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COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Thursday, February 23, 2006

Committee Room 1

Forum on Poverty - Deliberations and Recommendations

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Ms. Marilyn More (Chairman)
Mr. Mark Parent
Mr. Gary Hines
Ms. Judy Streach
Mr. Jerry Pye
Mr. Gordon Gosse
Mr. Stephen McNeil
Mr. Leo Glavine
Ms. Diana Whalen

In Attendance:
Ms. Mora Stevens
Legislative Committee Clerk

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2006

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:55 A.M.

CHAIRMAN

Ms. Marilyn More

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'm calling the meeting back to order, please. Sorry, I meant to say the Forum on Poverty. That is the correspondence we're dealing with in the second part of the meeting.

The first is the letter from the Speaker. We were looking for a mechanism in order to continue our research and our action on the recommendations that were given to us by approximately 30 groups and individuals when we had the Forum on Poverty. If I could just summarize the letter from Speaker Scott, he is suggesting that the best we could do is put the recommendations and the information we got in the form of a report to the Legislature and reminds us that, "Government is responsible to deal with poverty by policies, funding and appropriate action.", suggesting that perhaps this committee doesn't really have a role in that. Any discussion on that particular piece of correspondence? Jerry.

MR. PYE: Thank you, Madam Chairman, I just found that I was at a loss with respect to the letter from the Speaker and all due respect to the Speaker, it is not a concern of us whether the General Assembly is going to be in existence or not. We have heard from witnesses who presented themselves through the Forum on Poverty and they presented themselves on a number of different issues, indicating, first of all, that they wanted to be involved with any future development of policies or regulations around the Department of Community Services and we had suggested through this committee that there were alternative ways of doing that. One was by Voluntary Planning, one was by setting up a committee and I do see that in the Speaker's letter, he indicates that we could do this by way of resolution of the House.

I really think in order to respond to those presenters, who wanted to play an important role in the development of policy around the Employment Support and Income Assistance Act, then that's the way we ought to go and I'm prepared to say that although it can be accompanied by a report from the Standing Committee on Community Services, I think that I'm prepared to also say that we should make a resolution at this standing committee, to present to the Legislature, asking the Legislature or the minister or the government, to form a committee, with stakeholder participation, to tour this province. I don't care if the - I guess this is the 58th General Assembly?

MR. GOSSE: No, the 59th.

MR. PYE: The 59th General Assembly - excuse me, I'm getting slow in my age - when it comes to an end is irrelevant to me. What is most important, is to listen to what those stakeholders have said and to allow them a participatory role in a process of developing policies around the Employment Support and Income Assistance Act.

So I would just leave it at that, for now, until I hear others.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do we have some other discussion on this letter? Gordie.

MR. GOSSE: I'd like to read this quote, ". . . the Committee is not an arm of the Nova Scotia Government but is a very important part of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly." I read that and I was like, well, what are we doing here - why am I driving up here from Cape Breton to sit on a committee and listen to concerns of people who have come before this committee from all over the Province of Nova Scotia, to help us make recommendations to maybe provide better programming and better things for the people we represent all over the province. I just wonder what he meant by this letter. Maybe the committee could ask him what he meant by this letter. We're not an arm of government, I guess is what he's trying to explain. Well, maybe that day on the Forum on Poverty when there was only one of their members and the next day no members, maybe he should have attended. That's the last thing I'm saying.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Anyone else? Stephen.

MR. MCNEIL: I think the letter, correct me if I'm wrong, we had asked the Speaker to provide us what avenue we could go through and he suggested that the avenue, in his mind, is the House of Assembly. Right? I want to suggest that perhaps Mr. Pye had a good idea. If we believe as a committee that we want to push this further, since there is no other avenue in terms of the government side to deal with, maybe the Legislature is the way for us to deal with it.

Instead of doing a report, since I think the letter we have already sent out is pretty detailed on what the recommendations are that we put forward, maybe the resolution that Mr. Pye is talking about is the way to go. The only question that I would ask is, if the resolution is put forward, it will require money. If they are going to provide a committee

to go around the province to deal with this issue, is it in order? I don't know, would that resolution be in order?

[11:00 a.m.]

MR. PYE: The resolution is always in order. It's up to the government then to defeat the resolution based on the premise that, in fact, it is a money resolution on which the government hasn't costed and turn down the resolution, or turn down the request, and that would not reflect in a very good light on government. I think that there are sufficient resources, I mean financial resources and communications that would be set aside, or hopefully it can be set aside I should say, to provide the funding for such a committee to tour the province. However, I'm just purely speculating.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just want to throw in a note of caution here. If you check back at our original letter to the Speaker, in it we talk about the goal is developing an anti-poverty strategy for Nova Scotia. The goal is not necessarily getting more of the same information that we heard at the Forum on Poverty. So just keep that distinction in mind when we talk about possible motions. Stephen.

