

Title: Thursday, December 11, 2003 Members' Services Committee

Date: 03/12/11

[Mr. Kowalski in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It's 9:30. Several weeks ago a notification was put out for the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services to reconvene, to have a meeting. I consulted with all the members, and I basically asked for thoughts with respect to the agenda and also pointed out certain things on the agenda. So we circulated an agenda to all hon. members, and the briefing documents were circulated to you earlier. I also had a chance to consult with the three caucuses with respect to this. A number of members have advised me that because of the time of the year, some of you will have to be departing fairly early, but I hope that we'll be able to get all the business done before anybody has to depart.

So I welcome you. It's Thursday, December 11, and the appropriate time. You have an agenda in front of you, and I would ask first of all for approval of the agenda.

Mr. Broda: So moved.

The Chair: Mr. Broda; Mr. Horner. Would all agree, then, that that would be the agenda we would follow today?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

We have the minutes of January 28, 2003, that were circulated to you. They cover the meeting that we held at that time, in early 2003. Would there be any questions or comments arising out of these minutes? To move them, Mr. McFarland, Mrs. Jablonski. Thank you very much. That's carried, presumably.

Old business arising out of the minutes and identified on the agenda we had. First of all, there was the question of the long-term disability benefits for MLAs. Let me just give you a brief update on that. All Members of the Legislative Assembly are covered under an LTDI plan that somewhat parallels the public-sector plan, but it is dated, and it needs to be reviewed. I indicated the last time we had this discussion that in the history of Alberta there have been no claims under the existing plan to date. You'll note in the budget that we have that there is carried forward a fee that goes along with this plan, but I indicated that I would be undertaking a review and would be coming back to Members' Services Committee with some suggestions for us to update this plan.

The key parameters on this, which make it different from any other plan that seems to exist – well, I was going to say on planet Earth but certainly in Canada – are the following. In order to be eligible for coverage under the LTDI that we have, a member must resign. A member must resign in order to be eligible. Now, in all plans the purpose of a disability plan is rehabilitation. That is the purpose of the plan: to rehabilitate a person so that they can return to the job they held before. But in this case the key is that a member must resign, so there's no position to return to. That's what makes it different from any other one. In all of this there's also the concern about the definition of what gainful employment is in relation to return to work of a former MLA. The key thing is that in order to access it, you have to resign. So you have disability, you've become rehabilitated and healthy again, but somebody else now sits in that seat, so you can't return.

Maybe that's one of the reasons why nobody ever in the history of Alberta put in a claim against this LTDI. Yet we carry it, and you'll

see the number that we carry in the budget. So I'm going to continue working on this, welcoming any thoughts that anybody has, and in the meantime everybody is covered. Nobody has ever accessed it, and we continue to pay, this year something like \$115,000 a year for the policy that goes with it. So it is unique; it is different. There was a time in the past when there was a pension plan that was in existence, and the two could actually go hand in hand. People could qualify for something by leaving and going on the pension. We don't have that anymore. So I would welcome any thoughts that people have as we go through this.

Ms Haley: What I wanted to suggest was that over the next year or perhaps two if you could look at the possibility of a way that we could self-finance this.

The Chair: Yeah. That's one of the options. That is absolutely one of the options, and enough has been said about us paying – and you'll see in the budget the request for \$113,000 or \$115,000 a year for the premium. I guess, basically, the question is: why don't we just take care of it ourselves? It would probably be cheaper in the long run. But that's definitely one of the options.

Ms Haley: Thank you very much.

The Chair: The second item is the Court of Appeal decision in Carter versus Alberta. Members will recall that this matter had been going on for some period of time. Former Speaker David Carter had basically challenged the validity of the risk management fund as it applied to payments made to defend and settle a defamation action brought about by former member Stockwell Day. In his May 18, 2001, ruling Mr. Justice Hawco of the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench held that while the Assembly has the jurisdiction to determine the salary and benefits of its members, the Assembly through the Members' Services Committee delegated its power with respect to the establishment and administration of the risk management fund, and the justice said that it had done so properly. What Dr. Carter and the people with him basically said was that this committee had not in the past. The justice said: oh, yes, it did.

On June 19, 2003, this matter was dealt with by the Supreme Court of Canada, and it denied Dr. Carter's application for leave to appeal the Alberta Court of Appeal's decision in Carter versus Alberta. Previous to that, on December 13, 2002, the Alberta Court of Appeal held that decisions by the director of risk management and insurance on whether an MLA was acting within the scope of his or her duties did not violate the constitutionality and protected privileges of the Assembly and its members. Dr. Carter's appeal was dismissed with costs at that time, and that concluded the matter. The Supreme Court of Canada, along with all other applications, made no comment on the case as to the reasons why it was not granting leave to appeal. So that matter is ended, and the decision basically upheld the decision-making process that we followed. Over with. Okay?

Then, ladies and gentlemen, I take you to New Business, the Legislative Assembly budget estimates. I circulated a document a number of days ago to all members, and in the document are parameters that we have laid out for you in this proposed budget, seeking your approval for it, and perhaps we'll just spend a couple of minutes going through these parameters that are in your book.

