



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Members' Services

Wednesday, May 21, 2008
5:45 p.m.

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Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

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Also in Attendance

Blakeman, Laurie, Edmonton-Centre (L)

Support Staff

W.J. David McNeil	Clerk
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Liz Sim	Managing Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

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[Mr. Kowalski in the chair]

The Chair: Well, we'll call the meeting to order. I'm sure that all will assemble here momentarily. We do have a quorum.

Welcome to the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services. In the last couple of weeks, well, before that as well, when you were all elected to the Standing Committee on Members' Services, I provided to all members briefing materials with respect to the background of this committee, the Alberta Legislative Assembly Act, and other documentation. I invited everyone to come and visit me if they had any questions with respect to it. So it's probably not required to go through any of that.

We have an agenda in front of us, and I'd just like to advise you that item 4(e), Member Appeal, Constituency Expenditure, Mr. Johnston, has been withdrawn. That matter will be crossed off the agenda and will not return.

If it's at all possible to move up item (c) under 3, that would be helpful simply because it's a very, very quick issue, and it basically extends out of the minutes. Can we have approval for such? Mr. Taylor moves. Mr. Weadick seconds. Everybody agreed? Okay.

Business Arising from the Last Meeting. Interestingly enough, one of the quirks that exists in this business is that I provided to all members the minutes of the committee meeting of November 13, 2007. Because an election was called, this committee, of course, ceased to exist prior to the election. The sign-off in terms of the minutes falls under the authority of the chair of the committee, who did approve them on February 4. They're there for your information. They do not have to be approved by the committee because the last committee was the one that dealt with them.

There were a number of items that did come out of that. The first one has to do with 3(a). There's a document that you have in 3(a), which is simply a flow-through chart that basically talks about the allocation of dollars. Members will recall that when the budget was prepared, it had a number of dollars in it for each of the caucuses, and then there was a caucus funding contingency set aside pending approval by the Legislative Assembly of the continued existence of the policy field committees. That motion was approved. The day that that motion was approved, the dollars that were in the caucus funding contingency were then allocated to the three caucuses. That flow-through chart just shows you exactly what the dollar allocation is for the current fiscal year, after April 1, 2008. The numbers are there, and the breakdown is there. You can see the allocation that went with it. That's just an update with respect to that. Anybody have any questions on that? Okay.

Then (b), Implications of Extending Participation in the Benefit Plans to Former Members over the Age of 70 Years. The previous committee had a number of petitions made to it by current members and former members. In 2006 and 2007 there were a number of members who were anticipating leaving, and there were a number of members who basically were coming up to an age limit of 70. Our policy, basically, that we'd had before is that when a member left, the programs that existed for current members under the extended benefit program could exist for them for five years after they left or to the age of 70. However, what's happened, of course, because of demographics, is that everybody is getting older, and we have people who're just living longer. The question is: what of these things could we look at to basically continue through age 70?

We've had a number of discussions with the human resources people and with our insurers through our human resources division, headed up by Cheryl Scarlett, and basically the conclusion from discussions with the carrier is that additional coverage to age 75 can

be continued through Alberta Blue Cross for prescriptions, extended medical, and dental at no cost to the system above the premiums that people currently pay.

There was this additional request that members aged 70 to 74 do tend to do a bit of travelling, so when they go outside of the country, they want to basically carry these extended health coverages. Well, we can do it as long as the travel coverage is limited to 30 days out of the country between ages 70 and 74. There's a bit of a premium for that. The member who accesses it would pay for it, and the system would not. Because of the group package it can now be provided, and it would probably be of interest to a number of former members.

Mr. Taylor: That's 30 days repeated? So you could travel for 30 days, come back for a couple, go back?

The Chair: Cheryl, is that correct?

Mrs. Scarlett: Yes. Per trip.

The Chair: Okay. You have to come back to the country.

Mrs. Scarlett: You physically have to come back.

Mr. Taylor: But there's no minimum stay back here before you can turn around and travel again? Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: So what are you saying? You're going to head out to El Paso and just cross the border for 30 days and then come back?

Mr. Taylor: I'm so far from the age of 70 – well, I'm not that far.

The Chair: I'm not pushing that one, and I'm not going there, but that's okay.

Basically, that's what it is. Now, we've got a draft motion to this effect – has it been circulated? – that would basically allow that to happen. The draft motion would be an extended benefits options for former members. It would read:

- 1 Benefit coverage for former Members ["Extended Benefits Option" or "EBO"] be extended until age 75, except life insurance under the Members' Group Life Insurance Order . . .
- 2 Out of Canada emergency travel coverage be available to former Members aged 70 to 74 on the following conditions:
 - (a) the former Member must pay any additional premiums that may be required by Alberta Blue Cross, and
 - (b) the former Member may not be out of the country for more than 30 consecutive days per trip.

If you agree with that, I'd ask one of you to volunteer to move the motion.

Mr. Rodney: I do so move.

The Chair: Okay. That has been moved. Do we have a seconder? Okay. We've got a seconder as well. Did you get them all, Allison?

Ms Quast: I did.

The Chair: Okay. Would there be any discussion with respect to this?

Those in favour please raise your hand or otherwise signify. Okay. It's carried. Thank you very much.

Now, that business about moving up 4(c), Automobile Travel Allowance, Adjustment. Our policy is that for members who travel, there is a kilometre amount provided at 7 cents less than the posted public service rate, so our current allowance is 37 cents.

On May 1 the government of Alberta provided to all of its workers, employees, unions, what have you, an increase from 44 cents a kilometre to 46 cents a kilometre. Our policy is to always follow the government, not lead the government but follow the government. So to be consistent, if the government went to 46 cents and we're at 44, we would have to go to 39 cents to get the 7 cent differential.

We've had to do this on a number of occasions in the last number of years. What I'd like to recommend to you if you want to accept it is that in essence we pass a motion that basically is that we just keep the 7 cent differential in place. If it goes up, the administration automatically applies it; if it goes down, the administration automatically applies it. We don't have to come here and have it debated as an item.

I have in front of you a proposed transportation amendment order that reads:

Pursuant to section 39 of the Legislative Assembly Act . . . the Special Select Standing Committee on Members' Services hereby makes the following Order, being the Transportation Amendment Order (No. xx):

- 1 The Transportation Order . . . is amended by this Order.
- 2 Section 5 is amended in clauses (b) and (c) by striking out "an allowance of 37 cents per kilometre" and substituting "a per kilometre allowance as set out in the Public Service Subsistence, Travel and Moving Expenses Regulation less 7 cents per kilometre."

Then the policy would be in place, and then it could be administered that way. This would go into effect the same day as the government of Alberta one went into effect, and that would be May 1, 2008.

That's my presentation, and that's my proposal, and I'd invite somebody to move it if you wish to.

