

HANSARD

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COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, February 3, 2016

RED CHAMBER

Executive Council Office

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Public Accounts Committee

Mr. Allan MacMaster, Chairman
Mr. Iain Rankin, Vice-Chairman
Ms. Margaret Miller
Ms. Suzanne Lohnes-Croft
Mr. Brendan Maguire
Mr. Joachim Stroink
Mr. Tim Houston
Hon. Maureen MacDonald
Hon. David Wilson

[Mr. Keith Irving replaced Mr. Joachim Stroink]
[Mr. Terry Farrell replaced Ms. Margaret Miller]

In Attendance:

Ms. Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Mr. Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

Mr. Michael Pickup
Auditor General

Ms. Evangeline Colman-Sadd
Assistant Auditor General

WITNESSES

Executive Council Office

Ms. Catherine Blewett, Clerk and Secretary to Executive Council
Ms. Jeannine Lagasse, Executive Director



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2016

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN

Mr. Allan MacMaster

VICE-CHAIRMAN

Mr. Iain Rankin

MR. CHAIRMAN: I call this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee to order. We have with us this morning the Executive Council Office to discuss ministerial travel. I'd like to remind everyone to place their phones on silent so we don't have interruptions. We'll begin with introductions, starting with Mr. Irving.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: This morning, because we are in the Red Room, I am going to have to acknowledge everybody each time they speak, so just be patient. I will acknowledge you, your microphone will come on to ensure that we get everybody's statements on the record.

We have Ms. Blewett and Ms. Lagasse with us this morning. Perhaps you could introduce yourselves and also open with some comments.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Go ahead, Ms. Blewett.

MS. CATHERINE BLEWETT: I'd like to thank the committee for the invitation to be here this morning to discuss ministerial travel. I understand members of the committee have received and reviewed copies of the policies governing ministerial expenses and as you know from the documents, they go back to 1994.

In my capacity as head of the Public Service and Clerk of the Executive Council, one of the primary functions of course is to ensure that the machinery of government functions and happens in a coordinated and cohesive fashion. The work extends to ensuring government policies and procedures, such as the government travel policy, are properly adhered to and supported. Day to day, deputy ministers and line departments have the authority to review ministerial travel expenses and to ensure they comply with government travel policy. There are also additional checks and balances and quality assurance processes led by the Department of Internal Services. All expenses are to be in compliance, in order to be reimbursed.

Additionally, as members of the committee would be aware, ministerial travel expenses are now posted online so they are publicly accessible on a monthly basis. I hope we have the opportunity to discuss it a little bit more but I also wanted to highlight that in the new fiscal year, April 1, 2016, we're moving to ensure that deputy minister travel expenses are also posted online.

In my view, transparency and openness help to increase the level of trust between Nova Scotians and their elected officials, and the senior levels of the Public Service who are working on their behalf. As mentioned, in the package of the background material provided are the policies that go back to 1994, with the most recent documents actually updated this calendar year. The procedures for submitting summaries of travel expenses are laid out in the document and they serve an important function to provide guidance for ministerial executive assistants.

The government travel policy must be followed in all circumstances where a minister is travelling in an official capacity on government business. There is a series of steps and protections built into the system to ensure that only approved and appropriate expenses are reimbursed. The quality assurance actually begins before people start travelling. If travelling on government business, ministers must first receive approval to travel and that approval is provided by the Premier's Office.

When the travel is complete, expenses are submitted and the appropriate internal checks then occur. These steps include a review by the deputy minister of the department, as well as reviews with the Department of Internal Services. All required documentation per the government travel policy must be provided and it's all verified.

Once the steps are complete and approved, the expense is submitted for reimbursement. If ministers travel in their capacity as MLAs on constituency business,

their expenses are approved and charged to the Office of the Speaker. In these instances, the House of Assembly Management Commission regulations apply.

In summary, as head of the Public Service, I work with and rely on deputy ministers to ensure that any and all expenses occurred by staff or their ministers are appropriate and follow government policy. We have, I think, the internal checks in place to make sure that expenses are properly documented and verified before they're reimbursed.

With that, I'm happy to take some questions.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. We will begin with Mr. Houston of the PC caucus for 20 minutes.

MR. TIM HOUSTON: Thank you for those introductory comments, they're very helpful. I just want to make sure that I understand your role in the process. I think I heard you say the deputy ministers approve the ministers' expenses. Is that true that the deputy ministers approve the ministers' expenses, and what does that mean? Does the minister actually submit an expense report that he or she would sign and say, "Submitted by" and the deputy minister would review them and sign off that they're approved, and then would it come to you? What does it mean when you say that the deputy minister approves them?

MS. BLEWETT: To answer the question, perhaps I will start with the role of the Clerk of the Executive Council. In terms of our processes, all of the expense claims come to the Clerk of the Executive Council with the view to then being posted. For a number of years actually, the public process was just to bring the physical copies of the expenses and post them and leave them at the House. More recently, we post them online.

So as Clerk of the Executive Council, I don't approve ministerial travel. My job is to make sure that they are accessible to the public and in current process have them online, so it's the public part of it.

In terms of the deputy ministers' role, it's to make sure there are processes in place. They would typically review all ministerial travel expenses and the claims that come in. I could talk a little bit about the policy and how it applies, if you like.

MR. HOUSTON: So by the time the documents get to you - and I think they come to you in summary form?

MS. BLEWETT: Yes.

MR. HOUSTON: But by that time, they're already paid - submitted, approved, probably paid out, right? You're pretty far down in the process.

MS. BLEWETT: Yes, the summaries come to the Executive Council to be posted.

MR. HOUSTON: Do you have any authority to question what you see in any way or is yours purely just a filing exercise?

MS. BLEWETT: I can talk a little bit about the role of deputy ministers and then perhaps how that relates to me. When anybody submits an expense form - a minister, a director or a program level staff person - they are deemed to be in compliance with the travel policy. So deputy ministers for all line departments would look at ministerial expenses that come through. They would go through all the supporting documentation - that's the departmental check - then it goes through to the central agency, Internal Services, and they do a compliance check. If there are questions, if a receipt is missing or if there are any flags, any issues - sometimes we'll get a call back to say you may have missed something - then it goes back to Internal Services. By the time it comes to the Executive Council Office again, our function is to make sure that the expenses are public.

MR. HOUSTON: I just want to clarify, I think you said your department or you may get a call saying something is missing. Did I hear that correctly?

MS. BLEWETT: Yes.

MR. HOUSTON: So that implies that you do have some responsibility over the accuracy. Has there ever been a time when you have said this particular expense is not in compliance, we are not paying that, and declined an expense? Has that ever happened and do you have the authority to do that?

MS. BLEWETT: If I might clarify, probably part of the issue - I also currently function as the CEO for the Office of Immigration. When I meant "minister", as the Deputy Minister for Immigration, I actually do review the immigration claims. I'll look at all the supporting documentation and we submit all the documentation. Internal Services is quite excellent and they go through it carefully.

I have not seen something from my Immigration Minister that I would decline, if that's your question. So as Clerk, if I may, those have gone through the process and when they come to the Executive Council Office it's with a view to make sure that they are public and put online.

MR. HOUSTON: So in your capacity as Clerk, you have no authority to decline or question an expense that has been submitted to you, is that a fair statement?

MS. BLEWETT: Mr. Chairman, I've not had the experience, I guess, to test that. I would expect if there were questions and, for example, if a deputy minister may have questions or concerns, I expect then they would probably come to talk to me, as the Clerk. I've just not encountered that circumstance.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay, thank you. So I guess what I'm trying to get to is not what we hope might happen, but what actually should happen. So you have never had the

opportunity to question a minister's expense. Do I take from that that you have reviewed the expenses submitted before you in your capacity as Clerk, for each member at each opportunity, and have never raised an eyebrow, never thought to yourself gee, I wonder what this is all about? Do I assume that has happened or do I assume that in your capacity as Clerk you receive the reports and assume somebody else did that? That's what I'm trying to figure out, where is the segregation of duties here?

