

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, November 10, 2021

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

Organizational Meeting

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Public Accounts Committee

Hon. Kelly Regan (Chair)
Nolan Young (Vice-Chair)
Dave Ritcey
John A. MacDonald
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
Trevor Boudreau
Hon. Brendan Maguire
Claudia Chender
Susan Leblanc

In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

Kim Adair,
Auditor General



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2021

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Hon. Kelly Regan

VICE-CHAIR

Nolan Young

THE CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. I'd like to call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. I'm the Chair, Kelly Regan. I'm the MLA for Bedford Basin.

Just some reminders before we start. We'd ask that you please keep your masks on during the meeting unless you are speaking, and please put your phones on silent or vibrate. I'm going to ask the committee members now to introduce themselves. I will start to my left here with Ms. Chender.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: This is our first meeting of the PAC. It's known as our organizational meeting, and a brief review of committee procedures will be provided and a number of committee decisions will need to be made during our meeting today.

Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: During the campaign we made a promise to restore the powers of this committee, and a promise made is a promise kept. I'd like to make a motion.

I move that:

- (a) the committee meet weekly except as determined by the committee;
- (b) that the committee review the Public Accounts, the annual report, and other report of the Auditor General, and any other financial matters respecting the public funds of the Province as provided by subparagraph (2)(a) of Rule 60 of the Rules and Forms of Procedure of the House of Assembly;
- (c) and for greater certainty, the resolutions of September 26, 2018, and February 6, 2019, respecting the agenda and meeting of the committee are rescinded.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm assuming we can discuss this motion.

THE CHAIR: Actually, what I was going to say is we were going to deal with the meeting schedules just a little bit later. If we could just table that until we get to that point, is that okay with you, Mr. Young? Thank you. Then we'll do all of that.

This is just a review of the procedures. Members have been previously provided with a package of reference information by the clerk. The mandate of the committee states, "the Public Accounts Committee is established for the purpose of reviewing the public accounts, the annual report or other report of the Auditor General and any other financial matters respecting the public funds of the Province;"

The Public Accounts Committee has been meeting monthly on the second Wednesday and has been focused solely on Reports of the Auditor General. As a result of motions passed by the committee on September 26, 2018, and February 6, 2019, in addition to the clerk, Committees Office and Legislative staff, the Auditor General, and Legislative Counsel also attend meetings of the committee, and the Auditor General and Legislative Counsel will be provided with an opportunity to comment on their roles relative to the committee shortly.

Meetings of the Public Accounts Committee are televised and live-streamed and are open to the public to attend, but at present admittance to the gallery is restricted. Committee documents are provided electronically and microphones are also operated remotely by Legislative TV, and the Chair will recognize members and witnesses who wish to speak. LTV will activate your microphone once I've recognized you, and then you wait for the red light before you speak, just like we do during the Legislature.

The Public Accounts Committee has a Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedures which meets in camera at the call of the Chair to propose topics to go forward to the full committee for approval. It also reviews the committee's annual reports, monitors committee work, reviews sensitive documents and other such responsibilities as deemed

necessary. The subcommittee is established by the full committee. The establishment of the subcommittee is on the agenda for discussion later.

Witnesses who appear before the Public Accounts Committee are provided an opportunity to make brief remarks prior to the question-and-answer period at the close of questioning.

An equal amount of time is allotted to each caucus to ask questions during question period. There will be two rounds of questioning. The first round is 20 minutes and the second round is typically 10 to 14 minutes, depending on the amount of time remaining. We also have to allow time for dealing with committee business. The order of the questioning is: Official Opposition, Third Party and governing Party. Questions are to be directed during the Chair, just like we do in the Legislature.

If members are intending to introduce a motion at the meeting, they are to email it to the clerk. When the motion is put forward at the meeting, the clerk will distribute it via email to members. This reduces paper, is quick and is efficient. If members are reading from a document that has not already been provided to the committee, it should be emailed to the clerk, who will distribute it to members during the meeting via email.

In terms of the reports of the Auditor General, the recent practice of the committee is to focus solely on reports of the Auditor General. The AG provides report release dates to the committee via the clerk. The committee meets with the Auditor General to discuss a report that's been released on the next available meeting date of the committee after a report is released.