Mrs. Leskiw: I so move.

The Chair: Mrs. Leskiw. And somebody to second it. Mr. Mason. Okay.

Now we can have a discussion if there are questions or discussion.

Mr. Taylor: How is the 7 cent per kilometre differential chosen? Two questions there.

The Chair: A long time ago.

Mr. Taylor: Yeah. What's the justification for that? And how is the public service business kilometre rate set?

The Chair: By government in consultation with its unions.

Mr. Taylor: No, not by whom, but how? Is there a formula? Is there a way of determining that? Is it done in collective bargaining?

The Chair: Well, it's part of that, but I think it's also looking at the situation in the marketplace as well. Interestingly enough, I checked with the Canadian House of Commons this morning. They revised their order just a few days ago to pay 52.2 cents per kilometre. The federal government pays 52.2 cents per kilometre. A couple of municipalities in my constituency are in the high 50s – these are rural municipalities – 56, 58 cents per kilometre.

So to answer your question, we've always been at the low end in the province of Alberta. I'm sure that the 52.2 cent federal one would apply to federal employees in the province of Alberta, and if you're a provincial employee in the province of Alberta, you'd be getting 46 cents. But it is part of the negotiations.

5:55

Mr. Taylor: But you're telling me that there's no set formula that says that this is how we calculate wear and tear on the vehicle, cost of fuel, et cetera.

The Chair: All of that would come in, but our policy here is to follow the provincial one by 7 cents per litre.

Mr. Taylor: But what I'm trying to get at is the provincial formula, the provincial policy, whether or not we feel that that's, in fact, an objective enough or fair enough or scientifically based enough policy that we can automatically say, "Yeah, that less 7 cents," and we're always good with that, because this is an ongoing motion.

The Chair: Yes. Absolutely correct.

David, did you want to add something?

Dr. McNeil: Yeah. All I can add is that corporate human resources, formerly the personnel administration office, develops that number on at least an annual basis. What their particular process is I'm not certain, but I think there are various components to that that produce that number in the final analysis. That process has gone on for years as far as I understand.

Mr. Taylor: Is that process publicly available?

Dr. McNeil: I don't think it is. I think they issue that . . .

The Chair: Why would you say that?

Dr. McNeil: I don't know for certain. All I know is that they come out with: this is the number that will be paid.

The Chair: The policy established by this committee was that this committee would pay 7 cents less than what the public service rate of the province of Alberta was. I don't ever recall this committee going further than that.

Mr. Taylor: Where I'm going with this is that the way the transportation order is structured now, if I understand correctly, we have revisited this periodically and said: "Okay. The government rate is this. Let's subtract 7 cents per kilometre from that. Now we say that going forward, this is our rate." The motion before us right now essentially says that we will be 7 cents less per kilometre than the government rate whatever that government rate is.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Taylor: If that government rate were to be unduly influenced to the positive by a particularly tough session of collective bargaining or something like that, where suddenly the rate jumped 20 cents a kilometre or something like that, we would go along in lockstep if we pass this motion.

The Chair: That would be the intent. That's exactly correct. That would be the policy. If you want to revisit it every time, well, then, we just vote it down.

Mr. Oberle: Not that I'm any great expert on the subject and certainly haven't been around long enough to know what the history of this is, but the government can't, I would point out, just by virtue of tough bargaining or something jump that rate by any great amount. The federal government sets a reasonable amount every

year that would fall under the income tax radar as in: if you get paid more than that amount by your employer, then it becomes a taxable benefit, and all the agreements have to fall right there. I don't think the government would ever have the ability to jump it just because of a collective bargaining issue.

Mr. Taylor: Mr. Chairman, that was the assurance I was looking for.

The Chair: Okay. Further discussion? Questions?

We have a motion that's been seconded. All those in favour, raise your hand or say aye. Opposed? Okay. Carried unanimously. That was passed this particular day, so we've dealt with the matter. Thank you very much.

The next item, hon. members, has to do with new business. There has been a discussion among various members for the last two years with respect to this kind of activity. Those of you who are new may not be aware of all the background, and those of you who have been around will be aware of the background. Mr. Oberle wants to come forward with an overview and a motion. He has provided me with copies of the paper that's been prepared. Do you want me to circulate that?

Mr. Oberle: You may circulate it, yeah.

The Chair: I think everybody has it now, Frank, if you want to proceed.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We're circulating an overview document, which I'm going to refer to. The actual motion is also being circulated. Just prior to moving that motion, I'd like to review some of the changes that have been brought about to the operation of the committee structure in the Legislature and that I believe underscore the need for the motion that I'm going to propose today.

I would note that policy field committees have been re-established in 2008. There are five committees now instead of the four that there were in 2007, which allows for participation by a greater number of members, but it also requires greater resources. In fact, I think there are a number of opposition members that serve on more than one committee. It's a significant workload. While they are still under temporary standing orders, I think it would be fairly safe to assume at this point that those will be continuing features of our Legislature. While we all have work to do, we all intend to do work to strengthen those committees. Certainly, the all-party committees, I think, are supported and will be a feature.

The committees allow for a greater role of the Assembly in the scrutiny of bills, regulations, and business of departments. We had a referral just today to one of the committees. The year 2007 was the first time that the policy field committees were in action and showed that the members were especially active on the committees during the period that the Assembly was not sitting, with attending meetings, public hearings, in addition to reviewing what can be a substantial amount of material. The role of the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing has been greatly enhanced to ensure that the temporary amendments to the standing orders are reviewed, which I believe necessitates moving the committee to a different category. Reports of the officers of the Legislature now stand referred to the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices, which will greatly increase the workload of that committee.

In short, Mr. Chairman, I believe that the workload of MLAs on committees has increased significantly as a result of some of the democratic reform initiatives. Essentially, committee work on the

Legislature committees is now a year-round job rather than just sitting during the session. I believe that it only makes sense that the compensation for MLAs reflects the additional work they're undertaking and that payments be on a predictable basis and in a transparent manner.

I would like to speak specifically to the motion which is tabled before you. My motion proposes that we make the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing a category A committee – presently it's a category B committee – that we add a category C to the Members' Services Committee allowances order; that we place the policy field committees in category C, recognizing that while the Assembly motion only created them for 2008, in all likelihood they will be made on a more permanent nature this fall; that we create a fee system based on equality of committees and equality of members, specifically that the chairs of all category A and C committees will receive \$1,500 a month, the deputy chairs would receive \$1,250 a month, and the members would receive \$1,000 per month. My motion proposes that members could receive fees for committee work on a maximum of three committees. The maximum level of committee fees would be \$3,500 per month.

The amendment would replace the present per diem system for committees in category A and the newly created category C. They would be maintained for category B in the event they're ever required. My motion would have no committees left in category B, but we could leave the category there.

