

8:33 a.m.

[Mr. White in the chair]

THE CHAIRMAN: Order please. Ladies and gentlemen, we have a quorum. Mr. Minister, thank you very much for coming and bringing a goodly number of staff and others. We generally do an introduction. You introduce your staff and others that you wish to introduce. The Auditor General does likewise. Then you're allowed time for an overview of the department's history in that period of time we're dealing with here today. You must recognize that we the members will do our best, and I am the referee to keep them dealing with the history and not any new policy, because we venture into that now and again. If you can help us out by doing that also, it makes it much easier. Thank you.

We have one other announcement that we'd like to make before we commence. Today we have a number of resolutions – we'll get copies for you – to deal with at about quarter to 10 or so. We'll deal with the minister and his staff and their report until that time. Might we have a motion to amend the agenda so as to reflect that business at 9:45?

MR. ZWOZDESKY: I would move that motion, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: It's so moved. Is it agreed?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: And the agenda as amended. Might we have motion to that effect?

MS BLAKEMAN: I'll move that.

THE CHAIRMAN: Is it agreed?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: It's carried. Thank you very kindly.

Mr. Minister, if you'd like to commence.

DR. OBERG: Thank you very much, Lance. Perhaps I'll start by introducing . . . Boy, it echoes in here when there's no one here. Perhaps I could start by introducing my staff. On my far left is Pat Boynton, my assistant deputy minister, and Maria David-Evans, my deputy minister; on the far side Jim Menzies, the director; Duncan Campbell, the executive director; and Jordan Cleland, my EA.

Perhaps Pearl can introduce John.

MS CALAHASEN: Sure. To my right is John Lackey, the commissioner of services for children and families.

DR. OBERG: Peter, do you want to introduce your staff?

MR. VALENTINE: Thank you, Mr. Minister. On my left is Lawrence Taylor, a principal in the office. On my right are Richard Taylor, also a principal in the office, and Cathy Ludwig, who was recently promoted. She's a principal in the office. All these people are involved in work in the ministry of Family and Social Services. I think that's all of us here today, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you.

DR. OBERG: Thank you. We have one other person. Bob Scott, the director of communications, is sitting up here.

Perhaps if we could get going. Thank you for the opportunity to come and speak today about Family and Social Services' 1996-97

public accounts and the Auditor General's report for that year. I will make some opening remarks which cover some of the highlights that arise from these documents. Minister Calahasen has some remarks as well. After that, we would absolutely love to answer any of your questions.

The information for Family and Social Services appears in the public accounts beginning on page 76. In the Auditor General's report our section starts on page 105.

Since '96-97 a reorganization occurred which saw the aboriginal units move out of Family and Social Services to federal and intergovernmental affairs. For this reason I will not be making specific comments regarding program 4, aboriginal affairs; program 5, Metis settlements accord; or the statutory amount of \$30 million paid under the Metis Settlements Accord Implementation Act. Details regarding these amounts can be acquired from the new minister responsible.

In 1996-97 the ministry had an operating budget of more than \$1.3 billion. As a result of its operation the ministry generated a surplus of almost \$13 million, or .9 percent. About \$5 million of this operating surplus was moved to the capital investment vote. This was done primarily to support a major, onetime computer equipment purchase to help the ministry address the Y2K problem that exists with the current welfare payment system.

Nineteen ninety-six, ninety-seven saw a continuation of the success of welfare reforms. As a result of the ministry aggressively assisting individuals in training to return to employment, the welfare caseload dropped to an average of 43,042 from the budgeted level of 48,620. Fifty-five million dollars was saved in the welfare program as a result of this success. With the savings achieved in welfare, the ministry was able to reallocate funds to support spending pressure in other high-priority areas. Over \$32 million was reallocated to child welfare services under reference 3.2. Almost \$23 million was reallocated to assured income for the severely handicapped, reference 2.3.3, and over \$4 million was reallocated to services to persons with disabilities, reference 3.5. In all three of these program areas caseloads grew at a faster rate than was budgeted. However, the ministry responded positively by reallocating funds to address the needs.

On the revenue side, which appears on page 79, Canada health and social transfer came into full force in '96-97, while the Canada assistance plan was wound down. The net result of this change was a decrease in transfers from the government of Canada totaling more than \$242 million. When compared to '95-96, total spending for Family and Social Services increased by over \$68 million. This, coupled with the \$242 million reduction in federal revenue, indicates that the government of Alberta increased the allocation of provincial funding to Family and Social Services by over \$310 million from one year to the next.

In the Auditor General's report, observations and recommendations were made regarding income and employment programs, services to persons with disabilities, services to children and families, as well as the ministry's financial statements. Overall, I believe the report reflects favourably on this department, and I wouldn't say anything else.

A major recommendation was made regarding tendering of the contracts, and you may have some questions regarding this issue. The ministry has worked closely with officials from the Auditor General's office and Alberta Treasury to address these observations and recommendations, and I am pleased to report that corrective steps have been taken in all cases.

At this point, I will ask Minister Calahasen to provide opening remarks regarding child and family services.

MS CALAHASEN: Thank you very much, Minister Oberg. The office of the minister without portfolio was created during 1996-97,

specifically in June, to oversee the implementation of a community-based delivery structure for service for children and families. This is my very first visit to public accounts. I've been on that side for a number of years and have been the one to ask questions in many instances, so I look forward to hearing some dialogue occur as we continue to work towards getting some information.

During '96-97 significant progress was made toward realizing the goal of greater community input into the management and delivery of these services. In the public accounts, page 77, program reference 3.3, if you look at the reference, you can see that over \$8 million was spent in the office of the commissioner in a community service planning effort. These costs were incurred to conduct a grassroots community planning process to redesign the service delivery system for children and families.

On page 77 at program reference 3.3.3 you can also see that approximately \$15 million was spent on early intervention programs. In 1995 government committed \$50 million to the funding of early intervention programs over three years, ideally to be spent in instalments of \$10 million, \$20 million, and \$20 million.

In their local planning, communities are looking at ways to help at-risk children and families before they reach a point of crisis. The concept of early intervention is one of the four main themes or pillars of the redesign of children and family services. These community services provide a wide range of strategies to support healthy growth and development of children and families and address issues such as literacy, parenting skills, success in school, teen support, and family violence prevention. For the fiscal year '96-97, 234 projects were approved for a total of \$14.9 million in funding under the early intervention project.

A great deal of advance work is under way to ensure that the transition to locally based service systems occurs in a smooth, orderly manner. The redesign of services to children and families is strongly supported by the government of Alberta, especially when it was referenced by the Premier in his January provincial speech. It sure helps in integration when that happens. It is also woven in the throne speech. The investment that is being made in the development of a new and dynamic partnership between government and communities is one that will set the stage for future delivery of children's services and benefit Alberta children and families for years to come.

