



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Legislative Offices

Tuesday, September 29, 2015
4:30 p.m.

Transcript No. 29-1-2

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Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

Woollard, Denise, Edmonton-Mill Creek (ND), Chair
Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (ND), Deputy Chair

Bhullar, Manmeet Singh, Calgary-Greenway (PC)
Connolly, Michael R.D., Calgary-Hawkwood (ND)
Cooper, Nathan, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills (W)
Cortes-Vargas, Estefania, Strathcona-Sherwood Park (ND)
Kleinsteuber, Jamie, Calgary-Northern Hills (ND)
Nixon, Jason, Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre (W)
Shepherd, David, Edmonton-Centre (ND)
Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (ND)
van Dijken, Glenn, Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock (W)

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Del Graff	Child and Youth Advocate
Peter Hourihan	Ombudsman, Public Interest Commissioner
Glen Resler	Chief Electoral Officer
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Tracey Sales	Communications Consultant
Janet Schwegel	Managing Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

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[Ms Woollard in the chair]

The Chair: Good afternoon. I'd like to call the meeting today to order. I'd like to welcome the members and support staff attending today's meeting of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices.

I'd ask that everyone at the table introduce themselves for the record, and I'll then call on the members joining the meeting via teleconference to introduce themselves. Thank you.

Mr. Dach: Lorne Dach, Edmonton-McClung, deputy chair.

Cortes-Vargas: Estefania Cortes-Vargas, MLA for Strathcona-Sherwood Park.

Ms Sweet: Heather Sweet, MLA, Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Kleinsteuber: Jamie Kleinsteuber, MLA, Calgary-Northern Hills.

Mr. Shepherd: David Shepherd, MLA, Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. van Dijken: Glenn van Dijken, MLA, Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock.

Mr. Nixon: Jason Nixon, MLA, Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre.

Mr. Cooper: Nathan Cooper, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Reynolds: Rob Reynolds, Law Clerk and director of interparliamentary relations, Legislative Assembly.

Mrs. Sawchuk: Karen Sawchuk, committee clerk.

The Chair: Denise Woollard, MLA for Edmonton-Mill Creek and chair of this committee.

The people on the phone, please.

Mr. Bhullar: Manmeet Bhullar, Calgary-Greenway.

Mr. Connolly: Michael Connolly, MLA, Calgary-Hawkwood.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

I'd like to thank the committee staff for organizing and pulling the meeting together so quickly, and I'd also like to thank the Wildrose and Progressive Conservative members of this committee for making themselves available on such short notice. I know that many of them had already made arrangements for Friday, but I think that in the interests of all Albertans it's good that they were able to make the time for this meeting today.

Now, the meeting agenda was posted to the internal committee website yesterday afternoon. If anyone needs a copy, please let our committee clerk know.

Before we turn to the business at hand, just a few housekeeping items. The microphone consoles are operated by *Hansard*. Please keep your cellphones and BlackBerrys on silent and off the table because they can interfere with the audiofeed.

Let's have a look at the agenda. Would a member move adoption of our agenda, please?

Mr. Dach: I'll so move that the agenda for the September 29, 2015, meeting of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices be approved as circulated.

The Chair: Okay. All in favour? Any opposed? The motion is carried.

All right. Item 3 on our agenda, officers of the Legislature: 2015 compensation review. First things first. I want to sincerely apologize for the decision we made last week. During the election we promised Albertans that if we made a mistake, we would be honest, we would admit it, and we would fix it. That's what we're doing now. We're putting this right.

Over the course of the past weekend I had the opportunity to hear from a number of colleagues and constituents regarding the decision made by the NDP members of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices last week. It's clear that a mistake was made, and for that mistake we sincerely apologize.

While a meeting was initially set for this coming Friday to reconsider these matters, I decided to call the committee together sooner, this afternoon, in order to provide certainty to the public about our intention to reverse course. Given the fiscal restraints we're living under and the economic uncertainty that many Albertan families are experiencing, we think it is appropriate that we take another look at this issue. Alberta's six independent officers of the Legislature do important work for the people of Alberta, but that's not the issue here. As the opposition pointed out last week, the issue is that now is not the right time for an increase.

I would now ask if a member would move a motion that will permit us to revisit the committee's September 24 decision in this matter, and then I'll open the floor to discussion.

Mr. Kleinsteuber, MLA for Calgary-Northern Hills.

