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**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

A-45

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

A-45

**Standing Committee on
Government Agencies**

Intended appointments

1st Session
42nd Parliament
Tuesday 20 April 2021

**Comité permanent des
organismes gouvernementaux**

Nominations prévues

1^{re} session
42^e législature
Mardi 20 avril 2021

Chair: Gilles Bisson
Clerk: Julia Douglas

Président : Gilles Bisson
Greffière : Julia Douglas

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Tuesday 20 April 2021

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES ORGANISMES GOUVERNEMENTAUX

Mardi 20 avril 2021

The committee met at 0900 in committee room 2 and by video conference.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good morning. I call this meeting to order. We are meeting to conduct a review of intended appointments. We have the following member in the room: MPP Bouma. The following members are participating remotely: MPP Stiles, MPP Hogarth, MPP Sabawy, MPP Norm Miller, MPP Gates, MPP Bisson and MPP Sandhu.

We also have MPP Anand, who just joined us. MPP Anand, can you confirm that you are the honourable member and your presence, please? Where are you?

Mr. Deepak Anand: This is Deepak Anand, member of provincial Parliament for Mississauga–Malton, and I am calling from Mississauga.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you.

We are also joined by staff from legislative research, Hansard, and broadcast and recording.

To make sure that everyone can understand what is going on, it is important that all participants speak slowly and clearly. Please wait until I recognize you before starting to speak. Since it could take a little time for your audio and video to come up after I recognize you, please take a brief pause before beginning.

As always, all comments by members and witnesses should go through the Chair.

We will now move to our review of intended appointments. Yes, MPP Stiles? Go ahead.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to again raise my concern and the concern of the opposition that this meeting is not being broadcast in any sense to the public. We have so many tools available to us. We are meeting by Zoom right now. This could be posted as a live link very safely in any number of formats, including on social media. I would like to ask the Chair, please, if we can task staff with ensuring that this meeting is somehow posted and able to be viewed live.

As it stands right now, we don't have media able to watch, we don't have the public able to watch. Of all the things I think the public should be able to participate in in some respect, at least to view what we are asking and get a chance to get to know these appointees—it's public appointments. This government has had a shameful record of appointing donors and failed Conservative candidates. This is the third week, maybe, or the second week I've raised it, at least. I really think that this needs to be

addressed. So I would respectfully ask that the Chair or the steering committee come back with a plan.

We should be going live next week. There is absolutely no excuse for this. People are doing it in every respect and in all Parliaments, but somehow, here in Ontario, this government is incapable, seemingly, of making these meetings accessible to the public.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bisson.

Mr. Gilles Bisson: I would like to move a motion that this meeting be streamed live and that the Clerk disconnect everybody and bring everybody back so that it could be made live.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): I need to confer with the Clerk, and I will get back to you.

Interjection.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): After conferring with the Clerk, the advice I got is that, first of all, the broadcasting department is working on bringing future live broadcasting from this room, because there is an accessibility problem in this room, and they are not able to release the footage currently, because it is not up to their standards. Any member can record the meeting and release it after the meeting.

Interjection.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): In regard to releasing the video recorded by the members, it has to be agreed upon with the rest of the committee members.

MPP Bouma, I saw that you raised your hand. Do you want to continue the debate or participate in the debate?

Mr. Will Bouma: The Clerk clarified for you. That was going to be my point of order.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Any other comments, debate? MPP Bisson.

Mr. Gilles Bisson: I just want to make sure that people understand: My motion is that we disconnect, we come back so that the Zoom can be made available for members, and in the future that it be made available on broadcast and recording, but at the very least—and we have the right to use these videos. These are not closed meetings, so we don't need the permission of the goddamn committee—pardon the language—to be able to rebroadcast this particular committee.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We will take note of your comments, and I will discuss it with broadcasting for future consideration. Thank you. MPP—

Interjection.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bisson, you're free to make any motion, but I kindly ask you to be more careful with the language you use during the official proceedings of the committee.

MPP Bouma.

Mr. Will Bouma: Point of order, through you, Chair: I would like you to ask the member to withdraw.

Interjection.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Mr. Bisson, you raised your hand. Do you have any additional comment?

Mr. Gilles Bisson: I made a correction, and I apologized immediately when I made that comment.

But my point is, I moved a motion that, in this particular committee, we disconnect Zoom and we reconnect so that it can be rebroadcast. We do not need the permission of the committee in order to use the broadcast, because this committee is open; it's not in closed session—just as a point of clarification at the end.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Stiles, you had a comment?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Yes. Mr. Chair, I believe we have to vote on this motion first, first of all. Secondly, I'd like to speak in favour of the motion. I was in a Zoom town hall last night with 1,000 people on, and then because we couldn't accommodate the other 1,000 people who wanted to join, they watched via a live link.

There are many opportunities here, and I think it's really unconscionable that we are continuing to meet like this, in closed—and frankly, the comments of Chair regarding a need for us to receive [*inaudible*] members of this committee, as MPP Bisson has made clear, is—I would just challenge that point. This is supposed to be a public meeting. The fact that it is happening the way it is right now is really a disservice to the people of this province. This is a committee that should be viewed. I would challenge, as well, the idea that we have to go through the broadcast and recording service. This can easily be made public in many different respects, and you can even have closed captioning in different languages. People are doing this every day across this province. Why can't this government figure it out?

