



Fourth Session - Thirty-Sixth Legislature

of the

Legislative Assembly of Manitoba

Standing Committee

on

Public Accounts

Chairperson
Mr. Conrad Santos
Constituency of Broadway



Vol. XLVIII No. 1 - 10:00 a.m., Wednesday, February 11, 1998

MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Thirty-Sixth Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
ASHTON, Steve	Thompson	N.D.P.
BARRETT, Becky	Wellington	N.D.P.
CERILLI, Marianne	Radisson	N.D.P.
CHOMIAK, Dave	Kildonan	N.D.P.
CUMMINGS, Glen, Hon.	Ste. Rose	P.C.
DACQUAY, Louise, Hon.	Seine River	P.C.
DERKACH, Leonard, Hon.	Roblin-Russell	P.C.
DEWAR, Gregory	Selkirk	N.D.P.
DOER, Gary	Concordia	N.D.P.
DOWNEY, James, Hon.	Arthur-Virden	P.C.
DRIEDGER, Albert	Steinbach	P.C.
DYCK, Peter	Pembina	P.C.
ENNS, Harry, Hon.	Lakeside	P.C.
EVANS, Clif	Interlake	N.D.P.
EVANS, Leonard S.	Brandon East	N.D.P.
FAURSCHOU, David	Portage la Prairie	P.C.
FILMON, Gary, Hon.	Tuxedo	P.C.
FINDLAY, Glen, Hon.	Springfield	P.C.
FRIESEN, Jean	Wolseley	N.D.P.
GAUDRY, Neil	St. Boniface	Lib.
GILLESHAMMER, Harold, Hon.	Minnedosa	P.C.
HELWER, Edward	Gimli	P.C.
HICKES, George	Point Douglas	N.D.P.
JENNISSON, Gerard	Flin Flon	N.D.P.
KOWALSKI, Gary	The Maples	Lib.
LAMOUREUX, Kevin	Inkster	Lib.
LATHLIN, Oscar	The Pas	N.D.P.
LAURENDEAU, Marcel	St. Norbert	P.C.
MACKINTOSH, Gord	St. Johns	N.D.P.
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	N.D.P.
MARTINDALE, Doug	Burrows	N.D.P.
McALPINE, Gerry	Sturgeon Creek	P.C.
McCRAE, James, Hon.	Brandon West	P.C.
McGIFFORD, Diane	Osborne	N.D.P.
McINTOSH, Linda, Hon.	Assiniboia	P.C.
MIHYCHUK, MaryAnn	St. James	N.D.P.
MITCHELSON, Bonnie, Hon.	River East	P.C.
NEWMAN, David, Hon.	Riel	P.C.
PENNER, Jack	Emerson	P.C.
PITURA, Frank, Hon.	Morris	P.C.
PRAZNIK, Darren, Hon.	Lac du Bonnet	P.C.
RADCLIFFE, Mike, Hon.	River Heights	P.C.
REID, Daryl	Transcona	N.D.P.
REIMER, Jack, Hon.	Niakwa	P.C.
RENDER, Shirley	St. Vital	P.C.
ROBINSON, Eric	Rupertsland	N.D.P.
ROCAN, Denis	Gladstone	P.C.
SALE, Tim	Crescentwood	N.D.P.
SANTOS, Conrad	Broadway	N.D.P.
STEFANSON, Eric, Hon.	Kirkfield Park	P.C.
STRUTHERS, Stan	Dauphin	N.D.P.
SVEINSON, Ben	La Verendrye	P.C.
TOEWS, Vic, Hon.	Rossmere	P.C.
TWEED, Mervin	Turtle Mountain	P.C.
VODREY, Rosemary, Hon.	Fort Garry	P.C.
WOWCHUK, Rosann	Swan River	N.D.P.
Vacant	Charleswood	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, February 11, 1998

TIME – 10 a.m.**LOCATION – Winnipeg, Manitoba****CHAIRPERSON – Mr. Conrad Santos (Broadway)****VICE-CHAIRPERSON – Mr. Edward Helwer (Gimli)****ATTENDANCE - 10 – QUORUM - 6***Members of the Committee present:*

Hon. Mr. Stefanson

Ms. Cerilli, Messrs. Dyck, Helwer, Lamoureux, McAlpine, Mrs. Render, Messrs. Sale, Santos, Tweed

*Substitutions:*Mr. Maloway for Ms. Cerilli
Mr. Sveinson for Mrs. Render
Mr. Fauschou for Mr. Tweed**APPEARING:**

Mr. Jon Singleton, Provincial Auditor

MATTERS UNDER DISCUSSION:

Public Accounts, Volumes 1, 2, 3 and 4, for the year ended March 31, 1996

Report of the Provincial Auditor for the year ended March 31, 1996 (Volume 1)

Provincial Auditor's Report on Public Accounts and the Operations of the Office of the Provincial Auditor for the year ended March 31, 1996

Mr. Chairperson: Will the Standing Committee on Public Accounts please come to order. The business referred to the committee for consideration this

morning are the following reports: Public Accounts, Volumes 1, 2, 3 and 4 for the year ended March 31, 1996; the report of the Provincial Auditor for the year ended March 31, 1996, Volume 1; and the Provincial Auditor's Report on Public Accounts and the Operations of the Office of the Provincial Auditor for the year ended March 31, 1996. If members do not have copies of this report, there are extra copies available. If you need them, please indicate and the page will provide you with them. There are some preliminaries that we have to consider because there are changes in the committee membership.

During intersessional resignations, the rules are this: Section 52.5(4) of The Legislative Assembly Act, R.S.M. 1987, c.L110 which requires that during intersession a member must give notice, in writing, to the chairperson of a standing committee.

Rule 80.(2) states that "A member of any Standing or Special Committee of the House who is unable to attend the business of the committee because of

- (a) Death;
- (b) Long illness;
- (c) Resignation from the House; or
- (d) Resignation from the Committee, where accepted;

may be replaced by a vote of the Committee."

These rules have been applied already as precedents. It is the practice of the standing committee in Manitoba to accept resignations of committee members during intersessional session meetings only by way of a signed form. This practice has been confirmed by a chairperson's ruling, Mr. Len Evans, Brandon East, the last chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, ruled on January 29, 1991, that the established practice of the committee requires the member's signature indicating that the member wishes to be relieved of responsibility of the committee. In the above ruling, the committee agreed by unanimous consent to accept the substitution without a resignation form. Those are the rules. Any changes in the committee?

Mr. Tim Sale (Crescentwood): Mr. Chairperson, I move that the member for Elmwood, Mr. Maloway, be substituted for the member for Radisson, Ms. Cerilli, who, I believe, has submitted the required form.

Mr. Chairperson: Ms. Cerilli signed. This is what has been stated in the submission. I have before me the resignation of Ms. Cerilli as a member of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts effective February 10, 1998.

Are there any nominations to replace Ms. Cerilli? I have the signed resignation.

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, again I move that the member for Elmwood (Mr. Maloway) replace the member for Radisson (Ms. Cerilli) as per the accepted procedure of the committee.

Mr. Chairperson: It has been moved that Mr. Maloway will replace Ms. Cerilli. Is it the will of the committee to accept this motion? [agreed]

I have another form. I have before me the resignation of Mrs. Render as a member of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, effective February 10, 1998.

Are there any nominations to replace Mrs. Render? It is signed with writing.

Mr. Edward Helwer (Gimli): Yes, Mr. Chairman, I would like to recommend Mr. Sveinson replace Mrs. Render on the committee.

Mr. Chairperson: The nomination has been made. Mr. Sveinson will replace Mrs. Render. Is that agreeable to the committee? [agreed]

There is a problem with the third one because—I wish to resign from the Standing Committee on Public Accounts—it is signed by somebody else other than Mr. Mervin C. Tweed.

Mr. Helwer: I would like to report that Mr. Tweed is away out of the province at the moment, but I would like to, with leave of the committee—if the committee would accept his resignation.

Mr. Chairperson: The rule, as you have heard, only by unanimous consent. [agreed] Unanimous consent

obtained. Committee accepts. Somebody will replace Mr. Tweed. I will accept now any motion for replacement.

Mr. Helwer: I would like Mr. Fauschou to replace Mr. Tweed.

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Fauschou has been nominated to replace Mr. Tweed. Is that agreed to unanimously? [agreed] Unanimously agreed.

Now we are ready to proceed. As Chairperson, I have circulated a letter to committee members yesterday requesting that members submit to me items or questions requiring detailed answers at the committee meeting. I received a proposed list of agenda items which I also circulated yesterday to all members of the committee. For any committee members who do not have a copy of these agenda items, please indicate and the page will provide you with a list. Therefore, prior to the opening statements, perhaps the committee at this point should consider the proposed agenda before it.

Does the committee wish to adopt the proposed agenda? [agreed] So it will be the proposed agenda.

Hon. Eric Stefanson (Minister of Finance): Just speaking to the agenda, I certainly have no problem with it. I again appreciate the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) putting in the time and effort to prepare an agenda for the committee.

This is the second committee, I believe, dealing with reports for the fiscal year ending March 31, '96, and I just really am looking for, as part of the agenda, some decision from the committee as to how we intend to proceed this morning. It will be the second opportunity to deal with that particular fiscal year.

When I looked at many of the questions, some straddle '95-96; some do straddle into '96-97. They are not necessarily prioritized between those two fiscal years. As we have done in the past, I think it would be appropriate for this committee to make a commitment either to pass the '96 reports at the beginning of the meeting and move on to the '96-97 reports and all of the questions in the agenda or at least commit to passing the '96 reports at the end of this meeting here this morning, Mr. Chairman.

I guess part of that discussion, as well, should be whether or not—I am not sure what House leaders agreed upon, whether we are sitting till noon or till 12:30, but we should have some discussion around that issue as well. Other than that, I think the agenda is fine, but I think it should be part of the overall commitment to how we intend to proceed this morning.

* (1010)

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, I believe that the agreement in the last committee meeting is dealing with the last item the minister raised first, 12:30 adjournment, and that was certainly what my House leader indicated to me was the time for today. So, unless there is something different that has come up since the discussion between our deputy House leader and the government House leader, my assumption is 12:30. Maybe we could settle that first before we move on to the other item.

Mr. Ben Sveinson (La Verendrye): Mr. Chairman, I have not heard anything against it anyway. I would go along with 12:30.

Mr. Chairperson: So we are agreed that this will end at 12:30. [agreed] The only documents in proper order for reference in this committee, the business before this committee, are the Public Accounts for 1996, the Provincial Auditor's Report for 1996, and the report on Public Accounts and the Operations of the Office of the Provincial Auditor for the year ended March 31, 1996.

I would ask all members to keep their questions relevant to the business before the committee as contained in this report.

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, just a couple of comments on process. I want first just to put on the record that I wrote to the minister on the 30th of January, and in that letter there was an error for which I apologize. My intention was to indicate in that letter that we had had only one meeting in 1997 to consider the '96, '95 reports. However, I foreshortened a phrase there, and I apologize to the minister for that error.

