

Title: Wednesday, March 1, 2006 Public Accounts Committee

Date: 06/03/01

Time: 8:30 a.m.

[Mr. MacDonald in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. If I could call this meeting to order, I would be very grateful. On behalf of all members of the committee I would like to welcome everyone. Travel conditions are slow this morning, so we're going to have to be patient. This is the first major snowfall we've had since probably November, and it's slowing things down considerably this morning.

Now, I would like to note that there were no changes to the committee membership for this session.

I would also on behalf of all members like to welcome Mr. Dunn and his staff this morning. Thank you for your time and your patience with all the consultations we've had since November. We appreciate it.

I would like to alert all members that the agenda packages were distributed last Thursday. Are there any questions about those agenda packages at this time?

Mr. Hinman: Do you have any extra ones?

The Chair: Yes. Corinne is going to look after that, Mr. Hinman.

Before we ask for approval of the agenda, perhaps we should quickly go around the table and introduce ourselves.

[The following members introduced themselves: Rev. Abbott, Ms Blakeman, Mr. Chase, Mr. Eggen, Mr. Griffiths, Mr. Johnston, Mr. MacDonald, Mr. Oberle, Mr. Prins, and Mr. Rodney]

Mr. Hinman: Paul Hinman, Cardston-Taber-Warner.

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

Mrs. Dacyshyn: Good morning. Corinne Dacyshyn, committee clerk.

The Chair: Thank you. I would like to remind all Members of the Legislative Assembly that are here this morning that only members of this committee can vote on matters. I think we're going to be voting today on a number of motions.

Could I have approval of the agenda as circulated? Approved by Mr. Oberle that the agenda for the March 1, 2006, meeting be adopted as circulated. Those in favour? Opposed? Thank you.

Item 3, approval of the committee meeting minutes of November 16, November 23, and November 30, 2005, which have been attached. Are there any questions about those minutes? May I have approval, please? Thank you, Mr. Prins. Those in favour? Any opposed? Thank you.

Item 4 is the notices of motions which were tabled from the November 30, 2005, committee meeting. Both Ms Blakeman and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder have some motions that we're going to deal with this morning. The chair would like to seek direction from the committee. Mr. Eggen has many ideas, many suggestions for the committee, but they're all reflected in one motion, whereas Ms Blakeman's are separate. We can see how we're doing between now and, say, 9:45, but in light of time, how would you like to deal with this matter?

Ms Blakeman: This is my fourth or fifth try at this. I prepared them separately because in the past there has been some request to do so and some consternation that other members of the committee were

interested in parts of what I was proposing but were not interested in other parts of what I was proposing. Thus, I broke it out this time to make it easier for us to go through and debate it all. The motion put forward by the Member for Edmonton-Calder is substantially the same, covering much of the same ground. I would prefer to do the motions that I have put forward for the reasons that I've explained, but as always we're subject to a majority vote here, so I would ask the support of the committee to proceed with the motions that I've brought forward.

The Chair: Mr. Eggen.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. I largely concur with Ms Blakeman. I'm certainly not opposed to taking parts of the proposal that I put forward, you know, subject to amendment or whatever, and I'm glad that we have a series of individual ones that we can work with. I'll leave mine on there, and we can start with – I think you're on the schedule first, right?

Ms Blakeman: Yes.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. Well, I'll leave mine on. Sure.

Rev. Abbott: If they're substantially the same, perhaps we could just start with Mr. Eggen's motion. If it covers them all, then we're done. If it gets passed, if it covers all of the essential aspects, then we can move on.

Mr. Eggen: My feeling is that we might have a chance of getting some sort of reforms, you know, in pieces. I mean, if you guys are good for all of them, then great.

Rev. Abbott: Well, we had a discussion about this, and I think we're prepared to support the motions.

The Chair: Well, let's hear this. In light of that, you propose that we deal with this collectively. Anyone else?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Chairman, if I can. I have to say that the nationwide Public Accounts meeting we had down east instigated a lot of ideas and initiative for change. One of the things that came up, though, in our discussion down east or one thing that we realized was that Public Accounts, the way they operate in many other provinces, operate to discuss public accounts, not policy. So I think policy and the inclusion of policy in the amendments, discussion of policy, was one concern that some committee members had. Policy is generally best discussed, I think, at question period and in the Legislature. Here the purpose of Public Accounts is to review public accounts and to make sure that public dollars are being spent appropriately.

I know that some of the discussion within our caucus was that we wanted to try to expand Public Accounts, maybe try a pilot project, and to ensure that when we do have a meeting, when we expand our discussion, when we start to bring in groups from outside, we discuss public accounts and the spending of taxpayers' dollars but not policy. We wanted to try a pilot project.

8:40

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Rodney.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Chair. I'm just going to say that I hate to agree with my hon. colleague two to my right, but that's not a

problem at all. That's the way I saw it, the same as hon. member Griffiths, that that indeed was the spirit not only of the conference but of other jurisdictions across the country.

I'm just looking at Ms Blakeman's motion here, and she's completely right. We have to look at all matters relating to mandate and management, but not at this table. That's not our job here. I think we certainly have enough numbers to look at without getting into a discussion of mandate, management, or policy. The truth of the matter is that there are elements of this that I truly would support, but there are others that I don't, and I think it is problematic to have it as extensive as it is. It may be more effective to simply do certain clauses. That's all I have to say at this point.

The Chair: Okay. Well, let's quickly go through, Mr. Chase, because time is always important at this committee. We are restricted to 90 minutes, and there is a lot to discuss. Proceed.

Mr. Chase: Just for the sake of expediency our Conservative colleagues have mentioned that they agree with a number of the directions we're taking. Maybe we could have them suggest which ones they agree with – that will speed up the discussions – and then spend the rest of the time discussing the ones that are of a more controversial nature.

The Chair: Fine. Is the committee in agreement with Mr. Chase's suggestion? Agreed.

Ms Blakeman: I'm prepared to sever parts, especially ones that are giving multiple entries. I'm prepared to sever if that would mean that the rest of any particular motion would pass. So the one in particular referred to by the Member for Calgary-Lougheed appears to be 50(3), and in particular subsection (d). I am prepared to sever that off if the committee will entertain a positive motion to accept the rest of it, but at this point I still think it might be cleaner to just go through the motions.

The Chair: Okay. In light of time, please, let's quickly go through the motions, and we've got to be respectful of the Member for Edmonton-Calder. He has some ideas.

Mr. Rodney: One thing, Chair, if I may. Considering both of the motions and the merit of both, a number of us have put a lot of thought into this, of course, not just since the last meeting and since these were brought forward – and I thank both members for that – but since the summer, during the conference. In light of that, I do have a motion prepared that I think may solve this quandary and may be very expedient as well. I'd be happy to read it for you, if you would like to see.

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Rodney: Okay. The motion would be:

In light of last fall's discussion and the motions brought forward by the members from Edmonton-Centre and Edmonton-Calder, I propose that the chair and vice-chair be afforded the authority from this body to move forward and schedule a day in June when we could select some government-funded agencies and invite them here for a sitting in front of the Public Accounts Committee.

To me, if I can just speak to it for a second, that actually lives in very concrete terms some of the suggestions that are in both of the motions.

Mr. Griffiths: Well, I think that's an outstanding first step. I'd

suggest, though, an addendum, if I may, to the motion, that no committee members get paid for having a meeting outside of session. We'd operate this just as though it was in session. I'd prefer if nobody thought we were doing this so that we got paid an extra day or anything. It shows integrity and that we really want to make Public Accounts effective for principles, not for an extra payday, if that's all right.

The Chair: The clerk has some advice for us.

Mrs. Dacyshyn: Under the Members' Services orders you are certainly entitled to claim for your time during out-of-session meetings, but it's up to members whether they choose to fill those forms out and hand them in.

Mr. Griffiths: I guess it's left to people's integrity. Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Hinman: I guess the part that's puzzling to my mind is that this agenda has been moved and accepted. The people are here today. I just can't see why we can't deal with and vote on these motions now in an efficient way and get through it when it's here in front of us rather than reconvene to do it on another date.

