

[Chairman: Mr. Pashak]

[10:03 a.m.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'd like to call this meeting to order. We're only two minutes late. I'd like to begin by introducing two people. Mr. Moore has been named the deputy chairman of this committee. By the way, my name is Barry Pashak. I represent the riding of Calgary Forest Lawn. On my left is the new Auditor General of the province of Alberta, Mr. Don Salmon. Maybe I should just introduce him briefly by saying that Mr. Salmon was born in southern Alberta. He completed his articles with the office of the Provincial Auditor and obtained his accounting designation in 1959. I believe it was in 1978 that Mr. Salmon was selected as a result of a national competition to be the assistant Auditor General. It was obviously with a view that on the retirement of the previous Auditor General, Mr. Rogers, he would assume that position. We welcome you to the sessions of the Public Accounts Committee.

You have an agenda before you. The first item on the agenda is the discussion of the schedule for meetings. This has been the historical time for the meeting of this committee. It has always met at 10 o'clock on Wednesday mornings. I understand there could be a bit of a conflict with cabinet meetings, but to arrive at some alternative to that time might create some problems for us.

MR. DOWNEY: Mr. Chairman, considering the fact that a lot of our members are travelling on Mondays and Fridays and Wednesday is the cabinet meeting and it might be difficult to get our ministers and Thursday is government caucus, I would therefore move that we hold our meetings Tuesday mornings, starting at 10 o'clock when the House is in session.

MR. CHAIRMAN: May I just present an alternative to that. Our caucus meetings happen to be all morning on Tuesdays, which would make it inconvenient for at least some members of the opposition to attend at that time. My proposal would be to reconsider who we invite to these meetings as witnesses. In the past, the tradition has been to invite the cabinet minister. As a result of a meeting of Public Accounts chairpeople that I attended in Regina recently, I discovered the majority of these committees invite not the minister

himself; they invite the deputy minister. That's for the very good reason that if these Public Accounts committees are to function successfully, it's very important that they're nonpartisan. To invite the deputy minister takes the partisan politics out of it. If we're going to look at the way the public moneys are being spent, it may be somewhat to the advantage of the public and this committee to invite deputy ministers rather than cabinet ministers to these sessions.

MR. ADY: Mr. Chairman, we've got a motion on the floor, though, and we have to deal with it. I'll second the motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Do we need a seconder in the committees? No, we don't need a seconder. I was responding to the motion.

MR. DOWNEY: If I may comment briefly on your comments, Mr. Chairman, I have some difficulty personally with calling deputy ministers, as it is the minister who is ultimately responsible for his portfolio. Maybe some other members have some further comments, but that would be my judgment.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Does anyone have any further comment?

MR. HERON: Mr. Chairman, I'm going to check my schedule very carefully. I don't think we can avoid conflict, and I would have to favour the opening on Tuesday morning as the motion now stands.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Any further debate?

MR. PAYNE: Mr. Chairman, perhaps I could speak not only to the motion by the Member for Stettler but as well to your opening comments with respect to who is the most appropriate invitee, a minister or his deputy. I'm in the unusual position of having been both a deputy and a minister, as well as a member of Public Accounts. In my experience the ministers who attended previous meetings of this committee by and large have been prepared to make observations and reports not only of a technical or budgetary nature but also of a policy nature. I'm sure you would agree that deputies would be quite comfortable on the technical,

administrative, or budgetary side but would of course be most reluctant to get involved in any discussion of policy. As a consequence, I think the formula of the past, in which ministers were the primary invitees but, at their discretion, deputies accompanied them to the committee, seemed to be a fairly workable and appropriate formula. As a result of that experience, I'm prepared obviously not only to support the motion made by the Member for Stettler but also to speak, I guess, in a way against the comments the Chair made at the outset.

MR. CHAIRMAN: If I might just respond to those remarks . . . Is that in order?

MR. HERON: Mr. Chairman, perhaps you could give one issue at a time, and if I could call the question to first establish the meeting date.

MR. CHAIRMAN: There is another member who has indicated he would like to speak on this motion. Before I ask to have the question put, would you accept allowing . . .

MR. DOWNEY: If we're to act in the interests of expediting this meeting, perhaps I could let it stand and put this item to question.

MR. CHAIRMAN: All right. We'll put the question then on the day of the meetings.

MISS CONROY: The motion was that the committee hold its meetings on Tuesdays at 10 a.m. when the House is sitting.

MR. CHAIRMAN: All right. Those in favour of the motion as put, please signify. Those opposed? The ayes have the meeting.

