

Title: Wednesday, April 4, 2007 Public Accounts Committee

Date: 07/04/04

Time: 8:31 a.m.

[Mr. MacDonald in the chair]

The Chair: The chair would like to call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order, please. I would like to welcome everyone in attendance. Perhaps we will start. We'll go quickly around the table and introduce ourselves, and we'll start with the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

[The following committee members introduced themselves: Dr. Brown, Mr. Cardinal, Mr. Chase, Mr. Eggen, Mrs. Forsyth, Mr. Johnston, Mr. MacDonald, Mr. R. Miller, Mr. Prins, Mr. Rodney, Mr. Strang, and Mr. Webber]

[The following staff of the Auditor General's office introduced themselves: Mr. Dunn, Mr. Saher, Ms White, and Mr. Wylie]

Mrs. Dacyshyn: Corinne Dacyshyn, committee clerk.

Mr. Dubrow: Geoff Dubrow, witness.

The Chair: As chair I would like to advise committee members that the agenda for today's meeting was sent out on Monday. If I could now have approval of the agenda that was sent, please.

Mr. Strang: So moved, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Strang. Moved by Mr. Strang that the agenda for the April 4, 2007, meeting be approved as distributed. All in favour? Opposed? Seeing none, thank you.

May I also, please, have approval of the minutes of the March 21, 2007, committee meeting?

Dr. Brown: I so move.

The Chair: Thank you. Moved by Dr. Brown that the minutes of the March 21, 2007, committee meeting be approved as circulated. All in favour? Opposed? Seeing none, thank you very much.

This brings us to item 4 on our agenda. I'm pleased to say and express our gratitude, the entire committee's, to Mr. Geoff Dubrow, the director of capacity development at CCAF, for coming this morning. We appreciate your time very, very much, and we appreciate the office of the Auditor General for helping to facilitate today's meeting. I think it's going to be beneficial for us all. I look forward to it. We look forward to your PowerPoint presentation, and please proceed.

Mr. Dubrow: Thank you very much.

Mr. Dunn: Okay. Maybe I'll make an opening comment if I may. This is in regard to the matters that we've discussed really over about the last year regarding the performance and the effectiveness of Public Accounts, not just in Alberta but across the country. Those of you who may have attended at any point what's called the CCPAC meetings would have seen Geoff at the CCPAC meetings, which is the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees. Geoff, you met with those committees in Ontario two years ago, Prince Edward Island last year, and you'll also be presenting at the Victoria conference, for those of you who can make it to the Victoria conference, in August of this year.

Geoff, you mentioned to me that you've made this similar presentation now to approximately half of the PACs within Canada,

so six of them, including the federal government and a number of provinces, and now it's Alberta's turn. So I'm turning it over to you, Geoff.

Mr. Dubrow: Thank you very much, Fred, and thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for your kind words. Good morning to all members of the Public Accounts Committee and representatives of the Auditor General's office. I'd like to thank you very much for this invitation. In particular I'd like to thank the chairman, vice-chairman, and Auditor General for having facilitated this visit.

The Canadian Comprehensive Auditing Foundation, or CCAF, as it's known, has been working in the area of strengthening public sector governance for over 25 years, and one of the areas we've specialized in is strengthening Public Accounts Committees, hence the publication that you see in front of you. I won't go into it in any great detail, but just to mention, I've heard one member already make reference this morning to the fact that there's a guide that talks about the kinds of questions that Public Accounts Committee members want to ask of government witnesses. There are a number of other pullouts as well: a draft statement of mandates and powers, guidance on how to report and follow up, and a guide for witnesses. So there's some pretty interesting material in there. In particular I'd flag pages 19 through 34, a little longer than I thought, in the main guide, called A Guide to Strengthening Public Accounts Committees, which talks about, really, what some of the prerequisites are for a Public Accounts Committee to be effective.

As Fred mentioned, I've had the privilege and pleasure of presenting before approximately seven Public Accounts Committees to date in Canada. Corinne asked me to mention just a bit about my background. Prior to this I spent some time, from '99 to 2005, doing similar work internationally, setting up Public Accounts Committees and developing value-for-money audit capacity in countries like Russia, where there is no tradition of democratic development. Obviously, being here in our own country, in a developed democracy, the circumstances are very different, but at the same time Public Accounts and our system of oversight can be very tricky. So there's always interesting work to be done and experience to be shared.

To get more into the meat of things, I did want to just mention before I make my presentation that I have received a fair amount of information about some of the changes that have been made lately to the Public Accounts Committee through the House leaders' agreement and, I believe, some proposed changes to the Standing Orders. Those changes, I think, will bring Alberta closer into line with what other jurisdictions are doing in Canada and within the Westminster model, and I'll gladly talk about that as I go through my presentation. Just to, sort of, note some of them: understanding that the committee can report to the House and can compel a government response, the committee setting its own agenda, deciding when to meet, resources for the committee, meetings outside session, and I notice an *Edmonton Journal* article that emphasized that deputy ministers would be appearing as witnesses rather than ministers. Those are some of the changes that I understand have taken place.

So the purpose of the presentation is to give you an overview of some of the basic criteria that the CCAF suggests, based on the CCPAC guidelines and on our own guide, some of the basic criteria that we suggest are necessary for a Public Accounts Committee to be effective. What I'd like to do is sort of red flag some of those for you throughout my presentation, really to address some of the changes that have been made within the Public Accounts Committee of Alberta very recently. I hope that it'll offer you some context and be, sort of, less generic.

I should also just mention before I start that the CCAF is entirely nonpartisan. The tradition of the organization is to strengthen public-sector management. Similarly, having said that I worked overseas, I've worked in countries where there have been very sharp political cleavages – Serbia would strike me as an example – postwar countries. My background and training is always to be as sensitive as possible to local conditions, local circumstances, not to suggest that there's one model and that everybody needs to adopt it but rather to share experience from other jurisdictions and to practice a policy of what I call blunt diplomacy or blunt politeness. I'll try to give you some honest feedback, if you're interested in it, and some perspectives about what other jurisdictions are doing, but the purpose is not to cast judgment or, again, to propose that there's one model that everybody needs to follow.

I'm going to go through this fairly quickly. I want to leave a lot of time for questions and discussions because that's a very important part of the presentation, to have a chance to interact with the members. Again, we've put together a slide presentation on what basic criteria are for an effective Public Accounts Committee. I'll go through it very quickly because, as you'll just see – I'll flip to the next slide – what we've done is we've put together, based on the survey that we conducted last year of Public Accounts Committees, a compilation that gives you some idea of what other jurisdictions are doing in Canada. We looked at 14 Public Accounts Committees in Canada: federal, provincial, and territorial. So when we talk about a particular aspect of a Public Accounts Committee, we can let you know at the same time what other committees in Canada are doing, just to give you some perspective on that.

8:40

I won't spend too much time on the first page, but I will just say that there are sort of four main categories that we looked at for an effective Public Accounts Committee. One is some of the basic prerequisites. Are you meeting? Do you have the power to call your own meetings? Are you meeting outside the legislative session, which is something that has just been added? Do you have sufficient staff and technical capacity? So these are sort of the basic fundamentals. Again, I'll get into some of those as I go through the presentation.

The other one is constructive nonpartisanship. This is a bit of a tricky one because, of course, typically we are sitting in a Legislature, and I'm making a presentation to politicians. But Public Accounts Committees generally, and in some cases only theoretically, tend to be or are supposed to be less partisan – I can't say "nonpartisan" but "less partisan" – than other legislative committees. I'll be glad to talk about that as well and some of the conditions for that to happen.

