is – we'll see whether this is the consistent motion that comes forward. Coming from this person, I don't think that would be what's behind it, but I'm very concerned that there might be an element of punishment. I don't think this member would be doing that, but I sure hope I'm not seeing it in the rest of the requests for cuts because I'm assuming now that we're going to see cuts.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Great.

Karen, do you mind reading the revised motion just so we're all clear?

Then we have Richard and David.

Mrs. Sawchuk: Okay. Thank you. Moved by Dr. Brown that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2015-2016 budget estimates of the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner in the amount of \$6,843,340 as revised.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Richard.

Dr. Starke: Thank you, Chair. Well, I support the motion. I think it reflects the kind of fiscal prudence that is being demanded by the current set of circumstances that we have. There are no sacred cows here. None.

With regard to the comments that were made on the last motion about public scrutiny and public trust, you know, quite frankly, I've had lots of situations where a family has a situation where the breadwinner is earning less money, and even the watchdog eats less. That's the way it works. That's a reality that, you know, perhaps the opposition parties don't want to face up to, but as a government we need to make those kinds of difficult decisions. Those are the kinds of decisions that in a governing situation need to be made.

10:30

A 2 per cent cut, while it will perhaps affect the functioning of this and other offices – I can tell you that the kinds of scrutiny and the kinds of cutting that are going to have to be done to a number of different government departments, including health and education and others: those are departments as well that are going to have to live under this financial reality. To suggest that someone should be immune to that process is, to me, not realistic, and it's not reflective of the reality that we're in.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, guys. We spend a lot of time together. Let's keep it above board. We're trying to do good work here for the province. The partisan stuff: let's keep that off the record.

Go ahead, David.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Chair. You know, the Privacy Commissioner is a perfect example of what I was talking about before in regard to an office growing into an emerging need. The office of the Privacy Commissioner, for example, deals with electronic records, and the growth in the use of electronic records is obvious to everyone. Certainly, the importance of providing scrutiny and transparency over the information that the government uses is fundamental to democracy.

May I point out as well that freedom of information is a very large component of the Privacy Commissioner, and, of course, the importance of freedom of information legislation and the smooth functioning of FOIP is absolutely fundamental to a properly functioning democracy. Again, considering other circumstances that we live in and considering the atmosphere for cuts, it's more important than ever that the Privacy Commissioner has the capacity to do its job and to move into the places where information is going in 2014 and 2015, and so forth. I would caution everyone in making cuts around the Privacy Commissioner's budget.

The Chair: All right. I have Neil and Laurie.

Mr. Bikman: Gary Bikman, too.

The Chair: Thanks, Gary.

Dr. Brown: Just in response to that, the comment by my colleague, I believe that the circumstances that we're in right now with respect to the price of oil and the royalty income: we're looking at, realistically, somewhere over 18 per cent of our budget lost through the decrease in royalties with oil at its present prices. Over 18 per cent. In fact, I don't know what the latest figure was, but I figured it out last week, and it was an 18 per cent cut, just under a \$7 billion loss to the treasury of the province of Alberta. We're talking about a 2 per cent cut versus an 18 per cent cut in revenue, and I think it's a very modest thing. I think that it's something that can be accommodated within the existing budget in the supplies and services. You know, people will cut where they need to, so I believe it's a modest decrease. It could well have been more, but 2 per cent is a number that I believe is justifiable.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Neil.

Laurie, and then if we have no other government members, Gary.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Member. That's useful to know.

Unfortunately, I have the benefit of a long institutional memory here, and one of the things I can tell you and one of the things I am concerned about in the work being proposed here today is that we ended up paying significantly more in some areas the last time there were significant cuts in our budget. We ended up not saving that much because we didn't invest, for example, in infrastructure and then had to pay a massive infrastructure deficit, plus we heated up the economy, and it made everything more expensive and slower. So, you know, you've got to be careful about this stuff. It's hard to see the outcomes.

One of the questions that I had was: what was the outcome that you're expecting here? You're saying 18 per cent. I'm trying to figure out how long you think this is going to go on, and one of my concerns is: you lose 18 per cent for how long? Three months, four months, half a year, the whole year? Well, that's part of my problem. You guys have expert opinions you can pull on to get that information; I have to work without that.