So I speak in favour of this motion, and I believe we have to vote on this motion as—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bouma.
0910

Mr. Will Bouma: Point of order, Mr. Chair. As the Clerk has explained, the technology is not in this room yet at this point, but it's being explored to be able to broadcast these meetings. Therefore, the motion should be ruled out of order. And as the member knows, the Hansard is available to anyone; this is not a closed meeting. So until that becomes possible to broadcast, that motion is out of order.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Yes, MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Mr. Chair, with due respect, and speaking again to the motion: What is this archaic interpretation of broadcast that Mr. Bouma, respectfully, comes up with? We are right now meeting in Zoom. This

could be very easily live-linked to any—this is absurd. People could be watching this right now. In fact, that's how most people are accessing media right now. Most people in this province are joining work, are joining meetings, are joining conferences, are holding conventions this way.

To me, this is just an opportunity for the government to once again shut the public out of these meetings, because they don't want the public to see the appointments they're making that are extraordinarily partisan, generally.

But they also do a disservice, frankly, to all of the appointees, even the appointees who come through who have a lot to contribute. They also do a disservice to those people, because this is the opportunity where there's transparency and accountability.

So, Mr. Chair, again, I would urge everybody to please support this motion. It looks very bad on the government, actually. We'll continue to make it an issue. It would be very easy and straightforward to do this, and the government continues to try to make out like it's some kind of deep technological issue. That's absurd. Every other Parliament is doing this. Why can't we? There's no excuse.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Stiles and MPP Bisson, thank you very much for your comments, and MPP Bouma, thank you for participating in the debate.

I just want to reiterate the initial advice I got from broadcasting. This is a technical issue. This is an accessibility issue. It is not a political issue. I am not a technical expert on audiovisual or any other technical matters, and I'd guess neither one of the committee members are experts on these technical aspects. Therefore, I have to take the advice of the broadcasting department and go with their advice.

The motion of Mr. Bisson is in order and I am going to put the question—what is going to happen now is I'm going to put the question of Mr. Bisson's motion. If it carries, in that case I have to recess this meeting, disconnect Zoom, and we have to reconvene or restart again so that you have the opportunity to record the meeting. After that, it will be up to each member to decide how they want to use it.

MPP Sandhu.

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: We had the same issue at the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs the other day, but I believe the legislative channel was working. So I just want to confirm that—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Sandhu, the advice I got from the Clerk is that that was a different issue.

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: Thank you—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Do you want to continue, MPP Sandhu? Okay, thank you.

MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I would like to make sure this is a recorded vote, please.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Are the members ready to vote? Yes? Okay, we will start the roll call. The Clerk will call your name, and please confirm your answer—

Interjection.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay.

Ayes

Bisson, Gates, Stiles.

Nays

Anand, Bouma, Hogarth, Norman Miller, Sabawy, Sandhu.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): The motion is lost.

Yes, MPP Bisson?

Mr. Gilles Bisson: I have a second motion. My motion is that from this point forward, we always enact Zoom so that it can be recorded and used by members afterwards. I want a recorded vote.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): All of us heard MPP Bisson's second motion. Any discussion? Any debate on the motion?

I'm going to put the question. All in favour of—oh, sorry. MPP Stiles, you have a point of order?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Yes. I'd like to have a recorded vote, please.

Ayes

Bisson, Gates, Stiles.

Nays

Anand, Bouma, Hogarth, Norman Miller, Sabawy, Sandhu.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Motion lost. MPP Bisson.

Mr. Gilles Bisson: I'm disappointed in the outcome.

The Select Committee on Emergency Management found itself in a similar situation when we were unable to broadcast through broadcast services. In that particular committee, the members, including the government, voted with us, the opposition, in order to reset the meeting so that Zoom could be rebroadcast.

The fact that we're not rebroadcasting what are public appointments speaks volumes to what the government's intent is on these appointments. Quite frankly, it's scandalous that you would not allow this to be broadcast, considering this is a public meeting that anybody who could get into the building—if it wasn't for COVID-19—would be able to come into, sit and watch these proceedings in the committee room; they can't because the building is closed down, for good reason. And we're not allowing them to participate by Zoom. I think this is shameful.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Yes, I would like to add my—disappointment, I guess, is a nice way to put it—that the government members would sit here and not even allow this to be recorded.

This shouldn't even be a matter of debate. As MPP Bisson already mentioned, this is a public committee. This is basically using the pandemic as an excuse to not share what's going on in this committee, which is an important committee, as we've said many, many times. This is the only opportunity that the people of the province of Ontario have to review a few—not even all, but a few—of the appointments that this government makes to various agencies and commissions. These are agencies and commissions that make decisions every day that impact Ontarians' lives.

For the record, every Conservative MPP here has voted against live streaming of this meeting, which is extraordinarily easy—but now they're actually voting against the committee recording and rebroadcasting that. That, to me, is completely shameful. It is a strong sign. You are, in a sense, signalling the people of Ontario.

0920

I can guarantee that we in the official opposition will do our best and use all the tools we have to make sure the people of this province know exactly what you're doing. This is exactly what the people of Ontario have been afraid of: repeated opportunities in legislation that this government has used to pass all kinds of laws that have absolutely nothing to do with this pandemic, to appoint former Conservative Party candidates—failed candidates, many of them—to appoint Conservative donors to positions that they are not suited for, over and over, repeatedly. It is absolutely shameful that this government has taken this tack.

I would urge them again—I think the Conservative members should stand up to their own government right now. They should have done that last Friday. They should have done that this weekend. They should stand up to them right now and they should bring forward their own motion to broadcast this live and show their party and their government that they're not going to stand for this anymore.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bouma.