The practice has been to have a half-hour in-camera briefing with the AG in advance of the meetings to review an Auditor General report. An in camera briefing is also provided by the Auditor General in advance of witnesses appearing in relation to an Auditor General report and is part of the process. An action plan on Auditor General recommendations is requested from departments, which provides the committee with an update of the department's implementation of the Auditor General recommendations.

At this time, I would like to provide our Auditor General, Kim Adair, an opportunity to make some remarks.

KIM ADAIR: Thank you, and good morning. I'm very pleased to be here this morning and to meet all of you as the committee gets under way, and to provide some introductory comments about the work of the Office of the Auditor General.

There is a slide deck included in your package if you wish to follow along, but definitely not necessary. I'm going to speak to it and take you through the work of the office, essentially. Before I do that, I thought I'd first introduce myself a bit.

As you may or may not know, I'm fairly new to the position of Auditor General here in Nova Scotia. I was appointed on May 3rd of this year - so just over six months. I've been here, getting to know the office, getting to know your beautiful province. Prior to that, I was the Auditor General in New Brunswick for over 10 years and numerous years of - I won't say exactly how many years - but most of my career was in New Brunswick in various positions, financial in nature. I was the provincial comptroller. I worked for Treasury Board preparing the provincial budgets, meeting weekly with the Treasury Board Committee on financial decisions for the Province of New Brunswick. That's the experience and the background that I bring.

I am really pleased to be here. As you know, I am an officer of the Legislative Assembly or the House of Assembly. I consider all of you, as elected officials, my boss. In particular, the Public Accounts Committee is the committee that I report to, so it's important to me to build a strong working relationship with the members of the committee. I'd like to point out it is distinctly different from that of a deputy minister, who serves at the pleasure of the Premier. I report to the House of Assembly.

A bit about the office: We have roughly in our full complement 37 FTEs in the office, largely CPAs is the professional audit team. They're either CPAs or they are young professionals studying to become CPAs. Our budget is \$4.87 million, so just under \$5 million a year. Our operating mandate is set out in the Auditor General Act. It was last updated in 2010. I would say it's a very solid piece of legislation as auditor general acts go across the country. It gives me very strong authority to do the job with independence: very strong powers of audit where we can audit all government departments, Crown corporations, essentially the public purse.

We have very strong access to information, which is important for your Auditor General to have. There are very few limits in terms of access where we cannot access documentation in order to do the job.

That's a bit about the office and the Act. We work in doing audits to have significance in impact. Our work allows the House to effectively hold the government accountable for its performance in the delivery of services to Nova Scotians and its stewardship over public funds. That's essentially what we do in the reports that we produce for the committee.

Our office is broken down into two main teams: We have a Financial Audit Team, and that team focuses on carrying out financial audits of financial statements where I express an opinion on whether or not the statement presents fairly the fiscal situation of the entity. The largest audit we do is the audit of the Province of Nova Scotia. We are also the auditors for the Nova Scotia Health Authority, IWK, a couple of other examples.

The other team is the Performance Audit Team, where we look at various government programs - we look at so many each year - and we examine whether or not the

program is functioning as intended, meeting its objectives. We may look at areas of government's information technology, compliance with policy, that sort of thing. A couple of the most recent reports that have been tabled since I arrived was the pre-Primary program and the Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation.

In Slide 7, we have what we refer to as the accountability triangle. I just thought I'd mention that. I thought it might be particularly helpful to the new MLAs in understanding the unique nature of the relationship between my office, where we audit government, and then government is in turn accountable to the Public Accounts Committee to respond to the reports of our office, and also their performance reports for the Public Accounts Committee for the committee to assess whether or not the departments and Crowns are being effective.

I also want to mention that I am open to meet with you at your convenience whenever you want to, whether it's one-on-one, whether it's as a committee, whether it's with your caucuses. Sometimes people think they can't talk to the Auditor General. I want to emphasize that I am open and accessible to meeting with you, and I'm open to suggestions. Our office is constantly trying to improve. We are here to serve you and to provide you with reports and documents. We made a lot of changes in recent years where we now produce a highlight video of each of our reports. We're bringing in more graphics, more usage of social media to get the message out. All of those are in an attempt to improve how we produce our product.

[10:15 a.m.]