In terms of the agenda for today, I believe we should move through the agenda in as orderly a way as we can and see where we are at the end of the meeting. We are

not prepared at this point to make a commitment one way or the other that we will or will not pass '95-96 accounts and Auditor's Report at this time. So I propose that we start with any opening comments that are to be made by any of the three or four parties to the discussion and that we move through in an orderly manner.

Mr. Chairperson: Opening comments from any of the representatives of the parties?

Mr. Stefanson: Well, Mr. Chairman, not belabouring this, and I guess the letter the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) referred to and corrected in part, I also did respond to him this morning and pointed out the one error in his letter.

I think we have been fairly co-operative in terms of how we have dealt with the agenda. As I say, when you look at the questions we have before us today, many of them do deal with periods after March 31, '96. I recognize those reports are not part of the official agenda, but they have certainly been tabled with this committee, the '96-97 reports, and if we want to deal with the agenda in the fashion that has been laid out, I would think we should at least get a commitment to pass the '95-96 reports at the end of this meeting, or we should then start going through the agenda and reprioritizing and dealing with them sequentially in '95-96 so that we can ultimately come to a conclusion of those reports. I think the committee has always worked with that view to deal with the oldest reports first and start to clear items off the agenda and keep the more current issues before us. I do not think that is an unreasonable request, and anybody who has taken the time to look at the agenda items, if we want to deal co-operatively, deal with them as outlined by the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale), then we should at least have that agreement of this committee.

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, in my reading of the agenda, there is only one item which moves forward into '96-97 and that is question 10. All the others occur in one form or other in Volumes 1 to 4 or in the Provincial Auditor's Reports. I think we have observed in this committee many times that many items are multiyear in nature and begin in one fiscal period and may continue for a number of fiscal periods before they are resolved. I do not think there are any items, unless

the minister would like to point out some, that have not been raised in one form or other during '95-96. I do not want to get into a nitpicking discussion of this. Our intention is to have a full discussion on these items and see where we are at the end of the allotted time. The longer we take in this discussion, the shorter we will have for the agenda. So I suggest that if the minister is concerned about item 10, I have no problem with reversing the order of item 10 and item 11, if that is his concern, but I do not see any other that really does not occur in some form or other in the '95-96 statements before us.

Mr. Chairperson: There is a proposal here to reverse the items in proper order: item 10 will become 11; 11 will become 10. Is that agreed to by the committee?

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, I as well do not want to prolong this, and I do not think the request being made is an unreasonable one. You can start to go through the questions and you can see the second question refers specifically to '96-97; certainly the year 2000 issues are primarily dealt with by the Provincial Auditor in reports subsequent to '95-96. The whole issue of the committee process is certainly a much more current issue addressed by the Provincial Auditor in terms of how the Public Accounts committee is going to function moving forward. So, again, if you want to start going through them and relate specifically to '95-96, I think there is more than the one item that the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) referred to, and I guess I am having difficulty understanding what the problem is when committee asks for '95-96 reports at the end of the meeting, realizing there will be future meetings, and there are reports still before us that ultimately deal with most of these issues because they do roll forward. So to agree to pass some old outstanding reports which have very few specific questions related to them before us today would be a prudent thing for this committee to do.

Mr. Chairperson: What is the opinion of committee members? Any more discussion? Because the more we discuss this ordering priority--after all, we have approved the agenda. I do not know what you want. Are we going to proceed with the agenda as approved, or are we going to change things around?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Inkster): Mr. Chairperson, time is indeed precious. It is only two and a half hours.

We have already gone 20 minutes. I would suggest that we just proceed. The agenda has already been adopted, start off with item 1. I am sensitive to what it is that the minister is saying, and we will see what happens, hopefully before 12:30, but we should just move on to item 1 and forward from there.

Point of Order

Mr. Chairperson: A point of order is being raised. State your point of order, please.

Mr. Sveinson: Maybe I missed something, but we just heard that the agenda has been adopted. I never heard that the agenda has been adopted. We agreed to the time is what I heard, but I did not hear that the agenda has been adopted.

Mr. Chairperson: I will entertain a motion for the adoption of the agenda to preclude any unnecessary exchanges which are not related to the agenda.

* * *

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, I was told when I became an elected member that this committee had agreed to submit agendas. I have done so for all of the meetings in which I have been a member of this committee after I learned about that rule. You indicated there were no other items that have been put forward by other committee members. If we are going to proceed by the established procedures of this committee, then I think de facto this is the agenda because that is the procedure of the committee.

It seems to me that unless the committee is now going to make some new rules that rescind that practice, then it is almost moot to have a motion on the agenda since the agenda is supposed to come in the form of prepared work from committee members. Other committee members, for whatever reason, have not submitted items at the required time as indicated by you to all committee members in your memo of February 10—I am sorry, February 7, I believe it was, the initial one. February 10 was when you circulated these questions. So I believe that if you wish a motion, I certainly am prepared to move one, but I think that under the agreed procedures of this committee, this is the agenda. I have no problem with reordering items if the minister wishes

to reorder items, but I would not agree to reordering item No. 1, because that for us is a very important issue that moves through many years of this committee's work, and indeed the reason we have prepared agendas is evidence of the willingness on the part of the opposition at least to try and move in a constructive manner to make the work of this committee more constructive and more in line with work of other committees elsewhere.

So I believe we have an agenda. If the committee does not choose to honour that agreement, then I am at a loss to know what "agreements" mean, Mr. Chairperson.

Mr. Chairperson: If we do not honour what we have been doing all along—I just want to make a remark—I ask is that agreed to, the agenda, and everybody says agreed to. That has been the practice.

* (1020)

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, there is much more to this issue—and the member for Crescentwood knows that—in terms of the time lines of submitting questions and in terms of what the committee has done in terms of trying to deal with fiscal years sequentially. That is all that is being suggested here is when you look at these questions they straddle many years. We are certainly prepared to get into discussing these issues. They are important issues. All we are suggesting is that, when you look at the limited number of issues dealing with '95-96, it is not unreasonable to agree that in two—it would have been two and a half hours or two hours-plus that we can pass out those old reports at the conclusion of the meeting. We can deal with all of these questions, get on with the agenda, agree to pass '95-96. We still have many reports before us to be dealt with, the opportunity to ask questions on all of these issues. There is nothing that would in any way stymie the member for Crescentwood or any other member ultimately from asking questions on any of these issues as we move forward with the reports that we are going to be dealing with.

So we are saying: let us just get some of the older reports passed, dealt with, off the agenda, and deal with the more current agendas. That is all we are asking, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, I have already made my position clear and it is not changing. I am prepared at the end of the meeting to consider where we are and to assess progress—and I have not a closed mind on the issue—but I am not prepared to make a commitment at this time.

The minister makes much of his wish to move sequentially. I restate the fact that every single one of these questions, with the exception perhaps of question 10, deals with '95-96 fiscal year and, as is common, many of these issues recurred in the past and will recur in the future. So, finally, the government had all kinds of time to call meetings to consider these accounts. There was a commitment made by the Premier (Mr. Filmon) and the House leader, the government House leader, to intersessional committee hearings. Suddenly now that there is a session planned, there is a flurry of intersessional committees called three weeks before the sitting of the House has been announced. The government had all of January, they had all of the fall, they had all of last spring. I approached the Finance minister personally several times and asked for the scheduling for committee meetings. He referred the item to the House leaders and indicated that his preference was to deal with the House leaders. That was fine as far as I was concerned. The fact is that we have requested and requested and requested that this committee meet. We requested that this committee deal on a more comprehensive basis with the standards prevalent in other Public Accounts committees across the country.

We have indicated informally our willingness to talk about time allocation in terms of Estimates time. So we have been both co-operative and proactive on this issue. We have submitted agendas. We have kept the tone of the meetings informational and not confrontational, but quite frankly we are more than disappointed that the number of meetings held by this committee has not increased in spite of the co-operation and in spite of urgings from the Provincial Auditor to put the committee on a footing that is more in keeping with modern Public Accounts functions across the country.

So let us proceed. Let us have the discussions that are indicated here, and let us come to a mind close to the adjournment time about what we do about these accounts, but let the minister not suggest that it is

somehow the opposition that is holding up consideration of old accounts. The ability to schedule committee meetings is the Finance minister's ability, not the Chair's ability as it should be, but it is the Finance minister's prerogative. He has chosen not to exercise that prerogative except for one occasion to consider the accounts now before us. That is his prerogative, but he ought not then to suggest that we should be under some kind of obligation to pass these accounts, because we have already spent two hours talking about them.

I think the members know that something of this thickness often takes many, many hours in Estimates. The detail in Public Accounts far exceeds the detail in Estimates. The appropriateness of having many meetings during the year, as is the case in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, to work through the accountability of how the government actually performed as opposed to its budget in Estimates process, which is how it proposed to perform, is something that this provinces does not do very well. That has been well attested to over the past eight years.

So, if the minister wants to have a discussion about who is responsible for not passing Public Accounts, let him remember that it is his prerogative to call these meetings, and he has chosen not to do so until, at very short notice, we last week were asked to come to a Public Accounts meeting and to submit agenda items. At such short notice in fact that I could not consult my caucus colleagues, because we did not have a caucus meeting between the call of this committee and the having of the committee; our caucus meeting is today in fact.

So we can talk about this for two and a half hours, if the minister wants to. I am quite prepared to do that, or, we can go on and have a discussion of substance in terms of where this committee goes. But I have made my position clear, I am not prepared to give an advance commitment on the passage of 1995-96 Public Accounts. I have said that now three times. I will not say it again.

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, the member for Crescentwood, I guess, is right on one point. We could discuss this for the rest of the morning, and I certainly disagree with most of what he has said. I think he forgets the role that our House leaders play when it

comes to the setting of committees and committee dates and committee times. But, having said that, I think in keeping with what has generally been a spirit of cooperation in terms of how this committee has functioned and some good faith moving forward this morning in terms of that, if we can move through this agenda, it is not unreasonable to pass the '95-96 reports. I would agree that we should get on with the items before us, Mr. Chairman. So, with that, I would certainly recommend then that, instead of tinkering with shifting one item around, deal with the agenda as outlined and get on with it and with a view to try and take the last five minutes of the meeting and determine whether or not we have had a substantive enough discussion to pass the '95-96 reports.

Mr. Chairperson: The Chair thanks the honourable Minister of Finance. We can proceed. Now I am on the stage where everybody is giving opening statements.

The honourable Minister of Finance, you have not given your statement yet. I am asking you now if you can.

Mr. Stefanson: Well, Mr. Chairman, I think we have had enough of a discussion. I am prepared to get on with the agenda.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the honourable minister. The critic of the official opposition, Mr. Sale, do you have an opening statement?

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, I want to first record my appreciation to the minister and to the Auditor and to the various departments involved in providing responses which were prepared during 1997 to various questions that were asked in Public Accounts committee meetings: a letter from the minister in regard to the Child and Family Services information systems project; a letter to the Chairperson in regard to the attest auditor appointments for various groups; a letter to myself, interestingly undated—I am sure that was not the intent, but the minister can probably find the date—on the PMTS payments issue; and finally a letter on September 8, which will come up again in our discussion today in regard to Revenue Canada and the previous owners of the Winnipeg Jets. So I appreciate

the follow-ups to those various questions that we have raised.

