

[Mr. MacDonald in the chair]

THE CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting to order. I would also like to note for the record, please, that there are members of the Public Accounts Committee who have already been at a function this morning, and in light of the weather they may be late in arriving here. Okay?

First, I think with our new location here there is one thing that's certainly not on the agenda, but I would like to alert all members of the committee that we do not have to touch the microphones. We can be within a foot of the microphone, and our voices, I believe, are picked up quite readily. This is a new system. I'm not familiar, I admit, with the console in front of us, but we do not have to use it, I'm assured. Okay?

May I have approval of the agenda, please? Okay.

At this time I would certainly like to recognize the vice-chair, the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall, Mr. Shariff, and I would also like to welcome at this time the hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood, Mr. Gary Masyk, who is joining the committee this morning. Welcome. I think we will take a moment of our time and go around the table and introduce ourselves at this time, starting with the Member for Calgary-Shaw.

[Mrs. Ady, Ms Blakeman, Mr. Broda, Mr. Campbell, Mr. Cenaiko, Ms DeLong, Mr. Dunford, Mr. Goudreau, Ms Patty Hayes, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Hug, Mrs. Jablonski, Mr. Lukaszuk, Mr. Marz, Mr. Ouellette, and Mr. Shariff introduced themselves]

THE CHAIR: Okay. Now, we've had two committee meetings last year, November 21 and November 28. Are there any questions regarding the minutes of those meetings? Seeing none, can I have approval of those minutes, please? Thank you.

Now, item 4 on the agenda is Approval of draft Standing Committee on Public Accounts Report on 2001 activities. There is a motion required, and it will be tabled in the Legislative Assembly on March 7 if it passes. Could I have a motion, please?

MRS. JABLONSKI: I so move, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Now item 5(a), Legislative authority, Standing Order 50: "public accounts, when tabled [are] referred to the Public Accounts Committee." There have been no changes in this with the changes in the Standing Orders.

Now, there is also a memo that has been attached for the members of this committee's information. In summary it states that "when a Standing Committee or a Select Special Committee of the Assembly holds its meetings in a location outside the Legislature Chamber," such as this new committee room, the one we're in today, whether it's B or A, "the privileges of the Members participating in the proceedings of the Committee remain the same." Legal counsel, Senior Parliamentary Counsel, has graciously provided a letter regarding this issue, and I believe that has been circulated to all members. Are there any questions regarding that?

Seeing none, I would like to go on to 5(c), and that is committee funding. The budget and a copy are also attached. The budget was approved by the Members' Services Committee in December of 2001, and it's provided at this time for information only. There are no provisions for out-of-session committee meetings in that budget. However, in 2002 the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees conference is in St. John's, Newfoundland, and funding was granted by the Members' Services Committee for three members to attend. Delegate selection will take place later in the

sitting when invitation to the conference is received.

MR. SHARIFF: Mr. Chairman, it's my understanding that an invitation has now been received, and as has been the tradition in the past, I would move that the chair or his delegate and the deputy chair or his delegate and the clerk of the committee be the three delegates to attend the conference.

MR. GOUDREAU: I'll second that.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Any discussion on this?

MS BLAKEMAN: Just a question. Do we know when this conference is taking place?

MRS. DACYSHYN: Yes, we do. I apologize for the missing information. I only received the invitation yesterday. It'll take place in St. John's, Newfoundland, from August 25 to 27 this year.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Item 6, Organization of Committee Meetings. Of course, it's 8:30 sharp until 10 o'clock Wednesdays when the House is in session. I would remind all members that we are dealing with specifically the ministry annual report, the year 2000-2001, from the department that is being discussed and the Auditor General's annual report of 2000-2001. This is in no way, shape, or form a policy committee. We are dealing exclusively with the annual report.

Now, it has been traditional that there is one question and one supplementary question, and it has been the tradition that the opposition starts and it rotates in that order. We are meeting today, of course, with the hon. Mr. Dunford, the Minister of Human Resources and Employment, and his staff.

About the only thing that is not digital, I think, in this room is this clock, and I like to see that.

MR. DUNFORD: I'm not digital.

THE CHAIR: No, nor am I, hon. minister.

If there are any questions regarding this room or if there are members that would prefer to go back to the Assembly, I don't know how you feel about that, but we're here now, and perhaps you should try it. It's quite an expensive setup.

If there are any concerns from members regarding the scheduling of the ministries.

MS BLAKEMAN: Well, once again when I look at the scheduling, I know that on some dates we're having two ministers come in because the ministries in the fiscal year that we're examining were together. For example, on Wednesday, March 13, the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General were together as one ministry when it's looked at under the annual report that we're looking at. But I'm just wondering about consistency, because if we're willing to bring two in for one, then do we also get a comparison where they're split? So where we've had a ministry like Learning, which is two that have come together rather than one that's been split into two, why are we not getting two opportunities to examine that particular ministry? Learning used to be advanced education and education, and now it's Learning. So why am I not getting two opportunities to examine a department that's twice as big as it used to be? Or three, in this case.

THE CHAIR: Yes, that is a very good point. Hopefully next year there will be changes, but there's also the flip side of that. In recognizing that we do not meet outside session, it allows this committee to at least scrutinize the departments before each hon. minister gets his or her chance to sign their own document, put their own signature on the document.

Yes, Mr. Marz.

MR. MARZ: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I was just wondering what the advantages are of us meeting in this room, as it seems like we fairly well fill it and staff is grouped way down at the other end, kind of out of sight but not out of mind and looking a bit uncomfortable compared to what they would be in the Assembly. I'd just like to record that I feel that it was more convenient, as far as a member goes, to be in the Assembly for these meetings than what I've seen so far in this room.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Thank you very much for your observations. Would you like to have a test run for a couple of meetings?

MR. MARZ: No. So far, I think it's failed the test, and I'd just as soon have the next one back at the other. Not only that, it's probably much more convenient for the ministries and their staff because they're all located over there. It's a little more convenient for me, but it seems that it's quite tight and close in here.

MR. SHARIFF: I'm open to suggestions. Quite frankly, we have to accommodate the needs of members as well as ministers and their staff. From the looks of it right now, it's not very conducive, but I'm open to a suggestion either way, that we could stay here or move back to the Assembly. But I don't know what the technicality would be. Would we require any procedural change to move back?

MRS. DACYSHYN: To be honest, I'm not sure. I'll have to check with the Clerk and the Speaker's office on this. I'm really not sure.

MR. SHARIFF: If that's the case, maybe we can have a discussion but have a decision made at the next meeting, next Wednesday.

