

[Mr. MacDonald in the chair]

THE CHAIRMAN: Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting to order, please. A revised agenda has been circulated, but before we get formally started with that, my name is Hugh MacDonald, Edmonton-Gold Bar, chair of Public Accounts for this session. Mr. Shiraz Shariff is deputy chair, and this is Corinne Dacyshyn, of course. Would it be possible to get each member to introduce themselves, please, perhaps starting with Mr. Hutton here, and we'll go down the first row.

[Mrs. Ady, Ms Blakeman, Mr. Broda, Mr. Cao, Mr. Cenaiko, Ms DeLong, Mr. Goudreau, Mr. Hutton, Mr. Marz, Mr. Ouellette, Mr. Shariff, Dr. Taft, and Mrs. Tarchuk introduced themselves]

THE CHAIRMAN: And the gentleman from the Auditor General's office?

MR. HUG: My name is Jim Hug. I'm an Assistant Auditor General with the office.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Are there any questions concerning the agenda that has been circulated? Can I have a motion, please, to approve?

MS BLAKEMAN: So moved.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

The legislative authority for the Public Accounts Committee of course is Standing Order 50, and the deliberations of this committee will be comprised and compiled and tabled later on in the Assembly. Correct?

MS DACYSHYN: Yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: There has been committee funding approved in budget estimates 2001-2002. There's a copy attached. The budget was approved by the Members' Services Committee on December 12 last year, and this is provided for information only at this time. There are, of course, no provisions for out-of-session committee meetings. Later on this year in Regina, Saskatchewan, the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees is having a conference. Funding was granted by the Members' Services Committee for three delegates to attend, and delegate selection will take place later in the sitting when information is received about the dates for this conference.

The next item on the agenda. I had the pleasure of having a meeting with Mr. Peter Valentine and his staff last week. Mr. Valentine, unfortunately, due to a prior commitment could not attend personally this morning, but since there are so many new members on this committee, including myself, we thought it would be an excellent idea if one of his representatives could come along and give a brief explanation as to the Auditor General's office and the report and how important it is to this committee. So I would now call on Mr. Jim Hug to give us a brief description of the role.

Thank you.

MR. HUG: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll try to keep my comments brief. What I would like to do is comment on the timing and the manner of the release of our report and also just summarize the role of the Auditor General at Public Accounts Committee meetings.

Our report, of course, forms part of the materials that you refer to during Public Accounts meetings. The other materials are the annual

report of the government of Alberta and also the ministry annual reports. The Auditor General's report is normally issued early in October, and it's to coincide with the release of the ministry annual reports, which normally are released near the end of September. The report is tabled with the Assembly if it's in session, and if it's not in session, the report is released through the Speaker's office. Typically that's what has happened in the last number of years: the report has been issued through the Speaker's office.

The first two Public Accounts Committee meetings following the release of the Auditor General's annual report are normally devoted to a review of that report by the members. The Auditor General will be in attendance and normally supported by some of his staff. He is available during those two sessions to answer any questions that you have on the contents of the report and the recommendations that are contained therein.

The following meetings are normally focused on a particular ministry, and the Auditor General again will be in attendance during those meetings and will normally be supported by the senior staff that are responsible for the audit of that particular ministry. Again, the Auditor General is available to answer any questions you may have with respect to issues that arise during the discussions of that ministry. He'll also supplement comments made by the minister and his staff. Sometimes a minister will indicate that he would like the Auditor General to supplement an answer, or sometimes the Auditor General will just signal that he'll have some additional comment to make. Basically, his role is to try and clarify any issues or questions that the committee may have.

My final comment is that if any of you, when you are preparing for a Public Accounts meeting, have any questions about material in the Auditor General's annual report or have some questions about financial information that's contained in any of the ministry annual reports or the government's annual reports, please feel free to contact Merwan Saher of our office. He's an Assistant Auditor General, and he's in charge of external communications. He tells me he would be very happy to try and answer any of your questions.

Those are the comments I would like to make today. I don't know if there are questions you would have.

THE CHAIRMAN: Are there any questions, then, from the committee? Seeing none, I would like to again thank Mr. Hug for his time this morning. I understand he has another engagement at 9 o'clock. Again, thank you for taking the time to come by this morning.

MR. HUG: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: The next item on the agenda is a notice of motion that has been circulated by Ms Blakeman. I would now ask her if she has anything to say regarding this motion and if she would please read it for the benefit of the record.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much. I actually did do up a formal copy of the motion for the clerk of the committee, which I will hand to her. I am moving that

the standing committee adopt the guidelines of the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees as the framework to be used in discussions and guidelines for the committee.