Mr. Kleinsteuber: Yes. I move that the motion passed at the September 24, 2015, meeting of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approving a compensation strategy for the officers of the Legislature effective April 1, 2015, be rescinded and that for the fiscal year 2015-2016 the salaries for each of the officers remain at their respective 2014-2015 levels.

The Chair: Okay. Would anyone have something that they'd like to say to that motion?

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair. I know it's hard to believe that I might have something to say about the motion. Let me open by thanking the other members on this committee for taking the lead of the opposition and moving to reverse the decision that was made last week by the government members on this committee. I would, however, like a little bit of clarification around a couple of issues surrounding the arrival at this decision. Particularly, I'm interested to know who the "we" is that you refer to when you say: it's clear that we made a mistake. I'd just like some clarification around who the "we" is.

The Chair: I thought about it. I listened to colleagues, I listened to constituents, so the "we" is the people that voiced concern, to whom I listened, and those were the people that felt that we needed to revisit it, to look at it again. I realized that we made a mistake. We're admitting it, fixing it, and setting things straight.

Mr. Cooper: Excellent. Thank you.

Some members of the committee as well as some folks who are in this meeting will remember a committee meeting fairly similar to this in the spring of last year, when this committee made one decision and then others around the precinct of the Assembly felt it reasonable that the committee return to make a different decision. While your statement says that we will meet today to reverse the course and while I appreciate that the committee is very likely to change that course, I am hoping for some assurances today that there was little or no influence from the Premier's office or anyone in Executive Council that would have required this meeting this afternoon. As you know, we spent some time

yesterday corresponding about the frustration around this meeting being held today and not later in the week, so I'm hoping for some assurances from the chair that, in fact, no outside influence, including the Premier's office or Executive Council, influenced the timing of this meeting.

The Chair: I made the decision based upon what I was hearing, as I said, from colleagues and constituents. I decided that moving it forward was the right course of action in order to help show everyone that we really are changing, are reversing that decision. We're changing the action. We're going to take a course of action that is more fiscally responsible.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. I appreciate that. Certainly, we have heard from people in our constituencies very similar concerns. At the meeting last week we laid out our concerns around the economic realities that many Albertans face. You know, again, we're thankful that it appears that the right decision is going to be made.

4:40

Having said that, yesterday a member of the Wildrose caucus that sits on this committee received an e-mail from a caucus staff member of the NDP that would lead us to believe that there are other influences at play. We don't believe that we were supposed to receive this e-mail. However, it's unfortunate, or fortunate, that we did. The e-mail reads: three Wildrose MLAs have already responded with absolutely not; the meeting time does not work; we need to check ASAP with Denise to see if she still intends on the meeting tomorrow anyway; if she does, the Wildrose might raise a huge stink about it, claiming that they weren't given enough time to be consulted on the matter; this would continue the media cycle on the matter.

My question today is: is the meeting that we're having here truly about what's best for Albertans, or is it about stopping the media cycle on this matter?

The Chair: This is truly about what's best for Albertans. It's how to assure people that we are doing the right thing, and that's really all that I can say on the matter. I don't know any more about that specific issue. But it's really, truly about getting things sorted for people's assurance that we are doing the right thing.

Mr. Cooper: So this particular staffer was not from Executive Council or concerned about the media cycle and actually just about the meeting at hand?

The Chair: I called the meeting, and I stood behind this time for the meeting, absolutely, because we want to get concerns raised. We want to get the mistakes recognized and move on from there: fix things, make them right, and move on.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. I appreciate that. You know, from the opposition's perspective, if that is the case, we also are happy to move on. We encourage all members of the committee that in the future everything that we say isn't untoward or trying to usurp the government. This committee is an independent committee of the Assembly. We've heard points of privilege in the past on the independence of this committee. I know that if you speak to the Minister of Education, he will be happy to provide you with some of his comments, that are available in *Hansard*, on the independence of this particular committee.

It's critically important that at the committee level and here we are putting the needs of Albertans first, and that's exactly what the Wildrose caucus and the members on this committee from the Wildrose caucus were endeavouring to do last week. I think it's fair

to say that we would be willing to move forward. I wouldn't speak for the other members but to say that, you know, here in Edmonton we all have a job to do. We are endeavouring to put the needs of Albertans first, which is exactly what we were doing last week, and I hope and trust that that is the case for the government caucus on this committee as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cooper. I appreciate hearing that. That's great.

Mr. Kleinsteuber.

Mr. Kleinsteuber: Thank you, Chair. Just like you and many others in the room, I heard a lot about this issue over the weekend, so I would just like to apologize for the decision that I supported at that time. There is a lot of economic uncertainty here in the province. Given this, this is clearly not the time for an increase. This is why I put forward this motion.

