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## Panel on politicians' pay will get attention only if it suggests a big raise

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Byline: Vaughn Palmer  
Column: Vaughn Palmer  
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VICTORIA

The commission on compensation for members of the legislature drifted into the provincial capital this week for the last public hearing on the infernal question of pay for politicians.

Only a dozen members of the public showed up for Thursday's three-hour session, which was "one of the better turnouts," as the commissioners noted.

Precisely no one showed up for a hearing earlier in the week in Nanaimo. Attendance was "sparse" at the other half-dozen hearings. Written submissions, via e-mail and the post number in the mere "dozens."

But the apparent lack of interest in the proceedings could be easily remedied. All the commission has to do is call for politicians to be granted a hefty pay increase.

One could practically guarantee mobs roaming the streets with tar and feathers. Perhaps even an old-fashioned necktie party, with commissioners sharing the scaffold alongside any MLA reckless enough to support their recommendations.

Or, in the more prosaic estimation of Sue Paish, the Vancouver lawyer who is chairing the commission: "There will be plenty of reaction, whatever we recommend."

Sparse as the turnout was on Thursday, it probably spanned the full range of likely responses.

At one end were the folks who figure the politicians are paid too much already.

They included a delegation of the Raging Grannies, seven women wearing entertaining hats, who treated the commission to a song. "Money should be spread around," they sang in an approximation of the musical number from Cabaret. Coda: "So we say no more pay."

Two other presenters urged that the members of the legislature receive the same \$50-a-month raise as was recently voted for welfare recipients.

At the other end of the scale, there was Mike Geoghegan, a former ministerial aide turned lobbyist. He argued that the current compensation -- about \$76,000 a year and no pension -- is sufficiently inadequate as to attract, in the main, two kinds of people.

"The idle rich," and those for whom it is "the most money they'll ever make." Neither is the target group that Geoghegan would hope to attract to public office, namely "the brightest and best."

He wants MLAs boosted to \$100,000 a year with cabinet ministers and party leaders paid at least as much as the \$150,000 a year backbenchers in the federal Parliament get.

That's not likely to fly with the public. But Geoghegan observed that a lot of the controversy over pay has been generated by the politicians themselves, trying to one-up each other in gestures of populism. "Politicians tend to be their own worst enemies," Geoghegan said, though I can imagine the Raging Grannies saying, "not as long as we're alive."

Somewhere in the middle was Don Scott, a former member of the Manitoba legislature, now living in Victoria.

Serving the public, in the legislature, is "relatively thankless," Scott said. But it is also "the ultimate public service you can perform -- it is not just a take thing."

Thus his view that the pay and benefit package should make politicians "neither princes nor paupers."

He'd pay backbenchers twice the average provincial wage, meaning about \$80,000 a year, and scale ministers and party leaders upwards from there.

The commission -- lawyer Joe Wood and university professor Sandra Robinson are the other members -- didn't give any hints where it is headed in its response to all these submissions.

In addition to the now-completed schedule of hearings, they are also consulting current and former politicians, doing comparisons to other jurisdictions and taking a sample of public opinion.

Mind, you don't need to hear too many people crabbing about "gold-plated pensions" for provincial politicians -- the MLA pension plan was abolished 10 years ago -- to recognize that the public is not especially well-informed on this issue.

I'd be surprised if the commission doesn't recommend some sort of pension plan and probably that the base pay be boosted to somewhere between Scott's \$80,000 and Geoghegan's \$100,000.

The final report is due April 30, after which the commissioners may wish to make themselves scarce. For it is up to the politicians to implement the report, and thus take the ultimate heat for the recommendations.

If the commissioners have any appreciation of the predicament this report will create for both parties in the legislature, they will recommend more than the politicians can accept, thereby allowing the parties to scale back in the face of the inevitable public outcry.

In that regard, the most useful suggestion was from Scott, the ex-Manitoban.

He advised the commission to try to come up with some sort of continuing formula for determining pay for politicians, so we never have to do this again.

Not very democratic. But shrewd, and trust an ex-politician to see it.

[vpalmer@direct.ca](mailto:vpalmer@direct.ca)