The next question then — it did get involved in the previous discussion — is the selection of witnesses to appear before the committee.

MR. HERON: Mr. Chairman, I've given some thought to the ministers we'd like to bring before us in this order. I would like to move that we ask the ministers of Agriculture; Recreation and Parks; Transportation and Utilities; Tourism; Advanced Education; Culture; Economic Development and Trade; Forestry, Lands and Wildlife; and Public Works, Supply and Services. If we could use that as a starter, my motion stands here.

MR. CHAIRMAN: The past practice has been . . .

MR. MITCHELL: We still haven't discussed who's going to appear before this meeting. We haven't settled that. I'm saying that it's ministers or deputy ministers. That's what I'm referring to. I would like to address that.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think we have the motion on the floor, which is just the order of the departments.

MR. HERON: If that needs discussion, Mr. Chairman, I will amend my motion then to include that we summon the following departments, if you would like a full discussion on whom in these departments should represent them. My motion will then stand that we bring forth the following departments in the list that I gave.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think the past practice has been for the government side and the opposition side to alternate in terms of bringing departments before the Public Accounts Committee. This represents a departure from previous practice.

MR. ADY: You're saying the past practice has been that the government and the opposition alternate in designating who would come.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MR. MUSGROVE: Mr. Chairman, as a member of Public Accounts, I believe we designated the departments we were going to call as witnesses at the original meeting. This motion is amendable, but I think at this time we have to decide which departments and in which order. That was the practice before. At the organizational meeting we decided which departments were going to be called and in which order. Of course, the opposition had some input to changing the order of departments, but they were designated.

MR. CHAIRMAN: So at this point, I assume it would be open to any member to move an amendment to insert another department in the order as you've presented it or add, delete, or whatever to the motion that is before us.

MR. EWASIUK: Mr. Chairman, a clarification. Was Municipal Affairs on the list mentioned?

MR. CHAIRMAN: No, it wasn't.

MR. EWASIUK: I'd make the amendment to include Municipal Affairs.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Where would you put it? In which order of priority?

MR. EWASIUK: I don't have any particular concern about its priority, as long as it's on the list somewhere.

MR. ADY: Mr. Chairman, aren't there some Standing Orders on Public Accounts that cover this question we're talking about on designating, when it comes forward, and so on?

MR. MITCHELL: Are we agreeing that we have to specify the list now? If we are, I have some ideas for that.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I guess the only thing I could do at this point would be to entertain a motion to table this question until our next meeting, at which time we would decide on the order.

MR. MITCHELL: I move to do that.

MR. CHAIRMAN: There's a motion to table which is not debatable. Those in favour of tabling this motion until the next meeting of the Public Accounts Committee, which would be next Tuesday? Those opposed?

AN HON. MEMBER: Sorry, you called what?

MR. CHAIRMAN: A motion was made to table the question of the ...

AN HON. MEMBER: Mr. Chairman, you're not allowed to ... [inaudible]

MR. CHAIRMAN: But a motion to table takes precedence. There is a motion to table this question of the order and the departments that would appear before the Public Accounts Committee until our next Tuesday meeting. I'd ask for those who are in favour of the tabling motion to indicate.

MR. R. MOORE: Just on a point of

information, does that mean you're tabling the motion, that we'll come back and the motion will still be on the books?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Yes. The motion is not debatable. So those in favour of tabling, would you please indicate? Those opposed to tabling? The motion to table is carried.

We could now debate the question of whom from the department we'd like to call, if anyone would like to make a motion to that effect.

MR. MITCHELL: I move that we call, as a matter of course, both the minister and the deputy minister of each department.

MR. CHAIRMAN: The question then is to call both the minister and the deputy minister of the relevant department before the Public Accounts Committee. Is there any debate on that?

MR. JONSON: Yes, Mr. Chairman. It seems to me that the important part of the work of Public Accounts is to pose the questions and get the information we require. It should not focus upon certain individuals other than the minister in charge. Having been on the committee before, it has been my observation that the ministers, knowing the challenge before them, will bring any number of people from one to 10 into this Assembly to provide backup information and the information base we require. I think that flexibility should remain. To get into the business of specifying who we want from a particular department, other than of course our expectation of the minister himself or herself ...

MR. CHAIRMAN: Is there any further discussion?