THE CHAIR: That would be fine with me, certainly, but Mr. Mason and then Mr. Broda had comments on this.

MR. MASON: Mr. Chairman, we the taxpayers have equipped these beautiful committee rooms at considerable expense. I'm quite frankly very surprised to hear these comments. It's far more convenient, I think, for many of us to meet here. These are excellent facilities. If we want staff to join us, they can join us at the other end of the table or there can be arrangements made. You can move the furniture a little bit if that's the problem. But I certainly don't agree that we shouldn't be meeting in these fine facilities with all of the equipment and so on.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Mason.
Mr. Broda.

MR. BRODA: Yes. Thank you. I would say that I would agree to go back to the Legislature seeing that we are only meeting when we are in session. Yes, this committee room is a state-of-the-art committee room, but it's not only meant for this particular committee. There are other committee meetings that are held in here. I look around and when we have our people from the public that want to sit in the galleries, there aren't locations here to have

them sit so we can see who is the public. I think it's more conducive to be in the Legislature. If there are no restrictions or if there's no need for any other changes but to get an order in council, I think that's the route to go, as my opinion.

Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Thank you very much.

Mrs. Ady.

MRS. ADY: It's rare that we agree. I'd have to say that I think it's just movement and that we're all uncomfortable with change, but I think we should give it a little while just to see if it works or doesn't work. I mean, I think that the facility could maybe become and feel more like home after a while. I just think it's movement, and I'd be prepared to give it a month or two.

THE CHAIR: Yes, Mary Anne Jablonski.

MRS. JABLONSKI: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm in favour of staying in this room. I thought one of the reasons why we wanted to move to a committee room like this is so that we could be closer. Now I can look the minister right in the eye when I ask a question. Also, when somebody sat up in the public gallery, I could never see them, so I never got to see our guests. I'm really happy to be able to see everyone that's here today. So I would be in favour of trying out this room a little longer.

MR. CENAIKO: Mr. Chairman, can you clarify: is this meeting open to the public?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

MR. CENAIKO: Where are they going to sit?

THE CHAIR: Good question.

MR. CENAIKO: Unless we build a balcony over here too, and we have two in the Legislature. If this is a public meeting to be held in public, I think it should be in a public forum, and that's what the Assembly is all about, not for convenience.

THE CHAIR: Yes. Thank you.

MR. MARZ: Mr. Cenaiko basically made my point. This is Public Accounts, and we have to have provision, I think, to be open to the public. There may be only one or two that ever take advantage of it, but I think the provision is at the Assembly, and that's where we ought to be.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

The indications are that this is an issue that we need to discuss further. In light of the fact that as we discuss this, we're not getting at our real job, which is to scrutinize the Auditor General's report and the ministry's annual report, could we perhaps meet for a few minutes, if it is the wish of the committee, at 10 o'clock, after the minister and his staff vacate, to discuss this issue further? Is that okay with everyone?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. CENAIKO: Well, Mr. Chairman, can we entertain a motion and make a decision now?

THE CHAIR: Sure. Okay.

MR. CENAIKO: I'll make a motion that the Public Accounts Committee meet in the Legislative Assembly on Wednesday mornings during session. I make that motion.

THE CHAIR: Okay. For the record, everyone has heard the motion, and we have to discuss this, I believe, with the Speaker and the Clerk. But everyone understands the motion, and those that are in favour of the motion . . . I'm sorry?

MS DeLONG: I'd like to move that we table that motion until next week until we can discuss it a little further and so we can find out how easily . . .

MR. LUKASZUK: Where would you like to discuss it?

MS DeLONG: No, no. Just so that we can see what's involved in moving us back to the Legislature.

THE CHAIR: Okay. The clerk has graciously suggested that she could go make a call and find out the details of moving back to the Assembly. It was quite an informal process to move, in my view, from the Assembly to here, so it should not be a difficult move back if the members wish. We can vote on it later. Is that fair enough?

MS DeLONG: Yes. I'd appreciate that.

THE CHAIR: Okay. After our meeting we will take five minutes to either accept or reject the motion.

Now, the Minister of Human Resources and Employment has been joined by another staff member, I believe. Would you please introduce yourself to the committee, if you don't mind.

MS HOWE: I'm Shirley Howe. I'm the Acting Public Service Commissioner.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. For the record, we've also been joined by the Member for Calgary-Fort, Mr. Cao, and of course Mr. Mason.

Now I would ask the minister, please, if he has an overview that he would like to present to the committee, a brief overview.

Thank you.

MR. DUNFORD: I would. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Having noted the discussion about location, I tend to be a little mischievous and playful in the Leg. on the floor of the Assembly. Am I still allowed to be myself over here as well? Due to government cutbacks we cranked the thermostats down below 50 in all of our offices, so I have an extensive number of staff with me this morning because it's the only place where we could get warm.

8:55

With me today from Alberta Human Resources and Employment, that have not been introduced because they are not currently at the table, we have Susan Williams and Pat Boynton – there they are – and David Wismer and Neil Irvine. Behind them, Marcia Nelson and then my communications director, Laurie Collins. We have from the personnel administration office Mary Anne Wilkinson and Lorne Saul-Demers. We've got Dan Thompson, again from HRE, and Mark Asbell, who is the chair of the Labour Relations Board. You've just met Shirley Howe, the Acting Public Service Commissioner. So we cover a rather broad perspective in terms of the Alberta government and its civil service.

I'd like to begin by highlighting some of the ministry

achievements described in the annual report for the 2000-2001 fiscal year and to outline how some of these actions are playing out today. Now, I do this because of my experience in front of this committee. I know that when we deal with public accounts, we're really looking at what happened a year ago, but I always note that there's a tremendous temptation and urge to get into today, and certainly I'll be at the direction of the chair as to how we would answer any of the current questions. Certainly we're not here to stifle any of the members.

To begin, then, with the department of Alberta Human Resources and Employment, during the year that's under discussion the department provided three core businesses. We were helping Albertans to be economically independent. We're helping create productive work places and supporting people in need.

The core business of economic independence involves all of our programs to provide financial assistance, information, and advice to help people find and keep jobs. Details are on pages 30 through 37 of the report. This area of the department represents about 25 percent of the dollars but is incredibly important in terms of the number of people served.

There were more than 42,000 Albertans in employment programs, and more than 75 percent of them found work after participating. More than 5,000 people were provided with summer employment. There were more than 54,000 visits to Youth Connections centres across the province. There were more than 30,000 requests for information at the career information hotline. More than 665,000 career publications were distributed to people who asked for them. The ALIS web site, the Alberta learning information service, provided information about careers, learning, and employment in about 940,000 user sessions.