I look forward to any questions that you may have.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Madam Minister.

First, we have Mr. Zwozdesky, followed by Mrs. O'Neill, followed by Ms Blakeman.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning, hon. ministers and Mr. Auditor General. To all of your staff, good morning as well. Thank you for coming.

I want to begin in volume 2 on page 77, vote 3.2.5, which references foster care. Certainly there is a tremendous responsibility here from the government's perspective to look after children who are in foster care situations. I would echo that same seriousness from my personal point of view and ask a couple of questions about this. I'm struck by the overexpenditure of some \$13.5 million in this area. I'm not sure it's fair to criticize it, but I think it's fair to ask for an explanation on that and whether or not it relates to a dramatic increase in more children requiring this service. I'm hoping the minister, in explaining that overexpenditure, will clarify not only on what it was expended but equally important why it became necessary to do that and what sort of trend is developing in that area and what particular mechanisms the ministers have in mind for ensuring the best care can be given to these children who need it.

8:43

DR. OBERG: Thanks, Gene. First of all, the actual reason for \$13 million being overexpended is that our caseload went up from 8,960, which is what was budgeted, to 10,236. So what we have seen is an increase in the caseload, but we've also seen an increase in the actual case amount. As you can tell, our department is very much caseload dependent. We saw an increase in children needing foster care in 1996-97, hence the increase in the amount. We were very fortunate in that we could transfer funds over from the SFI funds where the caseload was lower than anticipated.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Okay. Following on the heels of that, I have another overexpenditure I'd like to know about, and that is on page 76, where we see an overexpenditure in the resource management services area of \$4 million. That overexpenditure of \$4 million is reflected in vote 1.0.9. Resource management services is something I'd need some clarification on. I'd like to know what programs that particular overexpenditure helped support and/or which individuals were beneficiaries, if you will, of the additional funds there. Or was it more administrative? Did it flow to actual families, or was this a sort of in-house overexpenditure?

DR. OBERG: Thanks, Gene. Resource management services is responsible for managing and providing financial services, which is financial control and monitoring, as well as administrative support to the department, which is materials management, accommodations, records management, and IT services. What you saw in 1996-97 was a little over \$4 million in overexpenditures: \$1.6 million of that was related to telephone and telecommunications costs which were taken over by Family and Social Services without the accompanying budget amount, another million dollars related to upgrading and replacement of computer equipment within the ministry, and \$1.3 million was a result of outsourcing of IT services and separation payments to staff. What happened was that we outsourced to ISM the IT component of this department, and \$1.3 million of that was the separation costs with the staff.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: So that's a lot of staff that were let go. Is that the idea?

DR. OBERG: That's right.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mrs. O'Neill.

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning, everyone. My reference is to the Auditor General's report on welfare reform, and it's on page 108. The Auditor General writes about three reports that evaluate the impact of the welfare reforms. When our Auditor General's report was filed, two of the reports had been completed, and there's reference to the one that was in the draft stage. My question is: what were the results of the studies, Dr. Oberg?

DR. OBERG: Thank you. The first study was published by C.D. Howe, and that's something that has been tabled in the Legislature in the past year, I believe. It analyzed the welfare reforms and concluded that the caseload decrease was achieved by focusing welfare to those fully in need while maintaining effective strategies to move people off assistance with employment and training supports.

The second study was conducted on a contract with Advanced Education and Career Development by Nichols Applied Management. It studied the specific approach that was taken in the Grande Prairie area. This study indicated that the economic climate in Grande Prairie was very favourable to implementing the reforms.

The third study was by Canada West, which was funded by Alberta Family and Social Services. It indicated an overall positive result of the reforms with most former welfare clients having improved their outlook and situations. Roughly two-thirds, or about 70 percent, of the respondents to the Canada West Foundation reported that they had found jobs and were now gainfully employed. What this does is move a long way to dispelling the myth that we gave everyone bus tickets and sent them to British Columbia.

MRS. O'NEILL: Staying with the Auditor General's report, on pages 108 and 109 he recommends that improvements be made to the accountability process related to the integrated training pilot program. Specifically I believe he was looking for written referrals from appropriate staff and improved feedback to frontline workers. My question is: how have these recommendations been addressed?

DR. OBERG: Thank you. The pilot program, which is run by Advanced Education and Career Development, was phased out in '97 because it was not achieving the outcomes that were desired. For all the programs run by Advanced Education and Career Development our workers who refer clients will share as much information about their assessment as possible while respecting client confidentiality.

MS BLAKEMAN: Welcome, everyone, the Auditor General and staff.

I am wondering about the services to children and families funding model working group. I'm trying to figure out what the role of this group was in the implementation of the regionalization of children's services. Specifically who were the people on this working group? Did they prepare any reports on behalf of this, and if so, what were the recommendations? Could you provide them to this committee?

DR. OBERG: Thank you. I'll ask Minister Calahasen to respond to that, please.

MS CALAHASEN: I'd be pleased to. As a matter of fact, Mr. Chairman, I don't know what reference it is to in the public accounts, but I'll certainly talk about the role and what they are doing.

MS BLAKEMAN: It's from the Auditor General's report on page 106.

MS CALAHASEN: All right. Thank you. Well, there was a funding model committee that was established to look at what kind of funding we should look at for children's services as we move to regional authorities. Some of the people that were on that funding model committee were Marie Adam Tootoosis – she was the steering committee co-chair – Herb Belcourt, community representative; Claudia Buck, committee co-chair; Brian Callaghan, community representative; Tapan Chowdhury from Alberta Health; Dr. Dan Cornish, community representative, central region; Art Cunningham, steering committee co-chair; Mat Hanrahan, Assistant Deputy Minister of Family and Social Services; Sharon Holtman, steering committee member; John Lackey, the gentleman to my right; Mark Lalumiere, Alberta Education; Murray Lloyd, community representative, northeast region; Paddy Meade from Alberta Justice; Maureen Mooney, commissioner's office; Sherrold Moore, community representative from Calgary; Merle Rudiak, steering committee co-chair; Ken Shewchuk, commissioner's office; Rick Sloan, community representative, northwest region; George Stephenson, steering committee member; Frank Wilson, resource management services from Family and Social Services.

Basically, what they were doing was ensuring funding for

children's services would continue, and they had to look at a means to be able to determine how they could establish the criteria to determine how that funding would go to the communities so that there would be no gap as we move from where it is now to the new system. Consultations were held during the spring and summer of 1997, and as a result of further analysis, the initial model has been modified by the feedback we received from the community at large. Various community groups have indicated some concerns. That funding model will be coming forward in the next little while in terms of what we're going to do with the system.

MS BLAKEMAN: Good. Thank you.

8:53

THE CHAIRMAN: Is that it?

MS BLAKEMAN: Yup, that's it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Such a shock.

Mr. Yankowsky, followed by Dr. Pannu, please.