May I go further and speak to the motion?

THE CHAIRMAN: You certainly can.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much. I think at this point I'm the second longest serving member of this committee, aside from the

vice-chair, and I carefully considered whether I wanted to bring this motion forward again. It has been brought forward previously, and I considered whether in fact there was any point to it, frankly. This committee is put together on a ratio basis and reflects the makeup and percentage of government members and opposition members, but I still think it's important to bring this forward and, with a number of new members of the committee, allow them to debate the idea as well.

These guidelines were developed over time, and certainly by experienced parliamentarians who wish to develop the best possible guidelines for how public accounts committees could operate across the country.

8:44

In the past I've gone back and read the *Hansard* from other discussions around motions similar to this. Government members are very quick to point out that this committee is empowered by Standing Order 50. Indeed that is true, but nothing in Standing Order 50 precludes adopting additional guidelines or setting out very clear guidelines or having the committee agree to accept the guidelines developed by the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees. So we're not limited or restricted by Standing Order 50. That simply says that the public accounts are referred to this committee. It's a process statement, not a philosophical statement.

I've also found in past debates that the government members have said that budgets and business plans and performance reports are all debated in the Legislature. That is indeed true at the beginning of the year. We here are examining the public accounts from past years, and that information is not as readily available. So those business plans and performance measurements and budgets and all are before the fact and we are operating after the fact. It's our job here not to be debating the philosophy of the government in particular but to be ensuring that the money was spent as it said it was going to be spent and that proper accounting measures were in place and, further than that, that value for money was received by the citizens in Alberta. Sometimes that involves probing a little deeper as to why something did not happen. It may be of great advantage to the committee to be calling additional witnesses before us to be able to question what happened.

I'm thinking back to the last meeting of this committee under the 24th Legislature, in which it came to light, based on something in the Auditor General's report, that there was some questionable activity from the Alberta Racing Corporation. This member and the member for Edmonton-Highlands had wished to probe further on that and have witnesses come in where we could examine more clearly what had gone wrong and, therefore, learn lessons for the future, again on behalf of all Albertans.

I recognize that the information that's been provided to the members of this committee includes a report that was done in 1991, which seems a long time back. It is, however, the only information that is available to us. It is not commenting on the guidelines except to say and point out which of the different provinces and the federal government and the territories have accepted and have implemented certain of the guidelines. So what is in here about Alberta may not, strictly speaking, be true to this day, but it is for the most part.

I have gone through the guidelines. I fail to see – and I look forward to hearing from members of the government who are on this committee – why there would be a problem with implementing all these guidelines. We already do follow a number of them. The ones that we don't are certainly put forward and followed by a number of other provinces. In some cases Alberta is the one or one of two that does not follow it, and I think they are valid guidelines to operate under.

I'm interested in why members of the committee would have a

problem with scrutinizing, for instance, guideline 3:

... to scrutinize the activities and operations of all Crown agencies and corporations in which taxpayers' funds have been invested, and to scrutinize the value for money obtained through privatization of any such bodies.

I'd be interested in hearing why there would be a problem in accepting something like that.

I don't want to take up the time of the committee by going through each and every one of these guidelines. I have put them forward as a package, and I hope the committee will consider this motion carefully. I urge the members of the committee to adopt the guidelines, all of them that have been put forward by the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees.

One of the issues I see that is critical to us – and it's reflected in one of the guidelines – is the budget that's available for this committee. As it stands, it strictly speaking only covers the travel for the chairperson, the vice-chairperson, and possibly one other – usually the clerk of the committee – to travel to the Public Accounts Committee meetings, which is important and should be done, and I support it. However, we are now in a position with this government where we have 24 ministries to scrutinize. In my four years, going on five years, of experience on this committee, this committee rarely is able to meet more than a dozen times in totality in the year because the committee only meets when we are in session and then not every single, possible week when we are in session. There are some when it's not possible to meet. Therefore, we are limited at this point in time to being able to scrutinize only half the government ministries that in fact are operational in this province, and I don't think that is servicing the people of Alberta very well. I think there is an urgent need to be able to have this committee meet outside the sessional dates, and that is one of the guidelines that is put forward.

I'll leave it at that. I look forward to hearing what the other members of the committee have to say. I hope this will be considered carefully. I think we are charged to do our best job on behalf of Albertans. I was very disappointed to see the low regard in which this committee is held by some ministers of the Crown. We've had it expressed in this Assembly that this committee is a total waste of time and a joke, and I think we need to be taking steps as members of this committee to make sure the committee does fulfill a mandate that has the bar set high, that we do the very best we can on behalf of Albertans. I don't want to ever sit in here again and have a minister come in and say that this committee is a joke. I think we need to strive to do better.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms Blakeman.

