



COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: 20 YEARS OF PROGRESS IN ACCOUNTABILITY IN QUÉBEC



Hon. Sylvain Gaudreault, MNA is the Chairman of the Committee on Public Administration at the National Assembly of Québec. He has represented the electoral district of Jonquière since 2007 and he served in the Québec Government as Minister of Transport and Municipal Affairs (2012-2014).

The National Assembly of Québec's Committee on Public Administration (CPA) celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. Following in the footsteps of Québec's first Parliamentarians, who as early as 1792 demanded that the Governor or his administration give an account of his expenses, the Committee on Public Administration continues to set new boundaries. This article explains how the Committee on Public Administration works and presents the practices and functions that set it apart from other Public Accounts Committees of the Commonwealth.

Spurred by the idea of mandating a standing committee to examine government management, Québec Parliamentarians adopted a series of amendments to the Standing Orders of the National Assembly on 10 April 1997. One of these divided the Committee on the Budget and Administration into two separate committees: the Committee on Public Finance and the above-mentioned Committee on Public Administration.

First established on a trial basis, the Committee on Public Administration became a standing committee five months later. In May 2000, the Committee on Public Administration's mandate was broadened with the passing of the *Public Administration Act*, which, by making the Administration accountable to the National Assembly,

recognised the role played by Parliamentarians with respect to government action and improving public services. The new Act facilitated oversight by requiring government departments to establish objectives, measure achievement of those objectives and disclose their results in an annual management report.

The Standing Orders list a number of functions for the Committee on Public Administration, two of which are particularly challenging. Deputy Ministers or Chief Executive Officers of public bodies must appear before the Committee to discuss their administrative management when it is reported on by the Auditor General or by the Public Protector, an ombudsman appointed by the National Assembly. In addition, the Act stipulates that the Committee on Public Administration must hear deputy Ministers and Chief Executive Officers at least once every four years to discuss their administrative management.

Other Committee on Public Administration functions include hearing the Auditor General on his or her annual management report and examining the annual report on the implementation of the *Public Administration Act*. The Committee on Public Administration is also mandated to examine the financial commitments of government departments and bodies, which is a unique mandate in the world of British Parliamentarism. In

addition, the Committee on Public Administration may examine any other matter the Assembly refers to it. Its sole role is to hold the Administration accountable; it does not examine Bills.

In carrying out its mission, the Committee on Public Administration relies on the close collaboration of the Auditor General of Québec. When the Committee on Public Administration examines one of his or her reports, the Auditor General participates in both preparatory deliberative meetings and public hearings, presenting the findings of his or her audit to committee members to inform them of the main issues.

Committee proceedings are carried out in a non-partisan, collaborative environment. Committee observations, conclusions and recommendations are the result of a consensus among its members.

The Committee on Public Administration is chaired by a Member of the Official Opposition who, with the Steering Committee, plans Committee on Public Administration proceedings so as to ensure continuity in the cycle of parliamentary oversight and accountability. Committee proceedings are the subject of a bi-annual accountability report.

Overseeing implementation of the Public Administration Act
Some of the Committee on Public Administration's

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Above: A recent session of the National Assembly of Québec's Committee on Public Administration takes place.

functions set it apart from other Commonwealth Public Accounts Committees. First, it has the obligation to examine the annual report on the implementation of the *Public Administration Act*.

Passed in 2000, this Act established new accountability mechanisms to promote results-based management centred on transparency. Every year, the Chair of the Conseil du trésor (Québec Treasury Board) must table a report on the implementation of the Act within the Administration. Appointed as the guardian of the Act, the Committee on Public Administration hears the secretary of the Conseil du trésor and that report in the context of a public hearing.

To mark the 10th anniversary of the *Public Administration Act*, the Committee on Public Administration and the Secretariat of the Conseil du trésor organized a day of reflection on the Act. A total of 175 Parliamentarians, deputy Ministers, Chief Executive Officers and managers discussed the implementation over the previous ten years and what the future might hold.

Regular and systematic controls to ensure accountability

In legislatures based on the Westminster parliamentary system, Public Accounts Committees rarely examine the annual reports of government departments and bodies. However, the Committee on Public Administration does precisely that over a four-year cycle. Although the National Assembly's sectorial committees share some of the load, the Committee on Public Administration takes on the lion's share of reviewing the annual management reports of some one hundred departments and bodies subject to the *Public Administration Act*.

