

Standing Committee on Estimates

Hansard Verbatim Report

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Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

Twenty-third Legislature

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES
1998**

Grant Whitmore, Chair
Saskatoon Northwest

Don Toth, Vice-Chair
Moosomin

Gerard Aldridge
Thunder Creek

Rod Gantefoer
Melfort-Tisdale

Walter Jess
Redberry Lake

Andy Renaud
Carrot River Valley

Hon. Maynard Sonntag
Meadow Lake

Violet Stanger
Lloydminster

Harry Van Mulligen
Regina Victoria

Deputy Clerk: — Since the last meeting of this committee, the House has effected a number of membership changes and that has left us without a Chair. Consequently, it's my duty as Clerk to this committee to preside over the election of a new Chair. And with that, I would ask for nominations for that position at this time, please.

Ms. Stanger: — I'd like to nominate Grant Whitmore.

Deputy Clerk: — Ms. Stanger has nominated Mr. Grant Whitmore. Are there any further nominations? Nominations cease. All those in favour of the motion? All those opposed? Carried.

And with that, could I have a motion then that Mr. Grant Whitmore be elected to preside as Chair of this committee? Mr. Sonntag. I have to get you to sign.

The Chair: — Thank you very much. The next order of business that the Standing Committee on Estimates has to deal with is the election of a Vice-Chair. Nominations are now open for a Vice-Chair.

A Member: — I'll nominate Harry Van Mulligen.

A Member: — I'll pass.

The Chair: — So we'll start again here.

Ms. Stanger: — I'll nominate Mr. Toth.

The Chair: — Ms. Stanger has nominated Mr. Toth.

Mr. Van Mulligen: — I move nominations cease.

The Chair: — Mr. Van Mulligen moves nominations cease. All those in favour? Opposed? Mr. Toth is now the Vice-Chair of Estimates.

I need a motion that Mr. Toth be elected to preside as Vice-Chair of the Standing Committee on Estimates. Moved by Mr. Van Mulligen, seconded by Ms. Stanger. All those in favour? Opposed?

Okay. We'll be moving on to the next order of business, and those are the estimates dealing with the Legislative Assembly. And I know that we have a couple of new members on this committee regarding estimates, and I thought maybe I would just review first the procedure of how we got here, for those who do not know.

The budget for the Legislative Assembly is first dealt with in a detailed way in the committee . . . Board of Internal Economy, usually between December and February period, by which then different segments of the Legislative Assembly, the child advocate, the Ombudsman, and the Provincial Auditor comes forward to the Board of Internal Economy with budget requests. In that all-party committee, there is agreement for the budget of the Legislative Assembly and other components of that. From there, these budgetary requests are then part of the provincial budget which was presented in the House.

And then, upon dealing with the estimates of the Legislative Assembly, they are not dealt with in the Committee of Finance as normal estimates are, but broken off and dealt within these chambers of the Standing Committee of Estimates because of their different nature from other estimates that are dealt with by the Legislative Assembly.

So I want to deal then first with the orders of reference that was agreed to by the Legislative Assembly on May 4, 1998:

That the estimates for the Legislative Assembly, subvotes LG01 and LG06; estimates for the Ombudsman and Children's Advocate, LG07; and supplementary estimates for the Legislative Assembly, subvote LG03, being Vote 21; and the estimates for the Provincial Auditor, being Vote 28, be withdrawn from the Committee of Finance and referred to the Standing Committee on Estimates.

General Revenue Fund Legislation Vote 21

The Chair: — So these will be the items that we'll be dealing with. I think today's agenda deals specifically with the Legislative Assembly and that of the Ombudsman's office. So I would like to welcome the Speaker, Mr. Glenn Hagel, to the committee, who will be leading us through this today in terms of these estimates. And I will be calling forward the third item of business, the legislative estimates being item 1 of Vote 21 on page 88 of the main *Estimates* book. And I think it's been supplied to all members that we'll be dealing with. And I would first like to ask the Speaker to introduce his officials.

The Speaker: — Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to introduce people who I think may all be familiar to you, but for purposes of the record: to my left, everyone will recognize Gwenn Ronyk as Clerk of the Assembly, and in the parallel structure equivalent to a deputy minister if we were dealing with a department; also then the Clerk to this committee, the Deputy Clerk, Greg Putz; Marilyn Borowski, the director of financial services beside Gwenn; and over centre and right here, Marian Powell, who's the Legislative Librarian; Linda Kaminski, director of human resources and administrative services; the Legislative Counsel and Law Clerk is Bob Cosman; and to my immediate right is the assistant to the Speaker, Deborah Saum; and then at the chair over at the wall is Margaret Kleisinger, who will become the assistant to the Speaker on June 1 when Debbie leaves my office.

If I may, Mr. Chairman, with your permission, just make some general remarks and advise the committee how I would propose to deal with the legislation estimates. As you said, Mr. Chairman, we find ourselves here in this committee dealing with estimates having to do with all but one of the officers to the Legislative Assembly. And because of the impropriety of calling to the Legislative Assembly, to the Committee of Finance, the officers of the Assembly and the Speaker, under whose jurisdiction some of these officers of the Assembly also find their budgets existing, this is referred, of course, to the Estimates Committee, to provide the same level of scrutiny to the offices of the officers of the Legislative Assembly as for line departments of government.

And in fact as you said, Mr. Chairman, if anything, it's actually not the same level of scrutiny, but actually more, because it's an area of budgetary planning where the budgets are actually also set in the public forum, at the Board of Internal Economy. And in fact the extreme of all is the Legislative Library, which provides yet a third whack in public scrutiny when we come before the Communications Committee of the Legislative Assembly. So it is currently intended to ensure that the same level of public scrutiny, if not more, applies to the parliamentary operations of the total system of government in the province of Saskatchewan.

What I'd like to do is . . . What I would propose, I think, in the interest of efficiency of time, is to just give you an overall picture of the operations of the Legislative Assembly. And in that, outline what I would see as the bigger accomplishments over the course of the past year within the Legislative Assembly operations. What we anticipate is the challenges that we're facing, either in this fiscal year or the next one or two beyond, and also what I see as some upcoming positive developments in terms of meeting our objectives.

And then what I would propose from that point, after having given that description, is just simply to walk through your votes and with each item just give you a brief explanation of the differences in budget between this year and last year on a line-by-line basis. And that's the way we dealt with it last year, Mr. Chairman, and if you wish, we'll deal with it again the same way this year.

Obviously the mandate of the Legislative Assembly is, in its most direct terms, to meet the needs of the members of the Legislative Assembly in order to permit the members to do the jobs that they were elected to do, functioning in, most obviously, in the legislature, but also in their constituencies.

In the broader sense, it is really the mandate of the . . . that falls under the category of legislation, that what we are doing is serving the process of parliamentary democracy for the people of Saskatchewan. Now largely that's focused on serving the needs of the members, because that's how it's personified, but it's not limited only to that.

And I'd just like to highlight for you some progresses that I think we've experienced over the course of the last year in that context. And let me start with one that I think all of you will be familiar with, and that's our improvements in our broadcasting system. I'm not referring to the function of the system within the building but, more importantly, to its access to the people of Saskatchewan.

As you will know, two years ago the legislative channel was carried to eight communities in the province. In the previous year's budget, in the 1997 session of the legislature, we expanded the coverage to become the first province in Canada to carry the legislative signal to every single constituency in the province. Every member had the legislative channel carried to the largest community within their constituency. And this year we were able to expand once again by another 30 sites, and we now have in Saskatchewan, 68 communities that receive the legislative channel when the House is sitting. There may be one or two of those that aren't finalized, but they will be by the end of the session.

A Member: — Cumberland House is coming up shortly.

The Speaker: — Yes, and that'll be the final? Yes, so we're just days away from hitting the 68th one. That'll have some cost to us.

We've been able to do that at no extra cost overall to the budget because of a substantial reduction in the distribution cost. And for that, I want to acknowledge the willingness of SaskTel to renegotiate our contract after switching from fibre optic to satellite distribution. So that enabled us to free up some funds to put into the hardware that's necessary to go to new sites, because there is a direct expenditure in each one of those sites to us in order for them to be able to pick up the signal.

Secondly, I would draw to your attention something about which I feel a great deal of pride — I know some of you who were directly involved as well — and that's in the last year here in Saskatchewan we hosted the Canadian region conference of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I want to extend a large compliment to the staff of the Legislative Assembly offices, as well as the members of the CPA (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association) executive who worked extremely hard at making it a very successful conference.

And the significance of it, I think, is that we served not only our own members well, but we served the system of parliamentary democracy and public education about parliamentary democracy in Canada well. It was the first time that a national CPA conference . . . and as we all know, the CPA is the instrument for professional development for parliamentarians in our province, our country, and other Commonwealth countries.

And it became the first conference that was carried, almost in its entirety, in both official languages, through CPAC (cable public affairs channel). And I think the comments not only received here in Saskatchewan, but from members from other areas who had constituents back home, indicated that it served the institution of parliamentary democracy well as people saw parliamentarians talking about their professional approach to and dealing with issues that they confronted as parliamentarians.