MR. MITCHELL: I believe there have been some pretty good cases made for having both the deputy minister and the minister. Your argument was the precedent set in other legislatures. I could emphasize the case for deputy ministers by saying that I think a deputy minister has a different view, a more technical grasp of his department, and that's something that is within the purview of this committee. At the same time, the minister, it has been rightly said, considers policy. I think both of those are areas that should be considered.

I would be prepared to amend the motion in

response to the members' comments previous to mine, to say that we would ask for ministers and deputy ministers for sure and then the minister can bring whomever else he would choose to bring. But I believe if we don't take the initiative to specify who we want to have here, it could serve to erode the effectiveness of the committee.

MR. BRADLEY: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to speak to the motion and move an amendment. It has been the tradition in this Legislature and this Public Accounts Committee that we invite the minister, and he makes the decision as to who else will accompany him to a meeting of the committee. I think that's been very successful in the past. The minister, if he felt it necessary, would bring his deputy or other officials from his department. So I'd like to amend the motion to delete the reference to adding the deputy minister and other officials. At his discretion the minister may invite other officials from his department that he so wishes to bring.

MS LAING: I'd like to speak against the amendment. I believe we invite people here to meet our needs, and we are the ones that should be determining who comes because we know what kind of information. The decision for what information will be given should not be at the discretion of the minister but at our discretion.

MR. KROEGER: If you're talking about designating the deputy minister, let me give you an example. For instance, economic development now has two deputy ministers. Which one do you want? When I was in Transportation, I had three deputy ministers and five assistant deputy ministers. Which one do you want?

The minister that appears has to be prepared to respond, and if he wants support people, he brings them. If he thinks he's qualified to give the answers to this committee, then he can do that. I think you'll find that some of the ministers aren't crazy about bringing support people.

MR. BRASSARD: I would just like to say that ultimately the minister is responsible, and I think it is his responsibility to answer for the department totally. If that requires his bringing

half the staff, that's his prerogative, and I think it should be left. I really don't think it's fair for us to designate specific individuals to be here at present.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We're now voting on the amendment, which is to in effect give . . .

MR. MITCHELL: I would like to address the amendment again and say it just seems to me that there is a question of process here. How does the minister know what questions we might ask? It is conceivable that he won't have the right person, and therefore, there would be a delay. We'd have to get that person called in or wait until the next meeting. I think it becomes cumbersome.

Having been in the civil service in the past, my experience is that a deputy minister has a pretty broad grasp. If it means that there are two or four deputy ministers, great, bring them all. I think the focus here is to expedite the process of this committee and its ability to exercise its mandate.

MR. CHAIRMAN: If I might make a comment then. Under the next item of business, I'm going to propose that we establish a committee to review the proceedings of the Public Accounts Committee. I have a concern related to some of the points that have been made in this discussion about the role of the committee. The point has been made by Mr. Payne, among others, that partly what we should be looking at are the policies of various departments, and that was the justification for bringing the minister before the committee.

As a result of the research that I've done in preparing to chair this committee, I've come to a view myself that maybe it's inappropriate to go into policy. Policy is debated in the Legislature itself. What we really perhaps should be doing is just looking at actual expenditures, and keep the politics out of the Public Accounts Committee. Now that's not the view that has prevailed in Alberta over the past few years, but it is the view of a number of public accounts committees. As I say, maybe this is a matter that we could deal with during the term by establishing a committee to look at it.

Mr. Payne, you indicated that you wanted to respond.

MR. PAYNE: Briefly, Mr. Chairman. First of all, I resist your inclusion or reference to the word "politics" as well. That was certainly not the intent of my earlier remarks. The point I was making, of course, is that the minister of the Crown is the one who determines the policy in his department. It's from such policy that expenditure judgments and actions are taken. I don't see it as an either/or consideration. I see it as a both/and consideration. In that context no one is better qualified obviously than the minister.

MR. CHAIRMAN: The amendment before you is to delete reference to the deputy minister in the motion that was proposed by Mr. Mitchell. So are you ready for the question?

REV. ROBERTS: How does the question read?

MR. CHAIRMAN: The original motion was to require both the minister and the deputy minister to appear before the committee. Mr. Mitchell amended that by adding "and any support staff at the minister's discretion." Mr. Bradley wants to delete reference to the deputy minister. Is that a reasonable interpretation of what has happened?

MR. MUSGROVE: Mr. Chairman, I understood the amendment to say: to delete deputy minister and bring in support staff at the discretion of the minister.

MR. CHAIRMAN: There's some discussion going on here. I'm sorry, I just wasn't able to pick up . . .

MR. MUSGROVE: The amendment to say to delete the deputy minister portion, and the minister would bring in support staff at his discretion.