I'd also like to mention that the effectiveness of the Public Accounts Committee is a very important element of what I hope to achieve. It was very important to me in New Brunswick over the years that I was there. I've worked with many public accounts committees. I'll mention that I think it turned over four times in the 10 years that I was Auditor General in New Brunswick, so I've learned to adapt and be flexible in terms of how each committee wants to operate in their practice.

I'd also like to add that I have suggestions on how the committee can work effectively in a non-partisan way, which is essentially a unique feature of public accounts committees. You're probably appointed to many legislative committees as MLAs, but the unique feature of the Public Accounts Committee under the Westminster system of government is that it is intended to be non-partisan. As difficult as that may be as elected officials, there are ways to do it and committees do it well. I have had experience - I took a course in the U.K. at one point about the committee effectiveness, observed in the British Parliament committee under way and have learned a lot about best practices of how public accounts committees can work.

I recently presented at the national committee where all the provincial Auditors General get together each year with the chairs and vice-chairs of the public accounts

committees in each province. I presented on cross-party collaboration of the public accounts committees and how that can improve the effectiveness.

I just put that out there that I'm open to work with you to improve the committee - although I would point out that there are many attributes that the Nova Scotia committee, I've already observed, has by way of best practice.

Just before I end my comments - upcoming reports: To let you know, we are scheduled to table a report on November 23rd that will contain two performance audit chapters. The topics are Internet for Nova Scotia - that was the provincewide initiative to extend internet - and also a chapter on early COVID-19 relief spending. We examined some of the programs that were given out during the early days of the pandemic.

Our December report will be a financial report where we provide details of the work of the office on the financial audit side - on December 7th. We also have a chapter on the fiscal impacts of COVID-19 on the province over the last year.

That's the end of my comments. I will pass it back over to the Chair.

THE CHAIR: No stranger to our Chamber here, we have with us today Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb. Mr. Hebb, would you like to make a few remarks?

GORDON HEBB: I'll be brief. Although we operate under the name Legislative Counsel, we are also the parliamentary counsel for the Assembly. It's in that role that I'm here today. As the Chair has already stated, we attend all the meetings of the committee and the subcommittee as parliamentary counsel. Our basic role here is to provide legal and procedural advice to the Chair, to the committee and the staff of the committee.

We can give general advice to individual members of the committee and their caucus staff, including assistance in preparing motions, if such help is desired. If the committee were to decide to subpoena somebody - which is a very rare event - we would prepare the subpoena for the committee. I believe there is only one occasion that I can remember where we appeared in court to defend one of those subpoenas where it was challenged by the federal government. That's all I have to say.

THE CHAIR: In terms of the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedures membership, we do need to establish that. We've traditionally established a subcommittee on Agenda and Procedures, which conducts agenda-setting. Decisions of the subcommittee are put forward to the full committee for approval. It consists of the Chair, Vice-Chair and a member of the Third Party, but the last number of years, there has actually been a member of the Official Opposition who has been named to the subcommittee and then the Chair is non-voting.

At this time, I would ask for a motion to establish the subcommittee. Mr. Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: In the past, the subcommittee was made up of the Chair, the Vice-Chair, a member of the Official Opposition and a member of the Third Party. This was actually put forward by the former Chair, now the deputy premier, which was accepted by all members at the time.

The motion I have today is that I move that the subcommittee continue to be made up of the Chair, the Vice-Chair, a member of the Official Opposition and a member of the Third Party.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion that anyone wants to have on this particular motion?

Mr. Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Just to make sure with the motion that we are continuing with the same process where the Chair is a non-voting member as well.

THE CHAIR: That's correct. It was the most ...

TREVOR BOUDREAU: It wasn't included in the motion. I just wanted to make sure that that was clear.

THE CHAIR: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Now we'll move on to the meeting schedule. Currently, the committee meets monthly on the second Wednesday of the month. The usual meeting time is 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. I believe we have a motion that the Vice-Chair would like to put forward.

Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: As I explained earlier, and an election promise that we did make was to restore the Public Accounts Committee. The motion that I have here is: I move that the committee meet weekly except as determined by the committee; that the committee review the public accounts, the annual report, and other reports of the Auditor General, and any other financial matters respecting the public funds of the Province as provided by Subparagraph (2)(a) of Rule 60 of the Rules and Forms of Procedure of the House of Assembly; and for greater certainty, the resolutions of September 26, 2018 and February 6, 2019 respecting the agenda and meeting of the committee are rescinded.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion on this matter? Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just wanted to get a little more clarification from the member about meeting weekly except by - whatever the wording is - except determined by the committee. How will the committee determine if we're not going to meet weekly? I just need more clarification.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: My understanding of "unless determined by the committee," if we're having meetings throughout the year, perhaps if something lands over a holiday season, whether it be Christmas or throughout, that the committee can decide on moving the meeting to a following week or subsequent weeks.