MR. YANKOWSKY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good morning, everyone. My questions are in reference to expenditures in the offices of the minister responsible for children's services and the assistant deputy minister of children's programs. The questions are all found on page 76 of public accounts, volume 2, under element 1.0.2. Now, there is nothing budgeted for the minister responsible for children's services, yet \$155,000 was spent. I would suspect this was due to the creation of that office after the estimates were debated, as we're doing at the present time. Is that correct?

[Mrs. O'Neill in the chair]

MS CALAHASEN: As a matter of fact, Madam Chairman, what happened was – it's true – in 1996-97 we were created. It was a new unit that had been pulled together. It was June when it was first created, and we actually took effect in July, towards the middle of August. Basically, it was a new unit that had been created, and there was no budget that had been allocated for it.

MR. YANKOWSKY: Thank you. On the same page element 1.0.5 notes the expenditures for the office of the assistant deputy minister for children's programs. Here I see that this office spent just over \$200,000 more than estimated. This is, of course, very significant, considering that the overall budget was only \$662,000. This represents an overexpenditure of 31 percent. What was the reason for this?

DR. OBERG: Thanks, Julius. The deficit in this area resulted from the ministry implementing a new monitoring and evaluation unit as part of the children and family services initiatives. Because this was a new unit, there had been no budget that had been allocated to it in the budget of that year. Basically what the unit was doing was designing a monitoring and evaluation process which will be implemented as the various child and family service authorities become operational, hence the overexpenditure.

MR. YANKOWSKY: Thank you.

DR. PANNU: Madam Chairman, Mr. Minister of Family and Social Services, I want to invite your attention to the Auditor General's report, '96-97, pages 110 and 111. On 110 the Auditor General makes some observations and recommendations with respect to management of contract performance measures. Then he goes on to

talk about the Michener Centre laundry contract as a specific case. Clearly, the Auditor General draws attention to the fact that, one, the tendering process was flawed, and secondly, the question of equity also arises in that there's an unfair advantage to those who entered the bidding process.

My questions are as follows. Have you taken fully into account the Auditor General's recommendation 14 and implemented his recommendations? Secondly, what actions, if any, have you taken to assess the financial costs that might have been incurred as a result of the flawed process that the Auditor General refers to, and have those who made those decisions been held accountable?

DR. OBERG: Thanks, Raj. In reference to your first question, the answer quite simply is yes. We have taken into account all of the Auditor General's recommendations, and we have implemented them. We have changed data and reissued the ministry's tendering model along the lines of what the Auditor General has come back with.

With reference to the costs of in particular the Michener Centre contract, we recognize that there were some problems, as were pointed out by the Auditor General. We have taken these into consideration. We have not identified as a specific line item the cost of what happened with that contract, but we have taken actions to ensure that it won't happen again.

DR. PANNU: My last part of the question was: any actions taken against those who were responsible for making these decisions?

DR. OBERG: No, there hasn't been.

DR. PANNU: My question is: why?

DR. OBERG: Because when we investigated this, we felt that everyone was acting under good conscience. They were acting a little bit under bad advice, but that's what happened. We have changed the department in how we tender contracts. We recognized, with the help of the Auditor General, what occurred in this contract, and we have taken actions to ensure that it doesn't happen again.

DR. PANNU: Would you please have some cost estimates as to what was lost? Or has the department done any work on this?

DR. OBERG: Sure. We don't have them specifically, Raj, but we'll get them to you, if that's all right.

DR. PANNU: Okay. Thank you.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Mr. Lougheed.

MR. LOUGHEED: Thanks. If you will look on page 76, public accounts, volume 2, down to element 2.3.3. I'm looking at the AISH program. The shortfall of \$23 million there, can you comment on why it occurred? Tell us what you can about that; will you please?

DR. OBERG: Sure. Thanks, Rob. The bottom line on the AISH program in '96-97 is that we saw an increased caseload over what we had budgeted. We have been seeing that actually following on into '97-98 as well, where the caseload is increasing quite dramatically. This is something that we are searching for the reasons why. It baffles me a little bit, quite honestly, to recognize that we are having probably an extra hundred people per month in Alberta who are severely handicapped, as the AISH acronym suggests, assured income for the severely handicapped. I think there is something else that is going on. We are taking a look quite seriously at this program

this year. However, the main reason for the \$23 million shortfall was purely a caseload increase.

MR. LOUGHEED: Just looking at the same area there, widows' pension, just above, 2.3.2. That was the opposite kind of scenario, a small surplus. Can you give an explanation for that?

DR. OBERG: Sure. We had a \$1.7 million surplus for the widows' pension, and it was due to a combination of factors. This client group has generally become more affluent due to such factors as higher employment rates and improved insurance coverage over the past few years. As a result, quite frankly, there are fewer widows that qualify for support under the widows' pension program.

The other important thing is that as the recipients turn 60, they become eligible for the federal widows' pension program. What we then do is deduct the amount from our widows' pension so that they don't get the cumulative effect of the widows' pension program. This has resulted in significantly lower benefits from the province being paid to the widows who qualify under the widows' pension program. I believe the equivalent is roughly \$813 versus \$770. Am I correct in those numbers? Good. A lucky guess. What it boils down to is that we would pick up the extra \$43 on those that qualify fully to bring it up to \$813, but the federal government would pick up the \$770.

MR. LOUGHEED: Thanks.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Mr. Zwozdesky, followed by Mr. Johnson.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you. I want to reference the Auditor General's report, pages 110 and 111, which is an excellent report, Mr. Auditor General. I thank you for it. I, too, am concerned about the privatization or contracting out of certain services. I'll just share with this minister quickly a concern that I had with respect to the department of public works, where the minister told us a few days ago that they don't tender anything in the architectural design area that's under \$10 million. There's a pretty serious concern there, and I'm just wondering if some of that same logic perhaps applies here in particular, as referenced by the Auditor General. I want to put it against the backdrop of the concern that we all have about the possible privatization or contracting out of children's services. In that respect and within that context I want to ask the minister if he has now created some specific written mandates or terms of reference to conduct the actual process of contracting out. I believe you said there was something happening. A subset to that question is: would you be willing to provide those written terms of reference to this committee for our review?

9:03

DR. OBERG: Thank you, Gene. With regards to the first question, quite literally we learned a lot from the Michener Centre laundry dispute. We learned a lot about the tendering process with regards to that. Currently the practice in our department is to tender out everything that is potentially being privatized. I must caution you, though, on the use of the term "privatization" when it comes to children's services. What we are doing is turning it over to the authorities who may or may not. They will not be active service deliverers, but they will probably keep using the same people that are out there at the moment. If, however, there is any new task or any job that comes up, certainly everything will be tendered. With regard to your second part of that question, we'd be more than happy to give you our tendering pamphlet.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Okay. Through the chair to all of the members, thank you.