The first one is that all estimates are rounded off to the nearest thousand as per a previous decision of this committee. Once again, one always has to look and gaze into the future. It's December of 2003. This budget will cover the period April 1, 2004, to March 31, 2005, so one has to guess as to what certain numbers will be required for the period starting April 1. For this budget we used the number

of 2 percent for an adjustment factor, considering where we are in Alberta and considering all the numbers that are available, including the average weekly earnings index, the cost-of-living numbers, and what have you, recognizing that we are guessing. We don't know what the whole world will unfold like in four or five months, but that's the number that was used.

So operational costs in this budget were increased 2 percent to the inflationary factor. For the member remuneration adjustments the number of 2 percent was used as well for this budget. The formula that we used for the application for adjustments to members is the average weekly earnings index in the province of Alberta based on the 12 months of the previous calendar year, being January 1, 2003, to December 31, 2003. I have a sheet here for you – Corinne, if you would distribute it to all people – to show you what the average weekly earnings index has been as we have gone from January through to this particular point in time.

Members will recall that the budgeted number that we used, going back three fiscal years, was a certain number. The actual change was 2.86 percent in 2001. The actual number for 2002 was 2.25 percent. The numbers, as they're running so far, recognizing that we still have the numbers for three more months to have added to this, plus then there has to be a seasonally adjusted averaging that goes into it – if we were to adopt a number today for MLA remuneration effective April 1, 2004, the number, as it's running to this point in time, recognizing that it's not the full year, would be 0.83 percent. That's what the number is.

So if you take a look at this graph, the average weekly earnings index in Alberta went up by 0.89 percent in January, 1.61 percent in February, 1.45 percent in March, 0.53 percent in April, minus 0.59 percent in May, 0.98 percent in June, 1 percent in July, 1.01 percent in August, and 2.03 percent in September. We still have the October, November, and December numbers to come in and then all the adjustments that have to go with it. I'm guessing – maybe I shouldn't do that – that probably the number will come in at about 1.25 percent.

In terms of the budgeting process there's 2 percent built into it. Whatever doesn't come up, that difference would be returned, then, to the Provincial Treasurer at the end of the fiscal year. But that's the number, and that's where we are at the moment. If it were to be today, the adjustment for members would be 0.83 percent as of April 1, 2004. So that's the parameter used. That's one of the basics for that.

9:40

In terms of caucus budget adjustments there was a 2 percent number built into it.

In terms of constituency service elements of the members' services allowance we built in an increase here of \$4,216 per constituency. In the current budget year we have a base number for constituency office allocations of \$51,809. About a month ago we allocated part of the fiscal contingency. I think it was about a \$900 adjustment for constituency offices. That moved it to \$52,699. With the additionals in here that would move the base, then, for April 1, 2004, to \$56,915. In talking to most Members of the Legislative Assembly over the last number of months, most basically indicated that that was a real concern.

I indicated just a minute ago that we had allocated the fiscal pressure contingency to the constituency offices. We have not done that yet to the caucus budgets, but we'll do that in the next few days. That approximately 1.75 percent to the constituency offices would see the following allocations take place. To the government members' budget, because there are 49 members in it, it would be 49 times \$1,000, for an additional increase of \$49,000. To the Official

Opposition's budget it would be seven members times \$1,000, and with the leader's office as well it comes to a total of \$13,000, which would be added to this year's budget. To the ND opposition's budget, including the allocations to the members plus the office, it would be \$5,000. That will be allocated in the next few days for the current year, and then that fiscal pressure contingency would be dealt with.

In terms of the next parameter the communications element was adjusted to reflect the increase in postal rates. I gather they're going up on January 1. The promotional element is based on the number of constituents, the people of Alberta: 3,153,723.

The potential fiscal pressure contingency for next year for those people who might have public service scale in-range adjustments: that allocation of 4 percent was set aside as per what the AUPE and the government have agreed to, because we follow that, plus the 2 percent that I talked about being the parameter for all the elements. The caucus adjustment would be 2 percent based on the 2003-2004 estimate for each caucus. The amount of dollars to go into the transition allowance remains static, the same, to continue that, to make sure it's fully funded. For budgeting purposes once again 85 sessional days were used.

As per the previous decision by the Members' Services Committee the other items that kick in, in terms of the annual population estimates, the RRSP, and the special allocation for Fort McMurray that had been worked out, again, between the AUPE and the government – we said that we would apply that to the member's office there.

We continued in this budget to have funds budgeted to equip constituency offices with furniture and equipment. We're now in our third year. We have 17 offices still to do. The rest basically have been done. That will be done, so this number of \$204,000 is a lower number than we've had in the past because we have made that progress. Photocopier equipment is still to do, to continue to do.