Mr. Shariff.

MR. SHARIFF: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. For the benefit of members who haven't been on this committee before, this motion has been brought forward unsuccessfully numerous times over the last several years. The issue has been debated and arguments have been presented, and as I have stated in the past, I don't see any reason for us to change the present practice that we have in place.

As the chair referred to earlier in the introduction, this committee has a mandate based on Standing Order 50, which clearly states that "Public accounts, when tabled, stand referred to the Public Accounts Committee." That's our job. That's a mandate that has been given to us by the Legislative Assembly. Reflecting on this motion, which, as I say, has been debated umpteen times, in a quick summary I believe that it will entail a lot of duplication of services, that we will not have the budget to put it into place, that at the present time we have a number of different avenues to deal with questioning the government and its policies.

As an example, let me just raise two examples from the document that has been circulated to all the members. One guideline that is referred to in this document on page 12, number 7, indicates that

Public Accounts Committees should hold public servants accountable for their performance of the administrative duties and implementation activities which have been delegated to them.

You know, I believe the buck stops at the ministerial level, and we will be seeing a lot of them in here.

Another guideline, for example, refers to:

All Financial Statements and all Auditors' Reports of all crown corporations and other agencies receiving funding from government or tax collection agencies

should also be included. So I can foresee that if you were to implement this, we would be dealing with so many agencies that receive funding directly or indirectly from the government. These are just two examples that I'm raising.

8:54

The public accounts process in Alberta is, I believe, one of the best and most advanced in Canada. I don't think this is a joke. I think we take this job very, very seriously. It's an important delegation of responsibility to us. We do have an Auditor General, in place since 1978. That Auditor General appears here and stays here for the entire process this committee goes through, and each of the ministers appears here to answer questions. There is a successful process in place, and there is clarity. It has served us extremely well. I see no basis for us to change our approach as it has worked extremely well in the past.

Mr. Chairman, this is a very important committee, and we have a major task ahead of us. I believe that every minute we spend in repeating a debate that has been debated here umpteen times takes away from the work this committee has at hand. I advise all hon. members to go back to the minutes of this committee in past years. There has been enough debate on this particular issue, and you will be able to find a lot of arguments therein.

Mr. Chairman, I do fully appreciate the reasons this motion is brought forward time and again, but I feel that we discussed this in the last couple of sessions and made clear why we did not want to support this. I just don't see the necessity for it. Therefore, I recommend that we reject this motion and proceed with the business of the day.

Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Shariff.

Are there any other members? Mr. Taft.

DR. TAFT: I look forward to serving on this committee, actually. I looked at Standing Order 50 yesterday, and it seemed like a remarkably brief mandate. It's one sentence. It's vague. I think it says that we shall receive the accounts of the government. It doesn't say that we shall do anything more than that, and if we simply literally rely on Standing Order 50 and just take it at that, maybe we should just call it a year. I'm wondering: if it's to be taken seriously, then Standing Order 50 on its own doesn't seem to give us much of a mandate. We do believe there is a mandate for this committee. We do extend and interpret Standing Order 50, so taking a literal interpretation of Standing Order 50 doesn't really make sense to me.

I have great fun in question period, and I know that's useful. Question period is intended for urgent matters. This committee, on the other hand, is looking back over the performance of a year or more ago. It's a committee that's responsible for some – I don't know – \$17 billion in expenditures. If we meet eight times a year, it seems like a shirking of our responsibility. If I were an auditor in

a private-sector firm, I would certainly spend more time than that on \$17 billion.

I also notice that this document is a nonpartisan document. In fact, it states very clearly in one of the guidelines that the Public Accounts Committee should proceed on a nonpartisan basis, which I think is commendable, and I do look forward to working with all of you on that basis. It's guidelines from a national organization. It's not a fly-by-night, partisan organization. It's sound. It's credible. So it's a bit of a puzzle to me why we don't proceed with these guidelines, but I guess there are a lot puzzles in this organization, in this government. I'd like to see them adopted, and I look forward to learning a lot more about public accounts. I'm delighted that the conference is in Regina, because then nobody will accuse whoever attends of going on a . . .

MS BLAKEMAN: On a junket?

DR. TAFT: . . . on a junket, much as I like Regina.

Anyway, I would support this motion and encourage everybody to take it in the spirit that's intended, which is to make this a stronger committee and to fulfill our duties as elected representatives of Alberta, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Cao.