Mr. Will Bouma: I would just like to state for the record, as you have mentioned already, Chair, that this business that we're talking about is part of the responsibility of the presiding officers of the House. It is being dealt with at that level. It is not appropriate for us to be dealing with it, in my opinion, as members of this committee. I'll leave it at that.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Anand.

Mr. Deepak Anand: Chair, I just want to ask a few questions. I'm not a regular member of this committee, but my understanding is that whatever we do in this room—is this being recorded for the Hansard? If the answer is yes, this claim that people will not know about what happened inside I find too rich, because through Hansard, everybody has the ability to read everything. That's number one.

Number two: My understanding was there is a technical issue. That's why, when we do the recording, when we want to share the recording, we want to make sure it is of good quality—so that people can understand and see it.

So I don't know what is going on, but I just wanted to confirm with this point of order: Is this being recorded in

Hansard? If that is the case, how does this mean that it will not be known to the world?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, MPP Anand. Yes, I want to confirm that this session is recorded for the Hansard, so it is official record.

MPP Bisson.

Mr. Gilles Bisson: I wasn't going to come back into this, but just because of the comments made—one is the assertion by one of the Conservative members that it's not within our place as committee members to make these types of requests. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are our own masters. The committee has the power to deal with issues such as what we raised this morning. Those motions are perfectly in order. To suggest that somehow this is not within our mandate and it is just the Clerks who run our committees—if we ever get in a situation where it's only the Clerks who run the House and only the Clerks who run committees, we'll be in trouble. There is a system in place by which the politicians make the decisions and the Clerks enact those decisions.

I have great respect for the Clerks. They are professionals. They do what we ask them to, and they go even further to get where we've got to go. So I just want to push that back.

The other part is, yes, this is recorded by Hansard, but as many members know, (a) not everybody even knows how to find Hansard; and (b) if they do, are they going to read through an hour and a half of submissions in order to see what happened? We live in a video world; we live in an audio world. Normally, if a person was interested, they could walk into our committee room—if it wasn't for COVID-19—and listen to what is going on. At this point, you can't do that, for good reason: because our building is closed down. So making it available to the public is a way of providing transparency.

The fact that the government not only voted against the motion to broadcast a Zoom today by way of ourselves and any future meeting tells me they don't want the public to know what's going on in this committee, and I think that is deplorable.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Hogarth, you had a comment? You wanted to participate in the debate?

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Yes. My comment actually was asked by MPP Anand. I was just wondering if there was a way that people could hear what was happening in this format. I understand you answered that the people of Ontario, if they are interested and want to learn of what happened today, could read it in Hansard. If you can just reconfirm that for the people of Ontario—that you can actually find this debate in Hansard. Is that correct, Chair?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Honorable members of the committee, we have been debating this issue for the last 20 minutes. We have another item on our agenda, and that is the intended appointees. I don't think it is fair for the prospective candidates to wait until we finish debating. We've debated it enough. I think it is time for us to move to our next item on the agenda.

Interjections.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): My statement was a reminder to the respected committee members. I see there are some hands. If you still want to continue the debate, we will go ahead with it.

Mr. Gates, go ahead.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I want to congratulate both of my colleagues for raising this issue. This is an issue that we continue to raise every single week.

What I'm trying to figure out is, why would any of the elected Conservative MPPs not want this? What are you trying to hide? Who are you trying to make sure doesn't know what you're doing in this committee?

The first person who is going to speak here today is very similar to what I've seen since I've been coming back here for the last four weeks.

When you say that we can't do this, whether it's Zoom or whatever—the Premier of Ontario, on Thursday night, is having a \$1,000 fundraiser where people can join on Zoom.

We have the right to know what's going on in this committee. And yes, there are things being hidden here. The fact that, as my colleagues have said before, most of the people who come to this committee either ran for MPP and lost or they've donated substantially to the PC Party, both federally and provincially—that's what you're trying to hide. That's what you're getting away from.

As far as Hansard goes—we're talking today to an individual for the Social Benefits Tribunal. If you're low-vision or you're blind, you can't read Hansard; you need audio. We're going to have—the first person we're going to talk to.

So I want to say to my colleagues, this has got to stop—hiding in this committee; hiding from the public in this committee; having nothing, quite frankly, but partisan PC appointments week after week after week. There is no reason why this should continue, and I think you're going to hear this every single week until you fix it.

Thank you very much for giving me an opportunity to speak.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): I would just like to remind the honorable members to confine themselves to the issue at hand, and that is the technical difficulties and the accessibility issue. We need to address that particular issue. I don't think anyone is opposing broadcasting these sessions. Therefore, I kindly ask you: Let's focus on the main issue at hand, and that is the accessibility and the technical aspect of this issue.

Any other debate before we move to the next item on the agenda? Any further debate?

Thank you very much, committee members.

INTENDED APPOINTMENTS

MR. RANIL MENDIS

Review of intended appointment, selected by official opposition party: Ranil Mendis, intended appointee as member, Social Benefits Tribunal.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Now we will move to our next agenda item. We now move to our review of intended appointments. First, we have Ranil Mendis, nominated as a member of the Social Benefits Tribunal.

As you may be aware, Mr. Mendis, you have the opportunity, should you choose to do so, to make an initial statement. Following this, there will be questions from members of the committee. With that questioning, we will start with the official opposition, followed by the government, with 15 minutes allocated to each recognized party. Any time you take in your statement will be deducted from the time allotted to the government.

You may begin your presentation, Mr. Mendis.