6:05

I also propose that recognition would be provided to the Leader of the Official Opposition, the leaders of other opposition parties in the Assembly, and the Speaker for their committee work at the maximum level for members, and that is the \$3,500 a month. I propose that the members of Executive Council would not be entitled to receive committee fees under this order.

Mr. Chairman, I believe this approach would provide the greatest amount of fairness and would treat all equally, regardless of whether they were government or opposition. As I said, we retain category B in the event that assignment of a committee to that category is appropriate at some time in the future. There would be no committees in category B at this time.

I would now like to move the specific motion that I'm seeking approval for, and I would also move at this time that the effective date for this motion would be May 1, 2008. You all have the motion before you. Do I need to go through it in detail, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: Well, it would amend the revised Members' Services Committee order. Members, do you all have this one, too?

Mr. Oberle: You have a copy of that, yeah.

The Chair: I would encourage you to do the motion because it would be in the written record, and members can just follow about how it affects the other one as well. I'd encourage you to do that.

Mr. Oberle: Okay. I move that the following Members' Services Committee allowances order be amended as follows:

- A Section 1 is amended
 - (a) in clause (a)
 - (i) by adding the following after subclause (v):
 - (v.i) Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing;
 - (ii) by striking out subclause (vi);
 - (b) by striking out clause (b) and substituting the following:
 - (b) "Category B Committee" means any committee of

the Assembly designated as a Category B Committee by the Select Special Standing Committee on Members' Services or by resolution of the Assembly;

(c) by adding the following after clause (b):

(c) "Category C Committee" means any of the Standing Committees of the Assembly designated as a Policy Field Committee which includes, for 2008, the following:

- (i) Standing Committee on Community Services,
- (ii) Standing Committee on the Economy,
- (iii) Standing Committee on Health,
- (iv) Standing Committee on Public Safety and Services, and
- (v) Standing Committee on Resources and Environment.

B Section 2(1) is amended by striking out "Category A or";

C The following is added after section 2:

2.1(1) A Member who serves as Chair of a Category A or C Committee is entitled to be paid \$1,500 a month.

(2) A Member who serves as Deputy Chair of a Category A or C Committee is entitled to be paid \$1,250 a month.

(3) A Member who serves on a Category A or C Committee and is not the Chair or Deputy Chair is entitled to be paid \$1,000 a month.

(4) A Member is eligible to receive fees under subsection (1), (2) or (3) for serving on no more than 3 Committees under this section to a maximum of \$3,500 a month.

(5) Notwithstanding subsections (1) to (3), the Leader of the Official Opposition, the Leader of any other opposition party represented in the Assembly and the Speaker are each entitled to be paid one allowance under this section equivalent to the maximum monthly payment that a Member may receive under subsection (4).

(6) Notwithstanding subsections (1) to (3), members of the Executive Council are not entitled to be paid for participation in Committees under this section.

D Section 3(1) is struck out.

E Section 3.1 is amended by adding "2.1" after "2(1)," and by striking out "3(1)".

F The amendments in this motion come into force on May 1, 2008.

The Chair: Additional comments?

Mr. Oberle: I have no additional comments at this time, and I move that.

The Chair: You move that. Is there a seconder? Mr. Taylor. Okay.

Mr. Taylor: Mr. Rodney.

The Chair: Sorry. Rodney.

Mr. Rodney: It's okay. We get mixed up a lot on these all-party things. We don't take it personally, do we, Dave?

Mr. Taylor: All Daves are Daves.

The Chair: Anyway, we have a seconder. We have it seconded by Mr. Dave Rodney. Now it's open for discussion through the chair.

Mr. Rodney: Anyone who's been around here working as an MLA or otherwise sees the hours that are put in. I think it's fair to say that committee work has been growing in leaps and bounds. The hours that go with it, the experience and expertise are commendable. It's

only fair; it's only right. I agree with the spirit of this, Chair, but I do have a couple of questions that I would like answered before I can vote on this. The first question might be very simple, referring to the types of committees, section 1(a). It was noted that we would strike subclause (vi). For the record, and for anyone without paper at the moment, that would be omitting the Select Special Committee on Electoral Boundaries. I wonder if Mr. Oberle can just comment on that.

Then, secondly, there are those that would argue that \$3,500 a month could be \$2,500 or \$4,500 or just whatever it adds up to. If Mr. Oberle can just let us know what the thought process is, the rationale for \$3,500 versus another number, because let's face it, colleagues, we could be tossing around numbers forever and never really decide on anything, but we need to tonight. So, Mr. Oberle?

Mr. Oberle: Okay. Can you just show me where you're referring to subclause (vi)?

Mr. Rodney: Sure. It's just this one. It's that one there.

Mr. Oberle: Okay. We don't have an appointed Select Special Committee on Electoral Boundaries at the moment. We will be appointing one at some time, and we can decide at that time where it falls.

Mr. Rodney: Okay.

Mr. Oberle: And your second question? I'm sorry.

Mr. Rodney: It was just the \$3,500. Could we explain why if it adds up to \$5,500 or \$6,500, it shouldn't be \$2,500? What was the idea behind \$3,500 versus any other number? A maximum.

Mr. Oberle: I just felt that was a reasonable amount without being excessive. It reflects the tremendous hours we put in, but it does not reflect any excessive amount, in my opinion.

Mr. Rodney: Okay.

The Chair: Others?

Mr. Weadick: I just didn't notice Leg. review. Which committee category would that be?

Mr. Oberle: It's already a category A committee.

Mr. Weadick: Oh, it's a category A?

Mr. Oberle: Yeah.

Mr. Weadick: It just isn't on the list. Okay.

Mr. Oberle: Just again for clarity, the only committee this affects is Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing that moves from B to A. All our other committees are already A except for the policy field committees, which are C.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you.

The Chair: Others?

Mr. Mason: Could someone remind me what the per diem rate for committee work is now?

The Chair: If you're a chairman of a category A committee, the rate is just a few dollars shy of \$500 a month, and what you would get depends on how many hours the committee sat.

What is it, David? You can pull it up. I can't remember.

Mr. Weadick: A hundred dollars a meeting. That's up to four hours.

The Chair: No, no. Those are dated numbers. Those are going back a long time. That was the original thing that was in there for quite a while.

Mr. Weadick: Oh, 1992.

The Chair: Yeah. Well, it's been a little bit more than that.

Mr. Mason: It was a good time. We had 16 members then.

The Chair: Sorry. We'll get you the specific year in question. You can be nostalgic later. What is it?

Dr. McNeil: I can't bring it up here. The computer is shut off, but I'll get it in a second.

The Chair: Was that the latest one with the affected changes, April 1, 2008?

Dr. McNeil: Yeah.

Mr. Weadick: Well, that's all right. It's in our members' consolidated book. I've got it.