The next item has to do with the LAO branch assuming responsibility for all mailings through the Legislature Building. It simply meant that we had to move \$14,000 from one budget to another budget. The net impact to the budget is zero dollars. It's just across the way. Here's the point that I mentioned a little earlier about risk management and insurance, two sides of it, of course: the legal side plus the LTDI side. The budget is \$113,000, 10 percent over the previous one. Legislation that has been approved by the Legislative Assembly calls, basically, for two select special committees of the Legislature, one on the Conflicts of Interest Act review and the other one on the Health Information Act review, so dollars have been put into the budget to deal with those all-party committees that would have to be put into effect after April 1, 2004. There's about another \$275,000 in here to deal with various projects that recognize and celebrate Alberta's centennial.

What is unique is that once in every four years in this budget we have to anticipate when there might be a provincial election the same way that I'm sure the standing officers committee will be dealing with the budget of the electoral commissioner here in the next few days. I'm guessing in terms of this budget being put before you that if all things go according to the norm, in the fourth year there is usually a provincial election in Alberta. The fourth year after the last provincial election would take us to March 2005, which means that we have to do certain things, and there's about \$425,000 to \$450,000 scattered throughout all these budgets in terms of assisting with the election preparation, the transfer and the in-house training and the preparation materials and the like. In a nutshell, those are the parameters used.

If you'll flip over to the next page, then basically you see the estimate comparison for all the various divisions within the

Legislative Assembly. The same number of staff years is being maintained. This has been maintained now for probably half a dozen years and certainly since I've been the Speaker, 89.9; that remains constant. You can see the bottom line is that, in essence, I'm asking for your consideration and approval for a budget that would have a bottom-line figure of \$38,217,000.

I will just give you a little more background, and then I'll stop. If you flip over to the next page, then you can see the printout in anticipation of the next three years as per the request of previous Members' Services Committees to basically go out three years. We will have the transitional allowance fully funded about 18 months from now. What we don't know, of course, is how many members will be returning and how many members will be leaving. But anticipating that in terms of the calls on that particular allowance, in essence we should be in a position to actually reduce the annual allocation to that from the \$4.2 million downwards, and it'll still build, and it'll be fully funded when we go out the next four years if we maintain a profile with that. But that's all subject to how many members will be returning and how many members will not.

The next page shows you the variance summary – it's the foldout page you have in here – broken down for every one of the elements within the budget. The left-hand column, the 2004-2005 element, brings you right down to the bottom line of \$38,664,000 less \$447,000 in revenues for a bottom line request of \$38,217,000. Then you can see the budget for 2003-2004, and then the third column over is the variance, the differences between this year's budget and the requested budget.

The variances are made up of two components. The human resource component, which is there – if we were to do absolutely nothing, on the basis of the contracts that are in place and the settlements that are in place, in anticipation of changes in terms of fee increases for such things as Blue Cross and health care and CPP, WCB, and the like, there would be request there for \$1,043,000 additional. Then the operational components, the items that I talked about a few minutes ago, would arrive at \$1,325,000. There's a footnote for each one of them.

Then in the remainder of the budget there's a micro approach to each one of these sectors, where the breakdown is to all of the adjustments or the changes in each one of the various branches or groupings. As an example, if you just go to the first one, financial management and administration services, you can see the profile of the budget on the second page, and you can see the request is for an additional \$38,000 on a base of \$560,000 broken down into the human resources component of \$26,000 and an operational expense component of \$12,000. There's a line-by-line approach to each and every one of these.

9:50

Now, I can stop here for a moment and try and deal with any of the questions you have about the parameters, or I'm at your will to proceed further to go over a quick overview in each one of these branches or sectors. Is continue okay?

The second one, then, the human resources services. In that particular branch it goes from \$733,000 to \$768,000, same manpower again, and you can see the human resource sector broken down to \$22,000 and the operational side being increased by \$13,000. As pointed out a little earlier, where it says "reflects an inflationary increase," that's the 2 percent just applied to that particular thing.

The next one, of course, the one that you all spend so much time on and is very stressful for the chairman of the meeting, is the Speaker's office budget. The current \$371,000, same number of manpower, going to \$377,000, and I'm sure there'll probably be a

detailed line-by-line assessment being requested in a minute or two, but we'll come back to that.

The next one, the public information branch, a current budget of \$1,106,000 being increased by \$5,000, so that's certainly a lot less than the 2 percent allocated. There are some internal adjustments being made with respect to that, and you can see that bottom line, same number of manpower.

I would point out that one of the really neat things that seems to be continuing to happen is that this building, the Legislative Assembly building, is attracting a tremendous number of visitors to it, and as I recall, we're going to be looking at something like nearly 150,000 people visiting the Legislative Assembly building and the grounds in the calendar year 2003, and that's really quite phenomenal. I'm told that it's quickly emerging to be the most popular destination point for outside visitors coming to Edmonton, of course West Edmonton Mall being number one – it blows everybody else apart – and then the Odysium being very, very significant and the Legislature. You can tell by the number of people that are in all the time. So this is a nice little positive aspect of what we do.