0930

Mr. Ranil Mendis: Good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members. It is a great honour to be nominated as a member of the Social Benefits Tribunal, and I consider it a privilege to appear before you. I would like to use this time to elaborate on my deep-rooted connections to the community and the skills that I can bring to the Social Benefits Tribunal in conflict resolution and my attitude for impartial adjudication.

Just two years after arriving in Canada, I was appointed as a citizen representative of the former board of the city of York parking authority, where I developed my skills in dispute resolutions pertaining to business and community consultations and building consensus on parking matters. Learning from that experience, I moved on to serve in a broad range of human service delivery agencies in the Peel region, such as the Peel Children's Aid Society, the community care access centre, the grants review committee of the United Way, the Canadian Mental Health Association—CMHA—and Peel region housing. Serving at the board level of social service agencies and a number of their committees, I gained insight and appreciation of the struggles of the most marginalized segment of our society and a feeling of the pulse of the community who benefits from these programs.

Professionally, as a CPA, I have served on a number of independent decision-making panels of CPA Ontario—formerly called CMA Ontario—CIMA Canada, as well as a professional body from the UK.

I also have my own experience as a caregiver of an extended family member with chronic paranoid schizophrenia. As the substitute decision-maker of this family member, I went through the Social Security Tribunal appeal process for denied CPP disability benefits. We had to prove that his disability was serious and prolonged. That experience taught me the realities of the system and the challenges that the appellants have to go through.

I was also a participant in the diversity initiative of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, TRIEC, where professionals like myself from diverse backgrounds are nominated to board-level positions in government agencies, boards and commissions, as well as the Public Appointments Secretariat. Over the years, I was placed by TRIEC on a number of boards, including the Salvation Army Toronto Grace Health Centre, which is a 150-bed hospital, where I currently serve on the board.

I was also part of TRIEC's profession-to-profession mentoring program, where we helped professionals establish a professional career in Canada. I was a proud winner of TRIEC's mentor of the year award.

Finally, I have shared my lifelong love of the game of cricket to help engage young people. Cricket is a game that is very popular among Ontario's diverse student population, but it is still not a recognized sport in our school system. As a member of CIMA Canada, I led a volunteer team to promote cricket in schools and provided school-children with overseas cricket scholarships as youth cricket ambassadors. Today, over 8,000 school cricketers have benefited through that program.

As a parishioner of St. Thomas à Becket Anglican Church in Mississauga, where I currently serve as a church warden, I help bring the GTA's Anglican community together through cricket. My volunteer efforts as a community builder were recognized by the bishop of Toronto, by awarding me the Order of the Diocese of Toronto, ODT.

I believe that with this broad range of life experiences, I can bring transferrable skills, awareness of inclusivity and accountability to make a worthwhile contribution.

I thank you for your time.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Mr. Mendis.

Now we will go to the questioning. We will start with the opposition. You have 15 minutes. MPP Gates, go ahead, please.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Good morning. It was a very interesting start to our morning, obviously, for the same reasons that we talk about every time we come here.

Sir, I'll start with why we're having trouble with this committee—certainly no fault of yours; it's kind of how the PCs have decided to run this committee.

I understand you have a long history of donations to the current government—thousands of dollars over the years.

Did anyone from the government reach out to you regarding this position on the tribunal?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I learned about this from TRIEC. I applied through that information session they ran for us, and my application was with the system. Nobody from the government contacted me on this.

Mr. Wayne Gates: So am I right when I say you have a history of donating to the PC Party?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I have a history of donations to the PC Party as well as the Liberal Party.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Can you tell me how much you've donated to the party and who—

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I do not remember the exact amount, but I have donated.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Do you want me to help you?

Interjection.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Sorry, Mr. Sabawy, do you have a point of order?

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: Yes, Mr. Chair. I don't think those questions are related to the appointment process. I don't know where the respected member is taking this discussion.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Sabawy, it is the opposition's time, and we allow them to ask a broad range of questions.

Continue, MPP Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Thank you, Chair. I believe these are very fair questions that are very, very important to the committee, quite frankly.

It's my understanding—and you can correct me if I'm wrong, sir—that you donated \$1,220 to Christine Elliott's leadership race. Do you remember doing that, sir?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I do remember donating to Christine Elliott's campaign.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Do you remember giving \$250 to her leadership race in 2015?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: Amounts, I am not sure—but I did donate to her, yes.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Do you remember donating \$1,155 to the Whitby–Oshawa riding association?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: Yes. I have donated to Whitby–Oshawa.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Do you belong to the Oshawa riding association?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: No, I do not.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Do you campaign for the PC Party?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I would think at least eight years ago, I have done campaigning.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Do you believe you are qualified for this position?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: Yes, I do believe I am qualified.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Do you think that your donations and connections to the current government had any influence on you receiving this appointment?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: My appointment, I would think, is because I bring the core competencies for this position, such as the professional judgment, listening skills and decision-making, which I have done for the last three decades. I believe that was the reason why I'm here.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I saw that you were listening to the debate that we had earlier. You can tell that the official opposition is extremely upset that it just seems to be people who donate to the Conservative government who are getting these appointments. Do you think that's fair? Do you think it's right that it should just basically be people who support the Conservative government who get the opportunity to volunteer on these committees?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I cannot comment on the premise of your question, but I can tell you that I have donated to both the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, I would say, equally.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Well, I appreciate you saying it was equally—because I have all your donations in front of me, and it certainly wasn't equal, I can tell you that. I guess it depends how “equal” is. If you give somebody \$5,000 and you give somebody \$1,000, I guess that's relatively equal. I wasn't great at math, so maybe you're right on that one, sir.

