

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

P-17

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

P-17

**Standing Committee on
Public Accounts**

Committee business

1st Session
43rd Parliament
Monday 25 March 2024

**Comité permanent des
comptes publics**

Travaux du comité

1^{re} session
43^e législature
Lundi 25 mars 2024

Chair: Tom Rakocevic
Clerk: Tanzima Khan

Président : Tom Rakocevic
Greffière : Tanzima Khan

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House Publications and Language Services
Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Service linguistique et des publications parlementaires
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Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

ISSN 1180-4327

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES COMPTES PUBLICS

Monday 25 March 2024

Lundi 25 mars 2024

The committee met at 1233 in room 151.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Good afternoon, everyone. I'd like to call the meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order.

The first item on the agenda is a motion filed by MPP Gélinas. I am opening the floor to MPP Gélinas to read the motion into the record and proceed.

M^{me} France Gélinas: That in addition to the current invited entities, the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to invite the following witnesses to participate in the committee's review of the Auditor General's Special Report on Changes to the Greenbelt:

—a representative from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry who was involved with the repeal of the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act, as determined by the ministry;

—Mariam Rashidi;

—Hannah Evans;

—Patrick Sackville; and

That in addition to the current invited entities, the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to invite the following witnesses to participate in the committee's review of the Auditor General's 2023 Review of Government Advertising:

—a representative from the Ministry of Finance who was involved in the development of the Building a Better Health System campaign, as determined by the ministry;

—a representative from the Minister of Health who can comment on the ministry's involvement in the development of the Building a Better Health System campaign, as determined by the ministry;

—a representative from the Ministry of Education who was involved in the Plan to Catch Up campaign, as determined by the ministry.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate? MPP Gélinas.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I'll start with the second one. If you look at this particular part of our work that we will do on government advertising, right now, there are only two people who have been invited. We know from the Auditor General's report that it was the Ministry of Finance that submitted the Building a Better Health Care System campaign, and the Auditor General said close to 118 of the ads would not have passed. Same thing with the Ministry of

Health: Make sure that the Ministry of Health's goals—and some of them were very good. We saw that we spent money on colon cancer, we spent money on the new services that are in our pharmacies, and this is all good—but really focusing on building a better health care system.

The reason I want us to be able to gain access to more witnesses is that I find that in the last few years the value that we bring to public accounts has really decreased. If you look at all of the Parliaments that have public accounts and you see what the Auditor General makes as recommendations, you see what the bureaucracy—and I have no problem with the public servants who often take those recommendations very seriously and put in place changes—you still see that members of Parliament have a role to play. Members of Parliament are able to bring objectives and set recommendations for how we could make this this even better. Unfortunately, I find that Ontario is not living up to the opportunities that we have. As members of public accounts, yes, we can be respectful and happy with some of the recommendations from the Auditor General that get implemented by the civil service and get responded to, but we can go even further.

Our goal is always to make sure that we get value for the taxpayer, get value for the taxpayers, taking into account what we are able to do now and taking into account what we could do in the future and what we could do different. All of this is a whole lot easier to happen if you get witnesses who were there on the front lines, who saw the work that the Auditor General has done—so, basically, they have done the work, the Auditor General comes and has a look at their work, makes recommendations as to how do we make things better, and, as I say, many times, those recommendations will be acted upon. But once we have a chance to talk to them and to hear their responses to our questions, it's really where we get the knowledge to bring things even further. Oftentimes, they will make suggestions of their own as to, "But if this and this were changed, we would be able to do a whole lot more. If this and this were changed, we would be able to do more with less, accomplish more, do things differently that would involve"—etc., etc. I don't know what they're going to say, and neither does anybody else.

But I can tell you that having only two witnesses, as is the case for the second part on government advertising, is very limited. So I'm suggesting, as you could all read in the Auditor General's report, that the Ministry of Finance come and talk to us—and they will be the one choosing

who is the best person is to send. We're not dictating or anything, but somebody who had a hand in the Building a Better Health Care System campaign that—if you have read the Auditor General, she was very clear that 118 of those ads were problematic. How do we make sure that we get value for money? How do we make sure that things move in the right direction?

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Same thing with the Special Report on Changes to the Greenbelt—to have somebody from the Ministry of Natural Resources, specifically when it comes to the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act, come answer our questions, to share with us what they have learned. We're not there to lay blame. We're not there to prosecute anybody. I'm not a lawyer and will never be; I know some of you are, but I'm not one of them. That's not what we're there to do. We are there to learn from them. They took actions. The Auditor General looked at those actions and made recommendations for change. Some of them have had the opportunity to start implementing some changes that came from the Auditor General. What else can they share with us to make sure that we achieve our goals, to get the best value for taxpayers' money?