Each of these initiatives helps individual Albertans be more productive at work. I'm convinced that the strength of these programs is part of the reason why Albertans have the highest labour force participation rates in the country. We believe that Albertans should be better off working. We help Albertans move successfully into the workforce and to start working.

Our second core business is to help ensure that Alberta workplaces are productive. More information is on pages 38 to 46 of the report. Part of productivity is fairness and providing the balance between employee rights and employer responsibilities. We help meet this goal by administering Alberta's employment standards. Our first function is to educate, our second to regulate.

During the year we started new educational initiatives with four industries: restaurant and food services, direct sellers, automotive dealers, and the hotel/motel industry. The intention is to ensure that employees and employers both know their rights and responsibilities and that compliance with minimum requirements increases.

The employment standards call centre is an important part of our work in educating Albertans. More than 182,000 clients received help in interpreting and applying minimum employment standards by telephone. Providing accurate, timely information can help reduce the number of complaints that need investigation and enforcement. Productive workplaces are also safe and healthy workplaces. Injury rates in the province rose between '99-2000 and the year 2001, and I'm very concerned about that. We took the first steps toward reducing that rate by opening a call centre, launching a safety web site, and hiring more inspectors. The number of worksite inspections more than doubled, and the number of compliance orders increased by over 60 percent, but we still need to do more.

Another component of productive workplaces is fair and stable labour relations. We appointed mediators to 110 cases and responded to 461 requests to help resolve grievances. We believe

that the best resolutions are the ones that parties reach themselves.

Let me turn to our third core business, supporting people in need. It is outlined on pages 47 to 51 of the annual report. The basic principles behind Alberta's social programs are that resources are dedicated to the people who need them most and that Albertans should be better off working. The most significant proportion of the budget, about 70 percent, supports this part of the business. Supports for independence provides benefits to people who do not have the resources to meet their basic needs. It includes training and workplace supports to help clients get the skills and experience they need to support themselves. About one-third of our clients are working, and SFI supplements their earned income. Another third are permanently not expected to work, and the other third require assistance because they are between jobs or headed into training. We provided benefits that were adequate to meet basic needs, but we also adhered to another basic principle behind our social programs: that Albertans are better off working.

We have been successful at reducing caseloads and helping move people into the workforce for several years, but our opportunity to reduce caseloads significantly is now limited. Caseloads averaged a little over 28,000 in 2000-2001. There are a significant number of clients who are receiving SFI now who have many difficulties in returning to or remaining in the workforce. For those Albertans who cannot support themselves through employment because of a disability, there is the assured income for the severely handicapped, or AISH. The program topped the \$300 million mark in 2000-2001. The caseload rose by about 7 percent over the year to average 26,700. There were two basic reasons for the increased costs of the program: more clients and higher medical costs. Those caseload pressures continue today as Albertans are continuing to access AISH as a result of advancing medical conditions or aging of both the clients and the caregivers.

The other significant program to provide for basic needs is the Alberta child health benefit. It keeps about 57,000 children in low-income families strong and healthy and encourages their parents to stay working. The program provides coverage for prescription drugs, optical and dental supplies, essential diabetic supplies, and emergency ambulance transportation. This program is an innovation in social policy. It fits with the government's overall priorities for healthy Albertans, and it encourages parents to work rather than turn to welfare for assistance. For an average annual benefit of \$250 per child this program keeps people off welfare, and it keeps low-income kids healthy.

9:05

We fund the Alberta child health benefit program through our partnership with the federal government in the national child benefit. The NCB has two goals: to reduce child poverty and to promote parents' attachments to the workforce. The partnership works like this. When federal benefits go up, provincial benefits are adjusted. Families on welfare either see a smaller increase in their income, or they see no overall increase at all in their benefits. In July 2000 provincial savings financed new higher back-to-school allowances for students and families receiving supports for independence. They also continued to a portion of families' shelter allowances. Funding was also provided to Alberta Children's Services.

Now let me switch to another part of the ministry, the personnel administration office, or PAO. It is the government's central human resource agency and continues its work on building a strong public service. You could look at pages 123 to 145, behind the personnel administration tab.

The Alberta public service has earned its reputation as one of the best in Canada through the hard work, dedication, and commitment

of its 21,000 employees. Working in 23 ministries at 166 locations across the province, these employees work in jobs as diverse as the province itself. The Alberta government, like other employers, is facing an aging workforce. The average age of our employees increased this past year by one year and is now at 45. Through the corporate human resource development strategy we continue to support learning and leadership development of employees, market the Alberta public service as an attractive employer, and implement leadership continuity strategies across all departments.

The Alberta public service received a gold award for innovative management from the Institute of Public Administration of Canada in 2000-2001. Our results continue to be impressive: 85 percent of employees were satisfied with their job in the public service, 92 percent of managers reported that their employees had the skills to meet current needs, and 81 percent of managers reported that their employees had the skills to meet future needs. We believe that we need a strong public service to meet the increased expectations of Albertans, to provide support to the private sector, and to continue contributing to a strong Alberta economy. During these times of fiscal restraint it is more important than ever to retain our valuable, skilled employees and continue to position the Alberta public service as a positive career choice in attracting new talent.

Let me turn now to another part of the ministry, the Alberta Labour Relations Board, and you can see pages 149 to 158, behind the ALRB tab. The board faced two procedural issues over the year: the timeliness of its decisions and the effectiveness of its staff in helping stakeholders develop their own solutions.

In 2000-2001 we saw the beginning of a process to improve timeliness that still continues today. The board began several new initiatives to get parties thinking about dealing with their problems earlier instead of letting them build up to become bigger problems. For example, before starting this new initiative, applications were taking more than 112 days to move from filing to hearing. By 2002 that time is now down below 60 days. The board and the government, for that matter, believe that the best settlement in collective bargaining is the one that the parties reach themselves. The board focuses its efforts on having parties resolve their labour disputes themselves.

To improve their effectiveness in helping resolve disputes, the ALRB now forces parties through a mandatory resolution conference to talk about the issues before going to hearing. This process allows the parties to reach their own settlement or resolution without having one imposed by a third party. So two words sum up the Labour Relations Board year, and that's "faster" and "better."

The Auditor General has looked at the ministry as a whole. He provided a fair assessment of the operations of the Human Resources and Employment ministry in 2000-2001. All of his suggestions and recommendations concerning the operation of the ministry programs have been accepted. The reservation on the ministry's financial statements is a result of the ministry continuing to follow the corporate government accounting policy of expensing all assets with a value under \$15,000.