The next one is the Legislature Library, 16.3 in manpower. I think the response of the members and the continuing support given to the library is something that I really appreciate. There's an increase there overall of \$130,000, \$37,000 of which is manpower, and the remaining is operational expenses of \$93,000. For the first time since 1980 there will be a national conference of parliamentary librarians in Alberta. Provinces and jurisdictions across the country host these things periodically. The cost of that conference is \$25,000.

I'd just draw to your attention the item called microforms. One of the positive things that the library is doing in-house is trying to assemble and work on, again, part of the history of Alberta leading up to 2005. Prior to 1972 there was no *Hansard* in the province of Alberta, so whatever was there in terms of historical recognition of what the members did from 1905 to 1971 basically is a result of newspaper reports, newspaper readings. At various times in the history of Alberta newspapers actually even reported verbatim speeches of members. So what the library started to do is assemble clippings from newspapers throughout the province of Alberta and basically put it in some kind of form that's accessible for all citizens of the province of Alberta.

The Clerk is just circulating some information on that, and it'll be a great little record, the scrapbook *Hansard*, basically, of the province of Alberta. As an example, just in the information we put out in here is the Speech from the Throne from March 15, 1906. We have no official *Hansard*, so there's no way to get an official document other than to find an extract of something of the past, and on and on. There's another article in there, April 3, 1906. Headline: Another Tussle With Decorum.

The Member of Rosebud read the Bulletin in the open house in the sight of all men, even the speaker, but not long after the latter's attention was attracted to it, and thereby hags a tale, and one or two sparkles of wit.

My Lord, they even write in a different language than we would speak in 2003.

I think it's really going to be neat. I think it's going to be a great addendum, and we're doing it on a sequential basis, so much of this per year for a number of years to basically have this kind of record. It'll be in a pretty good form, I think, Mr. Clerk. The quality of it should be quite good.

Do you have a comment to make?

Dr. McNeil: I think the utility of it is that we put it then on the web.

Once we've cleaned up the documents and so on, it's available on the web. So you can see from the front page here that all of these things are just – when you're on the Internet site, you just click on there and you ring up that particular year's information, and then you can go and click on the Speech from the Throne or whatever. So it's available across the province.

This is something the library has been collecting since 1906, but it's only been accessible if you go to the library and look in those documents. By digitizing it, it's available throughout the province. So I think that from a historical perspective it's really valuable, especially in light of the centennial and the kind of interest, I think, that will be specially generated with respect to the early years of the province.

The Chair: And to repeat: it's being done in-house, and there's a great deal of professionalism with the library staff.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Chairman, I just want to ask a question about this process. Is this all being done manually, or is there technology that allows you to digitize it from essentially a photograph?

Dr. McNeil: There's technology that allows you to digitize it from photographs or, you know, just scan in the information. So it's not like we're retyping all this stuff. We're just taking the original documents, taking a picture of it or scanning it, and away we go.

Mr. Mason: And that converts it automatically into a text form?

Dr. McNeil: I would say almost automatically. Sometimes there's a requirement because of the quality of the documents that you have to clean it up digitally, which takes some time, but it's not as if we have to enter in every piece of information manually.

The Chair: It's a neat project. As an example, not in the library one but part of it and going back to the public information one, I've asked the Sergeant-at-Arms, who's responsible for the public information one, to really hook up some fancy uniforms that all the visitor services might wear in 2005, or even maybe the pages, that would go back to the vintage of the time. I'm thinking of getting the Sergeant-at-Arms to have different dress than he's got. He might have a little white wig or something.

Mr. Mason: Well, I'm not wearing a waistcoat, I'll tell you.

The Chair: You don't want to wear a waistcoat.

The next item is the House services section. House services is basically responsible for the broad range of support services: the House and its committees including the legal and procedural support, the security, the ceremonial and visitor services, and in that one \$3,037,000 to \$3,586,000. The manpower component again remains the same. A \$549,000 increase; \$200,000 of that basically is with respect to the human resources staff. There are 30.6 positions, and the operational expense is \$347,000. The biggest number in there was the continuation of our centennial celebration projects.

Now, we currently have, again, in-house – I mean, there are some very gifted people that are being put to work here in terms of four books: an update on the Premiers of Alberta, an update on the Lieutenant Governors of Alberta, one on the Speakers of Alberta, and one on, basically, the members and other things with respect to that. They're being done. It'll be a very positive addendum to the history of Alberta, which will be widely used by scholars and other people. That's all being continued and developed over a several-

year time frame.

Mr. McFarland: Would it be appropriate at this time to recognize that you've got some great staff in visitor services, Mr. Chair? Their knowledge and their pleasant attitudes are an attribute, especially as we come in to the centennial.

As an aside, when I was over in the pedway, I noticed that they've even mounted the old Lieutenant Governor's uniform. I can recall His Honour, at that time Percy Page, giving me my Queen's Scout award down in Medicine Hat. Of course, I didn't know much about the decorum, and I thought he'd come down dressed as a Boston Bruins fan because it's all black and gold. In retrospect, maybe for the year 2005 the Speaker could find the old original Speaker's adornments and wear them every day as a way of greeting the 150,000-plus people, along with a cup of hot chocolate in the evening.