The next category pertains to holding an effective hearing. What are some of the criteria required for an effective hearing to be held?

Finally, what is the value-added of a Public Accounts Committee? The Auditor General is issuing a report, but what is the value-added? When you go back to your constituents and you have the very laborious and difficult task of explaining what a Public Accounts Committee is, what can you say to them about the value-added of what your committee has done? You've got an Auditor General's report, but what have you done to act on that report? That's something that I'd like to talk to you about because I think generally MLAs, MPPs, MNAs, and MPs are very interested in that particular issue.

I just wanted to address, before I start going through slides, one particular issue. We've just talked about the additional powers that the Public Accounts Committee has been given. One of the themes that I think will be a recurring theme through the presentation is:

okay; now you have some new powers, but what is it that you as a Public Accounts Committee want to accomplish? If I can sort of plant that question in your head early on, I think that, hopefully, by the end of our discussion that will be something that we might start to see some interesting ideas formulating. That's really the underlying question: what is it that you as a Public Accounts Committee want to accomplish? That's really related to the value-added.

Let me start by talking about the prerequisites. I don't want to spend too much time on the generic presentation, so I'm sort of going to try to flip to some of the issues that I think perhaps are the most relevant for the committee. Let me start with the issue of the PAC meeting outside session. We're going to have to change these statistics now that the Alberta PAC can meet outside session, but generally when the House was prorogued, according to our survey eight of the 14 Legislatures were able to meet outside the session during prorogation, and 12 of the 14 could meet during recess. So just to give you sort of an idea that your committee will now be meeting outside of the session, and you'll be joining about eight other committees that are now able to do that.

Let me talk about, again under prerequisites for an effective committee, sufficient staff and technical capacity. We noted with some concern during the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees that about half of the Public Accounts Committees in the country don't have a researcher. I understand that your committee will now have resources for a researcher. I should mention that – and I'll be happy to talk about this during discussion – most of the committees have used their resources for a researcher to hire an independent researcher. I think it's very important to flag that issue right off the bat. There are some provinces that just supplement the budget of the caucuses to hire their own researchers. But political researchers, partisan researchers, of course, are more partisan oriented. So I just sort of wanted to flag the importance of hiring a nonpartisan researcher, which most committees have done.

I'll be happy to talk about the different models of doing that. There's the sort of legislative library model, and there's a model where the clerk responsible for committees will hire researchers. There are a couple of different models. But I just wanted to sort of flag that, generally, if that researcher can be independent, that's something that's very important.

Let me talk briefly about constructive nonpartisanship, to coin a term. I don't believe there are any ministers on this committee. Is that right? There are no ministers on the committee, but ministers can be called as witnesses. Our study found that 4 out of 14 jurisdictions could call ministers as witnesses, although three jurisdictions declined to respond, which is usually the polite Canadian way of saying: we're uncomfortable talking about that. So the number is probably a little bit higher.

I think it's an important issue to discuss because, generally, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association findings and our findings are that when you have the ministers appearing as witnesses rather than the deputy ministers, it tends to greatly enhance the partisan atmosphere on the committee. The reasons for that are several-fold. One of them is that ministers tend to be equipped with good lines. So when a minister appears as a witness, the committee will hear the party line. The members of the government side will tend to compliment the minister for his initiatives, and the members of the opposition will tend to attack the minister. But this is political. This is not a judgment on Alberta; I haven't read your meeting transcripts.

The general practice is – again, I read this in the *Edmonton Journal* article but didn't see this quite in your House leaders' agreement. My understanding is that you'll now have deputy ministers appearing. I wanted to sort of flag this as an issue that we

might talk about because, generally, the idea, the concept of a Public Accounts Committee, the purpose of a Public Accounts Committee is to improve public administration, not to look at policy issues, although there's obviously a thin line sometimes between the two, but to improve public administration. The way that most Public Accounts Committees do that is by bringing the deputy head of the department in for questioning, questioning around the Auditor General's report.

Again, when the minister appears as a witness, this tends to divide the Public Accounts Committee along party lines, and this usually tends to be something that does not increase the effectiveness of the PAC. Our finding was that the PAC functions best when there's an effort made to keep the atmosphere as nonpartisan as possible. Again, I realize that I'm speaking to a group of elected officials and that that might sound difficult, but the PAC is not supposed to be by design an ordinary legislative committee. It's supposed to be an oversight committee designed to improve public administration and, therefore, less partisan than most other committees.

With regard to holding an effective hearing and whether reports of the Auditor General are permanently referred to the committee . . .

Yes, sir?

Mr. Cardinal: Just a question on the process. When you talk about deputy ministers and ministers represented here on the committee, one of the problems you would have if you took the ministers out would be that the deputy ministers probably would not be familiar with that particular department because they're probably in a new department. So I think it would be a little tough to make that change. But that's just a comment.

Mr. Dubrow: Well, that's a very interesting comment. I mean, I know that federally the tenure of deputy ministers is about 14 months, which, as you'll note, is very short. The argument for the minister to appear is that when you're looking at a performance audit, a value-for-money audit looking at the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of the department, generally the deputy minister as the head bureaucrat will have a better technical understanding of the issues around that audit than will the minister. Ministers tend to have a more broad, if you like, understanding of the issues.

Mr. Cardinal: I disagree in some cases.

Mr. Dubrow: Okay. Yeah, deputy minister tenure is highly troublesome because it's so short, and that's an issue that a lot of Public Accounts Committees have expressed concern about. Let's say that there's an audit on the Ministry of Education and that by the time that audit reaches the Public Accounts Committee, the deputy minister has changed. You want to call in the deputy minister, and instead you're looking at a new deputy minister who says: well, I wasn't there during the tenure, but I'll try to answer questions. That is really a problem when it comes to accountability.

8:50

Mr. Cardinal: That's what I was getting at.

Mr. Dubrow: Well, I think you're absolutely right. I would suggest that that's in a sense maybe a related but nonetheless separate issue in the sense that, again, calling ministers as witnesses is considered to be highly problematic because it adds to the partisan atmosphere on the committee. Nonetheless, I understand your point, and I think it's something that a lot of jurisdictions are trying to address. There are some Public Accounts Committees that have recommended that

the tenure of deputy ministers should be longer so that they can be held to account.

So just looking at an effective hearing, the question of whether reports are permanently referred to the committee, this is one of the sort of more elementary, more basic requirements of a Public Accounts Committee. Obviously, the reason why reports are permanently referred – as you see, until recently there were two jurisdictions in which reports were not permanently referred, Alberta being one of them. The importance of this, of course, is that this does not allow in theory a government to withhold a report for the consideration of the Public Accounts Committee by not proposing it. So that's sort of a very, very basic prerequisite.

I want to talk about the issue of having a planning or steering committee. Half the provinces have Public Accounts Committees with a planning or steering committee. I don't think that that's something that exists currently here. I think that's an issue that is very important to talk about because I understand that Alberta's approach is a little different than other provinces and other jurisdictions in terms of the way the Public Accounts Committee structures its work.