The Chair: We will be dealing with the motions that are on the agenda. We certainly will be, and committee members will be voting.

Mr. Griffiths: If I can clarify, I think the proposed motion was just to have a meeting outside of session to bring in a couple of bodies that aren't departments, that actually use public dollars but don't typically come to Public Accounts, to start to use the powers of Public Accounts effectively, the way it's supposed to be used.

Mr. Rodney: Just to clarify for our fine Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner. Of course, we would continue with the rest of the agenda and every meeting we have scheduled from now until May. This is not to say: okay, we'll see you in June. This is on top of everything we're already doing. We're going to start doing more, and we're going to give the authority to the chair and the vice-chair to set that meeting at their convenience. So this is on top of everything. This is not to replace a thing. We want to move forward, onward, and upward here.

Ms Blakeman: I appreciate the obvious thought and sentiment that's gone into the motion that has been read out by the Member for Calgary-Lougheed. Certainly, when it gets brought before us in a formal motion, I'm willing to entertain it, but it doesn't replace what's in front of us and included in the other motions. I would still like to go forward and put those in front of us and, in the order in which they were received, go through these.

The Chair: That's fine.

Before we continue – and we will deal with Ms Blakeman's motions first – the chair would like to recognize Dr. Morton, Mr. Lindsay, and Mr. VanderBurg, who have joined us at this time.

We will start then, if that is the way, with your first motion, Ms Blakeman.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. The first motion. It's been distributed, but I'll read it in for the benefit of *Hansard*.

Moved by Laurie Blakeman, MLA for Edmonton-Centre, that Standing Order 50 be amended by adding:

50(1) The public accounts and all reports of the Auditor General of Alberta when tabled in the House immediately stand referred to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

This is essentially an administrative motion. The way it is now, we just have Standing Order 50 with exactly that wording and nothing else, so this would allow us to use that as the section (1) and then add on other ones, as we choose, to follow. I'm actually putting forward what could go to the Assembly as a change in the Standing Orders. So this is administrative to enable everything else to follow.

The Chair: Any discussion on that?

Mr. Griffiths: Sorry. I'm still confused. Section 50 says exactly this already?

Ms Blakeman: Yeah, and that's all it says. What I'm doing administratively is putting a number there, making it 50(1) so that you can then have 50(2), 50(3), 50(4), et cetera. If you don't change this, you can't add the other ones on afterwards because it's just Standing Order 50. You'll remember that in amending bills, you often get changes in numbers where you'll get a short phrase that says "and everything after this word is removed," and then it gets added onto this one with a different number. That's essentially what I'm doing here.

Mr. Griffiths: Okay.

The Chair: Any further discussion?

Mr. Lindsay: Just a comment, Chair. I would suggest that 50(1) should become the last amendment that we would make because if we don't make any other changes, it would be unnecessary. I would suggest that we go through the other motions first and then come back to this one if it's necessary to make any changes.

The Chair: Would you like to proceed with a motion to table this at this time?

Mr. Lindsay: Yes, I would.

The Chair: All those in favour of tabling Ms Blakeman's first motion, 50(1), until the end of the meeting? Opposed? Thank you. That will be tabled until later.

Now, Ms Blakeman, you don't have to read your motion into the record. In light of the time constraints that we're under, we don't have to read this into the record.

Ms Blakeman: All right. Thank you.

Moved by Laurie Blakeman, MLA for Edmonton-Centre, that Standing Order 50 be amended by adding:

50(2) The Standing Committee on Public Accounts shall be empowered to examine and inquire into the public accounts, all reports of the Auditor General of Alberta, and all such matters as may be referred to it by the House, to report from time to time, and to print a brief appendix to any report after the signature of the chairperson containing such opinions or recommendations dissenting from the report or supplementary to it as may be proposed by committee members, and except when the House otherwise orders to send for persons, papers, and records, to sit jointly with other standing committees, to print from day to day such papers and evidence as may be ordered by them, and to delegate to subcommittees all or any of their powers except the power to report directly to the House.

For the motion on 50(2) I'm looking to widen the powers of the

committee, specifically to consider additional reports of the Auditor General and even allow us to have special sessions on it, for example. We've had a number of special reports issued by this Auditor General and haven't really had the time or ability to direct our attention to a thorough examination of those individual reports because at this point we're just set up to deal with the main report, and our structure has been to do one ministry per meeting. So I'm looking to allow additional reports to be considered.

8:50

As well, many on the committee are aware that we don't meet often enough to cover the scrutiny of all possible ministries in a given year. There are 24 ministries. We actually manage to get through a scrutiny of about eight or nine of them in a year, so it's quite possible that two or three years go by before we get a department before us. Our structure has been that we only consider the year that's in front of us. Therefore, you can have a department like Gaming come before us that we haven't seen in three years, but we can't go back and talk about the Auditor General's report and comments from two or three years ago or last year or even the annual report of that particular department because we've been restricted up until now.

This is to widen the powers to allow us to consider additional reports and previous reports that had been issued and also to issue expressions from the committee, which we have no mechanism to do now. There's no way for us particularly to communicate either back to the Assembly or other places. This would allow us to issue an opinion in a written form and also to allow a dissenting opinion from a main report. It also allows for requisitioning of additional research and the ability to meet in conjunction with or at the same time as other committees that may exist as legislative committees should we choose to do that. For example, I know there's a rural development committee. We could be sitting in conjunction with them if we wanted to have a specialized look at something in particular.

So it's empowering us to meet with other committees, to issue reports, including dissenting decisions, and to consider additional reports, particularly past ones from the AG and the ministries.

The Chair: Thank you. Has anyone got anything to say in regard to this?

Mr. Oberle: Well, I just think that at all times we have to focus on our role as a Public Accounts Committee here, and I think this motion steps well beyond the bounds of that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Dr. Morton: Is this wording adopted or paraphrasing wording from another jurisdiction, to your knowledge?

Ms Blakeman: I couldn't tell you which one, but these thoughts are long in circulation through the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees. There's also a world association, and I've brought forward similar motions in the past. So it's well out there.

Dr. Morton: Thank you.

Mr. Eggen: I think that the scope of this particular amendment is appropriate in almost all circumstances of the public accounts committees that sit across the country. The important thing, I believe, is that the Public Accounts Committee must keep its scope, as an hon. member just mentioned, on accounts and specifically monies. I think that by widening the scope, as this motion suggests,

of the way by which we can analyze the expenditures of monies, we will probably serve to perhaps steer away from the broader political discussions that we might have here in Public Accounts. I know that that has been considered problematic by some members here. So, in fact, by broadening the scope by which we look at the accounts of the province of Alberta, I think that we will be better serving the first principles of what a Public Accounts Committee actually is meant to do.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Griffiths: I've always found it interesting. I've witnessed so much how when someone is put on a committee, they suddenly become an expert, whether it's in seniors' housing or any issue. Being put on Public Accounts doesn't make me an expert in the processes or procedures on Public Accounts, so I'm wondering if we could get Mr. Dunn to perhaps enlighten us as to how this compares to other jurisdictions and what they would have for protocols and procedures on Public Accounts from other provinces or Canada, if that's appropriate.

The Chair: Mr. Dunn.

Mr. Dunn: Thank you very much. First of all, I'll speak to the motion here. At the introduction of the motion by Ms Blakeman, certainly what we would support is that all reports of the Auditor General stand before this committee regardless of when issued and the timing of when the ministries are. However, this motion does contain three elements that are different from the practice that has certainly existed in Alberta in the past but not different from other jurisdictions.

I'll start at the fourth sentence from the bottom, where it says, "to send for persons, papers, and records." That is different because you will be calling now before you maybe agencies, boards, and commissions which in the past have not appeared because they have not been part of the ministry's group that has been attending.

You could elect to bring forward – and I believe this maybe speaks to something that Mr. Rodney was talking about – certain of those organizations, such as an RHA, which does a fair amount of expenditure but has never appeared before the committee before. So you're asking for a change there, and I believe that's quite appropriate, and that does happen in other jurisdictions.