One of the things that happened the last time there was a big cut is that then there were big surpluses, and there was no planning whatsoever. So money just went out of here by the shovelful, and nobody had said: well, if we get money back, then we're going to reinvest in this department, this department, this department. There was none of that kind of thought or preparation for it. I'm really concerned that I see the government launching on another big cutting program again with no eye to how you come out of it on the other end.

The second part of it is ideological. Okay. I take you on the 18 per cent cut, but that's a choice of the government in that they could increase taxes, but they choose not to. That's another part of what's going on here. I say: well, you wouldn't have to do this if you reinstated a progressive income tax, for example.

So, regretfully, I don't think I am going to be able to support the member's motion although I appreciate the information that he's given. I understand part of where he's going. But you guys are not giving me the whole picture here, so it's hard for me to make those decisions.

As to my other hon. colleague here, with respect, I don't think he has any idea of the constraints we work under in opposition or I work under personally, so please don't make those kinds of suppositions without a little more background.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Okay. We just want to remind everybody of the time. We've booked you all for an hour here. We're already 40 minutes into that hour, and we still have a number more to go.

Mr. Bikman: I'll be brief. A lot of people watching this are going to be relieved and hope their departments get off this lightly, which we know they're unlikely to do. I've got a lot of confidence in the Ethics Commissioner and her staff. They're bright, creative people. They'll figure it out. It sure isn't our place to specify methods, disagree on results. I'll be supporting this.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

The question has been called. All in favour of the motion? Any opposed? [interjections] Sorry, Laurie. You're asking for a recorded vote, then?

Ms Blakeman: Yes, please.

The Chair: We have a recorded vote. Okay. We got it. Perfect. Yeah. We got everybody. That motion is carried.

[For the motion: Mr. Bikman, Dr. Brown, Ms DeLong, Mrs. Leskiw, Mr. Quadri, Dr. Starke, Mr. Young]

[Against the motion: Ms Blakeman, Mr. Eggen, Mr. Wilson]

The Chair: It's on to – again, it's in the order that we did them – the Ethics Commissioner.

Quickly, before we do that, members should also have a copy of the letter from the Ethics Commissioner advising that she would like to withdraw the office's request for an additional \$5,000 for travel. Would a member like to make a motion with respect to the office's 2015-2016 budget estimate? I'll open the floor for discussion. Richard.

Dr. Starke: Okay. Thank you, Chair. I would move that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2015-16 budget estimates of the office of the Ethics Commissioner in the amount of \$953,540 as revised.

The Chair: Okay. The motion is on the floor. Discussion?

10:40

Ms Blakeman: Again, I have the question about whether the salary increases and subsequent benefits – well, they don't have any kind of schooling involved – were part of actual contract or hiring agreements. In other words, are they kept to that legally? I'm just wondering if that was asked and answered before. I don't think so.

The Chair: Dr. Starke, do you want to respond?

Ms Blakeman: I'm sorry; the cut that you're doing is what per cent, sir?

Dr. Starke: Certainly, there are two answers. The cut is 2 per cent. With regard to the rest of your question, those questions were asked, maybe not in exactly that point form but in the discussion that we had with the Ethics Commissioner when she presented along with the lobbyist registrar as well to committee.

Again, as far as the specifics of it, I think Mr. Bikman made a very good point that it's not in our purview to decide where and how the savings need to be realized. We have very capable people in all of these offices. They will make those difficult decisions, and I trust in their judgment and their ability to continue to perform the core part of their mandate to the people of Alberta albeit in a more restricted budgetary environment. I think a 2 per cent decrease – again, as Mr. Bikman said, there are going to be a lot of departments that would be thrilled to have a 2 per cent cut. I think that this is prudent, and I think that this is a reasonable sort of response, and that's why I made the motion.

The Chair: Okay. David, go ahead.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. You know, it's interesting. There's sort of a theme to my comments here. Again, the Ethics Commissioner's office has expanded its scope considerably in the last couple of years in regard to the lobbyist registry. Also, I know from the hiring process that we went through that we hired this Ethics Commissioner on the strength of some changes and reforms that she was going to enact, right? You know, impairing or compromising the capacity of an independent office to provide scrutiny on ethics through a budget cut I find very difficult. Considering the independence and the auspices by which we hired Marguerite Trussler in the first place to provide a fair and balanced approach and the money that it would take to do the job, I trust her, quite frankly. I certainly can't support cutting the Ethics Commissioner's office's budget for this next fiscal year.