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I was with our Public Accounts Committee in the last session, and I found it very useful, even though we didn't adopt the framework suggested by our hon. member here. What I found is that the questions we asked were already stated in here, and the scope of questioning is related to the annual report of the ministry and the report from the Auditor General in the fiscal year in question. So this already gives us that framework, and I don't think we need to have other matters injected in there. I mean, our focus is representing our constituency and also to look into matters through those two types of documents, the ministry report and the report from the Auditor General. It's so clear, so why do we need to have other matters to complicate the issue? I would say stay on course, as we've been doing so well in the last few years, and be accountable for our constituencies by questioning the Auditor General and the ministries, and just get on with the business.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Mason.

MR. MASON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, I'd like to apologize for being late this morning. My questions might be seen as a waste of time by members, but I just want to ask the mover of the motion what impact it would have if this motion were to be carried. I'm sorry I missed most of your talk here. There's a list. I went through the guidelines for public accounts committees, and it seems to me some of them would need to be adopted by the Legislative Assembly as a whole. Is that not correct?

MS BLAKEMAN: As far as I know, only one of them contravenes the given mandate or reporting structure for the Auditor General. That's the only one I'm aware of that directly contravenes that, but I'm happy to be corrected and educated if the member has discovered more. Part of what the member may have missed: I pointed out that both he and this member had been looking to – or certainly I was – expand the abilities of the committee to question, as we pursued in the last meeting in the fall, the issue around the

Alberta Racing Corporation. I know that the Member for Edmonton-Highlands as a new member was nonetheless very keen to discover how we could all learn lessons and move forward on this, and certainly I was as well. So to my understanding – and I don't have an accounting background . . .

MR. MASON: Well, if I could just sort of interrupt the answer, number 3 of the universal implementation schedule says that the committee

should have a clear formal mandate to scrutinize the activities and operations of all Crown agencies and corporations.

Is that the one recommendation that you're suggesting would have to come from the Assembly as a whole?

MS BLAKEMAN: No. Sorry; I don't know the number off the top of my head. It's the one that talks about the Auditor General, that the committee would also scrutinize the Auditor General's expenditures. The way it's set up now, those expenditures are scrutinized through the Legislative Offices Committee.

9:04

MR. MASON: We are talking about bringing in the universal implementation schedule – are we not? – Guidelines for Public Accounts Committees in Canada.

MS BLAKEMAN: Yeah. It was attached and sent out along with the motion.

MR. MASON: Maybe a question, Mr. Chairman, to Mr. Shariff, who's clearly got a lot more history on this than I do. All these recommendations have lists of which provinces have implemented them and which ones have not and which ones have partly implemented them. Alberta has implemented a number of these, and a number Alberta has not implemented. How did that evaluation, then, take place? Can you answer that?

MR. SHARIFF: For the benefit of members who are here for the first time, this committee operates based on an agreement that is arrived at between all the House leaders and subsequently with a motion passed in this Legislature that gives us a mandate of what our responsibilities are.

It is very clear in Standing Order 50 that public accounts, when they are tabled in the House, will be referred to the Public Accounts Committee. Now, if we want to change that, it will require a legislative change. It will require a mandate change, and that is not something within our jurisdiction here. However, the functions that we have provided in terms of public accounts review have met many of these guidelines. I don't think there has been a formal motion we have passed here to say that we will adopt section (a), (b), or (c) of the guidelines.

MR. MASON: But not (d) or (e). So the committee has not gone through these one by one and said "This one is good" or "This one is not good for us."

MR. SHARIFF: No. Also, this report that is before us is a 1991 report. As Ms Blakeman pointed out, there hasn't been another review since then, so it's about 10 years old. I've no idea how it would fit in today's operations.

THE CHAIRMAN: Excuse me for a moment, please. Corinne Dacyshyn, the clerk of the committee, has had 12 years' experience, and she has some information to provide for all members regarding

your question.

MRS. DACYSHYN: These guidelines were brought forward to the body, the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees, and the body, which is made up of representatives from each Public Accounts Committee across the country, discussed them. The work was sent to each committee individually to answer those questions. I think that was Mr. Mason's question: who actually answered the questions on behalf of Alberta? At that time the chairman, the deputy chairman, the Auditor General, and myself collaborated to respond to those questions to the best of our ability. So the answer is that the committee did not go through each recommendation one by one. It was answered by the chairman at the time, the deputy chairman, myself, and the Auditor General.

MR. MASON: This was when?

MRS. DACYSHYN: Back in 1991.

