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Chair

Mr. Barry Devolin

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• (1550)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Barry Devolin (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC)): Welcome to the 28th meeting of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

So many of our recent meetings have been televised that I've always worn my jacket, thinking I needed to look good. But this one's not televised, so today I can get away with taking off my jacket, as can you.

It seems like only minutes ago we decided we wanted to have people from the Auditor General's office come to visit us, and lo and behold, here you are today.

I'd like to welcome Ronnie Campbell, Assistant Auditor General, and Jerome Berthelette. Gentlemen, if you could make a presentation of 10 minutes or so, we'll follow that with a round or two of questioning.

With that, I turn it over to you, Mr. Campbell.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Assistant Auditor General, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss our May 2008 report on the first nations child and family services program.

With me today is Jerome Berthelette, the principal auditor responsible for this audit.

[Translation]

The audit examined how Indian and Northern Affairs Canada manages its First Nations Child and Family Services program. Our colleague, the Auditor General of British Columbia, conducted a concurrent audit covering child welfare services for aboriginal people in B.C.

Mr. Chairman, some of the most vulnerable children in Canada are first nations children. At the end of March 2007 there were about 8,300 on-reserve children in care. This number represents more than 5% of all children living on reserves and this percentage is almost eight times higher than the percentage of children living off reserves who are in care.

In 2007, INAC spent \$180 million for operating and administration costs of providing services to children and families ordinarily resident on reserves.

[English]

With this funding, INAC supported 108 first nations agencies that provide a range of child welfare services to about 442 first nations.

INAC also used the funding to pay for the services provided on reserves by provinces. In addition, INAC spent \$270 million for costs related to children placed in care by first nations agencies and the provinces.

In 1990, the federal government adopted a policy that includes a requirement that the services provided to first nations children on reserves meet provincial standards, are reasonably compatible with services for children off reserve, and are culturally appropriate.

We found that the department has not defined what “reasonably compatible” and “culturally appropriate” mean. Furthermore, the department does not sufficiently take into account provincial standards and other policy requirements when it establishes levels of funding for first nations agencies to operate child welfare services on reserves.

Mr. Chairman, the department's funding formula dates back to 1988. It has not been significantly changed since then to reflect variations in provincial legislation and the evolution of child welfare services. In addition, the funding formula assumes that all first nations agencies have the same percentage of children in care—that is, 6%—and that the children all have similar needs. This assumption leads to funding inequities, because the percentage of children in care, as well as their needs, varies widely. The outdated funding formula means that some children and families are not getting the services they need.

Mr. Chairman, last year, through federal, provincial, and first nations cooperation, the funding formula was revised in Alberta. This revision links the funding provided to first nations agencies in Alberta to provincial legislation. When fully implemented in 2010, the formula will provide 74% more funds for the agencies' operations and prevention services. While this is encouraging, we found, however, that the new formula still assumes that a fixed percentage of first nations children and families need child welfare services. Agencies with more than 6% of their children in care will continue to be hard pressed to provide protection services when they also have to develop family enhancement services.

•(1555)

[Translation]

In our view, the funding formula should become more than a means of distributing the program's budget; it should also take into account the varying needs of first nations communities.

Funding is not the only issue. We believe that ensuring the protection and well-being of children requires that INAC, the provinces, and first nations agencies have a clear understanding of their responsibilities. Up-to-date agreements are essential. We found that INAC had no agreements on child welfare services with three of the five provinces we covered in our audit.

[English]

Finally, we found that INAC has little information on the outcome of its funding on the safety, protection, or well-being of on-reserve children. It does not know whether its program makes a positive and/or significant difference in the lives of the children it funds.

The large percentage of first nations children in care calls for all the parties involved in the child welfare system, including first nations and provinces, to find better ways of meeting their needs. INAC has indicated it will seek authority to extend the approach taken in Alberta to other provinces by 2012.

Mr. Chairman, your committee may want to invite the representatives from INAC to provide information on the work plan developed by the department to implement our recommendations. It may also consider inviting representatives of first nations agencies to provide more information about child welfare issues on reserves.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my opening statement. My colleague and I would be pleased to answer any questions your committee may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will use our normal procedure, whereby we will have a first round of seven minutes.

To begin today, from the Liberal Party we have Ms. Neville.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you very much for coming and for standing in the hall waiting until we agreed to let you in the door. Thank you also for this report; it's an important one.

As you undoubtedly are aware, we are all, I think, around this table committed to the equality of opportunity for all children, and particularly first nations children. You talked in the report about money for housing and infrastructure being allocated to child and family services, but you said that moneys were reallocated for other projects. We know that moneys are constantly being reallocated in the department, and I wonder whether you could speak to that a little.

I was out of town this past week, but my understanding is that the minister has dismissed the report, saying this is not about money. I wonder, in your answers, whether you could comment on the need for additional resources. We heard the previous minister blame the victim for the increase in the number of children in care. We're quite

pleased to see your report come out, in which you clarify that in fact that's not the case.

I'd like to focus a little on the jurisdictional issues. You talked about an expectation that the department would have clear authorities and expected results for the program. I'm going to ask a few questions and then let you answer.

Do you think the jurisdictional barriers or the issues are really a barrier, or a scapegoat, and what would you recommend to overcome these potential barriers? You talk about the lack of formal agreements in place. What are the barriers to accomplishing these agreements?

You also talk about a need to facilitate coordination between the child and family services program and other relevant INAC programs. What types of barriers are there within the federal government to this? Is it Treasury Board guidelines, territorial turf wars—what is it?

Some time ago, and it's really some time ago, I met with the child and welfare division of the department, and I think we should call them in. They indicated at that time that they had a plan that was ready to roll, and it's quite clear that no plan has been rolled out.

I don't know whether I'm making myself clear, but I'd like some comments, really, on the jurisdictional barriers that are in place, as you see them.

•(1600)

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: I think there were several questions there, and I thank you for them. If I miss one, or if my colleague and I miss one, then please just remind us.

You talked about a response from the minister. I don't know what comment you're referring to. I think the response we've received—

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): She must have been out of town.