MS. BLEWETT: As Clerk, I do not review all of the travel claims that come in, in terms of

MR. HOUSTON: Let's talk about your responsibilities as Clerk. One of your responsibilities as Clerk is not to review the ministers' expenses; your responsibility as Clerk, as I understand it, is to receive and file the ministers' expenses. So if it's not your responsibility to review the ministers' expenses, then it becomes the deputy ministers' responsibility to review them.

MS. BLEWETT: Yes, that's correct.

MR. HOUSTON: So the deputy ministers are responsible for reviewing and approving their bosses' expense reports - maybe even preparing. Which of those are the deputy ministers responsible for - reviewing, approving, or preparing?

MS. BLEWETT: My sense would be that deputy ministers would not prepare their ministers' expense forms. What deputy ministers are responsible to do is to ensure there is a process to review the claims. Again, any claim that's submitted by anybody is deemed to be compliant with the policy. So deputy ministers review them and then move them for processing. The travel policy - again, you are deemed in compliance and then it goes through the process.

MR. HOUSTON: Thank you for that. So in your capacity as CEO of the Department of Immigration, you've reviewed the minister's expenses as they come - that's one of your roles and they've all been fine. Are you aware of any situation where other deputy ministers have not approved expenses? Deputy ministers have deputy ministers' meetings, I think. Has this ever been something that has been discussed in that capacity? Are you aware? I'm just asking you for your general awareness now.

MS. BLEWETT: Thank you for the questions, and if it's okay I will try to take them one at a time. In my role as CEO of the Department of Immigration, I do look at my minister's claims any time they're submitted, including the background documentation. So I do that as a line deputy minister, for sure.

To your more general question about the extent to which we have corporate awareness and what deputy ministers talk about, it's a little bit of a change that I've made - I'm just about a year, or now am over a year in this job. In addition to having regular deputy ministers' meetings, one of the things that I've asked from a corporate perspective,

that deputy ministers who have responsibilities such as Internal Services, that they actually - it's a bit of a deeper dive, as opposed to having a management meeting to talk about corporate issues. It's really important to me on several fronts, particularly accountability pieces, that deputies are aware of their obligations and we actually have a chance to talk about them.

So fairly recently - and I can't remember the date, but it would have been within 2016 - the Deputy Minister of Internal Services - we have what we call a deputy ministers' breakfast; it's not such good food, but we do fill up and have bad coffee. It was fantastic. We spent almost three hours and we walked through the current travel policy. The deputy minister brought in a number of staff . . .

MR. HOUSTON: Sorry, when would this particular meeting have taken place?

MS. BLEWETT: I'm worried that I don't know exactly the correct date, but it was within 2016. We try to have these scheduled as it works on a number of different topics.

MR. HOUSTON: In your opening comments, you referenced the Premier's Office having some responsibility to approve travel - I think it was in the advanced stages. The Premier's Office has some interaction with the travel of ministers - is that before the trip or after the trip?

MS. BLEWETT: Yes, it's in advance of the trip so in terms of approving ministerial travel and the authority to go, that approval happens through the Premier's Office.

MR. HOUSTON: I'm thinking of the case of former minister Younger who did some travelling on behalf of the province. I'm just looking at a news article here from CTV where it says that Nova Scotia's former Energy Minister is coming under fire for \$35,000 in travel expenses he racked up in less than eight months. I remember that people were quite offended by that at the time, and the Premier saying at the time, "I don't know what he was doing on those trips . . . We'll certainly be asking the questions."

The Premier didn't know, but his office would have known, I guess, if the policy was followed. What would you say about a situation like that? In your experience, in your role as the Clerk, \$35,000 for travel in eight months - is that the norm or is that the exception? Do you have a spreadsheet of travel by minister, like for 2015? Is that something you would be looking at or somebody would be looking at?

MS. BLEWETT: I don't have a spreadsheet that would tell you the average. What we do have accessible online is by minister, by month, for everyone. It's all accessible online. They are not tabulated in terms of averages or anything like that.

MR. HOUSTON: In fairness, the stuff that's available online is not particularly user-friendly - it's PDFs and you've got to kind of troll through some of that stuff. I was curious about your comments that the Premier's Office has some involvement in the travel

of ministers, whether or not they may have different reports. I would have thought that if you are managing travel for a group of senior people that there might be an internal management report that would just list the ministers and the travel so that somebody could say oh gee, this department is doing a lot of travelling. That type of oversight at that high level doesn't exist?

MS. BLEWETT: In terms of approving the travel of ministers, again I can't speak for what the Premier's Office has in terms of a spreadsheet for approving travel.

MR. HOUSTON: So nobody in the Premier's Office has ever asked you to provide other more user-friendly summaries? For the Premier to be surprised by this particular minister's travel - to not know what the minister was doing on the trips and be taken aback, which he was. He said it's a lot of money and he was certainly going to go ahead and ask some questions about that, and we don't know if he did or not. If he was surprised by the travel that one particular minister was doing, I guess I would be curious if he had access to information so that maybe he shouldn't have been surprised.

Or the other side of that question, would he be surprised when he saw the amount of travel across all - and this happened to be one example that was brought to light but there are other ministers and other travel. Maybe that's a spreadsheet we could request, Mr. Chairman. We'll pick the year maybe and say by minister, the amount of travel that they did.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Blewett, did you wish to respond?

MS. BLEWETT: If it doesn't exist, I think we'd be very happy to pull it together so perhaps it's in a more user-friendly format. I'm going to turn my head quickly and look over to Jeannine - do you think that's something that we can probably do?

MS. JEANNINE LAGASSE: Yes.

MS. BLEWETT: Okay.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Houston, would you like to specify the terms of the information, how you would like to see it?

MR. HOUSTON: Yes, I would, Mr. Chairman. Just a simple spreadsheet maybe, if we can do it, if it's possible for the calendar year 2015, just almost two columns; one column has the minister's name and second column has their total travel.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Houston, our clerk will make note of that as well and correspond with the office to ensure the information is provided.

MR. HOUSTON: I think that would be useful and hopefully that's an analysis that exists internally because obviously if the Premier was surprised - I'm sure he probably

doesn't like to be surprised. One response to that might have been for him to ask for this type of very report on a more regular basis so he could be more in tune with what travel is happening under his watch.

The other question that kind of comes into play is whether taxpayers are getting value for this travel. I know in private business, if an employee was travelling, there would be an objective with hoped possible outcomes, some analysis of the budget and then a person would look at it and say, okay, that sounds like something that we should do. That's a good use of shareholder money, in that case.

I'm wondering if a similar process happens in the government where anyone is looking to see if this is a good use of taxpayer money. Is there anything that you would be aware of in your capacity as Clerk that somebody would prepare before a trip to say what their stated outcomes of their trip might be?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please. The time has expired. We'll move to the NDP caucus and Ms. MacDonald.

HON. MAUREEN MACDONALD: Thank you and good morning. This is always a topic that gets a lot of attention. Sometimes it's much ado about nothing, but sometimes there is something to be concerned about, for sure. Over the years I've seen issues around car leases for ministers and I think that practice has ended now, has it not - that ministers have cars leased versus using their own cars and charging mileage? Has that been a change in policy?

MS. BLEWETT: I believe that is correct, yes.

MS. MACDONALD: One of the things that was a surprise to me quite recently was the inequality of rates of mileage that's allowed across government. Can you tell me today what the mileage rate is for ministerial travel? I think it's the same throughout the Public Service, but I'm not positive of that.

MS. BLEWETT: I'm not positive either. I'd hesitate to give you a number that was wrong, but I'm very happy to get that to you in terms of the rates and how they apply across the service.