MR. MASON: In 1991?

MRS. DACYSHYN: Yes.

MR. MASON: Does this national organization of public accounts committees continue to meet?

MRS. DACYSHYN: Yes. Once a year in a different province. This year the conference was in Regina. For continuity usually the chairman, the deputy chairman, and the committee clerk attend the conference. From time to time there are studies and task forces struck to examine various issues, and there is a list of those sent out to you.

MR. MASON: Mr. Chairman, I guess from my point of view I would like to review the mandate of the committee in general rather than just throw this out. It seems to me that it might be a good time at the beginning of a term of the Assembly to have the committee take a look at what we do and what we could do better and see if there's concurrence from the Assembly if there is some need for a change in the mandate. Obviously, if we've been talking about this since 1991, it's time that we looked at it, I would certainly think.

Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. Are there any other speakers? Mr. Marz, yes.

MR. MARZ: I was just wondering why the mover would feel that Alberta should be the first one to totally implement all these guidelines? In going through this, I haven't noticed that any one province has implemented totally all these guidelines. It would indicate to me that a set of guidelines, although maybe general in scope, doesn't fit every situation across this diverse country. Although I agree with the last speaker, perhaps we should look at what is good and what we can formally adopt. But to blanketly adopt the whole thing when no other province has done so at this time – I would think it should be looked at more closely rather than passing this motion at this time.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. The clerk has some more information for us.

MRS. DACYSHYN: I just wanted to add one comment based on something Mr. Mason said. Back in I believe it was 1993 there was

a Select Special Committee on Parliamentary Reform struck by the Assembly with a very specific mandate to review several issues, and one of them was the mandate of the Public Accounts Committee. To my recollection the one issue that did get changed was that this committee used to have 21 members, and one of the issues that did come out of that special committee was that the number on this committee was reduced to 17 from 21. My recollection is that the committee ended. Perhaps there was an election. I just can't quite remember why we didn't go any further than that, but there was a select special committee struck to examine the mandate of this committee.

MR. MASON: Mr. Chairman, I'm going to try a reference motion, and I'm sure you'll advise me as to whether it's in order or not. I would move that these guidelines be referred to a subcommittee of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts consisting of four members from the government side and two members from the opposition side to bring back recommendations to the standing committee with respect to improvements that could be made in the functioning of the committee.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Mason. There's a speaking list here now.

MR. SHARIFF: I'm just wondering, from a procedural point of view: should we be resolving that first motion before we entertain another one?

THE CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MR. MASON: I was making it as a reference motion, referring this motion to that committee and making up a committee at the same time.

THE CHAIRMAN: We have to deal with Ms Blakeman's motion first, and there was a speaking list with Dr. Taft's name on it.

DR. TAFT: I'm new here. I appreciate Mr. Mason's comment that maybe there's an opportunity to have a fresh look at things, but am I correct in thinking our mandate is defined by Standing Order 50? Could you slowly read Standing Order 50? I've read it. I don't have it at my fingertips.

MR. SHARIFF: Standing Order 50 states that "Public accounts, when tabled, stand referred to the Public Accounts Committee." So when public accounts are tabled in the Legislature, they are referred to us.

DR. TAFT: Having worked in many organizations, it seems like a remarkably vague mandate. It doesn't say that we shall examine and make recommendations. There's no sense of action there, and I'm wondering if we as a group should consider recommending some clearer mandate or some alterations to Standing Order 50. Indeed, the way it's phrased right now, it says that the accounts shall be referred to us. It uses the verb "referred." For all we know, we're already overextending the mandate as it is. So I'm wondering if we should re-examine, given that this is the beginning of a whole new session, the entire mandate of this committee and make it perhaps more clear. I'd throw that out just as an idea.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9:14

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Ms Blakeman to conclude debate on the motion. Oh, I'm sorry.

MR. SHARIFF: Before we conclude, if I can just respond to Dr. Taft's comments. It may probably be appropriate for you to refer this matter to your House leader along with the ND member referring it to his House leader so that the three House leaders can come up with some agreement. Then it will have to be brought into the Legislature, just as we did the first day of the session, where we had a joint agreement and there were some changes that were brought forward in the Standing Orders. If there is that agreement, then certainly the Legislature will give us that mandate or designate a change format that it sees fit, but at this point in time I don't think this committee has that authority or the mandate to do so.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Ms Blakeman to close debate on the motion.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you. While I hesitate to close debate – I'd love to see every member involved in this – I was attempting to answer the question that had been put to me earlier as to: why would Alberta do this when they would be the only one? I would have thought from the number of times government members have stood up and proudly proclaimed that they were first or they were only, it's quite clear that Alberta likes to be the pioneering spirit and likes to be first. So I don't know why they would choose that being an exemplary Public Accounts Committee would be regarded in this case as somehow not to be achieved.