Also, just to update you on the restoration of the building. As we are all aware now, the banging and clanging is starting, and it's no more obvious than right outside the Speaker's office, which is where they're digging the hole to go down under. So I'm the first to know that they've started, and I'll be the last . . . and I'll also be the first to know that they're done, I guess, is the other side of the coin . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . This will lead to all kinds of speculation, I'm sure.

Related to that, I just point out that I think we have done a pretty decent job actually of planning for the implications in services. The significance to us of course is that, as part of the building shuts down for the restoration project to take place, then services have to be moving within and in fact beyond.

And so you will, I think probably, you will be aware that *Hansard* is no longer performed in this building; it's over in the Walter Scott Building now. So there have been moves have taken place there. And also the library technical services and much of what's down in the lower level have also moved over

to the Walter Scott Building.

The financial services that were in room 38 and upstairs now are moving into the vacated *Hansard* space. So there's, you know, some disruption in that. But I think it's been managed in a way that it's provided for a minimum of disruption in the services to members as we provide them through the Legislative Assembly Office.

I'd also like to refer us to the Internet. As you'll know, we've been on the Internet now at the Legislative Assembly for a couple of years. And last year we began with all of *Hansard* being included on the Internet; that of course continues. And at this point in time, basically all of the legislative publications are on the Internet.

One of the things that we believe has gotten a great deal of use from the Internet has been the attention to the advance notice that the public . . . and in fact it may be levels of government or jurisdictions of government, not only, not all entirely within Saskatchewan — but the level of notice of upcoming business that's also on the Internet. So if anything, we've allowed the public to better know what's going to be happening within the building than we have before.

The first year of service, in my judgement, has been very successful and well received. The use continues to grow. It needs to be updated so it's continuously current and useful. And just to give you an indication, from February of last year until February of this year, we had 25,000 visits to the Legislative Assembly web site.

It will also be significant in budgetary purposes that we have been able to significantly reduce our printing costs. The amount of printing that we do is very minimal now and is entirely within this building. It's for purposes by the elected members in the building. And the access then to the printed versions is through the Internet. And that's been a significant saving to us, and I'm not aware that we've had any complaints about that from outside the building at all. So technology, I think, has served us better and also reduced costs in this case.

Also significantly, we've improved the health benefits. As they improved for government public service employees, so they have for Legislative Assembly employees. But from your worlds that you're responsible for, significantly as well the health benefits have improved for constituency assistants.

I think that was approved by the Board of Internal Economy and I think was welcomed by all members for the quality of employment benefits for constituency assistants. That has substantially increased of course, our administrative task within the building. So that you take the number of constituencies and you multiply by the number of full-time and some cases part-time constituency assistants, and you look at the administration for all those things, has a significant implication on our operation here. But I'm pleased to say that I think it's been managed quite effectively.

In the wonderful world of Legislative Library, one update there. We are connected with the University of Regina for software for a cataloguing system which the University of Regina changed this year and had some cost implications because our

contract with them had to move with that.

However we are able to make common use of the software for substantially less than if we had to purchase it ourselves and only for our use. In addition to that, it gives us access through our library to some information from the University of Regina Library and them from us. So again I think we're using technology for common economies in both institutions and also to improve the service available from them.

Down in visitor services, members will be aware that there are some minor changes taking place out in the front foyer. And there are intentions as well to increase the information about the goings-on of the building and about our parliamentary system there with a television that will have a VCR (video cassette recorder). It is now playing live when the Crown Corporations Committee is meeting at this minute or when the House is sitting. Then that's being played live in the front foyer.

We will also, as the restorations take place, will use the front of the building as well to provide information about what's happening and why and also to ensure that it's put into the context of understanding the restorations as being a preservation of both a historical as well as a heritage site for our province and what goes on. And we expect that there will be public interest in that as they see all the big machinery around, and we want them to know what's going on.

The formal visits, the tours, continue to hold steady, numbers up just slightly, but in what I'd call the steady category. The number of people who are walking in the front door but not necessarily going on tours has increased. And we want to use that front entry into the building as a way of providing more information about what's going on here and about our system.

So we will be drawing from perhaps even things like the presentation the Speaker does in parliamentary democracy to schools, maybe setting out a videotape that would be used in the front there occasionally and things like that to let people know. The *Lisa Visits the Legislature* and those other videos are things that can play, and we're working to improve that.

Some challenges that lie ahead for us — it's not all in hand and easy skating. As you may know, Saskatchewan was the second jurisdiction in Canada to introduce the legislative television coverage back in 1982. So the good news is that we were among the absolute first in the nation. The bad news is that we now have among the oldest equipment in the nation for broadcasting services.

And as you will appreciate, since 1982 technology has just gone miles since that time as well. And so we're doing some reviewing of the technology available and beginning to be very active about looking at replacements of our equipment and technology. We're beginning to see some of the impact of older equipment.

We have now one of our five cameras that is no longer movable. And because it's become our system for replacement parts for the other four . . . and fortunately it's the one in the centre on the Speaker's gallery, that it always takes the distance shot or it could zoom in. It's no longer capable of zooming in; unfortunately it's locked with the full shot of the Assembly. But

what we should be alerted to is the fact that that camera is in that position now, and we anticipate that it's not going to be the only one in the near future.

So we do have some work to do to ensure the continuing quality presentation of the broadcasting of our Legislative Assembly meetings that are going out around the province.

Looking at some technological development that will enable us to use time-audio on the Internet, which would increase the quality of sound on the Internet. It would also then be a system that would provide for MLAs (Member of the Legislative Assembly) who want to, on their own web site pages, is to take speeches and put them on their own web pages, that sort of thing.

So as we improve the quality through technology — and we're going to have to do this shortly, in terms of the quality of what we do out of here — it will also increase members' ability to take advantage of that as well if they're into using the Internet to communicate with their constituents. That would also reduce some of our *Hansard* need to actually tape the proceedings, although *Hansard* would still need to transcribe.

I think we will still have some pressures on staff obviously because of relocations and the restoration, but I think that's cope-able.

And then good old library shelving continues to be an ongoing saga. After the Board of Internal Economy had approved a special warrant to get the shelving in place over at the Walter Scott Building, to get our stuff over there and still be able to be usable, and also to bring back some of the stuff from the Gemini storage, what happened is that the management of the project didn't get done within the fiscal year, and so we're going to have to go back to the Board of Internal Economy again to ask them to approve something that they've already approved, but because of the budgeting system, we weren't able to achieve by the end of March.

So the library shelving still is a challenge; however it's something that has been before the board and they fully understand.

And our security card access system is beginning to show some glitches and may be something that we'll be looking at needing to attend to in the not-too-distant future.

Mr. Toth: — The security card, is that the one to the building?

The Speaker: — Yes, to the doors, yes, that system.

Mr. Toth: — And on the shelving, when you're ... are we talking of shelving right now, temporary shelving to accommodate the library and all of its magazines and periodicals or ...

The Speaker: — It would be permanent.

Mr. Toth: — Or are you talking of what's going to be in the future when they move back?

The Speaker: — It would become permanent storage over

there. So what we're talking about is, we have to get it out. And so what the board has approved is putting in some mobile ... approval for mobile shelving that allows us to make the maximum use of the space available. It is something that the library has needed and has been growing all along. But what has happened is that the relocation has just exacerbated the whole thing. And so in order to save money in the long run, this was the right time to do it, and it was approved. But the project wasn't managed quickly enough to get the expenditures done before the end of the fiscal year.

But that will become then permanent storage, but it will be permanent storage that makes the stuff accessible and usable to us.

The alternative is having stuff sitting in boxes which is ... we really were at that point already. We were starting to get to that point.

Just in the ... a couple of positive things in the future, I think that aid in our presentation of the system of parliamentary democracy and its proper understanding within the public of Saskatchewan. It will continue to be the intention of the Speaker to continue the parliamentary outreach, and that will start up again this fall. Just to give you a very quick report on that, since the fall of '96, presentations have been made in 50 of the 58 constituencies, which include about 7,000 students with about 150 presentations, and those being students from ... and the school presentations to students from 108 different schools around the province.

In addition to that, there have been eight presentations so far made in the Chamber which have been taped and then made available to the school by the MLA involved, and I know at least one of the members of the committee here has taken advantage of that. And that's something that we'll continue to do. I want to see never, ever reducing the dignity with which that room, the Assembly, is seen but to see it as something that is seen as more belonging to our people of Saskatchewan perhaps than has been case. And I see — and to make it closer to people — and I see the process of having students or perhaps other groups ... in fact the Ombudsman national conference that was held here last year came into the Assembly and we did a bit of presentation in the Assembly that I think was well received as well.

So it's something I see continuing to do. Maybe if you just want to distribute these, I'll just give you a quick sample. Some of the positive stories about the institution of parliamentary democracy that have been carried in the weekly newspapers as we've done them over the course. These, I think, are all from within the last year.

And the other item that I'm excited about achieving, which I certainly anticipate to come into play in this fiscal year, is the introduction of what we're calling the Saskatchewan Social Sciences Teachers Institute on Parliamentary Democracy, and I know that the caucuses will be familiar with this. It's an intention again to extend from the Speaker's parliamentary outreach to schools, to increase the teachers' knowledge of the parliamentary process and what goes on, by bringing social science teachers to the legislature.

