



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Members' Services

Wednesday, June 4, 2008
5:45 p.m.

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Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

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5:45 p.m.

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[Mr. Kowalski in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, it being 5:45, I would now like to call everyone to order and welcome you to this Special Standing Committee on Members' Services meeting, a meeting that was agreed to the last time. We postponed it from one week to this week because of attendance of members.

I've been advised by two members of the committee that they would not be able to attend tonight, but they did have substitutes. Mr. Hehr did advise appropriately that Ms Blakeman would be the substitute, and Mr. VanderBurg advised that Mr. Lund would be the substitute. So all members are members of the committee for all intents and purposes for tonight.

We have an agenda in front of us, that was circulated, and I'll ask for approval of the agenda. If members want to add additional items, please indicate as well. The agenda is fine? Mr. Elniski, you would move acceptance. Does everybody agree with this agenda? Okay.

We have the committee meeting minutes of May 21, 2008. The minutes are there. The members would also have received a copy of the *Hansard* for that meeting as well. In addition to the *Hansard*, this is also online at the Legislative Assembly website. If you've had a chance to review the minutes, if you see any questions you have with respect to the minutes. Can we have a mover, then, for acceptance of the minutes? Mr. Taylor. Thank you very much.

Business Arising from the Last Meeting is item 4. In the meeting that we had last time, there was a request by a number of members for some information, so before I proceed to 4(a) per se, let me just give you that background of information as briefly as I possibly can to answer the questions that various members raised with respect to a number of items.

You have under tab 4 information with respect to the calculation of caucus budgets going back historically just a brief period of time, but they basically point out what the purpose of caucus budgets was that this committee officially agreed to, the calculations that were used, the government members' services element with respect to it all, the Official Opposition services, the NDP opposition services, essentially the description with respect to this, and an adjustment criteria that we had actually used with respect to arriving at the budget for the current fiscal year, the year that we're in, 2008-2009. The adjustment factor we used was 5 per cent over the previous year.

Attached to that as well you'll see appendix A, and it's current to the most recent memo that I had to all caucuses, which was in April of 2008. If you take a look at the base caucus budget calculations for the current fiscal year, that we're in, very briefly the PC caucus is based on the number of private members there are: 49. The base figure that we used was \$66,150, so the base amount was \$3,241,350. Then the committee research support item that we had for the previous fiscal year was adjusted by 5 per cent for this year, so that was an additional amount of \$756,000. For the 49 government private members the total caucus budget for 2008-2009 is \$3,997,350, rounded up to \$3,998,000.

For the Official Opposition, based on nine members – and we used the Leader of the Official Opposition in the calculation of the numbers; we have done that for a number of years now – it's nine times that to give you that \$595,350. The leader's office was adjusted by 5 per cent as well to give you that number that you see in the book, with the Calgary caucus office adjusted by 5 per cent. Then because of an impassioned plea by one of the members of the committee, Mr. Taylor, I recall, there was an adjustment of \$881 added to that, so you get the \$73,331. You had committee research,

with an adjustment figure for this year. It gives you a total allocation today of \$1,504,481, rounded up. We always round up.

In terms of the New Democratic opposition two members times \$66,150 gives you \$132,300 plus the leader's office, adjusted at 5 per cent, and the committee research to give a total budget for this year rounded up to \$551,000. Of course, there were no other members.

That was the formula that we agreed that we would use if we wanted to do certain adjustments or needed to do certain adjustments as we went through.

There was a question also about: "Well, what was the historical development of this? What has happened over the last several years?" The next tab you see in it basically shows you the numbers for the previous three fiscal years to the one we're in right now. The one we're in right now is 2008-2009, and you can see the numbers going back. You also see the difference in the numbers. As an example, these are government private members. If you look under the first one, it shows 49 times the \$66,150 that I just talked about. In the previous year there were 40 members, and the year previous to that it was 37, as it was in the previous year to that. You can see the flow chart, which is actually a very good chart, showing the different numbers of the caucuses over the last four years, the numbers that went into it, and the difference and the variance in the numbers over those last four years as well.

There was also a question that was asked by a member with respect to caucus employee turnover statistics for the last several years. We have those numbers attached for you as well in a flow-through graph over the last same number of fiscal years.

There was also a question raised with respect to salaried employees as at March 31. That's March 31 of 2008. Again, you can see the numbers going back over that same number of fiscal years, the last three, and how the numbers have changed and bounced around a slight bit.

The next item was a calculation of the members' services allowance. This is basically for a member's constituency office. We used, basically, three factors associated with that and the calculations that we have, and then we have this matrix calculation we had before. That is the guideline that we use in the determination of this.

Then what was the adjustment criteria? There were actually a number of adjustments made for this fiscal year, which were not exactly the same number, the 5 per cent, as for other budgets in here. As an example, with the adjustment to the accommodations element – these are your constituency offices – we increased it 11.5 per cent this year as compared to last year, not the 5 per cent. Members basically came to this meeting and said that there were changing costs with respect to the cost of rentals in constituency offices. The committee accepted that. The adjustment for this year was 11.5 per cent, and that's already been built in.

There also is a factor that we use in terms of our manpower employees with respect to the people we have in our constituency offices. There was an 8.8 per cent adjustment factor from last year to this year that was used in there. The postal rate essentially was the same as it was before because there was no rate adjustment on it. The amount is identified in there. Then the consumer price index that we used for other factors was 5 per cent, and the matrix adjustment was 5 per cent. Those were the numbers that were used to go in to build the various constituency office costs.

Then you'll see several charts with respect to constituency office costs. This is information that we bring to the attention of the Members' Services Committee when we build the budget for the following year. So this fall, when I'm asking you to look at the budget for 2009-2010, we will have items and dollars, as much as we can obtain from all of the constituency offices that we have in there.