Dr. McNeil: Committee allowances. Up to four hours is \$135.90, four to eight hours is \$224.20, longer than eight hours is \$353, and a category A chair is \$475.40 per month.

6:15

The Chair: Yeah, but that doesn't include the April 1, 2008, adjustment.

Did you get the answer?

Mr. Mason: Well, it was pretty quick, but I have a rough idea.

The Chair: Okay, \$353 for the full day.

Mr. Oberle: May I comment on that, Mr. Chair? The compensation as proposed in my motion is not just intended to replace the per diems, the chair's pay, though it certainly does that. It eliminates all of the other per diems, the chair's pay, all of that stuff. It in part reflects that compensation, but it also reflects what I believe is a greatly increased workload on committees and the fact that per diems don't actually reflect the amount of time that somebody puts in. You don't claim preparatory work; you don't claim travel time, for instance.

Mr. Mason: The effect of your motion, though, will be to eliminate the per diem and replace it with this.

Mr. Oberle: Chair's pay, everything, all the other little per diems: yeah, it will replace all of that.

The Chair: Others? Mr. Taylor.

Mr. Taylor: Sure. This is a tough one. We can tell already from the four policy field committees that existed last year, which I think

did some very fine work, that there is a significant increase in workload, and I'm certainly not going to disagree with Mr. Oberle's contention around that. We do work hard in this job of ours, and with additional responsibilities for the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections, Standing Orders and Printing, the five policy field committees, various other committees that we sit on, I think all of us will see our workload go up.

By the same token, we are being asked here to vote on our own compensation. In the Alberta Liberal Party we've always had a problem with that. Mr. Chairman, I think you and I have had discussions about that at Members' Services Committee meetings at various times in the past. It simply is a feeling of mine and of our caucus and our party that we should not be sitting in judgment of our own compensation, that someone independent, someone outside, should be doing that.

Now, I know that that's a very easy thing to say in theory, in principle, and it's tough to put into practice in practical terms. Many other jurisdictions have tried to do that. They've brought in outside accounting firms to determine their compensation and still ended up having to vote on the recommendations of the accounting firm and so on and so forth. It's not a perfect system, no question about it. But, still, we're being asked here to vote ourselves anywhere from a \$3,000 to \$3,500 a month raise. That's pretty significant to ordinary taxpayers. It's a difficult issue to wrestle with, in my view.

The Chair: In the legislation that we currently have, as all members have, the Legislative Assembly Act, it's mandated that it's the Members' Services Committee, which is an all-party committee that meets in public, that is the designated tool in the province of Alberta. That is the law of Alberta right now. It's this committee that must make that decision.

Mr. Snelgrove: Again, I absolutely appreciate what Dave is saying though I do read in here that members of Executive Council would not qualify, so I guess I can say that I'm not voting on my salary. You know, we do have committees that are independent that advise us on compensation for staff, and I can assure you that if that same committee were in your domain, looking at your compensation, I really believe that their suggestion would be far greater than this. It may take another form; I can't say that. I think the reality is that you're far underpaid. I know the workload from MLA days on committee work, and it is not substantially different than some ministries.

I can appreciate that there is no easy way to deal with this issue. MLAs ultimately are going to be responsible for it. So in many ways this is probably the dirtiest but the fairest way to have to do it because you and I are going to have to answer to the people of Alberta that in fact we are earning this money. I have far more people tell me, "I wouldn't take your job for all the money in China," than I ever do that say, "What did you get?"

As someone who's really not included in this, I can tell you that I support this. As a matter of fact, I think it's necessary so that people can actually maintain a certain degree of sanity with the work that they do. It's never easy, but I can certainly appreciate the position. There's really no other way to do it.

The Chair: Others? Other comments?

Sorry, did you want to respond?

Mr. Oberle: Yeah. If I could just comment, I guess, on the last two speakers. I wish to be clear that, I suppose, in my mind, I'm not proposing a compensation package here. I have not dealt with the other compensation, the MLAs' remuneration at all in this. I'm

attempting to address a workload that has been added to significantly just in the couple years that I've been here.

Nonetheless, I do recognize that MLA compensation is an issue, and I would have to say that I was cognizant of that fact in choosing the \$3,500. You will note that, first of all, you have to serve on three standing committees and be a chair of one of them in order to earn that \$3,500, which I would suggest is a very significant workload. But from there, if you do the math, that puts your total compensation at somewhere in the order of two-thirds what a federal MP gets, which is below what other provinces are tagging their new remuneration packages at.

Now, if somebody else wants to tackle that whole thing – I'm kind of of the same mind as Mr. Taylor that it would be nice to have another way of tackling it. But I'm not tackling it in this; I'm merely proposing that we properly compensate for the considerable hours that we put in and the year-round job that we've turned this into through our greatly expanded committee work.

Mr. Hehr: I would just like for the record to sort of reiterate Dave's position. I don't think MLAs should be setting their own salaries. Hey, when I took this job, I took it under the guise that I was going to get X for X years. Just the simple fact of a bit of the timing, the fact that we have to vote on it – I'm perfectly well aware. My friends and I sit around and talk where we go. We all know we want to attract good people to this business, and to attract good people to this business, you have to fairly and adequately pay. I know what my friends in a law shop are making, in X and other places. You know, I just don't like the fact that we have to vote on ourselves. I know the conundrum we're in, and I respect that conundrum nonetheless. Those are my feelings.

The Chair: Mr. Weadick.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you. Just like Mr. Mason, across, having served in public office at the civic level, it's part of what you have to do. You face it each and every time you look at this, but there isn't anywhere else to turn. You can't go to some big guy in the sky that says: thus shall it be. So you have to very realistically look at what you do and what the pay is for and make a very honest decision. I'm expecting that everybody at this table can do exactly that. Everybody knows the workload.

To say that we can't set our own is kind of a cop-out because there isn't anyone else. I don't want the federal government setting my remuneration when they don't know what I do. I'd rather with a group of people that I'm going to work with every day for the next four years sit down and try to come up with something that's reasonable, make it work, and then agree together and move on. I think that's the fairest way. It is the reality of this that a small group of us actually will set it for all 83 members. They have no say in it, but we will ultimately decide it for them, which is probably a little bit different than at the civic level, but it is really the only way you can do it. As much as it's uncomfortable – and we've been through it many times – I just can't see a better way to do it. We just need to step up and determine it is the right thing and then vote on it.

The Chair: Mr. Mason.

