

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Wednesday, March 31, 1982

Chairman: Mr. Mandeville

10:05 a.m.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Good morning, everyone. I see we have a good quorum. We're anticipating a short meeting. I think we all agree with that. We'd like to welcome to our meeting Mr. Rogers, his assistant Mr. Henkelman, Mr. O'Brien, and Mr. Heisler.

As we set out in our notice, this is an organizational meeting to determine what areas we want to deal with in the spring and fall sessions as far as the public accounts are concerned. I will go through our last year's organizational meeting. To start with, our times in the past have been from 10 to 11:30. If no committee members disagree with this, we could have a motion to have our times from 10 to 11:30. Mr. Wolstenholme makes a motion that we start at 10 and adjourn at 11:30 -- and I heard him say "sharp". All in favor?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. CHAIRMAN: In the past, we haven't been approving our minutes; it caused some problems. We have been filing our minutes, because we do have the Hansard. We have a verbatim record of everything in Hansard. Is it agreeable with the committee that we do the same procedure in the upcoming session? Moved by Shirley Cripps. All in favor?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We've been sending transcripts of the proceedings of each meeting to all committee members. Is that agreeable? Could I have a motion to that effect? Mr. Campbell.

There is one other area we should give some consideration to. In past meetings -- not recently -- we would get one member who would take up a considerable amount of time. So each committee member has one question and two supplementary questions. Mr. Clark moves. All in favor?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Are there any other changes?

MR. NOTLEY: Mr. Chairman, I presume that one of the first orders of business in terms of our priorities would be to go through the Auditor General's report. It would seem to me -- and I don't think we should make a decision today, but I give notice that I will raise it perhaps at the next meeting. That is with respect to the recommendation in the Auditor General's report concerning a report which would be filed in the Legislature. I think that's a decision we as a committee are going to have to make. We have not normally done that. So I think it would be appropriate that members have some opportunity to think about it and review it. So I am just giving notice that I will bring it up at the next meeting of the committee.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think that is something we gave some consideration to at our meetings last year. We do have some recommendations in a report here, and that is one of them. So we will be dealing with that at one of our meetings.

Are there any further recommendations?

MR. MAGEE: Mr. Chairman, wasn't it discussed last year that we should consider the possibility of a vice-chairman, to give some continuity to your office? Would it be appropriate at this time that we discuss the pros and cons of it and probably make a motion to that effect?

MR. CHAIRMAN: This was one of the recommendations that we certainly gave consideration to. I've talked to Mr. McCrae on this, and he thought we should set up a vice-chairman of the committee. I certainly think it's almost a necessity that we do this. Mr. McCrae indicated that possibly at our next meeting -- if I understood you right, Mr. McCrae -- we should consider this and see whether it should be our committee that should set up a vice-chairman or if it should be Mr. Crawford. Mr. Crawford is the one who recommends it to the Legislature, if it has to be approved by the Legislature. So that is where that is at right now, Mr. Magee. That was a recommendation by Mr. McCrae.

If there are no further recommendations on how we are to run our meetings, possibly we could have some recommendations on areas we should deal with. We have the public accounts and the Auditor General's report. We're really pleased with the overview on the report that he sent to all members. I have found it very beneficial. We also have the report on the accountability of public accounts, wherein there are many recommendations. We should deal with that area at some point.

MR. McCRAE: Mr. Chairman, if it would be all right with the committee, I would suggest that, since we do have the 69 recommendations of the Canadian Public Accounts Committees and Legislative Auditors outstanding, perhaps the committee might want to address them and vote on them. We could do that in groups or one by one. I don't think it would take too long, perhaps one meeting. But I feel we should begin with a review of that. Included in that would be the discussion on appointing a vice-chairman of the committee, in accordance with Recommendation 13. It would be my view that we could do that ourselves rather than having the Assembly do it. We are an autonomous committee, and I think it is just good business to have a vice-chairman. I think our group would be more than happy to make a recommendation from the government side as to who it should be. Do you want to do that this morning? Or we could come back another week and discuss it.

My recommendation would be that we discuss the 69 recommendations the next time the committee meets, and that from there we go to the public accounts volumes themselves and have Mr. O'Brien discuss his legislation, the meaning of the volumes of public accounts, and how they relate to the prior year's estimates and to the Auditor General's report. From there, we might go to the Auditor General's report itself and have him review either his overview or whatever detail committee members want, both his legislation and the recommendations in that report, and how they relate to the public accounts volumes. From there, I would suggest we have a discussion as to what departmental groups we might want in, based on the recommendations of the Auditor General and the public accounts volumes. Having decided what departments we want in, we would begin having them in and do our usual review of the 1980-81 public accounts of a particular department.

I make that general recommendation for discussion this morning.

