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# *The Committee on Public Administration: Ten Years of Continuity and Progress*

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by Nancy Ford

*The Québec Committee on Public Administration was created on April 10, 1997, on an experimental basis, and received permanent status five months later following amendments to the Standing Orders. Henceforth, this new Committee would hear the Auditor General concerning his annual report and, in the presence of the deputy ministers and the chief executive officers of public bodies, would examine the various matters raised in this report. The Public Administration Act, passed in 2000, established new mechanisms for accountability within the framework of a results-based management policy, conferring an important role to this Committee. This article looks at the work of this committee over the last decade.*

Sponsored by Henri-François Gautrin, a Government MNA, the *Act respecting the accountability of deputy ministers and chief executive officers of public bodies* underwent lengthy consideration before finally being passed and receiving royal assent in 1993. In effect, the passage of this Act led to making senior public servants responsible for their administration and enabled parliamentary committees to summon them for the purpose of discussing their management. At the time, the carrying out of this task was given to the sectoral committees according to their respective fields of competence. However, this legislative initiative would serve as prelude to the establishment of a standing parliamentary committee whose mission would be centered exclusively on the control of the government administration.

## **Responsibilities of the Committee**

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The Standing Orders of the National Assembly attribute three main functions to the Committee.

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**The permanent and temporary members of the Committee on Public Administration (from left to right) : Pierre-Michel Auger, Guy Ouellette, Nancy Ford, Clerk of the Committee, Vincent Auclair, Gilles Taillon, Henri-François Gautrin, Agnès Maltais, Rita Dionne-Marsolais, Jean-François Therrien, Johanne Morasse and Jean Domingue. Absent from the photograph are Lucie Charlebois, Roch Cholette, Hubert Benoit, Pascal Bérubé, and Martin Lemay. (Photo : Daniel Lessard, photographe, Assemblée nationale du Québec)**

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### *Examination of the financial commitments of the Ministries*

The Committee must examine all financial commitments equal to or exceeding \$25,000 of all ministries and government agencies whose estimates have been approved by the National Assembly. The purpose of this exercise is to ensure a constant surveillance by Parliament of government expenditure, more specifically as regards the compliance with rules and regulations pertaining to the allocation of contracts and grants.

The work load is considerable, given that it represents an average of 20,000 financial commitments per year. In order to fulfill its obligations, the Committee had to seek new ways of functioning.

Traditionally, a sitting to examine financial commitments always called for the presence of the minister responsible within the framework of a public hearing. However, in March 2004, in an effort to clear its backlog and make this exercise more efficient, the Committee substantially revised its operating procedures and working tools. On an almost monthly basis, the Committee now holds a deliberative meeting to examine recent financial commitments. Thereafter, it sends its written requests for supplementary information to the ministries concerned. The hearing of a minister is not excluded from the verification process, but the Committee will resort to it only if the information obtained is insufficient or if the situation warrants a hearing. More recently, in order to reinforce the administrative responsibility which lies with the upper-level management of ministries and agencies, the Committee has opted for meetings with the deputy ministers and chairs of organizations, rather than with ministers, during the process of examining financial commitments.

### *Hearing the Auditor General on his annual report to the National Assembly*

The mandate to hear the Auditor General on his annual report is more or less the fundamental reason for which the Committee on Public Administration was established, since parliamentarians wanted to give the Auditor General the opportunity to present the contents of his annual report to the National Assembly. Moreover, under the provisions of the Act the Committee on Public Administration has the power to undertake an in-depth examination of the chapters of the Auditor's annual report and to hold hearings for the purpose of questioning the deputy ministers and chief executive officers on their management whenever the report contains remarks and recommendations with regard to their administration.

The Committee also verifies each year the financial commitments of the Auditor General and holds a hearing on his own annual management report, which explains

the results obtained with regard to the objectives set forth in his strategic plan. This meeting gives the Committee a unique opportunity to discuss the manner in which the Auditor General is carrying out his own mandate, the difficulties he is encountering, and the use he is making of the resources allocated to him by the National Assembly.