Hon. Anita Neville: I said I was out of town. I said I was advised. Let's be clear.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: I have no view on that, because I'm not aware of the comment, but certainly the response from the department has been that they've agreed with all the recommendations, and part of that response has been that they intend to seek authority to take the Alberta arrangement and expand it to other provinces.

Hon. Anita Neville: Can I just interrupt you there? You talked about two other provinces by 2012. We're currently at 2008. Four years in the life of a child is a long time. Do you see a way, or does your audit show a way, that such a plan can be accelerated?

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: That's a good question. Our audit didn't get into that, because what we're talking about here is a departmental response to the audit. But certainly I think that would be a really good question to pose to the department.

You're absolutely right that time is of the essence. I think there have been several studies in this area that all point to similar issues. We talk about a fundamental disconnect between the way the funding is calculated and allocated, the disconnect between that and the reality that both the children and the first nations agencies face. So a lot of that won't get fixed until those funding agreements line up against the range of services the children need. But I think ways to accelerate the implementation of the department's response would be an interesting question to pose to the department, should you choose to have them come to the committee.

In terms of barriers and reallocation, I'm going to ask my colleague, Mr. Berthelette, to try to deal with that, and when he's done, if there's anything we've missed, please let us know.

Hon. Anita Neville: Thank you.

Mr. Jerome Berthelette (Principal, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Mr. Chairman, the issue with respect to the barriers between programs is discussed in paragraphs 4.38 to 4.41 on pages 16 and 17 in our report. There we note the coordination between departments is poor, and we particularly highlight the relationship between Health Canada and Indian Affairs with respect to, in this case, the availability of non-insured health benefits to children who are brought into care.

We note that there is a fundamental difference of point of view between Health Canada and Indian Affairs with respect to who is responsible for the provision of health services once a child is brought into care. Health Canada's point of view is that once a child is brought into care, it should be treated like any other child who is brought into care, and the cost of non-insured health benefits should not be covered by Health Canada. Indian Affairs' point of view is that the status of the child does not change, and the ability to access non-insured health benefits should not change just because a child is brought into care. So what happens is that Indian Affairs has temporary authority to cover off health care costs, non-insured costs, when Health Canada will not pay for those costs, but it can only do so once Health Canada has said to the agency or to the foster parent, "No, we will not cover that cost," and that foster parent or that agency has gone through the appeal process. This can result, as we note in the audit, in delays with respect to children accessing services.

The problem in this case is the terms and conditions of the programs. In order for Jordan's Principle, for example, to be able to work effectively, changes in the terms and conditions of the programs are going to have to occur so that the department that comes into contact with the child in the first instance will actually be able to cover all the cost and then go to the other departments, or perhaps even the provincial government, for reimbursement.

In large measure, it's a structural issue related to the way the programs are set up and the stovepiping that has occurred in the way the programs are established.

• (1605)

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemay, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, gentlemen. We decided just last week to meet with you, and I very much appreciate your coming here today.

I have problems with the Auditor General's report regarding first nations child welfare services. The Quebec government just amended its *Loi sur la protection de la jeunesse* (Youth Protection Act). Pursuant to the new legislation which came into force on April 1, 2008, children can be taken out of aboriginal communities, and the family has a year to improve. Otherwise, children could be put out for adoption.

If we invest \$180 million and the problem is not... Some agreements have not been concluded. Is the problem with the provinces and the federal government, or with the federal government and the Department of Health or the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada? I will ask the Auditor General and her representatives to tell us who is not doing their job.

[*English*]

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Mr. Chairman, the honourable member has raised a very interesting question. The delivery of services for children on reserve is a very complex situation.

In large measure, it's perhaps not a question of who is not doing their job, but perhaps it's more of a question of how we make sure that each of the sectors or jurisdictions responsible for delivering the service and supporting the service on reserve is actually coordinating what it is doing and that they are all supporting each other.

We noted, for instance, that in a couple of the provinces in which we conducted our audit there was no federal-provincial agreement with respect to the allocation of responsibilities between the federal and provincial governments and the first nations. It would be good, and we recommend that Indian Affairs actually enter into these types of agreements with each of the provinces. In their response, Indian Affairs has said that this is something they are going to do. Once they do that, and once they are able to allocate the responsibilities more appropriately and make sure the supports are better coordinated, I suspect we will see fewer problems on the jurisdictional front and more cooperation. Having said that, there are still structural issues with respect to how the formula is set up and the fact that it has not provided sufficient funding for provincial services that are required under provincial legislation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay: I appreciate the diplomacy displayed by the Auditor General and her representatives. It is like music to my ears. However, as a federal member of Parliament, when I read in paragraph 7 of your presentation that: "[...] the department has not defined what 'reasonably comparable' and 'culturally appropriate' mean." A colloquial expression comes to my mind right away: "Good heavens! What will it take for them to get it done?"

What will happen is that very soon, children will be taken out of several Quebec aboriginal communities, and they will not be returned. Call this whatever you want, but as far as I am concerned, this is assimilation. If you take a six-month-old or a one-year-old child out of its community and put it out for adoption, it will not be any more an Indian than you or I am.

Who will make sure that the department defines the terms "reasonably comparable" and "culturally appropriate"? It has not done it for the past 20 years. I am very uncomfortable with this sentence.

• (1610)

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: Thank you.

[English]

Clearly, that's the department's responsibility. In 1990 they developed the policy, the implementation of which we're auditing in this report. The department decided the program and funding should support activities that meet provincial standards, that have a degree of compatibility to them, and that are culturally appropriate. It's the department's policy that says that, so the responsibility quite clearly is on the department to determine what those things mean, how they will implement them, and then go ahead and implement them.

The member is absolutely right, it's been since 1990 and that hasn't been done.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemay: It has not been done since 1990. Now, in 2008, 8,000 children need support each year. We should prepare the minister psychologically and psychiatrically for his appearance before us two days from now. This must be included in his budget. If I have understood your statements, nothing was provided for for the children in those communities in the funding formula that goes back to 1988. Is that what you are saying?