We're modelling it after a federal . . . a program at the federal level but we're doing a much shorter version, one that's a strictly Saskatchewan version. And it's got the support and the intended participation by all three caucuses here in our legislature. It's been formally endorsed by the Saskatchewan branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. And I'm pleased to say as well that it has had the formal expression of support by the regional directors in Department of Education, by the Saskatchewan School Trustees' Association, and by, yes, and the Saskatchewan committee on social . . . Saskatchewan Council on Social Sciences, which is the STF's (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation) body that deals with this area of instruction.

So those are a couple of things, positive things I think, about communicating what this institution is all about — in its place, affecting the lives of Saskatchewan people — that I think will continue to help to build that bond and that bridge between the Legislative Assembly and the people, with a particular focus on the young people of the province of Saskatchewan.

So, Mr. Chairman, I'll stop there and I'm prepared, if there's any general questions, prepared then to just start walking through the subvotes one at a time if you like, and deal with any questions. And in doing that I would outline what's changed from last year's budget.

The Chair: — Yes, I think we'll open it up to general questions first with the highlights that you've made, and then deal with the specific votes. I've got Mr. Van Mulligen first, then Ms. Stanger.

Mr. Van Mulligen: — I just have a couple of questions; one is about the legislative channel. One of the concerns I have about the channel is that it's really provided to people without any context. There's no explanation or interpretation — other than a crawler across the screen — as to what is taking place, why it's taking place; what is proposed to take place, what has taken place.

I know the parliamentary channel that comes from Ottawa does have journalists who are there to explain the process, not to talk about the substance of what it is that members are saying. God knows we have enough media people in Regina to misinterpret what it is that we say.

But to have someone there to provide some context about, question period's coming up or the routine proceedings are coming up, and this is how the routine proceedings go, people present petitions and so on. Question period is such a length. The questions have to be distributed among the opposition members. While votes are being called — and this is opposed to having 10 minutes of dead time — that we might have someone give some explanation of what business of the House it is that's causing members to be called for a vote, and that kind of thing.

Whether in the future you might look at hiring some retired journalist who . . . or somebody with a poli-sci background to give that kind of explanation. I don't know what tremendous costs are involved in that, but whether that's something we might look at in the future.

And in addition thereto, whether it's also appropriate to — and

I don't know if we're doing this — to begin to send out columns or explanations to weekly newspapers about this new channel in town, and how it is that people might interpret some of what it is that they see on that channel.

I also have a question about the restoration that is taking place. Whether those restorations might also provide for improvement in the lighting in the Chamber. I wouldn't say it was Stygian in there, but it is just a tad gloomy to my mind.

I know that during the taping of that video, *Lisa visits the Legislature*, we had temporary lighting in the Chamber. Boy it was quite an improvement over and above what we have now. And I wonder if there's any possibility that might be included in the restorations?

And finally whether there is — for the people that work in the building, and MLAs I guess, less so than the permanent staff in the building — whether the restorations might also include provision for a men and women's locker rooms and showers? And that's my questions at this point.

The Speaker: — Okay. Maybe I'll just deal with them in the order that you raised them, Mr. Van Mulligen. I certainly will take note of your suggestion on the legislative channel to provide a context. I'm advised that the — and you put your finger on what precisely what might be a deterrent to it — I'm advised that the House of Commons channel has discontinued doing that because of the cost involved. But it's something that I appreciate. It's an interesting notion. I want to give it some thought. I don't know if it would be something that would have a significant cost to it or not. But I think it's worth discussing and would certainly welcome comments from other members as well.

Just on the surface of it, I find the notion appealing. It would be extremely important that any commentary — and you've made this point — be totally non-partisan, be purely informational. And therefore somebody like a political scientist or a politically not active journalist may be an appropriate person. Is the . . .

Mr. Van Mulligen: — Or a retired Speaker.

The Speaker: — Or a retired Speaker. Is there something that you know that I don't know, Mr. Van Mulligen? But no, that's right. Because our purpose should be . . .

Mr. Van Mulligen: — You wouldn't get Herman. He likes to golf too much.

The Speaker: — Our purpose should be with our broadcast channel, in my view to be as informative as possible. I mean it is for that reason that I think we all feel, appropriately, a great deal of pride about the fact that we have the most extensive broadcasting of legislative proceedings in the nation. From call to order to adjournment, there's nobody does more. You can't do more. And I don't know if there's anyone that does exactly that much in total; if there are, there's only one or two at most.

And then now being that the signal is going to 68 communities includes a pretty significant percentage of our total population. I want to consider whether in the broadcasting there's something we can do more to have people understand the process. Because

in effect, somebody who's watching it on television is the same as somebody who has come into the gallery and is sitting and observing, because we will have the signals when the bells are ringing to say what that's about.

Now we do provide, through the Internet . . . the agenda is on the Internet, so that stuff is all there, and maybe we can connect that.

Anyhow I certainly will want to think about that, and I thank you for the suggestion.

The columns and explanations to weekly newspapers is again something we're thinking about. Our approach . . .

The Chair: — Mr. Speaker, if I can interject, Mr. Toth wanted . . .

The Speaker: — Oh, on the same subject.

Mr. Toth: — Yes, if you don't mind, Mr. Speaker, just a follow up to what Mr. Van Mulligen has said.

And I guess first of all, I haven't watched the parliamentary channel enough to have picked up what . . . when I've had it on, there's been a debate or something, so I've missed out what some of the procedural information that might be there. So I guess what I'd be interested in is hearing exactly what they have. And you just indicated that now they've discontinued that.

In view of that, if I understand Mr. Van Mulligen correctly, he's saying that they have a little bit of a blurb on that, says this is what's taking place currently. Maybe one of the areas — if indeed it's something that could be beneficial — maybe your broadcast services could do that in some way right out of the Assembly here, instead of broadcasting . . . someone just interject. I don't know.

I'm putting that forward as an idea rather than adding something else to a system that's already there. First of all you'll have to excuse me; I'm not exactly sure what Mr. Van Mulligen was talking of in that case that I just presented.

The Speaker: — No, and your point is well taken. It would seem if we're going to explore it, it would want to be something that we have that's in-house. That would be probably the most efficient, cost-efficient way, for starters.

And also you'd want to, I would think, it would be something you would want very clearly under the authority of the Legislative Assembly to ensure its impartiality and its accuracy and all those important criteria.

I think this is something that we'll want to talk about and try and find a way to explore some possibilities and get a little discussion going from within as well. So I appreciate that.

On the matter of column explanations to weekly newspapers about it, we haven't done that. Again that's an interesting notion. What we've done so far . . . and this is largely driven by two things. One is budget. The other is the desire to permit — and in fact encourage not just permit — but to encourage local

MLAs to do their political communication about parliamentary legislative coverage.

We did a little bit of advertising in weekly newspapers in those communities in which we brought on the channel new this year and also last year. But largely what we did is we've got the information to the MLAs and encouraged them to use their communications allowance or their vehicles that they have to communicate the oncoming of the channel.

Because the channel would inevitably be coming on in this community, but not the community down the road because it's community specific, we also wanted to be sensitive to not wanting to create ill feelings, sometimes, between communities in a member's riding. And we thought that oftentimes the person who is in the best position to judge how to communicate it positively and constructively and most effectively will be the MLAs themselves.

Mr. Van Mulligen: — If I could, just on that, my sense would be is that we need to communicate more about process. And that's not something that I as an MLA would undertake to do necessarily. And neither do I think that there's any cost involved because weeklies are always looking for people to submit articles that they're glad to run. But for example, you know, you might have a column this week on petitions and how they're . . . sort of the history of petitions, how they're arrived at. Why is it that we say that people shouldn't be . . . or that the rule is that you can't sort of read everything about the petition and provide the contacts. You just simple read the bare . . .

The Speaker: — Why are they praying?

Mr. Van Mulligen: — That in Saskatchewan that there's a limit to the amount of time that can be in petitions and so on. If you want to submit a petition, here's who you might want to contact — you know, that kind of thing.

I mean there's all kinds . . . there's a very considerable body of knowledge that's built up around this place that I don't think people especially know of. Now they might not be especially interested either, but my guess is that channel being out there is going to create more interest.

The Speaker: — What's really interesting is I've been around the province to communities where the legislative channel has come on stream. In fact I don't think . . . it wasn't true in this year's . . . it won't be in any clippings you have this year. But last year I was making it a priority effort to get to communities where the legislative channel was coming for the first time in the constituency and so that it enabled me and the local MLA to make a joint announcement as part of the visit about the legislative channel coming on. And there were a few cases where the headline was "The legislative channel is coming to our town."

And so there is . . . I think sometimes we may be inclined, because elected members are sensitive to cynicism, we may be inclined to underestimate the interest in constructive, positive reflections on the institution that the citizens may have. And certainly my experience has been to support the latter, and so again I thank you for your suggestion. I think that's something about which I'll want to give some thought, and I can again see

potential in the weekly newspapers, in an information column in the communities that carry the legislative channel.

