

[Chairman: Mr. Martin]

[10 a.m.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: If we could bring the meeting to order. The first item of business is the last minutes we had for May 30, which were distributed and circulated.

MR. GOGO: So moved.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Any discussion of the minutes? Errors or omissions? All those in favour of adopting the minutes?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We got a reply just this morning from the Provincial Treasurer. I'll read it quickly:

On behalf of Executive Council, I am pleased to submit to the Public Accounts Committee the response of the Government to the recommendations contained in the Report of the Auditor General for the year ended March 31, 1983.

Obviously I haven't had time to circulate these, because I just got them this morning. We'll get them in the mail to you this week, okay?

The other items today. The one cabinet minister scheduled from the spring that we have left is Mr. Johnston, the Minister of Advanced Education. He was not able to make it today, but we have him scheduled for next week. So basically what I thought we would do today is reorganize, if you like, and see what members might like to do for the fall session.

One thing we have suggested — and I'll leave it totally up to the members here. I'd like to make a couple of comments. If you recall, last year I worked with Mr. Moore and handed out some recommendations re the Alberta PAC from our experiences going to conferences and these sorts of things. I suggested that if that was appropriate, we could at some point discuss them. I'm not saying that it has to be today. If I can lay it out for you people, I guess my concern is that I think the Public Accounts Committee could be perhaps the most important committee in government. One of the things we have to do with it, though — and it's difficult; there are varying degrees of success — is try to take away as much of the partisanship on the Public Accounts Committee as possible regardless of whether it's the Progressive Conservatives, Rhinoceros, NDP, or whoever in government. I'm talking years down.

I'm not saying we have all the answers. I've discussed this with Mr. Rogers, and the rest of it. But the purpose of this was to try to take the partisanship out as much as possible. Frankly in Public Accounts we should not be debating policy of the government, because that is appropriately debated in the Legislature. As I see it, what Public Accounts should be doing is making sure that after the government has put the policy in — whether or not we agree with it — we're in fact getting the best bang for the buck. That's the traditional role of Public Accounts. If all members look at it in that direction, then it doesn't become embarrassing for the government if we find that some civil servants aren't doing their job. I think we all recognize that our British parliamentary system always has some

partisanship to it. But in my opinion the role of Public Accounts should be to take away as much of that as possible.

Obviously I threw this out for discussion. I have extra copies here. But if members think it is appropriate to go through this at some time — I guess what I'm saying is that I believe that regardless of our political stripe, if we were to organize the best Public Accounts Committee in Alberta for all future governments, we'd be doing Albertans a very good service in terms of protecting the taxpayers' money. There may be other ideas; maybe most of these are not good. It was just a thought about some discussion about the role of Public Accounts, because members have told me that it's boring and that often they feel it's useless. I've had government members tell me that, and I haven't disagreed with them totally on the particular position.

I guess what I'm asking for is direction. If you people want to discuss this or just go on to other speakers in the fall session, I'm open to you.

MR. R. MOORE: I think it's a good idea that we do review your recommendations. They were distributed over a year ago. I know a lot may not be able to locate them in their filing systems, and I'm glad you brought copies. I urge people to pick up copies and that we do review these in our plans. This is an organizational meeting. It's somewhere in the organization plan that we do put this time aside to review them.

I do look at the importance of this document. I happened to get my copy just as I walked into my office to come down here; I haven't had time to look at it. I think it's a very important document that should take precedence over your recommendations. My feeling would be to review this and then come back to them.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I thought everybody would have it right on top of their desks and would have been studying it for the last year. I'm surprised.

MR. R. MOORE: Mr. Chairman, I said they were in their filing systems. It may be on top.

MR. CHAIRMAN: If I'm not adding words, I take it your suggestion is that we are set with Mr. Johnston for next week, that everybody should make sure they have this, and that this would be the next priority of business, which we'd look into in some detail. Is that your suggestion? It's not law. I have extra copies. I'll make sure that members who have somehow lost this important document . . .

MR. R. MOORE: I think this one of the response should be reviewed first. It may relate to how it's been handled. It might give us a little insight when we're looking at your recommendations. But I think the first one we should look at is the response of the . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: So as I understand it, the suggestion is: Mr. Johnston is locked in from the spring, and then go over the Treasurer's responses. That would probably mean that if we want to deal with this, we might not deal with it until next year, depending on how long the session ran.

MR. R. MOORE: I think it would come up the following week. I'm just saying that's the first round. I don't know what the membership are thinking on this.

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

[The committee adjourned at 10:11 a.m.]

MR. PAHL: Mr. Chairman, I was just sort of putting the date November 7 for Mr. Johnston, assuming there are no other ministers the committee wants to call. I wasn't aware that there was. But assuming there wasn't, could we then schedule the Treasurer's responses for the 14th and the recommendations presented by you as chairman for the 21st?

I would like to suggest that on the 14th we not necessarily set the ground rules, if you will, but plan a little for the discussion of the recommendations you've made. For example, I note that there's a recommendation that planning meetings be held in camera. If this is an organizational meeting of Public Accounts, we should make that decision before we get into what I would like to call the nonpartisan discussion of the organizational aspects you've suggested.

If that schedule is agreed to, I suggest that for part of the discussion we have on the Treasurer's response on the 14th, we reserve a bit of time to prepare ourselves organizationally for discussing your report. For example, have you solicited or would you solicit from the Auditor General comments that would be available? Would he be available for part of the meeting? Those sorts of questions.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I hope he would. I mean, it's up to the members, but I think the Auditor General is prepared to do that.

MR. PAHL: He has responded or is prepared to respond to your recommendations?

MR. CHAIRMAN: I've sent copies; we've had discussion. He can answer for himself.

MR. ROGERS: Yes, Mr. Chairman. As you said, we have discussed this matter. I'd be very happy to join in any discussion on this topic if the committee so wished.

MR. PAHL: Mr. Chairman, I think I've raised questions that we may not all have thought about. But I would like to reserve those decisions for the latter part of the meeting on the 14th, and then plan to schedule the discussion for the 21st, if there is indeed a date available. With those remarks, I guess I would move that recommended schedule and an adjournment.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We'll do one. Next week, of course, Mr. Johnston is scheduled. The following week we will discuss the Treasurer's response to the Auditor General — and you will hopefully get that information this week — with some time left to discuss the possibility of organizing the format, if you like, for the discussion of my recommendations the following week. Is that okay? All those in favour say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Opposed? Okay.

There was another motion. All those in favour?