Let me summarize the ministry's annual report. The ministry met nearly all of its performance targets. In the very few cases where performance targets were missed, remedial actions have been taken. The rest of the targets were met and in several cases were significantly above target. Client satisfaction rates are well above target and are often above 90 percent. Department-appointed mediators avoided work stoppages in a full 97 percent of cases. Particularly important in terms of responsibilities to taxpayers, we have achieved these results within budget targets. Taxpayers provided more than a billion dollars to support Alberta people, skills, and workplaces, and we were careful stewards of these funds.

Now, I'm pleased to take questions. To give me an opportunity to find the material, if you would identify the topic and appropriate page number, that would allow me to get to the information more quickly.

Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Dunford.

We already have a list of questioners, and in light of the time we will get right at it. Ms Blakeman, please, to start off.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks very much. Welcome, Minister and staff that are able to join us. I think these are some of the fun-seekers that may sometimes be in the gallery, and I'm glad of the opportunity to see you and welcome you as well.

Okay. Right to it. One of the major points that the Auditor General is making in his chapter on this particular department – so I'll reference the minister to pages 140, 141. Yeah, that's mostly it. In particular, we're on recommendation 21, where it's talking about a failure to monitor private providers of training, to monitor and restrict their access to personal information about clients. I'm wondering if in this fiscal year the department anticipated or set aside any money for legal costs which they could expect to result from people bringing forward suits about privacy of information or where they felt that their personal information had been misused. What kind of policy did the department have around that?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, we didn't set aside any funds for that particularly. I think that if you follow the Auditor General's remarks over time in the sense of dealing with private providers, there were pretty stern comments made the year previous to this, but I believe that we have their co-operation and their approval to the remedial efforts that we have made. But you could check with them directly if you wish.

MS BLAKEMAN: Well, okay. As a supplementary then. In the six years that I've been on this committee, I think every year there have been some fairly strong recommendations and strong criticism by the Auditor General to this department about its relation with outside providers of service, particularly in the training area. Six years is a long time to continue to struggle, and it seems that it's not so much a matter of a new problem as the next problem. So did the department have – what? – a 10-year plan on how to address this?

MR. DUNFORD: I'm not sure that you're characterizing this fairly at all, hon. member. We've gone to memorandums of understanding. We've dealt with most of the larger institutions. We think now we cover something like 93 percent of all of the students. We have been focusing now on those providers that have contracts with less than 50 clients. We may have to, you know, find some sort of line where we'd say that if it's only two or three clients, we might do something different than a formal memorandum of understanding. But I think by any performance measurement in this area, we've done nothing but improve and improve exponentially.

MS BLAKEMAN: I'll come back to this.

THE CHAIR: Mrs. Ady, followed by Mr. Mason.

MRS. ADY: Thank you. My question relates to pages 47 and 48 of the 2000-2001 annual report, goal F, that states that "Albertans in need of financial support are assisted." Are the benefits that are provided to low-income Albertans sufficient to ensure that they can meet their financial needs?

MR. DUNFORD: At some point during the year that we have under question, we began an internal discussion about what is the responsibility of a government in terms of providing the needs to Albertans that truly are in need. The question always revolves around whether or not you are to provide basic needs or whether you are concerned about quality of life. I should say that as long as that debate carries on, it's going to be very, very difficult to answer a specific question like that.

Now, the role that the Alberta government has taken thus far is that many of the needs that we will be talking about with Albertans would be of a temporary nature, because with the kind of economy that we've put into place, the kind of society with the cultural aspects that we have here in Alberta, there is opportunity for people to move from where they are forward into their lives. Particularly, then, the philosophy of this government is and hopefully always will be that people are better off working, so we want to keep people moving forward. In answer to your question, our focus is on basic need, so when we evaluate whether or not we're providing for basic need, the answer would be yes.

9:15

MRS. ADY: Thank you. You answered my supplemental too.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr. Mason, followed by Mrs. Jablonski.

MR. MASON: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, welcome to our happy new home.

MR. DUNFORD: I noticed that, yes.

MR. MASON: My question is along the same line. I did not see mention in this report – and I have not read it from cover to cover – of the low-income review. Could you explain to me, please, how the low-income review fits in with the business plans and so on of your department?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, in terms of 2000 and 2001 the low-income review was not in place. I don't remember the exact date of the Lukaszuk committee being put together. Alana is here and was part of that committee. Do you remember what the date of your appointment was?

MS DeLONG: It seems to me it was around the beginning of June.

MR. DUNFORD: Yeah, I think so. So the MLA team was put together, then, in the year that we currently have under discussion. They went out and did the stakeholder consultation. They then submitted the report. I don't remember whether the report – I can't keep the dates in my head – was submitted to us before March 31 or not. The difficulty that you would have in finding anything specific is that the annual report would have been submitted way back in – just let me talk to the deputy here for a moment. I want to get my dates right.

MR. MASON: Sure.

MR. DUNFORD: Mr. Mason, I'm getting my dates mixed up. The report that's under review, of course, would be to March 31 of 2001, and our low-income review didn't get up and going until after that.

MR. MASON: Okay. If I can, then, have a supplemental. What measures do you actually use to determine if people's financial

needs are in fact being met? For example, we get many calls from people who indicate that the rent is particularly a problem. I'm wondering if you measure what you give people for rent against what they actually have to pay, or is it based on how much money you have available?

MR. DUNFORD: That information is gathered. Certainly our department would be getting calls. We see it at the front lines in terms of our physical locations. MLAs within our caucus receive calls from constituents. We try to keep a handle as best we can on what the local conditions might be in terms of costs. We've been a strong supporter of Statistics Canada moving to market-basket measurement, because that will help us be able to follow and to monitor individual costs. I do agree with the aspect of your question in the sense of shelter allowance. If there was a prime motivation for putting the low-income review together, subsequent to the report that we're talking about today, I think that if you had to find one reason, although there were many, it was shelter allowances.

MR. MASON: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mrs. Jablonski, followed by Ms Blakeman.

MRS. JABLONSKI: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, on page 79 of the report, element 2.3.3, it indicates that under the assured income for the severely handicapped there was an overexpenditure of \$6.3 million. Could you explain why we had an overexpenditure?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, in my opening remarks I talked about a 7 percent growth in the AISH client base, but within that, of course, obviously there are more clients. I would hope that all members of this committee would be supportive of any health initiatives and health reforms that might be brought forward, because, of course, the tremendous impact that's being felt is medical costs.