Generally, the Auditor General will issue a report. The Public Accounts Committee will take priority chapters of that report and hold hearings on it. They won't go entity by entity, as the Public Accounts Committee of Alberta does. They won't select individual entities. Rather, they will say, "Well, the Auditor General's report just came out, and they've identified three chapters" – let's say, education, health care, and transportation – "as three troublesome areas." They'll red flag certain issues, and the Public Accounts Committee will then hold hearings on those issues. There are different ways of divvying up the pie in terms of which issues are heard, but generally the steering committee or planning committee plays a very important role in doing that. The idea, really, is to help focus the members and focus the discussion.

If there was a planning or steering committee, it would typically consist of the chair and the vice-chair. It could consist of a member of the third party, and in one province it also consists of the Auditor General and the Controller General. Typically, that would serve as a committee which would take the mass of information that's out there and say: "What is it that we need to accomplish in this meeting? What is our objective? What are the red-flag issues that the committee needs to be informed about?"

So if there was an audit on Education and there was a finding that the Education department wasn't performing well with regard to efficiency or economy, for example, in a particular area, the steering committee would recommend that that be an issue that would be discussed by the committee. So the purpose is to take that mass of information out there and focus the committee on a narrowly focused objective which they can then discuss in the brief hour and a half that they have.

I don't know. I hope that was somewhat clear in terms of setting context. Did that make sense? I'll be happy to talk about it. But that's why that steering committee is really important, especially in the Alberta case because of the size of the committee. Generally, the recommended size of the committee is seven to 11 members because when you get above 11 members, it becomes very, very tricky sometimes for there to be discussion. Again, the steering committee can focus that discussion.

Sorry. I think there was a question.

Mr. Dunford: Well, I'm listening carefully. Are you promoting steering committees?

Mr. Dubrow: Well, I'm saying that in the study that we conducted,

we found that committees tend to be more effective when they have a steering committee. We found that about seven of the 14 committees had a steering committee. What I am also saying is that a steering committee or a planning committee tends to – their role and responsibility is really to focus the committee, to help set the agenda for that meeting with a particular aim or objective in mind.

Mr. Dunford: So you are promoting steering committees.

Mr. Dubrow: That's a word that I tend to avoid, but I think I am saying that CCAF in the past has suggested that committees are more effective if there is a steering or planning committee.

Mr. Dunford: Could an argument be made that in Alberta, because of historically and generally a good relationship with the Auditor General, the massive amount of material, then, that has to be gone through, which you keep referring to, is not the situation?

Mr. Dubrow: Could you say that again? I'm sorry.

Mr. Dunford: Well, I don't consider the amount of material that the Auditor General provides us in his report as being a massive amount of material. It seems quite workable. It's presented in an easy, readable fashion. The government, at least in the years that I've been around here, has generally either accepted all of the recommendations of the Auditor General or at least accepted them in principle. There can be issues, as there are always in human dynamics, but I would make the argument that a steering committee might be more of a reflection of the relationship between a government and its Auditor General, and if it is, I don't think it's necessary in Alberta.

Mr. Dubrow: I would sort of return that with a question just for the purposes of discussion.

Mr. Dunford: Well, I'm a rookie, so that would be good.

Mr. Dubrow: Okay. Great. Typically the Public Accounts Committee of Alberta holds hearings on entities. Right? So let's say that you're going to call before you a particular entity, the Ministry of Education. The question really is: what would you be planning to ask them? Now, it's completely hypothetical because you don't have a report in front of you, but generally the Public Accounts Committee in a province functions as sort of a red-flag committee. That is, there are issues that the Auditor General has red flagged. That's sort of like a dashboard light going off: "We've done all this audit work. We're not going to share most of it with you because it's too much information, every financial audit, every financial statement, but here are the issues that are problematic."

The committee will then act on those in order to pressure the government or to hold the government's feet to the fire, to hold the government to account – and when we talk about government here, we're really talking about the bureaucracy side – for the recommendations that have been suggested by the Auditor General. The steering committee's job is really to focus that discussion, and then say: today we're going to be holding a hearing on a particular issue. Sorry. Let me back up. The steering committee's job would be to decide which issues from the Auditor General's report need to be red flagged and discussed by the committee and to set some general guidelines for that discussion in a way that helps the members focus on an outcome at the end.

Otherwise what tends to happen – you've heard the expression that working with parliamentarians is like herding cats – is that if there is no steering committee, there is no guidance to the committee

by the chair and vice-chair at the beginning of the meeting. So what will happen is that each member will start asking their own questions of interest to themselves. It might be a constituency question. There won't be a general purpose established for the meeting, and there won't be a general purpose established for the session.

I don't know if that makes anything . . .

Mr. Dunford: Well, I can relate to what you're saying, you know, in a jurisdiction that doesn't have three-year business plans, doesn't have annual reports that are presented to the public, doesn't have a Measuring Up document that's, again, presented to the public. I mean, if we could symbolize Alberta, at least one of the characteristics is that we keep handing people hammers to hit us over the head with in the sense that we produce a vast amount of information not only to, I mean, the general public, but the opposition has that. I think, you know, as a private member operating in the context of the Alberta Legislature, you get a fairly good grasp of what the issues are, and they tend to be confirmed by the Auditor General's report. I'm starting to look like I'm picky, but a steering committee means another committee.

Mr. Dubrow: Well, it's a subcommittee of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr. Dunford: Well, I understand that, but it's going to take up the time of, you know, people in their normal activities. I don't know.

Again, as I say, you know, it's wonderful at age 64 to call yourself a rookie, and I really quite like doing that, and now I'm on record as having said that.

I think we need more experience in Alberta of having the entities with us and dealing with the deputy ministers, which we've agreed to do, so we're already entering some new territory. Then we will maybe have to revisit this at some point. Again, I just find it an incredible amount of information that we provide people with, and it would seem to be unnecessary for some kind of steering committee to tell me what I need to deal with.

9:00

Mr. Dubrow: I see that there's another question, so perhaps I'll go to that, but you've raised an issue which I think is very important that I'd like to come back to.

Mr. Rodney: I'd like to thank you, Geoff, for being here, but if I do, then that could be construed as a partisan thing, that you're one of my ministers. I'll thank you anyway.

I wonder if I might clear up an inaccuracy that, at least, I thought I heard, which was that getting parliamentarians together was like herding cats. I think it's more like herding elephants. I don't know if others would agree or not.

That being said, I'm going to now go directly against what I just said in this sense. The previous speaker made a strong reference to a committee of a committee. When it comes to a steering committee, I don't know. In my experience – and I've been here since I started two and a half years ago – this group seems to get along pretty well. I just wonder if it can be construed as redundant or divisive to have a steering committee because if I'm on it, I get to help determine what's on our agenda, and if I'm not, I don't.

Mr. Dunford: That's what scares me.

Mr. Rodney: Yeah, I know. Don't be afraid.

I just wonder: if we have a workable relationship in the room with a committee of 15ish, would we still need to have a steering

committee when it seems that we don't have any snags with that? Because it could be argued that there are steering committees within each of the caucuses themselves. So I just wonder what your response is. If things are working pretty well as a committee, do we actually need another one, which is basically what Clint just said?

The Chair: Mr. Rodney, as chair I would really appreciate it if we could move on and go through the entire presentation. There are 12 pages, and we are about halfway through. Then we can get into a general discussion between the conclusion of the presentation and 9:45.

Mr. Rodney: I'd like to agree with you, but we're not supposed to get along, right? I think we should have a steering committee decide whether or not we should proceed.

Please proceed, Geoff. Go for it.

Mr. Dubrow: Thank you.

Mr. Herard: Mr. Chairman, I think I might be able to help clarify this particular point if you will allow me.