MS. MACDONALD: If I said it was around 33 cents, 34 cents, 35 cents a kilometre, does that sound right? We have some members on the committee that might know.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. MacDonald, I think it's about 42-point-something.

MS. MACDONALD: See how little I use my mileage.

AN HON. MEMBER: You should get out more, Maureen. (Laughter)

MS. MACDONALD: I guess so. I will try to do that in the next little while.

Quite recently my office was involved in an appeal of a gentleman who was on income assistance. It was with respect to getting an allowance for transportation. He had a transportation allowance for quite a long time, but then it was cut off. The conclusion of that appeal was that the department was prepared to pay him mileage. The mileage rate in the Department of Community Services for income assistance people is 25 cents a kilometre; it's about half of what we get and I find that curious. I know that probably our witnesses don't have any jurisdiction over this but perhaps it's something that can be raised internally with the Premier, so I would ask if you would do that. It doesn't really seem fair.

When I think about why there's an interest in what ministers and elected officials and deputy ministers receive as expense allowances, I think it rests on a concern that there isn't fairness in the system, and accountability and transparency as well. I know we're working really hard to address that. Then when you find these situations where people, the most disadvantaged people, are unable to get support for a doctor's appointment or whatever - grocery shopping, a recreational opportunity, an opportunity to visit a friend - and their mileage is 25 cents a kilometre in the Department of Community Services, you kind of shake your head.

I'm wondering if you can tell us about the political staff that are connected to ministers and the policies that relate to their accompanying ministers, with respect to travel and other associated costs, like accommodations and meals. As a former minister, I know that sometimes ministers travel with their political staff and sometimes they don't as well. What are the guidelines with respect to the executive assistants to the ministers?

MS. BLEWETT: Thank you for the question. In terms of anyone who would travel on government business, I believe the guidelines would be the same. Can I clarify? I think perhaps if your question is if there are decisions made about who travels when and with which minister, my sense is that that would likely be minister-specific or perhaps portfolio coverage, that's my sense. I don't think there's an explicit policy guiding allowing or disallowing, as far as I know.

MS. MACDONALD: So in other words, the policies that apply quite generally - rates and what have you would all apply - but who would oversee if the deputy ministers in the department reviewed the ministers' expense claims, who reviews the expense claims of the political staff?

MS. BLEWETT: The deputy minister would be responsible for the expenses within the entire department. So again, if there were staff accompanying the minister, the deputy minister would be responsible for any of those expenses and to make sure the process was in place, that they were appropriately done. So it is sort of cradle to grave, yes.

MS. MACDONALD: In preparation for today and looking through claims, by and large the claims all seemed quite in order and quite uniform, with one exception, and that

would be the Minister of Community Services. It's a question I would have with respect to the non-specificity of claims that are being filed by that particular minister where on numerous occasions, starting back in May 2014, the minister's expenses are being kind of bulk-organized under categories like "Miscellaneous Other Expenses" that don't really tell us a great deal about what that means. For example, in the month of May 2014, Various Meetings in the Province, Miscellaneous and Other Expenditures, \$664.94. Do you have any idea what would fall under 'miscellaneous items' that would cost \$664.94?

MS. BLEWETT: In terms of the specifics of that at the moment, I don't. I'm very happy to take a look and to work with the deputy minister to walk through them. I'm very happy to do that.

MS. MACDONALD: Because other ministers are specific if it's meals, if it's a meeting room, if it's travel, whatever. My question then is, what kinds of items would fall under miscellaneous?

MS. BLEWETT: I am again going to look to my left and see if we have that with us now. We would have to actually sort of look at the claim. Again, very happy to do that.

MS. MACDONALD: It's quite a large number - \$664 for miscellaneous. Anyway, if you don't have the information, we will look to get that.

Under what circumstances would a minister not be required to be specific? Even around travel, the Community Services Minister has a tendency in her claims to say, "various meetings throughout metro", but that's unlike what you will see other ministers say, maybe from their office to the Cunard Centre return or from my office to X, Y and Z community centre and back, but this is "various meetings". It's really consistent in her expense claims that there are various meetings throughout metro - August 2014, September 2014, October, November, December - this is a regular occurrence. In May 2015, \$108.81 throughout metro. It really does lack the detail that I see in other ministers' expenses. Why would that be?

MS. BLEWETT: I don't exactly know why that would be, however, if it's consistent, it may actually be how it's captured on the form. The one example I can think of, or the comparable one, for deputy ministers - one deputy minister travels throughout the province all the time, the Deputy Minister of TIR of course. So rather than put in an expense claim every day - and often it's all over the province - it actually is kind of a monthly one. I'm not sure if that's a comparable circumstance. I can't really speak to that, but again, I'm happy to look at that if it's consistent. There may be something behind it. We could get to the bottom of that. We can have a look if that's acceptable.

MS. MACDONALD: Also there were a couple of other things in the claim for the Minister of Community Services, there's quite a number. There are several various luncheon meetings that are claimed over \$200; at the Bitter End Martini Bar, \$57, and the Fickle Frog, \$57.99. To what extent would there be oversight with respect to whether or

not lunch is actually provided, let's say in a martini bar, for a business meeting? Who would monitor that and ensure that's the case?

MS. BLEWETT: Again, going back to the travel policy, and I should note in the travel policy that alcohol is explicitly not allowed, so irrespective of the name of the establishment, reimbursement through the travel policy, it just would not reimburse for alcohol, the name of the place notwithstanding.

I think your question is, so on those, who would approve it? It would be through the department, so the deputy ministers would look at it. It would be processed in compliance with the travel policy. As you will have seen from the material you requested, it's very consistent - it has gone back years and years, actually - in terms of the allowable expenses and how they're claimed.

I will follow up with the Deputy Minister of Community Services just to get a sense of what the process is and if she had any concerns.

MS. MACDONALD: I don't have a lot of other questions with respect to this topic. This topic was brought forward by my colleague in the PC caucus. I'm wondering if the guidelines included, and I've had a look at them but we were sent maybe 400 pages so maybe I didn't do my homework as rigorously as I could have - I've read some of it.

The monthly travel allowance in the documents that I've seen set out \$700 a month, or mileage - it's one or the other. Is that the case, is \$700 the kind of universal amount or has that changed in any way?

MS. BLEWETT: Mr. Chairman, I'm going to turn my head to my left.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Lagasse.

MS. LAGASSE: The amount of \$700 is actually set out in one of the corporate policies related to compensation of personal use for vehicles. That \$700 amount or mileage is actually set out in that corporate policy.

MS. MACDONALD: So in theory, mileage could exceed that, could it not, if you weren't doing the \$700 monthly?

MS. LAGASSE: You would be reimbursed for actual mileage, yes.

MS. MACDONALD: Are there guidelines or ceilings for hotel accommodation when people travel? I know in the past that has been an issue for various ministers under various governments.

MS. BLEWETT: If it's okay, Jeannine can kick me under the table as she looks, but I might generally respond in terms of some of the guidelines for hotel rates, particularly

in the international context, that's where it's quite difficult. Domestically, usually ministers are travelling as part of federal-provincial-territorial delegations. Often there are blocks of hotels and with most sectoral meetings, they try to have government rates and that kind of thing.

Where it is challenging - and sometimes quite out of the control of any delegation - are the international travel costs. Some of the hotels are challenging. Again, I've participated in Premier's missions. Nova Scotia in 2012 was the Chair of the Council of the Federation, and we organized a Premier's delegation to China.

So it's difficult to control the ceiling and the consistency sometimes. One country, different cities. So we always, again, speaking in my role as a former deputy in that department, we worked very hard to make sure our events folks tried to find the best rate, but that's where it's more difficult, for sure.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. We will now move to the Liberal caucus and Mr. Rankin.

MR. IAIN RANKIN: I just want to talk a little bit about the Auditor General recommendations as they relate to your role. As you know, a big part of the component of the mandate of this committee is to support the Auditor General's recommendations. We've now for the second time officially endorsed them.