The Ontario Auditor General has twice reported that the ministry's decisions regarding eligibility for ODSP benefits were frequently overturned at the tribunal.

Is the witness aware of the Auditor General's finding, and can you comment, please?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I remember reading some comments in the media, but I do not have the intricate knowledge of those aspects, no.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Why would you think that the Conservatives want to have Conservative-friendly people on this particular board?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I cannot comment on the premise of your question. However, I can tell you that I have been here because of my years of volunteer service, serving on the social services delivery agencies, as I have listed in my opening remarks. I have been on the boards. I have reviewed bylaws in different organizations. I have a deep connection to the community. So I believe that's why I'm here.

0940

Mr. Wayne Gates: Anti-poverty groups and legal clinics report significant delays at the tribunal. Is the witness aware of this issue, and can you comment, please?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: As somebody who is really deeply connected to the community, I have read those comments, but I cannot really comment on the reasons why because I am, just as anybody else, just reading the newspapers. I do not have the inside knowledge of why they are and what is going on. I cannot comment on that.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I appreciate that.

Have you had any lived experience with social assistance?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: Me personally, no, but I know a lot of people around my family and in the neighbourhoods.

Mr. Wayne Gates: So you've never lived on social assistance?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: No, I have not.

Mr. Wayne Gates: A single individual on Ontario Works can receive \$733 a month, and an individual on the Ontario Disability Support Program receives \$1,169 per month. Have you ever had to live on a poverty-level income like that?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I personally have not.

Mr. Wayne Gates: But you can understand where I'm going with that.

I'd like to take some time to speak to the organization you will be joining.

ODSP and OW recipients and those who are applying are frequently helped by our constituency offices, so we have a decent understanding of how frustrating the system can be.

Are you aware—and this is very important—of the significant delays right now at the tribunal?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I have read news reports about that, but if everything goes well today, I am looking forward to joining the tribunal and doing my best—bringing all the years of experience and doing the best for the recipients, because I know what they go through. I have a very good understanding of what that is.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Why do you think that is, sir?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I cannot comment about the things that I don't know. The reasons behind what goes on in the

tribunal and all the decisions the legislators make—I cannot comment about those.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Do you think that the \$733 a month for somebody on Ontario disability is enough money to live on?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: Those are decisions that individuals make and governments make. As a member of the tribunal, what I would do is, I would bring the skills and make sure that the recipients are heard and they are given a fair process and a fair hearing, and make an impartial judgement. The rest I would leave to the government decision-makers.

Mr. Wayne Gates: That wasn't my question, but I do appreciate the answer.

My question was, do you think \$733 a month for an individual on the Ontario Disability Support Program is enough?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I cannot comment on individual circumstances about different people and how much they get. I do not even know the rates, so I wouldn't want to comment on that question.

Mr. Wayne Gates: So you didn't even know the rates before I read them out to you?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I knew the ranges.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I'll ask you again, because I think it's a simple question, sir. Do you believe \$733 a month is enough for an individual on the Ontario Disability Support Program to live on? I think it's a pretty easy question.

Mr. Ranil Mendis: It is not for me to decide. It's the government's decision, so I would leave it to them to decide what is adequate and what is not.

What I can do as a tribunal member is to deliver the right decisions, impartial decisions, and make sure that I work hard—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Five minutes left.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Sir, I appreciate that, but that's not my question; and I think it would really help me to understand what type of individuals are going to sit on this board.

I'll make it easier for you: You're living in Toronto, and you're on Ontario Works. Do you think \$733 is enough to live on?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: Those decisions are not for me to comment—what is enough or what is not. I would definitely leave that to decisions-makers and the individuals who decide what is enough for each person.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Sir, I don't know why this is so hard for you, honestly. I'm trying to get an understanding here that—we have talked about this a long time. I would say very clearly, sir, that I could not live on \$733 a month. I don't care what committee you're on. It doesn't matter that I'm an MPP. I can say with all honesty that if someone comes into my constituency office and is on OW or ODSP, I can say to them that it's not enough to live on. I think that's fair. I think that's reasonable.

So when I ask the question, I'm not asking you about who makes the decision on the \$733. What I'm asking you is, do you think that's enough money to live on?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: Again, I would not want to comment on what is enough or what is not enough for individuals or families. I would leave it to the individuals and the government decision-makers who make these decisions or the legislators who come up with regulations. I would leave that for them to decide.

What I would do as a tribunal member would be to make sure that whoever comes—because I myself have sat in front of these tribunals and pleaded my case. Similarly, if somebody comes with their case—enough or not enough—I will look at the legislation. I will make sure they get a fair hearing, an impartial hearing, and I will make sure that they feel they—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Sir, I appreciate that, but I want to finish this up. Your role, on being appointed here, is exactly the role of the tribunal. You decide if someone should or shouldn't have their income reduced, so it's very important for you to answer that question—so you'd understand. But obviously, you really don't want to answer that question, and that's unfortunate.

So I'll move on, because I don't think I have a lot of time.

How much time is left, Chair?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Two and a half minutes, MPP Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Oh, I've got a little more than I thought.