MRS. JABLONSKI: So my supplemental, then, is: what is causing the substantial growth in the assured income for the severely handicapped caseload? Can we expect that to keep increasing, and is there going to be some sustainability there?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, one of the things that we know already is that if you look at handicapped children's services, you can almost see the numbers. They're soon going to become 18, and of course when they do, they're going to come onto our rolls.

One of the things, too, that is underlying all of this is that as a government, you know, we've been successful at communicating the benefits of our AISH program. It's the best there is in Canada. It's a type of program that people talk about, praise to some extent. So that information is around. You have families that traditionally felt it was a family responsibility to look after an adult child, but as that family is getting older, they become concerned about what is going to happen to that adult child if they pass away. So we see, then, a motivation toward getting the adult child placed on the AISH rolls. Because of the uncertainty over health care costs, people understand and realize that part of the benefit of the AISH program is the medical benefit card, so they want that protection as well.

We wouldn't have any empirical evidence of this, but I think it would only be logical to understand that with the tremendous net migration from across Canada into Alberta, not everyone that has come here has fit into the skilled workforce. They've brought the rest of their families with them, and we're glad they're here certainly, but then as new Albertans they of course would qualify for AISH and are doing so.

MRS. JABLONSKI: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Blakeman, followed by Ms DeLong.

9:25

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks. I'm going to pick up on our earlier exchange. I had started by referencing the recommendation from the Auditor General around more responsibility to protect information of clients, particularly where private providers were involved, and then I had gone on to say that the department had been involved with private providers for some time, from the mid-90s on, I would say. I think I didn't explain myself enough to the minister. The department seems to react from year to year to a new problem or the next problem that's been identified by the Auditor General around these private providers. Did the government have a plan that they were executing in trying to anticipate the next problem with private providers and move to do something about it, or has it simply followed along behind those problems identified by the Auditor General? It's been a long time.

MR. DUNFORD: Well, I tried to be somewhat compassionate towards you in my first answer because I'm sure you identify with your federal cousins.

MS BLAKEMAN: No, I don't actually.

MR. DUNFORD: Oh, well, that's good. So I can be more forthright then.

MS BLAKEMAN: Absolutely.

MR. DUNFORD: Okay. We inherited what we believe to have been some concerns over the contracts when Alberta was the first to sign the labour market development agreements, and we then inherited a number of contracts in Alberta that were under the HRDC. Now, I want to preface any comments that I go on to make in the sense that both HRDC at the federal level and then us here in Alberta – I don't think there's any similarity today compared to the kind of monitoring and the kind of information that is provided and the kind of information that is protected in terms of those contracts from the six years or whatever the date was that you mentioned before. I think there's been very good progress in this area. I think, again, by any measurement that to have memorandums of understanding to cover 93 percent of the actual people that are involved in these particular contracts shows very good progress toward achieving the goals of the Auditor General, which are the same goals that we have. We understand that this is taxpayers' money, we understand that we have a responsibility to be a steward of that money, and we understand that as much as some people have tried to paint us with the federal fiasco, they've been unable to do it because, simply, the evidence is not there.

MS BLAKEMAN: I'm still looking for the plan.

MR. DUNFORD: Well, the plan is to have memorandums of understanding to cover probably 98 percent of the client base that would be covered in these programs. The Auditor General, it's my understanding, has approved of that approach, and we're continuing to move forward on it.

MS DeLONG: If you could turn to page 33, my question pertains to the table identifying the percentage of participants employed postintervention. If you could comment on the variety in terms of the employment results between the different programs.

MR. DUNFORD: In looking at the tables that you've referenced, the average employment rate of participants who left employment and training programs increased by three percentage points over last year's results and, actually, have now reached 75 percent. Employment rates of course vary, depending on the clients that are entering the program. The employment insurance clients in short-term skills training have more recent work histories, that help them return to the labour market, and their re-employment rate is 85 percent.

What you're seeing, member, when you look at some of the skills for work and the training on the job, is what looks like bad news in the sense that the numbers are going down. The good news inside that is the fact that we are experiencing people now with more barriers to employment. When we started in 1993 to reform our welfare system, the number of clients – I'm going to use this number – was 93,000. Of course, the welfare reform and the economy picking up has reduced that number substantially. As those numbers get lower and lower, we're now into, say, 28,000, so you can see the significant difference. As we get into those particular areas, I think you could understand and it would seem reasonable to expect that there would be heavier barriers that you'd be working with.

MS DeLONG: As a supplementary, if you go back one page there, it mentions the number of clients participating in your various employment and training programs, and it's decreasing. It was 41,769 in this most recent year compared to the year before, which was 42,166. Why is this decreasing?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, we're very proud of this government's record in being able to provide a climate for an economy to develop in. The numbers that you've cited, the decline, is really the re-entering in the workforce. It's just that more jobs were available for the people. They're working and they're making money and they're paying taxes and things are good.

MS DeLONG: Sounds good to me.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr. Mason, followed by Mr. Broda.

MR. MASON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, I'm looking at your page on future challenges, page 54 of your annual report. One of the key challenges which you've identified facing low-income individuals and families is dealing with housing costs. I wonder if you could just give us a quick update on your ministry's initiatives with respect to that and what results you're achieving.

MR. DUNFORD: Well, it was of course identified, as we talked about in your previous question, the concern about shelter. Again, that led to the formation of the low-income review. Our strategy is that the information has been sought and has been provided. Recommendations of the low-income review committee have been made. We are currently developing the government response to those recommendations and would plan then, of course, to deal with affordable housing when we roll out the low-income recommendations.

MR. MASON: When might that be, Mr. Minister?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, I've had a couple of other items on my plate the last little while, but certainly I would class the rollout now as imminent.

MR. MASON: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Broda, followed by Ms Blakeman.

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Chair. If we go to page 79, under 3.1.1, which is program delivery support, for the operating expense in there we see a deficit of \$4.6 million, roughly, or 12 percent over its budget. Why did this program area have an overexpenditure?

9:35

MR. DUNFORD: We had to upgrade our computer equipment, and that was \$3.1 million of that. The staff salaries and supplies were budgeted in the income support program, but they should have been budgeted here in the training and employment program. So there was a surplus in the income support that actually offsets this, 1 and a half million dollars, that was left after you take into account the computer expense.

