



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

OGGO • NUMBER 042 • 1st SESSION • 38th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, June 7, 2005

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Chair

Mr. Leon Benoit

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Tuesday, June 7, 2005

• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone.

We're here today, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), to carry on a study of the activities and finances of the Commission of Inquiry into the Sponsorship Program.

We have appearing today the Honourable Mauril Bélanger, the Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, and as a witness from the Privy Council Office, Kathy O'Hara, deputy secretary to the cabinet, machinery of government.

If either of you has a short opening statement, I invite you to make the statement. If not, we'll go directly to questions.

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would indeed like to make a brief comment.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure for me to come and tell you about the Coordination Sponsorship Matters Group, which is attached to the Privy Council Office.

First, I'll briefly describe the role of the office. It was established on May 31, 2004 and placed under the direction of a senior official, Ms. Ursula Menke. A team consisting of two analysts and an executive assistant assists her in her position. The group reports to Ms. Kathy O'Hara, who is here with me today, and whom your Chairman designated as Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet, Machinery of Government.

[English]

The group is mandated to ensure that the Gomery commission has the support it needs from the government to do its work. For example, the group ensures that documents and information required from the government by the commission are produced. The unit has facilitated the production of over 20 million pages of documents for the commission and the release of an unprecedented number of cabinet confidences.

The unit is also responsible for the coordination of five departments involved in the commission's work: Privy Council Office Department of Justice, Department of Finance, Treasury Board Secretariat, and Public Works and Government Services Canada. It is responsible for ensuring the flow of information among departments and between the government and the commission.

The unit also serves as liaison with commission counsel. It supported the preparation of government witnesses.

Further, it coordinates the preparation of government submissions to the commission. It monitors the commission's hearings, which began last September, on a daily basis and provides summaries to departments. It prepares question period material and provides media monitoring.

[Translation]

The group has a budget of \$534,400 for the 2004-2005 fiscal year and \$548,00 for fiscal 2005-2006. Most of those two budgets is allocated to salaries. For example, of the \$548,000 budgeted for 2005-2006, \$453,000 is for salaries. The rest is allocated to operating costs, including travel between Ottawa and Montreal, and administrative expenses.

Ms. O'Hara and I can now try to answer your questions.

• (1535)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Monsieur Bélanger.

Mr. Preston, seven minutes.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you very much, and thank you for coming today.

I'll try to use my seven minutes wisely, if you'll cooperate with me and give me as short an answer as you can.

Ms. O'Hara, you're the deputy secretary to the cabinet for the machinery of government?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara (Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet, Machinery of Government, Privy Council Office): Yes, I am.

Mr. Joe Preston: And this intergovernmental group answers to you?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: It's actually called the Coordination Sponsorship Matters group, but that group does report to me, that's right.

Mr. Joe Preston: We have a bunch of different titles around here. I have "intergovernmental coordination group". Is that incorrect?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Yes. I think you're referring to a title that was used in a memo from February 18, if I'm correct, and that was—

Mr. Joe Preston: My briefing notes from the researchers call your group that name now.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The title is Coordination Sponsorship Matters.

Mr. Joe Preston: It's informally known to us as the Gomery war room.

The mandate you have, as has just been explained to us, is that you support the Gomery commission. You prepare reports that are asked for by the Gomery commission; I think the figure of 20 million was used for the documents. You also provide liaison with counsel. You give summaries to the different departments of what's happened in Gomery on a given day. I believe there was some point made of monitoring question period and using that type of information also?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No, what I said was "preparing material for question period".

Mr. Joe Preston: Okay, this department of the PCO prepares pieces of information to be used as answers in question period? It is certainly not questions.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No, we wouldn't dare presume to prepare questions for the opposition. The opposition has publicly paid-for resources to do that itself.

The PCO is, if you wish, the department of the Prime Minister and as such has a number of responsibilities, including helping prepare for question period.

Mr. Joe Preston: All right.

There are currently five people employed in the coordination group?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I believe it is four. It was five for a period of two months, I believe, in November and December of last year, but it's four now.

Mr. Joe Preston: All right.

You mentioned that Ursula is the head of the war room.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That's what I said, yes.

Excuse me, that's not what I said. I said Madame Ursula Menke is the person who is responsible for the coordination of sponsorship matters.

Mr. Joe Preston: Is she here today? Is there a reason she is not here to answer our questions?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I was asked to be here. You called for witnesses. The person to whom the sponsorship matters coordination group reports is Madame O'Hara. If there's a difficulty with the witnesses you have, I've not been made aware of it.

Mr. Joe Preston: Okay, on the reporting structure, Ms. O'Hara, whom do you report to? Does this group report through you to the Prime Minister?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: I report to the Clerk of the Privy Council.