It's been grouped in here. You've had this information for a couple of days, so I'm not going to spend too much time on it. You can see that there is a bit of a variance from one part of a constituency office even within a grouping of Edmonton or Calgary or a grouping of all of Alberta.

Then you've got the flow chart which is the constituency office lease information. You can see the variance, what it is per month that the members pay. You can have neighbouring constituencies that basically have a pretty dramatic variance in terms of the annualized cost per square foot, what the monthly total is, what the utilities paid are, a lot of microthings that go in there from parking to the term to the operating account and the like.

One member may say: "Okay. Fine. I've got to pay all of this." But when we look at the numbers, you might find that the adjoining constituency has a different situation and that the rent is dramatically different. It's really hard to come across with one statement that covers everything throughout the whole province of Alberta. It's virtually impossible. If you've got this, there's a lot of information in here, and you need it in order to make the basic decisions when we ask for approval for certain budgeting parameters.

5:55

The next one in here is just additional constituency office information. We've got a sheet on Calgary again. We've got a sheet on Edmonton again, on other urban constituencies. We tried to give you as many specifics as we possibly could with respect to that, but it gives you an idea.

The last item had to do with travel. A question was made at the last meeting. Well, the overall travel arrangements that we have basically are that for all members you've got extraordinary temporary residence in Alberta, up to 10 overnight stays anywhere in this province. It's available to all members. You have the regularly scheduled air trips. There's unlimited scheduled air travel service to any points in Alberta for travel on business which is specific to the leaders of the opposition parties. Auto travel in the province of Alberta: we have an annual amount that is allocated for all members based on the allocation that members approved last week. There is that little program that we had to allow spouses, family members to make four trips a year. A large number of members have been telling me that that's not enough to bring their spouses up for a variety of things. If you come from out of town, I guess you'll appreciate that.

We also made this little allocation for living expenses within a constituency, depending on the size of the constituency. It applies only to a number of members. Within the caucus budget, the ones I identified before, funds within the caucus can be used for travel, and it includes out of province travel. The request has always been, though, that you notify me about that so that we can keep track of it and provide for approvals for using caucus funds outside of the province of Alberta.

In a very general way, I think that's the information you requested. If anybody has any questions on it, we can spin this out and make sure everybody is happy with it before we go on.

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Chairman, are you suggesting that we're going to debate this request now, or are you asking for specific questions?

The Chair: First of all, we'll clear this off if you have any more questions. If you don't have any questions, we can go forward, then, to the next item.

Mr. Oberle: No. No questions.

The Chair: Is everybody okay?

Okay. When we had the meeting, we were having a discussion last time with respect to a request for additional funds for the Official Opposition caucus. Ms Blakeman had made a request. We have no motion, but I asked Ms Blakeman to consider preparing a motion, to have it in here. So the question, then, is: members, would you prefer Ms Blakeman to present us with a motion, or would you want to have a little discussion generally about the whole subject? Probably the most efficient way of dealing with this would be to invite Ms Blakeman to continue her presentation. If she wants to propose a motion, then we can be very specific about what it is we want to talk about.

Ms Blakeman.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. There actually is a motion that I prepared, just so that people have paper in front of them, and Allison will make sure that you each get a copy. My thanks to the Clerk for helping me prepare that. I appreciate your time.

Just to recap the information that I presented last week because I think there are two of you here that were not there for the presentation, right? Okay. What I'm asking for is \$300,000 to help the Official Opposition caucus budget deal with two things: inequities that have crept in over time, sometimes to do with cost escalation and sometimes to do with just a difference in funding. Clearly, we've lost the economy of scale. We're working with fewer MLAs, but we have a parliamentary obligation to essentially perform the same work: to debate every budget, to scrutinize all the bills that come before us. So the minimum requirements remain the same, but there are fewer MLAs to do it. This is not about the MLAs. It's about the resourcing of the people that help us get that work done.

So my goal overall was to hire three to four more researchers or portfolio staff with the money that I'm asking for. The way that I defended this – and the chair has already gone through how we receive our money and what the breakdown is for that, so I won't repeat it. But what was happening to us is that there were some areas where we were having to essentially subsidize a particular thing and pull money away from our research staff, so what I'm trying to do here is build our research staff back up again.

A couple of really obvious places where that had happened. One is in the Calgary caucus office. Now, our caucus has to pay for our Calgary caucus office. The money for the McDougall Centre clearly doesn't come out of your caucus budget. We have had a special allocation in the budget, but over time it has not kept pace with the actual costs that are there. Those of you from Calgary can probably speak to what has happened with the rents there better than I can, but it has been pretty extraordinary.

We were receiving \$73,000 and change for that Calgary caucus office. It was actually costing us \$132,800. So we're subsidizing that office, if you want to look at it that way, by \$60,000 a year. That's including the one staff person that's expected to be there. I think that the information that the chair has provided does point out how much the rents have gone up in Calgary, and that's certainly what happened to us. We had quite a reasonable price. Thanks to a lot of help from LAO in trying to renegotiate something, it's still, I think, almost quadruple.

The second issue that was listed in the original letter that I sent to the Speaker actually was the additional cost of the leader's overnight travel. We had a situation where he was entitled to the same 10 trips as Leader of the Official Opposition as any other member was, but of course clearly he was travelling much more. So we were using money from our budget to subsidize him. We don't like to send people out by themselves, or not the leader, so there was a staff person that was going with him. That was costing us about \$25,000 a year.

We have six researchers. One of those people has to spend some time doing some work to assist me in some other tasks, so we have five and a half FTEs that are dedicated to research. I wanted an additional \$150,000 to sort of buy us two more staff there, plus by redirecting the money that I just talked about in the leader's budget and the Calgary office, we could hire a third researcher. I had also done a presentation about new media. Since these budgets were developed, the expectation was that we would have a web presence, that we'd have someone capable of doing it, that we'd have the hardware and the software to do it.