MR. BRODA: Okay. My supplementary question. I guess you may have answered that question. On the same page, for capital investment you budgeted \$2.9 million, yet only \$312,000 was spent. How come we budgeted so much and only spent so little?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, when we put our budget together, we thought that there was going to have to be some capital cost to provide for the labour market development agreement system, but fortunately it turned out that we didn't need that process, so we didn't spend the money. We're not a department that spends out its budget.

MR. BRODA: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Blakeman, followed by Mr. Cenaiko.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks very much. There have been a number of constituents calling my office within the last few months talking about the move to bring the AISH offices and the SFI client services offices into the same location or merge them. Knowing that government doesn't move with lightning speed, the development of this must have happened in the fiscal year we're examining.

MR. DUNFORD: Very good. That's very good.

MS BLAKEMAN: I would ask you to discuss the plan that was developed in this fiscal year, then, or the steps that were taken to move these two offices together. I'm wondering how big the plan is.

MR. DUNFORD: Well, there might have been some consideration in the year that we're looking at. I don't recall a plan being put in place at that particular time. I think this is something that has bubbled up out of the low-income review, and I think it's one of the situations that's getting talked about, but you'll have to wait until we roll out the plan to, I guess, see the extent of it. No, we weren't doing anything back at that point.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. Well, I'll switch focus a little bit, then, for a supplemental. I'm wondering what programs there were in the department that were specifically targeted to women in this fiscal year.

MR. DUNFORD: Specifically targeted to women?

MS BLAKEMAN: Well, whenever I ask the question of the minister responsible for women, when I ask about programs specifically for women offered by the government, I'm referred, usually, to you.

MR. DUNFORD: Well, that would be fine.

AN HON. MEMBER: He knows women.

MS BLAKEMAN: I'm delighted. Now, what are the programs he's offering?

MR. DUNFORD: When the reorganization of government took place in May of '99, when part of three previous departments, including the adult side of family and social services, became Human Resources and Employment, we determined at the outset that women were Albertans and that our responsibility was to Albertans. So we continue to operate our system as best we can on a gender-friendly basis. Having said that, there are a couple of exceptions to that that one would have to consider a gender preference, and that is that we've continued with the widows' pension program through this particular year. Under our supports for independence we have cared for and continue to have compassion for single moms.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

At this point I would like to please remind all members of this committee that this is not a committee that discusses departmental policy. Whether it's good or bad or whether members disagree or agree, we are to deal specifically with the Auditor General's annual report and the document as provided by the minister and his department. Thank you.

Mr. Cenaiko.

MR. CENAIKO: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Hon. Minister, you and I had a chat regarding this earlier this year, and I think the Auditor General's report is excellent. You spoke earlier about the wellness of children. Why do we as a government provide benefits for family wellness or the Alberta child health benefit through HR and E and not Health and Wellness or the Ministry of Children's Services?

MR. DUNFORD: It's an excellent question. You know, on the surface the child is to be the benefactor, so the assumption would be made, I think, that at the top it might be a Children's Services issue, but the agreement through its arrangement with the federal government – we're actually starting at income supports for adults. So as they increase the income support for Canadians, generally adult Canadians, then we have a system whereby as a province we can view what is taking place as an action of the federal government. Under the national child benefit if we wish we can take funds and direct them back toward low-income families for the specific use and benefit of children. So it ends up as a benefit to the child, but it starts out working on an income support program for the adult.

MR. CENAIKO: Thank you.

As a supplementary on a little bit different topic: why does Alberta continue to have a relatively stable labour relations environment? I know one of your ADMs personally, and he'd probably say that it's got a lot to do with him, and I'd agree with that too, because we worked together for a number of years. Why do we have in Alberta a relatively stable labour environment compared to other areas in the country?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, I would think that because of the environment we work in, Albertans over our history have found ways to work together to accommodate each other's needs and desires. Even though we have a very vibrant labour movement within this province, I think you can characterize at least the private-sector unions as certainly understanding that the idea isn't to take a pie and just start cutting it up, but it's to actually increase the size of the pie so that all parties can benefit. I think we have an excellent Labour Relations Code, one that's evolved over time. More importantly, along with the code that is there as the foundation for collective bargaining and for how we deal with grievances in this province, we also then have a policy and regulations that would support that.

You know, we've put together mediation services. Our workplace relations and facilitation branch spends all kinds of time dealing with union leaders and industry leaders, making sure that they keep themselves up to date, keep themselves well educated and skilled and knowledgeable in these particular areas. We have a Labour Relations Board that operates as a quasi-judicial branch of the government. Politicians have left it alone to do their work. We've always, I think, had a balanced action in the appointments. I don't know this for sure, but I would bet that at union conferences across this country, union leaders would talk about the stability in Alberta, and we're very proud of that.

9:45

MR. CENAIKO: Thank you very much. I think you and your ministry and your staff have done a remarkable job, an admirable job.

MR. DUNFORD: Especially those from the Calgary Police Service, I bet.

MR. CENAIKO: Oh, unbelievable.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr. Mason, followed by Mr. Masyk.

MR. MASON: Thank very much, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, on page 31 of your report it talks about undertaking "a review to improve the array of programs and services that help people find and maintain employment, including disadvantaged groups." Then back on page 54 again it talks about housing as a key challenge. One of the things that has occurred to me in my time in municipal politics is that one of the important ways to help people get off programs where they're being supported by government and maintain ongoing participation in the workforce is to give them some equity in their housing. I wonder if that approach is of interest to the government, and I'd just sort of comment as well that the present system of social program delivery really mitigates against that, makes that almost impossible, or if someone attempts to do that, support from government is withdrawn. Is that a challenge that you see in your work?

MR. DUNFORD: There are seeds of what you're talking about that were noticed in the year that we're talking about, so I feel okay to deal with the suggestion and the question that surrounds that.

One of the things that I think we need to look at, Mr. Mason – and I'll be interested to see your reaction once we look at the government's response to the low-income review. We've had a history in this province of labeling and then entitling. One of the things that I noticed coming from the low-income review team was more of a focus on actual need, and I'm impressed by that thought, but what we're going to have to do is try to find a way to deal with need, to deal with the locale that that need is being expressed in, and then, of course, the resources that we would have to be able to respond to that need.

What drives us and why we call ourselves the people and workplace department is that we want to move people from where they are forward in their lives, and we know that by meeting needs, sometimes an intended consequence is employment, but sometimes an unintended consequence is also employment. With employment comes all of those personal things that having a job brings to a person but also then creates that kind of financial viability where they can start to have hopes of owning a home. We think that that should be a goal for everyone, you know, should they choose that kind of a lifestyle, and we'll be looking for ways to continue to assist that to happen.