Mr. Joe Preston: All right. This group, then, reports to the Clerk of the Privy Council through you.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Yes.

Mr. Joe Preston: And he reports to...?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: To the Prime Minister.

• (1540)

Mr. Joe Preston: Thank you.

On the budget you talked about in your opening statements, I've looked at the supplementary estimates here and the estimates, and you've mentioned that you are the administrative support for the activities associated with the Gomery inquiry. That's part of your mandate?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No. This is the Coordination Sponsorship Matters group, the one that coordinates government responses and also provides the response to the commission when it inquires for government material. I mentioned that there was an unprecedented number of cabinet confidences that the commission requested. The response for that was coordinated through this group. As well, the commission asked for lots of documents, and this group coordinated the provision to the commission of over 20 million pages of documents. It's in that sense that it coordinates among five government departments.

Mr. Joe Preston: What I'm looking for is this. In the PCO there's an identified cost of \$8.9 million set aside in this year's main estimates for the support of Gomery, and some \$6.2 million set aside last year for the support of Gomery. Are you included in that number?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I believe so, yes.

The numbers, of course, are the ones I've mentioned for this group. It's \$534,000 for fiscal year 2004-05, and \$548,000 for fiscal year 2005-06.

Mr. Joe Preston: That's a very small portion of the \$15.1 million budgeted for the support of Gomery—not Gomery's commission itself, but for the support of Gomery. Are there lots of other groups like yours, little groups out there doing different things for Gomery?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No. In the PCO, this is the only group doing such matters. The rest of the money would be used for such things as translation; I think that's somewhere around \$4 million. It is also for legal services, and also for counsel for our witnesses.

Mr. Joe Preston: The dollars I mentioned, the \$15.1 million, are only for PCO. You mentioned six other departments that are involved. Is there—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Every department may have asked some staff to do this kind of work—yes, in each department—but in terms of the Privy Council Office, that's the only group.

Mr. Joe Preston: In the Privy Council Office, \$15.1 million to support Gomery, of which the approximately one million dollars you've mentioned is for your department, or your subgroup, or whatever—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That's correct. It's the Coordination Sponsorship Matters group.

Mr. Joe Preston: It's the Coordination Sponsorship Matters group. If I repeat it enough, I'll probably get it.

So you've spent close to \$1 million, and the other \$15.1 million is spent by other groups.

Are any of the other groups also under your responsibility, Ms. O'Hara?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: No, they're not.

Mr. Joe Preston: So there isn't a connection there, even though this is the coordination group?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: In the other departments?

Mr. Joe Preston: In PCO, I mean.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: No, they don't report to me.

Mr. Joe Preston: Then I refer back to the name again, the sponsorship coordination group. So we have a sponsorship coordination group that's not connected to any of the other groups that are receiving funding to support Gomery. What are you coordinating?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Hold on. This is a unit at PCO, as I've said, that has the responsibility to coordinate among the Privy Council Office, the Department of Justice, the Department of Finance, Treasury Board Secretariat, and the Department of Public Works and Government Services. When the commission asks for information, as it did.... This group coordinated flowing back over 20 million pages of documents to the commission.

When the government is expected, as it is very shortly, to present a position on certain matters, this is the group that will coordinate amongst these departments. They are therefore connected on a daily basis, I would imagine, with the people in those departments who are providing the information.

Mr. Joe Preston: But the other \$14.1 million being spent within the PCO that has to do with Gomery is not connected to anything called the coordination group.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No.

Mr. Joe Preston: To me, it seems there's a disconnect.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Preston. You're out of time.

Madame Thibault, seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

In French, it's called the "Groupe de coordination intergouvernementale de la Commission d'enquête sur le programme de commandites et les activités publicitaires". You said that, out of \$500,000, more than \$400,000 was for salaries. Is that for people already working at the Privy Council Office and who are assigned certain duties, or did you hire new people from the outside who have joined the group for the desired period?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: They're people who are working full time in the group and who have been detached from other departments, but are paid out of the budget we've identified.

Ms. Louise Thibault: That's very good.

It states on the Privy Council Office Web site that the mission of the office is "To serve Canada and Canadians by providing the best non-partisan advice and support to the Prime Minister and Cabinet."

What means have you used to ensure that officials are impartial and that there's nothing partisan about the activities or sub-activities for which they are responsible as part of their duties? That's my first question.

• (1545)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The purpose of the Privy Council is to advise the Prime Minister and Cabinet in an impartial manner. And it

does so brilliantly. We ensure there is a structure and that advice is offered through the Clerk of the Privy Council.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you, Mr. Bélanger, but I know how it works. I wanted to know what means have been taken in view of the highly sensitive nature of this entire issue. Have you taken the necessary measures to ensure absolute impartiality? Did you think it necessary to do that in the Privy Council Office in view of the nature of the subject?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: On that point, I can tell that it's not for the minister to give instructions to officials, but rather to the people to whom those officials report, in this case the Clerk of the Privy Council. At that point, all established instructions, procedures and policies are complied with in order to guarantee this independence and impartiality.