My final question, Madam Chairman, is with respect to this same process of contracting out services and what it is that the minister and his staff do to rate and compare the various proposals. You must have some set of criteria or some sort of formula, which I would ask you to comment on, as part of the request for proposals process. Is that something you could also share with this committee? I'm not looking for reams of material, just some general insight.

DR. OBERG: Right. Certainly, Gene. We will share everything that we have on the tendering process and the contracting out provisions that we have in the tendering process. The bottom line is that that's a very difficult question to answer, because in every contract we look at something different. As you know, in many cases it's whoever provides the lowest cost gets the contract, but when it comes to the area of providing services to people, there's also a quality component.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Exactly.

DR. OBERG: So the lowest bidder does not necessarily get the contract. It's whoever does the best job for the lowest price. Those two are sometimes different.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Mr. Johnson, followed by Ms Blakeman.

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you very much. I'm referring to page 77 of public accounts, volume 2, about midway down the page, services to persons with disabilities. Under element 3.5.1, supports to community services I note spent more than double the authorized budget of \$8.4 million. That's reference 3.5.1. My question is: what has caused such a large increase in the rate of spending here?

DR. OBERG: Thanks, LeRoy. First of all, as you said, we had close to a \$10 million shortfall; \$1.8 million of that was for the cost of legal services related to the eugenics lawsuit. This was the Leilani Muir case that came in that year, and that was \$1.8 million. The other thing, though, was that the shortfall reflected a change in the way the ministry charges the administrative components of payments under the personal support services program. You can see the offsetting surplus, actually, in 3.5.7. If you notice, in that scenario we have an \$8.3 million surplus. So that's where the offsetting revenue is, in the line item.

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you. Also on the same page, referring to reference 3.5.2, handicapped children's services has spent \$2.4 million more than budgeted. Was this overspending related to more children receiving services, or did the services just cost more than expected?

DR. OBERG: I think, LeRoy, if I can, there are two reasons for this. First of all, we saw roughly a 10 percent increase in the caseload in this year. As well, we saw a number of decisions that were made by the appeal committees on very high-cost modalities of treatment. An example would be the autistic children. We had several children in this year that received roughly \$60,000 to \$70,000 settlements. Not settlements; I'll rephrase that. They received services that were from \$50,000 up to \$60,000 to \$70,000 in this time frame.

The other thing, quite frankly, is that in handicapped children's

services we saw an increase in the per child rate, as well as the costs in that field rising dramatically this year.

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Ms Blakeman, followed by Mr. Loughheed.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you, Madam Chairman. Reference: the Auditor General's annual report, pages 108 to 109. My questions are about the integrated training pilot program. I'm wondering if the minister can report on what steps were taken by the department during this fiscal year to ensure that the process of referral of SFI clients to the integrated training pilot project program is done on a basis that the client is able to benefit from the type of training. This question is springing from my experiences when I was with the Advisory Council on Women's Issues. We found that whenever women, particularly, were referred for any kind of training, they kept trying to make them into hairdressers and secretaries, which I must say there is a limited market for. It seemed to totally ignore whatever strengths or skills that person might be coming with. So given that this was commented on in the Auditor General's report, I'm interested in what steps in fact you have taken to make sure the referral is appropriate to the individual.

DR. OBERG: I guess there are two things. First of all, when that program was up and running, we tried to do exactly what you're saying. We had individual assessments. The individual assessments would then go to the integrated training pilot program, recognizing that there cannot be 10 million hairdressers. The comment that was made in the Auditor General's report was that there had to be more written referrals, that there had to be better communication between the staff. As I stated previously, Laurie, this program was something that was not continued. We felt that it was not meeting our needs, consequently the program was canceled.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. Could you be more specific on what processes were in place that were being used by the department that resulted in inappropriate referrals for some people?

DR. OBERG: I won't use the term "inappropriate" because that in a way would be impugning motive on the social workers. What the social workers did was assess the people that needed the jobs. They assessed them to the best of their ability and then made the communication to the Advanced Education and Career Development program. We found, quite frankly, that the program was not meeting our needs. So at this state in time, in 1996-97, we felt this program was not what we wanted. We felt there were too many problems with it. As the Auditor General had pointed out, the communication between the social workers and Advanced Education and Career Development was not optimum. Consequently, this led to many of the things that you were talking about, where there were 10,000 . . .

MS BLAKEMAN: Too many hairdressers.

DR. OBERG: Right.

MS BLAKEMAN: How often do we do this?

DR. OBERG: If I can, Laurie, on that issue, this was a pilot program. I would be much more hesitant to say this if it hadn't been a pilot program, if we hadn't tried and failed, so to speak, as opposed to not recognizing the failure and keeping on with the program.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Lougheed, followed by Dr. Pannu and Mr. Zwozdesky.

MR. LOUGHEED: Thanks. Let's go to page 77 again of volume 2 of public accounts and look at all of 3.2. That's the program reference number. That shortfall of \$32 million or so I expect is going to be due to growth of the program, unless you have other comments in that regard. Can you let us know why there were growth increases?

9:13

DR. OBERG: Thanks, Rob. First of all, we had planned, we had budgeted for a caseload of 8,960. The actual caseload averaged 10,236. We were very fortunate in this department in that we were able to reallocate money, essentially from the SFI program, to this program to take up that increase in volume.

With specific reference to your comments about why, I think there are probably a hundred and some thousand different reasons. Obviously I'm exaggerating, but there are a lot of different reasons why children's services have increased. Some of them we have a handle on; others we don't. What we're seeing is that over this time frame the caseload has increased roughly 18 percent. It has leveled off though. In 1997-98 what we've seen is the program effectively level off. We were going at a dramatic increase. The reason for this is difficult to say. We are going through a boom economy. Whether or not that played any part in it, whether or not our social workers were becoming quite aggressive, it's very difficult to say. But the bottom line is the funds were there; the resources were there. We hired roughly 375 more social workers during this time frame to deal with children's services, and we were able to reallocate the funds to look after this increase.

MR. LOUGHEED: Okay; thanks. Maybe a second question here. If you could address the child welfare shortfall and specifically foster care and residential care. If you can maybe elaborate on those two, because they seem to be certainly the biggest areas of concern there.

DR. OBERG: Yeah. Thanks, Rob. Basically what happens is that when we see an increase in the caseloads, we see a corresponding increase in the number of children that are apprehended. By increasing the number of children that are apprehended, we've had to have more foster care and residential care spaces during that time frame. They provide for the 24-hour-a-day needs of the child, so they're quite a high cost compared to the other services provided by the department. So if you saw a 5 percent increase in foster care, in the number of children that were apprehended, it correspondingly would lead to a 7 or 8 or 9 percent increase in the actual amount of dollars spent, because that is an extremely high cost part of this department.

