

**HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS**

**Wednesday, September 20, 2023**

**COMMITTEE ROOM**

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## **Public Accounts Committee**

Hon. Kelly Regan (Chair)  
Nolan Young (Vice Chair)  
Tom Taggart  
John A. MacDonald  
Melissa Sheehy-Richard  
Danielle Barkhouse  
Hon. Brendan Maguire  
Susan Leblanc  
Lisa Lachance

### In Attendance:

Kim Langille  
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb  
Chief Legislative Counsel

Kim Adair  
Auditor General



**HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2023**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS**

**9:11 A.M.**

CHAIR

Hon. Kelly Regan

VICE CHAIR

Nolan Young

THE CHAIR: Order. I now call the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order. My name is Kelly Regan. I'm the MLA for Bedford Basin, and the Chair of the committee. A reminder to everyone to place their phones on silent. I'm going to ask committee members to introduce themselves, beginning with the member to my left, MLA Young.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I would just like to welcome MLAs Lachance and Barkhouse to the committee as new members. (Applause) I would also like to note that officials from the Auditor General's Office - in fact the AG herself - Legislative Counsel Office, and Legislative Committees Office are in attendance as well.

We will be dealing today with committee business. At today's meeting, there are no witnesses. We have quite a bit of correspondence that's come in after we had requested information over the last while. We did have the Five-Year Highway Improvement Plan, and that was submitted by MLA Smith re the June 14, 2023 meeting. Does anyone have any conversation, concerns, or anything about that particular piece of correspondence? No? Thank you very much.

Then we have Public Service Commission information requested by MLA Coombes from the June 7th meeting. Is there any conversation or discussion on that particular item? We will make sure that goes to the website.

[9:15 a.m.]

A third piece of correspondence from the Liberal caucus office, the Leader of the Opposition, dated June 30, 2023. In it, MLA Churchill indicates that he has asked the Auditor General to investigate this alleged misuse of public funds pertaining to the advertising campaign and asked that this be brought forward at the next Public Accounts Committee meeting.

MLA Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Madam Chair, are you able to read that letter for the new members? I know it's a short letter, but are you able to read that for the committee, just so that everybody is aware of what is said? I do have some comments. I just want to make sure that everybody's aware.

THE CHAIR: I can summarize it. I'm not going to go through it all.

In it, Mr. Churchill says that he learned of the Nova Scotia Government's \$56,000 advertising campaign on the carbon levy that was scheduled to come into effect July 1<sup>st</sup>. He notes that he has significant concerns that this was an abuse of government power. If the intended purpose is to be educational, why are there several components that are misleading to the public? This includes but is not limited to: "failing to reference the federal rebate cheques that all Nova Scotians will receive; referencing the carbon pricing scheme as a 'carbon tax' when legally, the system is a 'carbon levy' according to the Supreme Court of Canada; failing to educate the public on the provincial government's role by eliminating cap-and-trade in Bill 208 and triggering the carbon levy."

MLA Churchill goes on to say, "By only telling a fraction of the story and presenting misleading information," he is "concerned that there has been a misuse of public funds by the Nova Scotia government in the pursuit of political gain," and then the line that was sort of the crux of the letter, which I have already stated.

MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Federally speaking, I just want to go on the record here that this is a punitive tax on people. This Liberal carbon tax is horrible. It's devastating. I talked to a trucker over the weekend, and he was telling me how the cost of everything is just inflated. It's costing Canadians. It's costing businesses. It's hurting the economy.

I'd like to just call on my colleagues to work with us to advocate to end the federal Liberal carbon tax.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Well, I'm sure with the suggestions that I'm going to put forward today, those members, having heard what the vice chair just said, will be in full agreement on the witnesses I would like to propose on some of these things. The theme is co-operation and non-partisanship.

I will say that I would like to ask the Auditor General to do an audit of Communications Nova Scotia based on the following: the Public Service Act, Chapter 376 of the Revised Statutes, 1989, page 16(c) says that the role of Communications Nova Scotia is to "ensure that communications from the Government of the Province are (i) timely, (ii) accurate", "factual and respectful manner" along with "objective and not directed at promoting partisan interests."

We know that they spent \$56,000 on partisan ads, and that was, by definition, as partisan as you get: blaming the federal Liberal government. And right here in the Public Service Act, Chapter 376, they literally broke the Act.

"The objects and purposes of the Office" - 25IB - "are to (a) provide centralized delivery of communications services with respect to non-partisan communications from the Government of the Province, including, without limiting the generality of the foregoing."

There have been examples in the past where governments have done this, and there have been repercussions. I look back to - it's a long time ago, but the Dexter government in particular had put road signs on the side of the roads that said: Brought to you by the Dexter government. Everything they built - some of us may remember those signs. They were everywhere. They were told that Communications Nova Scotia was not to be used in a partisan way. They had to remove those signs.

Again, I would like to figure out why we are back to this kind of communication from Communications Nova Scotia. This, as per the Act, has been broken several times, and public purse money has been spent in breaking the Act.

I would ask that we do an audit of Communications Nova Scotia on behalf of this topic to figure out who, what, where, and why. Thank you, Madam Chair.

THE CHAIR: I have a speakers list going now. MLA Young, MLA Taggart, MLA Leblanc. When you said you would ask, what you meant. . .

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I would like to put a motion.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, MLA Maguire. MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I have a question for the Auditor General first. Have you received that letter? All of us know that the Auditor General can audit whatever the Auditor General wishes to audit. It's completely in her purview. I guess I'll turn it over to see.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Adair.

KIM ADAIR: I can't say for certain I have not, but I don't recall receiving the letter.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I just have to say I cannot for the life of me understand why this is before us. The Leader of the Opposition sent a letter. I would have thought he would have sent it to the AG, but anyway, it tells me that somebody's totally out of touch with reality in terms of where Nova Scotians stand on this carbon tax.

It's just so harmful for so little gain to rural Nova Scotians it is unbelievable. I would have thought they would have realized, given the reaction - it's savage, the reaction of Nova Scotians - in particular rural Nova Scotians - to the carbon tax and the way it discriminates against those who have to travel to work, who have to drive a car to get to get to their job and to their doctor's appointments and to their banking or whatever. It's unbelievable.

I just can't imagine that they would even want to hear tell of this again. I guess they're that nervous about their federal cousins. They want to keep protecting them, but I think it's a huge mistake. I think that we should just carry on and forget about this. We should be supportive of the people of Nova Scotia in their desire to be rid of the carbon tax.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm not going to get into the ins and outs of this conversation, because the Public Accounts Committee is not the place to debate policy, but it is the purview of the Public Accounts Committee to ask the Auditor General to look into something. I just want to say that given that the Public Service Act is quite clear about regulations, I think this is an appropriate request of the Auditor General, and I support the idea of asking the Auditor General.

I do think MLA Young is correct - the Auditor General can audit whatever she pleases. I think that if there's a formal request made by the Public Accounts Committee, that brings some weight. I would ask my honourable colleague to put forward a motion if he actually wants this to go forward.