[English]

The Chair: A short answer, please.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: A big part of this solution isn't funding, I'm afraid. As Mr. Berthelette said, this is a complex set of issues. There are jurisdictional issues and basic program definition issues, but the funding of the program, if it's to meet its objectives, has to be related to the objectives it sets out. One of the objectives is to meet provincial standards. The funding needs to be calculated on a basis that understands what those provincial standards are and what needs to be done to meet them. Just going with a formula is going to be hit and miss; as we've seen in cases we've reported in the chapter, more often than not it's miss.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Campbell.

Ms. Crowder, you have seven minutes.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming before the committee.

I think many people have been aware of the underfunding, incompatibility, and a lot of the other issues. I think this report

clearly outlines that this is a serious problem that we can't ignore any longer.

You don't need to comment on this, but I also want to point out that in the B.C. report, which was a parallel report, they talk about the fact that 51% of the children in the province's care are aboriginal. That's a shocking number when you consider the percentage of the population.

In paragraph 4.19, under comparability, I have a quick question around the fact that one of the things they look at in many provinces are least disruptive measures and every attempt to support the family to keep them in place. You didn't specifically look at comparability, but did these disruptive measures come up?

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Mr. Chair, the issue of least disruptive measures came up quite often while we were conducting this audit, particularly within the Alberta context, where they use what they call the differential response models. That came up, and it was clear, particularly in the Alberta context, that before this agreement was entered into with Alberta, the family enhancement program was not available to the first nations agencies who were funded by Indian Affairs.

• (1615)

Ms. Jean Crowder: That's right, the family enhancement program is not available to agencies funded by Indian Affairs.

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: It was not available.

Ms. Jean Crowder: That means children are put in care rather than to support the family?

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: That means they didn't have access to those services that would help maintain the child at home with their parents and provide the parents and the family in general with the supports needed, when the child is taken out of care, to have the child brought back to the family, where the child's well-being could then be followed and ensured.

Ms. Jean Crowder: That's outrageous. Sorry.

Under 4.51, around the outdated funding formula, you said earlier that you can't just look at this in the context of funding. I agree, it's a much larger issue than just funding. But between that comment was the comment around the Alberta model, that it would take roughly a 74% increase, is my understanding, to have those services.

The Assembly of First Nations and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada have filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission, alleging that the services are underfunded at roughly 22% of what a provincial government would fund those equivalent services. Did you look at that at all?

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: There are two flows of funds, so I'll try to simplify it. One is to pay for the cost of children in care, and those are the funds we talked about earlier. In fact, I don't think we've fully answered the member's question about reallocation. The department pays those funds, and it finds the money somewhere in the department; it takes money from housing and infrastructure and the like.

Ms. Jean Crowder: *[Inaudible—Editor]*...in 4.72.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: The other stream of funding is to fund the agencies, and that's based on a formula. That doesn't take into account two very important factors. One is the actual number of case files the agency may have. The other is the evolving nature of child care services, from the more interventionist to, nowadays, a more prevention-type model. So it doesn't take into account either of those kinds of things.

The member is right that a lot of the people we talked to in this particular field say the manner in which the funding formula is developed and implemented encourages taking children out of the home rather than prevention, because a lot of the time these prevention services are just not there. One can only presume that people faced with reality have to do something, and they can only do what they've got the tools to do. I think we mention also in 4.35 that when provincial-level services are not available, then there are indications that children not receiving prevention or in-home services would instead be placed in good care. That seems to be a view that a lot of the professionals....

Ms. Jean Crowder: I know with the human rights complaint that was filed, in fact, one of the comments that came out is that there are more children in care now than there were under the residential schools. So people are seeing this as the residential schools played out again in a different way. It has a devastating impact on the families and their communities.

I just want to touch on Jordan's Principle for a moment, because of course that was my motion that the House unanimously adopted, which I'm very grateful for. However, what we've seen is very little effort to actually implement the spirit and intent of Jordan's Principle. In fact, in Norway House Cree Nation currently there are 37 children. The health minister recently announced that the services would not be interrupted, but it does point to the jurisdictional disputes ongoing between federal and provincial governments.

But I wonder if you could also comment on this. It's not only between federal government departments; it's also between federal and provincial governments and territorial governments. Did you look at the jurisdictional dispute between federal and provincial governments as well?

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: I will get Mr. Berthelette to answer that. I will say, though, before he does that, that we do have an example in the chapter about the dispute within the federal family, if you like, between Indian Affairs and Health Canada. Mr. Berthelette has already commented on that.

In terms of federal-provincial jurisdictional debates, I'll let Mr. Berthelette answer.

● (1620)

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: No, Mr. Chair, we didn't actually go into detail and take a look at federal-provincial jurisdictional issues.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: Mr. Chair, it's probably worth adding, though, that some of the interaction we have observed between the provincial governments and Indian Affairs has been communication that standards are not being met and that children are not getting the service they should be getting, trying to encourage Indian Affairs to do something about that. We have seen some cases where the department did react. The little we saw of that was not a traditional "you do it, no, I'll do it" type of thing, but certainly there are a lot of professionals involved in this field who do want to see those children get a good level of service.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bruinooge, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Winnipeg South, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank our witnesses today, and of course the Office of the Auditor General for another important report. Of course, our government is very pleased to be adopting all of the recommendations your office has made.

I believe we need this advice, and of course as a government we've faced a number of issues and have adopted as many important resolutions as we can to each area. But we've inherited many problems. We do appreciate that, and this is another one.

I would like to focus more on one section that I thought was quite interesting in paragraph 4.91 of your report, where you spoke somewhat at length about some of the accountability elements. You indicated it was difficult for the department, and of course through your audit, to receive meaningful reports as to how the dollars that were spent were actually allocated within the communities.

Aside from wanting you to maybe expand a bit on this analysis, I'd also like to ask a question in relation to.... In 2006, as a government we attempted to incorporate part of a piece of legislation before the House called the Accountability Act. We sought to extend the power of the Auditor General's office to first nations communities. Do you believe that had we been able to actually have that part of the legislation passed—of course, it was removed by our opponents—incorporating the power of the Auditor General's office to extend to first nations communities, it would have assisted your office within this specific section of your report?