So, in the spirit of improving implementation rates across departments - which still remain relatively low, but they are improving and we recognize that - do you see a big part of your role in terms of oversight of the various deputy ministers in going through each recommendation and ensuring their completion of the implementation? Is that part of your role as an oversight body?

MS. BLEWETT: Thank you for the question. I want to actually, if I may, just talk about how important I think the accountability function is. As I mentioned, I've been in my role now for about a year and I've had the opportunity to work with the Auditor General. The importance of accountability is key for our role.

When I started as Clerk, I started to participate in our deputy ministers audit committee. That committee has representatives from a number of departments and also our internal audit service. I started actually to note and have discussions with individual deputy ministers about the issue, for example, of follow-up on Auditor General's recommendations.

One of the things that we've done is, the Auditor General has been kind enough to actually come in and meet with deputy ministers and walk through an appropriate accountability lens and context for deputy ministers. I have also had separate deputy minister meetings to focus on audit compliance and our recommendations, even to the extent that fairly recently I've asked that I understand where we are by department, in terms

of moving forward on the recommendations - actually by year because sometimes that rolls. I've asked for that monthly - just an internal guide for myself. It's not a formal process, but it's pretty important to me. One of my colleagues said to me, oh, if it's important to my boss, it's important to me.

So I really did want to sort of make it clear to the deputy ministers that we have a stewardship role and an accountability function, and we take it very seriously. I think I mentioned we've had a couple of deputy minister meetings separately on internal services. We talk through how we can become more compliant.

There are always going to be circumstances where, for a particular reason, departments may actually have an issue or a challenge in compliance. One of the things that I'm encouraging - and I have to say I really appreciate the approach and openness of the Auditor General to have those discussions with deputies one on one and with departments, because very often it's just communication.

Departments often receive recommendations, they're quite happy to move forward with them, but often there may be a reason why it's slower or one happens out of choreography, so I've encouraged deputy ministers to make sure they're communicating with the Auditor General's Office in terms of implementation. Again, as a follow-up - and I'm terrible on the dates - every month I actually ask deputy ministers to let me know how they're doing, by department, by year. I sent them out a note just reminding them: Happy 2016. How's it going? I'm quite mindful, it's important work.

MR. RANKIN: That medium you're talking about that you routinely ask them how they're doing with the recommendations, would that be separate from the TAGR system? I'm just wondering because I asked this to - we had two departments, Municipal Affairs and Internal Services, along with the IWK at a meeting two or three weeks ago. They all seemed to be doing well with their outstanding recommendations, they all claimed to be about three-quarters or more nearing completion, so it's hard to put a quantitative figure on how near they are.

I guess with your role to ensure that they are that close because that's a self-assessment, I didn't really get a clear answer as to if there's consistency in their internal tracking system, if they have a spreadsheet. Is that your role, to make sure that they have some kind of consistent spreadsheet that's monitored and tracked at your routine meetings, or correspondence, so that it doesn't take another two years for the next Auditor General's Report for the public to find out that they weren't followed through, in terms of what he thinks?

I think the constant communication part is important with the Auditor General. I'm just wondering how consistent the framework is to measure the completion and how close they really are to completion.

MS. BLEWETT: Thank you for the question. The sort of layer of rigour that I have imposed on deputy ministers, it is separate from the TAGR process but it's actually fairly consistent in terms of what we're looking for, so Internal Services has taken the lead for me.

Again, it's a management practice, just generally being accountable for taxpayers' funds, stewardship of public interests, and it's a little bit of peer pressure. A little vignette, nothing like putting everybody's results up on the same screen and you look around the table. So it was a little bit of having deputies understand that it matters. Again, I'm not very heavy-handed but it's appropriate to be transparent.

MR. RANKIN: I know I have to share my time so I just want to finish that with one quick question: do you actually have an expected date of completion within that internal tracking system, that there should be no reason why that should be 100 per cent complete by such-and-such a date, et cetera?

MS. BLEWETT: Thank you for the question. Again I'm not going to presume because there may be a reason why a department can't. What I've asked for is an update on progress every month. So there may be a question that a department has in terms of implementing a recommendation but I expect that one month over the next they might be able to say, well, we had a conversation with the Auditor General's Office, or this one is moving. I just want to get a sense of the focus.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Rankin. We'll move to Mr. Irving.

MR. KEITH IRVING: I have a couple of questions here that I think follow up on my colleague across the way in terms of the differences between the travel budgets of various ministers. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about FTPs and the role that ministers play in attending those meetings, and the differences that various departments have. Departments like the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal presumably spend a lot of time on the Nova Scotia roads where the Department of Environment is perhaps in many discussions nationally.

Perhaps even a comment along the lines of the new federal government and its priorities and a change in the tone in terms of the importance that we as governments federally and provincially are now talking more and more often.

Could you comment on your experience with FTPs and the importance of being there?

MS. BLEWETT: Thank you for the question. I had a conversation with my federal Clerk colleague very recently and he said, I think we're back in the business of talking to provinces again, and I thought, that's great. It does have implications, particularly on some of the policy files that are important to Nova Scotia. The ability to participate makes a big difference for sure.

I might think about what's happening in the context of the environment, as you say. The federal government has a fairly aggressive and fairly clear mandate that they've received in terms of where they'd like to go on GHG reductions and carbon. There has already been a First Ministers' meeting with that on the agenda, so it's pretty imperative that Nova Scotia and all provinces participate in that. There is another First Ministers' meeting coming up March 3rd, which is actually the follow-up to the Paris meetings. Again, we had the Deputy Minister of Environment go to Paris, as we would have to. So folks will see that cadence in terms of travel.

In terms of substance, it's pretty significant. Federal-provincial relations don't always operate by consensus; there are jurisdictions that have different interests and our job, ultimately - you wonder why all of these policies are required, but it's all about government business - our job is to do our very best for Nova Scotians on key issues like where we may go with the Government of Canada on carbon pricing, for example. It's pretty important that we're there because there are larger jurisdictions with different fiscal capacity and a different imperative that might be quite challenging for us if we weren't there to be articulate about why we're there. I'm not sure if I'm answering your question.

MR. IRVING: That is helpful. The other reason I could foresee there being differences between various ministers and departmental travel would be the work of those ministries and the government priorities. I'm wondering if you could comment on how the government has chosen certain priorities such as exports and immigration that probably begins to - I would presume and if you could confirm - move some of the requirements for some departments to travel more than others.

MS. BLEWETT: Thank you for the question. It's not a tee up for immigration, but thinking about the priorities - government has done a lot of policy work on core priorities and it really is looking at our ability to compete internationally. There has been a lot of work done on the playbook *We Choose Now*, which was a follow-up to the Ivany commission, and people - so the whole human capital file, the immigration file is quite critical, as are doubling exports and where we would like to go in terms of seeing real movements.

I'll give you an example because I can speak most closely to it on immigration. One of the big criterion for us is our ability to attract folks to the province. The previous federal government actually made a change in how temporary foreign workers were treated, and you wouldn't think there's a connection but there actually is a direct connection. We have a Provincial Nominee Program and historically probably north of 75 per cent of the provincial nominees to the province came from that temporary foreign worker pool - highly qualified, working for companies, starting to make connections in Nova Scotia - and they were perfect nominee candidates.

Now with the temporary foreign worker essentially not existing in a way that will allow provinces to have that kind of turn, Nova Scotia, like every other jurisdiction, will have to compete for human capital globally so we won't have a pool of temporary folks

here who are acclimatized and ready to go so we actually have to be very aggressive going after attracting human capital to Nova Scotia.