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire, I will ask you to table those documents so that they're available for folks to see. I think they're in the pile on the right. MLA Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I would like to correct what the MLA for . . .

THE CHAIR: You can say Mr. Taggart.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: What Mr. Taggart said. This isn't about the carbon tax. I thought I was very clear. This is about a government that broke the policies and the Act. They spent \$56,000 of government money on partisan ads. It doesn't matter if this was the carbon tax, the fishing industry, the construction industry - it doesn't matter what it was. They broke the law. They broke the policy, and they broke the Act. In the past we've seen governments that have spent money breaking this Act had to pay the piper.

This government should not be given a pass because of a policy which two-thirds of the parties in the Nova Scotia Legislature voted against. It doesn't matter what the policy is. The fact is that the law was broken.

I would ask if you would have the same reaction if somebody broke the law and you said they only stole something that nobody likes? The truth is that \$56,000 was spent knowingly and willingly and Communications Nova Scotia, which is a non-partisan arm of this government, sent out very partisan attack ads. Therefore it was broken, and I would like to formally request in a motion that the Public Accounts Committee request the Auditor General look into this spending and the partisan act of Communications Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald, I believe you had a comment.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I just have a couple of quick questions. One is: Are you directing or are you asking the Auditor General to see if she should? (Interruption) I'll take that as an answer. The point is, Communications Nova Scotia, the last time I looked, is to get information out to the public. That was a federal Liberal carbon tax. I think everybody will remember. I've always said it that way. That's how they said it. The point that people can infer which party it was - it's the federal Liberal carbon tax. They were explaining that is coming up.

My colleagues are 100 per cent right, and I believe you would agree, that costs have gone through the roof. That's why inflation is going where it is. Twenty cents is added, basically, to the fuel. Guess what? It gets moved by rail and truck, which all use fuel. If people are wondering why groceries are going up, it's because gas is going up. It's not going to go down, and as this federal carbon tax gets added and keeps getting increased, inflation is not going to come down.

I just want to make it clear: It appears from the way it's being worded that Communications Nova Scotia, in my view, did their job. They let them know here is a federal Liberal carbon tax. That's the issue.

For me, I just don't have any time for dealing with this, to be honest, because I don't see it's a problem.

THE CHAIR: I think MLA Maguire did share information from the particular bill that outlines that it is supposed to be non-partisan, accurate, that kind of thing. I think that is, in fact, where the question lies right now - we have some people who think it was accurate and some people who believe it was not. MLA Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm going to be very clear for the four people on that side and the one next to me. We do not support the carbon tax - we voted against it. Do you not remember that? We voted against it in the Nova Scotia Legislature. I do not, and that was very clear from the leader of this party.

Secondly, you proved my point. On one hand you said, "The federal Liberal carbon tax," and on the next hand you said, "The federal carbon tax." There's a word missing there, and that word is a partisan word. That's what it was used as, a partisan attack ad. Communications Nova Scotia was directed by the Premier of Nova Scotia and others to put out partisan attack ads, and that's what this was.

In fact, during the by-election, they were told to take them down because they were partisan and they were misleading. What we're saying is, I don't care what the policy is. This isn't about the policy. This isn't about anything but the fact that provincial dollars were spent to break the rules and regulations of the Public Services Act, Chapter 376 of the Revised Statutes, which is very clear what you can and cannot spend money on. Very clear.

Nobody around this table or nobody on the top floor gets to decide if they follow the rules or not. The rules are there for a reason. Communications Nova Scotia broke the rules. We need to find out why these rules were broken and how much money was actually spent. Was it more than \$56,000? Was it less than \$56,000? Those are Nova Scotia public dollars that were spent.

Again I will say: This is not about the policy. If you want to comment on the policy, go ahead. This is actually about the breaking of the Act.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I'm new, obviously. This is my first day. I haven't had a chance to read the Public Service Act, and I just got MLA Churchill's email. But I'm reading his two points here - "Failing to reference the federal rebate" - his points are actually partisan, when you look at them. "Failing to educate the public on the provincial government's role by eliminating cap-and-trade." It's so partisan. It's actually kind of half-crude.



[9:30 a.m.]

I would like to have a moment to read this - the Public Service Act, because I don't know it yet, honestly.

THE CHAIR: It's a very thick bill. The part that pertains to Communications Nova Scotia is a couple of pages. It's not that difficult.

MLA Young. You can read, MLA Barkhouse, while MLA Young is speaking, and then MLA Sheehy-Richard.

NOLAN YOUNG: It seems like every time we're talking about a carbon tax, the NDP always get silent. I'd like to give them the opportunity to, maybe on the record for Nova Scotians - if you support the carbon tax or if you don't. I'll give you that opportunity.

THE CHAIR: Duly noted.

MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: MLA Maguire says that they voted against the carbon tax, so I am kind of confused here - talking about mixed signals. If that is in fact the case, then why does the leader of your party write a letter concerned about an ad that is indicating - so we're calling on your leader, Zach Churchill, just to tell Nova Scotians - it's wish-washy - where you stand, whether he supports his federal colleagues or whether he doesn't.

THE CHAIR: Order. MLA Sheehy-Richard, the member knows that that is not under the purview of this particular committee.

We're going to move on from there. I do see MLA Lachance, and then MLA MacDonald, I see you as well.

LISA LACHANCE: Just coming in to support our previous comment. The question is not about the carbon tax. It's not about any other policy that we're considering. It's not about, for instance, how we're going to fight hate and discrimination against trans folks today and every day in Nova Scotia. We actually aren't talking about policy. If you want to talk about policies, we can go there, but I don't actually think this is what this committee is for.

What we are talking about is whether or not a central Act of our government - the Public Service Act - has been contravened. That's the question. We're asking the question. We support the motion.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Lachance. MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the purpose of this meeting, I would have loved to have had this motion before so I could have read it and looked at it, and then I would have had time to revise it. In all honesty . . .

THE CHAIR: I'm just going to stop you there. I'm just going to stop you. I'm allowed to stop you.

We've had this conversation repeatedly. Ad nauseam. This is not council. You don't necessarily get motions ahead of time. This is not municipal government. Sometimes we have to act in the moment. I'm not going to go over that ground again, which we've gone over numerous times, okay?

Also, that piece of correspondence was sent out to all members. All members had the opportunity to read that when it was sent out - last Friday and today? Is that correct? This is not news. I just want to be really clear that our clerk did her work and sent it out to members.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: If I can finish that - and by the way, I did read the letter, and I think - I'm not sure. I might have gotten it twice. (Interruptions) I read the letter. I knew what was in it. All I'm saying is that if you're going to quote sections of it into a motion, all I said is it would have been nice. I didn't say you didn't do it and whatever.

However, due to the fact of how big this document is, I move that this decision be tabled until next PAC meeting.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I was going to suggest the same thing, because like with everything in government, you might read Section C of 16 but there's always Subsection D of 18. I have this, but I want the big document, which is going to be scary, isn't it?

THE CHAIR: As most of it does not deal with that particular portion of government, it won't be that difficult to get through, I want to assure the honourable member. Any further discussion? We have a motion on the floor. We have a motion from MLA Maguire and we have a motion from MLA MacDonald, right?