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: Mr. Chair, in a word, no. I don't think that was the issue at hand here in terms of whether or not and the extent to which first nations agencies were spending the money appropriately. I think the information that is needed is information on the outcomes, the results in relation to the children. That's not information that can be developed by auditors. To be fair to the department, from the work we've done, we've seen that this is not a well-developed area. We look for other people who do this really well, to be able to measure outcomes of children in care. There's not a lot being done in that area.

There has been some recent work in British Columbia, but the type of information we're talking about here is information on the extent to which those children are progressing, developing, the risk is being mitigated...and those are the types of conclusions that professionals in that area, in that field, would have to come to—social workers as opposed to auditors.

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: You also commented on the funding model itself and how the number of children in care in a community didn't necessarily receive similar funding levels based on the number of individuals in a community. For instance, one community of 200 people might have four children in care and would receive basically the same amount of funding, or more, than a community that maybe had 50 people and 20 children in care. I think you made a recommendation for a funding model change. Perhaps you could expand on what that model would look like.

•(1625)

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: Thank you.

I'll ask Mr. Berthelette to talk to that, please.

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Mr. Chair, what we found is that the funding formula does not take into account the actual number of children in care, the types of services or the complexity of services that might be required to take care of the children that are brought into care. We also noted that the funding formula is based on 6%, so as the honourable member says, a first nation with 14% children in care would have to work on an operations budget that is based on having 6% children in care. The impact of that funding formula on services is that the agency is unable to provide the sorts of services that are required for the number of children who are brought into care. They spend more time taking care of the children who are actually in care and do not have sufficient time to take care of ensuring that children are not brought into care.

So the change in the formula in Alberta is good, because it will provide 74% more funding for the operations side and incorporate prevention into the services that are being provided. But the problem we saw with the formula, and that we anticipate will continue, is that it's still based on the 6% and won't take into account the needs of communities where there are, say, 14% of the children in care.

What we'd like to see is a formula that is more closely tied to needs, that's tied more closely to what is actually required to take care of the children in care in particular communities.

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: The Alberta model you spoke of is, of course, still in the process of being fully implemented. The government is interested in having other provinces adopt it as soon as possible. You also suggested that the 74% increase was going to

make up for perhaps some of the lack of funding that might currently exist.

Is there any measurement of other provinces that your analysis took in?

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Well, Mr. Chairman, we didn't do an analysis of what is required in the other provinces to make up the difference between the funding for the level of programs in place and the funding that would be required under legislation. I would just note that in Alberta, when this work was actually done, what the department found was that it would require 74% more funding to make up that difference.

I would expect that in the other provinces the departments would probably find there is some difference. Whether it's 74% or not, we can't say.

The Chair: Thank you.

That concludes our first round.

We'll now move into our second round of questioning, with five-minute turns.

We'll begin with Ms. Keeper from the Liberal Party.

Ms. Tina Keeper (Churchill, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank you as well for being here. This is long overdue and a most welcome report.

I'd like to ask you a number of questions, and I think what I'll do is ask you the questions first and then you can respond.

I'd like to ask about the Alberta model, because I was wondering whether there was an agreement between the feds and the Province of Alberta whereby the province would fund part of the model. So are part of the services funded by the province? Who has been responsible for picking up the increase in the costs?

And on that point, I'd like to ask you if that cost-sharing model is the recommended model for federal-provincial agreements? I ask that because in Manitoba we went through a devolution process, which actually meant there was less money, I believe, for capacity and services in first nations child welfare.

I know I'm asking a bunch of questions, but I have another one about the special allowance payments. Now it says they will be cut as of April 1, 2008, and that the first nations agencies have not been informed of this. Could you give us any more information on that?

The other final question I have is about Jordan's Principle and health care services. Once a child is in care, you said they would be provided with the ability to access non-insured costs. Now, these children are often going into care to access what for other Canadians are insured costs. I'm wondering whether you have looked at the burden of costs on the child and family services program, because children are not able to access those health services otherwise.

•(1630)

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think Mr. Berthelette is going to handle most of this, but I just want to respond to the comment about the Alberta model being the recommended model. In our report, we're not recommending that model per se; we're recommending a funding formula that recognizes the range of services that are now being offered to children outside reserves and that also takes into account the reality in terms of the number of children each of those agencies has to deal with. That's the core of our recommendation.

What the government has already done is it has entered into an agreement in Alberta that, as Mr. Berthelette says, has resulted in their at least addressing that range of services to try to make sure that children on reserves have access to a similar range of services, and that's what has caused the 74% increase in the federal funding.

We do want to say, however, that that model itself has its imperfections, and a major one is the fact that it still presumes the 6% rate.

So I just want to distinguish between what we're recommending and what's been....

Ms. Tina Keeper: So is the 74% increase in costs being allowed because it's seen as a pilot project?

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: I think that's a question better put to the department, if they're able to come here, but I think they're recognizing that it's needed. I think they're now recognizing that is what's needed because that is what's available to other children in the province of Alberta, and if they're going to fund services to a provincial standard, then that's what it takes.

Ms. Tina Keeper: I'm just not clear, because in Manitoba there was a whole process where there was a transfer of administration to first nations child welfare agencies. There was a working relationship. It's had its problems, definitely, and one of the key problems has been the underfunding.

In Manitoba they recognize that there's a whole range of services that are needed too, and we've long been asking for funding for those services. Prevention services are a key component. So why is it that Alberta is being recognized for that work? Is it because the province is delivering those services?

I'm not clear about that. Is the province delivering those services?

The Chair: A short answer, please.

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: I may not have explained just how the model works and the federal-provincial relationships. Maybe I should take a second to compare and contrast Manitoba and Alberta, to start with, and then get to the honourable member's question more particularly.

In Manitoba, as the honourable member has mentioned, the governance with respect to child and family services has changed significantly in the past couple of years. In response to a number of reports that were released in Manitoba, the province, the first nations, and the first nations agencies have put in place first nations authorities, an authority for the first nations agencies north and the first nations agencies south. This authority is, from my perspective, and perhaps even from the perspective of the first nations, a step

along the road to assuming jurisdiction for first nations child and family services within the province of Manitoba. It gives the authorities oversight over the first nations agencies and it gives them the ability to go in and audit standards and to take a look at how the funding the agencies receive is actually spent.