The restoration, although not under the authority of the Legislative Assembly — it's an SPMC (Saskatchewan Property Management Corporation) activity — does . . . I can advise you that it has as its mandate to review the functions within the building, including the Chamber itself, and to make recommendation for the long term. And so lighting in the Chamber may very well fall into that category. Inevitably what happens is that before the spring session begins, they'll get up and replace all the lighting that has started to fade, and our best lighting in the whole session will be on day one. But then we just don't bring in the scaffolding and all that kind of stuff or whatever they do up there to change those lighting during the session. So the lighting does . . . If you get the impression that it's getting a little dimmer as the session goes on, you're factually accurate. The lighting, the lighting, the lighting, I emphasize the lighting is getting . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . so if someone is suggesting that the Speaker said that anything other than the lighting is getting dimmer in the House, I want to take issue with that point, but . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . No. But you will, and I think on reflection you'll note that and it has been something that has been looked at as well. So we're well aware of it, trying to stay on top of that.

And on the matter of locker room, it is something that was thought about, I think kind of went into hibernation, but may be considered. There is in my view, some small possibility of that being considered as part of the restoration. It has been in the mix of considerations, and what the committee that's looking and overseeing that is looking at is the balance, the total balance of needs within the building. So it's not dead, but it's not running up and down the hallways as an idea either at this moment. But I don't consider it to have been an idea that's been totally rejected.

So it would be, in my judgement, a move in the right direction to have access for people who work in this building, not only elected people but the people who serve those who are elected, and many of whom work extremely long hours under high stress oftentimes, and oftentimes with little physical activity accompanied to that. While this building is located in one of the most beautiful spots in Saskatchewan to get out and go for a brisk run or walk or that sort of thing, that there isn't some way at the end of that to come back in and take a shower before you put your suit on and come back into the Legislative Assembly and sit down.

And so it would seem to me that not only for elected members when the House is in session, but just on an ongoing basis, there would be some strong merit in having the ability for members to be able to take a shower in the place and to be able to store, you know, a set of walking or running shoes or that kind of thing. I think that would be good, healthy activity and would be something that the Speaker would certainly support.

Ms. Stanger: — Three short questions that are not related, but they're just something I'm interested in.

I'd like to know how many visits you've had to the Internet because I was just absolutely amazed how many visits that our caucus offices had to our page. And it would seem to me that

this would be one way of getting all this information out that all of us are concerned about getting out to the public.

And the next one is what will be the costs to the . . . I don't suppose you'd have an accurate, but you might have an estimate of what the extra benefits to the CAs (constituency assistants), what the cost would be for that or an estimation.

And the last — I'd kind of like to put this strongly — I've never mentioned it before because we weren't doing any restoration or anything and all of the female members have sort of made do, but it is really not optimum for us to be using the one, single bathroom that the pages have. I mean it's embarrassing; we walk in on each other. Isn't there any way, Mr. Speaker, that we could at least have a washroom for the female members? It's really not adequate what we have, and this is 1998. And we're going into the year 2000; I'd like to be able to say we at least have a ladies' washroom for the female members. Thank you.

The Speaker: — Just to respond to those in the same order that you've asked them, Ms. Stanger. On the Internet, the Legislative Assembly has had — from February 23, 1997 to February 22, 1998, a complete calendar year — has had 11,500 different visitors, so these are different people, who have made a total of 25,000 visits; so an average of a little over two per person that's made contact, and have made from those visits, 140,000 requests that have had some interaction. So we're averaging 72 visits per day, and we average 5.5 requests per visit. And for what it's worth — now you're not likely to ever be asked this, but this might be the kind of thing you just might want to save to bring up some time at a party when it's getting late and the conversation is lulling — but the average time per visit is 380 seconds, 380 seconds. So they're 6-minute visits is what they're paying.

The users are a variety, but it's largely from jurisdictions of government or government within. So these are . . . I think these would all . . . a large majority of these visits would be considered by the visitor to be practical as opposed to say, curious.

In terms of the extended health care coverage to the constituency assistants, our estimate of the cost for all of the constituency assistants in total is \$15,800 per year, is the . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . No, so I think it's probably less than many thought it might be.

And on the female members' washroom in the Legislative Assembly, it's on the long-term plan, but I'm advised not on the short-term plan. So it's also not actively running up and down the hallway. But I certainly wouldn't discourage the hon. member from urging that the priority increase. It has been, as we all know, an issue around this building for the better part of a decade, if not more. And so that's the current status. It's not in the active renovations plan to do with the restoration.

Ms. Stanger: — You realize, Mr. Speaker, this really does cut down on the communications. I'm told from the male members that often they communicate with the opposition members in the washrooms. We don't even have that available to us because we have one bathroom we share with the pages, so I can't even speak to the opposition female members and communicate in the washroom, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: — Well I'm very sensitive to the point that you're making and . . .

Ms. Stanger: — It is an informal place to communicate.

The Speaker: — I urge the hon. member to advise the minister of the Property Management Corporation actually . . .

Ms. Stanger: — Where is he?

The Speaker: — . . . of the importance from your point of view. And I would urge all MLAs actually, not just female MLAs, to do that.

Ms. Stanger: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . a little under the 380.

Mr. Van Mulligen: — I think it's just absolute nonsense that we continue to have a system where we have sort of one facility for men and we say that women aren't entitled to the same. I mean it's just absolute nonsense.

The Speaker: — Again, I would encourage all hon. members to . . .

Mr. Van Mulligen: — I'm not directing that at anyone in particular.

The Speaker: — No, well it's on the public record now, and I encourage members to do that. I quite concur.

The Chair: — Okay, we'll now move on to the specific estimates in each category regarding the Legislative Assembly. And I just want to also bring to the attention of members that when we're dealing with these votes, within these votes there are statutory votes which are outlined through a formula that have been predetermined with the Legislative Assembly, particularly in the area of members' expenses and terms of staffing for caucuses, party caucuses and such, are outlined already as statutory votes that are outlined. I just want to bring that to the attention of the committee.

Subvote (LG01)

The Speaker: — Okay. Before doing that, Mr. Chairman, if I could just ask members to turn to the previous page 87 and put the whole thing into context.

We're dealing with the budget items from administration down to caucus operations. So if you just want to put a bracket, it's those six that we're going to deal with here with the Speaker. And those six in total will represent an increase from the 1997-98, if you put those six categories in total together, they represent \$14.851 million.

And in 1998-99, on this fiscal year, from that base of 14.851 million, there is a budgetary increase of \$30,000 only. A budgetary, as Mr. Chairman has said, they'd be those things about which you will vote. Sorry, that was a budgetary decrease; I said increase. It's a budgetary decrease of \$30,000.

And then there is a statutory about which you don't have a vote but can ask questions. The statutory increase is \$104,000,

bringing us then to an overall increase in the budget for Legislative Assembly of \$74,000, on that 14.851 million. And that represents an increase of .5 per cent, one-half of one per cent.

So that's the big picture. And as you can see, in fact more than that is from statutory. And this is exactly how the Board of Internal Economy looks at it.

So first of all in legislative administration, LG01, it represents an increase in spending of \$110,000. This category includes the Clerk's salary, the Speaker's office, and the financial services and administration. That's what's covered in this when we talk about administration. So it's administration as we normally think about it as well as procedural administration to the legislature.

That is broken down: \$30,000 of that comes from staffing increases in a combination of the Speaker's office, administration, and finance area in total, so that's 30,000 of it; \$14,000 of that increase comes from the program change for the insurance for MLAs' furniture and equipment in your offices, okay, then you will have just become aware of that within the last few months; \$28,000 of that is just normal staff increments and cost of living adjustments; and then \$38,000 is from miscellaneous things combined together which include events hosted by the Speaker. These would fall into the protocol area — things like teas and the like — from telephone, the employee and family assistance program, and caucus services and supplies.

So that's the breakdown of the \$110,000 increase that you see before you there.

Subvote (LG01) agreed to.

Subvote (LG02)

The Speaker: — LG02 is an accommodation and central services. And you'll see it represents a \$10,000 decrease. This is expenditures which are payments to Property Management Corporation and it'll cover, in total, mail, the record management and minor renovations. The reason that there is a \$10,000 reduction here has to do with this library shelving and the fact that we've been able to reduce our storage of libraries in the Gemini Warehouse and in the old Health building. So the charges that we are receiving from Property Management Corporation for library storage has gone down because of what we're doing with the shelving. So the other side of the shelving cost is there is also a storage space reduction from other buildings.

Subvote (LG02) agreed to.

Subvote (LG03)

The Speaker: — LG03 includes most of those things that you would identify as going on in the Legislative Assembly. As you can see from the summary at the top of the category, this is your procedural support in the House; so this will be the whole Clerk's office, except for the Clerk herself, protocol, our sessional staff, our security that we have here, our legal counsel, our public information or visitor services, our library. So most

of the functions that go on within the Legislative Assembly fall into this category and the budget presented before you represents a decrease of \$126,000. Now there are within that decreases of even larger amounts, but also some increases, so I could just itemize the changes for you.

It is within this area that the grant to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is also allocated, and so that's reduced because there was a grant last year related to the conference that was held, which is not repeated of course, and a reduction of \$46,000 there in the grant to the CPA (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association). Also in equipment spent in broadcasting, air-conditioning in broadcasting, and our scanner system in security, there were \$89,000 in equipment purchases last year that aren't repeated so there's reductions of 89,000 there.