The other issue as well is that with the rapid escalation of the amount of people that were needed for foster homes, we saw an increase in the amount of money spent to develop new foster homes and new placement homes. You can't just take a child and put them in a home just because they've put their name up for a foster home. You have to go in. You have to assess them. You have to make sure and ensure that they're a good home, that they're a safe home.

MR. LOUGHEED: Thanks.

DR. PANNU: Mr. Minister, I refer to public accounts '96-97, volume 2, page 76. Under item 2, from 2 to 2.2.6, I notice there are considerable unexpended funds, \$55 million, indicated there. I really would like to get your understanding of how these savings

were made. Was it the result of changes in the rates, assessment of need and whatnot? If I may add a specific inquiry here, in item 2.3.4, assured support – supports for independence, there's almost 15 or 16 percent unexpended funds reported there. Again I would like you to explain why these savings. Was there a change in policies, assessment procedures, need for assessment, or whatnot? So if you would kindly help me understand this.

DR. OBERG: Sure. The easy answer is to say that the programs work. What has happened, Raj, is that we saw a huge caseload drop. That's where the majority of this money or the majority of the underexpenditure came from. We saw roughly a 5,000 drop in the budgeted caseload, from 48,000 to 43,000. As you can imagine, as people go off the welfare rolls, the need for employment training support, transitional support, employment initiatives, and things like that are decreased because the caseload is decreased.

You could take the other side of things, though, and say that they are doing their job very well. Because of the fact that they are doing their job very well, the caseload has decreased and therefore their costs have decreased as well. Essentially the same thing applies for the shared support on the supports for independence. With the tremendous caseload drop that we saw in that time frame, we saw an amount of unexpended money, which is what you're seeing there.

DR. PANNU: Okay. You had reported under that benefit some people not expected to work, an increase in caseloads. You were saying your department is trying to look into this to see why that increase. That's why, I guess, there's an overexpenditure of close to \$23 million. In the same general category, then, when you come down to the next statement, you explained it the opposite way by saying that there's a drop in caseloads. This is what I find puzzling.

DR. OBERG: Sure. Thanks, Raj. What we saw actually during that time frame is – we have the two programs. We have the AISH program, which is the assured income for severely handicapped, and we also have the assured support, or supports for independence. What we actually saw during that time frame is that there was a significant shift from the assured support to the assured income for severely handicapped. Actually, close to 2,000 people went from the assured support to the assured income for severely handicapped. So because the AISH program was a better program to meet the individual needs of that client at that particular time, they essentially switched programs. Like I say, this was one of the reasons we saw an increase.

DR. PANNU: That's what I was wondering about, if that might be one reason.

DR. OBERG: Yeah.

DR. PANNU: Thanks.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Zwozdesky, followed by Mr. Yankowsky.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll reference page 105 of the Auditor General's report where a discussion occurs with respect to income support payments and the eligibility of certain recipients, the ineligibility of others, and recommendations and comments by the Auditor General to help prevent and detect incorrect payments from being made. I'm struck by the fact that these ineligible payments continue to be made. As the Auditor General says, it's occurred over a period of years. I can understand that sometimes some of those things will slip through. However, I would like the minister and perhaps even the Auditor General, if possible, to comment on how the department intends to cope with

the increased needs – you've referenced two or three cases, such as AISH, this morning – on the one hand when you have staff reductions, that you mentioned in your opening comments, so as to help prevent any of these ineligible payments being made in the future. What does that mean to us, these overpayments, in real dollar terms? How frequent is this, how much is it costing us, and how are you going to cope with it to improve it in the future?

DR. OBERG: Thanks, Gene. To say how much it's actually costing us is a little bit difficult, because you have to assume that the people were caught prior to coming up with an exact amount. What we actually see, though, on an average per year is close to \$6 million. I think you may recognize that somewhere around four or five months ago there was a couple convicted of close to \$200,000 in overpayment. This is the nature of the beast. We have collection agencies. We've outsourced some of the collection agencies to go out and attempt to find where people have defrauded the system. Like I say, at the moment it's currently around \$6 million per year. We are enhancing a lot of what we do. We have signed contracts with other provinces to take a look at their welfare rolls. If there's any that are receiving welfare in both provinces, we cut them off. We have recently taken a look at the prisons. We have recently gotten into the federal prisons so that people do not collect welfare while they are in prison. The out of province accounts too. Quite simply, Gene, this is the nature of the beast. We try our best to ensure that there are not the overpayments, that there is not defrauding of the system. What we then do is take those payments and put them back to the people, such as AISH, that really need it.

I'd welcome the Auditor General's comments on this as well.

9:23

MR. VALENTINE: Thank you, Mr. Minister. I think, first of all, I should make a comment that in the report we don't allege that there are ineligible payments being made. We do state that our concern is that there's potential under the program for payments to be made to people who are ineligible. We go on to point out that in some situations the documentation continues to be incomplete, but we acknowledge that there's a good system and it needs the enhancement of training initiatives by the department to the people who are administering the program. That allows the department to continue to pursue actions which minimize the deficiencies in the documentation. In other words, our concern is: is there a system, and if there is a system, is it working? Our comments in this area don't result in either a bolded recommendation or a numbered recommendation.

It's a difficult area. We will always have some concern over the risk of a business failure. I think one could always anticipate that we would be addressing certain resources in ensuring that the systems are in place and they're working.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you. I appreciate the answer from both the minister and the Auditor General.

One of the things I'm concerned with is the caseloads of the staff, in particular in my area, which is the Argyll Centre. I have visited that location a number of times, and I should say I have always had good service. A large part of the factor to the success of those visits, Mr. Minister, is the fact that I and my office staff do a tremendous amount of research into each case that presents itself to us prior to going and advocating, because I want to be sure I'm advocating for, quote, a real case. Happily, so far I have been very successful in that.

My question is this though. Given that there are deficiencies in documentation – I would assume what that means is that there's insufficient staff or insufficient staff time, perhaps, in certain cases, not all but once in a while maybe, that might lead to those

deficiencies – which perhaps more staff could get, I want to know how this \$6 million figure compares, let's say, with other provinces. Are we per capita or per dollar at about the same level of ineligible payments, are we way ahead of the pack, are we behind, and what role do you think the staff could play to help correct that?

DR. OBERG: Sure. Thanks, Gene. First of all, with regards to the staff, what I will do is give you a few of the numbers. In 1992-93, where we were probably at our all-time high, we had 1,041 benefit workers. In '96-97 we went down to 839. So I guess that's roughly 18 percent, something like that. In fraud and error we had 44 people in '92-93 working with that. We moved up to 76 in 1996-97. So I think what you also have to keep in mind is that over that time frame our caseloads went from a high of close to 96,000 down to 43,000. What you saw is an over 50 percent decrease in the caseload, yet you saw an 18 percent decrease in the number of staff. You also saw an increase of probably 75 percent in the number looking after fraud and error.