6:25

Mr. Mason: Well, thank you. That member talked about municipal, and this was something we grappled with on Edmonton city council when I served on that body for three and a half terms. It came up a couple times, and in fact the council was for a number of years unwilling to take it on because of the difficulty of setting your own

compensation. It's really the only job in the world, being a politician, where you are forced to make your own compensation, and it is, I think, more difficult for politicians to make those decisions than many in the public might think. There were a number of years that went by on Edmonton council with no increase, and the council compensation fell farther and farther behind. Eventually council bit the bullet. Then the whole debate about somebody else who's more objective, who's not in a conflict of interest, should be making the decision: we had lawyers examine all of that. In fact, they said: "Ultimately, the law is that you are responsible. That is your responsibility as an elected member. When you got elected, you took on that responsibility, and you have to face up to it."

Then the next thing that we tried on council was to appoint a committee to make recommendations. We put people from the community on it, we put some Chamber of Commerce people on it, we put some union people on it and sent them away to study it. They did the research of other city councils and the provincial MLAs and so on, and they came back. It was interesting because the union guy said: well, you know, you guys need a big raise. The business guys said: is that all you're working for? So they came forward with recommendations for significant increases because there had been a number of years that had passed. There was a public outcry, so the council had to actually reduce the amount that had been recommended by the external committee.

You know, I've been through all that actually more than once. I just want to indicate that it seems to me that we have to make this decision. It is an increase; however, net of the per diems that members were receiving for committee work, it's not as big an increase as it might appear.

In our circumstances, in our little caucus of two people, there has been just a huge increase in the workload. Government has been very generous in giving us positions on all the committees and all the standing committees. We think it's just so that they keep us out of trouble. You didn't think we could see through your plan, did you? I sit on four committees, and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona sits on six committees. The work is quite challenging.

I appreciate the difficulty in dealing with this, and I wish there were some way that we could avoid it, but I think this is our responsibility. We have to vote on this based not on whether we think we should do it or not but based on whether we think it's the right amount or not. There are always going to be people in the public that think that politicians aren't worth whatever it is you pay them. Being a politician is unfortunately not considered – we're higher in public estimation than lawyers, but that's about it.

Mr. Chairman, you know, just to indicate that I think that it's a difficult and an awkward position to be put in, but I know that the workload for all of us has increased. In our particular caucus it has multiplied severalfold.

I think that based on that, we should approve the motion.

The Chair: Others? Shall I call the question?

Hon. Members: Question.

The Chair: All those in favour of the motion proposed by Mr. Oberle either raise your hand or say aye. Those opposed raise their hand or say no. It's carried, 8 to 2 if the Chair voted.

Now that this matter has been dealt with, I would like to just draw to your attention a most interesting report that was filed with the federal government a couple of weeks ago. It came from one of the gurus of a former Prime Minister's office, Mr. Thomas Axworthy, who's now the leading professor of political economics at a major think tank. He wrote a large, thick paper about the need to reform

the federal parliament, and one of his key recommendations in the report was that chairs of the committees of the federal House should receive compensation equal to that of a cabinet minister. So if you were a chair here in Alberta of one of these committees, you just voted yourself one-fifth of the amount of what the feds are going to be voting for their chairmen here in a matter of weeks from now, I'm sure. Just to put a value on all of this. Just an editorial comment from the chair. The discussion has all been done.

The next item is a request for additional funds for the Official Opposition caucus. There is in your documentation a letter that was sent to myself from Ms Blakeman. It was dated 19 March 2008. I've invited Ms Blakeman to come tonight to make a presentation with respect to the request. You have the one letter, which is the only piece of paper we have on this file.

Ms Blakeman.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, and thank you for allowing me to address the committee. I particularly would like to thank Mr. Snelgrove, who I think has the same night shift as I do because we're doing our ministries, so thank you very much.

Mr. Snelgrove: I was hoping you'd be tied up.

Ms Blakeman: Well, so far so good. But I really appreciate the opportunity to present to the committee on the adequate resourcing of the Official Opposition caucus. I am presenting a request on behalf of my caucus for an additional \$300,000 annually. I would like also to note and express my appreciation to both the chair and the vice-chair, who both gave to me their time and advice and assistance in preparing this presentation. I did bring extra copies if anybody does not have a copy of the letter, which I'm sure I can get to you, but I understand there's one in your package. I should note that the numbers that I have listed on that page were the numbers reflective of what was available to me at the time. Newer numbers are slightly different, so bear with me.

The \$300,000 is requested to help the caucus budget deal with two things: some inequities that have crept in which necessitated pulling funds away from our research staff in order to subsidize cost escalation or funding omissions, and, secondly, we have lost an economy of scale, working with fewer MLAs but essentially the same responsibilities. My goal from all of this is to be able to hire three more researchers to support our caucus with this money.

We currently have five and a half researchers that are covering 24 ministries. They do budget estimates, they do bill briefings, they in many cases write questions for question period, they often help prepare written questions and motions for returns, they do the Public Accounts prep for their particular areas, and they also are responsible for providing the background for correspondence, the expertise, the research as such, in response to inquiries that come into caucus. Each of our researchers currently averages four to five portfolio responsibilities apiece. It's a lot. It's too much, actually.

I was a member of the caucus between 2001 and 2004, when we had seven members, and I can tell you that we couldn't keep staff. It was kind of fun and sort of exciting for them to go through one sitting with us, but after 12-hour days for three months, when they looked ahead and all they could see were 12-hour days for the rest of the time they worked for us, they were gone. So we spent a lot of time retraining staff members. We had almost no institutional memory amongst the staff about how things work, what the processes and procedures were, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and we had no continuity. It was really awful.

That's why we need the money, and that's how we came to be in the position that we're in. Now, let me tell you where our money

comes from right now. We get almost \$600,000 through our member allowance, and all caucuses get that. It's based on \$66,150 per elected member, so that for us is \$595,350 to our caucus. We also get a leader's office allowance, which I believe is supposed to be the average cost of all the ministers' offices averaged out. What we get for that currently is \$457,800. We also get an allocation for a Calgary caucus office, and that is \$73,331. Now, that amount for the Calgary caucus office has not risen commensurate with inflation in Calgary rents, and those of you from that area will know what I'm talking about. The actual cost for us for the Calgary caucus office right now is \$132,800. We're subsidizing this office to the tune of 60 grand a year. That amount I just gave you is the rent and the one staff person that's working there. That was what that allocation was supposed to cover.

6:35

There are some differences between what we pay for out of our caucus budget and, as far as I understand – and I could be wrong, and I'm sure I'll be corrected – what the government caucus is responsible for. For example, McDougall Centre is not paid for out of your caucus office, but our southern Alberta office is paid out of ours. Therefore, although we received an allocation, you can see that having to subsidize it to the tune of 60 grand pulled money away from our researchers and cost us, if I can put it that way.

We also are totally responsible for our communications budgets, and although we have a leader's office support, there was a quirk in there where the leader's overnight travel was covered for 10 overnights, 10 per diems of overnights, but anything beyond that we again had to pull from the budget to subsidize. Those 10 nights only paid for the leader but no assistant to travel with him. So we've been subsidizing that as well.