The agencies themselves in Manitoba receive funding through two streams. The first stream is a federal stream, where the money goes from Indian Affairs to the first nations agencies. The second stream is a provincial stream that flows from the province to the authority and then from the authority to the first nations agencies. Some work will need to happen in Manitoba between the federal government, Indian Affairs, the province, the authorities, and the first nations agencies to determine how, going forward, they are going to implement a formula that will be consistent with the authorities that are now in place in Manitoba.

In Alberta they have pretty much a standard arrangement in which you have delegated first nations agencies that provide services on reserve to first nations families and children. These delegated first nations agencies receive their funding through Indian Affairs directly, and the Province of Alberta provides the oversight with respect to standards for these agencies. As we noted in this chapter, both Alberta and B.C. have brought to the attention of the federal government on a number of occasions that the funding that was being provided to the agencies and their respective provinces was not sufficient for the agencies to deliver the full range of services required under the legislation.

In answer to the honourable member's question, I can't explain why Alberta would go first and the others would follow, except that it was referred to as a pilot project in the first instance by Indian Affairs, and it is moving from a pilot project to becoming a full-fledged program.

In order to do similar work in other provinces, it will take some time, and Indian Affairs is going to have to put in place some sort of an action plan so that between now and 2012 we'll have negotiated agreements with each of the provinces and put in place an agreement that will allow the agencies to deliver the full range of services.

As Mr. Campbell has mentioned, it may be a question that the committee would want to take up with the department with respect to what does that plan of action look like, how do they plan on proceeding with the other provinces, and what do they think is required for them in terms of both funding and expertise in order to make sure they achieve the 2012 date?

•(1635)

The Chair: Thank you, sir. I appreciate that this is complex and that it was not possible to give a short answer, but.... Anyway, we appreciate the detail you've presented.

Mr. Albrecht, you have five minutes.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the Auditor General and the team, and also to the witnesses who are here today.

I'm going to focus on paragraph 4.51 again, going back to the funding formula's being outdated. You point out there that it was designed in 1988. I think we can all agree that a formula that was established 20 years ago would need some constant tweaking, at the very least, so I agree that changes are past due.

You refer in the next couple of paragraphs, specifically in paragraph 4.52, to the point about the formula's being based on the assumption that a first nations agency has 6% of on-reserve children placed in care. Then a little further in that paragraph you refer to the fact that in the five provinces you covered, it ranged from 0% to 28%.

To follow up on this concept of prevention models, as opposed to treatment models, I'm wondering whether there's any openness to or thought given—I don't see it in the recommendations, but maybe it's referred to elsewhere in the report—to how we can learn from those communities where the experience is actually less than 6% and as low as 0%, which would be ideal.

How can we learn from them and then possibly find ways to replicate that positive experience, to go beyond just correcting the funding formula and try to minimize the need and keep the percentage below 6%, and at the very least have it well below the 28% that you've indicated as the high experience?

I don't know whether you understand the gist of where I'm going here; it's to try to go beyond just the funding formula to deal with the issues at the grassroots level, so as hopefully not to need the funding formula at all. I know that's idealistic, but we've got to shoot for something.

• (1640)

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: I think that's an excellent question, Mr. Chairman.

I would hope there is something to be learned from those communities that haven't seen the need to bring children into care. I think probably all the members of this committee are aware that there are a variety of complex social factors that result in children being put at risk, and they've been well documented. Nobody is suggesting for a second that if you fix this program you fix everything that ails aboriginal children; that's certainly not the case.

I think if you have the opportunity to talk to the department about their action plan and about making all this happen, that question gets to the very substance and root of some of the issues in the program. It would be very useful to learn from those communities that have maybe been fortunate through other socio-economic circumstances. But one wouldn't know unless one were to ask the question, and I think it would probably be very helpful to get that information from the department and ensure that they're asking themselves those same types of questions when they expand the program.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Okay. Just to follow up, you're not aware, then, of any discussions that have resulted from your study that would have maybe nudged the department in that direction, as far as the Auditor General's report is concerned?

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: No, I'm not aware.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: I would just say, Mr. Chair, to assure Canadian taxpayers that their dollars are well invested and that first nations people have the benefits all other Canadians have, this is an

area I would like to see us pursue in the future. Possibly we could discuss this with officials when they come back to the committee.

On the next page, in paragraph 4.55, you refer to the fact that the formula is not adapted well to small agencies. I find that surprising, especially when the next paragraph talks about 50% of the agencies being actually under this 1,000 cut-off point.

Could you expand a bit on that? Paragraph 4.55 says that "exceptions could be made". Could you give us an example of how this small-community, small-agency situation developed and what kind of exceptions are referred to there?

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Mr. Chairman, the formula is set up on the basis that for economies of scale it would be better if the agencies served a population of children of approximately 1,000. That would give the best economies of scale.

Unfortunately, or because of factors beyond the control of Indian Affairs, or anybody else for that matter, there will be situations, or there have been situations, in which perhaps because of where a community is located, perhaps because it's a small isolated community, it would not be possible to pull together enough first nations to have a population of about 1,000 children. In that case, Indian Affairs will take a look at the situation that exists. The agency will also look at what other services it can provide, and it may enter into an agreement with the province to provide services to individuals living off reserve but situated close to the reserve. So through a strategy like that, small first nations agencies have been trying to deal with that issue, and Indian Affairs has agreed that in those cases they could go ahead and do that. But in an ideal situation, it is always better to have a larger population and to serve more communities, because that gets around the issues we point out at paragraph 4.56, issues with respect to governance, conflict of interest, training, and management.

But, as I say, in many of those situations, Mr. Chairman, where you have small agencies that are still being funded by Indian Affairs, they may be providing services off reserve as well and supplementing their funding that way.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Lévesque, you have five minutes.

Mr. Yvon Lévesque (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, please excuse me for being late.