I truly believe that a lot of these issues were not necessarily an issue the social worker could get at. A lot of the people that come in have the documentation, have the information. I would challenge anyone in this room or anyone who is not trained in fraud and error to distinguish between what is fraud and what is real, and that's one of the problems we have in this area.

Your question about the \$6 million. First of all, it's very difficult to compare it to other provinces because you obviously only report on the ones you catch, and we are much higher above on finding the fraudulent cases than any other province in Canada. We have put the extra resources towards it, we have outsourced it, and we've seen quite a dramatic increase. I would say we're probably the highest in Canada on a per capita rate of recovering the fraudulent payments. You can take the other side, that perhaps we're the highest in giving them out. I don't like to think that. But certainly that part of the department is something that's been working very well.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Well, we must continue to provide money to those truly in need and sort out those who are misrepresenting their circumstances.

DR. OBERG: Absolutely.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Yankowsky, followed by Ms Blakeman and Mr. Johnson.

MR. YANKOWSKY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have another question regarding early intervention programs. I reference page 77 of public accounts, volume 2, 3.3.3. This is regarding early childhood programs. Now, you were quite frugal here. You had a \$20 million budget but only spent \$15 million. I seem to recall that this occurred in the previous fiscal year. My question here is: what caused this underexpenditure of funds?

MS CALAHASEN: Thank you, Julius. I think that's an important question when we're talking about early intervention, especially when we're looking at the future, what could happen, and intervening early rather than dealing with a crisis. So I appreciate that. When you look at 3.3.3, it's true that we had the \$20 million, but we only spent the \$15 million. Just to give you an explanation, what happened in that respect was that the projects were a little slow to meet the early intervention criteria that were put forward by the department as well as the commissioner's office to make sure that whatever we're going to get, it's going to be something that's good for the community. Projects needed to be grass roots. They had to have real partnerships, so we had people who would be looking at

integration. They had to meet the strictly identified preventative needs for children and families. The community-based programming took some time to be able to take root, so some of the projects didn't get off the ground as quickly as we would have liked to have got them off the ground.

As the commissioner's office and as government we did not want to spend money just because it was available. What we did was we wanted to make sure that whatever we did was going to put tax dollars to good use. I think that when we were looking at what needed to be done, we didn't spend as much as we thought we could. It's just starting to take root now in terms of what needs to be done, and I'm really pleased to see that we've got that money now allocated for that.

MR. YANKOWSKY: Thank you.

You were frugal in the previous question for early intervention, and now in 3.3.2 you go on a spending spree for community service planning and you've had an overexpenditure there. What is the reason for this overexpenditure?

MS CALAHASEN: Well, you know, that's what happens when you're dealing with some different projects and being able to move from one to the other. The shortfall worked for three reasons. One was because community service planning occurred because of the introduction of the 18th region, which is the Métis settlements, and that only came on later during the process. Secondly, what happened was the cost of administering the early intervention program was charged to this element although the budget was actually in element 3.3.3.

9:33

Then the third reason was that we initially thought there were only going to be 2,000 people actively involved in this whole process, and we got something like about 12,000 to 15,000 that were actively involved. So we had to increase the dollars to be able to meet the need, to accommodate those numbers. That was a really significant jump from 2,000 to 12,000 to 15,000, which was an interesting perspective, because when you're talking about programs, you think the most you're going to get is this amount and what we did was increase so much. That I give to the good work of the commission and the people who really believed in what was going to happen. It was a democratic process that was very successful.

MR. YANKOWSKY: Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Ms Blakeman, followed by Mr. Johnson.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you. I'm referencing pages 76 and 77. I had always been against moving the support for women's shelters into this department, with the concern that they would disappear and it would be very hard to pick them out, and gee, I'm having trouble doing that. Which line item specifically refers to the support for women's shelters in here? We talk about individuals, we talk about children, and we talk about families. Nowhere in here do the words "women's shelters" appear.

DR. OBERG: Thank you. There is a reason for that, and that is because it isn't purely a women's issue. That's why we call it prevention of family violence, and it's line item 3.4.5. Roughly \$7.9 million was budgeted; \$8.1 million was expended.

MS BLAKEMAN: That was my second question. Let me have a point of clarification here. So 3.4.5 covers the office for the prevention of family violence and the funding to women's shelters?

DR. OBERG: Yes.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. There was an overexpenditure there. Tell me good news. Tell me wonderful things about how this money was used.

DR. OBERG: I would love to. I'd be more than happy to. There's a nice little thing called the Wheatland Communities Crisis Society, that is located in Strathmore, Alberta, which is in the Strathmore-Brooks constituency. It was not in the Strathmore-Brooks constituency of the day. But literally what happened was that the Wheatland Community Crisis Society is where these extra dollars went to. This is a centre in Strathmore that has 10 beds. It deals with both male and female victims of family violence. It is something that is a tremendous boost to the community. I recently attended an auction for this actually, where there were 300 people out, about three weeks ago or four weeks ago. That is where the funding went to. That's where the extra allocation went to: the new shelter.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: That was it?

MS BLAKEMAN: I've had my two questions. You won't let me have any more than that.

THE CHAIRMAN: Well, the one question was so lovely it didn't sound like it came from you.

MS BLAKEMAN: I'm working on my image.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Johnson.

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In the revenue section on page 79 – this is public accounts, volume 2 – transfers from the federal government have fallen from \$707 million to \$465 million. It's a drop of \$240 million. What is the cause for this reduction in revenue?

DR. OBERG: You really want me to get into this? The bottom line is that these are the transfer payments from the government of Canada. The federal government in balancing their budget this year did so by cutting a lot of the transfer payments, and not being a hypocrite, I won't complain about that. They had an incredible job to do. Part of what they did was cut the transfer payments to the provinces. I think we've seen the benefit of that in that they now have a balanced budget, but people should remember that what happened is that roughly \$240 million was cut in the transfer payments to the provinces.

THE CHAIRMAN: You were dealing with '96-97; right?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes.

Also on page 79, under revenue, there's \$1.6 million in revenue attributed to child welfare. Can you please explain how child welfare generates revenue?

DR. OBERG: Sure. Under the Children's Special Allowances Act, a child in the ministry's care is eligible to have benefits transferred from the child tax benefit program to the special allowance program. Under the special allowance program, Revenue Canada paid the department a flat monthly rate of \$85 per child for all children under the ministry's care for a total of \$4.6 million in the fiscal year '96-97.

So essentially what this is is a transfer from the federal government on a program basis as opposed to the Canada health and social transfer payments.

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you.

DR. PANNU: Mr. Chairman, one of the questions I have is in fact related to a question that was asked by my hon. colleague from St. Albert, so you may have answered it already, Mr. Minister. It deals with the very last statement of the first paragraph on page 108 of the Auditor General's report.

