
The British Columbia Estimates Process: Issues and Reform

by Harry Bloy, MLA

Holding the government to account for its spending plans and the annual voting of funds are two primary responsibilities of Parliament. This paper looks at the estimates process in British Columbia.



British Columbia still uses the Committee of Supply to review ministry estimates, rather than referring estimates to standing committees as many legislatures in Canada do. Since 1992, our Committee of Supply has been divided into two sections: Section A meets in the main committee room and Section B in the chamber.

This year, for the first time, all ministry estimates were reviewed in Section A. I should just explain that in 2005, cameras were installed in our main committee room, allowing live web-casting and post-adjourning televising of all Estimates debate in Section A. So this spring, government decided to do all the estimates in the committee room in order to free up time in the chamber to complete its busy legislative agenda by May 29.

Needless to say, this decision did not go down well with the Opposition. Under previous sessional motions, the Opposition had the option of choosing three ministry estimates for full debate in the chamber (Section B), where the proceedings have been televised live since 1991.

Let me now give an overview of what a typical sitting day for Committee of Supply — Section A (or the little House) looks like. This spring I presided over debates on

all ministry estimates, totalling some 153 hours, as the table shows.

When chairing Section A, on my right sits the Minister, with the Deputy Minister. Seating is available behind the Minister for five senior officials, and others sit in the public gallery. This year, I counted 23 officials from one ministry alone. Also, all ministry officials carry huge briefing binders.

On my left sits the Opposition critic, who may be assisted by unseen researchers monitoring proceedings via TV. Conspicuous by their absence are the news media.

This year, almost 17 hours were spent on Transportation estimates, closely followed by Health estimates (15 hours). This left about 120 hours for the other 17 ministries, the Premier's Office and the Legislative Assembly.

The questioning of the Minister is shared among the Opposition critic and opposition members with an interest in the delivery of services at the local level. Typically, the debate covers both partisan policy issues and constituents' concerns. As evidenced by the number of officials and the size of their binders, obviously hundreds of hours of prep time go into preparing staff for this process — "just in case" they are needed. However, at the end of the day, the proposed funding is usually approved without amendment.

This scenario is probably typical of what happens in other parliaments across Canada. To be frank, I cannot help wondering if this is what members of parliament at Westminster had in mind when they gained control of spending and began the scrutiny process so many years ago.

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Time Spent on Estimates, Fourth Session, Thirty-eighth Parliament (2008) (as of May 29, 2008)	
Ministry	Time Spent on Estimates
Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation	3 hours 14 minutes
Advanced Education	8 hours 20 minutes
Agriculture and Lands	8 hours 20 minutes
Attorney General	3 hours 39 minutes
Children and Family Development	8 hours 41 minutes
Community Services	5 hours 06 minutes
Economic Development	7 hours 04 minutes
Education	13 hours 36 minutes
Employment and Income Assistance	6 hours 14 minutes
Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources	5 hours 16 minutes
Environment	6 hours 20 minutes
Finance	3 hours 33 minutes
Forests and Range	13 hours 45 minutes
Health	15 hours 16 minutes
Labour and Citizens' Services	8 hours 56 minutes
Premier	8 hours 40 minutes
Public Safety and Solicitor General	3 hours 23 minutes
Small Business and Revenue	5 hours 14 minutes
Tourism, Sports and the Arts	1 hour 46 minutes
Transportation	16 hours 58 minutes
Vote 1 and Legislative Officers	2 minutes
	153 hours 22 minutes

Does the estimates process provide good value for the taxpayer?

It is becoming more of a challenge for members nowadays to hold government to account for financial management. I think there are really three issues: time management, information gaps and procedural obstacles. These issues are relevant ones, whether Estimates debate takes place in Committee of Supply or standing committees.

All members face competing demands on their time — no matter what party they belong to. This is due in part to the deadlines set by the calendar for completion of legislative business. These time pressures became obvious

during the BC estimates review process this spring. For example, the Minister of Health broke with tradition by not giving the 30-minute opening statement. Due to the crowded calendar, he had to be in the committee room to defend his ministry estimates and also in the chamber to pilot five bills beyond second reading near the end of the spring sitting (May 20-29 period).

On the other side of the House, it is probably fair to say that the Opposition feels it never has enough time to give ministry estimates the detailed scrutiny they deserve. In our Assembly, the adoption of a time allocation motion on May 6 certainly increased the pressure on members to complete all estimates by May 29.

Another issue focuses on whether we have the information, support or expertise to hold government to account for financial management. In other words, are we up to the challenge, given the size and complexity of the public sector?