KIM LANGILLE: I think we have to vote on the motion to defer.

THE CHAIR: That is an amendment now? It's a motion. MLA Maguire, just to clarify.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Just to clarify: Are you asking to postpone the motion so that you can read the Public Service Act? Is that what's happening here? Because there will be a quiz.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: It's so I can get a copy of the motion. I'll have to read those sections into it, and that's why I literally did say the next meeting. I'm not asking it to be deferred indefinitely. All I'm saying is that because you're talking about, to the Chair's point, a huge document that I'm going to want to review - although most people realize it's probably going to be bad to quiz me, because most people look bad when they do it. That's that. I table to defer the only two that supersede it, otherwise it would have been an amendment. I table to defer the only two that supersede it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. MLA Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Can you put in the motion to postpone until next week?

THE CHAIR: He did say that. We have before us a motion to defer action on this particular topic, the letter of the Leader of the Opposition, until next week. In fact, what we are talking about is not deferring it until next week but for two weeks, the next public PAC meeting. That's what we're voting on now.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Now, Office of the Auditor General 2022-23 Performance Report and Business Plan. I have a letter from Ms. Adair asking me to table these documents with the Public Accounts Committee at its earliest convenience. There is also a link to the complete version of the audited financial statements as well as the documents that the AG sent to me. They can be found at the AG's website at [www.oag-nb.ca](http://www.oag-nb.ca). For all of the members, I am tabling that with the committee.

Then we move on to the Department of Public Works. There was information requested from the June 14<sup>th</sup> meeting. Is there any discussion on that correspondence? Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: What was the information that was requested? I apologize, my brain is a little foggy right now.

THE CHAIR: It was Selection and Quality Management of Bridge Projects and 2020 Contaminated Sites. It's a big document that came. Are you clear on that? Any discussion on the correspondence?

We have also a response from the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing dated June 1<sup>st</sup>, and it was deferred from the June 7<sup>th</sup> meeting, I think, because MLA Young was chairing and I was not in attendance. I had some questions about the letter that came back from, I believe, Deputy Minister LaFleche. In the letter it refers to over- and underabsorption, which is we underspent or overspent, or civil servant-speak for same - but it doesn't indicate which it is, so I do think we need to go back to that department and say, "Okay, that's great, but were you underspent or overspent? Did it achieve what it was supposed to achieve?"

I also noted that the budget took a big jump when the Department of Housing went over to Municipal Affairs, but only two persons, according to what they had sent to us, were added. I would just like to write a letter to the department to say, "Can you please explain what's going on here because I didn't understand the response in its entirety?" Is the committee okay with me just responding back and asking for clarity on those points?

I'm seeing nods, so I will do that.

The record of decision from the May 3<sup>rd</sup> subcommittee. Members have been provided with the record of decision for the May 3<sup>rd</sup> subcommittee meeting. There is one remaining item to be dealt with. It was letters to departments with outstanding recommendations. We have the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage and the Department of Finance and Treasury Board re the 2018 Grant Programs, and then the Workers' Compensation Board re May 2019 WCB Claims Management.

The question is: Do we have a motion to write letters to those departments and/or entities to provide an update on the situation with those? MLA Young, did I see a hand up?

NOLAN YOUNG: I was just trying to remember - you're just asking to write a letter?

THE CHAIR: Yes, just to . . . (interruption).

NOLAN YOUNG: Okay, sorry. Yes.

THE CHAIR: It's at the bottom of the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedures, May 3, 2023. MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm pretty sure that was just something we didn't get to because we ran out of time. It was basically that the follow-up reports for these recommendations will be far in the future, so we were going to write letters to get reports back to see where things were with those follow-up recommendations.

I make the motion that we do write letters to the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage and the Department of Finance and Treasury Board

regarding the 2018 grant programs, and also the Workers' Compensation Board regarding the May 2019 WCB Claims Management Report.

[9:45 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

There we go. We will write that letter.

Then we come to the record of decision from the September 15<sup>th</sup> subcommittee meeting. The subcommittee reached decisions in relation to witnesses for upcoming Auditor General Reports.

I'll now open the floor for discussion. What you want to have in your hand is Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedures, September 15, 2023, Record of Decision. There's a lot of paper here today and I'm sorry about that, but that's what happens when we're catching up, right? You can see witnesses and topics there.

MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I'd like to make a motion. I move that for the topic of Ambulance Ground Services, the following witnesses be called: Deputy Minister of the Department of Health and Wellness and representatives; Emergency Medical Care Incorporated President and COO, and the Nova Scotia Health Interim President and CEO.

THE CHAIR: We have a motion on the floor from MLA Young. MLA Leblanc, then MLA Maguire.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm fine with removing the names from that list of people. I understand that things change around, so those changes are fine with me. I would like to add or amend that motion, that we add a representative from the Nova Scotia Paramedics Union, IUOE Local 727, which is here on the record of decision from the last meeting but somehow didn't make it into the member's motion.

THE CHAIR: To be clear, what MLA Leblanc is saying is that record of decision from the subcommittee on agendas and procedures did also include IUOE Local 727, so that's an amendment she is making to MLA Young's motion.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I would support that. I think we can't have a conversation without representation from the union and the EMTs. It just doesn't make sense. The topic

is literally Ground Ambulance Services. This audit is to determine if ground ambulance services are meeting the needs of Nova Scotians in a cost-effective manner. Who knows more than the actual members? They can tell you what's happening on the ground, they can tell you where the deficiencies are, and they can tell you where the investments need to be made. We know that. We do.

I think it's quite insulting to have a discussion about Ground Ambulance Services and where investment is needed and where investment has been made without having the other side there - the people you're investing in, the individuals you're investing in.

If this government votes down allowing the people who drive the ambulances - the EMTs - if they vote down allowing them a voice at the table when it comes to public accounts and investments in them, then shame on them. There's nothing to hide here. Allow them to come forward.

If this is about truly finding answers to the solutions, then let them come forward. If this is about protecting yourselves and your Premier, then vote against it.

THE CHAIR: I was saying, I think it was in subcommittee, I feel like we've had back-to-back ... (interruption). I can't say that. Thank you.

I will just note that what we have is a possibility here that when we write to witnesses, that we note the *raison d'être* - sorry, I'm still having trouble with words - of Public Accounts Committee. We're here not to talk about policy, we're here to talk about the spending of money. Does it achieve the objectives, et cetera.

Perhaps we can guide our witnesses a little bit in their preparations of opening remarks and things like that. I know it's not how this committee has always functioned, but if we can focus people on the money - how it's being spent and delivered, if the service is meeting the stated goals of the department - then I think we may be able to allay some concerns that we will be wandering off in areas where we should not be.

The Chair can also be a little directive with witnesses. While we don't want to cut people off, at the same time, we do want to ensure that we're focusing on the mandate of Public Accounts. Maybe we can have our cake and eat it too. We can have witnesses who can point out ways where the money can be spent more effectively without getting into the issue of policy. I'm just going to put that out there for the committee to consider.