We're reducing our printing costs. If you want to go in on the Internet and then eliminating the printing costs, what are we saving? The answer is \$68,000 is the reduction in the printing costs. And from the renegotiations with SaskTel on our broadcast distribution, we reduced our costs there by \$58,000. The other side of the coin then is that of that \$58,000 reduced in our broadcasting distribution costs, we increased broadcasting costs by \$30,000. The large, large bulk of this was the hardware for those 30 new sites. Then there was also some minor equipment, things like a wireless mike for the presentations in the Legislative Assembly. But the large bulk of it is we were able to take the savings and translate that into taking the signal to more communities and therefore be able to take advantage of that renegotiation.

Also, we had an increase of \$31,000 in library operating costs and \$30,000 relocation costs, and that will be an ongoing cost to us and these will be largely related to the restoration project. And finally there is in this category, \$40,000 increase in cost that has to do with supplies, staffing, staffing increments and the cost-of-living adjustments for staff in this area. So that's the chuck and jiving, which comes to a total of \$126,000 decrease in total.

Mr. Toth: — One question in regards to broadcasting. You mentioned about hardware.

The Speaker: — Right.

Mr. Toth: — Are you saying basically that every time you pick up a new community — let's say I'm using the . . . Image Cable provides a lot of the cable certainly in our area — every time you would add a community that they've got to put more hardware in? Is there no way that Image Cable themselves, in dealing with them, that they wouldn't have access and have basically the hardware they would add without a major additional cost to provide the service to additional communities?

The Speaker: — The answer. It's a different hardware but it's about the same cost and it is — now we argue it in the layman's language here — but it is equipment that is necessary for them to send the signal in that community. I think the proper word to use here is a decoder, as the signals are available from the satellite but they've got to be pulled from the satellite. They call it a decoder, and I think the cost of the thing runs . . . it's

\$800-plus if I remember it correctly, but they need that decoder to pull the signal from the satellite in order to send it into the community. It doesn't go out system-wide.

Mr. Toth: — And so what you're saying is they need a decoder for every community.

The Speaker: — Yes.

Mr. Toth: — It wouldn't be something along the lines of, like when you apply for cable you get a decoder in your own home. If you want to add to, and then you just get for a minimal amount, an additional chip that allows or gives you access to the different stations that are available. It's a little more complicated than that is what you are saying.

The Speaker: — It's more complicated than that because there is a signal being sent from this building all the time and it goes up to the satellite and then they have to have the ability, each site, to pull that signal off the satellite. As technology exists at this point in time — and we don't see it changing in the foreseeable future — there will be for us, along with the notion of expanding access to the coverage is also . . . now these are one-time costs. We don't do that each year, so that that nearly \$30,000 spent this year doesn't have to be repeated in those communities. The decoder is there and will be used on an ongoing basis.

Mr. Toth: — I guess one further question is, with the advent of access to rural customers now by the small satellite dish, does that . . . I believe Image is even . . . Image, I believe, is making that available now. That would almost be even a more economical way of transmitting it because then you're not . . . by community. All of sudden it's available on the broad sense if you've got the little dish and you've got access to that cable channel, I would think or assume.

The Speaker: — In terms of those who are receiving their cable not directly from the satellite . . . it's called a digital receiver decoder, is needed to send the signal. But those who have the capacity to pull the signals directly off the satellite then will have the capacity to pull the legislative channel off there.

I think this is probably an area, Mr. Toth, where as technology advances it's . . . we may be within years of, a small number of years of technology reaching that point, but we're not what we'd call close to it at the moment. And for the next foreseeable few years into the future, it would seem that there is a direct relationship between our willingness to offer the decoder to having communities receive the legislative channel. But I think you're probably looking a little further ahead than that, and that's reasonable to assume. The time will come, within perhaps the next decade.

Mr. Toth: — I guess I raised the question because of the fact that so many communities . . . and if there's only one or two communities per constituency, there's a lot of constituents don't get . . . will not have access to . . . But if you're looking at a substantial cost per community to make the service available, it's going to become a fairly large expenditure in this Assembly budget to make sure every community's got access to it.

The Speaker: — That's right. Although it won't be accurate precisely to say that the legislative channel is carried to the 68 largest communities in Saskatchewan, that'll be approximately true. And so we are at that point too where we're now reaching a relatively small number of additional receivers of the legislative channel for each thousand-dollar expenditure. And so there is . . . in terms of cost-effectiveness, the point you make is exactly accurate.

And I think what we'll want to do is keep our eye on this as this advances. Our director of broadcasting services is current and up to date on this whole issue as possible. And I would think it would be our objective that at some point, if it's possible to have the signal go to all television viewers without the limitations of requiring the decoders, that that's something that we would consider very desirable to do — not there yet.

Subvote (LG03) agreed to.

Subvote (LG04)

The Chair: — We now move to (LG04), committees of the Legislative Assembly. We'll be only voting the 64,000 because the other remaining amount is statutory.

The Speaker: — Right, and on this, as the Chair has said, there is two parts to it.

You will note this is the committees of the Legislative Assembly, and this won't reflect the actual expenditures, obviously with the Crown Corporations Committee sitting with its current budgetary requirement, but what we have before us is the budgetary estimate.

The budgetary estimate, as you will see, in the part that you vote is actually a reduction of \$4,000. The statutory component of the (LG04) is an increase of \$3,000 for an overall reduction of \$1,000. And it's down. The reduction is because of miscellaneous decreases to committee support for transcribing and the like, based on comparison of previous years' actual expenses. But this one is likely to . . . at the end of the day, expenditures will be substantially different.

A Member: — Is 64,000 correct?

The Speaker: — That's right. The old \$64,000 question. There it is, right before us.

Subvote (LG04) agreed to.

Subvote (LG05)

The Chair: — On (LG05), payments to and allowances to individual members, it does not require a vote, but we certainly do allow for the opportunity of questions in this area to the Speaker.

The Speaker: — And just one quick comment. These are statutes you said, Mr. Chair. These will be largely related to the cost-of-living index applied to the allowances and the minor changes made in the travel allowances as approved by the Board of Internal Economy, and as the Chair said, these are statutory.

Subvote (LG06)

The Speaker: — And (LG06), caucus operations, Mr. Chair, again is statutory. It represents a reduction of \$17,000. This occurs because of three things. One is the increase of one number to Executive Council results in a reduction then to caucus funding. And the increase of two private members . . . or sorry, independent members then also has a consequent reduction in caucus funding. There will be some increase in their funding, but it's less than what is offset by the loss in caucus funds. So that's what explains the \$17,000 decrease there.

If there are no questions here, if I may just make a wrap-up comment, Mr. Chair, before . . .

The Chair: — Certainly, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: — I first of all want to say thanks to the officials from the Legislative Assembly for their assistance in preparing for today and to assist me in providing responses to your questions, and also, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to thank all members of the committee for the questions that you raised.

Just in summary, I think it is fair to say that after all is said and done, that the purpose in the system of the Legislative Assembly is to serve parliamentary democracy. And ultimately the test is, are the expenditures assisting parliamentary democracy, people's understanding of it, and members' abilities to do their jobs that they were elected to do.

I draw our attention to some things that I think we have been doing and continue to do that are significant in that regard, without expressing any view at all about the performances of MLAs, but having to do with the access to information for the people of Saskatchewan to be informed citizens within a democracy — our expansion of our television broadcast coverage, our expansion in the Internet access, our parliamentary outreach, the introduction of the Social Sciences Teachers Institute on Parliamentary Democracy.

And I think as well, initiatives to open the Chamber a little bit more, to have people of Saskatchewan see it as their Chamber, as their place; it has something to do with their lives. And particularly, in my view, as those things have happened for our younger people, for our teenagers, for our future citizens of Saskatchewan to better understand their system and to think positively about its role in their lives.

I think we've done a number of things over the last two or three years that have gone a long way to assist in the awareness of the public about what goes on in this building and its place in their lives and their ability to make their judgements for themselves without having to rely on the filter of media in order to be their primary, if not their only, source of understanding of what goes on in this place.

And I think that serves democracy well. And I simply want to commend the members of the committee and the members of the Board of Internal Economy and the members of the Legislative Assembly for supporting that because I think as parliamentarians in the late 1990s in this province, we are doing the right thing in order to have an accurate view of the system

of parliamentary democracy be available to the most important people in this province, and that's our citizens.

So for all of that, I want to say thanks again, Mr. Chairman, for the questions today and the support for the budget.

The Chair: — Before your officials run away, Mr. Speaker, we'll deal with this motion. We will still have to deal with the supplementary estimates and one more vote on the (LG03) regarding the library, so I don't want you to disappear quite right away till we deal with that one also.

Mr. Van Mulligen: — I have one question on the construct of the estimates, and that is whether or not we ought to be looking at a separate vote — although I'm not suggesting any change in the process or the procedure that we employ in approval or reporting — but a separate vote for those services that are not intended to support members of the Legislative Assembly but are intended to support services that are offered to the public but not of the Executive Council. That is to say, the Ombudsman, the Children's Advocate, probably the Freedom of Information and Privacy Commissioner, because I think it's somewhat misleading to the public to say we have a vote, legislation; the total is \$17 million, but not all of that is necessarily to do with the operation of the Legislative Assembly.

So whether Finance and your office might look at a separate vote for those, although I'm not suggesting any change . . .

The Speaker: — In the process.

Mr. Van Mulligen: — In the process.