Is it fair to say that?

Mr. Saher: Yes. That's right.

Mr. Dunn: The second point is "to sit jointly with other standing committees." Now, that's quite broad, and I believe that there may be a two-way communication necessary here. It's nice for you to ask for that empowerment, but the other committee must also, I think, accept your attendance at the same time. This may be something which, again, is quite different in Alberta but not different in other jurisdictions. I do believe that you'll want the discussion such that the other committee will accept you being in attendance and how many of you attend: is it the whole committee, who controls the meeting, and who is responsible for it?

The third element which is different is "to delegate to subcommittees." I'm not aware that we've ever had a subcommittee of the Public Accounts Committee in the past. I believe that's what you're implying, that you would have a smaller group of this group, and I'm not sure that I've ever seen that in any other jurisdiction, where there would be a carve-off of this committee into a separate and smaller group. I don't know if that was meant as the group that

might sit with the other standing committees, or was that just for research or purposes of some sort of follow-up?

The Chair: Briefly, please, Ms Blakeman.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. I was anticipating more scrutiny on a particular issue; for example, the BSE report that was issued. There may well be enough interest in the committee that there be a specialization subcommittee that examined it in more detail and then shared their findings with the rest of the committee. Given how much work everyone has to do, if it can be processed a bit, that helps.

Mr. Dunn: Okay. Just in follow-up, I'm not aware of any public accounts committees that do that, but you may have some evidence from your research where it is being practised or carried out.

Ms Blakeman: Not off the top of my head. Sorry.

The Chair: Thank you.

Questions? Be brief, please, Mr. Griffiths.

Mr. Griffiths: Is it appropriate to propose an amendment to this motion that that section, "to delegate to subcommittees," be removed?

Mr. Eggen: "To sit jointly with other standing committees." We could maybe take that off too, right?

Ms Blakeman: I'll take that as a friendly motion, if it pleases the committee.

The Chair: Mr. Griffiths, would you like to proceed with your amendment?

Mr. Griffiths: No.

The Chair: Okay. We will call the question on the motion on 50(2) as presented by Ms Blakeman. All those in favour of the motion? All those opposed? The motion is rejected.

We will proceed with the next one, the motion on 50(3).

9:00

Ms Blakeman: Thank you.

Moved by Laurie Blakeman, MLA for Edmonton-Centre, that Standing Order 50 be amended by adding:

50(3) The Standing Committee on Public Accounts shall in addition to the powers granted to it pursuant to section (2) of this standing order be empowered to study and report on all matters relating to the mandate, management, and operation of all departments of government, and the committee shall be empowered to review and report on

- (a) the statute law relating to the department(s) in question;
- (b) the program and policy objectives of the department(s) in question and its effectiveness in the implementation of the same;
- (c) the immediate, medium, and long-term expenditure plans and effectiveness of implementation of same by the department(s) in question; and
- (d) any and all other matters relating to the mandate, management, organization, or operation of the department(s) as the committee deems fit.

Again, we're currently restricted to only questioning on the numbers but not any of the thoughts that go underneath it. I'll look to the Auditor General, but I think that if we're going to start looking

at value-for-money audits, you need a wider scope of examination because you're not just looking strictly at numbers: this department was over; that department was under. If you look at some of the issues that have been pursued by the federal Auditor General, you will see that she's moved beyond strictly examining numbers.

I'm not interested here in getting into the sort of longer ranging ideological policy that underpins, but if we keep restricting ourselves to just saying, "Why were you \$400 over on this?" we're not able to get into the larger discussion and scrutiny and questioning of the ministers that allow us to say: "Why did you make these choices that led us to this point? Why were contracts structured in a certain way?" That sort of thing. So I'm not interested in the ideological policy of the government at this point, but I am looking for the ability to question in a wider scope than we've done so far. As we move towards value-for-audit scrutiny, that's what we're going to need, or we will be forever stuck with a cash audit situation.

Mr. Oberle: Actually, I disagree, Mr. Chair, that we're restricted to a cash audit or whether we're over or under by \$400. We examine, for example, the Auditor General's recommendations.

This is a Public Accounts Committee, not a public law or public policy committee. Ms Blakeman pointed out that the federal Auditor General ventures into some of these areas. We are not the Auditor General; Mr. Dunn is. We're the Public Accounts Committee, and I think we should again focus on that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eggen: Yes, I believe that this amendment certainly might be controversial. But when we're looking at the dollar value of policy decisions, I think that we can take into public accounts what the price of those things might be; let's say, by not collecting revenues properly or things like that. The public accounts balance, in fact, is affected quite significantly if, let's say, we're undercollecting for stumpage fees or royalties or something like that. So in terms of revenue lost I believe that, in fact, policy does reflect that. So I would support this amendment.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chase: I see the Public Accounts Committee as being almost a secondary watchdog. I very much appreciate Mr. Dunn's auditing capabilities, and Mr. Dunn has indicated in previous sessions that he appreciates the probing nature of the questions that we ask. I would also suggest that given the structure of this committee and the number of government members versus the number of opposition members, there is always the possibility, if the government members feel that we're going too far, to simply vote against the approach. I think that the greater the accountability, transparency, and scrutiny that we demonstrate as a committee, the more we're serving the function of the Alberta people.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dunn: May I speak to this motion also? I'd like to support the sentiments within this motion, but I also want to add to Ms Blakeman's comments. Within the mandate of the office of the Auditor General there are sections 19(2)(d) and (e). Both of those sections, (d) and (e), empower our office to look into what is called management control systems, which does say that it includes – obviously, it includes more than just what it says here – "those systems designed to ensure economy and efficiency." Thus we do have that mandate to look into economy and efficiency under

19(2)(d). Under 19(2)(e): "when appropriate and reasonable procedures could have been used to measure and report on the effectiveness of programs." So we believe that we have those three Es in our mandate, similar to the federal Auditor General, and thus why these special reports will come to your attention.

So back to 50(1). All reports of our office stand before this committee. They all stand before this committee, including those under sections 19(2)(d) and (e). Obviously, we could also be asked under other sections of our act to carry out a special examination, which this office has in the past; NovAtel, by way of example. All of those reports, when asked by a ministry under the section of my act here, stand before this committee.

What is different in what you're looking at here – and maybe Ms Blakeman can speak to this – is (c) in your motion. In the extract from the Gomery report that you shared with the committee members when you sent out your agenda, it talks about holding the public administration to account for its spending of public-sector dollars. What (c) does is talk about "the immediate, medium, and long-term expenditure plans." You're going forward into something which may be intended, which is what the House deals with on the business plans, the supply votes, and those sorts of things. You're going forward versus what did take place, why, and how did you derive efficiency and economy from that which was spent.

That's been the history, I believe, of the Public Accounts Committee: to look at that which was done and spent and thus examined for efficiency, effectiveness, and economy. This is the one area that maybe Ms Blakeman would like to speak to, which talks about now looking forward, which is really, I believe, in many ways the House's prerogative: to look forward into plans and approve supply votes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Rev. Abbott.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I guess I would just say that that makes a lot of sense. As we are on the floor of the Legislature looking forward, we tend to have a lot more time to debate certain matters than we do here at Public Accounts. When we're at Public Accounts, we're sort of looking backward, and we can laser-beam in on a certain issue where we have seen a problem. We can take the time outside of this meeting to really do our research and examine so that when we get here, we can be very pointed and very, like I say, focused on the issues that we want to deal with. So I would agree with the Auditor General in this case.

The Chair: Mr. Chase is the last speaker, and then the Chairman is going to call the question on this motion.

Mr. Chase: Sorry. If Ms Blakeman would like to finish off . . .

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much for giving way. I'm aware that by speaking, I close the debate.

Yes, that is what I'm seeking to do. I've been on this committee – this is my 10th year. This committee has enormous potential to help the people of Alberta and to help the government and all members of the Assembly to be a better province and to expend the taxpayers' money carefully. We have by precedent, which we have not been allowed to move beyond, only been empowered to examine the past. Where we have a situation that we see develop over a long period of time, I think we need the ability to question the ministry forward.