I also want to record my appreciation, and I would hope the appreciation of members opposite, to the Provincial Auditor for his very thorough and helpful presentation, which he made to the members of the Public Accounts committee, with the exception of the minister who was not able to attend that day, but who, I think, received the same presentation at a somewhat slightly later date in regard to best practices. I thought that was a very helpful meeting. I think Mr. Rocan was also at that meeting, and I believe we had a couple of other members as well at that meeting.

I found that helpful, and I thought that it was the sort of thing that as a Public Accounts committee we should be doing on a more regular basis. So those really are my only opening comments. I just wanted to record my appreciation for those activities.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Sale. Does the Provincial Auditor have any statement to deliver to the committee?

Mr. Jon Singleton (Provincial Auditor): No, Mr. Chairman, I do not.

* (1030)

Mr. Chairperson: We will now consider the agenda. We will now proceed. The first item of business on the agenda is question No. 1, committee process.

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, I put this on the agenda of our last meeting and brought it forward to this meeting. It was the last question on the agenda at the last meeting. I think it was appropriate to move it to first place in this meeting, because I think that it is clear to all committee members, although it is probably not clear to Manitobans, that the Public Accounts committee function in Manitoba is significantly out of line with best practices. Now the government has made much of initiatives that would be in line with adopting best practices. There is a great deal of information put forward by the government around its various initiatives: better services, better systems; the desktop management initiative; the attempts to measure government performance. Those are laudable

initiatives to attempt to more transparently put in place mechanisms to measure how we perform.

I think the Auditor did a very useful thing for us when he summarized concerns going back over many years, in fact to 1987 when the Public Accounts committee perhaps was first made aware, although I have not looked at the minutes of that year, that the Canadian Council on Public Accounts Committees adopted guidelines to significantly improve Public Accounts committees.

The Auditor pointed out in a number of years and a number of conversations and most recently in his presentation to us in December that Manitoba has not significantly changed any practices since 1987 as a result of the changes in the recommendations of the Public Accounts committees. In fact, the Auditor said and, I think, maintains that Manitoba's Public Accounts committee meets fewer of these national guidelines than any other jurisdiction in Canada, which is not a record of which we should be proud.

Now, there are many specific, very important items in these guidelines that have to do with government accountability and the ability of the opposition and the public to hold government accountable not just for what it says it is going to do, which we do through the process of Estimates and budget debate, but for what it actually achieved, which is an issue of fact finding and analysis, not an issue of assessing policy. It may assess the wisdom of policy, but not the right of the government to set policy. That is not in question.

For example, a Public Accounts committee should, according to the CCPAC guidelines, adopt a written mandate and statement of operating principles—we do not have one—have the right to investigate all past, current and committed expenditures of government and recipients of public moneys. We just had a long discussion here in which the Minister of Finance (Mr. Stefanson) wanted us to limit our discussions to a particular year and to pass that particular year, and he was concerned whether or not the questions appropriately dealt with the particular year that we have not yet passed and that is on the agenda today.

It is very interesting that the guidelines indicate the right to examine committed expenditures, for example, the commitment to a new general ledger system, the

commitment to desktop management, the potential serious problems around the year 2000 issues, all of which have been raised by the Auditor in one form or another and not just this year. A very important issue—I recall an exchange between myself and the Finance minister that raised the issue of whether or not we could direct questions in this committee directly to the Provincial Auditor. There was one meeting in which the minister essentially attempted to intervene to sidetrack questions that were directed to the Auditor. A suggestion of the CCPAC guideline is that the Public Accounts committee should have and use the power to summon persons, papers and records. This is a very significant power which this committee does not apparently have.

Fourth, this is an area where we certainly are concerned and the Auditor is concerned: Be concerned with how government policy is administered with value for money in the implementation of government policy rather than with government policy itself. In other words, regardless of the policy, did we get value for it?

Have the right as a committee to request the Provincial Auditor to conduct specific reviews, not to have specific reviews only conducted when the Auditor sees fit or when the Finance minister requires it or requests it.

Have the right to review proposed changes to the act and changes to our mandate.

Scrutinize the operations of the Provincial Auditor. In other provinces, the Provincial Auditor comes before the Public Accounts committee with his plans or her plans for spending, for staffing, for how the office functions and how well it has functioned in the past.

Mr. Chairperson, here is a power that this committee certainly does not have: the right to call witnesses, as does the federal Finance committee of Parliament, to call witnesses and to take testimony under oath—that is, to conduct its business in such a serious way that witnesses are sworn and not simply providing information as a matter of courtesy.

To make recommendations to the Legislative Assembly. Well, I am not aware that we have tried to do that. Perhaps the committee would allow that to

happen, I do not know. It is certainly not in any written mandate that I have been able to find.

Lastly, in the list that I am looking at here, although this is not the complete list, exclude cabinet ministers from committee membership. Now, the minister has expressed concern about the partisan political nature of this committee, and I would agree with him that there have been times—and perhaps it will be written today that this is another one of them, that this is a partisan exchange. But one of the reasons that it is partisan is that the Finance minister calls the meetings and sits in the position of the chief respondent to all the questions. His staff does not respond; other minister do not come and respond; other senior staff do not come and respond. I would suggest to the committee that one of the reasons it is so partisan is that there are, on both sides of most exchanges, two elected people. If we were asking questions of the deputy ministers of a variety of departments, I think we would see that the tone and tenor of the discussion would be very different because it is not the deputy's position to argue partisan issues, so the relevance of partisan questions would not be there. Most other Public Accounts committees in Canada do not have the Minister of Finance sitting at the front of the table beside the Chairperson fielding all the questions.

It is fairly clear to me that the recommendations of CCPAC are not partisan recommendations. They are recommendations about good accounting principles, good auditing principles, good accountability principles, and they were put forward not by partisan people, but by provincial auditors, by public officials; not by publicly elected officials, but by public officials, public officials that have a long, long honourable record of serving provincial legislatures and putting forward recommendations to strengthen transparency and accountability of the public accounting process. Manitoba has not changed any of its procedures significantly in 10 years. It is the worst province in compliance with the CCPAC guidelines.

* (1040)

The Provincial Auditor, when I was elected, was Carol Bellringer. She met with us, and she indicated to us her concern that our committee was way out of date, that she was making efforts to move it forward. The

Acting Auditor for a period of time, Warren Johnson, who ably filled that office, indicated the same thing. When you talk with previous Auditors, you get the same story. This province has resisted all moves in the past 10 years to make a more modern, transparent, accountable, impartial, nonpartisan function possible for this committee. I believe that my honourable friend the member for Inkster's (Mr. Lamoureux) predecessor—the leader, the leader before the current leader resigned—in fact made many of these points to Public Accounts, so this is not an NDP fixation. I believe that the concern was shared by other parties who sat at this committee.

So I think that it is time that we called a halt to this process and said to the government: we have made your life a whole lot easier in Public Accounts over the last two and a half years. We have given you advance warning of questions, and we may have made your officials' lives more busy in the week or 10 days before the meetings, because they have actually had to do some preparatory work, but having sat in some of those offices, I know they did much of that work anyway, because they sat there and usually pretty ably anticipated the kinds of questions that might come out anyway, and that is what minister's briefing books are for.

Nevertheless, we have made the minister's life considerably easier by complying with the request—the request, the agreement of the committee for agendas, and we have worked very hard to keep the tenor of these meetings from becoming strident and partisan. The Auditor has commented to that effect, that he believes the meetings have been better, the Finance minister has commented to that effect, and Finance officials have commented to that effect.

Now, it is a two-way street, Mr. Chairperson, on which we drive. This is not a one-way street. Compliance and co-operation with modern principles of Public Accounts practice are not simply for the opposition to pursue. It is also for the government to pursue, and this government has not pursued it. The opposition has co-operated, has raised the question, has indicated readiness to move, has proposed that the committee itself, as it did in the question of agendas some years back, could in fact adopt practices that were in line with other Public Accounts committees.

Now, some of them would require changes to rules, but a very few of them. Having consulted the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, Mr. Remnant, he indicates to me that Manitoba precedent is what Manitoba committees do, that there is no written guideline that says the Minister of Finance shall call the meetings of the Public Accounts committee. Let me underline that. It is the Minister of Finance who calls them. That is the Clerk's understanding. The House leaders simply facilitate an agreed-upon date. The House leaders do not go to the Finance minister and say: Mr. Finance Minister, it is time you had a Public Accounts meeting. The Finance minister initiates that discussion.

Perhaps the Premier (Mr. Filmon) and he have a short, informal meeting; perhaps he does it on his own, but it is the Finance minister who calls the meetings. The Clerk is clear about that; certainly I think the committee is clear about that. So it is not the House leaders who call the meetings. They merely make the legal arrangements for them and their names go on the agreement I suppose, but it is the Finance minister who initiates the calling of the meetings.

There are many other things that we could do. We could agree to a schedule of meetings, that within 90 days of the tabling of Public Accounts we would meet for a day or two days or for two scheduled meetings or four scheduled meetings. We could set a calendar. That would be within the committee's ability, according to my discussion with the Clerk. There are very few things that as a committee we could not agree to do and then do them, particularly given that the members of the government have a large majority, or at least a very significant majority, on the committee.

If the government members wish to go to a regular meeting schedule or to agree on meetings within 90 days of the end of period or 30 days or whatever they want, they could do that. If the minister wished to go to a fixed timetable at which committee meetings were called, then he could avoid the question of whether the meetings were called by the Chair of the committee or by the minister. If it was on a fixed timetable, it would not matter. But underline that there are many, many things we could do. The legal issues of calling and swearing witnesses, that would require, in my understanding, some kind of legislated mandate within the rules and procedures of the Assembly.

But there are many things we could do to strengthen this committee voluntarily. The government has agreed to one-agendas. Of course, that puts the whole onus on the opposition, not on the government at all. It makes the government's life much more convenient because the minister can then hew to the agenda and resist questions that do not follow the agenda. So far from suggesting that somehow it is our responsibility to get Accounts passed, I would suggest that it is the government's responsibility to convene enough meetings for full discussion, to not do it in a hurried way, as this meeting was held, and to adopt some of the things that it willingly could adopt, that we sitting around this table could adopt, that would make this process transparent.

Now I would invite the minister and any other committee members to respond, but I think we need to stop evading this question and stop the process of having Manitoba be the worst in the country in its Public Accounts function, with absolutely no prospect currently underway that would change that sad position.

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Lamoureux indicated he wants to speak.

Mr. Lamoureux: I would concur virtually with everything that the member for Crescentwood, Mr. Sale, has put on the record with respect to Public Accounts. I see very little value to Public Accounts today. In fact, when I look at the formalization of the agenda and the idea of submitting questions in advance, one could ultimately argue that Mr. Sale could just be given back, or that members wanting to put a question forward would just be given some sort of correspondence written back to them.