I am certain that you also studied the Quebec report on youth protection, especially on the children of Nunavik. The problem is more serious in Nunavik because it is an isolated region where the villages, with populations of between 300 and 400 people, are many kilometres away from each other. Generally, the people who work in youth protection mingle with the families and have to face serious problems. They have no housing to put these children up. Therefore they get sent back to their families. In other first nations communities, children are treated in social centres. In most of the first nations population centres, the social centres are running at a deficit because the first nations are unable to pay the real costs incurred by the child services.

In these circumstances, I wonder whether the department's money is a good solution. I think that we should remedy the situation by getting at the root of the problem, by providing competent personnel as well as places for housing the children and protecting the people involved. Would it not be preferable to go about it in this way rather than to provide a heap of money that will in no way help to protect the children?

•(1645)

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Mr. Chairman, we have not read the study on the children of Nunavik. We focused our efforts on the child and family welfare service programs of the Department of Indian Affairs. In most cases, this had to do with first nations that reside in the south of Canada.

Nevertheless, the problems raised by the study are more or less the same as the ones that were observed in Quebec and in the other provinces during our audit. The reserves do not have enough housing or space to keep children in their communities. The communities and the government must find a way to improve this situation. If the officials remain unable to house the children, the children will have to leave their communities to live in other towns or villages. This is very hard on the family and on the children.

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: Do I have any time left, Mr. Chairman?

[English]

The Chair: One and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: Would you be able to recommend to the department as it manages this project, to lay the foundations before setting up equipment outdoors? This would mean that houses should first be built in the communities and competent people should be appointed. This is what the investments are meant for at the outset. Would you be able to recommend this to the department?

[English]

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: Mr. Chairman, departments make allocative decisions as they see fit. The irony here, and I'm sure it won't be lost on members, is that part of what the department has done in order to fund the costs of children in care is actually to have taken money from housing and from community infrastructure. It's a very complex set of issues, some long term and some very immediate, and I would presume and would hope that officials in those agencies faced with a situation where a child was at risk would deal with that and worry about the longer-term solutions later. But that's the irony of the situation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Clarke, you have five minutes.

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A little background here. I'm first nations. Being an RCMP officer in my background, having lived on reserve, worked on reserve, and also having worked in partnership with family services on the reserve, I've seen the apprehensions take place, and it's very frustrating. It's a hard burden, and it's hard on the heart when we have to see that.

The question I have here is probably twofold. One, with this study, did your committee go into these communities and look, or was it basically survey-type questions?

Second, as we look at the 74% from the Alberta government, what idealistic number would you suggest could help fix this problem?

•(1650)

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: In answer to your first question in relation to going into communities, I would say that it is part of our methodology. Whenever we are auditing any program that affects first nations or aboriginal people, it's always to go to the communities and always to speak to the people who are affected by the programs.

We don't audit first nations organizations. Like the honourable member, I've lived in communities and I understand where he's coming from, but we always do that as part of our audit work. In this case, the audit team visited 18 agencies in the five provinces and visited 12 individual first nations communities.

In relation to the question on what the ideal number is, as Mr. Berthelette pointed out, it will probably vary from province to province and it will probably vary over time. There is a hope, and I think a lot of people have expressed it, that if you get the model right and you start to fund some of those preventative services and try to help those families before they reach the point of crisis, in time the number of children going into care will be reduced. Over time, I think, things will change, but among provinces things will change. The only information we do have is the new Alberta model, as part of it deals with a range of services. In the first year, they've identified that by 2010 it will be up to 74%, but I would imagine that would vary from province to province and over time.

Mr. Rob Clarke: As the Assistant Auditor General, what type of formula would you recommend?

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: We've recommended a formula that I'll let Mr. Berthelette speak to in more detail. We've recommended a formula that not only addresses the needs of the communities but also addresses the range of available services. I think that has changed. To be fair to the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, since that formula was first developed in 1990, I think there's been an evolution in thinking on services. I think there was a time when the apprehension of children was more the norm—off reserve as well. Now the thinking is much more toward prevention and early intervention, trying to prevent agencies from having to take children away.

So the formula we're recommending addresses what's available in terms of services and what the needs are in terms of the number of children. The Alberta model, if you like, is part of the way there; it certainly does try to address that evolving range of services. What it doesn't do, though, is to address the funding that goes to the first nations agencies for their operations, and that's based on the 6%. One of the consequences of that is that those agencies have difficulty attracting social workers and other skilled staff, and when they do get them, they tend to be young and new to the field and can make more money elsewhere. So they can't keep the staff either. That's a big problem.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Crowder, you have five minutes.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

In paragraph 4.10, you pointed out the fact that this whole issue can't be looked at in isolation, that we have to look at poverty and adequate housing, caregiver substance misuse, and so on, which all relate to child neglect occurring on reserves. But you also point out that aboriginal children are more likely to be reported for neglect than non-aboriginal children, but they're not overrepresented amongst reports of child abuse.

When you looked at the Alberta model, were there any pieces put in place that also considered housing, poverty, and those things? I would agree with you that if we're just operating in this silo mentality, where we're dealing with child welfare and not dealing with the broader socio-economic issues, we're really just going to shift the problem around. Did the Alberta model include any of those factors?

• (1655)

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Mr. Chairman, the Alberta model includes early intervention and prevention services, family support for children with disabilities, and protection of children involved in prostitution. So the Alberta model is fairly broad, but as I understand it, from what I remember seeing while we were doing this audit, it doesn't get to the issues of housing and poverty per se.

Ms. Jean Crowder: And those are some of the root causes. I know the Wen:de report and other reports have talked about the root causes often being socio-economic.

In conjunction with the Alberta model, again, you pointed out in paragraph 4.13 the fact that little is known about the outcome of children placed in care, but that from a recent, limited B.C. report, outcomes related to children in care were poor and that children who had been in care were less likely to complete high school, and so on.

I know I've seen some other things, such as the higher incidence of their ending up in the criminal justice system, and so on.

Again, does the Alberta model have built into it a mechanism to look at outcomes in the long run? I know it's only been in place for a year, but intrinsic to the model, does it build in the review of those outcomes?

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Mr. Chair, I'm not an expert on the Alberta model.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Okay. That's probably a better question for the department then.