### *Hearing deputy ministers and chief executive officers of public bodies to discuss their management*

The *Public Administration Act*, which replaced the *Act respecting the accountability of deputy ministers and chief executive officers of public bodies*, enshrines the principle of oversight by giving the competent committee the obligation to hear the deputy ministers and the chief executive officers of public bodies concerning their management. It aims at a better administration of the public service, with emphasis on results.

On the one hand, government decentralizes and allows for more flexibility in the decision-making, giving administrators more responsibility. On the other hand, the Act requires increased accountability and obliges ministries, organizations and agencies to produce a declaration of services offered to the population, with clear objectives as to quality; a strategic plan setting their objectives for a period covering several years; and an annual management report indicating the results obtained.

Some 80 ministries and other public organizations are subject to the provisions of this Act. This confers to a single committee the huge task of examining a considerable amount of documents.

During the first years of its existence, the Committee concentrated its efforts on the scrutiny of ministries and organizations mentioned in the value-for-money audits included in the Auditor General's Report. However, in recent years, the Committee has added as part of its yearly work load the examination of 16 annual management reports, which are studied in a deliberative meeting of the Committee. The results of analyses prepared by a team of National Assembly researchers are then presented to the Members.

Seven criteria are applied in the analysis of the management reports and they are coherent with other tools regularly used by the Auditor General to measure the performance of the public administration. Hence, the information contained in the annual management reports must:

- be coherent with the other documents required by the *Public Administration Act*;
- provide the basic information required for performance analysis;

- make it possible to compare the results obtained and to consider them in their proper context;
- indicate the degree of satisfaction of the clients;
- explain the connections between the costs, the activities, the products and services, and the results;
- state the corrections and alternatives foreseen and
- mention the capacity of the organization to maintain and improve its results.

The members of the Committee estimate whether or not an organization has met with satisfaction the various criteria enumerated above. They address observations to the organizations whose reports are under scrutiny and decide whether or not they wish to convene them for a hearing in the months to come. Their observations, conclusions and recommendations are included in the Committee's report on the accountability of deputy ministers and chief executive officers of public bodies.

### Operating Procedures of the Committee

The Committee on Public Administration consists of twelve permanent members, including five Members from the parliamentary group forming the Government, four Members from the Official Opposition and three Members from the Second Opposition Group. This apportionment reflects the current minority government situation. In addition, members may take part in the proceedings, for an entire meeting or for the duration of a term of reference, as substitutes or as temporary members (the same apportionment as that of permanent members applies to temporary members).

As is the case in the Public Accounts Committees of all Canadian legislatures, this Committee is chaired by a member of the Official Opposition, while the Vice-Chair is elected from the government parliamentary group. The following table lists the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Committee since its creation, in April 1997.

From its very first experiences, the Committee adopted a non partisan approach to dealing with administrative questions. During the ten years of its existence, all of its decisions and recommendations following the examination of a matter have been the result of a consensus among its members.

To encourage this non partisan and consensual approach as much as possible in the conduct of their business, the members of the Committee concentrate essentially on the examination of management rather than on political choices or their relevancy. They have often stressed the importance of establishing this climate of cooperation and its usefulness for executing their mandate of parliamentary oversight in a constructive way.

Both the physical arrangement of the room in which the Committee on Public Administration meets and the relatively flexible way in which the debates are organized, particularly with respect to alternance and speaking times, reinforce this spirit of collaboration between members.

### A Decade of Oversight: An Assessment

During the 35th Legislature, the Committee held 71 sittings on accountability, for a total of more than 140 hours of work.

Throughout the 36th Legislature, efforts were concentrated on the examination of the results of follow-ups done by the Auditor General with regard to previous auditing and on the action undertaken by the ministries and agencies in response to the Committee's recommendations. The members invested much of their time to this exercise: some 100 sittings for a total of 210 hours of deliberations.

During the 37th Legislature, the Committee held a record number of 124 sittings for the oversight of government management. The health and education sectors were among the many different topics which held the attention of the members.