I think that, in order for us to give any sort of validity to Public Accounts in the future, there is a need for change. I appreciated very much the Auditor's office presentation that was made to members of this committee in which it was clearly pointed out that there can be value to having a Public Accounts committee, and I think there is that need for change. A part of it is to see if we can maybe strike together some sort of a steering committee that would look at ways in which we can enhance the roles and the responsibilities of this particular committee. I think that would be a very—it would be something of value coming out of today's

meeting if in fact there was an agreement that we would have a committee that would be struck to look at how we could be changing our Public Accounts so at the very least it is doing some of the things that every other Public Accounts committee is doing, not only in Canada, but in many other jurisdictions.

I recall the need for reform. The member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) talked about the former leader Paul Edwards talking about the need for change. I will go back to '89 when I was sitting down in caucus with individuals like Herold Driedger, who was the Chair of Public Accounts at that time, where we debated for hours on the need to see some change within Public Accounts. There is the idea, for example, of having annual general reports coming before Public Accounts, where we have the Estimates books coming before the Estimates, and then you have the annual reports coming before bodies such as Public Accounts. There were a number of ideas that were out there in terms of how we believed back then we could enhance the role of the Public Accounts committee.

I really and truly believe that, if in fact we want to give some validity to this committee, we do need to strike a steering committee, and by doing that I think then we would be doing a better service to Manitobans, because it is only from the efforts from very few from within the Chamber that there is any value to this committee at all today, and that is probably exaggerating its value.

I would look to the minister in giving guidance to other committee members in agreeing that there is a need for change. Surely to goodness, as he sits back he has to recognize that need is there. I look to the Minister of Finance and his colleagues on this committee and would appeal to them to reflect on the presentation that was offered to all members of the committee back, I believe it was in December, from the Auditor's office. I am sure each and every one of you would concur that there is a lot more that we could be doing as a Public Accounts committee and there is no real need for us to be putting off any sort of action to that effect. I am interested, and if I were to pose a question to the Minister of Finance, is to find out from him what he believes would be the first step at addressing the need for change. The Auditor's office

talked about a steering committee. Is that something which he would be open to see put together?

* (1050)

Mr. Stefanson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It certainly is one of the most important issues on today's agenda. As the member for Crescentwood indicated, I was unable to attend the first presentation from the Provincial Auditor which had representation from all parties in the Legislature, I believe, but I did have a separate presentation and discussion with the Provincial Auditor shortly after that first meeting. It certainly is a comprehensive overview that he has provided, some excellent suggestions for this committee, certainly some significant challenges in terms of the changes to this committee. Some of these would include areas like—as has been referred to—operating in a nonpartisan manner, and we can get into a discussion of what that really does mean. Also, issues of not being concerned with government policy, rather with value for money in the implementation of policy, again, in some aspects, a significant change to how this committee would function; does not examine the rationale for government programs in terms of the Public Accounts committee; and performs its role without developing another level of bureaucracy, which is important to all of us. So those are some of the challenges. The members have touched on some of the other challenges.

From my point of view and our government's point of view, the Public Accounts committee is one important part of accountability, but it is just one important part of accountability. The Estimates process is certainly one, areas like Question Period, the other committees that deal with other reports and so on, so there are various avenues for public accountability, along with other internal dynamics that government has, the introduction of our Manitoba Measures recently, the changes to our financial accountability act, a series of things that enhance accountability of our government today and future governments. I see a lot of value personally, and I believe our government sees a lot of value to the information that has been provided by the Provincial Auditor in terms of how the Public Accounts committee should ultimately function.

When the member for Inkster asks how I would see this moving forward, I have had some correspondence

over the last several weeks. I think we have exchanged a couple of letters each, the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) and myself, on this issue of whether or not there is agreement to change, how we move forward with change and so on. Certainly the indications I have given to the member for Crescentwood and through him, I believe, to his particular party, is we believe that the first step should be a discussion of House leaders because it is just one aspect of accountability. If you look at our Estimates process, at 240 hours of Estimates process we have amongst the most comprehensive in Canada. Our Detailed Estimates books, the information provided is amongst the most comprehensive. So, on that side of the equation, we stack up very well in terms of the accountability of the Estimates process relative to other provinces. I think in most other areas, we stack up either very well or reasonably well.

In the area of Public Accounts, I acknowledge that there can be improvements to the Public Accounts committee. So my suggestion and our suggestion is that the first step should be that House leaders should sit down and agree that we are prepared to look at accountability in totality, recognizing that this is an important part of that accountability, and this committee could certainly play a role on this very specific issue in terms of making recommendations how we could improve how we function, potentially the implementation, the timing of when that should take place. I believe members have suggested at what stage it happens, whether it happens during this mandate, whether it happens right at the front end of the next government, and so on. I think issues around timing, issues around how it functions and so on, this committee could offer advice, but I think the first step has to be that House leaders agree that it will be one component. We will look at all of the others and we will basically overhaul many aspects of how we currently function.

I think members expressed their frustration about Public Accounts committee. I would also say that in many respects our Estimates process, I would hope we could all agree, can be improved upon. When I come into some of the meetings with some of the departments and hear the kinds of discussion and what is taking place, in many cases that is often not as productive as it could be either.

So I would suggest that, when you look at the issue of Public Accounts, it is one very important component of the total accountability, and the first step should be that House leaders agree that it is important to get on with accountability. We have had problems in terms of some of our parties getting together in terms of House leaders meeting on various issues. We have had major problems over the last while. We have been prepared to meet as LAMC. We have had problems with one particular party being unwilling to do that.

I would agree that I would like to put a lot of those things behind us and move forward with how we can enhance the performance of the Legislature and the accountability of the Legislature. The first discussion should be House leaders agreeing that it is important to all of us, it is important to all members of the Legislature. Let us agree to address these other aspects as part of a total, comprehensive package, and with that we are certainly prepared to move forward.

I have corresponded that with the minister and the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale). I am not quite clear from his response whether or not he is in agreement with that or not, and I would certainly welcome the comments from the member for Inkster (Mr. Lamoureux) and other members, but we are interested in getting on with reform to the Public Accounts committee.

We are also interested in getting on with reform in terms of other aspects of how we function in terms of other committees, in terms of the Estimates process, and so on. If there was a will on all parts, we could come together with a much better package that allows more focused opportunity for accountability at the front end, as the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) describes, the Estimates process, the beginning of the budget. Public Accounts is the back end after the reports have been prepared and the year is over in terms of how we function, in terms of what really did take place during that fiscal year.

We do believe that the total process can definitely be improved, but it is a total process. Public Accounts is one part of accountability, recognizing it is an important part of accountability, so on that kind of a basis, we are very interested in moving forward and would gladly do so as soon as possible, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Minister. Any other comments?

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, a question, a little bit of history, perhaps the Clerk will know and perhaps the minister will know. How did the committee come to the decision to have agendas submitted by members and to create an orderly process of agendas, and when was that decision taken?

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, my recollection is that was one of a few items that was referred to in previous Auditor's Reports in terms of enhancements to how this committee could function. The committee determined that there was merit to it and adopted it.

I guess I am anticipating where the member might be heading with that particular question. I think what we are talking about here is more than the setting of agendas. We are talking about a major overhaul to how the Public Accounts committee would ultimately function. We are talking about potentially changing the membership from whether or not cabinet ministers are members of the committee, who appears, who answers questions, whether it is ministers, deputy ministers, whether you can call witnesses. So if that is where the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) is heading, I would say that what we are talking about here is fundamental reform that I think we all agree should take place.

All we are saying is, while fundamental reform has to take place here, it is part of a total package that also requires reform. We are prepared to get on with that, and we would look for the willingness of members of all parties in the Legislature to get on with that. Let us look at the total package and let us get a better package for all members to function in terms of accountability.

Mr. Sale: I thank the minister for the answer, which is the answer that I expected he would give. In other words, this committee sitting in committee made a determination that there would be a procedural improvement if it submitted agendas, and it agreed as a committee to do so and then it, at least in my time, has lived by that agreement. It puzzles me why, if we are committed to a journey, that we cannot begin with some steps on that journey. I mean, there are lots of famous aphorisms about journeys of a thousand miles

begin with a few steps. There are steps this committee can take, so let us see some commitment from the government that indeed they are serious about the journey. I am glad to hear the minister's words, but the minister has specific things that he could agree to, and this committee has specific steps by which it could improve its function and to which it could agree in committee. That has been the Manitoba practice.

I took the trouble of consulting the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly about this and his indication to me—now the Clerk can be overruled by the Assembly obviously, but his indication to me and his advice to me was that committees in Manitoba make their own determination of their own internal operating rules. I agree with the minister that some of the things which we are seeking to do would require in all likelihood consent of the Assembly to a motion recommending some change in procedure from this committee, but there are many things that would not require such consent. They simply are a matter of committee agreement and procedure.

So let the minister indicate some things to which he is prepared to give assent that are not legislative in nature but are procedural. I simply, as he well knows, was eliciting the precedent of the decision to use agendas, which was a committee decision. Nobody asked the House leaders about that one. So let us see some earnest of where the minister says he is prepared to go.

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, I guess I cannot help but be repetitive, and I have corresponded with the member for Crescentwood, and I would be interested in the response from the member for Inkster (Mr. Lamoureux), that we are more than prepared to look at changes to the Public Accounts committee, and we see value in the changes. We think ultimately it will lead to more meetings. It will lead to more time, it will lead to more input, it will lead to potentially even more work on behalf of officials and so on. It all adds value to our functioning as members of the Legislature, but as I concluded in the letter I just sent to the member for Crescentwood, I indicate: In conclusion, I continue to believe that a discussion of a change or expanded role for the committee should begin with the House leaders. The devotion of more time to the committee's activities will require rebalancing with the other activities of the Legislature. With your party's concurrence, our

government is committed to commencing those discussions as quickly as possible. We are committed to reforming this committee, but we feel very strongly that there is an opportunity also to reform other aspects of how this Legislature functions, how committees function and we should be looking at it as a package as opposed to an incremental activity or a change in one area without looking at the total package.

When I look at our Estimates process, being on one side of that process I see opportunities for improvement in the Estimates process as well, and I think we should be looking at the total accountability package and looking at at least launching that process, then this committee can certainly play a very significant role in terms of how we would see this committee changing and moving forward is part of that package.

Mr. Lamoureux: Mr. Chairperson, the minister has indicated that we all agree that the fundamental change is in fact necessary. I guess where I am a little bit nonsupportive is in terms of the method or the procedure by which he would like to see that change take place. The Minister of Finance would like to see the broader accountability question of government being addressed through the House leaders. Having had numerous, many discussions as a House leader with both government and opposition House leaders in the past, my suggestion to the Minister of Finance is that if everyone, as he himself indicates, is in full agreement that there is a need for fundamental change, nothing prevents this committee from striking or getting three individuals to sit down, to start the ball rolling in terms of the process as to what sort of changes we feel are necessary that can be made. I believe that the Auditor's office would in fact make itself available for this group of three to sit down, to answer questions on what other jurisdictions are doing for that group to be able to look at what other jurisdictions are doing, and, most importantly, for this group of three individuals to share those experiences with other caucus colleagues. By doing that, there will be more pressure then on the House leaders to be able to address this particular issue of accountability through the Public Accounts.