We do it in a number of ways, and we actually are trying, in the immigration context, to be as cost-effective as we can. We work with other Atlantic Provinces through the Council of Atlantic Premiers because there are immigration fairs; they happen all over the world. We couldn't possibly get to one-eighth of them but we are quite selective when we think about the - we've done work looking at the labour market in the province, the skill sets that would be amenable to the private sector, the human capital they need. We've done some work to target our travel and to target our efforts to make sure we achieve the best possible outcomes that we can.

That said, it's incredibly competitive, and for us, meeting those nominee targets is job one so we need to make sure we can - so that's an example.

MR. IRVING: Thank you very much. I'll turn it over to my colleague.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Farrell, you have just shy of four minutes.

MR. TERRY FARRELL: Great, I think I will be able to get this in in that time. Ms. Blewett, in the questioning from the Third Party caucus there was an impression left that there was an unexplained expense, if you will, on a particular minister's claim called "Miscellaneous and Other" I think was the heading referred to and that it was in the range of many hundreds of dollars. Isn't it true that under a heading like that that all the expenses claimed under that heading would have to be supported by receipts and that each of the individual expenditures explained in those receipts would have to be individually approved or that expense wouldn't be approved?

MS. BLEWETT: Thank you for the question. So that's absolutely my assumption, given that the travel policy is as it is. I suspect if there's a consistent way it may be how it's processed and it may be that one ministry is doing it one way. But absolutely, expenditures would have to be backed up by documentation.

MR. FARRELL: So there's no ability for a minister to claim an expense without support for an actual expenditure that occurred that was related to the government business they were conducting at that time?

MS. BLEWETT: I'm looking over to Jeannine but there's not sort of a miscellaneous category, no, they would have to be backed up.

MR. FARRELL: If Ms. Legasse has anything to add . . .

MS. LEGASSE: No, I think that's right.

MR. FARRELL: With respect to choices that ministers might have and making sure that they make responsible choices with respect to things like air travel, are there policies in place in terms of how they choose flights and airlines and things like that to make sure the taxpayer gets the best value for dollars spent?

MS. BLEWETT: In the travel policy - I'm looking to my left, I'm sure Jeannine is looking it up as we talk and will kick me if I'm saying it wrong - there isn't a designation, for example, of a particular airline or anything like that. There are explicit caveats with respect to international travel, business class, that sort of thing. I think the expectation through the policy is for the most cost efficient based on available fares and economy.

MR. FARRELL: Is there a particular rule with respect to business class?

MS. BLEWETT: There is in terms of business class, it's actually only allowable as an expense if a flight is a continuous flight in excess of nine hours. So typically that's international travel.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We will move back to Mr. Houston of the PC caucus for 14 minutes.

MR. HOUSTON: Thank you for your responses today. When I left off I was wondering about - because I think all of these questions in many ways drive to the same point and that's, what's the value to the province? I certainly accept that there are times when it's important that the province be represented at different meetings and discussions. Obviously that's the case and those are kind of easy ones, but I'm sure there's another end of the spectrum where there are trips that people say, well, I don't know. Who does - and how do they - assess what outcomes might come from a trip?

MS. BLEWETT: Thank you very much for that question, and I really appreciate that one because I have to say, there's a lot of thought that goes into ministerial travel. So from the perspective of a department - and if we kind of go down to the floorboards, pick a particular department - what are the objectives? What's the business plan? What are they trying to achieve? If there is sort of a programmatic reason to travel, that's self-evident, but there are clear questions that would be asked.

A deputy minister would always give their best advice to ministers - this will help advance provincial interests. This is where it's strategic. There are, I might say, probably far more instances when departments/deputy ministers would receive invitations to attend, and they're not even considered. First of all, we barely have enough time to get to all of our work in province. So we do work very hard to make sure it happens.

MR. HOUSTON: So it is the deputy ministers, I guess, in conjunction with the ministers who decide whether a trip has validity or not.

MS. BLEWETT: I think that deputy ministers would give advice to their ministers about the outcomes. It may often be, again, through many federal-provincial-territorial forums. There are a lot of meetings that come up, and very often ministers actually would speak to their deputies and get their advice about - what are we going to achieve if we go there . . .

MR. HOUSTON: I'm sorry, I'm conscious of the time and I have a couple more topics to cover. So the deputy minister kind of blesses it, or whatever, and then it does loop back to the Premier's Office - because I think we talked about the Premier's Office having some say in the pre-approval process. So an idea for a trip comes from somewhere - who knows where it comes from; the minister and the deputy discuss it, and then it goes to the Premier's Office for approval and then the trip happens. Is that kind of the process? Maybe let's talk very specifically about international travel. We're not talking about going to the Cunard Centre in a case like this. We're talking about a trip that's somewhere.

MS. BLEWETT: Thank you, that's helpful to be explicit. Again, if a deputy minister was assisting a minister, particularly if it's international travel - those are actually quite rigorous trips. There are agendas and outcomes for all the stops. Certainly the experience that I've had, there are rarely minutes that aren't accounted for; they are pretty set out.

A deputy minister would absolutely look at and understand the objectives of international travel. I'm sure and I'm confident that they would talk it through with their minister and any ministerial travel, that approval does come from the Premier's Office, so again, I think that . . .

MR. HOUSTON: So the Premier's Office has the final approval on this. Just in the context of that and the discussion about certain departments travelling more than others, are these decisions made against a budget? Is there a budget for each department, like an expectation as to well this is the Minister of X's portfolio, they are probably going to have to go to these conferences. Then when all these requests come in they look at, well this is what our budget was and how are we going to spend it?

Is there, to your knowledge, in your capacity as Clerk, is there a budget that the ministers have for travel for the year?

MS. BLEWETT: Yes, there typically are travel line items in budgets in departments, yes.

MR. HOUSTON: Would that be specified out like that in the Public Accounts in the budget that comes out annually, or is it more an internal number?

MS. BLEWETT: You ask a good question. I'm just trying to remember a page from the budget.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay, maybe we'll do it this way then. In the interests of time maybe I'll modify my information request, to add a third column which would say "The Budget". So we'd have minister, actual travel and then their budgeted travel. If we had that, that would be great, so I appreciate that.

In terms of ministerial travel, are there instances where external companies or entities or organizations pay for the travel arrangements for ministers, and that wouldn't be something that a minister puts an expense report in but it would be a trip that a minister takes that is paid for by another organization. Is that allowed?

MS. BLEWETT: I'm trying to think of circumstances where that might be allowed. I don't know the answer to that, where my mind is going. We'll certainly get the answer for you if that's okay.

What I think about, if there are national or international organizations quite separate from companies - UNESCO, La Francophonie. There are national and international organizations.

MR. HOUSTON: How am I for time?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Houston, you have approximately six minutes.

MR. HOUSTON: So when that happens . . .

MS. BLEWETT: I'll try to talk faster. (Laughter)

MR. HOUSTON: That wasn't a subtle hint to you, no. When that happens, would there be any mechanism for you to know that happens? Is there a form that comes to you that says, this minister is taking this trip, you won't see an expense report because this organization is paying for it?

MS. BLEWETT: I think that would be reflected in any expense claims.

MR. HOUSTON: But not if they didn't pay for it. If another organization paid for it, they'd have no reimbursement requirement.

MS. BLEWETT: I have to say, I have not come across that circumstance. We'll check if that's allowable . . .

MR. HOUSTON: I do have an example that might refresh the process. Recently the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development went to a conference in London and the trip was paid for by something called the Canadian Council of Ministers. I don't know what the Canadian Council of Ministers is. Presumably it's a reputable organization. It could be some other organization that has a very nice sounding title, I don't

know. So there's a trip that was paid for by somebody else, so what mechanism is there in the procedures for you to know about that?

MS. BLEWETT: We do know who they are and, again, when I said UNESCO or La Francophonie, it could have been any of those international councils and we know quite well about that trip. I don't know the specifics of it but if, for example, the minister's airfare was covered by the CCME - that's the Canadian council - the minister was speaking on behalf of all Canadian Education Ministers at an international conference, but very likely meals might still be required - those would still come through and be claimed as part of the expense policy. So it wouldn't be . . .