NOLAN YOUNG: Just talking about the mandate of PAC. PAC's mandate is specifically dedicated to past expenses of government, and who better to discuss past expenses of government than the department and the deputy ministers. I will not be supporting the amendment.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Again, we are encouraging this witness to come forward knowing that there will be some criticism of the previous government. We know that. I find it very ironic that they're saying that there cannot be a voice for the EMTs at the table because they're not part of a government department, yet we're going to hear shortly how they want to add NSCC and other witnesses who have the same type of relationship. On one hand, they're saying, "We want these witnesses because they're potentially beneficial to government," and on the other side they're saying they're not.

I go back to I think it's very, very insulting. This is a government that was elected on health care. This is a government that has said they will do everything to fix health care - everything but listen to the voices of the people on the ground. There's no harm in allowing them here. The Chair can direct them and say: "You can't talk about policy. Just talk about investment. Just talk about the money side of it."

They can sit there and the government can say: "We invested \$10 million in this," and wouldn't you want to hear from the people on the ground saying: "That's great but it didn't actually serve the purpose," or "It did serve the purpose, so thank you."

That's what we need to do. We need to make sure that all voices are heard when it comes to investment because investment isn't just about somebody sitting up on the seventh floor signing a cheque. It's about where the money goes, and how it gets there, and the impact it has.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Only the Auditor General knows what's in the report, right? It's not been released yet, or will it be released tomorrow? (Interruption) Next week - so we're discussing it in camera next Wednesday. I'm wondering if the Auditor General could maybe give us some hint as to whether she thinks that this addition, the IUOE representative, would be appropriate for the public meeting.

KIM ADAIR: The paramedics are definitely a key component of the ambulance services audit. Whether it's appropriate to call the union, I think that's the prerogative of the committee, not me. The names that we suggested were subject to the audit or auditees of the audit, and that did not include the union specifically.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I will say, going on my past experience - going in my eleventh year of Public Accounts, that there is precedent for this. There has always been precedence for this. No government has hidden from bringing unions and people who are directly impacted by the finances in this province forward. I will say that it does a great disservice to those people whom you all call heroes if you're refusing to allow them to have a voice. Actions speak louder than words.

The witnesses who are coming forward cannot speak on behalf of the people on the ground. Do you know who can? The people on the ground. The union leaders and the leaders within the EMTs who face this every single day - and I'll give you an example.

I see some people shaking their heads over there, but I'll give them an example. In the past, I've been on other committees where we brought in organizations. I think about the Veterans Affairs Committee - where we brought in other organizations that were kind of loosely - but they gave us fantastic information about what veterans were going through. We never would have heard that without them. This is exactly what's happening here.

A big part of this, whether anyone wants to talk about it or not, is recruitment and being able to recruit new people to this profession. We know that government officials are going to say, "Doing a great job. Money's being invested - \$10 million, \$5 million, \$6 million, \$8 million, \$1 billion, bazillion, trillion." They're going to say that. That's what they're going to say, but we need to hear from the union leaders and the leaders on the ground why we have a recruitment issue.

We know we have a recruitment issue. If pay is significant enough to attract - what is happening on the ground for members? We know that when it comes to long-term and short-term disabilities, it adversely affects EMTs. This, again, has a cost associated - a human cost, but also a financial cost to this province. Why would we not want to get to the meat and potatoes of this? Why would we not want to hear from everyone so that you can walk out of here better informed?

I agree with this knowing that the previous government is going to be open to criticism, and I'm okay with that. Let's do it. Let's put this stuff aside, let's hear the real answers, and let's do what this committee was meant to do, which is actually come up with answers and solutions.

THE CHAIR: MLA Young, then MLA Taggart.

NOLAN YOUNG: I hear the member across, and he keeps mentioning "in the past" and "we're changing stuff." I have two things. First is just to clear the record. I request MLA Maguire to table all the witnesses in the Public Accounts Committee - I think you said you've been here for 10 years - because my quick jurisdictional scan in the Liberal time: October 9, 2019, Department of Community Services, Department of Agriculture, Department of Justice; November 13, 2019, Office of the Auditor General and Department of Finance and Treasury Board; December 11, 2019, Office of the Auditor General; January 29, 2020, Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal; March 11, 2020, Department of Lands and Forestry and Contaminated Sites. I could go on.

I'll go back to the NDP's time: October 12, 2011, Chief Information Office; October 19, 2011, Department of Labour and Advanced Education; October 26, 2011, Department of Health and Wellness; November 2, 2011, Department of Community Services and Early Childhood Development.

I have a whole list of past topics, and I'm not saying that MLA Maguire's points and his passion aren't important, but this is not the mandate of PAC and there are other



committees for this. I respect the independence of the Auditor General and will be supporting the witnesses that she's chosen.

TOM TAGGART: I just have to say that I do agree with MLA Maguire on one thing - that the Department of Health and Wellness is doing a great job . . . (Interruption)

To fix and manage - it's in Hansard. It's in Hansard, okay? Trying to fix the many challenges that they were handed a couple of years ago. But I've got a real problem trying to understand how a union whose job it is to support its employees - I shouldn't say couldn't care less, that's probably an exaggeration - but its main goal is not to support or understand government programs. Its goal is to support it and increase the benefits of its membership. How in the heck would that be considered to be important in this case?

It's my understanding that we as a government hand the money to the Emergency Medical Care Inc. That's the organization. They're the people who should have to and be able to explain what's going on in that organization. For us to give a platform for the union to come in and start negotiating for their next contract is a little bit beyond what I believe this mandate is for.

THE CHAIR: I'm going to call the question now. I think we have discussed this particular topic ad nauseam. MLA Leblanc's amendment, which was to add an IUOE Local 727 representative to the list of potential witnesses as proposed by MLA Young.

All those in favour?

There's been a request for a recorded vote.

The clerk will conduct a recorded vote.

[The clerk calls the roll.]

[9:59 a.m.]

**YEAS**

Hon. Brendan Maguire  
Susan Leblanc  
Lisa Lachance  
Hon. Kelly Regan

**NAYS**

Nolan Young  
Tom Taggart  
John A. MacDonald  
Melissa Sheehy-Richard  
Danielle Barkhouse

THE CLERK: For, 4. Against, 5.

[10:00 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: The motion is defeated.

Now we move on to the original motion from MLA Young that the witnesses be the Department of Health and Wellness, the deputy minister and the executive director. The Emergency Medical Care Inc. - you didn't have the executive director, did you? (Interruption) Go right ahead.

NOLAN YOUNG: Just for clarity, my motion is that I move for the topic of Ambulance Ground Services, the following witnesses be called: deputy minister, Department of Health and Wellness and representatives; Emergency Medical Care Inc., president and COO; and Nova Scotia Health Authority, interim president and CEO.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Now we will move on to the next topic that came forward from Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedures from September 15<sup>th</sup>. The topic was the 2023 Financial Report of the Auditor General, and the witnesses are the Department of Finance and Treasury Board - that would be the deputy minister; executive director, Government Accounting; and executive director, Fiscal Policy, Economics, and Budgetary Planning.