Under the Standing Orders of the National Assembly, sectorial committees have the power to initiate oversight and accountability mandates and examine, on their own initiative, the management performance of departments and bodies in their respective areas of competence. In exercising that power, they ease the Committee on Public

Administration's burden. In order to coordinate its work with that of the sectorial committees, the Committee on Public Administration must inform them when it initiates the examination of a matter in one of their areas of competence. If a sectorial committee wishes to take over a mandate, it has 10 days to notify the Committee on Public Administration.

To help it meet its obligations, including its duty to examine all the annual reports every four years, the Committee on Public Administration has adopted a three-step procedure and an assessment grid.

First, Committee on Public Administration Members examine the annual management reports during deliberative meetings, send comments to the departments and bodies concerned and determine which entities they wish to hear in a public hearing. At this stage, the Members can count on the support of the National Assembly's Research Service, which performs a preliminary analysis. Using criteria determined by the Committee on Public Administration, each entity's

performance is assessed in four areas: fulfilment of its mission, achievement of its strategic objectives, quality of its public services and optimal use of its resources.

Second, the Committee on Public Administration holds public hearings. Committee members question the deputy Ministers and Chief Executive Officers who appear before it. The Committee on Public Administration then holds a deliberative hearing to establish its conclusions and make recommendations.

Third, the Committee on Public Administration tables a report before the National Assembly containing a summary of its work, including all observations, conclusions and recommendations made over the course of the sessional period concerned. Such a report is tabled twice a year and, since the beginning of the 41st Legislature



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(March 2014), has varied in length from 7 to 11 chapters. Each year, the Committee on Public Administration examines an average of 15 annual reports in deliberative meetings, but only about 5 of them are the subject of a public hearing.

A unique monitoring mechanism

The Committee on Public Administration attaches great importance to the follow-up given to its work by government departments and bodies. Every entity whose resource use has been the subject of a performance audit has four months after the Auditor General's report is tabled to devise and table an action plan in response to the Auditor General's recommendations. If called to appear before the Committee on Public Administration, it must send its action plan to the Committee two weeks before the hearing.

The Committee on Public Administration has put in place a mechanism to monitor implementation of its recommendations. Subsequent to each hearing, whether convened following a report by the Auditor General or to examine administrative

management, the Committee on Public Administration determines the conclusions and recommendations it will make to the entity concerned. It keeps track of the recommendations it makes and each entity's response using a dashboard-format Word chart. The Auditor General also verifies the implementation of some of the Committee on Public Administration's recommendations when doing the same for his or her own recommendations, and then determines whether the progress made on each recommendation examined is satisfactory or not.

A priori financial controls

Contrary to prevailing practice in most Westminster-style parliamentary legislatures, the Committee on Public Administration does not examine the consolidated financial statements of government departments and bodies. Instead it examines government financial commitments of \$25,000 or more, meaning expenditures authorized by the entities but not made. Each year, over 20,000 financial commitments are authorized by the Conseil du trésor, Conseil exécutif (Executive Council) and government departments.

To carry out this mandate,

the Committee on Public Administration extracts lists of commitments from the Québec government's electronic tendering system. It performs sample controls, targeting certain types of financial commitments it wishes to examine more closely. The Committee on Public Administration systematically examines the financial commitments of the departments and bodies whose deputy Ministers and Chief Executive Officers are summoned to appear before it regarding their administrative management.

Conclusion

The Committee on Public Administration performs regular and systematic controls to ensure the accountability of deputy Ministers and Chief Executive Officers. The follow-up mechanism it has developed to ensure implementation of its recommendations, the examination of government financial commitments of \$25,000 or more that it is empowered to conduct on its own initiative and its unique status under the Public Administration Act set it apart from other Public Accounts Committees.

Over its 225 years of parliamentary history, Québec has made significant strides in the

area of parliamentary oversight. By formalizing this important function, the Committee on Public Administration has played an essential role. As the Committee with some of the broadest powers in terms of oversight of the Administration, the Committee on Public Administration will no doubt continue to hone its approach and shine as one of the most dynamic committees of the Commonwealth.

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Left: A recent session of the National Assembly of Québec's Committee on Public Administration takes place.