THE CHAIR: When we say, "determined by the committee," are we talking about the subcommittee or the actual committee?

Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm waiting. You can answer that.

NOLAN YOUNG: As stated here in my motion, it would be determined by the committee.

THE CHAIR: Of course, we do also need to deal with the issue of whether we do meet during the Summer as well. Is there any discussion on that, Mr. Maguire?

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: A couple of questions: The committee will continue to meet when the Legislature is in session, but one of the things that I had a question about was around topics and choosing those topics. What I'm looking for is: Are we going to continue with the same type of breakdown for topics when it comes to who gets how many?

Also, in the past, when we had more meetings, a lot of topics would come to the floor during Public Accounts Committee and were voted on by members. I know that was done away with and the topics were supposed to go through the process of the subcommittee.

I'm just wondering if because we have more time and more spaces now, will we have the ability to bring topics forward as we see fit during a Public Accounts Committee meeting?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I believe we have just a motion on the floor that we should be dealing with first prior to discussing topics of the subcommittee. Would it be possible to proceed with this motion?

THE CHAIR: I just want to make sure that I'm understanding what the motion is: that you want the full committee to deal with when this committee meets and not the subcommittee? Normally I'd ask you to read the whole thing (Laughs) before we vote, just in case any members do not have a copy of it. If you could just read your motion, please.

NOLAN YOUNG: I'm moving that the committee meet weekly except when determined by the committee; that the committee review the Public Accounts, the annual report or other reports of the Auditor General and any other financial matters respecting the public funds of the province, as provided by sub-paragraph 2(a) of Rule 60 of the Rules and Forms of Procedure of the House of Assembly. The last part is: and for greater certainty, that the resolutions of September 26, 2018 and February 6, 2019 respecting the agenda and meetings of the committee are rescinded.

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion? All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We also did have a reach-out from the Auditor General about possibly having two-hour briefings about each Auditor General Report. The practice in recent years has been for a half-hour in camera meeting with the Auditor General, who would have a meeting with MLAs about her most recent report. The Auditor General did indicate that we could instead, on the meeting after her report comes down - so if it comes down on a Tuesday, on the Wednesday, we could have a two-hour meeting with her to plumb the depths of her report and then deal with the Auditor General's Report at a full public meeting the following meeting.

I was wondering if there was any discussion about that, any preference? What would the committee like to do in this case? Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I wanted to clarify - now that we are meeting weekly, or as determined by the committee - could we use some of those weekly meetings to meet with the Auditor General to get a clearer understanding of a report before we go to a public meeting? Could a meeting be a two-hour in camera meeting to take the place of the Public Accounts Committee meeting? Or would meetings with the Auditor General be on top of that weekly schedule? I would just like some clarification on that.

THE CHAIR: My understanding is that what the Auditor General proposed was in place of the meeting the day after, but I think I should perhaps let her speak on that particular issue.

KIM ADAIR: I'll start by saying it is certainly the preference of the committee, we will present to you when and however you prefer. But in observing the way things worked since I've been here and my experience coming from New Brunswick, what I suggested

was we table on Tuesday. On the day after you've had the opportunity to see and look at the report - which is not a whole lot of time, but at least it's not the day of - the following morning, we could do an in camera briefing of 90 minutes perhaps.

It depends on how long the report and how many chapters it is. We can take you through the details of the report and give you an overview with the purpose of preparing you and equipping you for the following week where the departments or the auditees that were the subject of that report could come for an open meeting.

The reason for the staggering effect, if you want to call it that - where we present in camera one week and then an open session with the departments as witnesses the following week - is that it gives you time to prepare and your researchers time to prepare from the in camera briefing where we present the details to you.

There are many ways to do it and I noticed from the material in the package that there have been many practices in the past days. We could try that for the two upcoming reports and see how you like it. Does that make sense?