MR. MASON: I'll look forward to reading about it in more detail. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Masyk.

MR. MASYK: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. To the hon. minister, on page 49, my question is: why has the Public Guardian encouraged private individuals to assume responsibility for dependent adults? I was reading the second bullet and the words "last resort" and in the third bullet, "whenever possible." Those words somewhat clarify a lot of things, but is there something in between that should be clarified?

MR. DUNFORD: I missed your point. Did you say the second bullet or the last bullet?

MR. MASYK: The second and last bullets.

MR. DUNFORD: To answer I think the initial part of your question, why we would encourage private individuals to assume responsibility, again it's more likely and more often that family members or close friends would have a clearer understanding of what a dependent's needs were and, of course, then those needs tied inside a value system and a belief system. So we would connect a couple of dots there in the sense that we would just make the assertion that the best guardian would be a private guardian rather than a central authority like a government. In the last bullet, at least the way I read the phrase, I don't see the contradiction that you've indicated, and perhaps you want to elaborate for me.

MR. MASYK: Yeah. It wasn't actually meant as a contradiction. From my perspective it somewhat explained the question that I brought forward, and I was just wondering if the connection of the two was parallel.

MR. DUNFORD: Well, this might be something that we're going to have to discuss later, because I don't know how to handle the question.

MR. MASYK: My final supplementary: how can we expect private individuals to manage the complex conditions and needs of

dependent adults?

MR. DUNFORD: Well, that is a good question. I wouldn't want anyone to think that because we recommend a private guardian and in fact a private guardian might be put in place, our office would just simply divorce themselves from that particular case. We're always available to provide what sort of assistance we can, what sorts of educational needs might be required, and perhaps then act as a counselor in that sense. So private doesn't mean abandon.

MR. MASYK: Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

THE CHAIR: Ms Blakeman, followed by Mr. Cao, if time permits.

MS BLAKEMAN: Right. Thank you very much. My last question. I wanted to talk about performance measurements, because as the government moved to a more business-based system of examining their accounts and monitoring and evaluating their work, performance measurements were brought in. But performance measurements are meant to be updated and improved, and to get performance measurements right is not an easy thing, so I encourage the minister to keep trying. Really what I'm referring to for your reference is in the annual report of the department from pages 32 on, where we have a number of different performance measurements. This was the last year of a three-year plan. Then we went into a new plan. So performance measures would have changed, I'm assuming. I'm wondering in this last year what the department felt were the useful performance measurements, let's say the most useful performance measurement, and my supplementary would be the least useful performance measurement.

9:55

MR. DUNFORD: This would be the first time we've had such a discussion. We've not asked ourselves that question. I believe that the most useful measurement would be something that would be quantitative, something that we could prove empirically. One that I'm always particularly conscious of – and of course the department knows this – is that I want to know what real employment is coming out of our programs. When I say real employment, basically we're talking about three to six months after graduation. To me that's where the rubber is going to meet the road.

I don't think there are any that are least useful in that sense. The department knows me by now, that I get concerned and fuzzy over qualitative measurements. These are subjective by nature. I might say that in my belief system, what gets measured gets done, and that's good news, but what gets measured gets done is bad news if you're not measuring the right things. So we're always examining ourselves when we put all of these programs together. You know, is this something that is valuable and something that we're prepared to go in front of Public Accounts committees and, in fact, in front of the public to say, "Okay; here's how you would measure us"?

I'm extremely proud, I might add, about this government. Again, I think it would be true that at this point in time the government of Alberta is the only one that has a Measuring Up document, where we expose ourselves to not only opposition parties but to the people of Alberta and to the people in the rest of the world to say: "Well, here are some of the things that we've done well. Here are some of the things we're not doing so well and need to improve upon." Of those 19 measures, I'm extremely proud of the fact that one of them is that Albertans who need assistance will receive it.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. I will follow up then. So between the end

of the first three-year plan and the current year that we're in, which could have been a new set of performance measurements, you said that you hadn't reviewed any of this. Do I take it, then, that you did not drop or change any of your performance measurements?

MR. DUNFORD: Oh, yes. Sure. We've done that. I've been advised to send you to page 187. There's an appendix there. It's called Dropped Performance Measures. We like to consider our plan as a living document, so we examine ourselves continually. We're of course also striving for constant improvement.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. At this time it's 10 o'clock, and unfortunately we're out of time. There were several members that indicated they had questions for the minister. Unfortunately, again, we have run out of time. On behalf of all members of the committee I would like to express a thank you to the minister and his staff for coming this morning and also for co-operating in volunteering to be the first department to come before the committee in this session. We appreciate your co-operation and your time.

MR. DUNFORD: Sure. Have me back if you want.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Certainly.

That ends this portion of the Public Accounts meeting this morning. Please feel free to leave.

In 30 seconds we have the item to discuss with the motion as presented by Mr. Cenaiko. In regard to the motion that was moved by Mr. Cenaiko, seconds to motions are not required in a committee appointed by the Legislative Assembly. That's a point of information for all members of this committee.

MR. OUELLETTE: Shouldn't we be able to debate the motion?

THE CHAIR: Oh, yes. Certainly the motion is in order, as is the motion as presented by Ms DeLong. Perhaps I shall briefly read both motions. It has been moved by Mr. Cenaiko that the committee move its meetings back to the legislative Chamber. There was a discussion, and Ms DeLong moved that Mr. Cenaiko's motion be amended in that the committee continue using committee room A for its meetings. There could be an agreement for both of them to withdraw their motions or vote on each. It's completely up to the direction of the committee, but we can go back to the Assembly anytime we choose.

Mr. Marz, in fairness, Mr. Shariff was first on the speaking list.

MR. MASON: Just on a point of order, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

MR. MASON: I had not understood Ms DeLong's motion to be as you stated.

MS DeLONG: My motion was just to table it until we had more information.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Yeah. That's what I thought too. For the record, the chair stands corrected. Ms DeLong's motion was to table the previous motion from the Member for Calgary-Buffalo. Perhaps I could add that we could have a test run of two or three meetings to see if people change their feelings about this committee room.

MR. SHARIFF: Colleagues, the motion is in order, and every member has a right to move a motion in this committee.

We have done some preliminary inquiries, and the clerk has informed me of a few things. First, if we were to revert to the Assembly, there's going to be a cost associated with the move, in particular with having security present while we meet in the Assembly itself. So there is a cost associated with that. There should be no additional cost with regards to *Hansard*. The clerk is also advising me that if we do choose to stay in this room for a trial period, they would try and reconfigure so that people would be facing each other, and I think the two end tables would be closed in so the minister and the staff can sit at that end.