MR. HOUSTON: I guess what I'm interested in is - obviously that's one that we know about and it's an organization you're familiar with, but how would you know if it was some company lobbying the government and taking a minister on a trip somewhere? How would you know? Is there anything in the procedures that you would know about that?

MS. BLEWETT: Ministerial travel is approved by the Premier's Office and the voracity of travel and the objectives that ministerial travel is meant to achieve, I have seen nothing but absolutely clear objectives. This government and previous governments - it's to advance the interest of the Province of Nova Scotia. So irrespective of that - the travel policy is there for . . .

MR. HOUSTON: That's fine and I appreciate that. It sounds like the answer is that the Premier's Office is the stopgap on that. They have the final approval. Who in the Premier's Office would do that?

MS. BLEWETT: The Chief of Staff or a designate approves the travel.

MR. HOUSTON: Do you know who that is at the moment?

MS. BLEWETT: At the moment I believe it's Kristan Hines in the Premier's Office. Previously in this Premier's Office it would have been Kirby McVicar.

MR. HOUSTON: If the Premier's Office were to decline a trip request - so this would be a trip request that was kind of approved by the deputy minister, forwarded to the Premier's Office to the Chief of Staff or the designate. They could decline it. I guess they could say no, we don't want you to take that trip. Are you aware of that ever happening - or, I guess, would you be aware of that happening?

MS. BLEWETT: That's outside of my wheelhouse. I assume those considerations might happen. You may have a legislative session - like all of those things. It's probably not irregular to say no, just as travel is approved in a department. Operational requirements come into it at some level, but I couldn't really speak for that.

MR. HOUSTON: In fairness, when this topic was first advanced we did ask to talk to the person in the Premier's Office who ultimately approves them, but you got the lucky draw instead.

MS. BLEWETT: And it's my pleasure.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Houston, you just have about 20 seconds left.

MR. HOUSTON: That's fine. I appreciate your responses this morning. Thank you very much.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We'll move to Mr. Wilson of the NDP caucus.

HON. DAVID WILSON: While we have you there, I know we talked a lot about travel and the issue around making sure that it's approved and the documents are there - a quick question just to kind of wrap that up. I know that often travel outside the province can get quite expensive, especially air fare, and often when it's reported people have concerns with that. I believe my colleague mentioned one incident some time ago when the Premier was unaware of the cost and that he'd be looking into it.

Since that engagement and that comment from the Premier, have there been changes to the policy where the Premier and the Premier's Office are more aware of maybe that outside-the-province travel so that the Premier isn't unaware of the travel in a scrum, for example, because ultimately the media are going to go to the Premier in the end.

Have there been changes to the policy so that the Premier is aware of those higher cost travel meetings and events that ministers and deputy ministers go on?

MS. BLEWETT: I might look around me and see if there's media - but what part of a comment was captured in a scrum, I don't know about that. I have to say that my experience is that always, and it has not just been this Premier's Office but it has been previous Premiers' Offices, they are fairly mindful of the travel and the costs. It's not a frivolous undertaking.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Recently on January 28th, there was a news release - the government announced that the offices of Planning and Priority and the Executive Council had been merged into one single Executive Council Office. Are there going to be savings by doing that? If so, how much? If not, is there an increase in the budget and will we see an increase in the cost of merging or integrating those two offices?

MS. BLEWETT: Thank for that question which is inside my wheelhouse so I'm happy to talk about that. We had the opportunity to consolidate the Office of Planning and Priorities into the Executive Council Office. As an organization it's probably about 38 or 40 people. Previously - and I call it kind of version 2.0 - there were sort of three different organizations all roughly supporting the same objective.

Treasury and Policy Board are consolidated now with the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, which has been a great fit, so leaving the Office of Planning and Priorities in the building. That is everything from if you have a manager, for example, on the Executive Council floor who looks after administration budgets, then you have somebody else in OPP doing exactly the same thing. A couple of things - it gives us the opportunity for efficiencies, just ordering, knowing what's going on. We're also looking at the functions more from a broader perspective. I should say there were no layoffs, staff was not impacted, but we do expect that over time it will be streamlined; there will likely be retirements. We are looking for effectiveness and we're looking for efficiency primarily out of that office.

MR. DAVID WILSON: That was leading into my second question - the number of FTEs, the number of employees. From my understanding, the reason for doing this wasn't to eliminate half the employees. It was more to streamline . . .

MS. BLEWETT: For effectiveness, yes.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Do you predict an increase or decrease? I think I heard somewhat of an answer, in the future would you predict that there would be a reduction in staffing level by integrating both offices?

MS. BLEWETT: Thank you for the question. That actually wasn't the objective of the consolidation. What I'm hoping for most of all, again, our Executive Council Office, our job is to do what we can to support departments and to support that two-way dialogue between the central agencies and departments. So I actually don't expect a big variance. We're looking for efficiencies. For example, if we have a couple of managers of administration - that's not an exact title - over time we'll get efficiencies, I think, primarily likely retirements and that kind of thing.

MR. DAVID WILSON: It's my understanding though, the deputy minister's position has been eliminated, and it's known that Bernie Miller was the Deputy Minister of Planning and Priorities. My understanding now is he's a senior executive adviser with a one-year contract. Is that correct?

MS. BLEWETT: Yes, that's correct. I can talk a little bit more about that if that's what you're interested in. The position of Deputy Minister of Planning and Priorities has been eliminated and there won't be another deputy minister position created. Mr. Miller has a contract. It's a year and it is - I'm going to say, sort of filling out his - he made a three-year commitment to public service and he came in actually through a competition, to a deputy minister's position that has been eliminated. He'll continue and that will meet his three-year commitment on public service.

MR. DAVID WILSON: So it's not a new contract. He's fulfilling the contract that he had with the province originally, which we know was a contract with Bernie Miller Inc.

So if I'm understanding you correctly, that contract is continuing on to fulfill the three years that was in the original agreement?

MS. BLEWETT: Actually, it's slightly different. The original contract was with Mr. Miller's personal company. The current contract, which we actually just recently did with the consolidation of Planning and Priorities and the Executive Council Office - it's a professional services contract. It's fairly standard, which will take him to the end of the three-year commitment. So it's, in fact, a different one.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Was there any payout from the original contract? Was there any kind of severance and he now falls under a new professional contract or agreement?

MS. BLEWETT: No, there were no payouts, no severance, and that was never envisioned.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Is he working solely with the government or is he still with the law firm that he originally worked with? Is he a full-time employee with benefits under this new contract or is it similar to the old contract where he didn't take part in the pension plan and the other benefits that come with, say, a deputy minister's position or an executive administrative position?

MS. BLEWETT: Sorry, would you repeat the question?

MR. DAVID WILSON: What I'm trying to get at is how much of his time is he contributing to working within the new consolidated identity and how much time is he working at his firm? Is he working on files or cases on both or is he a full-time employee, as you would say, of the provincial government?

MS. BLEWETT: His professional services contract with us will essentially be full time. He's working with - and his contract will be through - McInnes Cooper. That's the entity through which he is remunerated, but the commitment is essentially full time for the duration. He has a couple of other clients potentially.

Something I actually wanted to say which I thought was quite important and again it goes to the accountability piece - I actually asked Mr. Miller to make sure he checked in with the Conflict of Interest Commissioner. It was important to me that we made sure he went through that step. He previously did that when he came on as a deputy minister, but as the situation was changing, I thought it was important to make sure there weren't conflicts and that was covered off.

MR. DAVID WILSON: So there were no issues, no perceived conflict with the arrangement being made now with the new professional agreement?