Secondly, there hasn't been a recent survey, so we are not in a position to know that indeed Alberta would be the only one to accept all the recommendations. We are looking at a document that is agreed to be 10 years old, and we at this point don't have any idea as to whether there are others in Canada that have accepted all or most of the recommendations. I had put them forward as a package in an attempt to generate discussion, which indeed has happened, to perhaps generate ideas, which indeed has happened, with a couple of proposals to go through them or to look at them individually and see if there aren't more of them that we would wish to adopt as operating procedures for this committee.

So in that, it was a strategic move on my part to try and get the committee to expand the base from which it is operating. It may well be that some of the guidelines are not appropriate for Alberta. I've already mentioned one of them that would require a significant change in legislation, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't have a look at all of them carefully, which is why I put them all forward rather than just one or two or one each day.

Once again, in closing the debate, I do urge all members to consider this with favour, and I thank you for the opportunity to bring it forward to the committee.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms Blakeman. Seeing no other members to speak, I would now ask that we call the question. Those in favour of Ms Blakeman's motion, please raise your hand. Those opposed? The motion is defeated.

Mr. Mason, I would now ask you to move your motion.

MR. MASON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think I'll take the lead from Mr. Shariff instead, though, and move that this committee request that the House leaders consider whether or not it would be appropriate for the committee to conduct a review of its policies and procedures and its role.

MS BLAKEMAN: I'll speak in support of that, because I'm aware

that there is a move afoot, I think, that the Standing Orders are reviewed this coming summer. Perhaps that's just a wild rumour. Perhaps that's just wishful thinking on my part. Nonetheless, if it goes to the House leaders, at least there's some possibility that we would get some move beyond the oft quoted status quo on this committee. So I'd certainly support that.

Thank you.

MR. SHARIFF: I had made that recommendation, that respective members of their own caucuses discuss this with their House leaders. I do not see it appropriate that we as a legislative committee should through a motion be asking the House leaders to come up with an agreement, but I think independently every member in their own caucus should raise it with their House leader. When they have their regular meetings, they can bring it up on the agenda. If there is an agreement between the three of them, then certainly it can be taken to the next stage, but I do not see this committee as an appropriate place for us to pass this motion.

MR. MASON: If everyone else is finished, Mr. Chairman, I'll close.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. Dr. Taft, please.

DR. TAFT: I stand as somebody who's been elected by Albertans. I stand here as somebody who feels accountability for an enormous expenditure, an accountability that ultimately rests on our shoulders. I would appeal to each of you as MLAs, not as members of the Liberals or the New Democrats or the Conservatives but as MLAs with a public responsibility to consider reviewing the mandate of this committee. We are in a very responsible position here, and I am not convinced that Standing Order 50, as I read it, allows us to fulfill this responsibility. So I would really like to have a serious look at the mandate of this committee.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

MR. SHARIFF: Just looking at the procedures that have been applied to change Standing Orders, I do not recall, for example, at the beginning of this session we as a group having passed any motion to ask the House leaders to come up with an agreement. What I do recall is that we received a memo that indicated the three House leaders had met. It was received by the Speaker and then circulated to us, and subsequently appropriate changes were made to the standing order that fit, you know, the legal or language requirements.

Based on that, what I'm saying is that we can all individually go back to our House leaders and discuss this with them individually or as a group. They can then bring up an agreement within the three, but I do not see that as being a mandate of this committee, to pass a motion that will ask the House leaders to discuss or come up with an agreement. That's how I interpret the mandate of this committee.

Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Mason to close debate.

MR. MASON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, I guess I have difficulty with the logic of the hon. member. I thought this was originally his suggestion, and perhaps I misinterpreted it. But it really seems to me that we need to decide as a committee: do we think that a review of our mandate is appropriate?

It's fine to all go running off to our respective House leaders, and I'll run off and have a little conversation with myself. But, you

know, until the committee decides that it's appropriate to review its mandate, we don't have anything much to say to our House leaders. So I'll just continue thinking about something else until I get a sense from the committee that they'd like to do this.

I'd like to do it. I don't want to turn it into a big thing so that we can rip into the government some more. I think we all have an interest in looking at the numbers and effectively trying to discharge our duties. I think that this committee could benefit by this review. But we as a committee need to say that this is something we want to do as a committee, and if we don't have that will, then I think it's too bad. I think we should do this.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Mason, for the clarification of the chair and the clerk, are you withdrawing your motion?