With that, I would recommend, if the mover of the motion would consider withdrawing the motion for now, allowing this committee to meet for a few meetings, maybe until the Easter break, at which time we can have a small discussion over it again. If you're not pleased at that stage, maybe we can go back to the Assembly, which we'll be able to vote on.

10:05

THE CHAIR: Mr. Marz has been very patient here.

MR. MARZ: Mr. Mason brought up the point of order that I was going to raise on Ms DeLong's motion. It's my understanding with tabling a motion that you have to vote on it before you vote on the other motion.

THE CHAIR: You bet. Yes.

Mr. Masyk.

MR. MASYK: Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to note that for us that are in this building, it's handy, and if it was a vote, there are more that are in the other building, that's not so handy. Maybe on that note I'd like to remind Mr. Cenaiko that we're not in Calgary.

THE CHAIR: Okay. At this point the chair would like to remind all members of this committee that there have been some difficulties in getting these meetings scheduled in the short time frame. There has been in my brief time as chair of this committee what I view as significant difficulties in getting some ministers to co-operate. I would like to point out that now that we're away from the Legislative Assembly, that may increase the reluctance to travel even this short distance to this committee room on the fourth floor. It is much more convenient for the ministers to go from their office to the Assembly than from the Assembly to here, and I'm frustrated and disappointed that some ministers have found it difficult to come.

MR. CENAIKO: If the reconfiguration of the room could work, I don't have a problem with withdrawing my motion other than noting that I have grave concerns regarding public accessibility and/or the opportunity for the public to attend this meeting. You come through here, through double doors either on one side or the other. It looks like we're going through the Criminal Intelligence Service Alberta's office. We've got microphones all over the place. You know, I just have real concerns regarding accessibility to the public, and I'd like that noted. That's all. So I'll withdraw the motion, noting my concerns.

THE CHAIR: So you're withdrawing your motion.

MR. LUKASZUK: I just wanted to point out that the only reason we were in the Chamber for, I understand, some duration prior to my being elected is because there were no other options and the Chamber was the only room of a size that could accommodate this

committee. As I was advised by the committee clerk, who definitely has more experience with this committee than I do and not only with this committee – I understand she has a lot of experience from having visited other committees – it is an exception that Alberta Public Accounts Committee would meet actually in the Chamber. Most if not all of the committees meet outside of the Chamber.

There are more perhaps less pragmatic reasons for it as well. It's a legislative privilege to actually be in that Chamber, and that Chamber is not meant to be for nonelected members to attend. Perhaps this could be accommodated by having the ministries inviting fewer of their staff members, and then this room would be more than adequate. From experience on this committee I know that usually no more than five of the staff members from each ministry contribute to the debate or offer answers, and the rest of the staff members are simply in a viewer capacity, which perhaps is not necessary. It is a committee room. This is a committee. Why would a committee meet in the Chamber? There is no real reason for it. If there are on top of that additional expenses for security guards, I don't think we can justify that, especially as a Public Accounts Committee.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr. Cao.

MR. CAO: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair and my colleagues. I think from my perspective this is Public Accounts, so my concern is public access. I think that as long as there is a focus on rearranging the place, accessibility, opening up to the public, that is kind of my point of view. Now, it doesn't matter where it is located. That it's public, open, accessible to the public is the key point.

I heard Mr. Cenaiko withdraw the motion to move back to give us a chance to test it out here, and if the public is still accessible to this openness, then I'll stay with this.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr. Ouellette, Ms Blakeman, Mr. Marz, Mr. Broda, and Mr. Mason also have. . .

MR. MASON: It's just a point of order, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to make the point of order that if the motion has been withdrawn, then that makes the tabling motion out of order, which means that we don't have a motion to speak to. So I really think we should just adjourn.

THE CHAIR: You have a very good point, Mr. Mason, but in light of what seems to be quite a contentious issue with the committee, I'll seek the committee's direction.

Would you like to continue this discussion briefly? Each member can get their opinion on the record as to how they feel about this facility. If we're going to review this, it looks like there's a consensus to review this in two to three weeks as suggested by Mr. Shariff. So perhaps now is the time to have a brief discussion on this for another maybe five minutes. It's entirely up to you.

MR. OUELLETTE: I think that most of the stuff that everybody is going to be saying now is echoing what everybody else has said. I

think my hon. colleague here Mr. Lukaszuk has basically hit the nut right on the head. I mean, to me the Chamber is a very privileged place to be, and I don't see any reason to be using it for Public Accounts. I think we do have to keep it open to the public, although in my short time here I've seen very, very few public people that just wanted to walk in. For any meetings that anybody here has ever been to that were open to the public that they felt a need to be at, it doesn't matter if you have to stand on your head in the corner, you go.

I think we've got plenty of room here for the public. The argument about the ministers – no disrespect to the ministers, but, I mean, they're the ones that we're scrutinizing; they have to justify their report. I think they all have big enough balls to walk over here and get scrutinized. I don't think we have to bow down here and say that because they have half a block to come to a building for another meeting, we're going to reschedule ourselves to the Chamber.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. I appreciate your candour and the guidance from Mr. Mason.

At this time are there any other comments regarding this issue, the meeting room? I believe Mr. Marz has a comment.

MR. MARZ: Just some comments about the cost of going back to the other place because of security. I'm surprised that no one mentioned about the cost of the "build it and they will come" type of scenario, and that's what happened here. We never had any debate or input on how much money this place cost or why it was even built. Just because it was built doesn't mean to say that we should use it if it's not as accommodating as the other building was for our purposes. When I looked down at the end and I saw staff members that were fumbling through books that they were balancing on their laps – that is unnecessary when we have better accommodations for them.

I share Mr. Cenaiko's view that, you know, it should be accessible to the public. It's been a tradition in this province, and Public Accounts has been over there for some time. This is not the best room or best option. I think 512 has more room for something of this nature than even this room. It's wider, as far as a place for members of the public if they wanted to be there. I'm in favour of giving a reconfiguration a try, but I think we should have the discussion again, and I'll be raising it again around the Easter break.

10:15

THE CHAIR: Okay. Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

MS DeLONG: I move that we adjourn.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Ms DeLong moves that we adjourn, and that is fine; we certainly do not need a seconder. But I would like to remind members of the committee that the next meeting is Wednesday, March 13, 2002, and we will have the Minister of Justice and Attorney General and the Solicitor General here as well.

I would like to thank you for your patience and your comments this morning.

[The committee adjourned at 10:16 a.m.]