Would anyone like to make a motion?

NOLAN YOUNG: I move that for the topic of Department of Finance and Treasury Board the following witnesses be called: the deputy minister of Finance and Treasury Board and representatives.

THE CHAIR: Just to clarify, it was the Report of the Auditor General Financial Report, and the Department of Finance and Treasury Board would be the department you're calling, and it's just deputy minister and officials? All right.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm trying to be the adult in the room here, but I can't help but notice that MLA Young, recently talked about how we should be adhering to the Auditor General's recommendations and the Auditor General specifically recommended the executive director of Government Accounting and the executive director, Fiscal Policy, Economics, and Budgetary Planning. Why don't we just be specific about who we're calling and make sure that those three individuals are in the room?

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion?

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I agree with the member for Dartmouth North. At 9:57 a.m. today, the member for Shelburne said that we need to respect the Auditor General and the witnesses in the recommendations.

We can't on one hand say we need to respect the Auditor General and bring forward the list of witnesses, and on the other hand not. This is what has been extremely frustrating for me, that we're talking out of both sides of our mouth here. We're saying one thing when it benefits government, and we're saying another when it doesn't. We're saying that you can't have witnesses outside of a department, yet they're going to call for witnesses outside of a department.

They're saying that we need to respect the Auditor General and her decision, and yet saying, "We don't agree with the witnesses." We know that they're going to try to get rid of everybody on the list and have it down to one person. I just don't get how you can sit here being filmed on TV and say one thing, and then eight minutes later, say and do something completely different.

I will support the member for Dartmouth North's suggestion, and we'll move forward with it.

NOLAN YOUNG: Just to clarify, with the changes and stuff and people moving around, I tried to define it within the department. I'm fine with the witnesses. I was just cleaning up the language. I wasn't talking out of both sides of my mouth. I was just trying to be specific with the position.

THE CHAIR: With that in mind, would you like to amend your motion so that those particular positions are included in the witness list? To amend your own motion, we just need unanimous consent.

MLA Young, would you like to ask for unanimous consent to do that?

MLA Young has indicated that he is fine to move that we call on the topic of the 2023 Financial Report of the Auditor General, from the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, the deputy minister; the executive director of Government Accounting; and the executive director of Fiscal Policy, Economics, and Budgetary Planning.

Do we have unanimous consent for that change? He had to ask for unanimous consent to change his original motion, so I'm checking. Do we have unanimous consent? I'm seeing nods all around. Okay. Now we can vote on that motion.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

There we go. We have two topics. It's a Christmas miracle.

Record of decision from the September 20<sup>th</sup> subcommittee. The subcommittee met this morning prior to the public meeting. Members have been provided with a record of decision from this meeting. You may want to fish that out of your pile of papers.

I will open the floor for discussion.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Committee members will see that the record of decision is that the selection topic is Investments in Affordable Housing Programming, including student housing needs. The witnesses would be the DM of the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, a representative from the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, the chair of the Executive Panel on Housing in the Halifax Regional Municipality, the Deputy Minister of the Department of Community Services, a representative from Adsum for Women and Children, a representative from the North End Community Health Centre, and the DM of Advanced Education.

Madam Chair, I would like to make a motion that we split this topic into two. One topic would be investments in affordable housing, including student housing needs. The witnesses would be the deputy minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, a representative from the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, the chair of the Executive Panel on Housing in the Halifax Regional Municipality, and the deputy minister of Advanced Education.

A second topic would be investments in initiatives to end homelessness. The witnesses would be the deputy minister of the Department of Community Services, a representative from Adsum for Women and Children, and a representative from the North End Community Health Centre.

I'll speak on that motion. I think it's quite clear that basically - for the people who weren't in the subcommittee - I'm proposing that we take this very large, proposed topic and we divide it into two topics, and essentially divide the witnesses so that they are more appropriate to the topic.

Housing and affordable housing is actually a very different topic than homelessness in Nova Scotia. They are related, because if there's a lack of affordable housing, we see an increase in homelessness. But there is not a direct correlation or a direct relationship. Both are extremely important, and all through Nova Scotia, in every person's constituency, we are seeing a huge increase in core housing need and in either housing precariousness, an increase in people actually living rough or in shelters. Our numbers of people who are homeless are increasing everywhere in the province, and the numbers of people living in core housing need or in housing precarity are also going up.

This is a topic that is being discussed all over the country, and I would probably daresay all over the continent and the world. We hear this, that this is a global issue, that this is a national issue, but this is very much a Nova Scotia issue.

In my community of Dartmouth North, I cannot even begin to describe to you how many people come into my office now per week who are homeless. Mostly we serve people who have homes in Dartmouth North who are in danger of losing them, but now people who are homeless who cannot access services anywhere else are coming to my office. Friday there were four new people.

We have billions - okay, I exaggerate - hundreds of people who are facing homelessness in the next six months because of renovictions and new developments being redeveloped. There are all kinds of buildings going up, but none of them has dedicated affordable housing units.

This issue is going to get worse before it gets better for sure. It is appropriate for the Public Accounts Committee to be looking at these topics in depth and to make sure that government funding or government spending on both affordable housing and on the homelessness issue is appropriate and effective, and all of the things that we're supposed to be doing in the Public Accounts Committee.

I implore my honourable colleagues at this committee to accept my motion to split these topics in two and to accept my proposal for witnesses. This is not a partisan issue. This is an issue that every one of us is facing in our communities. Homelessness and affordable housing are not about partisanship. They are about policy, obviously. I'm not bringing this topic forward to show how great my party is at these things. It is to get some answers and to figure out what the government is doing about these very important issues. Lives are at stake. Health care is at stake. Mental health is at stake, and the economy is at stake when we talk about homelessness and we talk about affordable housing.

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire, then MLA Young.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I definitely support this motion. I think that it is the number one issue facing everybody in this room, the housing crisis in their community and the price of housing. I think it's just too big a topic to discuss in an hour and a half and for us to have 27 minutes each to ask questions.

We just don't know where this is going. I think the member for Dartmouth North is correct. I face housing issues each and every day. It's easily the number one issue. We need to know what the plan is for student housing. These things were supposed to be released. The housing plan was supposed to be released. I will say this: What's happening now is the government is deflecting and pointing blame. It's becoming a common thing.

I will go back to a September 7<sup>th</sup> article on CBC where “N.S. minister says international students need to take responsibility for finding housing, jobs.” This is what Minister Wong said. You’re an international student coming to a new country with a new language and a new culture, and it’s not on the universities. It’s no longer on the universities or the government to take care of those individuals.

[10:15 a.m.]

We are in the middle of a housing crisis. We need to call these universities to task. I’m sorry, but we need to bring them here in front of the Public Accounts Committee because a lot of money is being put in the public purse on the back of international students, and we know that.

I don’t know if people are aware of the difference in tuition. It is monstrous between what they pay and what they don’t pay. For the individual in charge of post-secondary education to say that it’s not their fault, that it’s on those students, is offensive, and that’s having an impact. I agree.