For those who are actually impacted by this, what do you think it is like for them, waiting for those hearings?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I think every appellant should have access to their hearing on a timely basis. And what I will do when I come to the tribunal, if everything goes okay today, is, I will make sure I will work hard. I have a very, very strong work ethic. I have always volunteered with my community, and I understand what the appellants are going through. The wait-list is the concern. I have read about that. I'm looking forward to joining the tribunal and doing my best to alleviate those problems to the best of my abilities.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Sir, I don't know if you know this, because it doesn't sound like you really looked into a lot of what you applied for in getting on this committee, but there has been a 50% increase in recipients in the last 10 years—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Wayne Gates: —and the average ODSP case-worker has 350 cases.

Do you believe the province provides the appropriate level of resources to the ODSP system? And do you think that the current system properly supports those living with disabilities?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: That is a question—as an outsider who has not joined the tribunal yet and has no knowledge of the workings, I simply cannot comment, and I do not know the details. Once I get in, as a management accountant, if my feedback is requested, I will be very happy to contribute and make sure that the system works efficiently and effectively for the benefit of the appellants.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Sir, I can tell you that my concern is that you have no knowledge of the workings of this particular committee.

Do you believe that current eligibility requirements for ODSP benefits from the minister are appropriate and are being properly applied when reviewing applications?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: As a member of the tribunal, I would be applying legislation—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much, Mr. Mendis. Unfortunately, the time is up for this part of the session.

Now we will move to the government side, and I just want to remind the government side that they have 11 minutes. Mr. Bouma, the floor is yours.

Mr. Will Bouma: Chair, through you: Mr. Mendis, thank you so much for joining us today. You have lived an exemplary life of service to your community in so many different ways. I am always so impressed by people who serve on some of the things that you have served on, taking on some of the trauma of others as they go through life, and yet here you are going through this process in order to serve further.

0950

I was wondering, what motivated you to apply for this position on the Social Benefits Tribunal?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: It comes through my own experience a few years back. Actually, we had very close family members—two of them—wrestling with psychiatric illnesses. We've seen them coming through in their twenties, now in their fifties, and I myself have seen how this person's CPP was rejected, knowing very well the three decades of suffering. It was rejected twice. Luckily, he had me as a substitute decision-maker. I went through the legislation, and we went through a long process—through OHIP, through a family doctor; nobody could give the records. Luckily, the social workers, God bless them, had written down everything and they managed to get 25-year-old documentation, and through that, we managed to get it. So those are my motivations.

I really had a feeling that, what if somebody didn't have that ability to go through and do the research? So then I made sure that I make sure that other people who have been in that situation would not go through the same troubles. That's the reason why I decided to come here.

Mr. Will Bouma: Thank you. That is very, very good to hear.

Mr. Chair, I'll turn my time over to MPP Sabawy.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Sabawy, go ahead.

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: Thank you very much, Mr. Mendis, for the introduction.

Out of all these experiences, can you point out your involvement in the community? What specific areas of expertise and experiences you got involved in with the community which you think can help you in your appointed role—and as well as what you learned from these experiences, and how are you going to bring this into your performance as a member of this?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I have a number of areas that I can bring—but I would like to take this opportunity to bring my involvement with cricket. Cricket is a sport that is hugely popular in Ontario, particularly in schools, and that is being played by mostly, I would say, new immigrants and newcomers to Canada. Although it is such a popular sport, it is not recognized in schools. So what I did do was bring it to my association called CIMA Canada, and I tried to bring the recognition and awareness of the sport in schools and gave them the chance to travel overseas and play cricket in England. With that program, to date we have about 8,000 young people who have benefited. My experience dealing with that program would be like this: There were the overseas cricket scholarships that we provide. I would get about 100 applications, 200 applications in some cases, for these 12 positions. So I had to go through a screening process—and here we have newcomers, parents, everybody excited, "My son can go, my daughter can go"—and eventually we had to come down to 12 players.

So those are the tough decisions that I had to make, and those are the kinds of experiences that I can bring to the Social Benefits Tribunal as I make my decisions based on legislation.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Sandhu, go ahead.

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Mendis. It's very impressive, the great work you have been doing in promoting cricket in Canada. I myself have been playing cricket for the last 20 years and since I came to Canada. This is always my favourite sport, and there is no doubt that this sport is becoming very popular in Canada for the last 10 or 12 years, especially with the new immigrants who are coming to this country.

Under COVID-19, most SBT hearings are being conducted online. What do you see as some of the challenges of online hearings, and how will you approach them differently than in-person hearings?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: My experience is sitting on boards and various conferences; even my organization, CIMA Canada, had a business conference with Zoom. In fact, we recently held a couple of cricket training sessions for staff using Zoom. It is a good technology that we can adapt to, and once I get into the tribunal, I look forward to see what can be improved, because there are various techniques that we can use to have separate discussions. So I'm looking forward to discussing those things once I'm in.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Four minutes. MPP Miller, go ahead.

Mr. Norman Miller: Thank you, Mr. Mendis, for putting your name forward for this position.

The Social Benefits Tribunal has very high case volumes, as you've heard. How will you ensure that you stay on top of the workload and deliver your decisions within the targeted processing times?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I think I would rely on my strong work ethic. Over the years, I have always managed multiple tasks: being a volunteer, raising a family, and keeping a full-time job. When I come to these positions, I would

definitely have that kind of a work ethic, to make sure that timely delivery of decisions is important. So I will make sure that I get fully organized and have everything systematically organized, making sure that I allocate the time that it requires, and making priority decisions first, ensuring that I deliver on what I take on.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Anand.

Mr. Deepak Anand: Chair, I was listening to Mr. Ranil Mendis, and I want to ask a question.