At this point I should inquire if the two new people to the committee have a copy of my letter to the Speaker. You do? Okay. Good. Then you know what I'm talking about.

So our staffing has been reduced quite a bit. It says 21 in the chart from the chair, but I double-checked everything, and I think we've actually got 18. For example, our researchers: we went from nine researchers down to six, actually 5.5, so that's a third reduction. Three communications people: we lost one there, so that is a one-third reduction. Our outreach went from two to one, correspondence from two to one. The new media person we kept. The southern Alberta office: two down to one. Our admin people: we had five plus three sessional people and we're down to three plus one, so that's a 50 per cent reduction. The chief of staff stays, obviously. We do, I must note, have a special dispensation currently for a part-time assistant for Kent, which I did not include in my calculations.

We have the same level of work to do. I'd like to do a good job. I'd like to be an efficient opposition. I'd like to not waste people's time because we don't have the real work to be able to use. We are trying to shadow 24 ministries for budget debates and bill debates and everything that has to go on. So I'm asking for the resourcing for our caucus to allow us to do a good job of that.

That's the recap that I had. You have the motion in front of you asking for the allocation. You know why that amount of money, and you know where I was going to use it, what I planned to do with it

6:05

The Chair: Would you like to move it?

Ms Blakeman: I would like to move it. Thank you. I'd like to move that effective immediately an additional annual amount of \$300,000 be allocated to the Official Opposition caucus budget for the 2008-09 fiscal year, and consider this allocation as part of a base budget in succeeding years.

The Chair: We're not going to be so formal as to have to require a seconder or anything else. We've got a motion on the floor, so we're wide open.

Mr. Oberle.

Mr. Oberle: Well, thank you Mr. Chair. I would like to thank you, I guess, for a pretty thorough addressing of the information requests that we had coming from the last meeting.

Mr. Chair, when we discussed this last time, I must admit that I had some sympathy for the argument. I'm certainly cognizant of the importance of the role of the Official Opposition, the need to keep a government in check, and certainly Ms Blakeman made some strong arguments in favour of some additional funding and the struggles that they're having there.

But since that time with this information I've done a little number crunching here, starting with looking at the funding that we get on a funding per member basis. The Conservatives get the base amount, \$66,000 and change, plus \$720,000 in policy field commit-

tee support. If you add those two together and work it out, it turns out to be \$81,578 per member.

Doing the same thing on the Liberal side, backing out the leader's allowances, the southern office, those sorts of things, it works out to a figure of \$108,150, or \$27,000, per member more than the Conservative caucus gets. And if you take the same argument to the third party, the NDs, again backing out the leader's allowance, it turns into a per-member funding of \$160,650, or very nearly double, what our caucus is allocated per member on the Conservative side. I recognize that simply dollars might not be a fair way to look at it. The roles are different, and the pressures are different, and all sorts of things. Nonetheless, that is the funding per member.

If simple dollars is not a fair way to look at it, I dug a little bit deeper and looked at: well, what about staffing levels? According to your numbers, Mr. Chair, the Conservatives have 36 staff for 49 members, or .73 staff per member. The Liberals have 21 staff for nine members, or 2.3 staff per member. The NDs have seven staff for two members, or three and a half staff per member. Again, maybe that's not fair either. Ms Blakeman certainly made the argument about economies of scale, and I understand that argument, though I would point out in the staffing numbers that the argument was made last time that there's a high turnover, and it's very difficult to keep staff. I don't see the turnover there that's any different than the turnover that we have on our side. I make that observation.

But you dig deeper yet and start looking at what is done with staff and with roles. What exactly are the pressures? I did a little research on what the Liberal staff have. At the time my numbers said 20 staff, but since that time one staff member has been added, I believe, in communications, not in research where the pressure was supposed to be. The Liberals have a chief of staff, an EA to the leader, a special assistant to the leader, a senior HR administrator, a senior finance administrator, a manager of research, a senior research analyst, and a director of communications.

On our side, Mr. Chair, I have the ever-capable Mr. Mike Simpson, who is our director of caucus. In his job description he is the research manager, the finance manager, the chief of staff, and the HR manager. So four of those roles are performed by one member in our staff, and while Mike is indeed capable, he is, I suspect, not alone in the world in his capabilities.

Another argument was made about travel allowances, and Ms Blakeman again pointed that out and the 10 trips per year that all MLAs get. While that might be constraining for a leader of an opposition party – I could see that – by my read of the information here, the Leader of the Official Opposition gets unlimited air travel within the province of Alberta. The members of the caucus also get their 10 trips a year, but the caucus can fund travel, as you just pointed out, including travel out of province. I would note that they have \$27,000 per member additional funding over what the Conservatives get. Perhaps some of that could be applied there.

Mr. Chair, I'm sure I remain open to a compelling argument, but I've got to say that I don't see it in the data, and I remain to be convinced.

I've got to highlight one more concern given Ms Blakeman's concern about economies of scale and efficiencies – and there certainly is an argument there – and the importance of the role of opposition in keeping the government in check and informing Albertans. I support those two; I said that at the start. Then I would have to say that I would be deeply concerned by this particular motion, which does not address any other opposition parties in the House currently or at any time. The motion suggests that we go forward. I would have thought the argument would have been made for opposition in general, not for the Official Opposition party.

Again, I believe I remain to be convinced. I'm open to a compelling argument, but I just simply don't see one here, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay. I have Mr. Mason on my list and then Ms Blakeman. Anybody else? Mr. Mason.

