

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

F-64

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

F-64

**Standing Committee on
Finance and Economic Affairs**

Committee business

1st Session
42nd Parliament
Thursday 1 April 2021

**Comité permanent
des finances
et des affaires économiques**

Travaux du comité

1^{re} session
42^e législature
Jeudi 1^{er} avril 2021

Chair: Amarjot Sandhu
Clerk: Julia Douglas

Président : Amarjot Sandhu
Greffière : Julia Douglas

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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; fax 416-325-7430
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Service linguistique et des publications parlementaires
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400; télécopieur, 416-325-7430
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Thursday 1 April 2021

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES FINANCES
ET DES AFFAIRES ÉCONOMIQUESJeudi 1^{er} avril 2021

The committee met at 1300 in committee room 151 and by video conference.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Good afternoon, everyone. I call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs to order. Before we begin, we have the following member in the committee room: MPP Fife. The following members are participating remotely: MPP Arthur, MPP Mamakwa, MPP Roberts, MPP Smith and MPP Thanigasalam.

MPP Cho, can you please confirm your attendance?

Mr. Stan Cho: Yes, Chair. Thank you. I am here in the city of Toronto.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you.

We're here to consider the committee process with respect to Bill 269, An Act to implement Budget measures and to enact and amend various statutes, which was referred to the committee today. Do we have a motion?

Mr. Stan Cho: Yes, Chair, I do.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Cho?

Mr. Stan Cho: I move that the committee enter closed session for the purposes of organizing committee business and that broadcasting staff be permitted to remain in the closed session meeting for the purposes of operating the electronic meeting technology.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Cho has moved a motion for the committee to go into closed session. MPP Fife?

Ms. Catherine Fife: The official opposition strongly opposes the moving of the organizational discussion of Bill 269 to go in camera. This is a departure from the way that traditionally this committee has operated, which should be open and should be transparent.

The government has obviously also not offered any rationale why this committee should move in camera. This is a pattern that the government has demonstrated by moving discussions that should be open for the entire province of Ontario to participate in and to bear witness to—if the government can offer no good rationale for moving in camera, then we will be requesting a recorded vote, and protesting the fact that this government is taking these conversations behind closed doors.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Any further debate?

Mr. Stan Cho: Sorry, Chair; I'm just waiting. Can you hear me? I'm not sure—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes, we can. We can hear you.

Mr. Stan Cho: You said you can hear me, Chair? Sorry, I'm having some technology—

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes, MPP Cho.

Mr. Stan Cho: Thank you, Chair. So, when committee business is organized by the subcommittee, it's done in camera. Given that this is the standard, we believe the same should happen when the full committee organizes business. All substance of debate on this bill would happen in public on the record, but the practice of organizing meetings of the committee routinely happens in camera. The public record for committees should focus on substantive work, not administration.

Finally, we've been organizing committee business this way for a year now and this should not be a surprise to the opposition.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Fife?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you for that explanation, MPP Cho. However, this is a huge departure from prior to your government coming into power. Traditionally, these conversations took place in an open and transparent manner. Not even the Liberals would do this, and I sat on that committee for those four years with them.

The other disturbing trend that I think all government members should be aware of is that prior to the budget being established, the government held behind-closed-doors public consultation on this budget. Why the government feels that us discussing the process by which we will examine Bill 269 via clause-by-clause or entertaining delegations—the people of this province deserve to know why the government is not engaging, quite honestly, in a process of consultation on the budget.

So the rationale offered by the parliamentary assistant to the finance minister is insufficient. It doesn't pass the test in a democracy. As I said, we will be asking for a recorded vote, because we find that this trend of having behind-closed-doors conversations about the people's business, of those we serve—it should be open and transparent for all of the province to see.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Any further debate? MPP Roberts?

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: I'll just note, Chair, for the record, responding to the member opposite, that our government did hold extensive consultations. This committee did hold extensive consultations throughout the summer. In fact, we heard from hundreds of stakeholders right

across the province. Literally anybody who wanted to have the chance to present to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs on how we, as an Ontario government, should respond to the COVID-19 pandemic had an opportunity to do that over the course of more than I believe it was 200 hours of committee hearings, a record in Ontario.

Our budget in 2021, tabled last week by the finance minister, continued to respond to feedback generated through that consultation.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Further debate? MPP Hunter.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: I really want to go on record to register my strong concern for the lack of consultation on this budget, budget 2021. The government cannot rely on discussions that we've had with businesses and communities and stakeholders in the summer of 2020 to inform the decisions on the budget for the 2021-22 fiscal year.

I would like to note that since the October budget, which those consultations informed, there have been five months that have passed. There has been a second wave that we have all experienced, and we are now in a third wave of variants of concern, which are new, which are having a different effect on the population. It's affecting more younger people and sending them to ICUs. And we are just on the cusp of a third lockdown that is supposed to be province-wide. So nothing has stayed the same since our consultations of summer 2020.

We need to hear from people from all regions of this province—from the north, from rural, from our cities and towns and communities—about how they want to see the government prioritize the spending that is happening in this province. They need an opportunity to do that. Many of them write directly to the members of this committee because there is no official forum to do open and transparent consultations.

Much of what the government has classified as consultations has been really just private meetings with organizations that represent certain groups, and they're not publicly available for people to attend or to see what the conversation is or to provide their input and their thoughts.