The Chair: All right. With no other speakers on the list, I'll call the question. All in favour of the motion as presented? All opposed? That motion is carried.

Ms Blakeman: Can I get that noted, please?

The Chair: We'll have a recorded vote.

[For the motion: Mr. Bikman, Dr. Brown, Ms DeLong, Mrs. Leskiw, Mr. Quadri, Dr. Starke, Mr. Young]

[Against the motion: Ms Blakeman, Mr. Eggen, Mr. Wilson]

The Chair: All right. On to the office of the Ombudsman and the office of the Public Interest Commissioner. We'll split these into two. Just so everybody knows, the committee received correspondence from Mr. Hourihan following the December 5 meeting. This was also posted on the internal website for the members' information.

Would a member like to make a motion with respect to the Ombudsman 2015-2016 budget estimate? I'll open the floor to discussion. Steve Young.

Mr. Young: Thank you. I move that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2015-2016 budget estimates of the office of the Ombudsman in the amount of \$3,282,000 as revised.

The Chair: Okay. The motion is on the floor. Discussion?

Ms Blakeman: Just for confirmation, that's 2 per cent?

Mr. Young: That's my motion.

The Chair: Yes.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. I just didn't hear the 2 per cent. Sorry. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. No government members. David, go ahead.

Mr. Eggen: I just wanted to ask for that same clarification, if it's 2 per cent off the amount. Is it 2 per cent off the amount after he made his revision letter or the change? Yeah?

The Chair: Okay. All right. No other people on the list. I'll call the question. All in favour of the motion as presented? Any opposed? We'll do a recorded vote.

[For the motion: Mr. Bikman, Dr. Brown, Ms DeLong, Mrs. Leskiw, Mr. Quadri, Dr. Starke, Mr. Young]

[Against the motion: Ms Blakeman, Mr. Eggen, Mr. Wilson]

The Chair: Okay. The motion is carried.

Let's move on to the office of the Public Interest Commissioner. I'd ask for a motion with respect to the Public Interest Commissioner's 2015-16 budget estimate.

Mrs. Leskiw: Moved by me, Genia Leskiw, that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2015-16 budget estimate of the office of the Public Interest Commissioner in the amount of \$1,248,520 as revised.

The Chair: Okay. The motion is on the floor. Any discussion?

Ms Blakeman: This is on the Public Interest Commissioner?

The Chair: Yeah.

Ms Blakeman: I was less concerned about the Ombudsman one and almost voted for it because I think there was a bit of padding there, but this one is brand new and I was really hoping would have more investigations under its belt, so I'm cautious about cutting them at this point in case we're really wrong, but I suppose they could do a supplementary supply request if it was that case, but I am cautious about this one because it is so new.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

No other speakers? I'll call the question. All in favour? Any opposed? A recorded vote has been called for.

[For the motion: Mr. Bikman, Dr. Brown, Ms DeLong, Mrs. Leskiw, Mr. Quadri, Dr. Starke, Mr. Wilson, Mr. Young]

[Against the motion: Ms Blakeman, Mr. Eggen]

The Chair: All right. Thank you. The motion is carried.

Now moving on to the office of the Child and Youth Advocate. Would a member like to make a motion with respect to the 2015-16 budget estimate for the office of the Child and Youth Advocate? I'll open the floor to discussion.

Ms DeLong: I'd just like to get on with moving the motion. The office of the Child and Youth Advocate is an office that I really appreciate – really appreciate – the work that they're doing, but the reality is that we've got to make sure that all the budgets are down. These are some of the first ones, and we've got harder ones to deal with coming up in the future.

So I move that

the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2015-16 budget estimate of the office of the Child and Youth Advocate in the amount of \$12,967,360 as revised.

The Chair: The motion is on the floor for discussion.

Mr. Eggen: Just to clarify, are you making a 2 per cent cut from the budget that was proposed or the budget from last year?

Ms DeLong: From their budget from last year.

Dr. Starke: Including supplementary.

Mr. Eggen: Including supplementary. Okay.

Again, this is an office that is just getting started, and the scope by which they have been given responsibility has made it necessary for them to make the proposed expansion possible through the budget. You know, it's just something I really, really think is necessary, not just to exist but to find the full scope of their practice in scrutinizing children in care, so I certainly can't accept cutting the budget of the Child and Youth Advocate.