THE CHAIR: Perhaps just for the information of the committee, because we have a number of mostly new members here, perhaps our clerk, Kim Langille, could explain what the recent practice is.

KIM LANGILLE: I'll say a couple of things. The practice has varied over the last couple of years quite a bit. Most recently, when we were meeting monthly, the Auditor General would provide the dates and they would be worked when the committee would meet with the Auditor General's Office about a report after it had been tabled, which would be put into the schedule on the next available date.

Now that the committee has moved to meet weekly, how it had worked previously when we were meeting weekly, the most recent practice was that the Auditor General would table on a Tuesday typically, come to Public Accounts Committee on the following day, Wednesday, give a half-hour briefing on the report and then do a two-hour public meeting with the Auditor General on the actual Auditor General report to get more information about the report itself.

The subcommittee would then look at the report and decide who it wanted to call for witnesses, and then I would schedule once that came to the committee - then it would be scheduled out.

About a year, maybe two years ago, the practice was to do a two-hour in camera meeting with the Auditor General after a report was released, and then the following week a two-hour public meeting, which used two meetings to discuss the report and not have any witnesses. Of course, the subcommittee would meet and they would choose if they wanted to have witnesses and so forth, and then they would be scheduled.

I just have one comment about having the Auditor General and then scheduling witnesses right the next week. That would mean that the subcommittee wouldn't come into play. That would just be discussed at the in camera meeting who on the committee would - I'm not clear how that might work.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: May we request a two- or three-minute recess just to discuss amongst our caucuses all these great options, now that we have more meetings?

THE CHAIR: I would just note before we move to that that if we adopt this, that means we have an AG's report on the 23rd of November, a two-hour meeting in depth on the 24th of November, then the public meeting the following Wednesday on December 1st. The AG then has another report on December 7th, so we would have the two-hour meeting on December 8th, and then the public meeting would be on December 15th.

Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Before we go to the recess, I just want to clear something up. Are you saying that the meeting with the AG as suggested would be in camera? Like you said, in the past it was a half-hour in camera and then a two-hour public meeting, giving us the ability to put this on the record. Are you suggesting that we go to a full two-hour in camera meeting? Is that the suggestion right now?

THE CHAIR: That is the suggestion for the day after the Auditor General's Report comes out, and then the public meeting would take place the following week.

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: No offence, but how many reports does the AG give a year? That actually is pretty relevant to how many times this is going to happen, because that's pretty important. Is it once a month? Twice a month? Forty times a year?

THE CHAIR: I know it's not 40 times a year, but I will let the Auditor General let us know that.

KIM ADAIR: Rough numbers, it has varied in recent years anywhere from 10 to 6 to 12 maybe. It varies.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: If we just said bank on 15 for scheduling, it's probably a good thing, it would have buffer into it, as opposed to, say...

THE CHAIR: I'm having trouble hearing you.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Sorry, I should have taken this off. For scheduling, you're saying 6 to 12 on the normal, so it would be better for us to say it's going to happen 12 times or 15 times - a schedule on the high end versus the low. Would you prefer for me to look at it at 12 or 15?

KIM ADAIR: Twelve.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Thank you. That's it.

THE CHAIR: Just for further clarity for the committee, if we're talking 12 and we remove the Summer and Christmas holidays, March Break we don't sit, you would have roughly slightly more than one time a month. Two meetings would be focused on Auditor General Reports, and then you would have the other two for other topics. I will leave that with folks to talk amongst themselves. We'll take a brief recess.

[10:36 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[10:49 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. Okay, we'll now call the meeting back to order. Just for greater certainty and clarity for folks, I do want folks to know, to be clear, the second meeting, the Auditor General would attend, but it would also be departments that would be attending at that, so they would be coming to respond to the Auditor General's Report. We will have to give departments notice that they will be expected to attend at that particular time and not to schedule a meeting further down the road.

The other thing I should say is that I think we're going to go over the 10:00 a.m. mark, so I would request permission to extend our time for an additional 15 minutes. Is that okay with the committee if we need it?

SUSAN LEBLANC: I have a meeting at 10:15 a.m.

THE CHAIR: We will be as expeditious as possible, Ms. Leblanc, if that's okay with the committee.