The Department should finalize [this third] report as soon as possible and complete the evaluation of welfare reform by analyzing the costs and benefits.

That's already available?

DR. OBERG: Yes, that's right. That was a Canada West Foundation report.

DR. PANNU: Oh, a Canada West Foundation report.

DR. OBERG: Right. That was the third report that was referenced.

DR. PANNU: Yes. I misunderstood. I thought it was internal to the department.

DR. OBERG: No.

DR. PANNU: Okay. My question, then, has to do with the recommendation made by the Auditor General on page 107. I think it's a generic recommendation that the Auditor General makes to all departments; that is, to switch reporting accounts to the accrual basis. Does the department intend to proceed with that recommendation by the Auditor General?

DR. OBERG: Absolutely, and I think the Auditor General can comment on that. I believe we were one of the first departments that took this initiative and moved to the accrual basis.

Peter, can you comment on that?

MR. VALENTINE: Thank you, Mr. Minister. The ministerial financial statements and the departmental financial statements that were prepared for the fiscal year ending March 31, 1997, were the first experiment in this process and were not mandatory. This year, on March 31, 1998, they will be required for each ministry and each department. In the process of moving from the old public accounts presentation mode to ministerial and departmental consolidated financial statements, there was a large learning curve to be attained by financial statement preparers in the various ministries.

The deficiencies that we noted in that process were in essence guidance to achieving full accrual financial statements for the March 31, 1998, year-end. So elsewhere in the report we have commented on the progress that had been made, and we are pleased with it and continue to work with each minister and, in particular, with Treasury, which is the lead in the issue. I think we will have by far the majority of the issues resolved by the time we get to this year-end. The proof will be in the pudding, in the work that will be done between April 1 and whenever at the end of June the consolidation comes forward.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mrs. O'Neill.

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My first question is in reference to page 78 in public accounts, volume 2. I see in line 3.5.1

under capital investment there's a shortfall of almost \$500,000 for supports to community systems. Can you tell me what capital items were purchased in this area?

DR. OBERG: Sure, Mary. What these reflect is the purchasing of a computer system and development costs for that computer system for the client support services. What we're looking at is a better way of managing the services to persons with disabilities. As of now we feel that this computer system has – and at that time we felt it would – helped us in dealing with client issues when it comes to services to persons with disabilities.

9:43

MRS. O'NEILL: Exclusively? I guess my question is for those supports to community systems. Are they in the local offices, if you will? I have in St. Albert, for instance, a Social Services office, and I'd like to take this opportunity to say that the personnel who work there are extremely helpful and excellent in their response. Is this something that will assist them?

DR. OBERG: Yes, absolutely, Mary. These are the software programs and the hardware programs that can be accessed from the individual offices. They aren't located there, so to speak, but they can be accessed from them. Certainly this will help the local offices deal with services to persons with disabilities to quite a significant amount.

MRS. O'NEILL: Good. Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very kindly, Mr. Minister. As you see from the appointed hour, you're officially off the hook, but we have one more comment from the Auditor General regarding contract management, that you touched on. Just stay to hear that out if you don't mind, and then we'll move into the rest of it.

MR. VALENTINE: Well, there were a number of questions here today with respect to contract management, and I want to refer members to section 2 of the report, starting on page 26, which falls under the Executive Council section because it is pervasive to all ministries. The issue is a management issue and thus requires the appropriate management skills and expertise to apply best and good practices in the management of contracts and the management of grants. In this section you'll see some discussion about some general principles of management and the need for training of personnel in order to exercise those skills. I would caution you that there are no cookie-cutter solutions to contract management or grant management, that each situation requires the application of management skills for attaining the goals that are sought and are identified and so on. Accordingly, on page 26 you will see recommendation 3 with respect to contract management. I just want to leave you with those to re-read and have a better understanding of the general management principles that need to be applied across the whole of the government sector.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very kindly, Mr. Minister and your staff. You're free to stay and listen to our debate, but I think you have a number of things you have to care for. Thank you. Well done.

Mr. Zwozdesky, I understand you have a motion you wish to put forward.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Mr. Chairman, I want to begin by explaining that the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, Shiraz Shariff, and I have not spoken as a follow-up to the last meeting a week ago. I had the flu for a couple of days, and now I understand he has the flu. We

haven't had a chance to get together, and I regret that, because we were to have sat down and tried to sort this out. So I wasn't anticipating us getting into it today, and I don't have all my notes here. But there are a number of motions that have been circulated, and I'd be happy to pick up on one of them, and that is to move that the standing committee be given the authority to require the Auditor General to perform a special duty review under sections 17 and 20 of the Auditor General Act as requested by the standing committee and to report the findings of the review to the standing committee.

I think, Mr. Chairman, that that would be very consistent with recommendations that have been advanced by the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees. It was the subject of some discussion here a few months back when that committee met. It would allow the Auditor General to step in where we feel it's necessary to do so. In addition to his own good wisdom, on his own initiatives perhaps, where money audits are required on government expenditures, I think that speaks very well to the openness, accountability, transparency, and honesty of the government's intentions.

I also would say that it has to go through the screening process that this committee of hon. members would first have a chance to review. Clearly, the government holds the majority of votes on this committee, and if they're uncomfortable with our request, they can certainly vote it down. But I nonetheless would say that the provision should be there, and I would welcome comments from other members as well as a response from the Auditor General.

THE CHAIRMAN: First, members of the government caucus. Mr. Johnson.

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I speak in opposition to this motion. The mandate of the Public Accounts Committee under Standing Order 50 is to review the public accounts after they have been tabled. Under this mandate the committee's focus must be on the review of the government and its ministries' actual results compared to the government's plans, not on any government policy or budget questions. Any change to the mandate of the committee must be agreed to by the Legislative Assembly and reflected in the Standing Orders. The Legislative Assembly has not suggested changes to the committee's mandate to this date.

Now, the motion proposes that authority be given under sections 17 and 20 of the Auditor General Act. Section 17 of the Auditor General Act provides for the Auditor General to "perform such special duties as may be specified by the Assembly" or the Executive Council. Section 20 of the Auditor General Act provides for the Auditor General to present "a special report to the Assembly" through "the chairman of the Select Standing Committee" on "any matter of importance or urgency that, in his opinion, should not be deferred" until he prepares his annual report to the Assembly.

As per section 17, then, both the government and the Legislative Assembly have the power to request the Auditor General to perform reviews. It would be a duplication, therefore, and appear unnecessary that a committee of the Legislative Assembly also have this power. The Legislative Assembly, if it considers it necessary, could ask the Auditor General to perform any special duties and refer the report to the Public Accounts Committee.

Therefore, Mr. Chairman, I see that this motion is not necessary, and I oppose it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Auditor General, would you like to speak to the matter or not?