Mr. Mason: Thank you. I wonder if we could distribute the memo that I brought. I was going to make the same point with respect to our caucus. What you have there is our costing for three additional staff, which is what we believe we need at a minimum to perform the work that we need to do. I'll just outline the structure of our existing staff. We have one full-time chief of staff. We have one administrative assistant. We have a half-time executive assistant to the leader. We have two research positions, one outreach position, and one communications position. Now, I will be very honest with the members of the committee. We have been very much struggling during this session to keep up with both the budget and the preparation of notes for bills, and I would like to request the committee's assistance in dealing with this. We need at least two more researchers. We do hire and we currently employ one temporary research assistant that is there to try and help us prepare notes for the bills, but we are seriously overstretched in that area.

It's very difficult to operate with one communications person. It's just not possible to keep up with the government releases and the government news conferences, and so on. In fact, we missed one important news conference altogether last week, I believe, because we simply couldn't deal with it.

There are no additional expenses that we're trying to throw on this. This is the basic cost, based roughly – not at the very bottom line of our grid, but near the bottom of our grid. Our contributions for the benefits and the cost of a BlackBerry: it adds up to \$176,455.08. If government members are going to entertain the motion that Ms Blakeman has put forward, I would be happy to amend it by adding \$175,000 in round numbers to that amount.

I'm happy to answer any questions.

The Chair: We do have a motion before the table. I think amending it to add a second one would dramatically change the motion. Perhaps we should deal with one motion at a time if you present a motion. Okay?

Ms Blakeman, we're on the motion that has been presented.

6:15

Ms Blakeman: Yes. Thank you very much for that. I thank and recognize the amount of effort that the Member for Peace River put into his scrutiny.

Just a couple of things that I want to address off the top. The first is that when we were talking about staff turnover and I was listing that as an issue, I of course was referring to the last time we had a very small caucus, which would have been staff turnover between '01 and '04. The statistics that were requested were for a year ago. They didn't cover the period that I was talking about. The issue there is that you can get young people to work a tremendous amount of effort for a short period of time but not for a very long time. One of the things we really noticed was that it was hard for us to keep staff longer than about a year. So we actually don't have the staff backup to show that.

With our staff – I'm not sure where the 21 figure comes from – what we have right now is the six researchers, one of whom gives some assistance to me half time. We have the new media person. We have two people in communications. We have one person that does correspondence and one person that does outreach. We have the two that you mentioned in the leader's office, one in the Calgary office. We have three admin people: one is a receptionist and also does the filing; another handles all of our financial transactions for caucus, is the relief receptionist, and also does some of the library

work; and the third person is general administration, so types letters for MLAs and things like that, sends the list to the Speaker, for example, before question period, takes the minutes at the meetings, and also does library and sessional papers. We do bring on some wage people for session, and there is one of those plus the half-time person for Kent. There is a chief of staff, indeed.

That's the staff that we have now. By my count I think we're at 18, and that's what they do. We don't have any control about their job description; it's as human resources determines what they're called. We as a general rule are not able to pay our people as well on the pay scale as the government is able to, so we're always in competition, with our folks being wooed away to government. That's actually where they go most frequently. We tend to pay lower on the scale for the same job.

The MLAs in our caucus get five trips in a year that are paid for through the LAO and then 10 overnights. You get 10 overnights but only five trips outside of Edmonton. That's my understanding. Am I totally wrong on that?

The Chair: MLAs can travel as they wish in the province of Alberta. There's no restriction on MLA travel in the province.

Mr. Oberle: Actually, I believe she's right on that point. There are five trips on mileage; otherwise, it has to be constituency mileage or unlimited travel to travel somewhere.

The Chair: Oh. Yeah. That's only if you claim that one little item, but within the – what is it? – 60,000 or 80,000 you can travel all you want. No, no. That's just for those additional four or five special ones. Hey, if you get 80,000 kilometres a year, you're in a car for 900 hours. If there are 40 hours in a week, you're looking at 21 or 22 weeks; you're looking at five months just sitting in your car to do that. No, you can travel within that. You have massive travel.

Ms Blakeman: Sorry. I was referring to the five special trips, if you call them that.

The Chair: Yeah, well, that was an additional one, but within that other number you can travel.

Ms Blakeman: Right. And as far as including the ND opposition, I'm the Official Opposition House Leader. I'm not privy to the pressures that are particularly facing a different caucus. I notice that the history of the Members' Services Committee has been pretty clear that where an allocation was granted to the Official Opposition, half of that was allocated to the third party, and I made an assumption there that if this application for additional funding was successful, I pretty much figured it would roll out as it has in the past at a 50 per cent rate for the third party. But I don't feel qualified to come forward representing both parties. I just don't know what their pressures are. It's a different caucus.

I hope that has addressed some of the concerns that you, in fact, have raised, and I'm happy to answer any other questions.

The Chair: Mr. Rodney, then Mr. Weadick.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Your office did prepare a really informative package. I found it useful not just for this conversation but for other situations as well. All sorts of statistics there. I also appreciated the historical references of the formula.

Mr. Oberle went on to outline the degree to which the Liberals and the NDP do receive more money per member. I also appreciate the economies of scale. I really, really do. If the dollars per member

were exactly the same, I'd certainly support looking at that again, but they are different. If they were the same, I'd see need for adjustment, but there is a substantial difference, and I'm having trouble seeing past that at this point in time. I think Mr. Oberle stated the case very, very well, and I've nothing more to add to the conversation without being repetitive.

Mr. Mason: Can I just get clarification?

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Chairman, I'm not understanding the per member. Are you taking the total caucus budget and dividing it by the number of members? Because there are two components. There's a per-member amount, which is exactly the same for all of us, pitifully small in our case. Then there's another amount. And we have, of course, 24 ministries to keep track of with two people.