MS. BLEWETT: No, not that I am aware.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I think part of the original question within the new agreement is Mr. Miller taking part of the benefits that other employees within the provincial government would take part. We know in the old contract I believe he didn't take part in the pension and the other benefits - is that still the case with the new professional agreement? I'm not sure if this is possible but is that something that is public or is going to be made public? I can't recall if his old contract was public but a lot of the information within that contract was out in the public realm. Is that going to be similar to the new professional agreement? Is that something that is going to be made available?

MS. BLEWETT: I'll answer the first part, which again any benefits, any participation in pension, there would be none of that in the new agreement for Mr. Miller comparable to the previous one. I actually believe that it has already been released; I think I read it in AllNovaScotia.com. It has been released and the previous contract was certainly released.

MR. DAVID WILSON: It's my understanding that McInnes Cooper are on the standing offer, I believe, for the province so work can be allocated to that. Are there stipulations within his contract that allow for him to say, I may be in a conflict here, I need to not be making a decision or play a role in a certain project that he may be tasked to work on, on behalf of Executive Council?

MS. BLEWETT: Thank you for the question; there are two parts to that. We've explicitly had that conversation and made that requirement clear, which is why I also asked him to make sure that he worked with the Conflict of Interest Commissioner, and the other part is actually the ethical expectations of his profession. We're quite comfortable and it has actually been a pleasure to have worked with him. We have no concerns from that perspective.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Blewett. The time has expired for that round of questioning. We'll move back to the Liberal caucus and Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

MS. SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: It's good to see you here this morning. I'm learning a bit about ministerial expenses. I'm not really familiar with them. We've been two and a half years in government and we're still getting notices from Deborah Lusby that private members are having problems with our monthly expenses. I question what kind of support is given to ministers when they take on the position, to guide them with the documents provided to understand their expenses.

MS. BLEWETT: Yes, no doubt, and Ms. MacDonald referenced the 400 pages - there is a lot. One of the things we've done is to try to make it fairly simple and accessible, for example, to ministerial assistants. It's fairly clear - item by item - the process that needs to be followed.

The other thing of course, we have all sorts of contacts and folks that ministers could regularly work with. We've got a Department of Internal Services. We've got an

entire section that could offer them support. So if they need it, we try to make sure they have the correct facts so they understand the guidelines, so the accountabilities are correct and followed.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: We do, too, but we still have issues after two and a half years.

MS. BLEWETT: I apologize for the 400 pages.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Some people have been there more than two and a half years, and they're still getting phone calls and emails from the Speaker's Office. Are ministers responsible for paying their expenses out-of-pocket initially for reimbursement?

MS. BLEWETT: I believe that there are a couple of ways that it may happen. As long as it's compliant with the policy it's okay. If - I'm going to say it was like 1996 - it was when Paul LaFleche was Clerk, I was reading it. For example, ministers may put an expense on their personal credit card and then it goes through the travel policy process. So I think it can happen in a couple of ways, but at the end of the day it will go through the same consistent funnel. Sorry, am I answering your question?

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Sort of. I know as an MLA I'm out-of-pocket. When I spend something it comes out of my personal pocket and then I have to wait to be reimbursed. So if my money is coming in late from the Speaker's Office or the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, then I pay the interest on my Visa bill. So I'm just wondering if it's an out-of-pocket expense personally - but you're saying it's both. It can be personal, or it can be paid by the department and then reimbursed.

MS. BLEWETT: I'm actually going to ask Jeannine for her thoughts.

MS. LAGASSE: I think, as Deputy Blewett has said, it can happen both ways, but normally the minister would pay and then there would be reimbursement.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Is there a time period in which they can submit an expense to be reimbursed, like three months? Is it just an annual - like by March 31st you have to have your expenses in for the year or is there a time limit on, say, you take a trip and within three months you have to submit those receipts for the trip?

MS. BLEWETT: I'm actually going to ask Jeannine if she might be able to help me on that.

MS. LAGASSE: I don't think there is. I'd have to confirm that for you, but we do encourage the ministers to claim their expenses on a monthly basis - that whatever they've incurred in that month they are encouraged to claim them for that month.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: So there's no snowballing effect. That's great. You did mention that there was a cap on ministerial international travel. Is there a cap on their expenses at all for ministerial departments? For example, you would break down your travel nationally, your travel locally, but is there a cap on their expenses at all?

MS. BLEWETT: I don't think I said there was a cap on international travel. They're explicitly separated as a requirement of the travel policy. So consistent with the questions or my answers earlier about departmental budgets, different departments may have different budgets to execute specific functions, so there may be variance between budgets in departments, for sure.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: A deputy minister would have their own travel because of their work as a deputy minister. How often would a deputy minister travel out of province on behalf of a minister?

MS. BLEWETT: Again, I think that's variable depending on the portfolios that the particular department had, and the portfolios that the deputy minister had. Sometimes deputies do step in for ministers and represent a jurisdiction if a minister is unable to go. That said, there are lots of specific deputy minister meetings that happen just for that level. So again, it can be variable, depending on the responsibilities of the portfolios.

MR. CHAIRMAN: If there are no further questions from the Liberal caucus, that ends questioning for today. Ms. Blewett, I'd like to give you an opportunity to provide closing comments, if you wish.

MS. BLEWETT: Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for the invitation to be here. This was my first opportunity to come to Public Accounts Committee, thank you very much.

In closing, I don't have prepared remarks but I really have appreciated the questions. I do want to perhaps leave the committee with a sense that I'm very clear about obligations and responsibilities that we have in terms of monitoring the expenses and the expenditures of public funds; we take it seriously. I'm quite proud of the table of deputy ministers who work really hard with their ministers to do the best they can for Nova Scotians. A huge thank you to Jeannine who puts up with me every day.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Ms. Blewett. We do have some committee business. An update for everyone on our March meeting schedule - the Liberal caucus has an out-of-town meeting scheduled for March 8th, 9th and 10th so we will not be meeting on March 8th. March Break is the week of the 16th of March - as a rule, we don't meet during March Break. If anyone has a comment on that or wishes us to meet, please state that now.

Hearing no comments on that, we will not be meeting on March 16th, so those are two dates in March when we will not be meeting - March 8th and March 16th.

Ms. MacDonald requested a legal opinion at our last meeting, which has been provided to us from our Legislative Counsel, Mr. Hebb. Everyone has a copy of that. The question essentially was, what power does this Public Accounts Committee have in subpoenaing documents from departments and other government organizations? I'm just going to read one excerpt from the letter:

“Ultimately, it is for the Committee to decide whether the document must be provided or, if it is provided, whether it is made public or if it may be redacted before being made public. Where the party in possession of a requested document refuses or neglects to provide the requested document or even where the Committee anticipates that the party will not provide the requested document, the Committee may direct the Chair of the Committee to issue a warrant requiring the production of the requested document.”

This committee has lots of power, I believe as it should, to examine the Public Accounts of government. I think that was why this committee was formed when they were deciding how our province should be governed many, many years ago, so the opinion is there.

I don't know if anyone wishes to discuss the opinion. If there is no one wishing to discuss it, we will move along in our agenda but everyone has a copy of that document.

We have a couple of pieces of correspondence, information has been distributed. One was on the Pharmacare Program and the five-year projections - everyone has a copy of that. Are there any comments? Ms. MacDonald.

MS. MACDONALD: As members of the committee know, when we met last week we had the deputy minister and other officials from the department. After a lot of stonewalling and a lot of pressure from members of the committee, the deputy minister finally agreed to release documents of the department's analysis on the Pharmacare Program at the end of the day. That didn't happen as the commitment was made. We, in fact, didn't receive documents until the following morning, close to nine o'clock, and then the documents that we received, I would submit, were not the full documentation that was requested.

So I'm really not happy that the commitment was made and not followed through on, and I think it's incumbent on our committee now to request that all of the documentation that exists on the Seniors' Pharmacare Program and the changes be provided to this committee forthwith, from whatever department they reside in. I'm feeling that the Department of Health and Wellness will have information, but probably the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, and possibly the Department of Seniors - all three of those departments are very active on this file.