10:00

The Chair: Such advice is always welcome. We'll take it under review.

Mr. McFarland: I do sincerely want to thank you for the quality of people that you've got in visitors' services.

The Chair: Thank you. That's good, because it's in the *Hansard* and it'll be circulated to all of those people. I do believe we've got some very gifted people and also quite multilingual, which really helps as well.

Dr. Massey: I don't think it should be confined just to visitors' services. I think that human resources and the financial administration, the technical people that serviced our offices, at least in my case, have just been outstanding, and I really do appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you. Mr. Gano is just a few people away from you there, and he'll convey that.

The next item, the information systems services area. This is always a very, very fascinating area to be involved in. The budget there, \$1,994,000 to \$2,491,000. That's an increase of nearly \$497,000. Information services is the technology side of the whole operation. In terms of the manpower you can see that in the adjustment there is \$52,000, but the \$445,000 is basically due to required network upgrades, the election-related activities, and inflationary factors.

We continue to follow a policy of replacement on a two-year basis. Previous to that, it was three, but this committee accepted a proposal to go to two. So you can see that in terms of data processing equipment there's a call there for \$314,000 for a number of things: the GroupWise conversion, the Novell to Microsoft conversion, network redundancy, constituency office networks, and HR/finance self-serve. I'm advised that the conversion to Microsoft is basically an important step forward, and it's something that we should be doing, so it's in here.

I'm going to ask Mr. Gano just to give you an example. Members rather frequently come to me and say: "How do we cure this spam business? How do we deal with this spam business?" I note that the United States Congress this week passed new legislation in the United States in an attempt to deal with this, but there appears to be no easy solution. You take one step forward, and all of a sudden something else happens to interject. Every Monday morning people in their offices go there and of course click on their machines, and, wow, they get all these messages that people get.

What you don't really know is how many messages are not sent

through. Bill, just point out to the members what you showed me the other day in terms of the messages that were kicked out, captured by the system and never allowed to get through, on a one-weekend basis.

Mr. Gano: Yes. This is the weekend of November 8 and 9 when we actually filtered out over 5,400 messages. You can see from the report that each line is a message that did not get through. However, there is no way of telling from this whether that message was aimed at one person or 300 people within the Legislative Assembly. But 5,400 messages did not get through. On that same weekend 9,200 messages came in from outside, and we filtered out 5,400 of them.

The Chair: On the basis of the volume of the machines that are there, if you break it down, somebody says: yeah, I got a hundred messages on a Monday morning. But it's a constant battle.

Mr. Gano: Yes. We're continually working at it; we're continually trying to improve and filter out more and more messages. New technology is coming on the market all the time that we're looking at and evaluating, so hopefully it will get better. Certainly, as Mr. Chairman indicated, legislation is being introduced in different countries around the world. Hopefully, that will impact it as well.

The Chair: Bill, would you just comment about the Novell to Microsoft conversion?

Mr. Gano: Novell is an operating system that is used on part of our network. The Novell company also markets the GroupWise e-mail system. They have recently made announcements that they are changing their business strategy, not so much moving away from operating systems but moving to a different type of operating system.

We had a strategic plan done a couple of years ago for information systems, and in that plan it did indicate to us that we should be moving to a more homogeneous network. Right now we have Novell, Microsoft, and UNIX environments. The plan recommended that we move to more of a Microsoft operating system so that we have a better ability to transfer documents back and forth and those kinds of things. That's what the plan recommended, and we said: okay; well, that's something for the future. However, with recent Novell announcements, we see that as being more of a need to begin that process now rather than a couple more years down the road.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Chairman, can the administration say how much would be saved if we moved from a two-year replacement on the laptops and office computers to a three-year?

The Chair: We can. In fact, that number would be about \$100,000 a year. I looked at even recommending to this committee that we do that at this time, but then I came back and said to myself: no; let's not do it now, because we're now in presumably the last year leading to another event. As soon as this other event comes in, there will be different members and new members, and they are going to have all kinds of requests coming in here. So if we stay with our current policy, we should be okay in terms of staff.

Mr. Mason: You might want to go to one-year replacement. You never know.

The Chair: Okay. One year was not something I ever had on my radar screen.

Mr. Mason: So you'd recommend that we not change this policy at this time.

The Chair: Not this year, because we're still in the two-year thing. There seems to be a settling down – I hope I'm correct on this – on the change of equipment and advance of equipment. We went through a period of time there where there were all kinds of new, for want of a better phrase, gizmos showing up every couple of months. But now it seems that if there's a BlackBerry or a blueberry, whatever the heck it is, it's going to be around for a while. It may be modified and improved.

Mr. Mason: This applies also to desktops in our offices as well; doesn't it?

The Chair: Absolutely. Yes.

Mr. Mason: I checked with our staff, and I guess they really think there might be a case for the MLA laptops, but they don't really think there's a case for their desktops. They are pretty good machines, and I think they are pretty comfortable with having them for a few years.