We’re seeing it over and over - you just have to walk around Halifax. Someone sent me a TikTok video where he had been out of HRM - he had left Halifax four or five years ago and he came back. He walked around and showed all the homelessness that’s going on in this city now, and it’s happening in each and every one of your constituencies now.

This is a big issue, and if you truly believe in working together to figure this out, and if you are truly going to show leadership on this, housing is a human right. It is a human right. Instead of lumping it all in and creating some kind of jambalaya where the media can only concentrate on one thing - there’s just mass confusion and we just throw as many things at it at once so that we can get it over with and say we talked about it - let’s actually separate this and have the discussion when it comes to homelessness and student housing. These are two interconnected, but totally different topics.

We should be able to talk about homelessness and the housing issue for Nova Scotia residents on one hand, and then talk about international students and what they’re facing on the other hand because the international students also have an impact on the public purse. They’re having an impact on people finding homes, and they’re having an impact on attracting Nova Scotians.

If you’re an international student - and Madam Chair may know the percentage of retention - if you just throw them into the meat grinder and there’s no place for them to stay, they’re not going to stay, and they’re not going to continue to contribute to this economy. For them to say: It’s not our responsibility? Well, if it’s not your responsibility, then maybe you should get out of the business of attracting international students if you’re putting them in unsafe and dangerous situations. It is on the government. Universities are

publicly funded, and you have a responsibility to ensure that every person in this province is safe and has access to housing.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: There was someone else ahead of me.

THE CHAIR: Oh, I'm sorry. MLA Young, you're ahead.

NOLAN YOUNG: I'd like to call a brief recess.

THE CHAIR: We have five minutes. We'll come back at 10:25 a.m.

[10:18 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[10:24 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. It's now 10:25 a.m. I call the committee to order.

We have before us the motion from Ms. Leblanc to separate the witnesses that came forward from the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedures.

TOM TAGGART: We're very supportive of understanding the challenges and . . . (interruption). Oh, sorry.

THE CHAIR: You know what, I apologize to everyone.

MLA Lachance, you are up.

LISA LACHANCE: I don't doubt that we all share the commitment to addressing both affordable housing and homelessness in Nova Scotia. They are, in fact, complex and distinct issues that really deserve a lot of our attention. What I'm hearing from people on the doorstep and in my emails is just, "Where is the urgency?" This is a crisis at all levels.

I think we really need to be focused. If I think about some of the specific issues that really deserve some attention in either area, when I'm thinking about affordable housing, I think that the goals of this current government are at stake. Issues like housing for workers - we're hearing across the province, in so many sectors, from small businesses to larger operations, of folks unable to find people to come to work for them because those workers can't find housing. This is at all income levels.

We have really strong immigration/migration targets to encourage population growth. Again, I'm starting to hear anecdotally of people starting to give up and go to other parts of Canada.

I'm sorry, but I'm having a lot of trouble thinking with the whispering in my ear.

THE CHAIR: Please continue, MLA Lachance.

Actually, I was about to interject because it is disconcerting having people talk nearby. My apologies for not acting sooner.

LISA LACHANCE: I would absolutely encourage folks who need to have a conversation to step outside the room, if that's what they would like to do, but not at the table.

I think our immigration and migration goals are at stake if we don't solve the question around affordable housing. In my constituency, parents are concerned that their children will never be able to live in the community they grew up in. People aren't able to find either rentals or housing to buy that they can afford where they grew up. There are public servants, dual-income couples who can't afford housing in this province.

The more we stress people around rental rates, the more their ability to do all of the things that we want people to be able to do - like think about having children and all that sort of stuff - is imperilled.

I'm also concerned - I'm sure we all saw, and I've certainly been thinking about this a lot - about the lack of affordable housing and a lack of rentals for folks who are in situations of domestic violence or other unsafe types of situations. I know people are always like, "Well, we see all the tents around Halifax and that's really concerning." You know who I'm actually more concerned about? I'm actually more concerned about folks who are in violent relationships within their homes, and they can't leave. They call for help and there are no spaces in the shelter, and there are no spaces in the shelter because there's no ability for folks to move out of the shelter into affordable housing.

People are being left with pretty critical decisions. I'm concerned about young people who are being exploited because they're sleeping on people's couches and they know that their options are a tent or a couch, but it's affordable housing they're waiting for. I'm really concerned about the folks who we don't see, in those situations.

We're hearing from increasing numbers of seniors who have never struggled for housing in their lives. This has never been a concern. They have always been securely housed. Certainly in Halifax, if you look at the most recent Point-in-Time Count in terms of homelessness, there's an enormous number of seniors who report not having ever struggled with this before.



[10:30 a.m.]

Also, all the complex issues that fall out from these two areas of affordable housing and homelessness. The Halifax Point-in-Time Count - 30 per cent of homeless folks who were contacted during that survey report being former youth in care in this province. That is a devastating statement on the policies and the structure that we have provided people. I think it's devastating that we can say our child welfare system, by that outcome, is a failure.

These are the types of issues that we need to hear about, and we need to hear about them in depth. Honestly, I won't even go into students, but I think in my opinion this could be three topics, because I think student housing is a critical issue on its own. We're still waiting for a housing strategy - we're waiting for a student housing strategy. We haven't seen those from the government, and yet at the same time, more people are struggling to maintain safe housing. If you go on Facebook Marketplace, people are renting out their hallways in their apartments in Halifax. If you go door-to-door in my constituency, there are six people in one-bedroom apartments. If anyone wants to come along with me, they can do that.

I just think we really owe it - now is a critical time to give these issues the attention they're due and to at least have two specific sessions, one on affordable housing and one on homelessness.

TOM TAGGART: I'm going to make a motion here, if I could. We absolutely . . .

THE CHAIR: There's already a motion.

TOM TAGGART: An amendment to the motion. I'm sorry. We truly understand the challenges faced with respect to housing and students, so I move to amend to split the topics to investments in affordable housing programming with the following witnesses: deputy minister, Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing; chair of the Executive Panel on Housing in Halifax Regional Municipality; and the deputy minister of Community Services.

Secondly, I move that student housing needs to be added as a separate topic with the following witnesses: the deputy minister, Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the deputy minister of the Department of Advanced Education.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: What I would say is there are people and stakeholders missing from that list. Homelessness and the housing are multi-jurisdictional issues. We know that. How do we know that? I'm just going to use this government's words. From a September 14, 2023 CBC article: "Premier calls on HRM council to roll up their sleeves and 'get to work' on housing." This is what the Premier of Nova Scotia said:

““You know, look, stomping your feet and pointing at somebody else - no,” Houston said during a news conference following a cabinet shuffle. ‘Roll up your sleeves and get to work.’” I’ll table this.

“Houston encouraged members of council to ‘look in the mirror’ . . . and said he agrees with” the federal government “that it’s time for municipal councils to ‘step up’ on the housing file.

“There are ‘lots of examples’ of HRM council dragging their feet on approvals that could see housing built,” said Houston, adding that the municipality has sent construction fees ‘through the roof’ as he read from an itemized list of examples.