I do not dispute there is a need for change in many other aspects, including the Estimates process, but we are not necessarily going to be able to tackle all of them at one time. What I see today is virtually no value to a

Public Accounts committee. If we do take the initiative as committee members to be able to just at the very least see and take a look at what changes we can incorporate without having to go into the Chamber that would positively impact the committee, wonderful; and if there are some legislative changes that are necessary, then we will bring it to the House leaders' attention. If we get our act together first and foremost as a committee, ensuring that there is that caucus dialogue, ensuring then, by doing that, that the House leaders will treat it more seriously, then we have a chance at getting it done.

* (1100)

I would suggest to you that if we just leave it up to the House leaders, even if the House leaders were to agree to do something, the first thing they are going to do is they are going to ask for a committee of sorts to get together to look at what sort of changes we want. So why do we not pre-empt that? If one wanted to, you could say that any sort of recommendations that would come forward would be reported back to the committee, we then would present it to the House leaders or respective caucuses in a formal fashion, but, most importantly, it would not have to take effect until after the next provincial election. I think that maybe the minister would see some merit in something of that nature, quite possibly.

So I would ask the minister if he concurs that there is a need for fundamental change. If he concurs with that, then why would we not authorize or at least sanction three members of this committee from each of the three political parties just to explore and report back to the next Public Accounts committee meeting? What do we have to lose by doing that?

Mr. Chairperson: Any other comments?

Mr. Stefanson: As I have indicated, Mr. Chairman, and to the member for Inkster (Mr. Lamoureux), I see that there is an opportunity to improve how this committee functions. I think we all agree that there is an opportunity to improve how this committee functions in terms of accountability and additional information and some of the specific recommendations that have come from the review done by the Provincial Auditor and the comparisons done with other

jurisdictions. But, again, recognizing the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) referred to at least a couple of provinces in his remarks—the province of Alberta, the province of Ontario—well, Alberta spends 20 days on its Estimates process; Ontario spends 96 hours. Six to 12 ministries are reviewed with a maximum of 15 hours per ministry. Compare that, I ask the member for Inkster, to what we do here in the province of Manitoba.

We have indicated that our House leader is prepared to sit down literally, immediately. I have had discussions with him. I have shared with him the correspondence that I have been sharing with the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) on behalf of his party and our view on the issue.

The first step could be for them to sit down immediately and say: is there agreement to look at a comprehensive overhaul and change to how we function on all of these areas, the Estimates area, the Public Accounts committee, and so on? That is all we are suggesting. Let us get that agreement. Let us get that process moving. Then we can as a committee potentially strike a subcommittee or whatever process we want to come forward with what we see as positive changes to how we will function. But let us get that agreement as the first step.

We are prepared to sit down as quickly as possible. We are going back in the Legislature March 6. We can have another Public Accounts committee anytime in a short period to strike a subcommittee or whatever to deal with issues in this area, but let us get that agreement that we can improve the total package and do not do things on an ad hoc or an incremental basis without looking at other opportunities for change. That is all we are suggesting.

I know the member has some history in terms of trying to reform other aspects of how the Legislature has functioned. At one point there seemed to be significant progress and then for various reasons there maybe has not been as much progress as many would like. But I think there is an opportunity here, because there appears to be a will. I do not know why there would be a reluctance to say: as the first step, let us have our House leaders and representatives get together, agree that these are the areas we want to

address, agree on a process, agree to have us as a resource in terms of the Public Accounts committee and start moving through on that process and looking at the changes, looking at the timing, looking at the implementation and all of those factors.

I do not think that is an unreasonable approach. I think it is a better approach in terms of ultimately improving everything. I know the member is saying, well, let us maybe get a little bit now and improve it somewhat. I would say if we are going to finally get into this, we have a comprehensive review from the Provincial Auditor, we have comparisons, and let us step up to the plate and do it on a comprehensive basis as opposed to just a partial basis or an ad hoc basis. I think there is an opportunity, and we are prepared to be a part of that process.

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, I appreciate the minister's indication that he is prepared to move on this issue early in the session with a second meeting of this committee in 1998 to strike a working group to do the kind of proposed comprehensive changes to which he refers. He appears to want to correct himself. I am prepared to cede to the minister.

Mr. Stefanson: Well, I always get nervous when the member for Crescentwood speaks for me. He was correct to a certain point, but I think he has to put as part of that that the first step is for the House leaders to agree on a total review, a comprehensive review of how we are going to deal with the other issues, particularly the Estimates process, the other committee process, and how we will move forward as a total package. If we get that kind of agreement amongst all of us that we are willing to take on that entire initiative, then I certainly see this committee meeting early in our next session and determining what role we should play, whether it is through a subcommittee, how we move forward, how we provide advice and value and recommendations as part of that total, comprehensive review. So he was partly right, but I think it is very important that he links it to the total package, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Sale: To be clear, I believe the Finance minister (Mr. Stefanson) is saying that the first step is a meeting of the House leaders, in his view. He also indicated that his House leader was prepared to do that. I took that as agreed then that this was something that would

easily happen and that that would lead to a meeting of this committee, which would lead to the definition of what a comprehensive reform would look like. So I do not think I was taking liberty with the minister.

I want to table a document which I believe all members have, which is the basis of the presentation of the Provincial Auditor to the members and to the minister. I have only provided one copy, because I believe all members have it already and, indeed, the Clerk's office may have it already. I think it should form part of our record for future discussions.

Mr. Chairperson, I also want to table a document, which is a draft of a report which in perhaps this form or perhaps in an amended form may appear in a report of the Provincial Auditor in the near future. I do have enough copies, I believe, for all members, and I would like to just refer briefly to this.

The Provincial Auditor, subsequent to his presentations to us, is in the process of preparing his next report, which I am not sure when it will be released but probably somewhat soon because it looks like it is in pretty final form in this draft. The Provincial Auditor kindly supplied a draft of his comments to both government and opposition members and asked for our comments in regard to his recommendation, which I think is a sign also of a good process on the part of the Provincial Auditor to solicit comments on his recommendations. I am appreciative of his careful procedure in this regard, because I think it is appropriate that he has provided this document to all members of the committee. I believe Mr. Helwer and Mr. Santos both had it and then distributed it to their members. At least I assume Mr. Helwer would have distributed it. I am not sure about that, but let me assume that.

Basically in regard to this set of recommendations, I want to put on the table a motion which essentially subsumes the recommendation of the Auditor on the page marked draft copy, page 40.

I would like to move, seconded by the member for Elmwood (Mr. Maloway), that the Public Accounts committee take steps to transform itself into a more effective force in government accountability.

The wording of that motion is on the document that I have tabled with slight changes.

Mr. Chairperson: I need a written form of the motion, Mr. Sale.

Mr. Sale: Okay.

Mr. Chairperson: It has been moved by Mr. Sale—and there is no need for a seconder in this committee—that this committee, Public Accounts committee of Manitoba, take steps to transform itself into a more effective force in government accountability. Any discussion?

* (1110)

Mr. Sale: Just to introduce this motion, Mr. Chairperson, the Auditor has provided from 1988 onwards recommendations of the committee, the federal committee that recommends changes to Public Accounts process, the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees. The Auditor appears to believe, and I certainly will let him speak for himself on this, but he appears to believe that the committee could take steps to transform itself. We do not need to wait for everything else to happen first. My brief meeting with the Clerk of the House of the Legislative Assembly indicates the same kind of assumption that committees in Manitoba can take steps to change their procedures and that, given that the government has a majority in all committees, this is not threatening the government's ability to control agendas. Certainly it is within the precedent and past practice of this committee to make substantive changes. I have acknowledged today that there are some things which we might well seek to do in line with the Auditor's recommendations that would require consent of the Legislative Assembly, but there are many things that we could do without that consent.

So this is a general motion which indicates the willingness of the committee to take seriously what the minister said in his remarks, and that is that we should transform ourselves into a more effective tool, that there are many opportunities for doing so which the minister appears to acknowledge, and I believe we should get on with it and pass the motion.

Mr. Stefanson: Well, Mr. Chairman, in light of the discussion and the member for Crescentwood's recap

earlier of my comments and commitments, I am puzzled by this motion because he seemed to agree—I will put words in his mouth now—that the House leaders should start the process, get on with the comprehensive review, if we are going to have an early meeting in the next session to determine just precisely the role we will play in terms of providing advice on the changes to the Public Accounts committee, whether we do a subcommittee of the Public Accounts committee and how we move forward. He has now tabled a draft report of a report to ultimately come from the Provincial Auditor which has not been tabled or officially made public and is not the final report, is one of his backgrounds or sources for his motion.

So I would suggest that there is absolutely no need for this motion based on what I understand are the commitments and undertakings of all of us around this table, to have the House leaders get on with the process, to look at the comprehensive review. In light of that commitment and the fact that we do not have the final report from the Provincial Auditor—and I think are being almost somewhat unfair to him and his staff in terms of how they can now be playing any role or commenting on a report that they have not even yet officially tabled to us as a committee or to the Legislature—I would ask the member to withdraw that motion. If not, I would suggest this committee defeat his motion.

Mr. Lamoureux: Mr. Chairperson, I would actually speak in favour of the motion itself. The Minister of Finance made reference to previous changes or if we want to enhance the accountability of the Public Accounts we have to address other issues. Some of those other issues he has referred to—and he has done it on a couple of occasions—would be the Estimates. When we started the process of changing the rules inside the Chamber—and we are all familiar with what actually transpired there. Ultimately you will see that part of those rules that changed it also changed the number of hours that are debated in the Estimates. In fact, technically, we could debate 180, 160 hours only in any given session. A lot depends on how the agenda unfolds during the session because you have a time clock that is put into place. At such and such a time, all the questions are in fact going to be placed. If you have only debated for 140 hours, that is all you are going to

debate for. In fact, we never did debate 240 hours, for example, in the last session.

The reason why I bring it up is the fact there were things that were done previously in an attempt to hold government and opposition parties more accountable and get them to behave in a more responsible fashion. I do not believe that it is necessary for us to be tying any sort of reform of Public Accounts to any other body that is inside the Legislature. What is important here is that we all—and I believe we all have recognized the need for change because today there is very little, if any, value to having Public Accounts meetings. We recognize that. Well, let us take the next step. By tying it into the House leaders or tying it into other forms of accountability such as concurrence Estimates and whatever it might be, other standing committees, what we are really doing is we are deferring any sort of something real, something tangible in terms of actions today. I do not believe that is in Manitobans' best interest, that there is nothing wrong with supporting the member for Crescentwood's motion, that in fact if I were to have suggested a motion, the motion would have been more so to have seen a committee strike today. Nothing prevents us. Government is not going to fall; opposition is going to create some dialogue with government on looking at how the Public Accounts can be of some value for tomorrow, because if it continues on in the way that it is going today, quite frankly, it is virtually a waste of time. We have professional civil servants who are relatively well paid, who sit around a table, who could have been doing something else. There was no value.