Let me just summarize some results of interviews with federal MPs in 2002:

- First, the good news. Most MPs did not seem to have a problem with the financial administration framework — the legislation, standing orders relating to the business of Supply, and committee mandates.
- Also, MPs felt they had a reasonable grasp of the big financial picture: total revenues and expenditures, deficits and surpluses, aggregate debt and trends.
- However, MPs often admitted they did not pay much attention to the Estimates, and only had “a weak idea” of what level of resources was spent to achieve program results.¹

To avoid being accused of Ottawa-bashing, let me be very clear that most members of provincial and territorial assemblies would have similar financial-competency scores as MPs! Most of us are generalists after all rather than experts in public finance.

Let me turn now to some procedural issues. I am not yet an expert on procedure but I think it is safe to say that parliamentary Estimates committees in all jurisdictions cannot recommend an increase in the appropriation requested, once review of line-by-line spending is completed. While they can reject or reduce the estimate, most of the time they simply approve it unchanged. As a result, the estimates process appears to be an annual ritual like the rite of spring.

Furthermore, surveys of MPs (2001) and MLAs (2002) reveal that Canadian legislators express “great frustration” with the government estimates process, and the net result is their limited participation.² These findings are far from new. As David Good points out, there is a long history of parliamentarians’ frustration with the review and approval of the government’s estimates.³

I think we need to recognize the fact that in Westminster-style parliaments, there is currently no forum for private members (backbenchers) where they can advocate new or expanded program activity, or propose even modest increases in government spending. I wonder how many members think the ban preventing parliamentarians from initiating expenditure is the main procedural obstacle to overcome.

Reforming the Process

As there is no shortage of ideas for reform, I want to focus on those that tackle the three issues described earlier: time management, information gaps, and procedural obstacles.

One way to revive the estimates process is to consider allocating a set amount of time for the minister to be available for opening remarks and answer any questions at the conclusion of the process. This would mean that the bulk of Estimates debate questions would be addressed by senior officials who would provide technical details.

This procedure would facilitate debate on public policy questions between the minister responsible and Opposition critics. It would also mean that technical questions regarding local projects or constituents' concerns (short snappers) could be asked in the minister's absence and answered by ministry officials.

On the other hand, I cannot help wondering whether this distinction between the minister's policy role and senior officials' administrative role is a realistic one in the cut-and-thrust of Estimates debate.

At the federal level, I have recently heard about the establishment of a new office, the Parliamentary Budget Office.⁴ This is an important step to address information gaps and enhance scrutiny of government spending. The office's mandate is to provide objective analysis to the House and Senate about trends in the economy, the state of the nation's finances, and the government estimates.

Appearing before the House Government Operations and Estimates Committee on May 13, the new Parliamentary Budget Officer (Kevin Page) explained his role. He said he can offer MPs "a little simplicity and clarity to reading the government's books" and also "flag those big material increases that show up in the estimates from time to time."⁵

It has also been proposed that the new office take on the specific task of looking at the estimates from the parliamentarians' perspective.⁶

Now, let me move to the topic of reform of House rules regarding examination of estimates. To date, much of the

discussion has focused on the distance between where we are now and where we ought to go.

However, one author, David Smith, suggests that we also need to ask another question: what ought to be undone? At the federal level, did the removal of estimates from the whole House acting as Committee of Supply to standing committees strengthen or weaken Parliament, the opposition, and the concept of government accountability?⁷

Dr. Smith's question is also a valid one to ask at the provincial level and not only in those parliaments that refer estimates to standing committees. In British Columbia, the question can be framed this way: Do we need to revisit the decision to review all estimates in the main committee room? Should we do some, or even all, estimates in Committee of Supply in the main chamber?

While it is too early to assess the experiment this spring, my personal view is that it is certainly more challenging to maintain order and decorum in a committee room than in the chamber. The more informal setting encourages committee members to interact with people who show up in the public gallery, behavior that would not occur in the chamber.

My simple conclusion is that there seems to be a widespread consensus that the estimates review process needs to be reformed. In Ottawa and in the provinces, members belonging to all parties feel frustrated by their inability to exercise effective scrutiny.

Notes

1. See Peter Dobell and Martin Ulrich, *Parliament and Financial Accountability*, Research Paper for Gomery Commission, 2006, pp. 24, 28-29.
2. David C. Docherty, *Legislatures*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2005, p. 18.
3. David Good, *The Politics of Public Money*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2007, p. 233.
4. See Gary Levy, "A Parliamentary Budget Officer for Canada," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, vol 31, Summer 2008.
5. *The Hill Times*, 26 May 2008.
6. Thomas S. Axworthy, *Everything Old is New Again: Observations on Parliamentary Reform*, Queen's University, Centre for the Study of Democracy, April 2008, p. 60.
7. See David Smith, *The People's House of Commons: Theories of Democracy in Contention*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2007.