The Chair: We're in a two-year conversion. It's pretty good, and I think we're pretty much up to date overall.

Ms Haley.

Ms Haley: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to say that I agree in part with what Mr. Mason is saying in that once the election is over, I think we need to look at the two-year policy. But I think we need to be careful not to come in with a blanket policy, because for some people who rarely use their computers, probably every four years would be enough. For other people who spend an awful lot more time on it, they do slow down; it becomes more difficult to do things on them. So I think we've gone from a blanket policy to one where maybe we need to become more aware of who needs what. But I would not recommend any change to this at this time.

The Chair: That's basically the position taken. But constantly they are under discussion and review and what have you.

The next item, ladies and gentlemen, is the committees. I indicated a little earlier two new select special committees that will come into play. The Legislative Offices Committee – and there may very well be some of you here on the Members' Services Committee that also sit on that committee – I understand are going to be reviewing that committee itself plus also looking at the Legislative Offices Committee – i.e., the Chief Electoral Officer, the Ombudsman – sometime in the next few days. Those are subsequent budgets to the Legislative Assembly Office budget, but this is basically where we're at at the moment. It shows an increase of \$144,000 based on those select committees primarily. The budgets for most of the others remain pretty static.

10:10

The next item is the sector known as MLA administration. That includes the expense categories for pay and benefits to the Members and former Members of the Legislative Assembly, the constituency office related expenditures, as well as operational expenses like travel, office equipment, and telecommunications. There's an adjustment number in there to move it from \$18,051,000 to \$18,826,000 based on – well, the human resources side is \$511,000 of that. That includes all of that 0.83 to 2 percent thing that I indicated a little earlier about indemnities for members on April 1 plus the increases due to CPP increases, LTDI increase, the dental, the group life, the Alberta health care, extended health care premium

increases, increases in actual claims history, and the like.

Then you can see some operational expenses. There's a reduction there of \$175,000 in travel, and then you can see some other reductions in office equipment, rental purchase. Because we've reduced the number of constituency offices, we have to deal with the 17, so there's a reduction there.

But the one element that would offset those reductions is that the constituency element goes up by \$350,000 to arrive at the \$56,915 and basically would probably satisfy the requirements of a lot of MLAs in their constituency offices. These are not benefits to MLAs; these are benefits to the constituency offices, offices that we all use to serve the citizens of Alberta. Basically, all the numbers just run right down in there.

Ms Haley: I wonder, Mr. Chairman, if I could ask for your consideration at some point, perhaps during this coming year, that you would maybe take a look at the communication elements of the budgets. I don't actually believe they've ever been changed in the 10 years that I've been here, and I think it's time that that portion of the constituency budgets be looked at.

The Chair: And you're absolutely correct that it has not been looked at in almost that length of time. Okay.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Chairman, is this the right time to raise a question about the salary increments for caucus and legislative staff?

The Chair: Well, the caucus staff is something that you will determine. I do not.

Mr. Mason: Right.

The Chair: The caucus budgets are determined by the three caucuses, so whatever you pay people internally . . .

Mr. Mason: No, I appreciate that. I appreciate that you want to preserve the ability of the caucuses to allocate their own funds, but we dealt with this last year, and for the LAO staff we have a 4 percent increase budgeted.

The Chair: No. That's not correct. That's not correct. There is 4 percent allocated for in-range adjustments, but that doesn't apply to everybody. That does not apply to everybody. That's just under the AUPE agreements with the province. You get to a certain range as you move up, and that's true about the LAO.

Mr. Mason: Okay. That's the in-scope people. So the out-of-scope people are allocated how much? In the LAO office?

The Chair: The out-of-scope people? Sorry; I can't identify who they would be.

Mr. Mason: Okay. I apologize. I'm a little bit confused, I guess.

The Chair: Not a problem. Brian, look on the agenda. There are two things we're going to come up to. First of all, in the next section over is your caucus allocation, which I might comment on then, and then item 6A is the final report of electoral boundaries. That would be, then, a constituency office, and I'll make some comments about that at that time if that's okay.

Mr. Mason: Yeah. What I'm getting at, Mr. Chairman, is that basically there's an escalator that's built in based on the AUPE

settlement which applies to the LAO staff and which does not apply to caucus or constituency staff. My objective is to make sure that it's equal between them, I guess.

The Chair: Well, on the basis of the recommendation I've just made with respect to increasing the constituency office allocation to \$56,915, that number, in fact, if one were to allocate it all to manpower costs within the constituency offices, would be far superior to that allocated under the LAO.

Mr. Mason: I appreciate that. There remains a caucus staff.

The Chair: Yes. Okay. Anything else on MLA administration?

The next three tabs, then, are the government members' services, the Official Opposition services, and the New Democrat opposition services. Now, that's based on \$55,000 per member times members in the particular caucus. Mr. Clerk, we just dealt with the fiscal pressure contingency. That's built into that base of \$2,646,000?