Parties appearing before the SBT—and I just want to know, with your previous experience with the other places as well—have legal requirements and they can sometimes have challenges. My question would be, in this event, how would you work with them to ensure that they have a fair hearing even if they can't understand the procedural processes? When there is a language barrier or there is a problem with the technology, how would you handle those situations? Did you have a similar situation in the past with the other experiences that you had?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: Yes, I have had similar situations, because I have conducted a number of interviews with young people for the scholarship program. They've had language barriers. I would make sure that they are properly accommodated with facilities, through translations, making sure that they are heard. In some cases, I would say we have to make sure that the access to forms and everything should be in plain language. When we make a decision, it should be a decision to be written in concise language. Hearings should be using plain language. We can have sort of case conferences to prepare them ahead of the hearing.

At the end of the day, we need to make sure that the appellant who comes here—even if we had to decline the request, they will have known that they got a fair hearing and fair process. And to do that, we need to make sure that we prepare them ahead of time and make them comfortable when they come to the hearing. Things like communication are very important, using plain language. I think those are the techniques that I would use.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute left. MPP Hogarth.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you very much, sir, for being here today. I was going through your résumé and it's quite impressive—your employment and your volunteer service; working with the Toronto Community Housing Corp., and your work with community care access centres and children's aid.

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You were recommended for this position following a Tribunals Ontario competitive, merit-based recruitment process.

I'm just wondering, what is your impression of the process, and why do you think that you are the best candidate for this role?

Mr. Ranil Mendis: I would say I bring a unique perspective to the Social Benefits Tribunal in that—an array of social service delivery agencies that I have worked for and helped them guide their processes as their leadership candidate or a board member. So that—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much, Mr. Mendis. Unfortunately, the time is up. Thank you very much for coming today and making your presentation. I apologize for the delay that happened.

MR. ALDO Di FELICE

Review of intended appointment, selected by official opposition party: Aldo Di Felice, intended appointee as member, Ontario Media Development Corp.—board of directors.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Now we will move to Mr. Aldo Di Felice, nominated as member of the Ontario Media Development Corp. board of directors.

You may come forward. As you may be aware, Mr. Di Felice, you have the opportunity, should you choose to do so, to make an initial statement. Following this, there will be questions from the members of the committee. With the questioning, we will start with the government, followed by the official opposition, with 15 minutes allocated to each recognized party. Any time you take in your statement will be deducted from the time allotted to the government.

You may begin your presentation, Mr. Di Felice.

Mr. Aldo Di Felice: Good morning, committee members. Thank you very much for having me here this morning. My name is Aldo Di Felice.

I want to take a moment, first of all, to thank all of you for your work. I know it's not the easiest of times. Even in the best of times, representing a large constituency of residents in your ridings, doing the legislative work you're all doing, the committee work you're all doing—I want to acknowledge that I, at least, am very well aware of the work involved and the efforts that you're putting in, and I want to thank you and move on from there.

I've been asked to take five minutes to tell you about myself, then outline my experience and qualifications to serve as a public appointee to the board of Ontario Creates.

I was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, but I've been a lifelong resident of Toronto since my family immigrated in the 1960s. For the past 50 years, my entire family has lived and worked in the Willowdale neighbourhood of Toronto. My father was a hairdresser who was so beloved by his clientele that, near the end of his 40-year career, he was nominated and won the North York Chamber of Commerce business of the year award. He was the first sole proprietor ever to receive that distinction, which had always gone to large companies with hundreds of staff. My mother was a homemaker who later worked for two decades at Cummer Lodge, which is a city of Toronto-run seniors' long-term-care home in our neighbourhood.

I myself was the first in my extended family to finish high school, let alone do post-secondary schooling. I attended the University of Toronto and graduated from the faculty of law in 1986.

I started my career as a corporate commercial lawyer at a leading Canadian law firm known as Blake, Cassels and Graydon. I assisted clients, big and small, as a business lawyer, with a wide range of transactions and commercial

agreements. During my seven-year association with Blakes, I also spent 15 months seconded to the Ontario Securities Commission in the enforcement, capital markets and corporate finance section of the OSC.

I was then recruited to join Sullivan Entertainment. Sullivan was a leading Canadian TV producer and distributor of iconic Canadian TV shows you may be familiar with, such as *Anne of Green Gables*, *Road to Avonlea* and *Wind at My Back*—long-running series. I held several senior positions at Sullivan Entertainment, including chief operating officer of Sullivan, over five years.

In 1998, I was recruited to join Teletatino Network. At that time, Teletatino was a single ethnic TV channel that had struggled through its first decade of existence and was just finding its feet, and had attracted a 20% investment from Shaw Cable, which was Canada's second-largest cable company. We have, since 1998, become a significant and respected Canadian multicultural TV and media company. As president over the past 20-plus years, I led a team that launched new digital TV channels in Italian, Spanish and English, produced countless TV segments and shows, and supported many community-oriented initiatives across Canada. Most recently, in 2019, I joined the three long-time shareholders of Teletatino Network to buy back the majority interest in the company, which had been held for the past 20 years by a publicly traded media company known as Corus Entertainment. We renamed the organization TLN Media Group, and we are now fully independent, 100% immigrant-owned and multiculturally focused. We have redoubled our long-time commitment to Canadian multicultural media and communities, including establishing new corporate headquarters and production studios in the historic Italian Canadian cultural hub, the Columbus Centre in midtown Toronto. We sit on the 20-acre main campus of Villa Charities.

For 50 years, across the GTA, that organization, Villa Charities, has provided cultural and educational programs and supported culturally sensitive long-term care and independent living apartments for seniors, who are a big supporter of Villa Charities.