I believe that what we are going to vote on is that the Auditor General will bring down her report on a Tuesday. The following Wednesday we will go in camera with the Auditor General to discuss her report, and then the Wednesday after that, the Auditor General and the departments will attend the meeting.

Again, the Auditor General will not do a presentation at that meeting, but will answer questions if there is anything to do with that report. It will be the departments that will be appearing at that particular time.

If we decide this isn't working for us, of course we can always revisit this process.

Are folks ready to vote? Are you in favour of doing ...

JOHN A. MACDONALD: A point of clarification. Did someone move it?

THE CHAIR: Thank you so much.

Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm happy to move that motion.

I move that that the Public Accounts Committee meet for two-hour in camera sessions following any Auditor General Report with the understanding that the following week we would then meet for a regular, public meeting of the Public Accounts Committee session where we would talk to department witnesses relating to the previous Auditor General's Report.

THE CHAIR: Did you want to make any further comments, Ms. Leblanc?

SUSAN LEBLANC: Yes. Based on my ample experience at the Public Accounts Committee and the different versions that we've had, this idea, especially if it is one that we can come back to and revisit if it's not working, I think it makes a lot of sense to try this for a couple of reasons. First, it gives us a good amount of time with the Auditor General to ask questions about the report in a non-public setting where we can also possibly work in a non-partisan way, as has been suggested, and frankly, this committee does need some work on that. A two-hour in camera meeting would allow us to try to do that.

Then, it also allows us to talk to witnesses in a timely fashion so that the report is fresh in our minds and fresh in the public's mind so that we can get some quick answers. My assumption would be that after that, because that's not going to take up all of the meetings in our yearly schedule, that we'd be able to then call more specific witnesses, maybe, or we'd have room in the schedule for things that don't relate to the Auditor General's Report.

In our opinion, this is a good system that we should definitely try. Again, we're saying that with the understanding that we can revisit it.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I think I have similar comments to the member. I think this is a great thing to try. I do believe if we can get the witnesses the next week and if the Auditor General would be there just in case we he have other questions about the report,

that second meeting that's in public, if we can have those two things, I think this is appropriate and it still gives us time to do other matters that aren't related to your report.

I just wanted to make sure we were on the record saying - we had to go through it to make sure we weren't losing too many weeks to a process. We wanted to make sure the witnesses could be in a timely fashion as well, so if this works, that's great.

THE CHAIR: I will just say in discussions with the clerk, she made it clear that it can sometimes be tricky to schedule departments, so we will have to see how this works. Our intention will be to give a heads-up to the departments that are the subjects of the Auditor General's Report so that they understand that they will be appearing soon after that report comes out. That is one thing that we are going to have to work on. Mr. Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I think that was exactly it. I think if there's a heads-up that they know that this report is coming on a specific topic - like we know this is happening in a couple weeks - they can know that this is the expectation of the committee - that they'll be meeting with us the week after.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Just for clarification. In the event - and obviously, I don't know how long these go - if the report that we have, the second one - if there's room, we would have other agendas. If it only took an hour to deal with that report, I assume the agenda would not just stop. It's not limited to that, if there's availability to deal with other reports, correct?

THE CHAIR: My understanding is that when a topic is dealt with on that particular day, that's what's dealt with on that particular day. There is timing in terms of questions, that kind of thing that happens. I don't believe that's happened before where we have added to an agenda on a day when we're dealing with an Auditor General report. That's what we deal with on that day.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: If that Auditor General Report only looks like it's going to take an hour, we're only going to come into the Public Accounts Committee for an hour? We're not going to do the whole two hours, then? All right, I guess that's how it is. Thanks.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I've heard some rumblings about the length of the in camera meeting and the in camera-ness of it. I just wanted to echo my colleague's comments and acknowledge actually the work that Ms. Adair mentions that has happened in the Auditor General's Office around clear and public-facing presentation of reports.

I just want to say that we don't have a concern with that in camera meeting, because everything being discussed will be publicly available in a way that's really designed to be digestible for the public. The Auditor General's Office has made huge strides in the videos and the explainers and the executive summaries, so we would really encourage folks.

I know one of our big concerns with the previous changes to this committee had been less public access, less clarity, but as my colleague said, we know that the unique nature of public accounts committees is to function in a more non-partisan way. I do believe that if we have the chance to dig into these as members, frankly, and then the public has a chance to see all the witnesses and the Auditor General and our questioning, I think that will be a really productive - hopefully - format.