* (1120)

The member for Crescentwood puts forward excellent questions for the Public Accounts committee. All of those questions could have been answered in correspondence. You need to have that face-to-face discussion and it should be expanded. The idea of having, for example, no ministers on the Public Accounts committee formally, as membership, to the ability of committees to be able to call witnesses, to having regular meetings. We only sit 90 days on average in any given session. There are all sorts of opportunities for us to sit in between, intersession, for two hours a day, once a week, or whatever it might be. It does not have to be perceived as a negative thing towards government.

I would argue that ultimately it is in all of our benefit to give some real strength and to look at the needs and to take some action. We have not seen action. I have heard discussion since 1989 on the need. Well, I am tired of listening to the discussion. Quite frankly, I would like to see some sign of real tangible action, even if it is informal, from the minister indicating that he would have no problem with a member from the committee—you know, Mr. Helwer has been a member of this committee, a member of government for the last nine and a half years. Mr. Sale has expressed interest over the years in Public Accounts. I have had opportunity to attend and usually it is to talk about the need for change, I must say. But to have three individuals from the committee sit between now and the next session and just come up with some sort of a recommendation of a process, it does not prevent the House leaders from getting together and meeting. It at least allows us to do something internally, which is being suggested from the member's motion. I do not think it is appropriate for us to turn a blind eye to something that is very important and could be much more important and play a very productive role for all Manitobans if in fact we at least allowed some sort of a process to take place. We should not be dependent on other factors that are there. It would be unfortunate in my opinion.

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, I want to respond to the perhaps allegation or at least inference of the minister that there is something inappropriate about tabling this document. Every single member of this committee had a presentation in which every single one of these points was made in November and December of this year. I do not know whether the minister had his presentation in December or in January that—

Point of Order

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, that is not the document that I was referring to. The one that I was referring to was the second document, the one that he indicated, and I made it very clear was the report by the Provincial Auditor that the Provincial Auditor has not provided in its final form or part of his report, not the overview document that he shared with all members representing different parties of the Legislature in the presentation. So that is the report that I was suggesting was inappropriate. I want to make that clear.

Mr. Chairperson: There is no point of order. This committee has the authority to accept tabled documents. I do not see any restriction anywhere that you cannot present certain documents, so I do not think the honourable minister has a point of order. So there is nothing to discuss.

* * *

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, to continue my remarks, it was specifically to this document that I was referring, that I think it is entirely appropriate that this be put on the table. Was this committee functioning in an appropriate manner? The gathering that the Provincial Auditor convened would not have had to be convened by him. It would have been a meeting of the committee called for the purpose of considering its function and direction and requesting the Auditor to provide guidance. In fact, the Auditor had to take the initiative to do that because we cannot get this government to call Public Accounts committee meetings on any kind of regular basis. So I am specifically saying it is quite appropriate for me to table this today and I reject the minister's suggestion that there is something inappropriate about it.

In fact, the Provincial Auditor should be commended for sharing with the committee a draft document and asking for comments specifically on the issue that he had spent a great deal of time and trouble to brief us on in detail with a good overhead presentation, good background support, and good discussion. This document does not even touch on all the issues; it simply repeats once again a recommendation of this Auditor and Auditors past that we get onside with the effective functioning of Public Accounts committees as they exist in other jurisdictions. So I would call for the question, and let us get on with the issues.

Mr. Chairperson: Before the question, the honourable minister wants to have the floor.

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, I am just reminding the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) of what he said about 10 minutes ago, that we did agree to refer the total issue to the House leaders. We indicated that we expected to be meeting early in the next session. Subject to that discussion of House leaders, which he is very optimistic in terms of what might come from that

discussion, and subject to what comes out of that discussion and agreement that this committee would then be looking at how we move forward to deal with suggestions for changes and reforms, whether it is a subcommittee or what the make-up of the subcommittee would be and the various issues that we would have to deal with. That seemed like a reasonable way to move forward.

The member, in previous correspondence to me, has indicated his party is ready to prepare to discuss the Public Accounts committee and Estimates process in regard of time allotted to both processes. He and I have shared letters back and forth on the issue. We seem to have agreement that at this stage that was the most appropriate way to move forward. As I say, in light of that agreement, there is no need for this motion at this particular point in time. If the member is not prepared to withdraw it, then at this time it should be defeated.

Mr. Helwer: I think I have attended various meetings of the Canadian association of Public Accounts at different times. I agree, we do operate somewhat differently than some other provinces, but in more ways than one. I believe accountability is the main tool or main issue for any Public Accounts committee, and Manitoba does operate somewhat differently than some other provinces in that the Estimates process is much more extensive than other provinces, although we do operate some other Public Accounts committees and other provinces do operate differently because of different circumstances, because of the way they have a different system of the Estimates process. So I would have to agree with the minister in this case that I do not think that this motion is necessary at this time.

I think his idea of getting the House leaders together as the start to change and make this committee more accountable and to change the operation of it somewhat is a proper direction to go. I would have to agree that as a start the House leaders can get together and discuss how we can change or modernize the system of accountability. That would be the first step, and I would have to agree that that is the way we should go. If at some time the House leaders want to bring in some members from the committee, that is fine, but I think that is where we should start. So I would have to say that this motion at this time is not necessary, and I

would agree with the Minister of Finance (Mr. Stefanson).

Mr. Chairperson: Any more discussion?

* (1130)

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, I guess just one final point. An option certainly is to defer that motion to our next meeting. We seem to have agreement with how to move forward. We have agreed for the House leaders to meet as soon as possible. Our House leader has given that indication and that that meeting should take place, and this meeting could be left on our agenda for the next meeting of Public Accounts. I think that would be reasonable if the opposition members are concerned about this issue getting bogged down or whatever and not being dealt with. It certainly might well be an appropriate motion at our next meeting, or it might not be necessary at our next meeting, depending what comes of the discussions of House leaders. So that might be a reasonable compromise for all of us.

I think we all recognize there are opportunities for improvements to the Public Accounts committee. We as a government recognize that; obviously members of the opposition recognize that. We believe very strongly it is part of a comprehensive package, and it should be addressed that way. I have looked at other jurisdictions in terms of other aspects of accountability, and we really do have one of the most comprehensive, accountable Estimates processes.

Having said that, it can be improved upon. We have all experienced it. I have walked into this room on many occasions and looked at the limited participation and the nature of some of the questions and felt that it could certainly be improved upon. We have all participated. I would ask members like the members for Inkster or Crescentwood, do they agree that the Estimates part of the process can be improved upon? To me it is just as important an accountability part of the process as the Public Accounts. Public Accounts is an important accountability. Today the Estimates process, in terms of how it functions, is probably even more so or just as important, so there is an opportunity to improve that.

When we looked at the changes to the Legislative Assembly the view was to try and do it on a

comprehensive basis because the reality is there is always some give and take in terms of how you change processes. That is just a fact of life if you are going to change a process that there has to be first of all the objective and recognition that something should be done and needs to be done, but ultimately to accomplish something the parties usually give and take in terms of reaching a compromise in terms of what they are all satisfied with. I think that certainly will have to be a part of this process. There seems to be a willingness to do it. There is a willingness on our part to do that, and I think we have agreed to how we will move forward over the next several weeks. So I would suggest that maybe the member for Crescentwood would say he will carry his motion forward to the next meeting of the Public Accounts committee, and we can get on with the rest of the agenda.

Mr. Sale: There is a Shakespearean statement about methinks someone doth protest too much. If there is a will to move forward—and I take the minister's word that there is—then what is the possible harm in this motion? If there ever was a broad motion in principle to do something, if there ever was simply a statement of will to move forward with absolutely no substance in the motion, no teeth at all—and yet the minister says, my goodness, we should put this off for awhile. Well, the last time we put something off was in May. We did not have a meeting for eight months.

This committee has heard from four different Auditors, five perhaps, four at least about need for change. Now on the road to Damascus the minister is prepared to say within a month or so we will have another meeting and maybe this would be a good motion to have at that time. Maybe, if the House leaders can agree and the sun shines and we do not have another flood, we will have another meeting. Well, we are not prepared to play that game anymore. We have heard that we are prepared to have more meetings from this minister too many times. We have not had those meetings, and we have not improved the functioning of this committee.

So no, I am not prepared to withdraw this motion. This is the softest and most innocuous motion that you could imagine to be put forward and yet it has got all the members opposite concerned that somehow we are making some commitments that might be irreversible.

There is not a tooth in this motion, and it is still objectionable to the members opposite. If you have any commitment to reform this committee, pass the motion.

Mr. Stefanson: Well, Mr. Chairman, that was an interesting response from the member for Crescentwood. When he starts by saying there is no substance to this motion, there is no teeth to this motion, one would certainly have to question why he made the motion in the first place. I guess he is certainly making the case that there is opportunity for improvement in terms of how this committee does function, and with his very own remarks suggesting that, that makes my point that we have agreed to move forward. He indicates he has the support of his party and his House leader. I take him at his word on that.

I have had direct discussions with our House leader. Our House leader is prepared to get on with this process. He has indicated he is willing to do so as soon as possible. I have not heard that kind of a commitment from the member for Crescentwood, but we did a few minutes ago seem to agree that that was a reasonable approach and a reasonable process to let unfold over the course of the next several weeks. If our House leaders do get together, which we are prepared to do, and say, yes, there is an opportunity to improve all of these processes to improve accountability, to improve information and so on, then we should be getting on with it. We are prepared to get on with it. The Provincial Auditor has made some very important and concise suggestions and recommendations, so we have a good starting point.

Mr. Chairman, it just confirms my point. Why is the member even making this motion in light of his comments? He should either withdraw it or at least carry it forward to the next meeting if he is concerned that nothing is going to happen. We are prepared to get on with it. Our House leader will meet. I am assuming that his House leader is prepared to do the same thing. So, again, I would suggest it either be withdrawn, deferred, or if he is not prepared to do that, we should at least have the courtesy of waiting for the official report from the Provincial Auditor, as opposed to tabling a draft report that we shared with members of the committee, that is not a final report, that has not been dealt with in any official way, has not been released publicly as a source of a document to make

this motion. As I said earlier, I think that is being unfair to the Provincial Auditor. I would also welcome his comments and input, and probably those are more appropriate when he does table that report. At our subsequent meeting, we will be able to have a fuller, more informed discussion with that very direct input from the Provincial Auditor and his staff. So the member should clearly withdraw his motion. It would be the most appropriate thing, but in the absence of that let us just defeat it and get on with other business.

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, I will not withdraw the motion, and I will conclude my comments. I will not make any further comments after this particular intervention. The motion is a motion in principle. The minister should recognize that the principle of committing ourselves to a road does not have in it the teeth or the specifics of what will be the hills and valleys and bridges of that road. It is simply a commitment to go down the road. The minister has said he believes that is an appropriate thing we ought to do. He is quibbling over the question of whether or not the road direction should be given first by the House leaders or whether this committee should perhaps say we want to set out on this road. Obviously, by the way our Legislative Assembly functions, the House leaders will have a role to play in that. We are simply asking that this committee commit itself to that journey in a formal and public way, and the minister seems to think that is inappropriate, it is somehow not needed. Well, if it is not needed then, I guess, it cannot do any harm. Let us do it, because it certainly is not going to commit us to anything specific except a commitment to the journey. That is what a motion in principle does. That is what this motion is. We should pass it now.