I've already talked about the Calgary office cost escalations. I've talked about the leader's budget. I believe, if I've got the numbers right, that allocation of \$457,000 is below by about \$40,000 what the average of all the ministerial offices is, but I could be corrected on that. I've talked about the leader being restricted on the overnight trips.

We also pay for all of our own communications staff. We don't get access to the Public Affairs Bureau. No surprise. So we do all of our own speeches and members' statements and questions and all of those kinds of things and, you know, communicating with the media and all of that.

I want to stop here and talk about the radio ads, which I know are a real sore point with a lot of you guys. I think you'll be interested to know that those ads were cleared. We cannot get authorization to make a payment out of our caucus budget without running it through the LAO, and they adhere to the rules that are set up by this very committee. So we did nothing wrong there, and we cleared those ads. All the rules about what language you can use, where you can say Official Opposition or Liberal caucus or caucus, are all in there, and we followed them all. Trust me. When we don't follow them all, they won't let us pay for it, or they make us reimburse it. You'll be happy to hear that there were some polls that we did that we were not able to pay for because they had not been approved and they didn't use the language that is permitted. So we are careful, as much as we can be, to get the approval through the LAO on how we do that and try not to make mistakes like that because it costs us.

Now, if you go back to my letter to the Speaker, you will see that I've touched on a number of the categories that I've talked about. The two categories I haven't talked about are new media and portfolio support. New media is not about radio ads, let me assure you. New media is about new media. It's about website and e-zine and database management. It's those kinds of communication tools

that everybody is expected to have now. I don't think that that gets paid for out of the caucus budget for the government members, but we certainly have to pay for it. This has been an additional cost for us.

Postage is very expensive now, so we do as much as we can by e-mail. We pay a firm to do an e-mail mailing for us. We try and do our press releases and as much of our correspondence as we can that way. But it costs us to use that service. We pay for our own website space. We pay for the webmaster, the staff person. We pay for the maintenance and the hardware and the software that is necessary to use. We also do quite a bit of printing and distribution of brochures and reports and research papers and things like that, and that runs us about \$10,000 a year. All told, all of those things add up to just shy of \$30,000 for us. That's the sort of additional cost above and beyond what we have been used to paying, and that's kind of accumulated along over the last – well, how long have websites been a must-have item? – you know, five to seven years.

Now, we also need a half-time person to do the database management. For any of you that have ever worked with that, you know you have to maintain that or your lists are not current, and you start to jam up the airwaves because you're sending a lot of crappy e-mails out there where the addresses aren't right.

We also need to be able to pay an IT person that is capable of being a website master. Right now we're paying somebody a lesser amount of money. I looked, and a Public Affairs officer position that was advertised last month for a program services level 3/4 had a salary range of \$55,000 to \$78,000. We would come in the middle there. That total bill of new media came in at \$74,600.

The final category is around the research staff. I said we have five and a half. I'm trying to get more. That last \$150,000 would buy us two more, and that's not at the top rate of pay. I've been checking, and actually more and more that researcher level is getting up higher. So it's to buy us two staff people.

I had also hoped there might be a little bit of space in there to be able to send either staff or MLAs to out-of-province conferences that were really current. Like, I paid to take myself to one on housing in Vancouver because we had no money to do that. Last year David Swann went to one on the environment, and he paid for that out of his own pocket as well.

But, you know, clearly, what's most important to us is the research staff. That's what we'd use the money for. By redirecting the money that we have been using to subsidize the leader's budget and the Calgary office, we could add a third staff person. That's where I was trying to get.

The final and most obvious question is: "Well, if you guys made it through '01 to '04, what is your problem? Why can't you do it again?" Really, the reason I started on this – and you'll see the date of my letter to the minister – was that when I got elected, I got up the next morning and I thought: we can't do this again. We're not serving people well. We're not fulfilling our role as Official Opposition. I can tell you from being around in those days.

You know, people would say: just do it again; you can do it. The truth was that we didn't do it back then. We didn't return people's phone calls. We didn't return their correspondence all the time. We left things undone. We couldn't research things. We wasted a lot of time retraining staff over and over again for things like that, and we went without, or we paid out of our own pockets. I'm asking the committee to consider properly resourcing the Official Opposition. I think we need to be able to do our jobs. Yes, we have nine MLAs, but we have 24 portfolios that we go back to. This money is not for the MLAs. This money is to support the caucus office and the staff that support us so that we all together can perform the roles and duties and responsibilities of the Official Opposition.

Thank you for allowing me to present that to you. I appreciate your time on this committee and the forbearance of the chair and the vice-chair. I'm happy to answer any questions. I brought some backup documentation with me.

The Chair: Okay. Ms Blakeman was invited to appear before the committee, so the role that she will have will be to answer questions that members would want to raise with her. This is not a debate now – she's not an official member of the committee – so questions of information and the like.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you for the presentation. I've got a number of questions, both for the chair and for Ms Blakeman. Since I am a new member on this committee and I don't have the expertise that some of you have, I wouldn't mind, Mr. Chairman, before I make this decision, the copies of some previous budgets. I don't know what was spent in previous years.

The Chair: Copies of which budgets, sir?

Mr. VanderBurg: The caucus budgets.

The Chair: We're going back?

Mr. VanderBurg: Yeah.

The Chair: Previous years' caucus budgets?

Mr. VanderBurg: Yeah.

The Chair: You do have a document there that I did provide to you with the current caucus budget, then you have the flow sheet. You mean going back several years?

Mr. VanderBurg: Yeah.

The Chair: Well, that can be provided.

Mr. VanderBurg: I wouldn't mind having that.

The Chair: How far back?

Mr. VanderBurg: Oh, a couple of years.

An Hon. Member: '63-64.

The Chair: No, no, no. We're not going back to '63.

Mr. VanderBurg: A couple of years would be good for me; '06-07.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. VanderBurg: Then the second point that Ms Blakeman brought up was staff turnover. I think all caucuses have had a number of staff turn over since I've been here in 2001, a lot of different researchers. Again, is there any data on staff turnover from the NDs, Liberals, PCs, Alliance? Is there any of that available?

6:45

The Chair: Well, I suppose we could probably get that for you from our human resources people, but you could get that directly from your whip, who should have that, and it could be provided from the other caucuses as well. But failing that, we could get Mrs. Scarlett to give us some of that. How far back do you want this to, sir? Like, is three years okay?

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, three or four years. Yeah. That's fine.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. VanderBurg: Three years.

The Chair: From a couple now we've gone to three and now to four.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, the financial stuff was a couple of years so I could get the pattern.

The Chair: Okay. Let's just make a decision. If we go to '05-06 and '06-07 and '07-08, how would that be?