MR. NOTLEY: I don't think it would be appropriate this morning to start singling out departments for in-depth examination until we've completed the review of the Auditor General's report, because I think that would be the place to start. I don't have any quarrel with the proposed sequence Mr. McCrae has suggested. However, I don't think we would want to spend a lot of time reviewing the public accounts in general, because we've done this in

terms of how they're set up and so on. Most members are in a position to deal with that relatively quickly. I hope we would get into the Auditor General's report fairly early, because we don't want to end up with only two or three weeks of the spring session left not even having touched the Auditor General's report. It's an important, major report, and we have to have sufficient time in order to properly evaluate it.

Therefore, I think we should compress these other things in one or two meetings at most, and not go on indefinitely on generalities when we have some major recommendations that I think this committee is obliged at least to review and evaluate.

DR. CARTER: Mr. Chairman, I agree that we really ought to start with this book. A number of us who were on the committee before have done some reading in that document. Thanks to Mr. Rogers and his input at the national level, we have the document there. So I think we do owe him and his office a certain amount of responsibility in dealing with this at a very early opportunity. So I'd like to support the notion that we deal with that first. It may well be that we can go through that in reasonably short order because of the fact that at we are in alignment with a fair number of those recommendations. Hopefully, we might deal with that first and then go on to other issues.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Any further recommendations?

MR. WEISS: Mr. Chairman, I think there is one matter we perhaps could review, not taking exception to Mr. Notley's remarks on wanting to get into depth on the others. One recommendation in particular I believe can be dealt with at this time. That is in reference to the nomination of a vice-chairman. I suggest, Mr. Chairman, that with respect to you, there is the possibility that, through illness or not being able to be present, the Public Accounts Committee would then be able to maintain its continuity. Perhaps by the nomination of a vice-chairman, those meetings could be proceeded with. That is one of the recommendations that could be dealt with in exception to the others. If it is the committee's wish and there is support for it, I recommend that it be discussed.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Are you saying we should do this this morning? It is in one of the recommendations we are going to deal with. If it's the wish of the committee, we could nominate a vice-chairman this morning.

MR. WEISS: Mr. Chairman, it's nothing personal. Your health is very good. It just so happened you had a misfortune the other day, and I wouldn't want that to recur. Let's hope it doesn't. But should it, a vice-chairman would then be able to proceed and Public Accounts would have continuity.

MR. NOTLEY: Mr. Chairman, I'm sure you are. But I would register a little bit of a caveat on this question. Traditionally the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee has always been an opposition member. That has been done for definite reasons over the years. Presumably we would get a vice-chairman from the government caucus. I think that is something we should think about. I would want to think about the implications of that, frankly, before we jump. In my judgment, it is a departure from the normal route.

MR. STEVENS: You should read this.

MR. NOTLEY: Fine. We'll have an opportunity to go through that. That would be the appropriate occasion to discuss it.

MR. COOK: I'd like to disagree with my seatmate. I'd like to suggest that we proceed with selecting a vice-chairman this morning. It's in conformity with the report we've been discussing, and it's a common occurrence in other jurisdictions where the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee is a member of the opposition and the vice-chairman -- for example, in Ottawa -- is a member of the government side. So I suggest we just carry on.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Any further discussion on electing a vice-chairman this morning?

MR. WOLSTENHOLME: I'll nominate George Topolnisky as vice-chairman.

MR. MAGEE: I don't know if it's necessary, but I'll second the motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Any further nominations? We really haven't opened the meeting up for nominations, but we'll say we have and accept that as a nomination.

MR. COOK: I move that nominations cease.

MR. BATIUK: I'll second that motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We have a motion that nominations cease. All in favor? So our vice-chairman will be George Topolnisky. Congratulations, George.

The recommendations we've had before the committee are that we start with the recommendations on accountability in the little book we have. Secondly, we deal with public accounts and, thirdly, we deal with the Auditor General's report. Fourthly, we will deal with departments on an individual basis. If we don't have any further recommendations, we'll let that stand as the order we'll deal with public accounts. At our next meeting on Wednesday, we'll start with the recommendations on the accountability of public accounts. Is there any further discussion?

DR. CARTER: Mr. Chairman, just a general request to the Auditor General for information. Earlier this week, when your report was released, in the morning you had a press conference. Were copies of your report handed out at that time?

MR. ROGERS: Copies of the report were brought down to this building at the exact time the press conference began. They were delivered to the Premier's office, the Lieutenant-Governor's office, various opposition offices, the Provincial Treasurer's office, and the remainder were given to the Clerk. There was a misunderstanding. This has been the procedure that has been carried out over a number of years -- prior to the Auditor General's report, there were the public accounts which were released by our office. They used to be placed in the boxes for the availability of members, so members would have access to them before the session began. But I understand that this week, they were handed out after the session began. I was not aware that was going to happen. I had felt that all members would have them prior to session commencing at 2:30. I regret there was that problem and will make sure it doesn't happen next year.

DR. CARTER: Thank you. I appreciate that very much. I for one felt uncomfortable that some of the opposition in the House had copies in time for question period, whereas the government members were left somewhat high and dry. Thank you for your comments.

MR. CHAIRMAN: That pretty well concludes our meeting. Could we have a motion to adjourn? Dr. McCrimmon.

*The meeting adjourned at 10:22 a.m.*