* (1140)

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, without prolonging this very much more, the way I understand the substance of the member's motion is he has taken it in part from the draft Provincial Auditor's Report that he tabled, which was provided to the Chair and Vice-Chair of the committee, which does not necessarily mean that all members of this committee have had a chance to see it. It is not a final report. The Provincial Auditor has not commented on the report. Obviously, he is not in a position to comment on a report that he has not tabled yet. I am suggesting let us wait for that report,

particularly when the member is using that as one of the basis. In fact, the way I understand it from just reviewing the motion with you, Mr. Chairman, using that draft Provincial Auditor's recommendation as the substance of his recommendation, again, the prudent thing for this committee to do is wait until that official report arrives, let the Provincial Auditor speak to us about his report at that particular point in time, let us have some dialogue with him as well as his officials, as well as amongst ourselves.

Therefore, the motion is clearly premature and I think in some ways unfair to the Provincial Auditor and his staff. Therefore, in light of the commitments we have all made, recognizing the need to get on with dealing with this issue, let us do that. And in the absence of the member for Crescentwood withdrawing this motion, then I think until we have a final report from the Provincial Auditor, this motion should be defeated at this particular point in time.

Mr. Chairperson: On a matter of procedure. The motion is now on the floor of this committee. It cannot be withdrawn unless the mover withdraws it himself, and even if he does want to withdraw it, if the committee does not want it to be withdrawn, he has to ask the permission of the committee. It is not the property of the committee being acknowledged by the Chair. After this motion is disposed of one way or another, the member for Inkster said he wants to move another motion. Then once the floor is clear, he can move his motion. There is nothing that prevents any member of this committee from moving any motion as long as it is in writing.

Voice Vote

Mr. Chairperson: The question before the committee is the motion moved by Mr. Sale, seconded by Mr. Maloway, that this committee take steps to transform itself into a more effective force in government accountability. Shall the motion pass? All those in favour of the motion, please respond by saying yea.

Some Honourable Members: Yea.

Mr. Chairperson: All those opposed, please respond by saying nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

Mr. Chairperson: The Nays seem to have it in terms of number but not in terms of intensity. [interjection] Well, I am using both my ears and my eyes.

Formal Vote

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairman, could we have a recorded vote, please?

Mr. Chairperson: There is a request for a recorded vote.

A COUNT-OUT VOTE was taken, the result being as follows: Yeas 3, Nays 5.

Mr. Chairperson: The motion is lost.

* * *

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, I have a second motion that I would like to move and then speak to.

I move that this committee adopt the procedure of meeting within 60 days of the receipt of Volumes of Public Accounts and within 60 days of the receipt of any report of the Provincial Auditor.

Mr. Chairperson: It is in writing.

Motion presented.

Mr. Chairperson: Any discussion on the motion?

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, in putting forward this motion, I simply go to the precedent set by the committee in agreeing to agendas. This is a very minor but important move on the part of the committee which would ensure that we did not get behind as we have in every year since I have been an MLA. I am not sure about previous history, but I think that we have been behind in the past on many occasions as well.

This is clearly a procedural decision. It is easily accomplishable. Sixty days gives lots of time for scrutiny. It certainly gives time to fit members' schedules to allow for meetings that have been well prepared for and, coupled with the agreement that our

discussion would be guided by an agenda, I think this would go a long way towards bringing orderly annual Estimates processes into line with what happens in some other jurisdictions.

I would say that this is also a minimal agreement. If the minister still wished to avoid having more regular meetings, he could accomplish that goal by simply having one meeting within 60 days of receipt of Volumes 1 to 4 and not having any more. He would still have to, by my motion, allow there to be meetings within 60 days of each report of the Provincial Auditor. Sometimes the Provincial Auditor has only two volumes in a given year; sometimes he has three or four, or she has three or four. I remember two years ago, I believe there were a total of six different volumes of Provincial Auditor. So in that year we would be meeting more frequently.

This seems to me to be the kind of simple, clear, reasonable procedure that any committee charged with the examination of financial reports would want to take. I remind all members that, for example, companies must have meetings within a certain period of the filing of their annual returns. All of us have belonged to organizations that must have their annual meeting within some certain period of the year-end. In school boards, it is 90 days. They must deal with the audited statements within 90 days of their receipt. This is a common practice in the business world that the minister is familiar with and supportive of in my last encounters with him in which companies are required to have annual meetings within a certain time of receipt of their annual statements. They are not allowed to simply not do that just because it is not convenient or because the sun is not shining or for some other reason; they have to do it.

There are audit committees in every major corporation and in most small corporations. Audit committees are made up of the board of directors and selected other officers, but they certainly are made up of a board of directors, and we might, if the minister likes the analogy, think of ourselves as the director of a large corporation called Manitoba Inc. There is nothing onerous about the requirement of this motion, nor is it a major change in terms of what any well-functioning committee might do. So I commend the motion.

I think if the government wishes to show good will in regard to the agreement, that we should evolve this committee into a more useful function, a more modern role, then it will agree to this motion, and if it wants to continue to obfuscate and avoid accountability and not have meetings that are timely, so that more than a year after the end of a fiscal period we are still considering the records of that fiscal period, then it will defeat the motion. I think this will be a useful test as to whether the minister seriously thinks we should get on with reform or whether that is posturing, which I hope it is not, and I hope he will instruct his colleagues to support this motion.

* (1150)

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, just before I respond. The member for Crescentwood may have clarified this in his comments—if he did, I missed it—where he refers to 60 days of the receipt of Volumes 1 to 4. Now he is aware that they do not necessarily all come out at the same time, so is he suggesting 60 days after receipt of each individual report a committee meeting be called or 60 after the last report is tabled?

Mr. Chairperson: The question has been posed.

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, thankfully, partly due to the efforts of the minister and partly due to the efforts of the Provincial Auditor, we are at the point where most of these volumes come on a predictable basis. The dates for them have become pretty stable. I was moving a very gentle motion. My intent was simply to say, by the time we have Volumes 1 to 4, let the clock start, and 60 days later we must have had a meeting. So I am not suggesting that we meet for Volume 1, Volume 2, Volume 3 and Volume 4 within 60 days of each. I think the practice has been to table some of them together, and Volume 4 often has followed somewhat later. Sometimes in the past, Volume 3 has followed later, but in recent years it has been much more on a predictable kind of basis. I think that has been an improvement. I have recorded that improvement in previous committees. My intention was Volumes 1 to 4, all having been received, the clock starts.

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, speaking to the motion, I am glad that the member is picking up on one of the

recommendations of the Provincial Auditor in his overview to us about being nonpartisan when he talks about posturing and avoiding accountability and so on. I would suggest, if he is looking for somebody who is posturing, he need look no further than in a mirror and he would get the answer. When you look at this recommendation in light of the lengthy discussion we have just had on improvements to accountability, the need to improve and change how the Public Accounts committee functions and the fact that we are committed, I have indicated very clearly, which I have not heard from the member for Crescentwood, our House leader is prepared to meet as soon as possible to start that process of looking at the total package of accountability to the Legislature in terms of Estimates, committees, Public Accounts committee and so on. But again, at this particular point in time, that would be the most prudent approach to take. Until that process at least begins and starts to unfold, I believe that this motion, once again, should preferably be withdrawn through unanimous consent in the absence of the member for Crescentwood's willingness to do that. Again, this motion at this particular point in time should be defeated.

Mr. Chairperson: Any other discussion.

Mr. Lamoureux: Yes, just very quickly, Mr. Chairperson. I note that having reports in a timely fashion come before committee has been somewhat of a problem in past years, and as I interpret this particular motion, it is attempting to address that particular issue. It is not necessarily to limit any sort of changes in the future for the Public Accounts that might address the issue in a more specific and detailed way in the future, hopefully in the very near future, much like we had the changes for the agenda. I think that when the reports are tabled that there is a sense of need to have it come before committee in a timely fashion, and that is what I see this motion doing.

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, in presumably concluding debate on this, I understand the minister's direction to his caucus is to defeat the motion, which I regret. It is very interesting. The government is a government that has championed business, championed the private sector. Private sector accountabilities require annual meetings to consider annual reports and financial statements. They require that they be signed off within

a certain period of time. Now, this is a very big corporation—the government likes to talk about it that way; I do not like it, because I do not believe that is what government is—but this government talks about doing its business efficiently, and yet here is one of the most fundamental business rules. Receive and report on the annual statements, examine them with the shareholders present, let people ask questions. By law that is a right in the corporate world. Sometimes those meetings are long and sometimes they are very short and that is the way it is, but the meetings have to be held.

Now this is not something that would require the Legislature to have to think long and hard about because the Legislature already has. It passed an act to regulate businesses. It has many other acts that regulate public sector organizations, like school divisions, that set forth what has to happen with public statements of the operation of those divisions, but somehow that kind of direction is not good for the source of the direction, the Legislature of this province. Somehow it is really good to have public corporations have to report publicly with audited statements within a certain time frame but it is really bad to have that happen for those who make the laws, the government of the day.

I do not understand that, Mr. Chairperson, particularly from a pro-business government that believes, it says, in that kind of transparency in the private sector but it does not apparently believe in it in the public sector. What would be lost by passing this motion? What would be lost? We would have to have a couple more meetings than we have now. I do not think that is a loss. We would comply, in at least a minor sense, with the way the private sector is required to do business around accountability for financial operations. I do not see that as a loss. We would not have the situation where we are two and three years behind in considering public accounts. I do not see the down side of that quite frankly. So what would be lost by agreeing to have regular meetings within a certain time frame of the receipt of audited statements and Public Accounts? What could possibly be lost by that?

Now the minister has made much of his commitment to get this process of reform underway. He is talking about quick meetings of the House leaders, an early

meeting in the new session, and I hope that indeed will happen. But what would be lost by this committee instructing itself to meet within a certain time frame of the receipt of accounts? What accountability would be damaged or diminished? How would the public of Manitoba be badly served by a commitment to actually talk about the Public Accounts of Manitoba within a reasonable time frame of their receipt? How would our jobs as MLAs be made somehow less effective by doing that? I fail to see how that could be the case and yet this committee appears willing to say no, we should not do that. We should have a meeting of the House leaders and then maybe we should have a meeting of the committee and then we should have a process that will last until we are no longer government and then we would like these changes to take place. Well, no, we are not going to do it that way. Either we are going to make progress while this government is still government, for whatever short period of time that is, or we are not going to make progress, but we are not any longer simply going to defer to some endless referral discussions that do not move our process forward one iota when there are clear things we could do by agreement that would not fundamentally require the Legislature's action that are well within the mandate of most committees to make decisions about meeting times and meeting subjects and, particularly in this case, about the receipt and scrutiny of audited statements.

You on the opposite side and some of us on this side have all had something to do with the business world. We would be somewhat concerned if a company in which we had any involvement did not meet to consider its annual statements until 12 or 18 or 24 months after the fiscal period to which those statements pertained. I do not think we would have much confidence in the management of that company. But that is apparently what we are going to continue to do by defeating this motion. I do not understand that, because it does not seem to me that it enhances our role as legislators in the eyes of the public. I do not see how it advances the Conservative government's status as a well-managed government, which it certainly likes to refer to. It seems to me that it just sticks us in old procedures that other provinces have long since given up on, that the business world would not tolerate, and Manitobans should not tolerate either. But it appears to be the will of this government to do that.