My expectation would be that Bill 269, the budget bill, would be consulted on and that people would have an opportunity to come before this committee and to provide witness to us about how the budget will affect them and the priorities they want to see. I don't believe that the government should be opposed to this. We shouldn't be rushing decisions that will affect people for 2021 and into 2022, when we hope that we will be beyond recovery and into growth in this province, having had the vaccines administered.

I want to just register the strong opposition that I have to any closed-door meetings and discussions that are not going to openly and transparently invite Ontarians in so that they can have a say in their budget. These revenues come from the people of Ontario through various means, and they deserve to have an opportunity to have their say.

The government should not be shutting down discussions for any reason. There's no reason to do that. We

are all available, all of us. We all work together. Chair, I admired the fact that you, more than anyone on the committee, did those hundreds of hours and listened to those testimonies. It was a heroic effort on your part, as the Chair of this committee. We were there—I was there for as many days and hours as I could over the summer, but it's not enough. That was last summer. We're talking about 2021 and moving forward, and how this budget, with record spending, with record deficits and with a crisis of our generation with COVID-19, as well as the recovery that we are all needing and hoping for—the budget is the foundation on which that recovery will begin. The people of Ontario deserve to have their say in an open and transparent way. It should not be rushed. We should not be blocking people from coming forward to this committee.

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Many individuals have already reached out to me as a member of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs to have their opportunity to express their views to this committee. They are hoping that this committee will listen. That's what they're hoping, that this committee will listen.

I just could not even imagine why you don't want to listen, because the government does not have all the ideas. You don't have all the solutions. You need to listen to and invite people in so that you can hear directly from them in terms of what their priorities are, what matters most to them, what will make the most difference. That requires a forum in which they can come forward and provide some sort of witness and some sort of testimony to this committee. That's the purpose of our standing committees, with all parties and all members represented here. Everyone comes to this committee in good faith, to do the work on behalf of the people of this province.

So that's what I wanted to say. I don't know if I will have the opportunity—because we don't have a majority on this committee, we are at the mercy and the whim of the members of the government. So I am putting forward this plea and in a public way, because people have been writing to me and my office, expecting that they will have an opportunity to come forward and be witnesses to this committee. I think that we should give them every opportunity to be heard.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Before we go to MPP Cho, MPP Babikian, can you please confirm your attendance?

Mr. Aris Babikian: Yes. Can you hear me, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes, we can. Yes.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Good afternoon, Chair. Good afternoon, everyone. I am Aris Babikian, MPP for Scarborough—Agincourt. I am in Queen's Park.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you, sir. I will go to MPP Cho for further debate.

Mr. Stan Cho: I just want to remind all members of the purpose of today. In closed session, we will be determining the schedule. Every meeting of substance for public hearings and clause-by-clause will happen in open session, Chair. So I suggest we move this motion to a vote.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): MPP Mamakwa?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Just a quick comment—can you hear me?

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Yes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Just a quick comment: I've been with this committee since we began back in the summer of 2018. Over the last couple of years, I've experienced what happens to Indigenous people, First Nations people in the province of Ontario. And I always think about responsibility, accountability, resource allocation. Those three things are so paramount in what we do.

Sometimes, as being part of the committee, I take pride in trying to make change within the system that's here. One of the things I face is the jurisdictional ambiguity that exists. This past winter, the last couple of months, I've travelled to communities. You have little kids with no access to clean drinking water. You have people that are living in tents. This is Ontario, right? We've had these discussions at these committees. You have heard them.

Most times, I hear back from this committee's members that the system that's there—we talk about that it's not the province, it's the federal responsibility. I want to be very clear: When you say that, that is structural violence. When you start doing that jurisdictional Ping-Pong with the health and the lives of those children in the north, Indigenous people, First Peoples, that is structural racism. And that's what happens. I continue to see it. I see it; I live it. I don't know if you will ever understand that. I mean, as First Peoples, as guests of these lands—I don't know if I should call you "immigrants." I don't know.

That's one of the things that you have to understand from me looking in at the system. And when you try and explain to us your rationale—but at the end of the day, what does that mean? At the end of the day, there's structural racism here, there's structural—you know, like for

me, as a First Nations, Indigenous MPP, as your colleague. That's what that means.

I just wanted to put that out there, because it's real. You could be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Meegwetch.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Further debate? Seeing none, are the members ready to vote?

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Recorded vote.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): A recorded vote has been requested. Shall the motion carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Julia Douglas): Mr. Babikian; Mr. Cho, Willowdale; Mr. Piccini—sorry, we started the vote before doing the attendance check.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): No, we did it—sorry, MPP Piccini, I believe. Can we do it? Or—

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): They still have a majority, so I think—yes.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Julia Douglas): Mr. Roberts—

Mr. David Piccini: Hi, Chair. Yes, it's MPP Piccini, on my way back to my constituency, in the passenger seat. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): Thank you.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Julia Douglas): Mr. Smith, Peterborough-Kawartha; Mr. Thanigasalam.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): All those opposed, please raise your hand.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Julia Douglas): Ms. Fife, Ms. Hunter, Mr. Mamakwa, Mr. Arthur.

The Chair (Mr. Amarjot Sandhu): The motion is carried. We'll now move into closed session, which will take just a moment, please.

The committee continued in closed session at 1318.

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