MR. VALENTINE: The only comment I would make is that I think this amendment would require an amendment to my Act. Therefore,

if it were to be passed by this committee, I think it's got to go on and result in an amendment to the Auditor General Act. You should be aware of that circumstance.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Assuming no others wish to speak, I would close debate by offering the following comments in an attempt to convert those who are opposed, or at least get them to rethink it. Maybe we'll table this for further discussion; we'll see.

I would say in response to the hon. member behind me that his comment about the issue of special duties requiring, in one instance, the Executive Council's direction and/or the direction of the larger Legislative Assembly – while that is true, I think the member must recognize that not all MLAs who sit in this Assembly have yet had the privilege of sitting on Public Accounts. Once they do have that privilege of sitting on this committee, they would likely have a different view of it than would members who haven't had that experience. This is an extremely important committee, because it's only here that we really get to quiz what has taken place and hold the government accountable for some of those things, and the committee works quite well.

As to the aspect of requiring legislative changes, that's how progress occurs. This is a housekeeping item. If this committee were in fact to vote in favour of this, certainly it would come forward to the Legislative Assembly. We would have a larger debate on it. It's not something that the government hasn't done before; that is to say, we amend legislation all the time. That's all in the interest, again, of progressivity. I would suggest that this motion is in keeping with that.

9:53

With respect to the comment about accountability and this particular motion representing potentially some duplication, what else can we do to help the government be accountable to the public and to be more transparent to the public than to make sure every avenue available for accountability and transparency is explored to its fullest? That's what this motion speaks to. We're simply asking that, not as a habit but from time to time, it might be necessary for this committee, for its own clarity, to ask for more information. A special duty review – it could be accomplished through that route.

I'll close by simply saying that precedents do exist: with respect to the Gainers issue, which I believe the Auditor General conducted a special review on; with respect to the Swan Hills waste treatment plant. I mean, these are megaprojects where something in the order of \$390 million or \$400 million in the first case and about \$280 million in the second case was explored. Answers came out. The public was to whatever degree satisfied or not, but at least the information was provided. I would suggest that's very much in keeping with what the government is touting about being accountable.

I would urge members to reconsider their position and allow this to go forward as a recommendation. If it gets shot down at the next level, I'll live with that. But for this committee to not take this opportunity to give itself a little more power, a little more teeth I think is really unfortunate.

I would urge members to please vote in favour of this motion.

THE CHAIRMAN: All those in favour of the motion, please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE CHAIRMAN: All those not in favour of the motion, please say nay.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Nay.

THE CHAIRMAN: The motion is lost by the voice of the mouths that I saw moving into the nay.

We have some time for another motion. Do you, Mr. Zwozdesky or Ms Blakeman, wish to move another motion?

MS BLAKEMAN: I can.

THE CHAIRMAN: It will be painfully close to be able to deal with it. We may have to table it, but you can move it.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. Why don't I do that? I don't want to keep people over, but let's get as far as we can so as to not waste any time. Is that okay?

THE CHAIRMAN: Great.

MRS. O'NEILL: Excuse me, Mr. Chairman. To table something means something different. You mean to just bring it forward? To table means quite something different.

THE CHAIRMAN: It can be raised from the table at any time.

MRS. O'NEILL: These have been and were also – I don't know. It's your call. I don't know that you want to table it, Laurie.

MS BLAKEMAN: No. I don't want to table it, but I do want to move it and get it on for the discussion. I guess it will have to be continued once we . . .

MR. ZWOZDESKY: You've got three minutes.

MS BLAKEMAN: Right. I'll just talk faster. I'd like to move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts prepare reports on its findings and recommendations on an annual basis, submit these reports to the Legislative Assembly, and have the government table a comprehensive reply to each of the recommendations contained in the reports within 60 days.

I'd like to see this motion accepted by the members of the Public Accounts Committee. It is consistent with a recommendation contained in the Canadian council on public accounts. But I think more to the point for the current Members of the Legislative Assembly, it is consistent with the Government Accountability Act. In particular, I'm looking to assist the government in its attempts at accountability by helping to correct deficiencies identified by the Public Accounts Committee during its deliberation with the ministers. As well, I think this allows for the Public Accounts Committee to follow up and monitor progress.

One of my personal concerns, as I watch particularly financial and public accounts matters being referred to in the Legislative Assembly, is that there's often a point made that: well, you were there when the decision was made; why didn't you know more about this, or why didn't you do something about this? I think you could say this about all members that are involved. My concern is that I do know as much as possible about what has gone on, and I have been able to make responsible movements on behalf of the constituents I represent to assist the government in making the best possible decisions with accountability. We've heard a number of examples over the past period of time of pilot projects that were tried and mistakes that were made and attempts to correct that, and I would like to be more helpful to the government in identifying these problems, being able to work on them as quickly as possible to monitor and follow up.

I think maybe we need to carry on more of this discussion in front of the Legislative Assembly. Therefore, by submitting the reports to the Legislative Assembly, that could be accomplished.

I speak in favour of this motion. I am moving it formally. I read

it out; I read it into the record.

THE CHAIRMAN: It is formally moved. You may wish to table the motion until such time as we deal with resolutions again. That way it will come up automatically and doesn't have to be raised from the table.

MS BLAKEMAN: Is that the correct procedure? I'd like us to commence in the next meeting, be able to continue discussion on this.

THE CHAIRMAN: That would be the case.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay.

THE CHAIRMAN: Table it until the committee deals again with the motions.

MS BLAKEMAN: Then I have to untable it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Great. Move it.

MS BLAKEMAN: Yes. That's what I'm moving.

THE CHAIRMAN: Is it agreed?

MRS. O'NEILL: Mr. Chairman, I apologize. I'm just having a problem with this tabling, because it has different currency of meaning in, for instance, *Robert's* rules and all the rest of it. I don't know whether we just want to refer to a continuing of the discussion next week.

MS BLAKEMAN: Yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: Yes. That's what tabling does.

MS BLAKEMAN: That's what I'm trying to set up.

THE CHAIRMAN: It's not tabled sine die, which means "until raised"; this is tabled to a time specific.

MRS. O'NEILL: Okay.

MS BLAKEMAN: It's more like the discussion is adjourned to be picked up as soon as we meet again. Am I reading this?

THE CHAIRMAN: Yes. That's exactly how it is.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. That's my understanding of what I'm trying to say.

THE CHAIRMAN: So we just continue it.

All right. Is the motion agreed to?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: It's carried.

We do have one announcement. We have before us on March 11 the Hon. Pat Black, Minister of Economic Development. At such time we will hopefully be able to catch up on our minutes. We're a little late in that our secretary was pressed before this, and now she has a damaged foot. She's at home, and we send our condolences, I'm sure.

We do, then, need a motion for adjournment.

MR. JOHNSON: So moved.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Is it agreed?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: It's carried. We stand adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:01 a.m.]