10:50

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, David. Any other discussion?

Mr. Wilson: Yeah. Matt, can you put me on the list?

The Chair: Sure. Okay.

We'll go Laurie, then Jeff. Go ahead, Laurie.

Ms Blakeman: Sure. I'm struggling with this one, especially since you're cutting not from what they requested but from what they received last year. Really, it brings them down. They in particular have had to come back to us a number of times in order to be able to do the work that we were expecting of them, so either we agree that we don't expect that work from them – they've been pretty clear in the times they've come back to us, saying: this is what we need in order to do the work appropriately. We've had a number of discussions with them in the last 18 months because of that. I'm quite concerned, especially knowing that it's a 2 per cent cut off last year's budget, or the year that we're in. I think that'll be a real strain given the work we're expecting them to do.

The Chair: Okay. Sorry, Jeff. We have a government member, so we'll just go to Alana quickly, and then we'll go to you.

Ms DeLong: I just wanted to make it clear that the previous 2 per cent cuts were based on last year's budget. This one is based on their budget plus their supplemental, so we're actually starting at a higher number.

Ms Blakeman: The \$13 million?

Ms DeLong: Yeah. I mean, we have done the cuts the same in all of them. Again I've got to say that I see, you know, the children's advocate role as extremely important. Children's services has always been something that I've held close to my heart, well, like most people. It is something where we've got to be the same across the board, or we'd be looking like we were somehow doing favouritism. Again, I have to stress how important their work is and how I very much appreciate it.

The Chair: Okay. Thanks, Alana.
Go ahead, Jeff.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you, Chair. I cannot support this. I'm sorry. In response to Ms DeLong, I think that, you know, understanding that the allocation of scarce resources is a challenge for government, I fully understand some of the justification for where you're holding back and where you're making cuts in regard to some of these offices, but this one is different. It should be looked at differently. It is an office that deals with and advocates for some of our most vulnerable youth in this province, and to just lump it into another group that needs to learn to cut because you don't want favouritism is an argument that, as far as I'm concerned, falls well short of logic and reason.

As much as I respect the members opposite and their attempt to be prudent with the dollars as they see them or the way in which they are taking them coming in with the current oil prices, I would just encourage them that this is not the office, this not the area to be looking to make those cuts. This is a front-line service, no different in some ways than health care, no different in some ways than education. I think this will have a far-reaching impact.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Jeff.

No more speakers? I'll call the question. All those in favour? Opposed?

Ms Blakeman: Recorded. Thank you.

The Chair: There's been a call for a recorded vote on that as well.

[For the motion: Mr. Bikman, Dr. Brown, Ms DeLong, Mrs. Leskiw, Mr. Quadri, Dr. Starke, Mr. Young]

[Against the motion: Ms Blakeman, Mr. Eggen, Mr. Wilson]

The Chair: Okay. We are moving on to our last office, the office of the Auditor General. Would a member like to make a motion with respect to the 2015-16 budget estimate for the office of the Auditor General? I'll open the floor to discussion. Sohail Quadri.

Mr. Quadri: Yes. I'd like to move the motion that the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approve the 2015-16 budget estimates for the office of the Auditor General in the amount of \$26,754,000 as revised.

The Chair: Okay. The motion is on the floor. Any speakers? Go ahead, Laurie. I saw your hand first. Then David.

Ms Blakeman: I can speak from experience as to the frugality of this particular office. They have a long history of trying very hard to return some of their budget, in other words to come in under budget, but also to continue a very high standard, particularly in recruitment of – they're not students and they're not interns. There's another word.

Mrs. Sawchuk: Articling.

Ms Blakeman: Articling. Thank you. As they work towards their CA designation.

So I would advise you not to vote against the Auditor General's budget because any time this has been done before, it has not worked out for government or opposition. When they cannot cover everything, eventually somebody figures it out, and the egg is always on our faces. I think we're better off with him working at full steam than without him and his office working at full steam.

The Chair: Thank you, Laurie.

Mr. Bikman: Gary here. May I speak?

The Chair: Yeah. Okay. We'll go David and then Gary in lieu of no other government members. Just so you're all – I'm comfortable staying, but we're about four minutes to our allotted time, just so everyone is aware.

Go ahead, David.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. I just wanted to clarify. Is that a 2 per cent off the last year's budget, then?