Mr. VanderBurg: That would be perfect.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. VanderBurg: Then the second point. Maybe Ms Blakeman could answer this. There was a \$25,000 request for additional leader's travel costs. So the existing budget, the budget passed last year: how much of the travel costs did the leader incur outside of Edmonton, outside of Alberta?

Ms Blakeman: I don't know how much of his regular travel. It's sort of transport travel.

Mr. VanderBurg: Right.

Ms Blakeman: But the \$25,000 reflects the amount that we paid once he had exhausted his 10 overnights. So that was specific to overnight hotels essentially.

Mr. VanderBurg: Right. But you're asking for an additional \$25,000. I mean, that's a lot of hotels.

Ms Blakeman: Yeah. It is.

Mr. VanderBurg: Right.

Ms Blakeman: And the staff that travel with him.

Mr. VanderBurg: How much of last year's budget would have been outside of Edmonton and outside of the province?

Ms Blakeman: Outside of the province there was one trip, and I don't know that it was run through this budget. All the rest of the travel would have been inside of the province and outside of Edmonton. The leader lives in Edmonton, so there is no cost until he leaves Edmonton.

Mr. VanderBurg: Right. Okay.

Ms Blakeman: With a staff person.

Mr. VanderBurg: Then additional for the southern Alberta caucus office.

The Chair: Sorry. Could I just jump in here? I just want to draw your attention to a policy that this committee established when an allowance was provided to the Leader of the Official Opposition. At the time the committee said what it would do. The request made by

a previous representative from the Liberal caucus basically said: we need an office allowance for our leader. So the question was: how are we ever going to determine what it is going to be?

After a lot of discussion, a lot of debate the decision was that the committee would provide an allowance for the Leader of the Official Opposition for his office or her office in an amount equal to the average of the offices of Executive Council ministers of the previous year.

I just circulated a piece of paper to show you that in the current fiscal year, 2008-2009, when the provincial budget came down, I simply took out the budget book, put it in front of me, and wrote down what each minister's office in Executive Council is and then divided it, and the average is \$499,348. If we were to apply the policy that we currently have, effective April 1, 2009, for the fiscal year 2009-2010, that would be the number we would allocate for the Leader of the Official Opposition. That's the way the policy would be applied.

In the current year the number is \$457,800. That's what the current budget is, at least the policy that was used. The request of \$25,000 would be less than what the average would be there. I just provided that for you for information as you go forward on this one.

Mr. Weadick: Just a clarification.

The Chair: Yes, sir.

Mr. Weadick: Is that \$457,000, then, a reflection of what the average ministerial office would have been in 2006-2007?

The Chair: A year ago.

Mr. Weadick: Okay.

Mr. VanderBurg: The actual, right? Not the budgeted amount.

The Chair: Oh, well. Sorry. I took it out of the budget.

Mr. VanderBurg: Oh. Okay.

The Chair: Whatever the document was that was just released here a couple of weeks ago, this is the average; \$499,000 is what it is. You know, there's one budget that's right on \$500,000. They are different numbers, but there are a couple right on the number.

That was just for information. I'm not skewing anything.

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Chairman, are there any other formulas that I don't know about, since this is my first meeting?

The Chair: No. That was the essential formula other than the formula that was already pointed out by Ms Blakeman: the amount of dollars per capita, per member, to determine the overall caucus budget. But that was the only one with a formula or a policy that was to lead in that particular direction.

Mr. VanderBurg: Okay. I'll go back. Based on my new information, you'd like additional funds over and above that formula. That's what's you're saying.

Ms Blakeman: Yes. Now that I understand how the formula was arrived at, yes.

Mr. VanderBurg: Okay. So the formula plus \$25,000.

Ms Blakeman: Yes.

Mr. VanderBurg: Okay. That's my final question.

Ms Blakeman: Didn't you want to ask about the Calgary caucus office?

Mr. VanderBurg: Oh, yeah. Sorry. I wrote it down here: a summary of the southern Alberta caucus expense. What do you pay for rent down there?

Ms Blakeman: We pay \$4,400.

Mr. VanderBurg: I'm just hearing from my Calgary colleagues.

An Hon. Member: It's pretty expensive.

Ms Blakeman: Unbelievable.

Mr. VanderBurg: Not that I want you in Whitecourt-St. Anne, but, I mean, it's cheaper there.

Ms Blakeman: Anybody else I can answer questions for?

The Chair: Do we have additional questions? Mr. VanderBurg, you're finished?

Mr. Rodney, then Mr. Oberle, then Mr. Weadick.

Mr. Rodney: Thanks, Chairman, and thanks for the presentation. Hon. Blakeman, I'm surprised that you didn't welcome us. Do you want to do it now?

Ms Blakeman: Yes. I would love to welcome you all to my fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre. I was thrown because my back is to my fabulous constituency. I always sit on the other side so that I can look out the window and remain grounded. I apologize.

Mr. Rodney: We've served on other committees before, and I missed that, especially as I can see, pardon the expression, over your left shoulder that there are new buildings in your constituency.

In fact, with all facetiousness aside, Chair, one of the things I am interested in is Mr. Mason's take on this, but of course we'll open it up to him when you've got a list going.

Hon. Blakeman, I don't think anyone would argue that your categories are not valid. I think it's fair to say that new media is a new expense that people in our positions are encountering. Leader's office, you mentioned Calgary. I pay in Calgary. So does the hon. Taylor. It's just that I wonder. You see, the first and last categories are new and the middle two are additional. I know that all of us struggle for volunteers and to get the best rates on everything because it's either money we have to raise ourselves or public money, and we need to be conservative, if you'll pardon the word. I just wonder what taxpayers are going to have to say about the numbers. Again, I'm not attacking the categories, but I just wonder if better deals could be had other than \$75,000 and \$25,000 and \$50,000 and \$150,000. I just wonder if you can comment on the amount.

A question for the hon. chairman. If I hear this right, because this is my first time on this particular committee, the ministerial office budget, again, is just under \$500,000, and you're saying that the allocation for the leader's budget this past year or the year upcoming is closer to \$460,000, a difference of \$40,000. But the request is for an additional \$300,000, not an additional \$40,000. Am I reading that correctly? This was passed out. According to the formula it

would be in the neighbourhood of \$40,000, but the request is in the neighbourhood of \$300,000.

The Chair: I think there's an overall request for \$300,000. I just gave you one example to look at these items. The Leader of the Official Opposition in the current budget gets \$457,800. All I'm saying is that on April 1, 2009, if we use the existing policy, it will be \$499,348. The request is almost half, for \$25,000 extra, which is about halfway to what it will be next year, if that answers your question.

Mr. Rodney: To pull those two together if I may, then, how would you rationalize to constituents the difference in numbers between the asks here?