9:24

MR. MASON: No.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay.

DR. TAFT: Could you read back the motion?

MR. MASON: The motion was that

the committee communicate to the three House leaders their desire to review the mandate of the committee and its policies and procedures and request the House leaders to consider that.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. Thank you.

Seeing no further questions on the motion, I call the question. Those in favour of the motion as proposed by Mr. Mason from Edmonton-Highlands? Those opposed? Motion defeated.

MR. MASON: Mr. Chairman, I suggest we change our response to the questions posed by the public accounts committees of Canada that suggest that Alberta has implemented the policy of nonpartisanship in the committee. Clearly it has not.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Item 6 on the agenda, which ironically enough is the Organization of Committee Meetings, has been discussed. We traditionally have met, of course, on Wednesdays commencing at 8:30 in the morning. The scope of the questions by the members is generally away from policy. This is strictly a question of audit. There has been in the past a tradition of one main question and one supplementary question, and this would alternate between government members and members of the opposition, and it was traditional that the member of the opposition went first. Are there any questions or any suggestions regarding this organization or this format?

MS BLAKEMAN: If I might presume to clarify, the questions are also limited to the year that we are examining, under consideration.

THE CHAIRMAN: Yes. Thank you.

Now, the schedule that has been circulated. Are there any questions concerning that?

MS BLAKEMAN: To clarify, are you talking about the schedule of ministers that are coming in?

THE CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MS BLAKEMAN: Are we on agenda item 7?

THE CHAIRMAN: No.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. I'll speak again when we get to that agenda item.

THE CHAIRMAN: Item 6(d). Okay?

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay.

THE CHAIRMAN: Next week – this is tentative; we will send out a memo – is the Minister of Health and Wellness. We are in negotiations. There may be some difficulty in arranging a meeting next week with the minister of health on such short notice, but the rest of the schedule has been confirmed. Hopefully later on this afternoon we will know whether the Minister of Health and Wellness and his staff can come.

Yes, Ms Blakeman.

MS BLAKEMAN: I will speak to this then. I'm sorry; I'm not understanding why there's a difficulty organizing the Minister of Health and Wellness to come to this committee. These public accounts were released in October. We've followed the same schedule for at least 10 years. Why would the minister now be saying that there could be a timing difficulty? I mean, short of some internationally important conference that the minister would have to be attending, the minister is well aware and has a full department of staff to know when these meetings are coming. Health and Wellness traditionally has been one of the top three or four ministries under scrutiny. It should have been easy for the minister and/or his staff to understand when he would be coming up in the rota, and given that that same minister is a member of cabinet and must have been well aware of when this Assembly was going to be called into session, knowing within a week or two when he would be expected to appear, this could easily have been calculated in October. So I don't understand why there is an issue about whether this minister may or may not appear.

The reason for my concern is that in the past there was also a minister who didn't find it convenient and asked to be rescheduled, and as a result we never had the opportunity to scrutinize and question that minister at all because it was not possible to work them back into the schedule. I've already pointed out that this committee is only able to barely scrutinize half the 24 ministries that now exist in this government, and certainly some ministries have a larger budget or perhaps, it could be argued, have a greater impact upon Albertans, and certainly Health and Wellness would fall into that category. I am much disturbed to hear that there's a possibility this minister would not be appearing as desired. As far as I can tell, these ministers appear before this committee because they're called, not at their whim when it is convenient for them.

So I strongly put forward that if this minister is having problems, then I would like to hear why in front of this committee and have the minister appear and explain why he's not available, as he should well have been expecting.

Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms Blakeman.

Mr. Broda.

MR. BRODA: Thank you Mr. Chairman. In defence of the minister and knowing myself also, I've got some times booked already that I have to reschedule, and I booked them three months ahead of time. So things do occur.

The minister's position is time consuming. There are things that may have cropped up. There's a possibility that something has come up, say he's had a commitment since November, so that he cannot come to a meeting. Things do change. I restructured some things yesterday that I had to attend today. So that's in fairness to the minister. If he can't make it, maybe we can reschedule him at some other time.

Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Shariff.

MR. SHARIFF: With all due respect, before we express our emotions, it would help to have the facts before us. There was no scheduled preset for which minister would come before us on what day. The chairman and myself met shortly after our appointment, and I did give the chairman the latitude to identify the ministries that he would like to bring forward before this committee, and at that point in time we asked the clerk to contact those ministries and try and co-ordinate a schedule. That request has only gone out in the last two weeks. So I don't think we should be expressing the emotions without factual information taken into consideration.