Dr. McNeil: That's the per member allocation. This is for next year.

The Chair: Yes, it is.

Dr. McNeil: So we've added 2 percent on top of this year's. We'll increase this year's by this amount.

The Chair: Yes. I appreciate that, but that base \$55,000 includes that addition, that number? No, it doesn't, Jacqueline? We have just allocated that fiscal contingency of 1.75 percent based on the 2002-2003 base and indicated a little earlier that the government members' services would get an additional \$49,000, the Official Opposition an additional \$13,000, and the New Democrat opposition \$5,000 in this fiscal year. Those numbers are not built into this base figure?

Ms Breault: Correct.

The Chair: They're not? So that would be slightly higher then.

Dr. McNeil: There's a contingency in next year's budget that would make that higher by 2 percent.

The Chair: Okay. Fair game.

Did you all follow that? In essence, it would be a little more than \$55,000 per member because we had allocated down at the bottom line a fiscal pressure contingency as a result of waiting to find out what all these negotiations are all about. That would be the minimum. It would be adjusted based on that sometime during the year.

So within that, then, to get back to your question, Mr. Mason, there's only one line for these three budgets. That's the way you've always wanted it to be, and no one in the LAO has any idea how any caucus decides who it's paying and what. I'm just assuming that there's some association with what's going on in the public service of Alberta. As an example, for the New Democrat opposition there's going to be an increase of \$6,000. If you want to give it to one person, you give it to one person. There would be no caution from me on that. Go ahead.

Mr. Mason: If I'm speaking out of turn, people, please correct me, but I would assume that like our budget, in the other caucuses the vast majority is allocated to staff costs. So the problem is that if we get a 2 percent increase for the global caucus budget, then it becomes very difficult to pass on the same increases that are being received by

people working in the LAO. So I'm not sure how you can make a motion to change that without getting into meddling within individual caucus budgets, which is not what I want to do. I don't know. Is there a way to do it, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: A way to do what?

Mr. Mason: A way to provide for an equivalent increase for caucus staff.

The Chair: Actually, there will be an equivalent. There's 2 percent built in here, plus I said that under that fiscal contingency, whatever the number will be, the difference will be added to your budget the same way that we just added right now to your current year's budget that fiscal contingency.

Mr. Mason: So there will be enough money that the caucuses, if they choose, will be allowed to increase what they pay to their staff so that it's equivalent to what the LAO staff receive.

10:20

The Chair: Yes. That's correct. That's all built in here. No motions are required.

Mr. Mason: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Horner.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I guess now I'm a little bit confused. If the negotiations that are out there right now come in at, let's assume, 5 percent, does your contingency that's built into this budget cover providing all the caucus staff with that additional 5 percent?

The Chair: Well, we're not providing anything to any caucus staff; we're just providing it to the caucus.

Mr. Horner: Right. Understood.

The Chair: What the caucus decides to do internally is the business of the caucus.

Mr. Horner: But as Mr. Mason is asking, would it be sufficient to do that?

The Chair: Well, the difficulty I have as the chairman of this committee is that I have no idea what the state of negotiations is between the government of Alberta and the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. The figure you used, 5 percent, I must admit is not the figure we used in basing the fiscal contingency.

Mr. Horner: Right. It was 2 percent; was it not? Okay. But there is no direct correlation. Whatever comes out of those negotiations isn't automatically put back into the LAO budget; is it?

The Chair: Well, that's why we have the fiscal contingency, which allows that.

Mr. Horner: I understand.

The Chair: We've never, ever gone to an addendum in the fall like other departments. We've never done that. We've always carried it, and we found it to deal with it.

Mr. Horner: Thank you.

The Chair: So do you want to go line by line for all these caucus budgets? Well, there are three lines. I do.

Ms Haley: This is Speaker humour; isn't it?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms Haley: You can just tell. We'll definitely go line by line on yours.

The Chair: Yes. This is true. You've gone line by line on mine.

We carry nothing in the independent members, the vacant electoral division, and the electoral boundaries. So the bottom line, if you go back to the comparative, is that we're looking at the same manpower, 89.9, a budget of \$38,217,000. I think we can do it, and with a lot of co-operation it should happen.

Any questions or comments or any further items you would like from me? I'd be very happy to respond at this time.

Ms Haley: I'd like to move the motion that we accept this budget the way it's presented.

The Chair: There's a motion from Ms Haley to accept the budget. Seconded by Mrs. Jablonski and Dr. Massey.

Questions?

Mr. Mason: I just want to indicate, Mr. Chairman, that I think that overall the budget is very good, but because of the members' separation allowance item, which I don't agree with at all, I'll not be supporting it.

The Chair: Other questions?

There's a motion, then, moved by Ms Haley, seconded by Mrs. Jablonski and seconded again by Dr. Massey. All those in favour please say aye or raise your hands.

Some Hon. Members: Aye.

The Chair: Opposed? So it's carried with one exception. Okay. Thank you very much. We'll work on getting all of this done. I really appreciate that.

