

**How much is a politician worth? Depends who's doing the judging;
Commission hears opposing viewpoints on pay for MLAs**

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British Columbia MLAs are overpaid, underworked and don't deserve a raise of any sort.

British Columbia MLAs work long hours for much less than they could earn in the private sector and should get a huge hike in pay and pension benefits.

Those were two contrasting views offered last night during the sparsely attended final public hearing of an independent commission tasked with making recommendations on compensation and pension arrangements for B.C. politicians.

The three-member panel held eight such hearings across B.C. And yesterday's was representative, said Sue Paish, the Vancouver lawyer who chairs the commission.

Only a half-dozen people or groups made presentations at the Hotel Grand Pacific, which Paish said is about the norm. One presenter thought MLAs deserved much more while five called for no raise or even a reduction.

Paish said presentations have been split about equally across B.C.

"We've heard from very few people who are beige on this. People are black or white," she said.

Last night was an example of that polarization. It began with Michael Geoghegan, a consultant-lobbyist and a former ministerial assistant.

Geoghegan told the panel that MLAs should receive a significant wage increase -- from the \$76,100 current annual salary to somewhere in the \$100,000 range. Cabinet members should receive in the \$175,000 range and the premier around \$200,000, he said.

He also suggested tying politicians' salaries to the grid used to determine wages for senior managers in government so that wages would be regularly updated.

"If we want to attract the brightest and the best, we have to pay salaries somewhere in the ballpark [of the private sector]," Geoghegan said.

MLAs are held to a higher standard of behaviour than non-politicians, he said. "They take a lot of abuse and so, too, do their families."

Geoghegan was outnumbered, however, by those yesterday who believe MLAs don't deserve any raise.

Ted Hawryluk, who is disabled, said MLAs should get either no more or just the extra \$50 a month recently granted to those on disability assistance.

Hawryluk pointed to last fall's cancelled sitting of the B.C. legislature as a reason not to grant MLAs a raise.

"There is a lot of legislation that could have happened last fall that didn't happen last fall," he said. "They did not come to work in the fall."

Poverty activist Rose Henry suggested MLAs receive no wage increase or even a cut, with the proceeds going to social services.

The meeting also included an appearance by the Raging Grannies, who sang a song that ended in "so we say no more pay."

The Grannies' message was that there are many other things to put money into -- mental health, homelessness, light rapid transit, education, guaranteed annual incomes, global warming and health care, to name a few -- other than pay increases for MLAs.

"One of my concerns is that the decision has already been made and that this is just a sop to the public," said Frances Thoburn of the Grannies.

Paish assured the presenters that the panel will independently make its recommendations in a report to the Speaker due April 30. Its recommendations could be voted on during the current session of the legislature.

Bucking the polarization trend last night was a presentation by former Manitoba MLA Don Scott. Scott suggested MLAs receive twice the province's average wage, which would amount to about \$80,000 a year.

Cabinet ministers should get 2.75 times the average wage while the premier should get three times, he said. He also recommends improvement to MLA pensions.

"I don't see that politicians should be some sort of princes, nor should they be paupers," Scott said.

WHAT THEY MAKE NOW

A quick look at remuneration for MLAs:

- MLA base pay -- \$76,100 a year.
- Supplementary allowance for cabinet ministers, leader of the Opposition and Speaker -- \$39,000 a year
- Premier's supplementary allowance -- \$45,000 a year.
- Pension -- The pension plan was cancelled in 1996. Instead, MLAs receive an annual contribution to their RRSPs of nine per cent of their base salaries.

-- Jeff Rud



Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist

THE PRICE OF DEMOCRACY:

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Illustration:

- Photo: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist / THE PRICE OF DEMOCRACY: The provincial legislature is certainly a beautiful place to work, but one of last night's speakers said B.C. will have to substantially hike the compensation received by elected members if we're to be served by "the brightest and the best." Others suggested MLAs are overpaid and don't deserve a raise.
- Photo: With an independent panel now reviewing the issue of MLA compensation and whether it should be improved, the Times Colonist felt it was important to give readers a sense of what a provincial politician does during a typical work day. We asked two Vancouver Island MLAs to provide readers with sample glimpses of their daytimers -- both for days when the house is sitting and when it isn't. The randomly dated examples above were submitted by Ron Cantelon, Liberal MLA for Nanaimo-Parksville, and Maurine Karagianis, NDP MLA for Esquimalt-Metchosin.