The Speaker: — We'll take that under advisement. It certainly would not be a troubling factor to me. And I think there is some merit for a vote in the book, for those who pay attention to these things, to know what it is that it costs to support parliamentary democracy. Point well taken.

The Chair: — Okay. Thank you. I would ask members of the committee to consider this resolution and I would ask for a mover and a seconder. Or no seconder, I'm told.

Be it resolved that it be granted to Her Majesty that for 12 months ending March 31, 1999, the following sums — General Revenue Fund budgetary expenditures for Legislation — Legislative Assembly, \$5,126,000.

Do I have a mover? Any comments or questions by the committee on the motion before it?

Motion agreed to.

The Chair: — We'll now move on to a second motion that has to come forward. This is regarding ways and means. That the resolution no. 1:

Be it resolved that towards making good the supply granted to Her Majesty on the accounts of certain expenses of the public service for the fiscal year ending March 31, 1999, the sum of \$3,845,000 be granted out of the General Revenue Fund.

Do I have a mover? Mr. Toth.

Motion agreed to.

Supplementary Estimates 1997-98 Legislation Vote 21

The Chair: — Now we move on to supplementary estimates and I think all members have a copy of this, and this deals in the area of a supplementary estimate of (LG03) regarding the Legislative Library. Mr. Speaker, would you like to comment on that?

The Speaker: — This is what I referred to before as funding having been approved by the Board of Internal Economy that ended up not actually all being expended because the project wasn't able to be achieved before the end of the fiscal year. So this was a supplementary . . . or was a special warrant that had been considered in some detail by the Board of Internal Economy, the biggest factor of which was the Legislative Library shelving.

What I can report to you is that in total, after all the numbers were in, is that in fact the budget of this whole section together was 240 . . . the expenditure was \$245,000 under budget when we came to the end of the fiscal year.

The Chair: — Is there agreement for the supplementary estimates (LG03)?

Subvote (LGO3) agreed to.

The Chair: — Okay. Moving on then to another resolution to be brought forward then to the House:

Be it resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for the 12 months ending March 31, 1998 the following sums:

For the Legislative Assembly \$310,000.

Do I have a mover? Ms. Stanger. Agreement by the committee? The motion is carried.

The second regards supplementary estimates. No. 1:

Be it resolved that towards making good the supply granted to Her Majesty on account of certain expenses of the public service for the fiscal year ending March 31, 1998 the sum of \$310,000 be granted out of the General Revenue Fund.

Do I have a mover? Ms. Stanger. Do I have agreement by the committee? Thank you.

That completes the Assembly estimates before us. I want to thank the Speaker and his officials for bringing us through this detailed budget by the Legislative Assembly. And I think the things that were outlined today by the Speaker in terms of the direction that the Assembly is going, in terms of information to the public, is I think very important in light of the, I guess the cynicism out there in the public towards politicians.

I would like to suggest, if I could, a short break before we move on to the Ombudsman, if that would be appropriate by the members of the committee. Maybe we can convene here in 10 minutes, about 10:40.

The committee recessed for a period of time.

The Chair: — I call the meeting to order. I think our recess is over. Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: — Am I being called to order, Mr. Chairman? I get the feeling you had a special kind of pleasure there, Mr. Chairman.

Ombudsman and Children's Advocate

The Chair: — We will be moving now on to the portion of the subvote (LG07), which deals with the Ombudsman and the child advocate. The committee won't be voting on this specific subvote today because on Thursday we will have the child advocate here, and the vote is combined, so we then will have the members voted for the . . . to be presented to the Legislative Assembly. But today is an opportunity to meet with the Ombudsman and have a chance to ask questions and comment on the activities of the Ombudsman's work.

I would ask the Speaker, Mr. Hagel, to introduce the officials that are here today.

The Speaker: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to introduce the officials today and then turn it over to them for a response to your questions, as officials of the Legislative Assembly.

With us today are the Ombudsman herself, Barbara Tomkins, and the deputy ombudsman, Murray Knoll. You may recognize Mr. Knoll from having seen him here yesterday, along with his son Mark, who was one of Saskatchewan's Olympians. And so we're pleased to have Ms. Tomkins and Mr. Knoll here to respond to your questions related to the Office of the Ombudsman.

Would you like the Ombudsman to just give a brief description of the office and what she sees as the pertinent points and then go from there?

The Chair: — I was going to suggest that Ms. Tomkins could give us an overview of the office.

Ms. Tomkins: — Our office I think popularly is seen as an office which exists to receive and investigate complaints against the provincial government — and that's certainly what we do — we see our role as something much broader than that, and I think in recent years have put a particular focus on, or are trying to put a particular focus on the broader view, which is taking the narrow perspective and turning it a little bit.

A broader view of our role is that we exist to promote fairness in the provision of services by the provincial government, which is a wider mandate than to simply investigate complaints as they come.

We do investigate complaints as they come, and we'll continue

to do so. I can give you exact numbers, if you're interested, but last year . . . We tabled our annual report within the last few weeks and last year our number of complaints received and completed is virtually the same as the year before — a little difference, but not significant. So around 2,000 per year in jurisdiction complaints.

We also receive generally a roughly equivalent or higher number of complaints that are beyond our jurisdiction. Now we do not investigate those, but we will attempt to provide some kind of service to the person who is calling with those complaints; so they do involve our time and resources. In fact we're a pretty good referral agency. We know who's out there, who can help with just about everything.

In looking at the broader picture then, what we have started doing in the past year, especially since we were fortunate last year that this committee and the board allowed us funding for a half-time communications coordinator, which we had never had in the office before . . . We're focusing a more direct effort on not just public education about the office, which we're enhancing, but also public education about fairness and what fairness means in the context of an Ombudsman's consideration. And we're also interested in focusing some of that public education, a lot of the public education, on government and government employees — the hope being that when and if government better understands the criteria for fairness, they will develop policies and administer them in a way where complaints won't arise.

We're also interested in public education for the public in terms of how to deal with your own issues and your own problems, how to approach an agency when you have a complaint, in a very practical way — what to take, who to talk to, and so on — so that some people will be able to deal with their own issues, or at least attempt to deal with them, before coming to us.

So in that broader picture we see a much larger role, or a broader perspective. We see a larger role for public education and a more coordinated approach to public education than we've used in the past, I think. We now have, with our communications person on staff, a surprisingly long strategic plan or priorities chart, whatever you want to call it, of various publications, presentations, and different activities that the office could consider to achieve those goals. And we've narrowed that down to a list which we think reasonably, over a relatively long term, we can accomplish. We're talking two to three years.

And one of the disadvantages of having an expert in the field come into your office is of course, they know a great deal more than anyone else in the office. When we were doing it on an ad hoc basis, and at least to me, the list of things that we intend to undertake is much more focused, but also much longer and much broader than I certainly would have thought of on my own. So the communications person has been a tremendous help to us, and I have no doubt will be a greater help in the future.

And that public education effort, while it may assist in . . . and may in net result reduce the number of complaints on the one hand, in the sense that some complaints may not occur, it will also, I think, by simple communication, increase the number of

complaints that might not otherwise have got to us because people didn't previously know that we were there or what we did.

The highlight of last year for us was that it was the 25th anniversary of the office. Although we sort of cheated; we have a two-year 25th anniversary, so we're at the mid-point of our 25th anniversary right now. But the bulk of the celebrations were last year.

The highlight for me, and I think for all of the staff, and the Speaker alluded to it in his comments, was we hosted the national conference of Canadian ombudsmen in September. It was wonderful. Everything went very well, the people who came were very impressed with the city, with the province, with my office and my staff. Mr. Speaker gave his presentation about parliamentary democracy. Now here's a bunch of people who think they understand how democracy and the parliamentary system works, and I'll tell you it was without any doubt the highlight of the conference to all of the participants.

The government kindly proclaimed a week as Ombudsman Week, and during that week we had certainly increased media attention to what we normally would have, which is again worthwhile for our public education aspect. We undertook some events on our own as outreach to government and members of the legislature. We have decided, as a result of the success of that week, that we will continue that. With or without a formal proclamation, we're going to set aside a week a year, only we decided, having had the two-year anniversary, we are now going to move it to September, which is a little bit flimsy since the anniversary is actually in May, but there's a whole bunch of reasons why it works better to do it in September, just moving the birthday up a little ways.

The Speaker: — 25 and a half years.

Ms. Tomkins: — That's right. That's what it'll be. It'll work fine on years when there's no anniversary to count.

As to actual numbers of complaints, as I indicated, last year the numbers were very similar to the year before, which are both near-record numbers. Our numbers so far this year from January to April are quite substantially higher than for an equivalent period last year. Now our complaints don't come in a level stream so it could be we're getting a heavy end at this stage and it'll level off and balance out later on. Obviously we can't predict that.

Looking at the numbers that we were looking at in Mr. Knoll's projections, in one sense it's very encouraging, in another sense it's rather terrifying if the projections come true because we're not used to dealing with numbers of that sort. But I suspect it will level off, but I have no reason to suspect that the workload will decrease. I suspect it will increase over the course of the next year.

In terms of our budget submission to the Board of Internal Economy, you've probably noticed we were approved at the board by . . . the board approved for us a substantial increase in our budget. I recognize that it is substantial.