Ms Blakeman: I'm approaching this, I think, with a different thought pattern than you are. Really, what I did was look at it, and I thought: what's the minimum of what we need to really go forward with any kind of—I don't want to say competency because it makes it sound like what we have right now isn't competent, but we needed three more people. Why couldn't we have three more people?

6:55

I went back and met with our staff and said: "Where are the biggest problems here? What's costing us money that we couldn't get more researchers out of this budget if we squeezed a little harder?" And what came forward is what I brought out to you, that we are subsidizing away from our research budget. Our labour budget is, like, 90 per cent of our budget. Where was it costing us money? It was subsidizing the Calgary office. It was the extra money going towards the leader's allowance. So that's one person. Then two more people. That's what the rationale is. The two things match up: where are we short, and how do we get three more people?

Mr. Rodney: So if I understand you correctly—again, we don't cast aspersions. What would be the point? We're doing this all-party thing because it's the right thing to do. When I ask this question, that's where I'm coming from. Are you suggesting, then, that the \$500,000-ish formula is not necessarily applicable, that it's not necessarily valid here anymore?

Ms Blakeman: If you're talking about the member allocation, you know, I'm not the expert or the best person to make this work. I'm just telling you what we need and what we tried to do to fix it and where we're struggling with it.

Mr. Rodney: Okay.

Ms Blakeman: We get money in three different pots. I told you how much in each different pot. Can I justify this to Albertans and to constituents? In a New York minute.

What is the big difference between six months ago and today? Well, we had an election. We lost a chunk of our budget because we lost eight members. With that went eight members at 66,000 bucks, yet we still have the same responsibilities.

Mr. Rodney: Sure. Well, as the chair indicated, the purpose of this is not to debate but to ask questions, and I do appreciate your clarification. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Hon. members, we have a little problem here from an administrative point of view. I have six members on a list. This meeting will adjourn at 7 o'clock. This matter will have to go

over to a next meeting. I will need to determine the date of that meeting and will recommend to you that it be two weeks hence, June 4. But if there are questions that people have for further information to make the decision, they should be raised with Ms Blakeman now, so somebody can be in a position to get the answers.

Mr. Snelgrove: What if it's a question for you, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Well, you'll be fifth on the list.

Mr. Snelgrove: It's just on budgeting. Do we have the budget? Would this come from the Leg. budget if it's approved?

The Chair: No. What will have to happen is that at the conclusion of all these decisions we will provide a document, well, quite frankly, to the government as part of the supplementary or additional estimates that will be dealt with in the fall, presumably. That would answer that question. That would cover all of this. Yes.

A question?

Mr. Weadick: No. Just some information that I would like to have. Frank, from our perspective in our caucus – you know, I'm hearing that we may be a little light in two areas. One is rentals.

Mr. Oberle: We're not light in any areas. We've got unbelievable bench depth.

Mr. Weadick: From a financial perspective there may be . . .

Mr. Oberle: Oh, finances.

Mr. Weadick: Yeah. Money, money, money. Rental in Calgary and Edmonton. They're struggling with it at the caucus level, and we've got members struggling with it at the constituency level. We may have to have this committee deal with all of them at once. Can we get some numbers around that?

The Chair: On rents?

Mr. Weadick: Yeah. On rents.

The Chair: Yes. We can have that provided to all members.

Mr. Weadick: So we could maybe make a decision, do it all at once?

The Chair: Yes. We can have it in a binder for you for the next meeting.

Mr. Weadick: The other one would be the actual member thing. I prefer dealing with members across the board, if I can, because I'm guessing that we're going to find out that there's a little shortage in some other places as well. Do we have an idea what we could do on an average member basis so that we could get the funds up on all of the caucuses so we could deal with some of the issues that we have?

The Chair: All of which can be done. Anything in the imagination of the committee.

Are there any additional pieces of information they want from Ms Blakeman? Thirty seconds.

Mr. Oberle: If we could explore that Calgary caucus thing. We turned down constituency rent increases to reflect the rental market in Calgary in a Members' Services Committee meeting before the

election. I believe the opposition parties also voted with that motion, if I recall, because of the difficulty that if you jack up the rent, then the member or the party might just go rent nicer facilities. The number that you have for your southern office is not right in front of me, but it seems to me to be roughly reflective of a constituency budget for an MLA in Calgary – and Dave would certainly know the struggles of that – who has to not only pay for the office for a full-time staffer but also has to conduct his constituency work. He has whatever other expenses are allowable under that within that same envelope. So if you could at the next meeting comment on that disparity.

If I may, very briefly, Mr. Chair, I need to point out that the government caucus on a per-member basis receives the same funding as the Liberal caucus, and we do the same job with that funding. I recognize there are economies of scale, and that's what we're talking about here, but we do have the support of the Public Affairs Bureau. So do you. We only use news releases, really. What else could we use?

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much. I think we have a problem because the meeting was scheduled to adjourn at 7 o'clock. I need to get a date for the next meeting. Can we meet in two weeks from tonight?

Some Hon. Members: No.

The Chair: What do you mean no? We've got to find a date.

An Hon. Member: Seniors' awards that night at Government House.

Mr. Snelgrove: It should be sooner than later.

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, what other standing committee meetings are there next Wednesday?

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Chairman, it's my understanding – please correct me if I'm wrong – that we may upon 24 hours' notice to your office provide substitutes for a meeting.

The Chair: Yes. Absolutely correct.

Mr. Oberle: So I would urge that we have this meeting as soon as possible, and if we have to provide substitutes, we will maybe go with that.

The Chair: Do you want next Wednesday?

Some Hon. Members: Yes.

The Chair: Well, I just want to make sure there are not more committees meeting at the same time.

Okay. Can we meet, then, at 5:45, Wednesday, May 28? The item on the agenda will be this item. If there are additional items that members want to bring forward, bring them forward to me in the next few days, but otherwise we're going to go with this, and Business Arising from the Last Meeting will show 3(a), request for additional funds for the Official Opposition caucus. That will be the item.

Mr. Mason: Why wouldn't you deal with a couple of other items?

The Chair: Well, that'll come, too, but that's under New Business.

Mr. Mason: Okay. We'll finish the agenda is what you're saying.

The Chair: Yeah. Absolutely. If there are other items, bring them to my attention.

Mr. Oberle: Mr. Chairman, I'm unable to attend that meeting, but if it's the will of the committee, I'll certainly arrange for a replacement and make sure that my input is provided to that replacement. I'll probably take the opportunity to speak to Ms Blakeman some time between now and then.

The Chair: Okay. That's where we're going. Next Wednesday night at 5:45, and if you need a substitute, please provide 24 hours' notice.

Can I have a motion to adjourn? Thank you.

I'm sorry we kept you three minutes over because I know you all have to be someplace else in 27 minutes.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 7:03 p.m.]