We've had some issues that have come before this committee, I think, almost every year. Our ability to say, "When will the ministry

actually deal with this, and what steps are they looking to take in the future, or what targets are they moving toward to deal with this particular issue when it keeps coming up” – we’re precluded from asking those questions right now or getting into the discussion at all. It’s not the kind of discussion that comes up during the budget debate because we’re examining choices that the government has made in supporting or not supporting or, in fact, reporting, as it does to this committee, and that kind of discussion I haven’t heard brought forward in the Assembly under any kind of budget debate or supplementary supply or interim. We don’t tend to talk about reporting requirements as part of the budget; it’s how the money is actually going to get spent.

So it was to allow us to examine particularly troublesome areas and get some indication of when it would be resolved. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

All those, please, in favour of motion 50(3) as moved by Ms Blakeman? All those opposed? The motion is defeated.

The next motion. Please proceed, Ms Blakeman.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you.

Moved by Laurie Blakeman, MLA for Edmonton-Centre, that Standing Order 50 be amended by adding:

50(4) Within 150 days of the presentation of a report from the Standing Committee on Public Accounts the government shall upon the request of the committee table a comprehensive response thereto.

This is very straightforward. It’s assuming the ability of the committee to send a request to the government and particularly empowering the government to respond to any question coming forth from this committee. That is not enshrined at this point, and there’s no expectation or ability of the government to respond to the committee. So this was to enable that.

9:10

Mr. Eggen: I think that this amendment speaks to the fundamental gap that’s existing now with the Public Accounts Committee certainly meeting outside once a week just during the session but then not being able to report back to the Legislature. So with that gap in place currently, it makes it difficult to, I guess, hold into account and to actually legitimize some of the things that we find here in this meeting.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Oberle: I’m a little confused. What reports from this committee are envisioned here that the government would have to respond to? Which reports is this committee going to submit to the government that you’re asking them to respond to?

Ms Blakeman: I can’t anticipate in advance what this committee might choose to do to issue a report, and part of what was considered in the preceding amendments is our ability to do that. That’s not to say that the committee doesn’t decide at some point to issue some kind of a report or a study and ask the government to respond to it. This would empower us to actually get a response. There’s nothing in place to do that at this time.

Mr. Oberle: We’re not at present empowered to submit a report, are we?

Ms Blakeman: No.

Mr. Oberle: Then what’s the purpose?

The Chair: The chair perhaps could add some clarification to this. The documents that were circulated at the meeting – once a year I stand up and present a very, very brief report to all hon. Members of the Legislative Assembly, and that is it. It is circulated. It is not a statutory requirement. Just for your information.

Mr. Chase: The intent of this motion is to increase the communication process to allow both the committee and the government to demonstrate a greater transparency and accountability, an opportunity for exchange.

The Chair: Thank you.

Any other speakers on this motion?

All those in favour, please, of Motion 50(4) as moved by Ms Blakeman? All those opposed? The motion is defeated.

The next motion. Please proceed, Ms Blakeman.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you.

Moved by Laurie Blakeman, MLA for Edmonton-Centre, that Standing Order 50 be amended by adding:

50(5) The Standing Committee on Public Accounts shall be empowered to retain the services of expert, professional, technical, and clerical staff as it may deem necessary.

Again, very straightforward. It’s empowering the committee to retain the services of experts, professionals, and technical and clerical staff as the committee deems necessary. We’re not empowered to do that currently, and I think that as we get into more and more technically complex issues – and indeed we have seen some of those; for example, the report on the securities – members of the committee may well benefit from being able to bring in advisers to the committee or to retain them. We’re not able to do that at this point, and I think it behooves the committee to be as well informed as possible. While there is a great deal of expertise around the table, I don’t know that we all have the same level of expertise on every issue.

This enables us to bring in some experts or people with a particular background to advise us and also in some cases to support us clerically. We share one committee clerk with a number of other committees, and she has limited resources at her disposal to support the committee administratively. So this would allow us to assist ourselves by being able to retain additional clerical support if we felt we needed it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Rev. Abbott, followed by Mr. Oberle.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you. I’m just wondering if the member had any kind of a budget item in mind for this or how it would fit in with our current budget. It does sound quite expensive when you talk about, you know, professional, technical, expert witnesses, clerical staff, et cetera. Those dollars can add up, so I’m just wondering if she had a budget in mind and where the money would come from for that.

Ms Blakeman: Well, I wouldn’t presume to dictate that to the committee. I think the committee needs to do that. This empowers us to be able to do it, which at this point we can’t. If you look at the following motion, it at that point is saying that we would be granted any money that we require. Now, I’m assuming that this is a fiscally responsible committee, and it would not go about chucking money at things unless it was felt it was necessary. I’m presuming that if we were looking for a variety of advice, then we might well issue an RFP for it if that’s appropriate. I cannot speak for the committee, nor will I speak for the committee as to what kind of a budget is necessary or which kind of technical experts we’d bring in, but at this point we can’t do anything.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Oberle: Well, again, this is a Public Accounts Committee. If it was a public policy committee, then I'd wholeheartedly agree that we would probably need the services of outside experts or professionals, but as a Public Accounts Committee I think we have the expertise on the committee, and with the able assistance and sage advice of our Auditor General sitting at the table every time we meet, I fail to see what else we would need.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eggen: I believe that this amendment is essential to any reforms that we can possibly bring forward to the Public Accounts Committee. My concern is that if we, indeed, do meet out of session and bring in outside agencies, it only continues to be perhaps an expanded coverage of monies being spent in our provincial government. You know, the expression "a mile wide and an inch deep" comes to mind in regard to our ability to actually scrutinize the new responsibilities that we might take on in any better way than we do now, which I would suggest is wanting both in depth and breadth. So I think this is an absolutely essential component that we must look to, if not now then sometime in the immediate future, if we are in fact expanding our scope.

The Chair: Thank you.

Dr. Morton: Could Ms Blakeman give us some idea of how this compares to the practices of our federal counterpart and provincial counterparts in other parts of Canada?

Ms Blakeman: As far as I'm aware, there's a great deal of latitude everywhere but Alberta to retain and to otherwise bring in advisers, technical support, experts, professionals, however you want to deem it. The Auditor General could also comment on that.

Mr. Dunn: This certainly is seen as best practice. This is the better thing to do, thus, that you should have access to independent and objective individuals who could help supplement your questions or the answer that might have been provided to you in order that you properly understand it.

Clearly, the matters that we will bring to your attention at times, whether they range from BSE to a securities commission, that you've already referred to, to something to do with long-term care and medical attention, that type of thing, yes, those may not be matters which you personally have had a lot of experience or background in but on which you wish to obtain some form of inquiry, possibly research, before you ask certain questions of the members. I would expect that this is something which is being looked at in a number of jurisdictions as being a better way of preparing the committee to ask the appropriate questions to get to the answer that they're wishing to hear: are our dollars being spent efficiently?

This is something which, I clearly understand, is linked with the next section, (6). In order to have the committee be properly prepared, you wish to be able to engage independent and objective individuals. Well, we've got to be prepared to also remunerate them. So 50(5) is obviously dependent on 50(6), but it is seen, Dr. Morton, as the better way to go.

9:20

The Chair: Dr. Morton, do you have a brief comment?

Dr. Morton: Can the Auditor General indicate or inform us as to how outside experts are selected, what the process is? Is that at the discretion of the chair, or does the committee vote in these other jurisdictions? What is the process for selecting what outside experts we want to hear from or utilize?

Mr. Dunn: I'll have to get back to you on that. I believe that for the most part it's being used by the committee as a whole, but I'm not aware.

Maybe, Merwan, are you aware?

Mr. Saher: No, I'm not aware of the process other than to add that there are established processes for committees to have ongoing research staff directly available to the committee. I imagine that research is encompassed in this particular amendment.

The Chair: Mr. Griffiths?