I would request - I would make a motion, if it's required - that this committee ask the Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, and the Department of Seniors to provide the full documentation that they have on the Seniors' Pharmacare Program - the statistical analysis, the financial data, the demographic data.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Are there any comments? Mr. Houston.

MR. HOUSTON: I definitely support my colleague's comments on this. Many of us will remember what happened at Public Accounts Committee last week when we were asking a number of questions of the deputy minister about changes to the Pharmacare Program and the deputy minister was unable, unwilling to provide answers to questions that I believe he should have known.

We do know what happened with the analysis. With the analysis there was an undertaking that, yes, we'll provide the analysis by the end of the day, and that didn't happen. The next morning, a version of the analysis was released - not to this committee, but to a press conference - and then another version of the analysis came out around the same time. It certainly leads me to believe that there was much work happening with the analysis.

So in terms of my colleague's motion that this committee be provided with more details - all details - about the changes, I would certainly support that motion. I would amend it to include previous versions because I want to believe that when these changes were approved at the department level - I'm going back now before the minister's sunny press conference about the changes - I believe there would have been an analysis.

I have a difficult time believing that that is the analysis that was ultimately presented to the public. I believe there were probably a number of versions of it. I would be very interested - and I think the people of the province would be very interested - in seeing those versions, particularly given that the minister, the Premier, the department, and in fact, all members of this government are completely unable or unwilling to explain the impact of these changes.

Why are these changes happening? Pharmacare is not a program that belongs to the Premier of this province or this Minister of Health of Wellness. Pharmacare is a program that belongs to the people of the province now and going forward. I myself intend to grow old and might see myself as a Pharmacare member.

This impacts every Nova Scotian. This is a serious change to be made by a government that is completely unwilling to explain the changes. So I would amend my colleague's motion to say that not only would this government provide all the documents and various versions as to how they arrived at the decision to make the change, somebody in this government, in this department - probably multiple people - think this is a really good idea.

I don't think this is a really good idea, I certainly need more information, we all do. I would like to see that information provided to this committee and I would also move that since we have the Department of Health and Wellness before this committee next week, Mr. Chairman, I move that we extend that meeting from its normal time of 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. - I would move that we extend that meeting for one hour and that we invite the minister to appear in that additional hour and explain to this committee the changes to the Pharmacare system. At that time he can explain the documents and the versions as to how he came about the decision that this was a good idea for the people of the province.

Specifically, Mr. Chairman, I would move that the meeting of the Public Accounts Committee on February 17th be extended by one hour and that the Minister of Health and Wellness be invited to attend as a witness to explain changes to the Seniors' Pharmacare Program and to present the documents on how the decision was arrived at.

I very much look forward to hearing from my Liberal colleagues on this committee, on whether they think it's a good idea that this happened and the minister appears and explains to Nova Scotians what's happening. Maybe they don't think there's any explanation required, maybe they also think it's a good idea to make these changes to the Pharmacare system.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order. There are two motions that have been put forth. We should deal with them separately as they were two separate motions. Mr. Rankin, I believe you wish to comment. Perhaps you can state which motion you'd like to comment on, as you do so. I'll give you the freedom to speak on both, if you wish.

MR. RANKIN: I'll do that. I think both motions are similar and I think it's important to note that this committee is about analyzing financial execution of government policy, not to analyze the policy itself. In this case this policy has not been implemented and won't be until April 1st so we're proposing to look at expenditures that haven't even happened yet. For that reason and that reason alone, I don't think this is an appropriate place to talk about policy. It has been said, across the country, in every province, this is the most political Public Accounts Committee that we have in the country, and that's why I'll be voting against this motion.

Now if we want to do each vote separately, I'm fine with that. We had an agenda-setting so to extend the meeting an hour for another topic - just two weeks ago we had the agenda-setting meeting, all three Parties agreed on those agendas. I don't see any regular reason why we should be adding to an agenda because the Opposition Parties want to do that, so I'll be opposing both motions. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Rankin. I saw Mr. Houston and then Ms. MacDonald.

MR. HOUSTON: I also think there's a responsibility of this committee to be somewhat responsive so I take my colleague's point, that we did set an agenda a couple of weeks ago going forward, stretching out a couple of months.

Unfortunately the people of the province have been ambushed by this change. I think it's a significant change and as a committee that looks at expenditures of this province and the impact on Nova Scotians, I do think it's a relevant topic and I would just say that it's convenient timing, in fact, in my mind, Mr. Chairman, that the Department of Health and Wellness is here next week and this being such a significant issue, I think it would be worth the minister's time to come and explain this to the people of the province.

I would hope my colleague reconsiders but I do look forward to hearing from his colleagues opposite as well.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. MacDonald.

MS. MACDONALD: Mr. Rankin wasn't with us last week and I want to remind Mr. Rankin that a commitment was made by a witness in front of this committee. The commitment was to provide the various models that had been run on the demographic and financial data in the Department of Health and Wellness with respect to the Seniors' Pharmacare Program. That commitment was made last week. With all due respect around the role of this committee, that commitment has not been kept. That data has not been provided. The modelling has not been provided. The details of that have not been provided, and that was a commitment that was made.

Now if the member and the members of the Liberal caucus and government on this committee want this committee to be de-fanged so that we can't even hold witnesses accountable for commitments that they make at this committee, then so be it, but you be crystal clear when the vote is held on that amendment what the implications of that vote will be with respect to the ability of this committee to hold witnesses accountable on behalf of the people of the province. That's my first point.

My second point on the second motion - and I will support the second motion in extending our discussion next week, but I don't know if my colleague in the PC caucus would be willing, if we go for an additional hour, to maybe entertain the idea of the deputies from the Department of Seniors and the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, or at least the Department of Seniors coming because my perception is that the Deputy Minister of Seniors is very heavily involved in the work around the Seniors' Pharmacare Program. I would like to have an opportunity, and I think the seniors of the province would probably like an opportunity to hear from the Deputy Minister of Seniors. It's just a suggestion.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Rankin, did you wish to make a comment?

MR. RANKIN: I do recognize that I was not present for the last meeting, but I do understand that some information was provided, and it was provided before the press

release happened to the committee members. If they don't like the information they have, they're welcome to ask for further information, I have no problem with that. But in terms of extending meetings and things like that, I don't think that's in the interest of the committee.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Do I have agreement from committee members to extend discussion beyond 11:00 a.m.? There is some disagreement. That leaves us with just over a minute remaining. We have two motions before us.

On the first motion to request all documents related to the decision on Pharmacare premiums from the Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, and the Department of Seniors - oh, sorry, we're going to run out of time because it's going to take too long for me to run through the amendment and I'm not clear on what the amendment is. I would have to ask for clarification. There was an amendment made to it.

MS. MACDONALD: Let's vote on the main motion and forget about the amendment. The motion is all documentation, which would capture - it's what we were promised, the modelling - all of the documentation.

MR. CHAIRMAN: So the motion is as Ms. MacDonald has stated. Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

A request for a recorded vote has been made. We are now at 11:00 a.m. I'm going to consult with my legal counsel here - one moment.

We can finish that vote. We will start with a recorded vote and I'll call names of committee members.

Please answer Yea or Nay.

YEAS

Mr. Houston
Ms. MacDonald
Mr. David Wilson

NAYS

Mr. Rankin
Mr. Irving
Mr. Farrell
Ms. Lohnes-Croft
Mr. Maguire

MR. CHAIRMAN: I vote in favour of the motion.

The motion is defeated.

That concludes our meeting for today. Our next meeting is on February 10th. It will be here in the Red Room at 9:00 a.m. We will have Service Nova Scotia with us to discuss the Heating Assistance Rebate Program. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 11:00 a.m.]