““Some of these fees have gone up by seven and eight times, and every one of those fees land on the cost of housing. So to ask the question now, why is there not more affordable housing when, as a council, they have been just jacking what I would call these hidden taxes up through the roof? So nobody should be surprised that there’s an affordability crisis.”

Those were the words of the Premier of Nova Scotia, where he said that . . .

THE CHAIR: I will ask Mr. Maguire to table that, or your researcher.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: We’ll table that . . . Where he clearly said that the responsibility lies on HRM and city council for this.

Again, we’re about to have a discussion on investment in affordable housing when the Premier himself has tried to say: This isn’t me, this is you. The response - and I will have this tabled, Madam Chair - again, this is CBC on September 15<sup>th</sup> - “Halifax councillor says N.S. premier’s housing comments based on ‘sheer ignorance.’” They’re taking issue with Premier Houston’s laundry list and complaints about the city’s failures. He said, ““What I found interesting was . . . the sheer ignorance of the premier when it comes to this topic. So, I guess when you don’t know very much it’s easy to get emotional about an issue,” Counc. Sean Cleary said Friday. Cleary said it’s unclear whether it’s Houston personally who is not up to speed or [the minister himself].”

Councillor Cleary went on to say some of the things that HRM has done. He said, “the planning process is actually not as burdensome on most developments, particularly the type of developments we want which are more financially sustainable and more environmentally sustainable. The stuff where you’re, you know, bulldozing forests and putting up all new infrastructure that takes a long time.”

What we have now in HRM, we have the Premier of the province pointing fingers at city council, and city council pointing fingers back. Enough, enough. Now we want to have a discussion about affordable housing and the housing crisis here without HRM? I'm assuming they're going to vote against this. They don't want HRM to appear. They don't want the different stakeholders.

We saw in the last one where they voted against certain witnesses. But I think what we need to do here as individuals - there are nine of us around this table who are elected officials - is we need to step up and show leadership on this file because it's impacting each and every one of us. We need to stop pointing fingers and saying that this is a Liberal/Progressive Conservative/NDP issue. We need to stop pointing fingers and say this is a municipality or federal issue, or provincial issue.

What we need to do is say enough is enough, sit in the bloody room, stop pointing fingers at each other, and figure out what needs to be done. I know the response is going to be the same. They're not part of the government and they don't get public funding. That's the short-term view. The long-term view is that when people are homeless or underhoused, they have significantly more health care issues. They end up in the justice system. They end up on income assistance. There are massive implications to this.

My motion would be to amend the witness list to include a representative from city council and/or a representative from the Metropolitan Regional Housing Authority to come in here and talk about the issues they're facing so that we don't have the bloody municipality pointing fingers and the Province pointing it back.

In the meantime, we have over 200 tents that they know of. When hurricanes happen, there's nowhere for them to go. I will quote the Premier from two Winters ago when he said, "winter is coming." Everybody remembers that in the Legislature. Winter is coming and we're going to do something. We're going to make sure . . . (Interruptions) No, I have the right to continue to talk.

THE CHAIR: He's got the floor.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Madam Chair, the Premier himself said, two years ago, that Winter was coming and that this issue would be solved. What we've seen is an explosion of homelessness in Nova Scotia and in HRM. We had the Minister of the Department of Community Services at the time say that she visited the tent sites, and then tell me that she drove by. A drive-by is not a visit.

We know that this issue has gotten larger. We know that this issue is becoming more and more. We have the Minister of Advanced Education saying when international students are coming to this province it's not his problem, it's not his issue. The common denominator here, the common theme, I should say, is finger-pointing.

When international students come to this province and they have nowhere to go? Not my fault. It's Cape Breton University, it's Dalhousie University, it's Mount Saint Vincent University. When people are struggling to find a place to live in HRM - and I use HRM as an example because that is who the Premier picked a fight with - our biggest municipality.

The member for Colchester North can laugh, but I just got a text message from one of the councillors who said the government and the minister are refusing to meet with city council and have refused to meet with him. If that's not picking a fight, I don't know what is.

Madam Chair, I think if some of these people around this table had actually been homeless at some point in their lives and felt that helplessness, they would have a little bit more urgency to this. Instead of pointing fingers and saying: It's your fault, we have an opportunity to actually come together.

I'll tell you this. Go on social media and talk about housing and homelessness. Every single response - I have 8,000 to 9,000 people sitting on my Facebook and my social media today. You know what the response is? Stop pointing fingers and work together.

THE CHAIR: THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire, we have a point of order. I wanted to let you . . . (Interruption) Afterwards, yes. I'm going to let MLA MacDonald make his point of order.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: You can't have an amendment on an amendment. You'd have to deal with the first one, and then MLA Maguire would be able to amend it after the point . . . (interruption). We haven't voted on - you can amend a motion. You can't do an amendment to an amendment. That's all . . .

THE CHAIR: You can do a sub-amendment. We did that earlier.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: That's kind of weird. I've never seen it.

THE CHAIR: We just did it at this meeting. I swear to God. Back to MLA Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I think what needs to happen is we need to set the example. If nobody will set the example, then we need to set the example. If nobody in the federal government, if nobody in the provincial government, and nobody in the municipalities - everybody is claiming it's everyone else's fault - then why not set the example here? Why not get everybody sitting here... (interruption). No, it's not. Why not . . .

THE CHAIR: No, he's still speaking. You can't.

[10:45 a.m.]

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Why not have those people appear here in this committee, and then we actually lead this committee with clarification? Wouldn't that be nice, to actually have the province and the municipality sitting in the same room, and when they point fingers, we as committee members can challenge them. We can challenge their statements. The Premier himself said: This is on the municipality. They need to roll up their sleeves and get to work. The answer from the municipality was: We're spending lots of money, we're spending lots of time. The response from the Province is: It's your fault.

Again, I will say this: If you're not spending adequately on housing - and another thing that came out is the Premier himself and the minister have said there's going to be no investment in public housing. There's no investment, and that is truly affordable housing. There's no investment in public housing coming from this government. We can blame past governments and we can say: You know what? It's your fault we're in this mess. Guess what? You know what leadership is? Taking responsibility, finding solutions, and finding answers. Bad leadership is pointing at other people, and that's what we've got here.

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire, we have another point of order. I do try to let you finish your thought there when we hear those.

NOLAN YOUNG: With all respect to these very important issues at hand, we're talking future policy. Within the mandate of this committee, it's a backwards-looking committee. (Interruption) Well, it is a point of order. My point of order is we're outside what the mandate of the committee is, and all of the issues you're talking about, tremendously important, but there are other avenues. There are other committees that talk about policy. There's the Legislature, there's the Law Amendments Committee. I'd just like to get back to the mandate of the committee and move on with our business here.

THE CHAIR: Of course, your point about backward-looking is absolutely taken, but backward-looking could include last week. I do think that some of these issues can be dealt with by giving clear instructions to our witnesses when they come, and that could include that this looks at what the past investments have been. It is not about policy going forward. I think we have to keep that in mind when we are inviting witnesses, and I think that with the committee's help, I can keep witnesses on track for that kind of thing. It's not always what we've done here, but I think that we could do that with the assistance of the committee.