Mr. Griffiths: My question was asked and answered. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chase: I very much appreciate the advice of our in-house economic expert Mr. Dunn, our Auditor General. The bottom line is the committee. I appreciate Dr. Morton's clarification. It's always the committee that has the final decision. Again, I refer to the makeup of the committee. I would not as an individual member propose outlandish expenses. What I'm seeking and what I think the motion is seeking is to empower us with knowledge so that we can make the appropriate decisions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chase.

Mr. Prins.

Mr. Prins: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm wondering if we do not already have this ability individually through our researchers if we do not have the power as a committee to access this type of information on an ongoing basis if we run into a situation where we think we need expert advice. I'm thinking that we probably already have this power. I don't know if anybody can answer that.

Mr. Chase: I'll speak in this case to our Liberal opposition research capabilities. They're extremely restrictive. Mr. Dunn referred to independent, nonpartisan experts. This is the whole point of it: we want to see the widest view possible before making the crucial decisions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lindsay.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I haven't been on this committee for a long time. The motion seems like it's pretty straightforward, but thinking back, I can't think of an example where the work of this committee has been restricted due to a lack of expert, professional, technical, or clerical staff. So I struggle with why we need this.

The Chair: Thank you.

Seeing no more speakers, all those in favour of motion 50(5) moved by Ms Blakeman? All those opposed? The motion is defeated.

The next motion, 50(6), if we could proceed quickly, please.

Ms Blakeman: I won't be moving that at this time, Mr. Chairperson, because it was subsequent to 50(5), which has been defeated. It was to give the committee the ability to fund bringing in experts, and that has been adamantly refused by members of the committee, so that is a moot motion.

Moved by Laurie Blakeman, MLA for Edmonton-Centre, that Standing Order 50 be amended by adding:

50(7) That the standing committee adopt the guidelines of the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committee as the framework we would use in discussions and guidelines for the committee.

I will proceed to 50(7), in which the committee would adopt the guidelines of the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees as an operational guideline and use it in discussions for the committee. This gives us a larger framework to work from. The committee has voted down every single suggestion that I've brought forward, regardless of it being best practice across Canada or well received in other places, so this is my last-ditch attempt to try and have the committee give itself the range to be able to make choices in the future beyond the very narrow choices that precedent sets out for us from actions in the past. This would allow us, using our agreement, to be guided by the guidelines of the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees to at least be able to make ad hoc decisions as we went along by referring back to this.

I'm trying to make this committee move into the 21st century and be more useful to the committee members and to the public, and there is great reluctance, I can see, to do that. Obviously, the federal government committee works under these guidelines. They've been developed and agreed to at the very conferences that members referred to earlier, which is the national conference of all the Public Accounts Committees provincially and federally, that meets once a year. It's a good guideline to work from for this committee on behalf of all Albertans.

I urge members to at least give themselves the option of making some ad hoc decisions in the future if they're not willing to widen the scope of the committee at this time.

The Chair: Rev. Abbott, followed by Doug Griffiths.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm just looking at the guide right now, and I see that many, many provinces have not yet implemented many of the recommendations. It has a very clear listing here of implemented, sometimes implemented, not yet implemented. You know, like I said, it ranges from the House of Commons to the various different provinces, the ones that have and have not implemented certain guidelines or recommendations. It seems pretty obvious to me just by the fact this document exists that we are using it, that we are trying to implement some of the contents here, and that we have a measurement as to how we're doing on that. I mean, if the spirit of the motion is just to continue on to try to adopt as many guidelines as is feasible or possible for Alberta, then of course that sounds like a good idea, but I think it's something that we're already doing.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Chairman, I seek the sage advice of our Auditor General for comment on this.

Mr. Dunn: You've obviously got some material that you've done some research on which does show the framework which this organization has proposed, and I believe from your research you'll see that there is a mixed reaction across the country. However, I'd like to also speak in favour of this motion and where this organiza-

tion is leading Public Accounts. As much as we've had this discussion up through the previous six sections and no change has been reflected through your decisions, Public Accounts, as described by Gomery in that extract that was sent out to you, should be the pre-eminent standing committee. If we do believe in accountability for the administration of public policy in an efficient and effective manner, we should be prepared to hold them to account, that is the public administration. That's what I believe these guidelines as a framework are attempting to do.

I'll pick up on what Mr. Chase said. This is an organization which is nonpartisan. It is multijurisdictional. It cannot be seen to be biased in any way, shape, or form politically. It is there to try to make things better for Canadians and provincial citizens. I would certainly want to see you consider this as the framework, as guidance going forward should changes in your performance wish to be made. It is a thorough examination of practices not just in Canada but throughout the Westminster parliamentary model. They look at other Commonwealth nations, and they pick up their guidance from those other nations too.

To me, all this says is that you'll use it as a framework in further discussions – I believe I put the word "further" in – and guidelines for the committee. It is merely asking you to adopt a thoughtful framework which has been put together by a nonpartisan public accountability organization.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chase: As Auditor General Dunn pointed out, this is an enabling motion. It's giving us another tool, a proven tool to put into our box. We're using, basically, demonstrated historical wisdom from across the nation and across the sea. This allows us to look at the present as well as to look into the future. I support the notion of using this as a tool for greater accountability.

9:30

The Chair: Ms Blakeman.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. I appreciate the comments and the research that has been done by the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmor. However, he didn't do quite enough research because in fact we do not adhere to these principles. At previous times when I've brought this up in this committee, it has been resoundingly voted down, and there was a refusal on behalf of the committee members to adhere to those principles. The other times when I've tried to do this, it's been voted down by the committee, and we've not adhered to that or attempted to change any of our practices to move towards accommodating that framework. So that's the history of it. I think we need to be able to have more flexibility in the way we operate this committee, and this is to allow that.

The Chair: Mr. Lindsay.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I guess I could support this with a friendly amendment, and I guess the friendly amendment that I would suggest would be to replace the word "adopt" with "consider" and that we add the word "future" in front of "discussions." The reason for that: if we approved it the way it was, I think that it could be limiting if we adopt the guidelines or maybe some things outside the guidelines that we may want to consider differently than that. So I think "consider" would cover that concern.

The Chair: Mr. Rodney on this amendment.

Mr. Rodney: I really respect where the mover of 50(7) is coming from, even more so now that we have a friendly amendment. I'm a big fan of considering what everybody else across the country and around the world is doing, and I believe that's exactly the direction that we've been moving in, and that was indeed the spirit of the motion that I brought forward, that perhaps we reconsider. On this particular issue let's face it: we don't live in a one-size-fits-all sort of society. I'm sure there are incredible suggestions in the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees' guidelines, and we've got to take a look at those things, but there are going to be things that apply here that aren't in that set of guidelines, and there might be things that would handcuff us. So let's take a look at it. Let's not just blindly adopt a set of guidelines. Therefore, I would be happy to support the amendment.

The Chair: Ms Blakeman, will you support this friendly amendment?

Ms Blakeman: Well, I don't see it as friendly because it is clearly changing the intent of what I'm doing, but he's moved the motion, so it stands right now as a subamendment. We should just vote on it.

The Chair: Okay. Fine. We will be voting on the subamendment as proposed by Mr. Lindsay. It would read like this:

50(7) That the standing committee consider the guidelines of the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees as the framework we would use in future discussions and guidelines for the committee.

Dr. Morton: Can I ask a question?

The Chair: Yes.

Dr. Morton: Was it the intent of the mover of the amendment to drop "shall," as in "shall consider" rather than simply "consider"?

Mr. Lindsay: You must have a different one. There's no "shall" in there.

Dr. Morton: Okay.

The Chair: So those in favour of the subamendment proposed by Mr. Lindsay? The subamendment is carried.

Rev. Abbott: Just speaking on the original motion and the sub and the amended motion, I'm looking here at the guide once again. It does say, Ms Blakeman, that Alberta has implemented 17 of the recommendations and that we sometimes implemented 13 of the recommendations, for a total of over 50 per cent, so that's a far cry from zero.

Also, in Improving Accountability it says that Alberta has implemented and sometimes implemented a total of 66 per cent of the recommendations in the guideline. So we're well over halfway there already according to the statistics right here in the Comparative Jurisdictional Implementation Survey.