Mr. Rodney: Sure. No, as Mr. Oberle identified, it's the total divided by the number per.

The Chair: Okay. Is that clarification?

Mr. Weadick.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you. I think that probably the opposition have highlighted something we all struggle with. I know that most of our members share a person. Each of our MLAs gets one-half of a person to do everything: write their speeches and assist with research and do the letters and do all of the things they need to do. When I look at the opposition and at the numbers, I realize that I'm not sure if you're all working with one half-time person. But I know that most of us are, and you get by the best you can.

What was compelling to me as I looked back over the four years of staffing, I noticed in the Official Opposition that you've had roughly 18 to 20 positions all the way through for four years straight. It appeared to be enough in '05, '06, '07, '08 to get done whatever had to be done. I know there are a few less members now, which means that probably they're chasing less for member work and, you know, trying to get a little bit more of the party work done, but it appears to be pretty consistent. When I looked at the third party, same thing: there are six or seven all the way through for four years, so we've been getting the job done. The only place where there's a bit of an uptick is if you go to '05: the government had 27, and they're up to 36. But there are quite a few more members to answer the phone for and try to provide some level of work.

If I had looked at this and seen a drastic drop, that it appeared up until last year that the job was being done by the opposition quite comfortably and you had 30 and that now because you have less members – you were dropped to 20 – I could see that being an impact. But when I looked back and saw that it's been pretty consistent for four straight years, the same number of people have been doing the same work year after year – and whether it's 18 or 19 or 19 and a half sort of depends on how you hire and at what rate – I just don't see the requirement for a major increase.

I think we all have to work as efficiently as we can with the resources we have. As I said, I know I talked to my members, and they're all sharing. They have half a person. As an MLA working and trying to represent a constituency, as are all the MLAs, it's a lot of work for one LA to represent two members and try to handle all of their bookings and mail and all of the other issues that come around for that member. So I don't see a huge value to spend the extra money, but I still remain to maybe hear a compelling argument.

The Chair: Mr. Elniski.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you. I look at the budget, and if I break the line items down a little bit, I think you raised one point that kind of caught my attention, and that had to do with one full-time person to support Mr. Hehr. Oh, he's half time right now. I would fully and completely support that person being changed to a full-timer. I think that it compels us to do everything possible to make sure that he is specifically capable of doing his job. I don't think there would be any question with regard to that.

I also don't have a significant amount of issue with the request for additional funds for the Calgary offices because I know what those are doing, but again I would repeat some of Mr. Weadick's argument in that I haven't seen it in terms of the numbers of personnel. You know, I understand caucuses grow and caucuses shrink and they do those kinds of things, but I haven't seen a real compelling argument yet for the total for the rest of the budget, so I'm struggling a little bit to account for the rest of the money.

Thank you.

6:25

The Chair: Ms Blakeman.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I have an org chart from October 26 of 2007, which would have been inside of that last year, and it shows 26 people, not 21, so that would be 26 down to 18.

And thank you for this one. I didn't know who Duncan Taylor was because he's not a research analyst. He's doing database, evidently, so my apologies. I didn't even know he was there.

There is a difference, and we have dropped. I went through that, sort of going into communications, where we'd had three and now we've got, you know, down by 50 per cent in a lot of them, so it has made a significant difference to us. It makes a difference in the following way. As I said before, we have to do all of our own communications, for example, so we have things like nine people sharing in two people to do the communications. We have nine people sharing in the one guy that does the media and also does some speech writing for some people.

We have 24 ministries that are trying to be handled by six researchers. That's the level. So when you add them all together and say, "Oh, well, everybody is getting two people," that's just not what's happening because they're not all researchers. Some are communications; some are admin staff. I've talked about the different things that the three admin staff are doing. Then we have extra wage help that comes on when we're in session to help photocopy and do petition preparation and all of that kind of thing.

So we have gone from 26 people down to 18 plus one: 19. I'm not including Mr. Hehr's assistant in these numbers, by the way, because that was a separate allocation. That's what we're having to do. Nine of us are sharing in the pot of people that are available in the different areas. In many cases your caucus just isn't dealing with communications staff. You get to pull from a different resource there with Public Affairs. I hope that answers your question.

The Chair: Others?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Chairman, I just want to point out that certainly not all of our staff, of the 36 identified here, are researchers or direct. We have support people as well. Currently, I believe, our research group is eight people. That would include the senior research analyst.

The other thing, Mr. Chairman, is that in addition to the disparity in funding, I would like to point out that I think our Conservative

caucus has been served well by the funding. In fact, we've lapsed significant dollars for the last two years that I've been the whip. We're adding some communications support this year in staff and website support and those sorts of thing. We're looking at a cost of about \$1,200 per site plus a licensing fee, which is usually minimal. That's going to run us – well, \$1,200 per site times 50 members would be far below what the media ask from the Liberals is. If we look at that cost at nine members, we'd be looking at about \$10,000, not \$75,000.

Again, I hope I remain open to a compelling argument, but I just don't see it here.

The Chair: Mr. Taylor.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I mean this with respect, but my question to Mr. Oberle would be: precisely what is it that your researchers research? Not to call into question the validity of their research at all – I'm sure it is valid – but I suspect that it's quite different from the role that our researchers have to play in that we don't so much have to hold the government members or the members of the governing party accountable as we do the Premier and Executive Council. When you look in terms of five and a half researchers, which is what we have right now, we are down from, I believe, eight before – Ms Blakeman, is that correct? – or nine researchers.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. Nine.

Mr. Taylor: Nine researchers. Those researchers are engaged in shadowing the various portfolios – and now there are 23 of them plus the Premier's office as well – as well as doing any original research on work that we're doing in terms of policy initiatives of our own or private members' bills that members of the Official Opposition caucus are working on. Like Ms Blakeman, I'm hardly qualified to speak on behalf of the third party, but I'm quite sure that their experience is more similar to ours than it is, perhaps, to yours.