The total increase to my budget that was approved at the Board

of Internal Economy was \$256,000. I would like to note that of that, approximately \$110,000, slightly over 110, is what we think our one-time expense is, what were approved by the board as expenses to be reviewed again at the next board meeting. And frankly with the hope that we wouldn't even be submitting for them again.

That money relates largely to the board's approving for us two temporary investigators to assist us in clearing up a backlog which has built over many years and which we are hopeful can be cleared up within the space of about a year, but with no commitment that we can or we can't. We wanted the ability to look at it at the end of the year and the board agreed with us in that respect.

But I'm hopeful that \$110,000 will not be requested next year, and if it is, I would be very surprised if we would be requesting all of it for next year. We might want to continue those temporaries for another few months. I think it's extremely unlikely we'd be asking for the full amount.

The balance of the increase which the board approved relates to salary increases, which last year, given our relatively small staff, were fairly substantial. We had our investigators, of whom there are five, reclassified to a higher level by the Public Service Commission and consequent increases in salary. We had complaints analysts reclassified and a consequent increase in salary.

And the other proportion of the increase relates, as I alluded to, to the temporary investigators, to an increase in the communications budget itself which we had allocated far too small. We had allocated \$4,000, which I think you know better than we do, doesn't buy you a pamphlet let alone a reasonable program. So we asked for and were approved for a \$15,000 increase to the communications budget.

And then the other major increase that was approved was my submission for two permanent positions, which in the submission to the Board of Internal Economy I referred to as resolution facilitators. As we have discussed how these positions might work and what they might do, I'm coming to call them intervention officers in my mind. But whatever we call them, what we are hoping, that these positions, and they're not at the . . . the temporaries started early in May; the resolution facilitators haven't yet been hired. The advertising is in process.

What we have done is had some fairly extensive discussions with all of the staff who are involved in investigations work and in supervising that, airing ideas as to how these people might work, what they might do and what best fits within the system. And of course what we've learned is everyone has many ideas, some of which are contradictory, and we're still refining exactly how we see these people fitting into our process. But what we're hopeful that they will be able to do is intervene earlier in disputes, intervene in different kinds of disputes than we now would necessarily take a dispute resolution approach to, and also simply assist in the workload at the analysts' desks, which is where all of the incoming complaints come.

There are a number of things these people could do, and I think the realistic view is that we're going to work it out; we're going

to have a plan, but it will evolve as the positions operate, and that quite possibly what we see these people doing in a year or two down the road may be very different from what I project now that they'll be doing.

But that makes up those temporary positions; the resolution facilitator positions make up the vast majority of the increase that was approved by the board.

Ms. Stanger: — Thank you very much. I just want to say to Ms. Tomkins and Mr. Knoll, thank you very much for the work that you do; we appreciate it. And my office appreciates the work that you do as a legislator.

I just have two questions. The first one is a little lengthy and the second one isn't as lengthy.

While I believe in your mandate to communicate to the public as to what fairness is and what their rights are and what they should expect, I also want to ask if you convey to the people that with fairness and rights comes responsibilities. I think this is integral in the fact of advising people of rights and fairness, is also when they have these, as to what their responsibilities are in a democratic system. I find in my office when folks come, sometimes they're cognizant of what they perceive as fairness and rights, but they're not cognizant as to what their responsibility is. And I would feel a lot of comfort, even though I agree that people should know what their rights and what fairness is and what they should expect from a democratic system . . . I would want our officers to be conveying what some of the responsibilities are in a democratic system also.

And my next question is, do you categorize your complaints into subject areas? Like I mean, do you say I have this many consumer complaints, this many complaints was say the taxation system, education, health, or do you do it that way or how do you categorize your complaints or people asking questions of your office.

Ms. Tomkins: — I'll do your last question first because it's easier. The complaints that are within our jurisdiction are categorised by departments, board, commission, corporation, the government agency that the complaint is against.

Ms. Stanger: — Oh, I see.

Ms. Tomkins: — Complaints received that are not against government, that are beyond our jurisdiction, we record by category: consumer, federal government, municipal. They're quite broad categories. I think there's eight or ten. But they're categorized in the kind of way that you refer to, whereas the one, the complaints that are in our jurisdiction, are recorded and reported by department.

Ms. Stanger: — So it's in the back of the report, annual report?

Ms. Tomkins: — Yes.

Mr. Knoll: — Annual report, yes.

Ms. Stanger: — So I can check in there.

Ms. Tomkins: — Yes.

Mr. Knoll: — Page 38.

Ms. Stanger: — Thank you very much. I'll put that down.

Ms. Tomkins: — As to your earlier question, I think we do what you're alluding to, although perhaps not in the way that you allude to it. I'm not sure. I certainly agree with you that we all have responsibilities living in a parliamentary democracy or in any kind of a system, and that rights are balanced by responsibilities in some measure.

When we are considering a complaint, this is a very common consideration for us. There are certainly cases where someone in my mind in fact is being unreasonable. I was considering something recently where government was alleged to have done or neglected to do something and that this was unfair, whereas the person who brought the complaint had themselves done or not done the exact same thing. And the position they were taking in effect was it's no problem that I didn't do that, but they should be responsible because they didn't do that.

And so we're not talking about rights and responsibilities in a formal public ed sense, but for example, in dealing with that complaint, we have said to the person involved, no, we don't think you were treated unfairly. We think it was an oversight by government, as it was an oversight by you. Had you done what you're saying you wish they had done, it would have brought it to government's attention. They would have immediately taken care of it. There was no suggestion the government didn't wish to do what this person was asking. It simply got missed.

And so this question of balancing of responsibilities of government and responsibilities of individuals, and rights of individuals and rights of government, is a factor directly or subtly in probably every complaint or just about every complaint that we look at.

And the thing that I do try to emphasize when I speak about our office is that in my office and in virtually every Ombudsman's office in the world — and I'm not sure why this is — but in virtually every office, about 75 per cent of the complaints which are brought to you are not substantiated. And in many ways that's the most important thing for a government to know and for the public to know. And each of those people — whether it's substantiated or not substantiated — each of those people, we explain to them why: what we've learned, on what basis we've concluded that they weren't treated unfairly, and sometimes that involves a little bit of a slap on the wrist for them, that they had a role, that they had responsibilities that they didn't carry out that played a part in how they ended up in the circumstances they're in.

So I think the office is very aware of public responsibilities, and it may come about in a different way than a sort of public lecture about rights and responsibilities. But it's certainly a factor in our work. That was a very long answer, I'm sorry.

Ms. Stanger: — No, it was very interesting to me, because I have been having this question raised with . . . I'm an educator in my previous life, and I am having this raised more and more by educators, colleagues of mine, just this past weekend, saying that while it seems to them that the kids that they are teaching in high school seem to understand what their rights are, they do

not seem to understand what their responsibilities are. And they are asking of me what, you know, what we can do. There's no doubt in my mind that you would do that. But I just wanted it on the public record to show that we are — you, we, other agencies — trying to promote this. I guess I'm asking you, because I respect the word Ombudsman so much, is how we as a society — that's an ominous question maybe — can educate people so that we have a better system. It's very worrisome to educators out there. If you have any comment, I'd sure appreciate it.

Ms. Tomkins: — I certainly don't disagree that we all as citizens have rights and responsibilities. I think the vast majority of us, of every age, take our responsibilities very seriously. I don't wish to diminish the concern that some people don't; but I don't want us to lose sight of the fact that most people do. And I think that if there is to be an effort to educate about responsibilities, it should be clearly focused or directed or reported as clearly relating to a segment of the population, but not as being of general application. I'm very concerned with a tendency which I think we all have to tar everyone with the same brush, and it's rarely, where we're talking about negative things in any aspect of the population, it's rarely warranted. I don't know if it's ever warranted.

Ms. Stanger: — I think that's an excellent observation, that while you're looking for solutions for problems that you perceive, you must remember the other people that aren't part of the problem, which are the majority.

Ms. Tomkins: — The vast majority.

Ms. Stanger: — Yes. So that's a good point to raise. Thank you very much. I just wanted your sort of ideas on this.

Ms. Tomkins: — Thank you.

Mr. Toth: — Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. One question in particular with the . . . when a complaint is raised with your office, and you've investigated the complaint, what role does your office have then if there is . . . if the complaint is substantiated, in making sure that the complaint is addressed, that the issue brought forward is certainly addressed and correction is made if correction is necessary?

Ms. Tomkins: — The role that we have is the same as any Ombudsman, and it's one that surprises a number of people, but it's fundamental to who we are and why it works. I have, and no Ombudsman has, an ability to require government to correct its mistakes, or to require them to take any action. So that when we've investigated a complaint — concluded that someone was treated unfairly or wrongly or unreasonably or whichever term — what I am authorized to do is recommend to government. I advise them of the details of the investigation, what we learned, of my conclusions and how I reached those conclusions, and then I am authorized to make recommendation.

I can make recommendations virtually limitless; there is . . . it's very broad, the nature of recommendations we can make. But it may be a recommendation to address a specific case as simple as recommending the government reimburse somebody some money; it may be recommending that they change a policy so that situations don't recur; it may be both. There is quite a

breadth of what we can recommend.