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Yes. You may want to ask the department. But I would note that the prevention and family enhancement work is about trying to return the child to the family and provide the family with the supports it needs to be able to successfully raise their children within the context in which they live.

So it does try to address part of the root cause, but as you say, it's a question you will probably want to explore in more detail with Indian and Northern Affairs.

Ms. Jean Crowder: In paragraph 4.50—which perhaps I'm just not understanding—it says at the bottom, “At the time of the audit, INAC provided First Nations agencies \$787 annually for each child ordinarily resident on reserves”. It's not clear to me how to interpret that number.

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Mr. Chairman, that's the number that arises from the application of the formula for operations on a child-by-child basis.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Okay, so \$787 annually per child—then that money would be rolled in for just the children who needed it.

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: That funding is used to provide the agency with the operations and administration moneys. It needs to hire staff, to buy hardware and software, to pay legal costs, to pay for all the administration that goes with operating a first nations agency.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Did you look at what a reasonable figure would be to fund, or was that just reporting on the actual figure?

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: That's just reporting on the actual figure. I think the Alberta model begins to show the consequences of what happens when you put a more responsive model in place, imperfect as it is.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Can you tell me what the comparative Alberta figure is per child?

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: No.

Jerome.

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: We didn't do the mathematics.

Ms. Jean Crowder: We can probably ask the department that one too. It sounds as if we're getting a few questions for the department.

In 4.53 you say program funding is not tied to needs, but a group of first nations has accumulated about \$4.7 million in unpaid bills owed to a provincial agency for services it provided to them. Was this because they were mandated to meet the provincial standards but didn't get the dollars?

I'm speaking too quickly, sorry.

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Mr. Chairman, in essence that was the situation here. This provincial agency provided services to a number of first nations communities that the agency served and the agency charged the first nations for providing those services. The first nations didn't have sufficient funding to pay for them because the first nations are funded according to the formula.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you.

Next is Ms. Keeper, for five minutes.

Ms. Tina Keeper: Thank you.

I'm so glad I have the opportunity to do another round of questioning because we didn't get to my other questions.

Thank you for your answers and for all the information, because it is really important.

I'd like to ask you the other two questions I had.

Did you find a burden on the child and family services programs, an unacceptable burden really, because of the fact that many children have to go into care to access health care services that other Canadian children are entitled to, particularly in dealing with complex medical needs?

The other question I have is about the Children's Special Allowances Act. Treasury Board recommended that funding be cut as of April 1, 2008, and I wondered if you had any more information on that.

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Mr. Chairman, we have no other information with respect to the children's special allowances, and I believe it should be an issue that committee members may want to follow up on with the department to find out what they're going to do about the children's special allowances.

Ms. Tina Keeper: Are you aware whether first nations agencies or any agencies that deliver services for first nations children are aware of this cut?

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: When we did this audit they had not been formally advised of the fact that the Department of Indian Affairs is required to take the children's special allowances into account. They may have heard about it through the grapevine, so to speak, but they had not been formally told.

With respect to the burden on child and family services, this is a difficult issue. When you talk about children with complex medical needs, it is important, Mr. Chairman, that the committee understand that both on and off reserve there are times when children will be brought into care because the family is not able to provide the support the child needs. That is both on reserve in the first nations

situation and off reserve in the non-aboriginal context. That can happen in both contexts.

The issue we have here, particularly with respect to the first nations situation, is that because there are no other social services and an insufficient number of other health services on reserve, and because of the jurisdictional dispute between the way Health Canada looks at its responsibilities and the way the Department of Indian Affairs looks at its responsibilities, children on reserve often have to be brought into care to access the services because we can't get an agreement in place that would be able to support those children who are supportable within their homes through services that can be provided by the community.

Ms. Tina Keeper: Right, and that's the point exactly.

Has there been any auditing of those costs to the child and family services program?

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: We didn't look at those costs. Children with complex medical needs were a bit peripheral to what we were looking at. Those children would be brought into care in order to access services, and that's why we have a paragraph about them, but it was a bit tangential to our overall focus.

Mr. Chair, it's something you will probably want to discuss in more detail with Indian Affairs.

Ms. Tina Keeper: Thank you.

May I ask one more quick question?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Tina Keeper: Can I go back to the cut in this special allowance? In your report you note that the resources for this agency's operations will be reduced by approximately 30%—this particular agency that you note. Do you think this will have that type of impact across the board?

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Mr. Chairman, the impact this cut will have on agencies will depend on the number of children they actually have in care, because the children's special allowance is tied to each particular child that is brought into care. If, in a particular instance, a community or an agency has 14% of children in care, the impact of the cut on that particular agency would be higher than on an agency with, say, 5% children in care. It's really a matter of the number of children in care: the more children in care, the greater the impact.

• (1705)

Ms. Tina Keeper: But those children, for instance, who come from a home where they would be supportable in their home now have to go into care to access health care services, which puts an undue burden on the Child and Family Services Agency, because they're not health care providers. That becomes a very difficult issue as well for the agency. Now they're going to have a cut to that special allowance funding as well, in addition to all those....

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Mr. Chairman, that's correct. As I said earlier, I think it's really something the committee will want to explore in some detail with Indian Affairs: why they have to make the cut, and what, from their point of view, they think would be the impact on the first nations, and what, from their point of view, they think are some strategies that could help minimize the impact on communities as a result of taking into account the children's special allowance.

Ms. Tina Keeper: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We've completed two rounds, and at this point, if there are members who still have questions, maybe they could just indicate to me, rather than going through the roster.

Monsieur Lemay or Ms. Crowder, do you have any further questions? No?

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemay: I want to put my questions to the minister, and there are many of them.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

Does anyone else from the...?

Okay. Well, with that—

Hon. Anita Neville: Can I just ask one question?

The Chair: Yes, Ms. Neville.

Hon. Anita Neville: Thank you.

It's just a quick question for clarification, Mr. Berthelette.

Did you say that the Alberta model is still being funded at a 6% capacity?

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: Yes, Mr. Chairman, that's correct. The Alberta model still uses 6% children in care as the basis for the funding that will be provided to first nations agencies.