My understanding is that the Minister of Health and Wellness will be responding to this committee in a letter format, and at that point in time both the chair and myself will consult, and hopefully we can do that by the end of the day to determine what happens next Wednesday. So that's in defence of the Minister of Health and Wellness.

Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Shariff.

Dr. Taft.

DR. TAFT: Yes, Mr. Chairman. For clarification, when it says – and I'm speaking as someone with a particular interest in the Health and Wellness portfolio – the Minister of Health and Wellness may not be attending, will his deputy and senior staff be attending or that's it? So if he doesn't come – zip. Okay. Is there a possibility of rescheduling then? Since schedules are obviously made to be amended.

THE CHAIRMAN: Yes.

DR. TAFT: You know, as the Speaker made so clear to us when we were being oriented as rookie MLAs, the cabinet is responsible to us. The government is responsible to us. If we are to fulfill that mandate as MLAs, we've got to put questions to them, I would argue. So could we reschedule?

THE CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MR. SHARIFF: On the issues that were raised by Dr. Taft, yes, certainly that rescheduling can be done. I don't think he's denied or he's rejected the invitation to be here. It's just that on that particular day – I don't know what the reason is – he's not available. Mr. Mar has been before this Public Accounts Committee before. I don't think he has shied away. I do not recall ever an incident where, when he has been here, he has not responded to the questions we have for him. So really, I think we have to be fair and reschedule him. Certainly, you know, this session is going to go on, and in the fall we'll continue with this list, so if he was to be the . . . [interjection] Sorry. Whenever. If rescheduling can be done here, it should be accommodated. I'm not suggesting at all that he should

not appear before this committee. I'm pretty sure he wants to come before us. It's just a matter of timing.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Before the chair recognizes any other members of the committee, the clerk has some additional information.

9:34

MS DACYSHYN: When I contacted Mr. Mar's office, initially he was quite agreeable. He agreed to come on that date. His scheduling secretary confirmed the appointment immediately. I believe the issue is that the department has indicated to the minister that they might not be prepared in time for a meeting on May 2. He certainly indicated that they would reschedule, and it is up to this committee. I can move the schedule around, if you'd like me to try and ask the minister to come earlier than putting him at the bottom of the list. But he certainly was agreeable initially to coming.

MR. MASON: I don't think this particular minister is the kind of minister that would dodge coming to this committee at all, but I would like to stress that appearing before the Public Accounts Committee should have a very high priority in any minister's schedule, and other things should sometimes have to slide in order to accommodate the committee. If the department has indicated he's not going to be prepared, then I'm certainly willing to look at finding a more suitable date so the minister can come prepared to answer all our questions.

DR. TAFT: Well, I would just reiterate the idea that it's very important that this minister meet with us, and I don't want it to be put off until the fall or beyond. It's possible there won't be a fall sitting, and we start over in any case.

I must also say that it's hard for me to understand why the department's not ready if we are debating last year's public accounts. Anyway, that's here nor there.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

We shall then see this afternoon about Mr. Mar, and we will inform all members of the committee what the schedule will be.

Are there any other questions? Yes, Mr. Shariff.

MR. SHARIFF: Mr. Chairman, when we began the meeting we did introduce ourselves. Since then I've noticed that a few members have come in. Maybe for the benefit of everyone here, those who did not have the opportunity of introducing themselves earlier may want to introduce themselves for the record.

THE CHAIRMAN: That is an excellent idea. I see three members who have come in. Mr. Mason, of course, is on the record. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs and the hon. Member for Red Deer-North have joined us.

Would you like to introduce yourself first, hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

MR. LUKASZUK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thomas Lukaszuk, hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs. Sorry for arriving late. My daughter didn't see fit that I leave the house early this morning, and the traffic didn't help. I'm looking forward to working with all of you on this committee. It looks like there will be a great challenge for the next few years to come.

MRS. JABLONSKI: I'm Mary Anne Jablonski, hon. Member for

Red Deer-North, and I'm very pleased to be here this morning. I apologize for being late. I got hung up at an auction for kids, so I apologize.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Are there any others?

MR. MASON: I'm Brian Mason. I'm the other half of the by-election twins from the last session. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-Highlands. I also had getting-to-school issues this morning.

THE CHAIRMAN: Seeing no other questions, may I have a motion to adjourn this meeting? Motion by Mr. Broda. Agreed? Okay.

Thank you very much for your time and your patience.

[The committee adjourned at 9:39 a.m.]