I know that we had started to hear a little bit about what goes on in other public accounts committees. I can tell you that in many other jurisdictions where you have a Conservative government in power, where you have Conservative members as a majority on committees, they put out reports that really change the way public service gets delivered, that really change how you ensure that people get value for their money.

Don't be afraid to learn from what we hear from those witnesses. Don't be afraid to go beyond what the Auditor General has told us. We are not Auditors General; we are members of provincial Parliament. We are elected officials. We hear from our constituents, we hear from our work here at Queen's Park, but at the end, we all want the government to be as efficient as possible, to make the best decisions moving forward.

Some of the recommendations may be to remove some of the red tape and some of the steps that they have to go through that do not bring a better outcome, that do not bring us to better decisions. Those are the people on the front lines, and hearing from them can only help us in our work to make recommendations toward how different ministries and the Legislative Assembly as a whole conduct their work, make their decisions and move things forward so that we have as good a Parliament as possible, so that we have as good structures in place for our different ministries to serve the people of Ontario as good as they can.

So that's the idea behind those. I could go on, but I know we have better things to do.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate?

Mr. Stephen Crawford: I just want to get on the record that typically in public accounts, with scheduling issues and whatnot, we would have a closed session, so this is an abnormal situation we're facing here today. Also, with

respect to bundling several together, I think it's unusual as well.

We are going ahead with these reviews on the greenbelt and government advertising. We've agreed to that, on the government side, and we're okay with that.

But again, I think that scheduling and issues of such typically are done in closed session.

I will just leave it at that.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I want to speak to the motion filed by Madame Gélinas—in support of that motion.

When we go forward to consider the Auditor General's special report on climate change and the greenbelt, we all know—both sides of the House know—that there are a lot of lessons to learn on the process, how that took place. It's still unfolding, as we all know. The autopsy, if you will, of what happened and what should have happened is still unfolding; particularly today, for example—we're considering the urban flooding risk, which was also a report of the Auditor General.

I think it's really important that we hear from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, because they were involved, very directly, in decisions around the greenbelt and the greenbelt land removal that had significant impact. What we're learning and what we need to understand is that we need to treat wetlands as part of a system. When we talk about the Duffins Rouge removal from the wetlands system, that is an example of how we are not understanding that impacts to our wetlands and impacts to our greenbelt are part of a larger system. The Minister of Natural Resources, and particularly—the minister's involvement in these decisions is important for us to understand.

As Madame Gélinas said, we are here to learn. We are here to understand what happened, what went wrong and what we need to put in place so that we don't come to a point again in this province where we are essentially—this House was seized with this greenbelt scandal, if you will, and time that could have been spent doing the people's business was 100% wasted; money was wasted and resources were wasted because, as the government has admittedly said, this was not an adequate process. The Minister of Housing said that this process failed on many accounts and did not take into account all of the information that we need to make these good decisions—in particular, I would say, when it comes to having the MNRF there, scientific information that we need to understand. It would be really important for us to have a representative from the ministry here, to understand how they made their decisions, particularly when they talked about the removal of the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve.

What was also, I would say, very strange in this process is, it would appear that one ministry was taking direction from another ministry, which further complicated and confused a decision that should have been taken in a clear direction based on clear and scientific evidence. I don't know if it's normal for the MNRF to take direction from a completely different ministry. That appears to be what happened, and I would like to be able to ask the represent-

ative to explain how that unfolded. I have questions, like, was there a study done to analyze the environmental cost of removing the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve, the DRAP? That's a very significant piece of land. If there was no study, we need to know how the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry came to the decision or supported the decision for that to be removed from protections.

So there are many, many questions that remain—and not simply the process, not simply the cloud that we know hangs over this decision when it comes to decisions perhaps being made by insiders and not experts. I know even in Hamilton, there were developers whose requests to the Ministry of Housing were written word for word into the changes to the urban boundary, for example. So we need to address what happened and how this happened, in terms of who has access.

We also need to understand, going forward, the impact of these decisions on our wetlands, on protections for people, on flooding of people's basements.

Absolutely, I think that it's really important that we hear from a representative from the Ministry of Natural Resources. It's only one half of the story as to what happened with greenbelt removals—and I fully support Madame Gélinas's motion on calling a representative. I think it's very important, particularly as, also, the decisions from the Ministry of Natural Resources were referenced in the Integrity Commissioner's report, which was a companion piece, if you will, to the Auditor General's special report.

I would be surprised if the government would not support this. I'm assuming that the government themselves want to understand what transpired, to be transparent, to try to restore trust. This government has really lost trust, in certain sectors, that these decisions aren't made based on insiders and money—not based on what's best for Ontarians and what's best for the future of our wetlands and our green lands. So I'm hoping—hope springs eternal—that the government will support this motion.

With that, Chair, thank you for your time.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate? MPP Bouma.