MR. BRADLEY: It was the intent of my motion to invite the minister only, and the minister can bring whichever support staff he wishes to bring at his discretion.

MR. R. MOORE: Question.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay. So we're just leaving it up to the minister then. The intent of the amendment is to leave it up to the minister to bring in whoever he wants to these meetings.

Then are you ready to vote on the amendment? Those in favour of the amendment, please signify. Those opposed?

So we're back to the main motion which as amended is to . . . In effect, the amendment has become the main motion, the way it . . .

REV. ROBERTS: Mr. Chairman, I wonder, though. By logical extension it would be presumptuous of those who wanted to amend the prior motion to tell the minister whom to bring at all. So any reference to bringing support staff would be presumptuous with that line of thinking. Maybe we should just amend it again to say we only want the minister to come.

MR. MITCHELL: I would have to speak against that amendment. I would definitely like it to be known.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'm not sure that he has put it as an amendment yet. I'm not sure that the amendment is in order. He's making a comment which I think is out of order.

REV. ROBERTS: Well, it's on the main motion. The motion now is that we have the minister and the support staff that he wants at his discretion to come with him.

MR. DOWNEY: Mr. Chairman, may we hear the motion as amended, please.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Yes. I'm just having it written out here for me. Bear with me for a minute. The motion as amended is that we will require the minister and any support staff at the minister's discretion to appear before this committee.

AN HON. MEMBER: Question.

MR. CHAIRMAN: The question has been called. Those in favour of the motion as amended? Those opposed? The motion is carried.

MR. M. MOORE: I'd like to bring a motion in relation to what we are talking about, how we will conduct the affairs of Public Accounts, if that's in order, Mr. Chairman. The last four years, under the chairmanship of Mr. Martin, it ran very, very well. He brought in a situation which probably a lot of us didn't agree with

when he brought it in, but it worked very, very well. I'd like to put that in the form of a motion now: that in the process of conducting our hearings, each member be given one question and two supplementaries and then drop to the bottom of the speaking order if he wants in again. That gives everybody a fair chance to have their say, rather than one or two dominating with a whole long list of supplementaries. Again, my motion is that we conduct our affairs with one question and two supplementaries, and if there are any more questions, they drop to the bottom of the speaking order.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think it's in order to accept the motion under other business, if the members are agreeable with that.

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Is there any discussion of the motion?

I might make another comment again, if I may. I guess in Committee of the Whole like this it's my prerogative to do that; I may speak on your motion. The practice I discovered in other public accounts committees is to sometimes have a lead questioner, the person to be designated by your caucus, who could follow a line of inquiry until he was satisfied with that line of inquiry and then maybe revert to allowing other members to add supplemental questions, but designate a lead questioner for a given department's expenditures.

MR. DOWNEY: If I may just comment on your comments, Mr. Chairman. I think all members of this committee are interested in serving on it. The scenario that you suggest might conceivably limit the major participation to three people. I personally don't feel that's totally fair to other members of the committee. So I would support the motion as it's proposed.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Is there any further discussion on this motion? Okay, those in favour of the motion as presented? Those opposed? The motion is carried.

There is one other item under other business. That is that we have a small budget for this committee, and we're going to begin the budget-building process for next year. If you

have any suggestions as to what we might do over the next 12 months that would require the expenditure of public funds, I would suggest that you bring them to this committee one week hence, next Tuesday. We'll put that item of a budget for this committee on the agenda for next Tuesday.

I did mention that also I wanted to include an item of setting up a subcommittee of this body to examine our procedures, with maybe a review of some of the points that I made earlier today. But as I understand, this committee may not have the power to establish a subcommittee. So I think I will have to take that under advisement and report back next week.

Is there any further business?

MR. M. MOORE: I move that we adjourn.

MR. CHAIRMAN: There is a motion to adjourn until 10 o'clock next Tuesday. Those in favour of the motion? Those opposed? Meeting adjourned.

I did forget something. I thought Mr. Moore would help me out here. It's been traditional to review the Auditor General's report at the first two meetings of this committee. So if we could send out memos to that effect, the next witness will be the Auditor General.

I'm terribly sorry. If we could just reconvene for one brief moment. It's also been very traditional to spend the first two sessions of this committee reviewing the Auditor General's report. I'm getting a sense of that. So with the concurrence of the group, could we put that on the agenda for next week?

MR. M. MOORE: I so move.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I hope everybody has a copy of it. Okay, we're adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:32 a.m.]