

Privacy commissioner makes his case for more after the cutback years

Vaughn Palmer
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VICTORIA - The day began with information and privacy commissioner David Loukidelis seeking approval from the legislature finance committee for a 20-per-cent budget boost.

His office is responsible for release of information and protection of privacy for some 2,000 public bodies. "The heart of an accountable and responsible government," as Loukidelis told the committee.

Nonetheless, the B.C. Liberals had put him on a regimen of budget and staffing reductions, only letting up this past year.

He's trying to play catch-up again this year, asking for a \$3-million budget, up from \$2.5 million.

Wage increases. A rent increase. The cost of the new lobbyist registry, which the government has delegated to his bailiwick. Plus he'd hire three staff to clear a growing backlog of cases.

Still, a frugal operation. His Alberta counterpart has twice the budget with half the caseload.

The Campbell government's own information office, the public affairs bureau, has 10 times as many staff.

The committee took the budget request under advisement.

This being the day for hearing submissions from the independent officers of the legislature, next up was police complaint commissioner Dirk Ryneveld.

Like Loukidelis, he's experiencing a growing caseload. "Not necessarily because police behaviour has become any worse. It's just that we're more aware of it."

Still, he made a stand pat submission on his \$1.4-million budget, for now at least.

Former judge Josiah Wood is reviewing the enabling legislation for the police complaint commission with a view to clarifying some powers and strengthening others.

When the report is complete -- "I would be surprised if we didn't get it by the end of this week" -- Ryneveld may well have to seek additional resources.

Third in the parade was the conflict commissioner, the incomparable H.A.D. Oliver.

His is the smallest of independent offices, both in terms of budget (\$300,000) and public profile.

"I've tried to operate in such a way that you don't read my name or the names of MLAs with problems in the media," he remarked.

"If you do read them, I've fouled up somewhere along the line."

He meets with MLAs in his office, talks to them on the phone, dispensing "political preventive medicine" -- advice they'd be wise to take on how to stay out of trouble.

Only once -- when Glen Clark failed to consult him in advance about the matter that eventually led to his resignation -- has Oliver been forced to launch a full-blown inquiry, at a budget-busting tab of

\$200,000.

Otherwise he's under budget every year, even musing at one point that he might request a permanent reduction in funding.

"I got furious telephone calls from two deputy ministers wanting to know what the hell I was doing," he disclosed Monday.

But neither the deputies nor the scandal-mongers will have Uncle H.A.D. to kick around much longer.

"I think my tenure of office is drawing peacefully to its close," said Oliver, who'll be 86 by the time his second five-year term expires next summer. "It would be a good thing, I think, for new blood to come into this or any other office."

New blood was on display in the legislature press theatre Monday afternoon, as the new child and youth representative, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, held her first press conference.

The finance committee will review her budget -- and those of four other independent officers -- later this month.

Turpel-Lafond, a Provincial Court judge from Saskatchewan, is not scheduled to take up her duties until early in the new year.

But she'd travelled to Victoria to take the oath of office earlier in the day and this was her first chance to talk to the news media.

Keen. Already cognizant of the challenges ahead. Determined to make a difference. Not interested in dispensing "bromides."

But she also had a revealing answer when asked if it was hard to give up her post on the bench.

She said she hasn't given it up, not completely. Her home province granted a leave of absence for the duration of her five-year appointment here in B.C.

"It is a comfort to me that I have a position to return to in Saskatchewan," she said, noting that she's uprooting her husband and young family (four children) to move to the West Coast.

Not meant to suggest a lack of confidence, nor a lack of commitment to a full term.

But she's well aware of the wild swings in policy regarding child protection here in B.C. "Three sea changes in the last decade," as she put it.

She may also be aware (she needed only to ask around) of this government's capricious treatment of the independent officers of the legislature.

"I'm not naive," Turpel-Lafond said.

"If the resources are not there, if the commitment is not there, I can return to Saskatchewan."

There'll be no leashing this watchdog.

vpalmer@direct.ca

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