Mr. Will Bouma: Chair, through you: I think it's unfortunate that we're not in closed session right now. As we heard this morning at our training session for committee Chairs from the Clerk's office, committee business is typically done in closed session. It's unfortunate that we're not doing that here. Regardless, I think that's the reason why I will say that I, unfortunately, can't support this. In my opinion, it has been brought forward in a poor way.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate?

M^{me} France Gélinas: All that the motion does is, it gives the Clerk the right to invite those people. Nobody is going to put a gun to their head to come and testify or anything like this. We're inviting them to come.

Usually, people decide to come because they have ideas for change, they have a message: "The Auditor General made those recommendations. Here's how we are implementing them, but here's what else you can do." They are

on the front lines, and they come to help us make this place work better.

That's all that the recommendation does. The Clerk will invite them. If they wish to come—usually they will wish to come when they have something to contribute—they will come. If they don't wish to come, nothing happens—they get invited, they say no, end of story. I would say it's a very little ask. At the same time, it's an opportunity to gain knowledge, to turn the page, to move forward. All of this happens through the work of public accounts.

There's no better example than the work we did with Laurentian University. The work that we did with Laurentian University allowed my community, which was so, so, so angry at the university, to learn what had happened. Were they happy to learn what had happened? Absolutely not. They were infuriated to learn what had happened, but, once they knew, they were able to turn the page and help Laurentian rebuild.

This is a bit what we're trying to do with the greenbelt—let people know. We will invite people to come and tell us exactly what happened so that we, as members of Parliament of the province of Ontario, can turn the page and move on. Right now, there are still a lot of people not happy with what has happened.

It's not a big ask. The Clerk will do an invitation. If they say yes, they'll come with their ideas. If they say nay, it ends there.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I would like to say that I support the motion. I'm glad the members have brought it forward, really, from the perspective of having access to as much information possible. Again, in our role here in public accounts, we are often in a hurry too, but to be able to access information from people who were involved in the decision-making process and to understand the pieces that went into it and the different pushes and pulls that resulted in the decisions that were made—I think it's important, and I'd like to support it.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate?

Mr. Will Bouma: Mr. Chair, through you, again: I would just say I always look to the member from Nickel Belt for her length of experience and everything else here, and so I'm just surprised that this would be brought forward in open session like this.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Any further debate?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Point of clarification: Is there something wrong with moving a motion in open session? This is the first I've heard an objection to moving motions on committee business in open—why would this not be considered in open session? That is my question for clarification.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Through the expertise of the Clerk—there's a right to move motions, and, based on what I understand, the contents seem not out of order.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I just want to comment further on that. As the member from Brantford—Brant said, MPP Gélinas has extended experience in the House, and she always understands process and procedure and does everything

above board and in a way that is intended to improve our work here, to make sure that people understand that we are doing the people's business and that we need to do this in a transparent way.

I'm unclear as to why MPP Bouma would say that it's unfortunate that we're doing the people's business in public. That's a surprise to me, given that it has been clear that these motions are in order. There is nothing sinister with this motion. We invite all kinds of representatives on all kinds of issues to bring clarity and to help us understand what transpired—particularly in this instance, when we're talking about the greenbelt and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry made decisions around the greenbelt removals that are referenced in the Auditor General's special report on the greenbelt. So it is not unusual—in fact, it makes a perfect amount of sense that we would want to hear from a representative of a ministry that was directly involved in the decisions that were made around the greenbelt.

I'd like to believe that, given what we've all been through—we wasted the better part of, I'm going to say, six months to a year on this greenbelt “bordel,” as they say in French; I don't know what else to say in English. And that the government would now be more—they should be moving this forward. It seems to me that the government members would want to bring transparency. As they say, the best disinfectant is sunlight, so why wouldn't we be shining sunlight on these decisions that were made, that did bring us to the point where these bills had to be repealed and that there is an RCMP investigation?

Let's err on the side of getting good information so that, going forward, all of us, both sides of the House—govern-

ment side and opposition side—are armed with the information that we need to know to be able to make sure we are making proper decisions that don't fall under scrutiny and suspicion the way the greenbelt decisions have.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate?

Mr. Will Bouma: No argument with the contents of the motion—it's just that these things are normally done in closed session. Again, that's exactly what we heard from the Clerks this morning in committee Chair training from the Clerk's office. I would presume that the member would have respected that when she brought this motion forward, and had it come through closed session.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate on the motion?

M^{me} France Gélinas: Recorded vote.

Ayes

Gélinas.

Nays

Bouma, Crawford, Sandhu, Skelly, Laura Smith.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): The motion is lost.

Unless there's any further business, we will now move into closed session. Thank you, everyone. I will now recess the committee for five minutes so that we can enter closed session to conduct report-writing.

The committee recessed at 1250 and later continued in closed session.

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Ms. Sandy Shaw (Hamilton West–Ancaster–Dundas / Hamilton-Ouest–Ancaster–Dundas ND)

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