MR. MCNEIL: The problem with that, they have basically said to us there is no role for us to play at this point and if they choose to put a strategy out at some point down the road, they'll do it. As a committee, if we're willing to say, okay, we're satisfied and we're going to drop the issue, then that's their - the only other avenue we have is the Legislature, according to the letter. We can't send it to somebody else, you know, I mean unless you want, as chairman, to write letters to the Premier every second week and have him respond back to you. The only other avenue we have is the Legislature.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, but you'll notice he changed our original request from a task force or some kind of committee that would involve the relevant departments and the voluntary sector, the stakeholders - you will notice he refers to it as a task force made up of members of the House. So, you know, we would have to be clear what we're talking about as a task force as well. You know I'm not saying one way or the other, but I just want you to remember what we had originally asked for and make sure that any motion from this committee stays true to that original purpose.

MR. MCNEIL: I would make this suggestion, and it's outside of this committee, it would end up being, but I'm not sure. They don't see a role for us, quite honestly, by the looks of that. So perhaps the next question is for our collective caucuses, meaning those that are here, to maybe deliberate on this issue . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: All those present in the room, yes.

MR. MCNEIL: . . . to see how we collectively move forward on this and keep the issue alive because there is no other role according to the Speaker in terms of our

committee. So I would suggest that maybe there should be some conversation happening at that level.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, let's hear Leo and then everyone has had a chance to say something initially. Then perhaps we can talk about whether or not we want to do it in the form of a motion or just consensus. Leo.

MR. GLAVINE: Well, certainly I'm disappointed, you know, with the response from the Speaker on this issue. It's quite typical of what we saw in the two-day forum where there was minimal participation by government and the letter, you know, certainly to me reads that it's not an issue that they want out there for a long, continuous and sustained debate on. It's a problem that I feel they don't want to truly recognize and the extent that exists in the province. I think for this committee, you know, to take the line and the thinking here which says, "I am mindful of the likelihood that this General Assembly is in the latter part of its existence and that the Committee comes to an end with dissolution.", therefore, you know, the poverty issue and the work of the forum and so on is pretty well over, done, null and void.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That we're a lame-duck committee at this stage.

MR. GLAVINE: Yes. So I really take issue, you know, with that and I think for us it would be an absolute failure for this committee to go away quietly when so many Nova Scotians put their faith and trust in us when they took the time to come and present before the committee and some very, very strong, strong presentations that there is need for a change in direction in how employment support and income assistance needs to be delivered, as well as the more global poverty issue that faces Nova Scotia.

I think in some way we need to be asking for this committee that would go around the province, not necessarily hear all of the compelling kinds of statements about the nature of poverty, but rather a solutions-driven type of committee which asks people to come forward. What are the things that we can do better in a societal way and specifically addressing the Department of Community Services and even more specific, employment support and income assistance which leaves many families and individuals short of meeting their basic needs?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I have to say that in fairness to Jerry's suggestion, if we did as the Speaker suggests, the task force made up of MLAs, at least it would continue to clarify what the issues are and still keep the topic before the public. There are advantages that way as well. Gordie.

MR. GOSSE: I just think we should take the report back to our caucuses and possibly between both caucuses, table the report in the Legislature. It's not going to be a positive report, but I think that's the only way to go. I don't see any other way but to take that report and table it in the Legislature and make it what we heard. That's the way I feel

about it, between both caucuses that are here right now, that's a possibility that should be done is to take that report and table it in the Legislature.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We don't have a report as such.

MR. GOSSE: When we get it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We have our letter with the initial recommendations and we certainly have the Hansard which covers everything that was said, both at the two-day forum and also at our meeting dedicated to that topic and how we're going to move ahead on that.

MR. MCNEIL: I would agree with what Gordie is saying, but bearing in mind the number of reports tabled in the Legislature, there needs to be a decision and it needs to be a political decision, quite frankly, among our collective caucuses to decide if this issue is important enough to keep it on the front burner. If it is, then we need to find a way to do as the Speaker said, use the Legislature. It's a minority situation, the resolution comes up, we need to be prepared to debate it. Someone needs to be prepared to call it and maybe it needs to be collective resolutions, but that's a discussion that I think should take part in our collective caucuses and then be discussed at that point.

Clearly, as both members indicated earlier, they do not want this issue on the table. They want to get rid of it. If we want to let that happen, then so be it. If not, across the street in the Legislature is the only chance we have. We can table the report and like every other report that gets tabled over there we'll all get a copy thrown on our desk and someone will read it. So if we truly believe in the issue, if we heard what people said to us how important this was, and we believe in those recommendations, then the next step is the political step which is our caucuses need to decide what we're going to do at the Legislature and then we can move forward on that. I think that's what we have to do.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So how do you want to leave here? Do you want to have a motion to that effect or do you want just a consensus that we will . . .