MLA Maguire, you were speaking.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: What really boggles my mind is that we continue to do this dance here in the Public Accounts Committee where we say we're going to work on behalf of the people of Nova Scotia, and then when we ask for witnesses and individuals to come forward who are going to be part of the solution - you cannot tell me part of the

solution is heavy investment from the Province, the municipality, and the federal government . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire, I'm just going to point out that MLA Young's intervention - I'm not sure it was a point of order - his intervention was that we need to be talking about the past. If you could narrow your remarks a bit to talking about the past, I think that would give the government members some comfort here that - well, it's not about comfort, but this is the mandate of the committee. We want to make sure that we are adhering to that mandate. It is not about future, but it can be about where we are or where we were last week, because that's the past. Where we are now, that's present, and then we have future.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Again, what I will say is why not include all the stakeholders to talk about why we are here today? In fact, I would say, Madam Chair, that this probably wouldn't reflect too poorly on the current government. That's what I don't get. I'm sitting here, knowing that I was in power for eight years as part of a majority government, and we would receive heavy criticism, I'm sure.

If we are willing - if I am willing - to bring those witnesses forward, knowing that it opens us up to criticism, why won't they? The truth is that we are hearing from city councillors in HRM who in the past have requested meetings with the department - with this government - to help deal with the current housing crisis, and it has fallen on deaf ears.

Again, we need to start taking a more holistic approach to this stuff. The investments that were made in the past, or lack of investments when it comes to public housing . . . (interruption). No?

THE CHAIR: No. I think if you want to have a conversation, maybe just step outside. It really is, particularly for those of us who have hearing impairments, et cetera, it can be really disconcerting.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Madam Chair, why not have the conversations of the decisions that were made in the past? I think that's what Nova Scotians are looking for. If we want to talk about past-looking and to the investments of the future, Nova Scotians are looking for people to step up and say: We've learned from our mistakes, we know where we're at today. Put the partisanship aside and have these meetings. We have the opportunity - each and every one of us has the opportunity to find solutions and learn from the mistakes of the past, to make sure that we deal with housing.

But what's happening right now is there's a refusal to even look back a day, a week, a month, a year. I don't get that, and it's very frustrating to me when I have - each and every day, I'm dealing with people from not just my community but right across this province who are coming to my - and from some of these people in this room, from their constituencies, from their communities. They're coming to my office and saying: Where

do I go? I bet if I asked each and every member here, very few of them know that the waiting list for housing right now is about 5,000.

The member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island talked about, God forbid, women fleeing dangerous situations. We've had lots of that come into my office, and we were able to go and put them in housing, because there's an urgent housing list. Do you know what that wait-list is now? It's over a year. That is what's happening.

When we start to have the discussions about why we're where we are, instead of showing leadership, we had the Premier of Nova Scotia, the most powerful person in Nova Scotia, say, "Roll up your sleeves and get to work" - which just inflames, and it talks down to the mayor of Halifax and to city councillors. That's what it is. When you're saying, "Roll up your sleeves and get to work," what does that say to you? That you're not doing your job (interruption).

What we need is to bring some . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. MLA Young, if you think that this is unbelievable, I suggest you watch some past Public Accounts Committee meetings. It's not unbelievable.

MLA Maguire, I would note the time is coming along. We have seven minutes left. I do have a speakers list of MLA Leblanc, MLA Barkhouse, and MLA Young.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I know that some of the members are annoyed. They're annoyed that I'm sitting here and I'm irritated and upset about the current situation. It's painful for them to listen to this.

But you know what's actually painful? Living in a tent in the middle of Winter. Not being able to find a place in the middle of a storm. There was a recent article where people are having to give up their animals - their family pets - because of the lack of affordable housing and landlords now refusing to take pets.

I will say this again, and I've said this a few times. I feel like there's this disconnect. Once you get into government, it's not about for the people, it's for the party. If people really cared about what's happening in our own backyards and how we've gotten there, we would call a proper list of witnesses. It wouldn't just be government-friendly witnesses.

That's what's going to happen here. We're going to have a fight about why Adsum for Women and Children should be able to come. We're going to have a fight about the North End Community Health Centre. We're going to have a fight about people whom the government depends on to provide housing services at a cheaper price. That's what it is. Not-for-profits can take a dollar and stretch it into five. Government can't, so they look to Adsum for Women and Children and they look to the North End Community Health Centre. They look to Phoenix Youth. They look to HomeBridge Youth Society. They look

to Metro Turning Point Centre. And they say, provide us with these services that we can't provide, because we will spend way more money.

Then when we say to them, let's bring them in and let's have a discussion with them to figure out what needs to be done and where they believe changes could have been made, we have a government that says: No, we don't want to hear from them.

I do think that part of this today is we either truly believe in working together with all of our stakeholders - not just the friendly ones, not just the ones who are going to pat each other on the back and say that you did a great job. Do we really want to know the horrific truth of homelessness and the housing crisis that's happening here in Nova Scotia in every one of your communities, or do we want to cover our eyes and plug our ears and only listen to the people who say that you're doing a great job and you're the best?

We have a decision to make here today. Are we open to criticism as a committee? Are we open to learning as a committee? Or is it going to be the same old BS as usual where people use . . .

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire, I'm pretty sure BS is unparliamentary, although I do appreciate that you did use the initials.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Is it going to be the same old, same old where we continue to plug our ears, cover our eyes, and then when we go back into the Legislature? We hear things like: We did a \$2-million investment on this, and we did a \$3-million investment on this. One of the very concerning issues around housing that this government is directly responsible for is the rent subsidies - changing it from 30 per cent to 50 per cent to be eligible, after saying they didn't have enough money. They had a \$116-million surplus that could have gone to helping all those Nova Scotians. This was directly on them.

You want to talk about looking in the past, there you go. I just gave you something, Madam Chair . . . (interruptions). Again, they may think it's grandstanding, but clearly, they're not sitting in their communities talking to people who are struggling every single day. I don't know how many tents they see when they drive to work - the explosion of it.

Those people don't care if you're Progressive Conservative, Liberal, or NDP. They don't care. They just want somebody to step up instead of flapping their gums and being critical of everybody around them and actually do something; \$116 million was left on the table that could have built public housing, that could have done rent subsidies, that could have made changes in people's lives. Instead they did nothing with it.

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire, could we maybe vote on your motion at this time?

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: My motion . . .



THE CHAIR: Sub-amendment.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: My sub-amendment is that we allow HRM, someone from city council, and somebody from the housing in HRM to be added to this list of witnesses so that we get the full picture and we finally get people to step up and sit in a room and come up with real answers.

THE CHAIR: That is a sub-amendment to the amendment, which was the government's sub-amendment, is that correct?

SUSAN LEBLANC: I would be happy to call the question on this sub-amendment. My comments are for the amendment.

THE CHAIR: Let's do the sub-amendment.

All those in favour? (Interruption)

MLA Leblanc will be up. Is there agreement to extend the meeting? (Interruptions)

The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:59 a.m.]