	Chairs	Vice-chairs
35th Legislature	Jacques Chagnon (Westmount–Saint–Louis)	Michel Côté (La Peltrie)
36th Legislature	Geoffrey Kelley (Jacques-Cartier)	Cécile Vermette (Marie-Victorin) Solange Charest (Rimouski) Hélène Robert (Deux-Montagnes)
37th Legislature	Rita Dionne-Marsolais (Rosemont)	Pierre Marsan (Robert-Baldwin) Sarah Perreault (Chauveau)
38th Legislature	Gilles Taillon (Chauveau)	Vincent Auclair (Vimont)

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Several hours of committee work were also set aside for the surveillance, in the presence of their respective administrators, of the management of ministries and public bodies who offer direct services to the population, such as the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry responsible for Families, Seniors and the Status of Women, as well as the Consumer Protection Agency .

Moreover, the Committee collaborates on a regular basis with the Secretariat of the Treasury Board regarding any proposed improvements to laws and regulations pertaining to oversight. In 2005-2006, the members actively took part in both private and public meetings concerning the report on the implementation of the *Public Administration Act*, the purpose of which was to assess the results of its application five years after its passage.

They are happy to note that their concerns, which were expressed during the course of numerous public hearings as well as in their oversight reports, have been taken into account and are mentioned in the Treasury Board Secretariat's publication entitled *Five years of results-based management within the Government of Québec*.

To this day, the Committee on Public Administration has tabled in the National Assembly 19 unanimous reports on the accountability of deputy ministers and chief executive officers, which contain 298 recommendations on a large variety of topics.

After a decade of existence, the Committee has noticed greater transparency on the part of the ministries and agencies under its scrutiny, as well as growing open-mindedness with regard to its role as an overseer of government activity.

It is interesting to observe as well that the ministries and organizations under examination have often taken the opportunity afforded by the hearings to make public an action plan intended to respond to the deficiencies pointed out in either the Committee's accountability reports or the Auditor General's value-for-money audit reports. Furthermore, appearing before the Committee allows organizations to take stock of their programmes and to explain them fully to the members, thus rounding out the overview furnished by the Auditor General. They often find objective allies within the Committee to defend their action and improve their services.

The Committee on Public Administration reveals itself as an indispensable tool for ensuring productive oversight of the government administration. Among other things, it promotes a better comprehension by the citizenry of parliamentary responsibilities. It achieves this goal through dialogue with the representatives of the public service for the sole purpose of assuring efficient

management of public funds and better services to the population.

## The Future

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The ten years during which the Committee has existed are sufficiently rich in experience to allow us to conclude that its vision has been one of constant and significant progress in the exercise of its oversight mission. After having established the very basis of its parliamentary control strategy, after having defined a framework and established powers and practices that have been tested, the Committee has continued to refine its operating procedures in order to accomplish its mission in the best way possible. Nonetheless, there are still many challenges ahead.

One of the challenges in the organization of the committee's business concerns the difficulty in planning sittings within the framework of overall parliamentary activity. According to the Standing Orders of the Assembly, an order of reference to a committee from the Assembly has precedence over other business. As a result, Committee sittings are apt to be cancelled or postponed whenever a scheduling conflict arises.

As satisfying as it may be to reach a consensus regarding its value-added recommendations, Committee members still must face the major challenge of making sure that these recommendations are implemented by the agencies and ministries to whom they are addressed. Follow-ups are an essential component of oversight.

Another major challenge for the members is to communicate and sensitize both the general public and the media to their role as overseers of the government administration. The Committee on Public Administration has distinguished itself through innovations it has brought to the execution of its mandates over the years. It has certainly been at the centre of all changes regarding oversight and it continues to play a key role in the evolving implementation of results-based management within the Québec public administration. The Committee must now serve as an important link between the population and the government administration, to ensure efficient and effective management and dispensation of services.

There are still many challenges in store for this young committee which came into existence as a pilot project, and has since evolved into a dynamic model and a guide for all parliamentary committees who have at heart good management practices within the government apparatus.