The Chair: Thank you.

Member Cortes-Vargas, please.

Cortes-Vargas: Alberta's six officers of the Legislature all work very hard for the people in Alberta – and, yes, it is about the people in Alberta – but that's not the issue here. What I understand is that previously this committee put on a salary freeze when in similar economic circumstances, and given the current fiscal restraints and in line with MLA salary freezes, I believe that this freeze should apply equally to these officers.

The Chair: Thank you.

Anyone else? Okay. I'll call the question on the motion, then.

Mr. Bhullar: Sorry, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Oh, I'm sorry. Mr. Bhullar.

Mr. Bhullar: My apologies; the mute button takes a second sometimes.

I just want to make a very brief comment. Sometimes saying "I'm sorry" is the most difficult of actions. I appreciate the fact that somebody is recognizing that the decision that was made last week was a very tough and, quite frankly, insulting decision for everyday, hard-working Albertans. I appreciate very much the fact that members of the government have found it within themselves to change the course of direction. I hope that they will continue to keep an open mind when members of the opposition, whether it be the Wildrose caucus or us, bring forth these types of ideas because this is just the beginning of what will be very difficult deliberations that we will be facing when it comes to Alberta's budget. In a spirit of co-operation I sincerely hope the members from the government caucus will in fact support these types of ideas when it comes to the budget being proposed later in October.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to read the motion one more time before we vote on it.

Mrs. Sawchuk: Moved by Mr. Kleinsteuber that

the motion passed at the September 24, 2015, meeting of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approving a compensation strategy for the officers of the Legislature effective April 1, 2015, be rescinded and that for the fiscal year 2015-2016 the salaries for each of the officers remain at their respective 2014-2015 levels.

The Chair: Thank you.

Questions? Comments? Mr. Connolly?

Mr. Connolly: No.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

All right. All in favour?

Mr. Cooper: A recorded vote, if we can.

The Chair: A recorded vote? Okay.

Mr. Dach: In favour.

Cortes-Vargas: In favour.

Ms Sweet: In favour.

Mr. Kleinsteuber: In favour.

Mr. Shepherd: In favour.

Mr. van Dijken: In favour.

Mr. Nixon: In favour.

Mr. Cooper: In favour.

Mr. Bhullar: In favour.

Mr. Connolly: In favour.

The Chair: Thank you. That's everybody, right? Nobody opposed? The motion is carried. Thank you to members for that.

Okay. We're on to item 4, conference attendance, the second matter of business, the Council on Governmental Ethics Laws conference, which is being held in Boston this year. Historically the committee has sent members to this conference, but given the realities facing the people of our province, I would ask us to revisit that decision.

Would a member make a motion that will permit us to revisit the committee's September 24 decision in this matter? Ms Sweet.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Madam Chair. I would like to move a motion that

the motion passed at the September 24, 2015, meeting of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices approving attendance at the 2015 Council on Governmental Ethics Laws conference in Boston, Massachusetts, from December 6 to 9, 2015, be rescinded and that the committee not send delegates to the 2015 conference.

The Chair: Thank you.

Discussion? Mr. Nixon.

Mr. Nixon: I'm certainly happy to see us revisiting this issue as well. I would point out that I think that we on the opposition side were pretty concerned about this when we met last week, but I don't want to pile on. I think that your discussions with Mr. Cooper make pretty clear that you want to go in a different direction, and we support that direction.

I do have one concern, really quickly, on this, though, and that is how a conference like this even made it to the table for consideration. As I look at the agenda for this proposed conference, it was quite a stretch. We went through it with staff to find more than about 5 per cent of the agenda that probably had much to do with Alberta politics. I'll give you a couple of examples: "Are there Shades of Grey in a House of Cards?"; "Super PAC Potluck"; "A

Hitchhiker's Guide to Federal Anti-Corruption Efforts"; a lot of sessions on freedom of information under American legislation. You know, they're in the United States. They have different laws than us. I just caution the committee in the future to be making sure that conferences like this that make it to the table are truly relevant for what is going on in Alberta and Canada. I will leave it at that.

The Chair: Can I just mention one thing about what little I know of that conference? I haven't attended one, but it is a North American conference. It does take place in different cities. It has been in Canada different times. I'm not sure. I imagine that they split the agenda items, but I think that they've got representatives from each.