The next item is Other Business, the Final Report of the Electoral Boundaries Commission. Well, we all know that the report is done. It's finished; it's dealt with. I have one handout that I'm going to have circulated now to you just for your information.

I'd indicated before that in the Electoral Boundaries Commission report there were major recommendations made by the electoral commission itself that there was a need to take a look at the amount of dollars in support of constituency offices as a result of the changes that are coming forth with constituencies. We all know that there will be 83 constituencies. They will be more equitable in terms of population, size per constituency, even though the population of Alberta will continue to grow, but when the next election occurs, whenever it is, then in essence based on the current numbers and based on the current things – I just provide this to you for information following up on what Mr. Mason said – these are the 83 constituencies with their base budget of \$51,809. You already just approved a new base budget for the next fiscal year going up to 56,000-something. So that number will change.

These are the electors based on 2003. This is the communication

allowance for each of the constituency offices, again 2003; the constituents, 2003; the promotion allowance, 2003; the totals you currently have in the current budget for each MLA. However, the next two columns are based on 2002-03 costs; that is, the previous year. We have no way of knowing, because we're only in the month of December, what the actual accommodation costs and the annual manpower costs will be for each MLA in the province of Alberta.

So the one thing that I wanted to point out to you is that there's tremendous variation. In terms of accommodation cost there's one constituency office where, including rent and utilities, it's \$1,200 a year. That's the lowest one. The highest one, rent and accommodation, is \$25,520. The average is \$11,739. Now, these are just numbers, and I don't think there are too many conclusions one can make.

Then for the annual manpower costs again it's the last year, not the current year. The minimum manpower cost in one office is \$21,356; the maximum manpower cost in another office is \$52,938. The average annual manpower cost is \$35,900. Now, every MLA determines what kind of staff they want, how many hours they work, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So you have all of this.

The bottom line is that there are variances. MLAs have basically said to me that some of them have real concerns about the amount of dollars it costs them for accommodation; others say that it's their manpower thing. So as a first step in trying to deal with this, we've basically assembled this. We will update this again when this fiscal year closes to know the accommodation costs, the annual manpower costs, and towards the end of next year and the following year we'll basically come up with some proposals based on your input in terms of how we should better deal with this.

The bottom line is the following: MLAs choose where their offices are going to be. They basically said that they want to have that. They want to make that decision. They do not want the Legislative Assembly Office of Alberta to go and get the space or find the space. Secondly, in the constituency MLAs determine who it is they want to employ and what standard and what background and what qualifications these people have. We have no prescribed list or anything else, and most MLAs say that that's the way they would like it to be and like it to continue. However, then you have these variances, and it's almost impossible then to compare.

So I'm wide open on this. All I know is that the Electoral Boundaries Commission basically said that this is an area that had to be bolstered. As a result of increasingly larger constituencies, constituencies farther away from the capital, and regardless of the equipment or what have you, there is always the concern: how do you deliver the service that people need or want, particularly in larger and larger constituencies?

There is a whole series of steps that we can take as we go forward with respect to this, including the comparative across the country, the comparative with the Canadian House of Commons, where they average about \$275,000 per constituency office. In Ontario it's basically the same number for services for a constituency office in funds allocated to members of their Legislative Assembly. The average for a constituency office in Alberta is \$70,537. The least amount going to a constituency office is \$62,726, and the highest number is \$91,232, based on where we are at the moment.

So I just leave that with you for information, and if there are questions or comments, I'd be happy to deal with them.

Then the other business that we have, hon. members, is to deal with these two revised Members' Services Committee orders based on the decisions that we made this morning. One is order MSC 2/03, which basically does two things. First of all, it confirms what we did a few days ago by changing the base for constituency offices from \$51,809 and substituting \$52,699, and this is to be now.

The next one, to come into force on April 1, 2004, is the new constituency services order which would move it from \$52,699 to \$56,915 and change the communication base because of the increase in postage, I believe, from 96 cents to 98 cents. So I would look forward, please, to having two motions.

Mr. McFarland. This would be on service order MSC 2/03?

Mr. McFarland: It would.

10:30

The Chair: Okay. Seconded by Mr. Ducharme. All in favour? Sorry; I didn't ask if there was discussion.

The second one, then, is Members' Services Order 3/03. Is there a motion? Mr. Horner, seconded by Mr. Bonner. Questions or comments? All in favour?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: So that's passed. Okay. Thank you so much. That's done.

Other business?

The date of the next meeting will be at the call of the chair in consultation with the members.

Have a very, very merry Christmas and a very, very enjoyable time with your families as you go through the next little while. Please, get some rest. I've looked at all these schedules that everybody has, of all the caucuses, over the next couple of months, and I think that a lot of errors are being made with people not getting away and having a rest someplace. One does not have to work 30 days a month.

Motion to adjourn.

Mr. Woloshyn: Adjourn.

The Chair: Mr. Woloshyn, seconded by Dr. Massey. All in favour? Thank you so much.

[The committee adjourned at 10:31 a.m.]