MR. MCNEIL: I'm not sure there needs to be a motion on it. I think there needs to be a consensus and then our caucuses - I know my colleagues who are on this committee will certainly bring it to our caucus and make it part of a future caucus meeting and then we will move forward from there. I assume you will do the same.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We'll make a commitment to do that as well.

MR. MCNEIL: And conversations take place from there.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, is everyone comfortable with that line of action?

MR. PYE: What is the line of action?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That the representatives from this committee, the Liberals and the NDP, take the issue of how to move forward on the recommendations that have come forward from the public and the non-profit sector to our respective caucuses and try to work out a joint strategy for moving them ahead.

MR. PYE: Okay.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And if we have to do that through a joint motion in the Legislature, I think we're prepared to recommend that.

MR. PYE: But at the end of the day, it must encompass the stakeholders and those individuals who wanted to be a participant of this committee.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MR. PYE: I want to say as well, I want to inform my colleague, the member for Cape Breton Nova, that if the report goes before the Legislature and the recommendations are not endorsed by the government or department, it dies with the 59th General Assembly as well. So there is absolutely no difference than what the Speaker is saying with respect to a committee. I really don't put a whole lot of faith in that and hope we really seriously consider the direction which is in the best interests of those stakeholders who presented at that two-day conference.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do we want to have anything on our official record as the Standing Committee on Community Services in terms of a next step for this standing committee?

MR. MCNEIL: I don't know if there is a next step for the standing committee. If you read the letter, the letter clearly says the only step is the Legislature. So if that's the step, then it moves from this committee to the caucus level.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, one thing I think we might do and I will ask the clerk to comment on that, we could at least recommend that this issue stay on our continuing agenda and within a certain period of time - two months - that we actually come back and make sure we've moved forward. Otherwise, it just sort of gets shuffled away.

MR. PYE: Excuse me, Madam Chairman, I think that a short period of time is important because, remember, we had identified items that were short, medium and long term and if we're talking about two months down the road, I don't know if we're really addressing those very real issues.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Add it to the next meeting, shall we have a brief session on this topic on March 30th?

MR. PYE: Absolutely, I would prefer that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do we have agreement? Will you have had a chance to consult with your fellow colleagues - March 30th, the end of March.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Is that soon enough, Jerry?

MR. PYE: It's soon enough.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, so we ask to have this put on the agenda for our next meeting. We have some other letters that we need to deal with before we adjourn.

MS. MORA STEVENS (Legislative Committee Clerk): Just at the end of the meeting that we have on March 30th with KidSport, we were already going to add a few agenda topics. So that was sort of 10:45 a.m. until 11:00 a.m. Does the committee want another 11:00 a.m. until 11:15 p.m. added on for the forum discussion?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, I'm wondering, KidSport is a small program relative to some of the other big issues we've dealt with, I wonder if we could finish with that discussion at 10:30 a.m. and then do the two 15-minute segments. Okay.

The next letter was to the Honourable Barry Barnet, Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, with our recommendation about the Keep the Heat program, asking that those low-income people who pay for their heat through their rent would be eligible for a rebate. The response is there that they'll take the recommendation into consideration if and when they have a Keep the Heat program for next winter. Any discussion on that?

MR. PYE: We've seen the file. That's about the best you can do.

MR. MCNEIL: Why would anyone be surprised, you know, that program has been completely mishandled from the very beginning and why would anyone even think - we were silly to suggest that he might take a good idea and implement it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, we did our best to voice the concerns that certainly came up at the Forum on Poverty. Anyone else want to comment on that? Okay, so we'll just receive and file that.

The next letter was the one to the Premier with our initial recommendations from the Forum on Poverty and we asked that they be considered in the upcoming Spring budget. We just got back a letter of acknowledgement suggesting that they would be in touch with us later.

The last one is from Mayann Francis, Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission. We asked the commission to look into whether or not adequate nutrition and housing could be

considered to be basic human rights under federal and provincial legislation and, again, they acknowledge the letter and they're going to check into that.

Oh, yes, well, then we have a copy of our letter to Minister Morse and we haven't received an acknowledgement yet, but I'm assuming that that will be forthcoming. We also have, I think, the correspondence regarding Alice Housing from Minister Morse. We haven't heard the outcome. They were in discussions with Alice Housing and we don't know - do we know if that has been resolved?

[11:15 a.m.]

MS. STEVENS: We haven't heard.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So any discussion on any of the other letters and their acknowledgments? Okay, we will keep you posted.

So the next meeting is Thursday, March 30th. We will review the KidSport program. We will also continue with our discussion on the Forum on Poverty and we will also do a few organizational items around future agendas. Could I have a motion to adjourn, please.

MR. MCNEIL: So moved.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We are adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:16 a.m.]