We start at the level of the president of a corporation, or the deputy minister — roughly the equivalent of permanent head, I think is the PSC (Public Service Commission) terminology. That's roughly where we start. And there's generally discussion either literally in a meeting or via communication, or by mail. There'll be a discussion with the deputy coming back and saying — on a good day — I think you're absolutely right; and on other days, I think you've misunderstood, or have you considered it this way; and we have a discussion.

If at the end of that discussion the deputy or the president, or whomever I'm dealing with, still won't accept the recommendation and hasn't convinced me to change the recommendation or remove the recommendation, which does occasionally happen as a result of those discussions — we can be persuaded that we've missed something or we have missed something on occasions — then I have the choice if I wish to do a report to a minister, which would be similar to the report to the deputy in the sense that it would include details of the investigation and the conclusions, and how we got there and what we recommended, and would include in addition an explanation what the deputy's response to that was; provide that to the minister for his consideration and response.

If he chooses not to accept the recommendation I may table a special report in the House. I can table a report of just one individual case — although that's rarely done but it can be done. Or I can include that case in the annual report as a way of laying it before all the members of the House for their consideration, at which point the members can then pursue anything that's in the annual report.

Mr. Toth: — The reason I raised that is that I think it's your office, if I'm not mistaken, that lists sometimes a list of a number of the areas that you've dealt with; the complaints been brought forward . . . or am I dealing with a different one. But I know that, I guess what I'm trying to say is, if at the end of the day you really don't have any authority or ability, as it seems to me there's been different scenarios I've read where it's like you have been not beating your head against the wall; when issues have been raised with your office, you have done a thorough investigation.

And just a few moments ago you mentioned about the fact that you do, I think you used the term, "slap on the wrist," if someone comes to you with a complaint, but at the same time and through your investigation, you find that the complainant may not really have a major complaint — there were scenarios that they didn't deal with themselves. Whereas on the other hand, when a complaint was brought forward and you find that yes, there is a legitimate complaint here, it must be frustrating if you make recommendations and those recommendations are just treated like water running off a duck's back. And for the person who has raised the complaint, I guess on the basis of that individual it's got to be frustrating, because I'm sure that the investigative process takes time and that indeed maybe you're looking at a year or two years before you finally come up with a recommendation and only to find that no heed is given to the recommendations.

So I guess the question that I would ask of you is, what role or

what avenue you would see your office pursuing to indeed give you the authority to have, if you will, some authority whatsoever to indeed follow through and make sure that when you've done all this extensive work, that indeed the complaint is addressed at the end of the day versus your office saying, we've investigated, here's what we've found, here's what we'd recommend, and then that's where you end up stopping because that's as far as you can go.

Ms. Tomkins: — I wouldn't say that I have ever had a recommendation that at least as was the response was presented to me was treated as water off a duck's back. I've had recommendations which were not accepted, but I think — and hope after thoughtful consideration — I think that our recommendations are considered seriously and thoughtfully.

Our recommendations are accepted about 80 per cent of the time. And that's, you know, we might recommend you do this and the department involved does this much — I'll call that accepted. You know there's always going to be those. But in general there's acceptance about 80 per cent of the time.

I also won't deny there's frustration for exactly the reasons you say. We've done a lot of work; in many cases I firmly believe have a far better perspective on the situation we're looking at than anyone else on the government side or the complainant side, because we've got all the information and neither of them do. We're an objective body.

In my mind I suspect I put a little quotation on the cover of the annual report, actually quoting myself, which was a bit narcissistic, but it's . . . What I see our office as, is in effect a standing forum for public inquiry. As governments and various organizations will appoint an independent third party to investigate and make recommendations to them, our office exists to investigate recommendations to government on any issue the public brings to its attention.

You ask what steps I was taking to be able to compel government to act. Frankly none. If I were able to compel government to accept my recommendations, I would cease to be an Ombudsman. It's an inherent part of being an Ombudsman that you can't compel, that you recommend.

And the reason for that is, because I wasn't elected, I am perceived, I hope, as objective. I am perceived, I hope, as competent, interested, and all those good things. But at the end of the day, what I do is investigate the government's administration of its policies, practices. And if I conclude that government is acting in a manner which is not fair, and I bring that to the attention of government, that an independent third party after investigation has concluded that what you are doing is not fair, it then falls to government to either defend the unfairness or to correct it.

And who is ultimately responsible for the treatment, the dealings with the public by government, I'm afraid is you folks, not me. And it to me is absolutely right that it's elected people that bear that ultimate accountability and I'm not an elected person. They're not my policies. They're not my processes. I think that our recommendations and our comments should be given great weight because of who we are, but I don't seek to be able to compel government to accept my recommendations. I

would like to compel them to give them serious consideration and I think they do do that.

Mr. Toth: — I guess a further question would be, how many have . . . or I should say . . . I guess maybe I could word it this way: have you seen or had an increase in complaints in the area of health? What would be the percentage . . . or do you get complaints regarding Workers' Compensation Board as well?

Ms. Tomkins: — Workers' Compensation Board always is a — if I can just be excused, I'm going to grab my report — Worker's Compensation is always a major contributor to our case-load, and likely always will be. I don't think it necessarily reflects badly on someone or on a department to always be . . . Worker's Compensation makes decisions daily that have a real, substantial impact on people. It's not surprising that they're going to receive more complaints than another department. I think they increased last year against Worker's Compensation. In 1996 we received 158 complaints against Worker's Compensation. In 1997 it was 170.

Health is actually a harder one for me to answer easily because we receive complaints against different health boards and then the Department of Health. And I don't have handy, although I could certainly total them up for you fairly quickly if you want, the total of those. I suspect they have increased. I suspect they've increased against health boards. I should check this before I say this. Just doing a quick check, it would appear they have increased against health boards, but the numbers are not huge. Oh, I'm sorry, Murray's adding and saying that they are the same between '96 and '97.

I expect — and I'm again just more working on gut feeling than anything scientific — I expect health board complaints will continue to grow. I think there's a learning curve for us and for the public in learning that we have jurisdiction for health boards. Our jurisdiction of agencies that aren't pure government agencies comes out of a definition within the legislation. When the composition of the health boards changes I believe we will retain jurisdiction.

The health boards also have established, and I commend them for this, each health district has established a — for want of a better expression — a formalized complaints process within the health district. So there is an identifiable place where people who have complaints, concerns, may go, and an identifiable process which it follows, including appeals and so on within the organization, as for example Worker's Compensation obviously has a system of appeals, and it may be, and it's quite likely, that when you have an appeals process, almost invariably it requires then that situations be reconsidered and considered and resolutions are reached.

So that system that's set up within the health districts probably is achieving a number of resolutions, so the complaints don't end up coming to my office because another of the fundamentals of the Ombudsman is that an ombudsman cannot get involved with the complaint generally unless all available mechanisms for appeal and resolution have been considered.

So for example, if someone calls this morning with a complaint against a health board, I will and must require in most cases — there's always an iffy thing — that they take their complaint to

the health board first through their process. Then if they're dissatisfied at the end, we take it back.

Mr. Toth: — Well I guess I would have to say I feel very strongly that you need to have a body outside. Like I think it's appropriate that health boards have a mechanism that people can go to if they've got a concern — whether it's a health board or whether it's Workers' Compensation or any agency. I think at the end of the day if you feel, an individual feels that their concerns haven't been addressed to what they would understand or their satisfaction, that they have a body that they can go to outside of that area that will look at it more objectively, because regardless of how you set it up — health boards — people will still look at that appeal mechanism as being manipulated or part of or run by the health district board, even though its appeal process is there. They will not view it as being an agency that they will see it as viewing the complaint very objectively.

And so I think that's why it's imperative that, whether it's your office or whatever office, that there is that perceived independent body that individuals can approach with compliance if they feel they haven't had their complaints addressed appropriately from within. And I can see that certainly from Workers' Compensation. I can certainly see some of the problems arise there.

So while I commend boards and suggest that every agency should have that process, there are times when you may not be able to . . . or where individuals may not have felt that their complaint was addressed to their satisfaction, that they can then move to what they would deem as being independent and/or ask for an investigation.

And while they may not receive what they were looking for, they can say that, well we certainly had the privilege of going to a body that was totally removed from a particular . . . that looked at it objectively. And so I think that's important. And I think, even in your area, in your role as an ombudsman, that that be perceived out there. So I thank you for that.

One final question. This goes to Mr. Knoll so it's a little more personal. What relation are you to Arden Knoll? And how's he doing on the golf field?

Mr. Knoll: — None at all. If you'd ever seen me golf, you'd know why. I'm afraid I don't know him.

Ms. Tomkins: — But Mark's a good golfer. Is he not?

Mr. Knoll: — No, he's even worse than me.

Ms. Tomkins: — But a much better skater.

Mr. Toth: — Anyway, thank you so much.

The Chair: — Well this brings to an end the area dealing with the Ombudsman to this committee here today. I want to thank the Ombudsman and her official for coming down today to review and highlight the activities of the Ombudsman. And again, thank you today for coming to the committee.

Ms. Tomkins: — I'd like to thank the members for their time and for their questions. Thank you.

The Chair: — I want to again thank the members for their participation today in the subjects that we've been dealing with, and I want to remind them that we'll be meeting on Thursday at 9 a.m. in Room 10. And we'll be dealing with the child advocate that morning and also the Provincial Auditor.

The committee adjourned at 11:19 a.m.