THE CHAIR: I do believe that we need to vote on this particular motion - all of the members in favour of the motion to move to the new process outlined previously by me and moved by Ms. Leblanc.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Now we're going to move expeditiously on to training. I would note that training sessions are held in camera and training has been provided in the past to public accounts committees regarding the public accounts from the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, and training prior to the committee's review of the Auditor General's financial report has been provided previously as well.

The AG's financial report is being released this December 7th. Is there interest in receiving training from the Department of Finance and Treasury Board? If so - and I'm seeing nods around here - when would you like to do that? Does anyone have any commentary?

Just in conversation with the clerk, what has been the process in the past is that the week before the financial report would come out, usually we would have some training about what to look for - that kind of thing. Our challenge is that on December 1st, which is the week before the financial report comes out, that's when we will be dealing with the public portion of her first report which comes out on November 23rd. We could do it on November 17th?

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN MACDONALD: Is this in person or is it virtual? I'm just asking. I'm local but we do have some members that obviously aren't, so that's just my question.

THE CHAIR: It has been delivered in person previously.

[11:00 a.m.]

Mr. Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I was just going to ask, how long does the training typically take? Are we talking ...

THE CHAIR: It's typically scheduled for two hours. Sometimes it doesn't take that long, but basically two hours. By the nods around the room, we'll agree that on the 17th we will request training from the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. As well, the CAAF, the Canadian Audit and Accountability Foundation - we've already provided committee members with some information about this organization, and in the past, training has been provided to the committee from the CAAF. My understanding is people found it valuable.

Is there any interest in receiving training from the CAAF - if so, we'll deal with that first. Is there any interest in having that training provided? I'm seeing nods around the room. Then the tricky question: if so, when would you like to do that? We will be scheduled up until the 15th of December at this point. If the committee wishes, we could meet on the 22nd or we could go into the new year.

I'm hearing new year, so early in the new year. Maybe not the first week, maybe the second week. Second week of the new year? We'll ask for that.

Also, the Auditor General has offered to provide an orientation and training session to the committee, and I think this is something that's new for the committee. Is there interest in having the AG do that with us as well? Perhaps maybe the Auditor General would just like to speak for a moment about what she would do in that particular training session.

KIM ADAIR: Sure. I have many thoughts and ideas as to what I could do for orientation. I think it would be a good discussion with the subcommittee to decide the agenda. You've just decided CAAF would come, but a thought would be perhaps my office could do the first orientation maybe in January, and we invite CAAF to come at a later date once the committee has been functioning for a number of months or a year. There are a number of new members, new MLAs, new members on the Public Accounts Committee.

Sometimes I find it's more useful to hear from CAAF after you've got your bearings and you get an understanding of how the committee functions, because they deliver this training to international Public Accounts Committees so it's really helpful. I think that I could give you a pretty good orientation in the early days, so perhaps my office could do the January orientation that we've just talked about, and we invite CAAF later.

THE CHAIR: I'm just asking for a nod. Are folks in agreement with the Auditor General's suggestion - excellent.

Mr. Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: Point of clarification, Madam Chair: Auditor General training in January in CAAF at a later date? Okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: There was one piece of correspondence that had been forwarded to the members of the committee. I would request to have this item added to our committee's agenda. This was the letter from the NSGEU regarding island employment. Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: In light of this request, I would like to make a motion. I move that the committee review the Ombudsman report and consider the operational and departmental oversight failures in Island Employment, as well as consider broadly government oversight of third-party use of public funds. The NSGEU, which represents the workers there, has asked for this committee to consider the situation. I move that we do and that we put it into a schedule now, if possible.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I would note that this is part of the agenda setting. We will support it, but what I would suggest is what I asked earlier, that we need some clarity on agenda setting. What I had mentioned earlier was - in the past, we were able to bring topics like this forward and vote on it. I just think that we need a little bit more clarity on how we're going to set the agenda, but we will be in support of this.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Just a quick question: It's just to bring them in and put them on the agenda? The motion is just to have them come in and present after we've read the Ombudsman report? I just want clarification that that's the request - to come in after we've read it and we're going to ask them questions.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: My motion is that the committee review the Ombudsman report, which is the report that talks to this issue, and consider the operational and departmental oversight failures at Island Employment, as well as consider broadly government oversight of third-party use of public funds.