Mr. Quadri: Including supplements.

Mr. Eggen: Including supplements.

Mr. Quadri: But you've got to understand this, you know. He's also asking for \$740,000 in extra money for two people.

Mr. Eggen: Right. Yeah, I know. I remember. I was there.

Mr. Quadri: So you have to take that into consideration.

Mr. Eggen: Right. Well, you know, I think Mr. Bikman put it very well that the people that run these offices have the best capacity to make decisions about being careful with the money. I know that the Auditor General was doing that already when he came in to visit us last week. I mean, every year that I've done this with him, I say, "Well, don't you want to expand? There are so many other things you can audit," and so forth. They have a self-regulating element to their office already that you should think about very carefully. So I can't support cutting the office of the Auditor General of Alberta here today.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, David.

We'll go to Gary, then, on the phone.

Mr. Bikman: Thank you. If any of the rumours we're hearing in the news lately are true, we're going to need this office even more, so I oppose the cuts. Cue the laughter.

The Chair: Everyone is here checking Twitter, wondering what you're talking about, Gary, but, hey, we'll let you have that one.

Dr. Starke: I want to just have on the record that these proposed adjustments, or these moved adjustments, to budget are not in any way a statement with regard to a value proposition as to the work that these various officers of the Legislature do. That's not the point. You know, that's not the point here at all. All of them perform important work. We understand that. I understand that. But all that being said, we have very specific realities that we're dealing with from a budgetary standpoint.

You know, quite frankly, I think that when all the dust settles and we have a budget for the '15-16 year, it will show that a 2 per cent reduction is actually preserving the function of these offices at a level that a lot of government ministries are not going to enjoy. While we can split hairs as to whether it's a critical or a

front-line service or not a front-line service, we have chosen in our proposals to not make any differentiation from one office to the other. It's minus 2 across the board. We rely on the resources and the abilities of the various people that are in these offices, all of whom have considerable ability. Yes, I would acknowledge and agree that the Auditor General is particularly frugal – I agree – but we are all going to be challenged this year, all of us, in terms of meeting objectives from a budgetary standpoint, and I would suggest that nobody will be immune from that process. So I do support this proposal.

Mr. Chair, those are my comments.

11:00

The Chair: Okay.

Ms Blakeman: I'm speaking to this motion but also more generally. It's very difficult for me to make good decisions here because I'm not privy to the overall plan that all of the other members at the table are, with the exception of the Wildrose member on the phone and the New Democrat member beside me here. You guys have much more information on this than I do. I still have not heard, you know, how long this is expected to go on. Are we going into a second year, where we would be anticipating that these offices would have to last two years under the restraints that are being put there? One year? I mean, you guys have got the experts. Where are you with this?

I'll note that a number of times I think I hear the members saying – and forgive me if my construct is incorrect, but it does sound like: since we're treating everybody equally, that's fair. Well, as a long-time champion of equality I can tell you that treating people equally does not create equality. Those that had smaller budgets will have a harder time here than those that had larger budgets, so it's not equal or fair.

I also am really concerned that I'm not hearing any kind of plan for surpluses or a plan for reinstatement. What I hear is that they're going to cut and have no idea about when this money might get restored. I've just seen this one come and go. This would be the third time now, and it never saves taxpayers money. It always costs them money, mostly because that kind of work has not been done.

I really hope that we're going to be hearing this either from members on the committee or as a larger announcement soon, but I will so enjoy watching the Wildrose members now on the Conservative side hoisting themselves on their own petard.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. With no more speakers, I will call the question. All in favour of the motion? Any opposed?

Ms Blakeman: Recorded, please.

[For the motion: Dr. Brown, Ms DeLong, Mrs. Leskiw, Mr. Quadri, Dr. Starke, Mr. Young]

[Against the motion: Mr. Bikman, Ms Blakeman, Mr. Eggen, Mr. Wilson]

The Chair: With that, the motion is carried.

All right. Thank you, everybody. The motions of the committee will be forwarded to the President of the Treasury Board and Finance along with copies of the officers' budget documents and transcripts from all of the committee meetings, including today's.

Moving on to other business, any items for discussion?

If not, the date of our next meeting will be at the call of the chair.

Adjournment. Would a member make a motion to adjourn. David. All in favour? Right. Good. Thank you, everybody.

[The committee adjourned at 11:03 a.m.]