The reason that I point this out is to suggest to you, is to communicate to you that the roles our researchers play and, flowing out from that to some extent, the roles that our communications people play are, I think, somewhat different than the staff that serve the government caucus. It's not to suggest that your guys don't work hard. It's not to suggest that you have it easy because you have one legislative assistant to every two MLAs or anything like that. It's to suggest that the nature of the work that a government caucus staff does and that the Official Opposition caucus staff does is somewhat different. In my opinion, to try and bring it down to a direct dollar-to-dollar or person-to-person comparison probably doesn't capture the full value of what we're talking about here.

The Chair: Mr. Mason.

Mr. Mason: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I wanted to just make the case that the structure of staffing in an opposition caucus is very different than the structure and function of staffing for the government caucus. I think a couple of members have mentioned that one of the primary functions of the staff in the government caucus is to provide individual support for members in terms of their bookings and so on. I just want to indicate that in our caucus, with the exception of the leader, where I have a half-time executive assistant, that's not one of the main functions of our caucus staff. When we had four and certainly with Rachel as well now, we have depended mostly on the constituency staff to handle the bookings and so on. It's not one of the functions that we provide particularly for MLAs other than the leader.

The other major difference that I see is that the government caucus can depend to a greater degree on government resources for support. I don't know how it actually works, but I am making the assumption that government departments will provide you with the information that you need and that the Public Affairs Bureau will assist with communications and so on. We need to duplicate all of those functions within our staff. If our staff aren't there to do that sort of thing, then it simply doesn't get done.

You know, I just wanted to reiterate as well that the situation that we're in, where we're trying to keep track of 24 departments or ministries, including the Premier, with the resources that we have, is very daunting. We have to set priorities very rigorously in terms of what we can actually do. There's much going on in government that we probably should be aware of and we probably should be looking into and providing comment on that we just can't get to. We just basically have to pick a couple of issues at a time that we can deal with. We are struggling to do that.

I guess the last point I'll make is that the structure that I outlined for you is not a top-heavy administrative structure. It's minimal. We've kept that as an important principle, that we try to put the resources right to the people that actually do the important work, and we don't have a large structure of administrators there. We've got one chief of staff, one administrative assistant.

6:35

The Chair: Others who would like to participate? Mr. Lund.

Mr. Lund: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I've just been doing a bit of calculation. Then I heard Mr. Mason's comments, and quite frankly I have some sympathy with some of the comments that he made. I can see where, yes, we probably do have some advantages, legs up, if you will, with the capacity within the ministries that we can access at some times.

I'm not sure that I could support those total numbers, but I believe that I could support something less than what we have before us on the table, the \$300,000. I think Mr. Oberle outlined where there probably could be some assistance in helping the Official Opposition with the structure of their – not that it's any of our business, but I always get a little nervous when I see a lot of administration. I think there's usually a way of trimming some of that. Personally, right now I cannot support the \$300,000, but I will leave my mind open to some lesser amount, like, as a suggestion, 50 per cent of it.

The Chair: Others who would like to participate on this motion?

Mrs. Leskiw: This is all new to me, so deciding what is needed and what's not needed, the amount of \$300,000 or the amount of \$176,000: I don't think I'm in a position to decide how many you need, how many you don't need. I definitely think Mr. Hehr needs to have a full-time instead of a half-time.

The Chair: Can I just make a comment on this at the moment? We have dealt with Mr. Hehr in a very, very sophisticated and honourable way. The Legislative Assembly, not the Liberal caucus, will take care of virtually all of the expenses associated with Mr. Hehr – it's a separate item – but on a half-time basis. Ms Blakeman is referring to the other half time. Mr. Hehr is very happy with the situation, he tells me.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. I hope I've been clear that that was taken care of by LAO. It's not part of this.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you. I also agree with Mr. Lund. I definitely

think both oppositions need a couple more staff members to help them out. I don't know if \$300,000 is what we're looking at, but I do feel for the work that both parties have to do. I do think that I'd be willing to support something less than this but definitely with an increase of help somewhere in the research department.

The Chair: Others who would like to make a comment?

There being no further individuals who want to participate, we have a motion. Shall I call the question? The motion is that effective immediately an additional annual amount of \$300,000 be allocated to the Official Opposition caucus budget for the 2008-2009 fiscal year, and consider this allocation as part of a base budget in succeeding years.

All members in favour of the motion, kindly raise a hand. Three. All members opposed, kindly raise a hand. Six. It's defeated 6 to 3.

Okay. Now what?

Ms Blakeman: May I propose a second amendment? Is that allowed?

The Chair: A second motion, you mean?

Ms Blakeman: Yes. A second motion.

The Chair: Proceed.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. If you take the document that was before you and replace the \$300,000 figure with the \$150,000 figure, that would be my second motion. It would then read: moved that effective immediately an additional annual amount of \$150,000 be allocated to the Official Opposition caucus budget for the 2008-2009 fiscal year. Well, I don't know if you want the 50 per cent.

Mr. Mason: I'd rather have \$175,000, but I'll take \$150,000 if you want to add it to your motion.

Ms Blakeman: Are you talking about the 50 per cent step down, or do you want the same amount of money?

Mr. Mason: The same amount of money.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. Then I'll let you do your own motion.

The Chair: Please proceed, Ms Blakeman.

Ms Blakeman: That \$150,000 be allocated to the Official Opposition caucus budget for the 2008-2009 fiscal year and to consider this allocation as part of a base budget in succeeding years.

The Chair: Okay. We have a motion on the floor.