The Chair: Thank you for that clarification, Rev. Abbott.

Now, the main portion of 50(7) has been changed. On the main motion on 50(7) as amended. All those in favour? Opposed? Seeing none, thank you very much.

The last motion here, 50(8).

Ms Blakeman: It's not the last motion of the day.

The Chair: No. I realize that, and that's why we have to proceed quickly, please.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you.

Moved by Laurie Blakeman, MLA for Edmonton-Centre, that Standing Order 50 be amended by adding:

50(8) The Standing Committee on Public Accounts shall be empowered to sit during periods when the House stands adjourned, and the budget shall be sufficient to do so.

This the committee has heard me speak about repeatedly. We are very restricted in what we're able to do on this committee because the committee by precedent has only sat while the House itself is sitting. When I started in '97, this House sat in the spring session for an average of 14 weeks. We're now at an average of 11 weeks. We tend not to meet the first week that we're in session. We don't meet on the weeks off. We're not scrutinizing anywhere near all of the government departments, and we're attempting to do one per meeting.

We're now looking at about a third of the departments, and I don't believe we are serving Albertans well if we're only able to scrutinize one-third of the ministries every year. We're not allowed to go back and question a department that appears before us infrequently about anything other than the year before us, so we can't question about anything in the past. I really believe that we need to empower the committee to meet outside of the House sitting. I know that some members feel that they don't want to be seen as doing this to get paid more money. I am not commenting at all on paycheques. I just want the power of the committee to be able to meet outside of when the House sits so that we can consider more of the business that is set before us. Currently the Auditor General's report and the annual reports of 24 ministries are set before this committee, and we are not doing our job.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Oberle: A question of clarification for Ms Blakeman: by what rules does she see sittings outside of the regular period when the House is sitting? Are you envisioning scheduled sessions or sessions at the discretion of the committee?

Ms Blakeman: Again, I'm not speaking for the committee there. It depends on the situation. At this point we have no ability to do it at all. The committee may choose to meet once a month when we're not sitting, or they may decide to come together over an issue of great importance – for example, the long-term care report – and have a special sitting dedicated to that or to some other issue that's arisen. I don't want to put those kinds of narrow parameters on the committee. I think it needs to be flexible enough to deal with that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Rodney.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Chair. On 50(8) I do understand the intent of the motion. In fact, it's perfectly in line with the spirit of the motion that I read earlier. As I mentioned earlier, even within the wording of my motion it has consideration for Edmonton-Centre and Edmonton-Calder. The last part has been addressed: "The budget shall be sufficient to do so." As Mr. Griffiths has mentioned, it's up to the discretion of each member. So I don't know that we need to vote on that. The fact is that we've already got a movement to "sit during periods when the House stands adjourned" in this motion. In the spirit of collegiality I think we could move forward, but I wonder if we should be moving forward to Edmonton-Calder's

motion because that'll take some time and the one that I suggested earlier as well.

The Chair: You're absolutely right. We have the first motion, that has been tabled, that we have to deal with after we deal with this one.

Mr. Chase: Just a clarification. I gather, Mr. Rodney, that you're supporting the idea of the committee discussing future meetings outside of our current legislative process. You're in favour of that idea with the details to be determined at some later point by the committee? I'm just looking for clarification.

9:40

Mr. Rodney: Yeah. In fact, should I read this motion again? This is a concrete example of exactly that.

The Chair: The chair would really prefer to deal with these motions. The chair was given direction to deal with these motions. Let's deal with them. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder has been very courteous and patient in waiting for his turn, and in fairness to him if we could deal with these motions, deal with the one that's tabled, and then we can deal with any further motions that have already been proposed.

Mr. Rodney: Okay.

The Chair: Mr. Chase. There's a long speaking list here already.

Mr. Chase: I'm hoping that I'm interpreting the will of the committee in allowing us the possibility to have sessions outside. If we accept that concept, we can create whatever fiscal concerns, meeting dates, et cetera, if we approve the concept.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Dr. Morton: Again, could Ms Blakeman or the Auditor General give us a sense of whether this practice is used at the federal level or in other provinces?

Ms Blakeman: It's used almost anywhere else. They organize themselves differently. Not all jurisdictions go – actually, I don't think anyone else goes ministry by ministry. The committee meets and decides that it wants to pursue a particular issue and then does so. As far as I'm aware, no other province or the federal is limited to meeting only when the House is sitting.

The Chair: The chair would like to clarify at this time for all members that "a standing committee or special committee may, without leave of the Assembly, sit during a period when the Assembly is adjourned." That's in Standing Order 51(1). We have no budget to meet outside session, and that was discussed earlier, I believe, by Mr. Rodney.

Mr. Dunn: Ms Blakeman has actually answered the way that I was going to mention. We're all aware that other jurisdictions, especially the federal jurisdiction, do sit quite extensively throughout the year. But to pick up on the point that Ms Blakeman was mentioning, they meet more on subject matter issues. The subject matter, obviously, that they met extensively on was the sponsorship advertising situation federally.

We are not the jurisdiction which meets the least – I believe that

you probably have some of the stats – but we are certainly not meeting as frequently as you could to give this committee the sense of fulfilling its full responsibility. You are handicapped by a 13- to 15-week period, and thus it does not allow you to get through to pierce the subject matter to the extent, I believe, that you wish to be able to pierce it on some of these very, very difficult and comprehensive subject matters.

So, Dr. Morton, yes, other committees do meet outside the session of the House, and as the chair has mentioned, it looks like you already have the authority to do so.

Ms Blakeman: We just don't.

The Chair: Any other discussion on this motion?

Mr. Oberle: Well, I guess I'm prepared to support this, but I'm just wondering. I'll ask Ms Blakeman if there's a point in passing this if we're already empowered to do so.

Ms Blakeman: Well, it's a difference between the larger empowerments available in the Standing Orders which apply to everyone. This committee has always chosen not to and has stated that Standing Order 50 did not give it the latitude to do that despite what was said in other parts of the Standing Orders. So this committee had not given itself permission to do that. This motion has the committee empowering itself to do so.

The Chair: Rev. Abbott.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think, as I mentioned at the very beginning of this, we're certainly prepared to look at meeting outside. We're certainly prepared to support that concept, although I do like the way Mr. Rodney's motion covers it better than this one. This one is sort of a blanket opening with a blank cheque to meet any time for any amount of money, so I don't think I'm going to support this motion. However, I think that the motion that Mr. Rodney is going to bring forward in a few minutes certainly embodies the spirit of this, of meeting outside and trying to plan some kind of an opportunity to meet with bodies other than our direct ministries.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chase: I believe that Mr. Rodney is headed in the same direction, but Mr. Rodney's motion is very restrictive. It calls for a single day in June, and we're looking for opportunities, if this is what the committee desires, to meet on more than a single day in June. If this is a direction that the committee feels is important to carry out the business of the people of Alberta, then let's empower ourselves to meet and set the guidelines as we go.

The Chair: Thank you.

To conclude, Mr. Prins, please.

Mr. Prins: I think that this is precisely the issue. Mr. Rodney's motion already carries with it a commitment to do so. We already have the power to do so. The next motion actually commits us to doing that, if we approve that motion.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Blakeman: Question.

The Chair: The question has been called on Motion 50(8) as moved by Laurie Blakeman. All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is defeated.

Now we have to deal with the matter of the tabled motion, please, Motion 50(1).

Ms Blakeman: I won't be moving that tabled motion.

The Chair: You won't be moving that motion?

Ms Blakeman: I would have to give an alternate motion.

The Chair: Would you like to withdraw this?

Ms Blakeman: I'd have to withdraw it because at this point the numbering is off on the one motion that was passed. Oh, no. I'm right. I'm sorry. I should move it. Right. It's on the table. I'm moving it, and that allows us to renumber the one motion that was passed as amended and make it 50(2).

Moved by Laurie Blakeman, MLA for Edmonton-Centre, that Standing Order 50 be amended by adding:
50(1) The public accounts and all reports of the Auditor General of Alberta when tabled in the House immediately stand referred to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

The Chair: Okay.