The Chair: Sure. But if you could be brief, I would be grateful.

Mr. Herard: Yeah. Well, on page 6 you show that there are seven jurisdictions that have steering committees and seven that don't. You make a statement that some of us are having difficulty accepting on the surface. It probably would be good if you could give us some examples of the quality of the work of those particular committees that led you to this conclusion, the kinds of deficiencies that you found in areas that didn't have a steering committee versus the ones that did. Then perhaps some of us, rookies or not, might understand where you're coming from.

Mr. Dubrow: Yeah, that is a very good question. It's also a very specific question. I'd have to go back and take a look at some of the research we've done and see if I can find some examples. I mean, generally what we do is put out our questions to the clerk of the committee, who will respond to them. We don't always go in and, sort of, look at the background details, simply because we're putting out in our survey over 120 questions. I'm not sure I can give you an answer, but I recognize the importance of the question. If I can get some information back to the committee on that, I'll gladly do that.

I'll continue with the presentation, but I'll also come back. Whether you have a steering committee or you don't have a steering committee again goes back to: what are you trying to accomplish as a committee and as a Public Accounts Committee? I think that whether or not a steering committee is a useful exercise for you or not will become more apparent when we talk about what the committee wants to accomplish. So I will continue, and perhaps we can get to that discussion about what the committee wants to accomplish in a few moments.

The question of whether the PAC has the power to issue recommendations: most Public Accounts committees issue recommendations. I've just skipped ahead to page 8. Most Public Accounts committees issue substantive reports to their Legislatures, and most committees have the power to issue recommendations. They don't all issue recommendations, but we found that about 12 of the 14 Public Accounts committees had the power to issue recommendations. Again, it doesn't mean that they necessarily do. Similarly, the same number will issue a substantive report to their Legislature.

Let me kind of give you a sense of what that means. This is the, sort of, typical model, and I have to say in all honesty that it does

diverge significantly from the model that is currently being practised in this particular jurisdiction. The typical model will be that the Legislative Auditor will issue a report, which will be tabled automatically to the Public Accounts Committee, currently referred to the Public Accounts Committee. The Public Accounts Committee will then act on that report. A steering committee in many cases will choose the priority chapters of the Auditor General's report which it wants discussed, and the committee will hold hearings.

When the committee has concluded its hearings, what it will do is issue a report, and included in that report will be recommendations. Usually those recommendations are adopting the Auditor General's recommendations, but the committee has the right to go further. It might say: "We concur with the Auditor General's recommendations, but we as elected officials see things a little differently than the Legislative Auditor does. We have a nose for what's happening in our individual constituencies, and our judgment is that the government should also do X, Y, and Z." So the Public Accounts Committee will issue recommendations and, as I said, 12 of the 14 Public Accounts committees have the power to do so, and 12 of the 14 have the power to report substantively to the House what they've examined.

Ms DeLong: Does this mean that most jurisdictions don't automatically respond to every one of the Auditor General's recommendations without going through this PAC process first?

Mr. Dubrow: That's true. When you say they don't automatically respond . . .

Ms DeLong: Because we have a policy that each department of the government has to respond to every single one of the Auditor General's recommendations and either accept them or reject them within – what's the time frame?

Mr. Dunn: We will issue our annual report in the early part of October, and the government normally has responded by the early part of December. It was late this year because of the restructuring that took place, but the response was received in March.

Ms DeLong: And pretty well all of them are accepted unless there's very good reason not to. You know, there isn't a role for this committee to go after the government to follow up on these, except for a very few which may not be accepted and would sort of narrow us down in terms of the work that we were doing.

Mr. Dubrow: That's right. Currently the way the PAC functions in Alberta, the opposition doesn't have the opportunity or isn't afforded the opportunity to be part of that process of issuing recommendations. In other words, when the Auditor General issues its recommendations, the government issues its response.

Generally because the Legislature has a constitutional responsibility for oversight, it's the Legislature's responsibility through the PAC to compel the government to respond, which means that the PAC might go above and beyond what the Auditor General has reported and say: well, we agree with your recommendations, but there are some other things that the government really should be doing.

Currently the way the system functions, the government is responding to the Auditor General's report without giving the opposition a chance through the Public Accounts Committee to express its concerns about the way that programs are being run with regards to economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. That is very unique in terms of the model here because in most provinces the

Auditor General's report goes right to the PAC, and it is the PAC that will hold hearings. The Auditor General's report will be the main input for that discussion, but members of the government side and the opposition side will have a chance to discuss that, and it's the Legislature through the Public Accounts Committee that will hold the government's feet to the fire and say: we think you should be doing X, Y, and Z.

9:10

Mrs. Forsyth: I'm going to take this in two different directions. First of all, I'm going to comment as someone who had the honour of being in cabinet for the last five years, subject in one of my portfolios to, if I may use the word, the wrath of the Auditor General. We respected his recommendations coming forward to us in the departments that I served in and also found that he was very good at holding our feet to the fire fairly if he thought there were some issues that needed to be addressed in a department that I had held previously.

The other thing on that is the fact that that is a public document, and the opposition was very good at reminding us about the Auditor General's report and, again, as a previous cabinet minister, keeping our feet to the fire in following through with the recommendations of the Auditor General. So I think we had those balances.

Where I think the direction can go differently from the way Alberta is moving under the Public Accounts Committee is under the leadership of the chair and the vice-chair having the ability in September and in October to bring forward some of the committees that we are calling forward; i.e., Capital health, the Calgary regional health authority, and the other committees that we have the ability to question when we do make the decision to. So I think we have an opportunity to have what I would consider a double whammy because of the Auditor General making recommendations to the department and the Public Accounts taking some of those committees that fall under the particular departments and allowing them to question those. In fairness, I think we're well covered, we're well received, and I think we have the opportunity to set Alberta on the map. We have the ability to do that.

Mr. Dubrow: Well, I thank you very much for your comments. I think what I enjoy the most about visiting different jurisdictions is being able to have and to facilitate and to participate in this kind of discussion. I think the exchange of ideas is very important.

Again, I began my presentation by saying that my job is certainly not to suggest that there is one model that all jurisdictions need to ascribe to. At the same time, I do want to sort of underline that there is a Westminster tradition which is very much grounded in the inseparable relationship between the Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee. This refers to the gentleman's question who was talking earlier about performance reports and measuring up, that traditionally in the Westminster system, both in other Westminster countries such Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand but also in Canadian jurisdictions, the Public Accounts Committee's job is really to legitimize the report of the Auditor General and take it further if it wishes.

It's the constitutional responsibility of the Legislature to hold the government to account. All the Auditor General can do is issue recommendations. It's the role of the Public Accounts Committee to probe those recommendations and go further if it wishes. In our system the Auditor General doesn't have the power to compel the government to do anything. It's through the recommendations issued by the Public Accounts Committee that the government is compelled to act, and that is the job of the Legislature, to hold the government to account.

Currently the system that you're describing differs in some way from that in the sense that when the government responds to recommendations, if I can use this term, it's pre-empting the role of the Legislature in acting on the main issues that have been flagged by the Auditor General's report. That gets back to the issue of: what does the committee want to accomplish? What are its objectives? If the objective is to ensure value for money for all citizens of the province, then one would ask the question: would that be best served by looking at the issues that the Auditor General has red flagged and probing them, discussing them, and issuing recommendations to the government that might go above and beyond what the Auditor General has recommended? Above and beyond doesn't mean the Auditor General has done a bad job. Above and beyond means that legislators as elected officials sometimes have a different view of things, and they might want to add to and supplement those recommendations based on their own experience. That's something that currently is not the case.