4:50

Mr. Nixon: With all due respect, though, with this agenda item, for sure, it would be a stretch to see it having a major impact on Alberta, so that should be taken strongly into consideration, in my view. I'm disappointed that it was even considered to send members after reviewing that agenda.

The Chair: Thank you.

Any other comments? Ms Sweet.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Chair. Although all members will know first-hand that conferences can be valid educational tools, I think that it is still right that we do not send anyone in particular to this conference.

The Chair: Right. Does anyone have anything to bring up on this matter?

Mr. Bhullar: Yes, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Bhullar.

Mr. Bhullar: Yes. May I be put on the list?

The Chair: Yeah. Go ahead.

Mr. Bhullar: Okay. Well, thank you very much. Again, I'm very pleased that we are revisiting this decision. The reason why this is incredibly important is, obviously, the signal we send to the people who send us to the Legislature and who in many cases are losing their jobs as we speak. I'm reading another announcement from a major Alberta corporation laying off over 200 people. I think that that's very important, that we show people that we are doing everything within our power.

The next step that I'd like to put forth: I don't believe that we have the legislative authority to make this a mandate, but the reason why I feel that we should at least discuss this is that it will help with setting precedents within these respective organizations. What I mean by that is that I feel that this trip was brought to our attention because it involves members of this committee, but we should also ask of these respective organizations, the six legislative officers, to take a very hard look at different conferences and the like that their offices and their organizations may attend internationally and to perhaps see how they can reduce those types of expenditures.

Now, many of the officers of the Legislature already do a phenomenal job at this. I mean, where else do you have legislative offices returning money from their budgets to the government at the end of the year? I think that they do a great job, but we need to send a signal to all government-related entities that things like international travel and pay raises need to be off the table for the next couple of years unless international travel is absolutely essential. I wanted to bring that up as a point of discussion.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Good point. We do the review of the offices' budgets later on in the year, and that is an area that we might be addressing. We probably will be. So thank you.

Mr. Bhullar: Great. Sorry. What do you mean, "We probably will be"?

The Chair: I mean that we've talked about the compensation package, and later in the year we'll talk about the budget of the offices. Within that we could be looking at whatever travel they do have or plan to have. Is that clear?

Mr. Bhullar: Yeah. You bet. I thought that maybe there was some discussion already about this.

The Chair: No. That hasn't come up yet.

Mr. Bhullar: Okay. Perfect. Well, thank you very much.

The Chair: That's good. Anything else?

Let's call the question. All in favour? Unanimous. Thank you very much. The motion is carried.

Item 5 on the agenda is other business. Are there any items for discussion under other business?

Mr. Cooper: I just have one quick comment if I might. I just want to first of all say thank you that we arrived here. It's under some very unfortunate circumstances, including the schedule of the meeting today. Perhaps I have no evidence of outside pressures; however, I do see the government whip here today as well as the caucus chair in the gallery – I appreciate their attendance – making sure that we can move this agenda forward. I want to really just stress that as we move forward as a committee, the independence of this committee is of utmost importance.

Each member has a responsibility to represent Alberta taxpayers in a way that reflects the current environment as well as the reality that many of them face. I had an opportunity to tour a facility in my constituency yesterday where they have about 200 employees, and by Friday they will have 100 employees. It was a stark reality check of where we are as a province, and I encourage any one of you that would like to come down and see first-hand that type of reality. I

know that the owners of that facility would be more than pleased to tour folks through to see just exactly where we are as a province. As we go forward, we need to be considering those individuals in the decisions that we make. I also, you know, encourage the government members to encourage Executive Council to move this province forward as quickly as possible when it comes to getting back to talking about the issues that are important to our province and to Albertans.

With that, I hope that we all have taken a step forward in terms of recognizing the importance of the work and the role that we play and that we are representing the constituents that elected us and each and every Albertan in one way, shape, or form or another.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate your comment very much.

If there's no other business, we need to set a date for the next meeting, and that will be just about it. We can send out an e-mail for that. Would that be better for most people? Okay.

Mr. Cooper: Will we certainly have more than 24 hours' notice so I have the agenda a week prior?

The Chair: Mr. Cooper, I assure you that we will have. . .

Mr. Cooper: I've been assured once in the past, too.

The Chair: I know you have.

Mr. Cooper: Mistakes were made.

The Chair: Mistakes were made. We will get more time in front of the next meeting.

All right. So we will call for a motion of adjournment. Mr. Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: I move to adjourn the meeting.

The Chair: All in favour? Thank you very much.

All right. Thank you, everyone.

[The committee adjourned at 4:57 p.m.]

