

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Appointment and Composition of the Committee

The Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly provide for the appointment of an all-party Standing Committee on Public Accounts. The Committee is appointed for the duration of the Parliament (that is, the period from the opening of the first session immediately following a general election to the end of a government's term and the calling of another election).

The membership of the Committee reflects proportionately the representation of parties in the Legislative Assembly. All members except the Chair are entitled to vote on motions; the Chair may vote only to break a tie.

In accordance with the Standing Orders, a Standing Committee on Public Accounts was appointed on December 10, 2007, for the duration of the 39th Parliament. The membership of the Committee when the House adjourned for the summer recess on June 18, 2008, was as follows:

Norm Sterling, Chair, Progressive Conservative
Jerry Ouellette, Vice-chair, Progressive Conservative
Laura Albanese, Liberal
Ernie Hardeman, Progressive Conservative
Andrea Horwath, New Democrat

Phil McNeely, Liberal

Liz Sandals, Liberal

Maria Van Bommel, Liberal

David Zimmer, Liberal

Role of the Committee

The Committee examines, assesses, and reports to the Legislative Assembly on a number of issues, including the economy and efficiency of government operations; the effectiveness of programs in achieving their objectives; controls over assets, expenditures, and the assessment and collection of revenues; and the reliability and appropriateness of information in the Public Accounts.

In fulfilling this role, pursuant to its terms of reference in the Standing Orders of the Assembly, the Committee reviews the Auditor General's Annual Report and the Public Accounts, holds a number of hearings throughout the year, and reports to the Legislative Assembly its observations, opinions, and recommendations. Under the Standing Orders, the Auditor General's Annual Reports and the Public Accounts are deemed to have been permanently referred to the Committee as they become available.

In addition, under sections 16 and 17 of the *Auditor General Act*, the Committee may request the

Auditor General to undertake a special assignment in an area of interest to the Committee.

AUDITOR GENERAL'S ADVISORY ROLE WITH THE COMMITTEE

In accordance with section 16 of the *Auditor General Act*, the Auditor General and senior staff attend committee meetings to assist the Committee in its review and hearings related to the Auditor General's Annual Report and the Public Accounts.

Committee Procedures and Operations

GENERAL

The Committee meets weekly when the Legislative Assembly is sitting; with the approval of the House, it may also meet at any time when the Legislative Assembly is not sitting. All meetings are open to the public with the exception of those dealing with the setting of the Committee's agenda and the preparation of committee reports. All public committee proceedings are recorded in Hansard (the official verbatim report of debates in the House, speeches, other proceedings in the Legislative Assembly, and all open-session sittings of standing and select committees).

The Committee selects matters from the Auditor General's Annual Report for hearings. These matters typically relate to the Auditor General's value-for-money audit work. The Auditor General, along with the Committee's researcher, briefs the Committee on these matters, and the Committee then requests senior officials from the auditee to appear and respond to questions at the hearings. Since the Auditor General's Annual Report deals with operational, administrative, and financial rather than policy matters, ministers rarely attend. Once the hearings are completed, the Committee reports its comments and recommendations to the Legislative Assembly.

The Committee also follows up on when and how the ministries, Crown agencies, and organizations in the broader public sector not selected for hearings will address the concerns raised in the Auditor General's Annual Report. This process enables each auditee to update the Committee on what it has done in response to the Auditor General's recommendations since the completion of the audit.

MEETINGS HELD

The Committee met 15 times during the December 2007–September 2008 period to review the following sections from the Auditor General's *2007 Annual Report* and to write reports, where warranted, for subsequent tabling in the Legislative Assembly:

- Archives of Ontario and Information Storage and Retrieval Services;
- Centre of Forensic Sciences;
- Fish and Wildlife Program;
- Hazardous Waste Management;
- Hospitals—Management and Use of Surgical Facilities;
- Long-term-care Homes—Medication Management;
- Ontario Sex Offender Registry;
- Outbreak Preparedness and Management; and
- Universities—Management of Facilities.

REPORTS OF THE COMMITTEE

The Committee issues its reports to the Legislative Assembly. These reports summarize the information reviewed by the Committee during its meetings, as well as make comments and recommendations.

All committee reports are available through the Clerk of the Committee (or online at www.ontla.on.ca), thus providing the public with full access to the findings and recommendations of the Committee.

After the Committee tables a report in the Legislative Assembly, it requests that ministries or agencies respond to each recommendation either within 120 days or within a time frame stipulated by the Committee.

During the period from December 2007 to September 2008, the Committee submitted the following reports to the Legislative Assembly:

- *Centre of Forensic Sciences;*
- *Community Colleges—Acquisition of Goods and Services;*
- *Hydro One Inc.—Acquisition of Goods and Services;*
- *Ontario Realty Corporation—Real Estate and Accommodation Services;* and
- *School Boards—Acquisition of Goods and Services.*

FOLLOW-UP ON RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY THE COMMITTEE

The Clerk of the Committee is responsible for following up on the actions taken by ministries, agencies, and organizations in the broader public sector in response to the Committee's recommendations. The Office of the Auditor General reviews responses from ministries and agencies and, in subsequent audits, follows up on the actions reported.

COMMITTEE MOTION TO CONSIDER ISSUING SPECIAL REPORT

On June 11, 2008, the Committee passed the following motion:

That, following the Auditor General's completion of his value-for-money audit of the prevention and control of hospital-acquired infections, including *C. difficile* in the selected hospitals, if, in the Auditor General's opinion, his recommendations could have a significant and timely impact on public health, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts of the Legislative

Assembly of Ontario calls on the Auditor General to consider using the discretion outlined in section 12(1) of the *Auditor General Act* to release that chapter of his Annual Report in a special report to the Speaker; and that, prior to the tabling of this report with the Committee, the Auditor General may inform the Deputy Ministry of Health of his opinions, observations, or recommendations.

Because of this motion by the Committee, as well as the recent public interest in *C. difficile* infections, the Auditor General decided that the results of the audit of hospital-acquired infections should not be deferred until his *2008 Annual Report*. Accordingly, he submitted a special report entitled *Prevention and Control of Hospital-acquired Infections* to the Speaker of the House on September 29, 2008.

OTHER COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees and Visiting Delegations

The Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees (CCPAC) consists of delegates from federal, provincial, and territorial public accounts committees from across Canada. CCPAC meets at the same time and place as the Canadian Council of Legislative Auditors (CCOLA) so that issues of mutual interest can be discussed. The 29th annual meeting of CCPAC was hosted by the Yukon and was held in Whitehorse from September 7 to 9, 2008.

In April 2008, the Committee received a delegation representing the National People's Congress, Republic of China.