The other reason why it's so important for the Public Accounts Committee to issue recommendations to the government is that it then makes it easier for the Public Accounts Committee to go back and say: "Okay. We issued these recommendations a year ago. Now, have you done what you said you were going to do? Have you implemented the changes? Have you closed that loop of accountability?"

So the Auditor General finds a deficiency, and it's the role of the Legislature to ask the government to make some changes while the Public Accounts Committee retains the right to call back that department in a year's time or two years' time and say: did you make the changes you said you were going to do? In one jurisdiction in particular that I'm thinking of, the Public Accounts Committee will regularly ask departments for a status report. They'll say: "Well, we want to see your status report. What have you done to implement those recommendations?"

So again, the Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee function best when they function in a lockstep with each other, if they're complementing each other's work in a way that maximizes the report of the Auditor General. That tends to happen when the Public Accounts Committee is issuing recommendations and then following up to make sure the government has done what it said it would do. In this case, usually, generally, we're talking about whether the bureaucracy has made changes to a program with regards to economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. Sorry. A long answer to your question, but I hope that gives some clarity to sort of the typical model, or the typical Westminster model.

Maybe just one other point on the last slide: whether the PAC can initiate inquiries outside of the business referred to it by the Legislature. This is another area where a lot of Public Accounts committees – I'll give you an example. You're familiar with the accounting officer concept, which is the notion, as a result of the new accountability act in Ottawa, that it's the deputy minister who is the accounting officer who has to appear before a committee and account for what's taken place in his department or her department. The Public Accounts Committee decided to study this issue, to hold hearings on it, even though it wasn't something the Legislature asked it to do or that was in the Auditor General's report. But it was an issue that they decided was of importance to the province in terms of governance, and Public Accounts committees have a tradition of doing this.

One of the things that Public Accounts committees, when they're newly constituted, don't always realize is that they have the ability in particular jurisdictions. I don't know if that's the case here. I don't believe it is. I don't think the committee can look at business not referred to by the Legislature. But some Public Accounts

committees will hold hearings on governance issues which they think are important: the quality of internal audit systems, the state of performance reporting in the province, and other governance issues that are of interest to the committee. So there is a very wide and varied role for the committee, but again we tend to find that committees are most effective when they're issuing recommendations and following up on those recommendations based on the report of the Auditor General.

Why don't I stop there. I realize that I've provided you with a lot of information. I see a lot of very contemplative faces out there, which is great. We have time for discussion, and maybe we can use that to generate some ideas. Yes?

Ms DeLong: I've got just a quick question on slide 6, the bottom one: the power to call witnesses and send for records. You know, I don't know whether we have that power as a committee. We do?

Mrs. Dacyshyn: I can answer that question. We do have the power. I can read you a very short excerpt from our practical guide to committees, if you wish.

A committee of the Legislative Assembly may invite any person to appear before it as a witness. A committee may not, however, summon any person to appear as a witness without an order of the committee or the Assembly.

That's our Standing Order 69.

A witness cannot be summoned or brought before the committee by a Member on a Member's own initiative.

Power to compel a witness to appear before a committee, to give evidence on oath orally or in writing, as well as producing papers, documents, or things required by the committee is provided in section 14 of the Legislative Assembly Act.

Ms DeLong: Thank you.

9:20

The Chair: Thank you.

Dr. Brown, do you have a question or a comment, please?

Dr. Brown: I have a question for Mr. Dubrow, and it relates to when we're examining the accounts of an outside entity or a department or whatever. It strikes me that it would be profitable for us as members of the Public Accounts Committee to have some inside knowledge of how that institution or that body or that department functions. I'm wondering whether there's any precedent or examples for a site visit to a department or whatever to talk to people who are not in the upper levels, echelons, of the bureaucracy. Those people who are actually delivering the services often know when money's being wasted or when things could be done more efficiently and whatnot. I'm wondering whether there are examples where those powers would be, for example, to go into a health region and to make inquiries in advance of a Public Accounts Committee so that you could inform yourself and perhaps become aware of inefficiencies.

Mr. Dubrow: I was recently in Tanzania, and the Tanzanian Public Accounts Committee conducted a site visit which is a little bit different than the kind of site visit you're referring to, which is that the Auditor General's report referred to a school which didn't actually exist. The Public Accounts Committee members went out to see if the school actually existed and found that there was no school. That's probably not the kind of site visit you're referring to.

An Hon. Member: It's an out of sight visit.

Mr. Dubrow: Out of sight visit. All joking aside, though, I have

heard of committees travelling and looking at sites, but I don't have a lot of examples for you. Again, usually what we do when we get questions like this is we try to note them and get back to the committee with answers, and I'd be very happy to do that. I don't have any specific examples that come to mind, although I am aware that there are committees from time to time that have gone out to look at a particular issue.

Dr. Brown: Well, it's more in having access to the individuals, I guess, who, as I said, are delivering the services. Quite often, for example, when you're in a hospital, you hear comments from the head nurse on ways that funds are not being efficiently used or the fact that supplies are short. There are shortages of sheets, you know, to change in an old folks' home, or there could be numerous examples of different things that might come to light by virtue of the fact that you're not talking to the upper echelons of management but to those people that are actually delivering the services.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Herard, followed by David Eggen, followed by Harry Chase, please.

Mr. Herard: Thank you. I guess my first question, I think, has been answered by the clerk with respect to the process for requesting attendance of witnesses. But it seems to me that when you're dealing with an Auditor General's report, which essentially deals with the past, you ought to have the ability to call the deputy minister that was, in fact, in charge at the time of this report that you're doing work on. So if there's been a change in the department, then I don't know that we're restricted from calling the deputy minister that was, in fact, responsible at the time, based on what I just heard.

The second one is a question of accountability in departments that essentially act as pass-through agents of funds. In some cases – for example, in the case of school boards – you have duly elected trustees that receive funding from provincial governments, and they then are accountable to their own population. Perhaps in the case of health jurisdictions they may be appointed and therefore more directly responsible to government. I guess the question I have is: what experience could you share with us with respect to the appropriateness, number one, and, two, whether or not it's effective to call as witnesses elected members or, in the case of a school board, the superintendent in a jurisdiction where they are essentially accountable to their own populations?

Mr. Dubrow: Well, those are excellent questions. Let me start with the school board one because I understand that the House leaders' agreement refers to the expanded mandate of the committee to look at issues including school boards. One of the questions that I would put out back to you is: when the committee is calling a witness or when the committee is looking at a particular report, what basis of information do they have to call that witness? In other words, generally Public Accounts committees are acting on performance audits that have been conducted by the legislative auditor. Let's take British Columbia as an example. In British Columbia the Auditor General will audit the financial statements of school boards, but they do not conduct performance audits of school boards. In other words, the Auditor General will not go in to the elected school boards and say, you know: have your programs performed well with regard to economy, efficiency, and effectiveness?

So really, at this point the only information the Public Accounts Committee would have to deal with the school board would be an audited financial statement. So my question to you, if you were

considering holding a hearing with the school board, is: what would you ask them? What would be the basis of the information? You wouldn't have any independently audited information on performance to question them on. The other issue, of course, is that there will naturally be a tension between school boards, as they are elected, and the Public Accounts Committee or provincial auditors because the school boards will say: "Well, you know, we're independently elected. Why are you meddling in our affairs?" That tends to be the kind of issue that comes up at the provincial level.