Mr. Rodney: I appreciate round 2. It's not that it would be unexpected. Again, I think every member has shown appreciation for extra pressures that we all experience. But just to chop the number in half – I think that in fairness to members and in fairness to taxpayers I asked last time for a little bit more of a breakdown of exactly how that money would be spent. I would feel much more comfortable voting for or against this amendment if I knew exactly how that \$150,000 was going to be spent.

Ms Blakeman: It ends up being spent for two researchers and their benefit program. It puts a researcher on the low end. The one I

looked at before was for the LAO, and it was a salary to \$76,000. We couldn't afford to pay that, so it would end up being a salary of about \$60,000, which is a sort of mid to lower level research person and their benefit package, which brings it up to \$75,000. So we would use the \$150,000 for two staff people, two researchers.

Mr. Rodney: A quick supplemental to that, Mr. Chairman. The last sentence, "and to consider this allocation as part of a base budget in succeeding years," is a separate sentence. I just want to point out that, you know, if numbers were different in the House, numbers would be different in each of these packages here. If we had a minority situation, if it was 40-ish to 40-ish, it would be very different. I'm not sure why this would be considered as part of a base in succeeding years. I do believe that that complicates matters.

Ms Blakeman: Yes, I understand that, and that's why I sought advice on this one. Essentially, it's in recognition that this committee votes every year on these budgets. You can't say, "For the four-year term" or "For this 27th Legislature." This would be the set-up.

I didn't want to have to put you guys through this every time. That's why I was asking that it go to be part of a base allocation. It would come up and be considered by the committee again next year. They have the ability to cut it, to adjust it with CCOLA or not. That's why it's there. It's a way of handling this administratively.

Mr. Rodney: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Ms Blakeman.

The Chair: Mr. Weadick.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to talk again. I don't know if \$150,000 is exactly the right number or not. I think Mr. Taylor did make some compelling statements, for me at least. I'm new here, and I don't have, I guess, as much understanding of how an opposition works or what it has to do. There probably is some truth to the fact that there are going to be some different requirements placed on some of your staff that ours don't have. I'm not even sure what all of those are as I sit here, but I think I'm at a point where I can consider something. I think Mr. Mason also made some good comments that trying to track a large number of fairly technical documents can be extremely difficult with a small staff.

I believe I am comfortable with some level of support. I just don't have a comfort level with what's going to work effectively or what it would buy us. I know what Mr. Rodney was saying, and I think it's something we do have to deal with reasonably quickly. When would we be meeting again, Mr. Chair? I'm just trying to get a sense.

The Chair: At the call of the chair in consultation with the members. Are you completed?

Mr. Weadick: Yeah, I'm completed. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Oberle and Mr. Elniski.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I feel very much like I'm in a used car showroom here, where you write the number on a piece of paper and then slide it across the table, and the guy crosses out the number and writes another one and slides it back. I feel like I'm there for two reasons. One, this is no way to arrive at the number, and two, the number often doesn't relate to the value of the car by the time you've finished sliding the paper back and forth. Sometimes it has nothing to do with the actual value of the car.

6:45

Mr. Chair, I have real trouble with this. I said that I remain open to a compelling argument. I think I do. Nonetheless, I just don't see it here. I haven't heard one here. I reiterate that we have a staff there that has four people appointed to manage portfolios for 21 staff where I have one person doing for 36 staff. Maybe there is a number. I don't know. I really don't know. I would say in response to Mr. Mason: I understand that there are different roles between the opposition and the caucus, but managing staff is managing staff. How many directors, managers, and senior whatever do you need to manage 21 staff? We have one for 36 staff. I just simply don't see the compelling argument here, and I'm not prepared to support any funding here until I see a compelling argument otherwise.

The Chair: Mr. Elniski.

Mr. Elniski: Thank you. Actually, my argument has been made.

The Chair: Ms Blakeman.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks. I made the suggestion of that particular amount based on what had been suggested by the member sitting beside you, actually, so I didn't completely pick it out of the air. I went on what had been suggested as a member of your caucus being open to it.

What is true is that the caucuses do operate differently. We don't focus on the individual. None of us would ever consider thinking about: well, we get half of this person's time to do something. We don't. Everything is focused on 24 ministries. So it's, you know, how many portfolios are you responsible for as an individual, and then how many portfolios does each of the research staff have to be trying to deal with? Right now they're trying to deal with four to five of them. Obviously, the person that has Health and Wellness probably has four portfolios. The person that picks up some of the smaller ones has five portfolios. We don't get any one person to call our own or even a part of them to call our own. You know, I share a researcher with three or four other people. We just don't approach our work because it's not focused on us as individuals; it's focused on the parliamentary job we have to do in holding the government, with its 24 cabinet members and ministries, accountable. That's how we focus things.

Once again, we don't particularly get to choose what the titles of people are. That comes through HR. We have three people that are in a position where they supervise some others. The director of research: that individual is listed here as manager of research. We call him a director. I don't think he is still even paid at the top level of the example that I gave you that's currently being listed for LAO. We have the director of communications, who handles that direction of policy, and we have the chief of staff. There are no other managers there.

Again, we focus everything on trying to work with what comes at us from those 24 ministries and what comes at us from the 3 million people that live in Alberta, because we answer the phone for every phone call. Wherever they live, we deal with it in that office. Whatever information they want, whatever letters they send us or CC copies: we do our best to try and respond to all of them. That's the additional work.

I mean, senior administrator, finance: I couldn't tell you right now what other designation that person gets because it's usually on a grid of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. They will be assigned that based on where they're falling in that grid. So this person is admin staff, and they handle all of our requests for funding. They pay the water cooler people and the various other things they're responsible for. That's

what they do. That's the financial part. And, as I said, they're the relief receptionist, they also do some filing, and they also work with the sessional papers. This is not a grand job. That may be the title, but they're basically a pretty low-level admin support. If you're truly concerned about this being a top-heavy administration, I can ask the LAO to provide the salary range that they're working in for that particular job.