An Hon. Member: Question.

The Chair: The question is called. All those in favour? Opposed? Thank you.

The chair would like to thank the committee for their discussion this morning on Ms Blakeman's motion.

Now if we could proceed quickly, hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, on your motion.

Moved by Mr. Eggen:

Be it resolved that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that the Standing Orders of the Alberta Legislative Assembly be amended to reflect the following changes to its functions:

- That the committee be able to meet outside of the Legislature sittings. Further, the committee's meetings should not be restricted to once per week during a sitting.
- That the heads of all bodies subject to public audit, including government departments, agencies, boards, commissions, and corporations, could at the committee's discretion be called to appear before the committee.
- That the committee be allowed to examine major government policy initiatives with significant implications for the accountability and/or expenditure of public dollars.
- That the committee be allowed to initiate investigations, call expert witnesses, and require testimony under oath on matters of alleged government wrongdoing.
- That after conducting an investigation, the committee be empowered to prepare a report and recommendations, including dissenting reports if any, submit them to the Legislative Assembly, have them debated there, and require a written government response to the recommendations.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. You know, when you look at my motion, you see that the spirit of each of the five reforms that I proposed are individual items that we have previously discussed to some degree in this meeting. For the sake of expediency I am not going to go over them again save to say that I would like to direct each member's attention to the first two proposals that I have here,

which seem to be in the spirit of change that the majority are willing to go to. These are certainly the first two I put forward in order of importance, and I'm glad to see that we do have some appetite for each of these.

If you can look specifically at the language of the second one especially, I am saying that meeting outside of the session and bringing forward agency boards, commissions, and Crown corporations is still at the discretion of the committee. So please understand that we're not launching into some large blank cheque sort of enterprise, as someone had mentioned here earlier. Rather, you know, we do have to be responsible in looking within the confines of our ability to scrutinize the public monies being spent here.

That being said, I believe that each of these five reforms is the way that this Public Accounts Committee will be going eventually, sooner or later, and I think that in the spirit of doing the very best job possible, we should continue to look at each of these five reforms and realize that, in fact, they do serve the best interests of the public and public monies being spent here in the province of Alberta.

So if someone was willing to amend my motion, just looking at those first two, then I would be happy, but otherwise we can certainly continue on.

Mr. Oberle: A question for clarification. Mr. Eggen, are you yourself proposing that we drop the last three?

9:50

Mr. Eggen: Yes.

Mr. Oberle: Okay. So you're only considering the first two points?

Mr. Eggen: That's correct.

Mr. Oberle: Well, I would ask that you consider on point 1 the second sentence: "Further, the committee's meetings should not be restricted to once per week during a sitting." I couldn't support that. I am in favour, in fact, of expanding the sittings of this committee, but we couldn't do that during the sitting without scheduled meetings.

Mr. Eggen: No. It's impossible. You're right.

Mr. Oberle: You just couldn't fit it in.

Mr. Eggen: Sure. Well, I would be willing to scrap that second sentence as well in the spirit of compromise and horse trading.

Mr. Griffiths: I'd hate to throw out the baby with the bathwater, but my notion of Public Accounts is that we have a group of people who sort of drop their political bias and come to this meeting to discuss the spending of taxpayers' dollars to make sure that it's properly done. Now, my major concern with this, as with Ms Blakeman's, is something like the third bullet, that discusses examining major government policy initiatives, which should be left to the Legislature. It's a duty of the Legislature in question period to discuss public policy. That's my major concern with the reforms that we talk about, that we will delve into public policy discussions instead of public accounts discussions. So although I am quite supportive of the first two bullets, I still worry that we will devolve into public policy discussions.

I'm confident that the motion that has been brought forward by my colleague from Calgary, to have a trial period where we actually call in outside bodies and discuss them – if we can go through that process and show that we don't delve into public policy, that we deal

with public accounts, then I'd be much more confident to support a permanent change. But until I've witnessed it and seen that we can actually operate in the best interests of the taxpayers in accounting for public dollars, I'm reluctant to go to a permanent move for fear of discussion of public policy rather than public accounts.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have a few members yet to speak on this motion.

Mr. Oberle: Well, just a question of clarification. This motion is amended by dropping the last three bullets, isn't it?

Mr. Eggen: Yes.

Mr. Oberle: We're only considering the first two bullets?

Mr. Eggen: My procedure is perhaps a little bit rusty on this. Yes, my suggestion, if it's relevant to do so, is to drop the last three bullets and the second sentence of the first bullet.

The Chair: Okay. Do we have consent from the committee?

Mr. VanderBurg: Just to speak to and further emphasize what Mr. Griffiths has said, I think that Mr. Rodney's motion that we'll be getting to deals more with the line of where I want to go, the ladder approach, a rung at a time, and it's not open-ended. We can show caucus members on all sides of the House that we can handle outside agencies, that we can handle sitting outside the session.

I know that both Ms Blakeman's and Mr. Eggen's motions are well intentioned, but at this time I'm not prepared to support them, and I'm prepared to move on to Mr. Rodney's motion and use the ladder approach. I think that it's more manageable, and we can get on with our meeting. We've got some other issues to talk about.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Griffiths: A procedural question. I haven't heard anybody amend this motion, and my understanding of *Robert's Rules of Order* is that a person cannot amend his own motion. So I believe that the motion should stand as it is unless amended by someone.

The Chair: There can be a subamendment by someone other than . . .

Ms Blakeman: Do you want me to do it?

Mr. Eggen: If you don't mind.

Ms Blakeman: I will move an amendment to the motion brought forward by the Member for Edmonton-Calder, Mr. Eggen, that the last three bullets be removed from the motion and that the second sentence of the first bullet, that is, "Further, the committee's meetings should not be restricted to once per week during a sitting," also be struck. So the motion would read:

Be it resolved that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that the Standing Orders of the Alberta Legislative Assembly be amended to reflect the following changes to its functions:

- That the committee be able to meet outside of the Legislature sittings;
- That the heads of all bodies subject to public audit, including government departments, agencies, boards, commissions, and corporations, could at the committee's discretion be called to appear before the committee.

The Chair: Question on the amendment. All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is defeated.

Now the main motion as presented to the committee by Mr. Eggen. All those in favour of the main motion? All those opposed? The motion is defeated.

Now the motion by Mr. Rodney that we were dealing with earlier. Could we proceed with that, please?

Moved by Mr. Rodney:

In light of last fall's discussion and the motions brought forward by the members from Edmonton-Centre and Edmonton-Calder, I propose that the chair and vice-chair be afforded the authority from this body to move forward and schedule a day in June when we could select some government-funded agencies and invite them here for a sitting in front of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr. Rodney: Absolutely. In the spirit of efficiency, effectiveness, and economy, I will not speak further than I have already other than to say that I believe that this is a definite, concrete step in the right direction, capturing some of the sentiments of our colleagues who have made motions earlier today.

I would ask that we record the vote on this one, please. So I would like to move this forward as we've suggested and have a recorded vote.

The Chair: Yes. The committee clerk would like to briefly discuss this matter with us.

Mrs. Dacyshyn: Very briefly. With respect to what I said earlier about the Members' Services orders and payment to members, the money can always be found in our committee envelope. To pay members outside of session, we aren't restricted because we don't have the budget in our own committee. There can be money found for other meetings. If the committee chose to hold more meetings and bring a motion to Members' Services next year to make the budget so, then we could do that. But the money can be found for the meeting that you're talking about here.

Mr. Chase: Two ways of going at Mr. Rodney's motion. I appreciate the fact that he's allowed a single day of extension. He's framed that particular day in June, so he's provided some meat to it. Would you be willing to extend that idea and not restrict it to a single day or specifically in June? Was this to be an experimental circumstance? If so, were we meeting for the regular hour and a half, or could this potentially be a full-day meeting where we go through a variety of committees? You said that it could select some government-funded agencies, invite them here for a sitting in front. Were you thinking of two or three? Can you qualify?