But again, my suggestion, if I can use the word, would be that the committee's time is best served in calling witnesses in which there is an independently verified, i.e. auditor's, performance report of a particular department or agency because that provides the basis for the committee to hold a hearing and make recommendations on a particular issue. If you're calling a school board official as a witness and there's no independently verified or independent audit that's been conducted with regard to performance, unless there's something wrong with the financial statements, it's really hard to understand what the committee will achieve by doing that. That's something just to bear in mind.

I think you asked me another question as well, which was calling the deputy minister of the department at that time. That is a question that you will hear in many Public Accounts committees. There was just a battle in one provincial jurisdiction over this very issue. I can't remember which one it was. I think it was another western province, where the opposition wanted to call the deputy minister at the time, and the government said: "No. It's got to be the current deputy minister." There was a battle over that. So that really gets into what your own rules will allow. But as I said, there is definitely an interest in Public Accounts committees in that issue, and it has been raised in the past in other jurisdictions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Before we proceed to David Eggen, the chair would like to remind all members of the committee that the Minister of Education each year tables in the Assembly the audited financial statement of each school board in the province, including, I think, private schools as well. So that is done by statute. There's an obligation to do that, and I think that was done earlier this week, if I'm not mistaken. So the audited financial statements of each school board are available through the Legislative Assembly.

David Eggen, please.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thanks, Mr. Chair, and thanks as well, Mr. Dubrow, for appearing this morning. Certainly, I think there's an appetite to strengthen the effectiveness of the Public Accounts Committee here in Alberta, and you're certainly presenting some fertile ideas to help us do that.

9:30

One area that I'm particularly interested in is the capacity for this membership to be able to do research and to pursue individual issues, perhaps, that might cross ministries and/or through different agencies that we fund. You talked very briefly about the research capacity of a Public Accounts Committee. My problem with that is that I just can't see what that would look like, really. If I, let's say, wanted to look at something to do with Capital health that had a very specific issue that I would suspect was a concern, then how could I summon some research capacity to pursue that, you know, in a reasonable way. We don't have that now, so any suggestions would be appreciated.

Mr. Dubrow: Great. Well, two excellent questions, and please call

me Geoff. Let me start with the research issue because I was hoping that someone would ask. There are really two models in Canada for research, legislative researchers, if you like. As you know, unlike the American system, committees generally in Canada and the Canadian parliamentary system are weak. In some of the congressional models you'll find that committees will hire their own staff. I mean, I think of my work in the Russian parliament. The state Duma, the lower House of the Russian parliament, has about 50 people attached to the budget committee: huge, huge responsibilities, huge numbers. I think we don't have 50 researchers in the entire country working for parliamentary committees.

I'll give you a sense of what the two models are. The typical model tends to be the parliamentary library or legislative library model, where there is a legislative library, which tends to be independent from the legislative staff, which will hire researchers. Those researchers will be farmed out to the committees. Let's say that you have 10 committees, so they'll hire, for example, two researchers, and they'll assign that to each committee. That's, sort of, one model that you find. The House of Commons does that, Ontario does that, and Quebec does that.

British Columbia has a bit of a different model. There's a clerk of committees, so the chief committee clerk, if you like, and that individual will hire committee staff and assign them to committees. In terms of infrastructure it's a bit of an easier model than: my God, we've got to develop a legislative library now. So it might be a little bit easier for a legislative committee to look at a model like that.

Let me talk about the function of a researcher because that's also very important. I mean, the word "research" can mean just about anything. Generally, the job of the researcher is to conduct research on behalf of the committee, but what that really means is that they will tend to, for example, provide a summary of the Auditor General's report, a particular chapter. In other words, let's say members of the committee are going to be reading the chapter on education. Members of the Legislature are very busy. They're dealing with a multitude of issues, and often it's fallen on the researcher, for example, to prepare a one-page summary for the members: here is the main issue in that chapter, and here are the recommendations. So if, heavens the thought, the member hasn't had a chance to read the whole report, they might have the opportunity to read the brief. That would be the kind of thing that a researcher would do.

The main role of a researcher in Public Accounts Committees is to prepare the committee's report. That's a job that doesn't usually go to the clerk. It usually tends to go to the researcher on the committee to do that. If the committee is about to issue recommendations, it would be usually the researcher who would perform that role. Because there are a large number of members on the committee, even if you had less members, it would be very hard to imagine the researcher being able to do very much for an individual member. The priority would probably be the committee itself and the committee's operational business, if that makes any sense.

Mr. Eggen: I guess there are two things that come to my mind there. First of all, for the mandate that we have here and perhaps the expanded mandate you can see in our new Standing Orders that are pending, how much more human resources do you think we might need to do that research properly? Then, I guess, you're implying that since we're together here like this, the direction of that research would be coming from the committee. Again, you know, we would have to have some kind of organization to direct that, right? I don't know.

Mr. Dubrow: Right. And I don't want to sound trite in saying that that could be the role of a steering committee or some type of

grouping of the members of the PAC who are directing the work of the Public Accounts Committee, but you're right. Generally, the number is anywhere from one to two. I don't think there's a PAC in Canada that has more than two researchers.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Thanks.

Mr. Chase: Alberta is a democratic anomaly. Our history indicates that we had a Social Credit government for 36 years. We've had a Conservative government for 36 years. What happens is, I think, that there's a sort of a hardening of the mental arteries. There's a belief: well, if it isn't broken, why fix it? We've had a previous administration that felt that autopilot was a good place to be, and . . .

An Hon. Member: Question.

Mr. Chase: It's a different format. It doesn't require a question off the bat.

. . . that autopilot was fine, and, you know, FOIP was not something to be concerned about. Bill 20 was passed last year, that buried information for 15 years. So it's not surprising to me that the idea of a steering committee would be considered unnecessary by certain government members because this was also the former administration that admitted that the government didn't have a plan, and the whole point of a steering committee is to provide a focus.

Now, one of the things that I take heart in is the fact that there are a number of newly elected members that came on in 2004 from a variety of parties, and that gives me hope that we can work together. I've seen examples of that possibility occurring. I think, for example, when we have all-member participation in standing policy committees, the idea of teamwork and focusing on the well-being of the province will take place.

Unfortunately, when the Auditor General can only make recommendations but can't see those recommendations through and when you have a majority government that hesitates to follow up on the recommendations of the Auditor General, you're in a bit of a quagmire. Can you give me a sense as to how it is that the federal Auditor General has the power to command change? Is it partly because there are actually changeovers in federal governments, or is it a different set-up that gives the federal Auditor more power to see things through?

The Chair: Mr. Chase, when you read to your two grandsons before bed, I bet they fall asleep real fast.

Mr. Chase: Usually the grandfather falls asleep before the grandsons.

Mr. Dubrow: Same for the father, by the way, in my case.

Well, you've raised some important issues. Let me start with the issue of the Auditor General. The Auditor General of Canada does not have the power to compel the government to do anything. It's the Public Accounts Committee that has the power to compel, and that is the nature of our Westminster system. In other countries the Auditor General does have the power to send notes directly to the departments and say: please take action on this issue. Under our Westminster tradition the Auditor General has no enforcement powers. The powers go to the Public Accounts Committee, and it's the Public Accounts Committee that has the power by issuing recommendations to compel the government to respond. I just wanted to sort of clarify that.