But our money is not spent on administration; it's spent on research. That's what we're trying to do.

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Chair, I need to point out again that we have eight researchers for a staff of 49, so we share our researchers with six other people. We don't have anybody that's focused on a person basis either. It's focused on the task.

With respect to job titles and roles and, you know, the person that does the water coolers and the photocopiers, I might point out that Mike does that as well amongst his other duties in our caucus.

This issue of titles and whether that comes from HR rather than from your caucus. Your caucus certainly works with HR to identify those titles, and regardless of what they're called, when you're a senior or a director, that means different things on pay grids. If you're suggesting, as you seem to be now, that you have front-line researchers who actually just have a title, they're also getting paid at that title. Maybe you have another problem in your staff that I never teased out of the data here.

Again, there's no compelling argument for me here at all, Mr. Chair. When I see one, I'll certainly consider it.

The Chair: Anyone else wish to add something to this subject matter? Do you want me to call the question?

Ms Blakeman: Question.

The Chair: The motion before us is that

effective immediately an additional annual amount of \$150,000 be allocated to the Official Opposition caucus budget for the 2008-09 fiscal year, and consider this allocation as part of the base budget in succeeding years.

Would all hon. members in favour of the motion please raise their hands? Four. Would all hon. members opposed to the motion please raise their hands? Five. It's defeated.

Okay. Now what?

Mr. Mason: Mr. Chair, I don't think we have any sort of top-heavy organization at all. We have a very small and tight group of excellent staff. I don't know what argument would convince Mr. Oberle, but I just want to express my view that if the hon. members opposite would walk a mile in our shoes, I think that they would realize that holding such a large government accountable is not only important, which they've acknowledged, but also very difficult. I mean, we're not just faced with a large government with a lot of support in the Legislature; some very good politicians on the other side as well. It's a great challenge with the resources that we have.

I'm feeling kind of caught here because if there are some issues that members opposite have with the way the Liberal caucus spends its money, that's fine, but I don't think they apply to us. I just don't feel, unless we get some sense from the government members about what it is they're willing to support, if anything, that it's worth while to put any more motions on the floor.

Mr. Oberle: I just need to respond to that, Mr. Chair. I've let it slide till now. Mr. Taylor commented on: what is it exactly that our researchers do? I can tell you that there's not a private member, a

non Executive Council member in our caucus that doesn't feel that they hold our government to account, whether they do it on the floor of the House, which is your avenue to do that – well, we do that occasionally. I know you lob puffball comments about the questions that we ask, but our members do that every day in CPC and other avenues that we have, and we employ researchers in order to do that. That's what our researchers do.

We hold our government to account, too. If you think we run an operation where the Executive Council runs roughshod over the rest of the caucus and we remain ready to raise our hands like trained monkeys, I would have to take offence to that. As the government whip I can tell you that those government members are very active in holding our government to account. It's a challenge every day as the whip and, I'm sure, as an Executive Council member.

I don't know how to arrive at fair, Mr. Mason. Your caucus gets double per member what our caucus does. You have four times as much staff per member. How do you arrive at a fair number? I have some very deep sympathy for the task you have. From where I sit, it seems the most difficult part of your job would be: how on earth do you staff the committees and do House duty and ask the questions and all that? You cannot put a staffer in the PFC or on the floor of the House. It's a simple fact of the matter that you have two members, and there's not anything that can be done about that. I have great sympathy for that. I'll bet you keep some pretty fancy hours. Nonetheless, you can't put a staffer in that position, so there's no solution to that. You have two members.

The Chair: Mr. Elniski.

Mr. Elniski: I'll let Mr. Mason go first, sir.

Mr. Mason: I'd like to respond.

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, you know, I appreciate the government's generosity – I've said this – in providing a seat for the NDP caucus on each of the standing policy field committees as well as the other committees. The net result is that I sit on four committees, and Ms Notley sits on six committees. Now, we can run from committee to committee and be present at as many of the meetings as possible, but unless we have the staff to prepare

our notes for us and do the research, we can't be effective in those committees. You know, I think that if you check, you'll find that the normal committee load for other members in other caucuses is probably one or two committees.

You know, we appreciate being put on those committees, but we don't have the staff complement to keep up with the new regime around here. I'm not criticizing the new regime around here. I like the fact that we have these standing policy committees and that there's a more collegial atmosphere. Quite frankly, we may have two members, but the responsibilities that have been given to us, including by the government caucus, are substantial and are not resourced.

The Chair: Mr. Elniski.

Mr. Elniski: Yes. Thank you. As I look at the NDP opposition in terms of the numbers – I go back a couple of years here with some of the numbers – some of them certainly have declined. I agree that there is at some point in time, I think, a baseline value for the type of service being provided and the actual cost of the delivery of that service. Whether you have two members or four members, I don't know that that baseline dollar changes in my mind. I don't necessarily know that I see that. Also, as you know, I have very little time in the Assembly and in this particular business, but I can see some compelling logic, certainly in my own mind, to look at whether or not, for example, for your four-member to two-member caucus, in fact, that should net result you in a decrease of any dollars at all. That's all.

Thank you.

The Chair: Well, we're approaching 7 o'clock, which is the time to leave. May I as the chairman of the committee encourage all the members to try and have further discussion with respect to this matter. A date for the next meeting: for lack of a better suggestion, perhaps sometime in August after consultation with you? I don't need agreement. I'm just making that as a suggestion; that's all. We're not going to get there anyway, and we're running out of time. We won't be able to get to item 5.

An adjournment motion? Everybody agree? Okay.

[The committee adjourned at 6:59 p.m.]