Mr. Rodney: Sure. I'd be happy to comment on that. It suggests right in the wording of the motion that "the chair and vice-chair be afforded the authority." So I would want to leave it in their capable hands. Indeed, I think it is fairly open-ended for them on that day. I would not to use the word "experiment" so much as a bit of a pilot, just to see if this goes well. We all agree that we should do it more in the future and/or have other particularly suggested agencies, associations, or other audited organizations. Then we take it from there.

So, like you, I'd like to move forward on this. I do believe that this is a positive first step.

Mr. Eggen: My reading of your motion is that we will schedule a day in June, and when we're in that meeting in June, we could "select some government-funded agencies and invite them here for

a sitting.” So the way you have it, the language suggests that we’re meeting to suggest the agencies that we’re going to choose. That’s the way it is worded now. If that’s what you want, then that’s what it says.

Ms Blakeman: I’m sorry, Mr. Chairman. I’m just giving you notification that it’s 10 o’clock, and as I have another meeting, I’m going to have to excuse myself from the meeting.

10:00

The Chair: I realize. If you could have some patience with us. We’ve spent a lot of time this morning discussing your nine motions, so if you could also be gracious, we would appreciate it.

Mr. Eggen: Anyway, just to continue then, please. Do you want to choose the agencies beforehand and then bring them in?

Mr. Rodney: Well, I’m wondering if Mr. Eggen would like to make a friendly motion and change “we” to “they” in the fourth last line because that indeed was the intention. “I propose that the chair and vice-chair be afforded the authority from this body to move forward and schedule a day in June when they,” meaning the chair and vice-chair, “could select . . .” So that would be chosen beforehand, mutually decided upon by the chair and vice-chair.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. That’s good.

Mr. Rodney: Does that make sense?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. Absolutely. It’s just in the spirit of proper language.

Mr. Rodney: Good. Thank you. Indeed. Happy to accept that.

The Chair: Mr. Lindsay, do you accept that? Mr. Rodney, pardon me.

Mr. Rodney: I know we look like brothers, Mr. Lindsay and I.

The Chair: Pardon me. I apologize. So could you read this motion into the record, please?

Mr. Rodney: I’d be happy to.

In light of last fall’s discussion and the motions brought forward by the members from Edmonton-Centre and Edmonton-Calder, I propose that the chair and vice-chair be afforded the authority from this body to move forward and schedule a day in June when they could select some government-funded agencies and invite them here for a sitting in front of the Public Accounts Committee.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chase: Would you consider it a friendly amendment to get rid of the month of June? I mean, why are we restricting the chair and the vice-chair, forcing them to find a suitable day in June to make this decision to choose committees that will appear before us? It would appear, because we haven’t extended it beyond the regular legislative time, that we’re not extending another day of meeting; we’re simply asking them to select some committees that we could meet at some future date. So I would suggest at least get rid of June. Your intent is still there, that they do the decision-making for us. But, you know, I don’t see a point in restricting them to June.

Mr. Prins: If I could just add maybe, “propose that the chair and the vice-chair select some government-funded agencies and invite them

here for a sitting in front of the Public Accounts Committee sometime in June” so that you’re not saying that you’re going to select them in June. You’re going to select them and invite them here for a sitting in June.

Mr. VanderBurg: I think that’s the intent.

Mr. Prins: As long as we understand the intent, but I think we have to move on.

Mr. Rodney: Yeah, that is the intent. Just to address Mr. Chase’s concern directly, I’m guessing that he hears from constituents, just like I do and others do, that our job is to make sure that – well, they want to hold our feet to the fire. Truly, sir, the intent of this is that since we already have meetings every week from now until May, the very first possible month to do this is in June. So this was much more of an intent to be accountable both while we’re sitting and as soon as humanly possible after that. Mr. Chase, it does open the door for whatever might be next even sooner. You know, I keep on hearing words like “practical” and “concrete.” That’s why I thought I’d put that in there.

Some Hon. Members: Question.

The Chair: Thank you. The question has been called. All those in favour of the motion as presented by Mr. Rodney?

[For the motion: Rev. Abbott, Ms Blakeman, Mr. Chase, Mr. Eggen, Mr. Griffiths, Mr. Johnston, Mr. Lindsay, Dr. Morton, Mr. Prins, Mr. Rodney, Mr. VanderBurg]

The Chair: It’s unanimous. Thank you.

I would like to note that a report will be prepared to be tabled in the Assembly outlining the committee’s decision regarding amending Standing Order 50, and it will be considered by the Legislative Assembly.

Again, the chair would like to thank all members for their patience this morning, but we also have item 5 on the agenda now, which is Organization of Committee Meetings as it stands on February 27. The legislative authority is Standing Order 50, and I have to remind you that “Public accounts, when tabled, stand referred to the Public Accounts Committee.” This committee examines ministry expenditures from the previous fiscal year using the most current ministry and Auditor General’s annual reports; that is, 2004-05. The dates and time of the meetings are Wednesdays from 8:30 a.m. to 10 a.m. when the House is in session. Members are encouraged to steer away from policy questions, keep questions on the fiscal year under review.

In the past the tradition has been one question, one supplementary, and that alternates between opposition and government members. Now, there was some controversy the last time. Members who are not on this committee who had been coming felt that they weren’t being treated fairly by the chair. The chair thinks that we have to deal with this matter. We have to deal with it before we meet next week, and the chair is seeking advice from any of the members.

Mr. VanderBurg: The chair and I have discussed this, and I want to tell you that I see no bias on behalf of the chair. I watch his list. The two of us have worked very well up here to make sure that everyone has had their opportunity to say. If there is a weakness, maybe after the chairman calls the meeting to order, then the list is started. The two of us have been very liberal in creating the list. The list is here, and we start with the people that have requested. But I think maybe to make it clear for the chair and whoever sits in

that position, after the meeting is called to order, then by show of hands the chair starts establishing a list and it goes opposition, government, opposition, government. I don't have a problem with that. Really, I think that that's been your practice and your intent. So if that clears it up, I would just as soon that the chair just carries on with business as usual.

Mr. Eggen: So just for clarification then. We're starting at 8:30, we vote that we're starting, and then we start the list. Is that the short version? Okay.

The Chair: If someone comes in at 20 to 9 or 10 to 9 and the list is already made and people are here at 8:30 – Rev. Abbott said it very well earlier. We've got to start looking after those who are on time and not those who are not. If someone shows up at 10 to 9 and there's available time at 10 to 10, then they will be given an opportunity before this committee.

Mr. Eggen: Sounds good to me.

Ms Blakeman: I'm seeking clarification there. Because it goes opposition, government member, if you have four opposition members and one of them is late, are you saying that that person does not go into the mix until everyone else has spoken? So you would continue to rotate between the three opposition members that are there and whatever other government members are on the list?

The Chair: That is correct.

Mr. VanderBurg: Only if they've indicated that they have multiple questions. I mean, if the slots aren't filled, of course that member would have an opportunity earlier.

The Chair: For instance, if I wasn't the chairperson and I was to show up and ask you if you could please exchange your position on the list for mine, that would be fine with me. It would be fine with the committee if you want to exchange your spot with someone else.

We'll see how this works. If you have any other suggestions or ideas or comments, just let us know. Okay? Thank you.

Now, if you review the schedule, the schedule we're going to hopefully follow for the rest of this spring session is formed with input from the deputy chair.

Item 6 on the agenda, Draft Committee Report on 2005 Activities. I need a motion on that, please, that the report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts on 2005 activities be approved as circulated. Rev. Abbott.

Mr. Chase: I'll second it.

The Chair: We don't need a seconder.

Could we have a vote on this, please? All those in favour? Thank you.

Seeing none opposed, is there any other business under item 7? No.

The date of the next meeting will be March 8. We will be talking to the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security, the Hon. Harvey Cenaiko.

On behalf of the committee I would like to thank Mr. Dunn for his time and input this morning. We appreciate it.

Could I have a motion to adjourn, please? All those in favour? Thank you. Again, the chair thanks you for your time and your patience this morning.

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