When I look back at how I used to talk about our public accounts committee system abroad, the fascinating thing about it is that, as I

said, it's the PAC that generally issues recommendations to the government, but the implementation of those recommendations is not compulsory. It's a system of voluntary compliance.

9:40

In the Canadian federal system I think something like two-thirds of the recommendations are implemented. That includes PAC recommendations, though, not just Auditor General recommendations. Public opinion and the concern of a government about public opinion is the main tool that pushes government to implement those recommendations, in my opinion. The only tool that really exists for an opposition in a majority government is embarrassing the government in a way that compels them to act, and that tends to be what happens in our system. There's a sensitivity on the part of government: gee, we'd better implement these changes in order to ensure that we get re-elected. That tends to be the chief vehicle for doing so.

I do want to note something else, though. I think our discussion about the Public Accounts Committee cannot be taken out of the context of the other changes that are occurring in Alberta as a result of the House leaders' meeting, and I mean the fact that there are four new policy committees that are being added. These changes are very important in sort of the overall changes that are happening in the province. I think it is fair to say that to the best of my knowledge there is no other jurisdiction in which the opposition is not represented, generally, in committees. I'm not familiar with too many jurisdictions that have caucus committees as their chief way of decision-making.

So I think it is fair to say that my observation as a political scientist would be that if I look at the way Alberta has functioned, generally, that has been designed in a way that has marginalized the opposition. It's not a judgment, and I'll be a typical Canadian and apologize if I've offended anybody, but that is my observation because in most jurisdictions legislative committees function on an all-party level. If a Public Accounts Committee has been the only committee that has had all-party representation, that must have put a lot of pressure on that committee for it to function in a nonpartisan way.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dunn: Mr. Chairman, I see the time, and I'd just like to take two or three minutes to answer some of the questions and also maybe clarify how Alberta is doing vis-à-vis the other jurisdictions. I appreciate very much what Geoff has done. He has summarized from their survey how other jurisdictions perform, but we also need some clarification as to position Alberta.

Take last year's annual report – if you don't have it, share it with your neighbour – volume 2 of 2, and turn to page 250. I had explained this to Geoff prior to him preparing his material, how things are treated in Alberta. If we had summarized the number of recommendations from 1996 to 2002, you would have seen that there are 209 total numbered recommendations. Those are the recommendations which are key and important for people to follow up on. You'll note that the fully implemented, together with the progress satisfactory, the follow-up on them – that's the 21 beside it – left only three out of the 209 not fully implemented: disproportionately large compared to any jurisdiction that I'm familiar with and, certainly, across Canada disproportionately large. When I meet with my colleagues, as mentioned, we have a rate of acceptance and implementation far beyond everybody else.

Also, you'll note that we bolded up the heading here: 3 years. That was an agreement we arrived at a few years ago at a most

senior level within the government, that recommendations accepted by a department or ministry should have three years, a reasonable time frame in order to effect the implementation, not just work at it. Other jurisdictions use four. Federally they use five to target theirs.

By way of a comparison the federal Auditor General's rate of acceptance of their recommendations is 44 per cent. That's the last one. Flip over to page 231. This is why we have performance measures on the performance of our office. This will now give you the two years, 2004 and then 2005-06. You'll see that the acceptance, if you look at the top under 2(a), in 2004-05 was 87 per cent. The acceptance in '05-06 is 96 per cent. Those are the ones which the departments are working on to implement. The ones that have not been accepted: we do not let them go; we continue to pursue and follow up.

To your comment, Mr. Chase, we follow up every recommendation by repeating the actual performance of the audit. This is not what all other jurisdictions do. So what you're getting through our work for you is to make sure that the recommendations are sound, understood by departments, accepted – we prefer – implemented with all due dispatch within three years, but at the end of the day we test the implementation by rigorously reperforming the audit to say: yeah, it is; it's not just that you told us you did that. So we do get that effective follow-up there.

What I don't want you to lose is what Alberta has accomplished – and I'll pick up on some other comments here – around the performance reporting, which is available for this committee, because I believe it's important for that performance reporting, which you've asked questions on in the past, to continue to be open to your scrutiny together with the Auditor General's recommendations, that we will continue to inform you where we're having some difficulty or just a difference of opinion with the department.

What I'd like to support and what we've heard today – and you've probably heard me say this before. I want you to, when the witnesses come here, hold those to account that can effect the change, which is the administration. The administration has the ability to effect the change. Thus also ask them: "After you have made that change, implemented that recommendation, what will you achieve? How will the outcome change or improve?"

Obviously, we had a similar dialogue with Geoff. I want you to also understand that because of the way in which our office together with previous PACs and the government itself together with the opposition members have effected that sort of process, let's not lose the value of that while we do make some changes to progress in the future around calling other witnesses or other agencies, boards, and commissions, meeting out of session, having appropriate resources for yourself and, indeed, ongoing continuing education.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Prins, please, do you have anything to add at this time?

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Chair. In listening to what Mr. Dunn has just said, it seems like we may be ahead of the rest of the country in many of these things, so rather than us changing to meet their way of doing things, maybe they should change to meet the way we do things.

I have a couple of questions. In relation to these out-of-session Public Accounts meetings that we're planning to hold this fall, we've already got Capital region and Calgary health region booked for September 12, and there might be some other dates that we can move towards. Is it advisable to possibly have a theme-based approach – you were talking about planning meetings – having several health regions over a short period of time? The same, maybe, would be for educational institutions, advanced education:

get a number of them coming in at once so that we could look at issues, find problem areas, or look for efficiencies so we could help in that way.

The second question. This relates to what Neil just talked about: site visits or getting information outside of this meeting. Is it possible to hold in camera sessions, say, maybe prior to a meeting? If we're meeting at 10 o'clock, like in the fall, would it be possible to hold a meeting for half an hour or an hour prior to that to get some background knowledge or information? Rather than having a site meeting, just an information meeting. So that would be in camera, off record, out of *Hansard* so that we can ask some questions that we might not ask if it's on the record or with the media. The in camera meeting would be just strictly within the committee and possibly one or two people from these other groups. So I'm just asking that question: if that's being done or if we could do that.

Mr. Dubrow: Well, those are two excellent questions. I mean, the benefit of thematic-based meetings is that it gives members of the committee a longer amount of time to get their head around an issue before you go on to the next one. So if you're having a meeting with a regional health authority, and then you're moving on to talk about transportation the next day, it doesn't really give members a chance to really get their head around an issue. If you're holding meetings with three or four health authorities, then a researcher could compile some information from the Auditor General's report on regional health authorities, prepare that for the members, and have what could be an in camera briefing to sort of give the members a background.

Before you meet the first health authority, you might have someone say, "Well, the Auditor General last year conducted a review of X number of health authorities," if that's indeed the case here, "and these were some of the findings, and these are some of the issues that you might find are sort of a threat or a crosscutting theme, that all of the regional health authorities had a problem with X or most of the regional health authorities had trouble with dealing with Y." So it gives you a chance to get your head around it and deal with some of the broader issues rather than just meeting with one and then sort of, "Okay, now we're onto another topic," because it doesn't give you a whole lot of time to really delve into some of those issues. Is that a good answer?

9:50

Mr. Prins: Yes. That's on a theme base. In the in camera session you would say that that might be a good place or a good time, then, to explore some of these areas or issues prior to actually questioning the witnesses.