Hon. Anita Neville: And do you have any figures indicating what the reality is in Alberta?

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: No, Mr. Chairman. Our range is 0% to 28%; you can get a range like that, probably, in Alberta as well, from a small number of children in care to a relatively large number. You can find that range in Alberta.

Hon. Anita Neville: Do you have any indication as to why Alberta was chosen as the pilot project? Was there a rationale developed for that?

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: All I can say is that, as we noted in the report, both B.C. and Alberta brought to the attention of Indian Affairs the fact that the agencies were not able to provide the full range of services. From what I saw in looking at the files, Alberta, on a number of occasions, made presentations to the government and to Indian Affairs about its differential response model and the positive results it was getting with the differential response model. Because they were concerned about the situation on reserve, I think it's fair to say that they pressed the government to do something about... Alberta did try...[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

Hon. Anita Neville: Do you have an indication that these kinds of things are being done by other provinces?

Mr. Jerome Berthelette: The only indications we have are that B. C. and Alberta are making these formal statements to the Department of Indian Affairs about the situation in their particular provinces.

Hon. Anita Neville: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Campbell, you'd like to make a comment?

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: Mr. Chairman, if I may, if you'd indulge for 30 seconds, I'd like to say a couple of things. One is that a number of the questions today have been in relation to information we think could be better provided by the Department of Indian Affairs.

If I may be so bold, to make your meeting with them flow a little more easily, you may want to consider capturing that list and asking them to bring some of that stuff in advance. I know when officials come you ask for information and they say they'll get it to you, but your members may have already identified some pieces you want to know, and no doubt other pieces will come to mind during the hearing. You may want to give some consideration to that.

Then, finally, at the beginning of the hearing you thanked us for waiting. I'd just say no thanks is necessary. I'd like to thank you and your committee for taking up this cause and for paying attention to this particular chapter. It's undoubtedly hugely important, and I wish you all the best in your efforts.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you for the advice and for the kind words, Mr. Campbell.

With that, we will complete....

Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I wonder at what point we could talk about getting the department and some agencies here. I think there are a number of unanswered questions. Given the impact of this report, the importance of this report, and the huge population growth in the under-18s on reserve, it would seem it would be really important for us to close the loop on this particular piece and get that report on the action plan.

The Chair: Okay. We can certainly discuss that in terms of scheduling. As you know, the subcommittee has identified two or three priorities we want to work through in the next short while. Next week is a break week, and then the two weeks after that are booked, I think. Certainly it's something we could consider.

Monsieur Lemay.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemay: Mr. Chairman, following Mr. Campbell's comments, I would like the department that is specifically involved in this file to be notified that today we met with representatives of the Auditor General and that we would like to meet the minister.

On Wednesday, I hope that we will not put questions to the minister that he will be unable to answer. We should not take him by surprise, we should deal openly with him. I suggest that we advise the minister that we met with representatives of the Auditor General and that we intend to come back to this subject very soon, because the survival of several first nations and communities is in jeopardy. This problem dates back to 1990, and has still not been solved.

[English]

The Chair: Before I go to Ms. Neville, I know the department monitors or reads the minutes from our committee meetings, but if you would like, I can certainly communicate to the minister and bring to their attention the discussion today. I can ask them to look at the minutes of this meeting and identify some of the issues that will inevitably be raised on Thursday.

Ms. Neville.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemay: I would especially like him to prepare his appearance before the committee to answer the large number of questions that we will be putting to him following the appearance of the representatives of the Auditor General. He should be able to identify the persons who will be able to answer the questions raised by the Auditor's representatives.

[English]

The Chair: As you know, Monsieur Lemay, when the minister appears before us on Thursday to speak on the estimates, he needs to be prepared for a very wide range of questions, including these. But having said that, I suspect when we bring his attention to today's meeting, they will pay particular attention to the questions that were raised today that our witnesses suggested would be better answered by the department.

Ms. Neville.

Hon. Anita Neville: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the two gentlemen again for being here today. This is a seminal report, and it's really about what many of us around the table have been talking about. It's a manifestation of the extreme poverty that many first nations communities live in. I don't know whether you require a motion or not—if you do, I'd be happy to have one prepared for the next meeting—but I think it's important that we'll have the minister here on Wednesday, but only for an hour.

I think it's important that we have an in-depth discussion with department officials on this issue, on the number of children in care.

The report here gives a figure of just short of 9,000 children identified. We've heard other numbers as high as 27,000 children in care, and I'm not sure how you count them. We've also heard there are more children in care now than were in the residential school system. So I think it's incumbent upon us as legislators today to look at this issue in depth and with more rigour, and if it requires an extra meeting or two, so be it, but I really would like to move forward on this issue.

• (1715)

The Chair: I would suggest that as chair of this committee I notify the minister that we had this discussion today with the Auditor General's office and tell him that to several of the questions asked by committee members the response from the Auditor General's office was that they might more appropriately be answered by departmental officials. He and his officials ought to be prepared to deal with those questions. They can get a good sense of what those might be on the basis of the minutes of today's meeting.

As you know, on Wednesday committee members can take wide latitude in asking the minister and his staff questions. As recently as last week, we kind of agreed on what our priorities were for the coming meetings. If we are presuming there will not be sufficient time on Wednesday, and if you'd like to put a motion forward that you'd like to deal with this or that you think it needs to be dealt with at an extra meeting or something, that might be the better way to do it, rather than having me trying to decide informally that one priority trumps another.

Ms. Crowder, did you have something to say?

Ms. Jean Crowder: I just wanted to make the point that the main focus of the two-hour meeting on Wednesday will be the estimates. We will certainly have an opportunity to ask a question or two, but I would suggest that the amount of information in this report actually requires a more in-depth reporting back from the department, and I also believe we need to hear from some of the first nations agencies that are involved in it. So hopefully Ms. Neville will put forward a motion that will accommodate those issues, because I simply don't feel we'll have time to deal with them in the context of all the other issues in estimates on Wednesday.

The Chair: That's my sense too, that probably in two hours we're not going to be able to cover everything. But if such a motion were brought forward, we would certainly deal with it.

Once again, gentlemen, thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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