In terms of memberships, besides being a member of the Law Society of Ontario for the past 33 years, I was invited to serve as a director on the board of Villa Colombo Vaughan, which is one of the Villa Charities' seniors' long-term-care homes, located in Kleinburg, Ontario, and I did so for several years until last year, 2020.

In 2009, I was appointed by the then-government of Ontario and served for 10 years as a public member on the Public Accountants Council for the Province of Ontario. The council has played a major role in oversight and delivery of public accounting services in Ontario during a period which saw the unification of the profession.

I am also a long-time member of the President's Council at St. Michael's Hospital Foundation, helping to raise friends and funds for the hospital.

In 2019, I was recognized as one of TD's 10 most influential Hispanic Canadians.

With all that said, I believe I'm fully qualified to serve the public interest as a member of the board of Ontario

Creates, and I would graciously accept the appointment, should it be formally approved. Thanks very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. We will go to the questioning.

We will start with the government side, and you have nine and a half minutes. MPP Bouma, go ahead.

Mr. Will Bouma: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Through you, to Mr. Di Felice: Thank you so much for joining us today. If I didn't know better, reading through your résumé and listening to your opening statement, I would think that you had been preparing your entire life to take a position at Ontario Creates. It certainly helps frame your qualifications.

I was wondering if you could go a little deeper and share with the committee why you believe you are well suited to meet the expectations of Ontario Creates.

Mr. Aldo Di Felice: Thanks very much for your question.

Well, I believe I have the relevant professional experience, the relevant industry experience and the relevant lived experience.

In terms of professional experience, I have a legal and financial background which I think is essential to what Ontario Creates does. It is a significant undertaking at Ontario Creates, with a number of complex programs and a multi-billion dollar industry which they are supporting. So I believe the legal and financial background in and of itself is necessary, and I have that.

My industry experience has now, remarkably, been over a quarter century. It feels like yesterday that I started in this industry, in 1993, with an independent production and distribution company that dealt at the time with the OMDC, the Ontario Media Development Corp., the predecessor to the current corporation. So I think in terms of industry experience, it's wide-ranging.

In terms of lived experience, I've been working with a federally regulated broadcaster that has a significant public service mandate. Although we are a corporation and not a not-for-profit corporation, there are large expectations of federally regulated corporations to contribute to communities—in our case, primarily the Spanish and Italian communities of Canada, but then, more and more so, cross-cultural communities, bridging cultures.

I think all of that experience is relevant. I don't see among the current board nor last year's board of Ontario Creates anybody with that particular mix of experience— independent, ethnic media involvement at a high level, as I have been doing—so I think I'm relatively well suited.

Thank you for your compliment.

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Mr. Will Bouma: Mr. Chair, I'll turn my time to MPP Anand.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Anand, go ahead.

Mr. Deepak Anand: Mr. Di Felice, again, I'm going to echo what MPP Bouma said about your résumé: It's very impressive.

You started as a lawyer. You got educated as a lawyer—a doctor of law, at that—and then got involved in the creative industry, and now leading TLN. Why that switch? How did that switch happen? And how will that help Ontario Creates?

Mr. Aldo Di Felice: Well, I have a very wide range of experience, and my career path was never planned.

I started working as what people might generally call a business lawyer, a corporate and commercial lawyer, downtown, but we tended to work for a number of entrepreneurial companies in various industries. One of those industries happened to be the media post-production services industry.

What happened was that one of our clients recommended me to a headhunter who was looking for a head of business and legal affairs at Sullivan Entertainment. I was approached as a result of my work for a major post-production house in Toronto. We were doing general corporate and commercial work, and that led my career path to Sullivan, which then led to a career path in, ironically, an ethnic television service, which I would never have expected.

Although I may have both a Latino and Italian background that's well suited for Telelatino, that was never my career goal.

In fact, I was, as most immigrants do—at least in the 1960s and 1970s—trying to assimilate within mainstream business and then join the mainstream on Bay Street—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Four and a half minutes left for the government side.

Mr. Aldo Di Felice: —so a bit circuitous and fortuitous, but that describes my career path.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Miller.

Mr. Norman Miller: Thank you for putting your name forward, Mr. Di Felice, for this position.

The Ontario Creates vision statement reads as follows: “An Ontario where our creative industries are globally leading and competitive; celebrate Ontario’s cultural vitality; and drive economic growth and development in the province. We want Ontario to be a globally leading jurisdiction, recognized for innovative local companies producing exceptional content as well as a competitive destination for investment and development.”

I understand you may not have had an official Ontario Creates orientation, but can you share with the committee how you might add value and contribute to the Ontario Creates vision, please?

Mr. Aldo Di Felice: As I said, I think one of the perspectives that I bring to the table is a niche of the entertainment industry, a niche of the creative industry that is ethnic-focused media, which I don't think usually gets big play, but it's going to be increasingly important in our society. I think, from that perspective, that is one unique attribute to myself—just being fully immersed for the last 20 years in ethnic media, in multicultural media.

As I said, my legal and financial background is, I think, relevant to an agency that is involved in a wide variety of fairly complex programs, from tax credits to grants to working on export development. I have a pretty large what people used to call a Rolodex—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Mr. Di Felice, unfortunately, I have to interrupt you. Since we're running out of time, we'll have to continue at the next meeting.

The Clerk will be in touch with Mr. Di Felice about coming back next week.

Thank you, everyone, for being here today and participating in this meeting. I am adjourning the meeting until next week.

The committee adjourned at 1015.

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