There could be further discussion about this. Basically, yes, I'm asking for it to be on the agenda, but it would probably require some witnesses being invited. I'm not exactly sure which witnesses. Probably NSGEU and maybe the Nova Scotia Office of the Ombudsman and maybe someone from Island Employment - I'm not sure - but definitely the NSGEU and definitely the Office of the Ombudsman.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I think that was my question. It's not just reviewing it; it's actually saying we want to have those witnesses come in to have a discussion with them. We're not just discussing the report - it's actually having questions of the Ombudsman and NSGEU?

SUSAN LEBLANC: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: My question would be: Is this something that we're looking to have at our next available space and time? That's kind of where I'm getting at. Do we want this at our next Public Accounts Committee meeting?

THE CHAIR: We won't be able to. We're booked up. The earliest would be in the new year.

Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I think barring any future agenda-setting meeting, I am suggesting that we put this on the agenda. Let's face it, we've already put a bunch of things on the agenda, so it can happen. I will amend my motion to suggest that it be at the next possible Public Accounts Committee meeting that has no agenda attached to it.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I think maybe this is what MLA Maguire might have been mentioning - how we do the agenda-setting through subcommittee, and I think we've got to get into a routine of how we're going to do that.

I'm okay with it this time, of course, but certainly how that process unfolds going forward would be good for the subcommittee to define.

THE CHAIR: Just to be clear that normally the pattern used to have these items go to subcommittee and make those determinations there, but the full committee can always override any decision of the subcommittee. I think that in this particular case, point well taken. There is a process, we should be following the process, but we know that at any point the full committee can override what the subcommittee chooses to do.

Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I would also like to add as a witness a representative from the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

THE CHAIR: I do believe on this particular motion we will need to vote.

Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: If the process is normally to push this through the subcommittee, should this not be going through the subcommittee?

THE CHAIR: That can happen. If that is the will of the committee, it can go to the subcommittee. Again, we would have to vote on whether we go to this directly, which is the first motion on the floor. Then someone could put forward a motion saying that it should go to the subcommittee. It's up to this committee to decide.

It's Mr. Hebb's belief that in fact, instead of voting on two separate motions, whoever wants it to go to subcommittee should amend the first motion.

Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Lastly, I just want to ask: When will the subcommittee meet for agenda setting? Will it meet before or after the beginning of the new year? Do we know when it's meeting?

THE CHAIR: It's up to the subcommittee. (Interruption) Sorry, it's up to the Chair. (Laughter)

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: That's a big part of it. When will the subcommittee meet?

THE CHAIR: The subcommittee could absolutely meet before that time. In fact, next week we do have training time, so the subcommittee could meet next week to schedule that.

Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Just because I know I as well as many other members are new, I just want to clarify that even if there is a proposal to move this to subcommittee, that a vote by this committee can always override what is decided in the subcommittee. Just playing this out, if someone suggests that we amend this to determine in a subcommittee, and then we vote that amendment down, then we could still support the original motion here and that doesn't have to interact with the work at subcommittee at all because this committee has primacy. Is that accurate?

[10:15 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: This committee has primacy. I should note that we actually need to extend our meeting once again because it's now 10:15 a.m. With the concurrence of the committee, will we extend to 10:30 a.m.?

SUSAN LEBLANC: I have to leave early, but that's fine.

THE CHAIR: To 10:30 a.m., is that possible?

Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I just want to apologize too because I am new as well and was looking at the historical norms. I'm not looking to push this toward the subcommittee. We can vote.

THE CHAIR: I think the committee will vote on whether this topic will, in fact, come to Public Accounts Committee at soonest available meeting.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Our next meeting date would probably be November 17th if Finance and Treasury Board is available to do that training. Also at that time, or following that training, if the training is in fact provided, the subcommittee would meet to discuss potential topics. Are members in agreement?

I believe we usually meet at 9:00 o'clock. The training would probably be from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. It could finish a little sooner. Then the subcommittee meeting could take place after 11 o'clock. Is that okay with the members?

Mr. Maguire, we're just waiting for you. Are you in favour of the meeting being on the 17th? Alright. Is there any further business?

I will adjourn the meeting and we will meet again on the 17th at 9:00 a.m.

[The committee adjourned at 10:18 a.m.]