Mr. Chairperson: One point of clarification. I just state the facts. Right now, in the rules conventionally followed by this committee, the committee cannot call its own meeting. Therefore, there is some need to amend this motion by substituting "recommend" for "adopt" because, if the committee itself cannot call its own meeting, how can it prescribe the time for a meeting without having that power traditionally, cumulatively? So we just recommend if the mover would agree to this.

An Honourable Member: Maybe the Chairman should rule it out of order.

Mr. Chairperson: I cannot amend the motion. I am the Chair. I am in a position of impartiality.

An Honourable Member: You could rule it out of order. Just rule it out of order. I think that would be proper procedure.

* (1200)

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, I would ask for guidance from you and from the Clerk. Was there a motion recommending the committee adopt the procedure of agendas when that change took place, or did the committee make that change itself? I believe the minister has already answered this question, but perhaps we should reflect on that before we accept your ruling in regard to this issue, because we have already a precedent of a procedure. I do not believe that that precedent had the term "recommend" in it. I do not believe that any other body was required to approve that action on the part of the committee, so I would like some clarification on that issue.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay.

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, in light of that comment and the confusion I was going to suggest that this motion at a minimum be deferred to our next meeting. I think that concern that you have raised has just added to that. I say that for a couple of reasons. First of all, of course, the process we currently follow, whether it is right or wrong, is the same process that has been in place for many years under various governments in Manitoba but, probably more importantly, the draft guidelines, CCPAC guidelines

that the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) tabled here today, under the steering committee one of the recommendations, it said it recommends that the number and timing of meetings and hearings be addressed.

So again, if there is the willingness, and I still have not heard from the member for Crescentwood the willingness to have his House leader get on with this comprehensive process, if there is the willingness to get on with it, at our next meeting we will know very clearly whether or not we are moving down the path of the comprehensive review to the Public Accounts committee, which includes the number and timings of meetings and hearings, which can be significantly different in terms of what we are currently doing, in terms of how they are scheduled, when they are scheduled, and so on.

So I think the prudent and appropriate response would be to wait for that process to our next meeting and, therefore, at a minimum it seems this motion first of all is out of order, but if not I would certainly encourage that it be deferred to the next meeting of this committee. At that point in time we will know very clearly whether or not there is agreement to move forward on a comprehensive basis or, as the member for Inkster (Mr. Lamoureux) skeptically suggests, whether or not this will all break down because there is not a willingness to deal with things on a comprehensive basis. We will know that, I would think, in very short order over the next several weeks. This issue and this motion is one of the many important issues in the draft CCPAC guidelines that we all have before us here today, Mr. Chairman. So, again, the member referred to posturing, and so on, and I suggested that he look in the mirror and I would encourage him to do it a second time, because we do believe that there are opportunities to enhance accountability.

In many respects, we have an extremely accountable system here in Manitoba when it comes to our Estimates process, our various committee meetings, our Question Period in the Legislature, and so on. We are saying there is an opportunity to improve one aspect of accountability here in Public Accounts committee, but in terms of doing it in a responsible, prudent, long-term fashion, let us do it on a comprehensive basis. We are

prepared to do that. I have the commitment from our party and our House leader to get on with it. I would like to hear the same commitment from the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) if he would stop his posturing and get on with the rest of the agenda, Mr. Chairman.

But let us either have it withdrawn because it is out of order or deferred to the next meeting.

Mr. Chairperson: Can the Chair suggest a recess of a few minutes so we can clarify whether the motion is in order or not? Because the clerks would like to research that. [agreed]

The committee recessed at 12:05 p.m.

After Recess

The committee resumed at 12:16 p.m.

Mr. Chairperson: Will the meeting please resume order. As I have explained before, because this committee lacks the authority to call its own meeting, this will not be consistent with that kind of situation. This motion, in its present form, needs to be amended or else it will be out of order. For the last time, may I request unanimous consent of this committee to change that word "adopt" to "recommend"? Does the committee give unanimous consent to change and amend this motion on the floor?

Some Honourable Members: Yes.

Some Honourable Members: No.

Mr. Chairperson: Unanimous consent has not been granted. Therefore, I rule that this motion, because of form, is out of order. However, it does not preclude another motion being put in its proper form.

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, may I have the motion to strike the word and replace it, please? What is the word that is required? Recommend. So moved. May I just speak briefly to the motion?

My understanding of recommending to ourselves in such a fashion, because we do not report the minutes of

this meeting to anybody else at this point, we simply recommend, I guess in this case we are recommending to the Finance minister that he use his current role as the caller of meetings to follow the intent of the motion, which is to call meetings within the periods prescribed. So clearly he can do this, and I think that if he is serious about the commitment of his government to move in a reform manner in this committee—

Mr. Chairperson: Order, please. The member has to be recognized before he speaks. I have first to accept the motion, put it on the floor and then I will recognize the member, Mr. Sale. So the motion has been put now in its proper form, that this committee recommend the procedure of meeting within 60 days of the receipt of Volumes 1 to 4 of Public Accounts and within 60 days of the receipt of any report from the Provincial Auditor. Discussions.

Mr. Sale: Mr. Chairperson, thank you. My understanding of the intention of this motion would now seem to be with the required change that you required to essentially instruct the Finance minister to use his role as the caller of meetings, not the convenor because you are the convenor, but the authority for the calling of meetings, to use that authority in the way in which the motion directs and that by supporting this motion the committee members will be requesting the Finance minister to use his authority to call meetings, to do so in conformity with the intent of the motion which I think we have already debated and we should vote on.

Mr. Stefanson: Mr. Chairman, again, being somewhat repetitive—well, first of all, I could indicate that we have a formal agenda although I recognize there was a fairly short time frame, but we have now had a couple of motions and so on which have not in any way been provided as part of the agenda submitted, but recognizing that we have said all along that we have agenda categories or areas and we will obviously have flexibility and accepting motions is certainly a key part of that.

* (1220)

I recognize that but I have indicated there appears to be a willingness to look at reforming how this committee functions. One of the key recommendations in the guideline document deals with the meetings, the

numbers of meetings and so on, and I am not suggesting that there is not some merit to looking at—if we cannot make progress on a comprehensive basis that there is not some merit to looking at then some other adjustments, whether it be how we schedule meetings or whatever, but I think we should let the next several weeks unfold and see if we are going down a path of comprehensive reform. We certainly are prepared to look at these kinds of things related to timing of committees as they relate to the tabling of documents and so on. But I think we should at least allow these next few weeks to see if there is this willingness, which I sense there is, but again, the member for Crescentwood has not clearly indicated that his House leader is prepared to meet and sit down ASAP with our House leader and others, that we are prepared to move on looking at a comprehensive reform. So we should at least allow these next few weeks to unfold with that process and, therefore, I would suggest that this motion should be deferred to our next committee meeting and dealt with at that time.

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Helwer indicated he wants to speak.

Mr. Helwer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Yes, I would have to agree that I think we should delay this until the next meeting. First of all, I think the Minister of Finance, this minister, and also the former minister have always been prepared to meet as soon as possible after the reports come out. I think by putting a certain time limit on it would restrict the flexibility of the government or of the minister. First of all, that time limit could be right in the middle of Estimates, when we would be dealing with Estimates. We do not know what particular department we could be dealing with at that particular time, so I do not think that putting a certain time limit on it would be advantageous in any way making this government or any government more accountable.

As I have said, we have always, with a degree of co-operation, tried to bring these issues to a meeting as soon as possible. Unfortunately, sometimes it has been longer than others. I think given what the minister has said that we should give the House leaders the opportunity to meet and try to come to some agreement as to how we could possibly improve the operation of the Public Accounts committee, there are many factors

to be considered in this, the whole accountability issue. So I think this should be deferred until the next meeting, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairperson: Do I have a motion?

Mr. Helwer: Mr. Chairman, would a motion be in order at this time to table this motion until the next meeting?

Mr. Chairperson: I need a copy of the motion in writing according to our procedures. A point of order is being raised.

Point of Order

Mr. Sale: A point of order, Mr. Chairperson. I would like some clarification on my memory of the rules under which we function, whether a motion to table is the same as a motion to postpone to a definite time. I am not clear about whether that distinction exists in our rules or not. If the member wants to table a motion, I think that he can do so, but I do not know that it is in order to table it to a definite time. My memory is that a motion to table to a definite time is debatable and a motion to table is not, but I am asking for clarification.

Mr. Chairperson: There is a subsidiary motion here moved by Mr. Helwer that we, as a committee, table this motion on the floor, the main motion on the floor, to the next meeting of this committee.

As it stands now, I have to work on the operating rules of this committee which is also the same as Committee of the House or the House itself. We do not operate under the rules of order. We have our own rules as is stated in the rules of procedures of the House. To answer the question, the motion to defer is the same as the motion to postpone, and there is a distinction between whether you defer or postpone to a day certain or you postpone indefinitely. One of them, as indicated, is debatable; the other one is not.

As it stands now under our rules—so I have read the motion of Mr. Helwer: I move that we postpone, move that we take a motion to the next meeting. That is the motion. [interjection] To table. Is it to table?

The motion to table, as it stands now under the existing rules, is out of order because of certain rules. Rule 65: When a question is under debate, no motion

shall be made except: (b) to postpone it to a day certain. Therefore, if a motion is to proceed, it should be to a day certain. Unless this committee sets a specific date for the next meeting of the committee, the motion will be out of order. The motion is out of order. It has been ruled so.

There is another motion pending on the floor. The main motion is that this committee recommend the procedure of meeting within 60 days of the receipt of Volumes 1 to 4 of Public Accounts and within 60 days of the receipt of any report of the Provincial Auditor.

Question being called? No. Mr. Lamoureux? Discussion.

Mr. Lamoureux: Mr. Chairperson, I recognize that we are somewhat running out of time, and I also indicated that I was hoping to be able to move a motion. I does not appear as if I will be able to move the motion. What I would like to hear from the minister at the next Public Accounts meetings is an I-told-you-so. I am somewhat of a skeptic in believing that the minister is not going to be able to say that.

What I would suggest to the minister and his colleagues is that if in fact he is unable to say that at the next meeting, what I would like to see is a committee of three people from this group, from the Public Accounts committee, be put together in order to address this. So even though I did not get the opportunity to move that particular motion this morning, it is a motion which I would want to move at the first opportunity I get at the next meeting of Public Accounts in hopes that the minister will be supportive of that motion if in fact the House leaders have not been able to resolve this issue.

As per the motion that the member for Crescentwood (Mr. Sale) has put forward, I have already indicated my comments.

Mr. Chairperson: The hour is 12:30. That is what we set. Is there any unanimous consent, willingness to exceed the hour?

Some Honourable Members: No.

Mr. Chairperson: Being 12:30, the meeting of the Public Accounts committee is adjourned.

COMMITTEE ROSE AT: 12:30 p.m.