Mr. Dubrow: Well, there is such a thing as in camera briefings. That's not the committee's deliberations. That's getting the committee members up to speed. Again, if members haven't had a chance to read the entire report, or if they sort of need some broader perspective – like, we're going to talk about health authorities for the next two days; now someone's going to come in and just give you some background on that because you're all very busy and you're dealing with different issues – that can be done in camera. It's not committee deliberations. It's just a briefing. So that would be my response to that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dubrow: I know that you're running short on time. I just wonder if I could make sort of one last very quick comment, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Please proceed. Yes.

Mr. Dubrow: Just to go back to the comments that Mr. Dunn made earlier. Again, I started my presentation by thanking him for being actually the chief motivation for me to visit the committee. A couple of issues. Performance reports in most provinces: as director of capacity development in CCAF I promote the use of performance reports by legislative committees, so I'm certainly not saying that committees should not use performance reports. In fact, it can be a very good basis for information for the committee on what the government is doing. But for a Public Accounts Committee the chief focus tends to be the Auditor General's report. That's the red flag: independently verified audit conducted by the Auditor General raising particular issues that should come to the attention of the committee. So if there's an issue on Education, the committee will deal with the Auditor General's chapter on Education. They might very well use as an input into those hearings, as background, the performance report.

But I'm not familiar with another PAC that would use the two on par because the role of the Public Accounts Committee is to look at the report of the independent external auditor of the government. Performance reports can certainly be part of that process, but they don't tend to guide the process. It's the Auditor General's report that tends to guide the PAC process. So I would just sort of raise that as perspective.

Similarly, with the issue of following up and the issue of a high acceptance rate of recommendations by the government, I just repeat the observation that it really is the role of the Public Accounts Committee to supplement the recommendations, if it so chooses, of the Auditor General and then to issue or to compel the government to respond and to make sure it's followed up. So the fact that there's a high implementation rate of recommendations now might be very laudable, but it would be interesting to see how that number might be affected if the Public Accounts Committee and the elected officials were the ones compelling the government to make changes, adding to the Auditor General's report.

I'd like to thank you very much for having had the opportunity to be here. I want to stress again that the purpose for coming here is the CCAF's interest in governance issues and in strengthening public-sector management, not to cast judgment on any practices in particular but to participate in a free exchange of ideas. It's been a real pleasure to do that.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dubrow. Again, I think on behalf of the committee I would like to thank the office of the Auditor General for doing so much to facilitate this morning's meeting. I appreciate that. I think that at this time I'm convinced that we can make Public Accounts more effective and more efficient. We also have to thank and recognize past members of this committee, particularly Mr. VanderBurg and Mr. Griffiths. They have encouraged us all along that we can be more effective and efficient, and I think their efforts should be noted at this time as well.

That concludes item 4 on our agenda, and the very best.

Item 5 is our Other Business, which is to get our schedule for meetings this fall, September and October, finalized. As the vice-chair has stated, we have sent letters to both the Capital and the Calgary health authorities inviting them to appear in September, but we have several other dates that we need to fill in. I was given general direction the week before last from members of the committee. In order to get everything teed up, we need direction from the committee.

Dr. Brown: Mr. Chairman, I would be prepared to move that the following groups be invited to meet with the Standing Committee on Public Accounts: the East Central health region from 10 o'clock till noon on Tuesday, September 11, 2007; the Northern Lights health region from 1 to 3 p.m. on Tuesday, September 11, 2007; Grant MacEwan Community College from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesday, October 16, 2007; Mount Royal College from 1 to 3 p.m. on Tuesday, October 16, 2007; the University of Alberta from 10 a.m. to noon on Wednesday, October 17, 2007; and the University of Calgary from 1 to 3 p.m. on Wednesday, October 17, 2007.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Brown.

Any questions regarding that motion?

Mr. Chase: Just a quick comment in support of the motion and a clarification. When my colleagues and I left Public Accounts last time, we were under the belief that some very good recommendations had been made by committee members, which we supported, and we were also very aware of our 10 o'clock duties for our caucus meeting, so we saw no need to stay around and confirm what had already been discussed. We were very supportive, as I am, of these suggestions. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you. Appreciate that.

David Eggen, please, quickly.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I certainly don't want to stand in the way of this schedule, but I just was curious to hear some rationale as to why we're covering two sort of pairs of things that seem quite similar – right? – like University of Alberta, University of Calgary, as opposed to perhaps having some other sampling of other large-budget departments out there and/or large revenue earning departments. I was always curious to perhaps have the Gaming and Liquor Commission come forward. Could I just get some background on that?

The Chair: Mr. Prins, please. We were just sort of discussing this. Go ahead.

Mr. Prins: Short of sounding like we already have a subcommittee of PAC here, the chair and vice-chair and the Auditor General have met, and we do meet from time to time and discuss some of these things. That's why I brought up the question about theme-based possibilities.

If we're going to go out of session – we're actually spending two days in a row in September and October – to aid the researchers and to get our heads around some of these issues, we've decided to come up with this recommendation that we would tackle these in this year. There's always room later on, maybe next year or whenever. There's still – what? – 130 agencies, boards, and commissions that are basically on notice, I guess. This was the recommendation that we came up with, Dave, partly for the expediency of the theme-based issues.

Mr. Eggen: Okay.

The Chair: I would like to remind the hon. member that we're looking at perhaps \$6 billion. It would be greater than that for those four health authorities.

Mr. Eggen: Oh, no, I realize that. This is a good list. In the spirit of trying to look at other things – I mean, the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission is a very large income generator, to the tune of some 20-some billion dollars, so that would be an interesting one to pursue sometime in the future too.

10:00

The Chair: They were on the list. It was quite a long list generated last time, and hopefully we will have the opportunity to get to that next year.

If I could have a vote, please, on the motion presented by Dr. Brown: all those in favour?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Any opposed? Seeing none, it's unanimous. I would like to thank you for that. The clerk and the vice-chair and the chair, we'll get at that and get those times and dates organized, and we will keep you apprised.

Mr. Dunn: On the basis of what we've just heard, preparing you for next week, if I may just take one minute. Next week you have the Department of Environment up here. You'll have their annual report. You'll have our report. You'll want to look at volume 1 of our report; it refers to drinking water. If I can just refer you, look at volume 1 of our report, pages 25 through 61 in volume 1, which talks about the drinking water issues. That's our theme; that's what Geoff has called a "chapter."

Look at that together with the annual report pages 26 and 33, which talk about their performance measures around drinking water quality in Alberta. If you look at page 25, you'll see the performance measures that they have on the quality of drinking water throughout Alberta, drinking water safety indicators, together with page 33 – I think it is – that talks about the infrastructure of drinking water. Then the other one I would refer you to is page 38, where

they indicate a 55 per cent satisfaction performance measure. I believe you want to take that into your thought process when you discuss matters with them.

In addition, you have to look at page 83 of our volume 2, which takes you back into the drilling area around the water issues together with the contaminated sites.

All the recommendations have been accepted except two in principle, and the two that are in principle are recommendation 4 and recommendation 29. Both deal with information technology issues and the difficulty in looking at the technology around the contaminated sites and also the technology around the drinking water.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you.

The date of our meeting is next, Wednesday, April 11, and we have the hon. Rob Renner, Minister of Environment.

Item 7, a motion to adjourn.

Mr. Strang: So moved.

The Chair: Moved by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead that the meeting be adjourned. All in favour?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? Seeing none, thank you very much.

[The committee adjourned at 10:03 a.m.]