Ms. Louise Thibault: All right. Thank you.

When I look at the organization chart, again on the same English and French Web site of the Privy Council Office, I see that there are currently three commissions of inquiry, but that this is the only coordination group the Privy Council Office has established. You say they've submitted things to Judge Gomery, that they're doing such and such a thing. But why was the decision made to allocate resources there and not elsewhere? That's my second question. Then I'll have a third one.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: There's also the Arar Commission. A group of this kind does exist, but it's part of the Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Department, not the Privy Council.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Does the same kind of mandate and operation apply with respect to that coordination group?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I don't know whether those people borrow staff or only use their own people.

With your permission, I'll give you more details on that question. As part of the commission of inquiry on Somalia, which was established to investigate the behaviour of military personnel, a support group was established within the Department of Defence. A much larger group was set up in the Health Department for the tainted blood commission. It's standard that, every time a commission of inquiry is established concerning a subject that can be attached to a specific department, a coordination group is created.

In the case before us, five departments were concerned: the Department of Public Works, the Department of Justice and Finance, as well as Treasury Board and the Privy Council. So we decided that the coordination group would be within the Privy Council.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Could you tell us whether, in one way or another, employees belonging to this working group prepared the testimony of ministers — I could name a number, if you wish — or individuals working in minister's offices in the context of the Gomery Commission?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes. As I mentioned in my presentation, one of the group's roles is to assist the government's legal advisors in preparing witnesses.

Ms. Louise Thibault: So you prepared people.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: When I say witnesses, I mean the government.

Ms. Louise Thibault: As I understand it, the members of the group took part in the preparation of certain political witnesses. Among ministerial staff, there are political staff. Let's take, for example, the presentation by Mr. Dezainde, who — correct me if I'm wrong — works in Mr. Saada's office.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: We're talking about witnesses who work in government or who worked there at the time the events under inquiry occurred. That's the applicable criterion. Preparation assistance consists in ensuring that those persons have the necessary documentation and are aware of their responsibilities and rights.

• (1550)

Ms. Louise Thibault: However, do you think it's normal for the government, when it promised to shed light on the entire sponsorship scandal, to establish a division that, while supporting the commission's work, tries in a way to manage political risk by preparing certain witnesses?

As a result of the way you prepare those witnesses, who are people directly or indirectly involved in this affair, and the influence they can have, you help manage a political risk of another order.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No. The assistance these people receive is provided to them because they work or worked for the government. As such, they're entitled to a certain amount of support. Moreover, the various political parties have also received support in the area of legal advice through public funds. I even believe the Bloc québécois and the Conservative Party have done so. I don't know whether that was the case of the Liberal Party. The coordination group is not involved in that respect. It only concerns government employees who had some responsibility during that period.

The government is also entitled to advice. As a result, persons who did or are currently doing the work have received advice from the coordination group and their own advisors.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Thibault.

[English]

Your time is up.

Just for clarification, Mr. Bélanger, it has been asked a couple of times—and it's not clear to me—whether the salaries of the staff who have come on secondment are entirely paid for out of this budget of approximately \$500,000 a year. If so, are there any other costs that are applicable to this group that aren't shown in this amount?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: This is the full amount. There are no others.

The Chair: So that's full salary paid—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Correct.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Scarpaleggia.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to follow up on one of Madame Thibault's questions, which was on the subject of witness preparation or briefing. Could you elaborate on that? When you prepare witnesses, how does it work?

I suppose I could address this to Ms. O'Hara or the minister.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'll try, and then I'll ask her to add.

The preparation for witnesses would involve making sure the witnesses understand their rights and their responsibilities—because there's a large framework here—what the expectations of the commission are and the purpose of their testimony, with the view of making sure the information sought is indeed obtained and that the commission therefore can carry out its responsibilities.

That is the approach given to that. There have been a number of witnesses who have indeed benefited from that advice. Whether they've all followed it or not, I don't know.

Madame O'Hara might be able to add a bit more there.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: These are all government witnesses who are represented by government counsel. So what the group is doing is helping government counsel in the preparation.

I want to be clear. The group isn't doing the preparation itself. Government counsel is doing the preparation, supported by the group.

In our case, for example, the Government of Canada had a document called a “will-say”. Some witnesses have will-says, so government counsel and this group were involved in developing that will-say document.

What happens in the preparation is that you're told which documents the commission counsel is going to question you about. So what we do is help to find those documents that the witnesses will be questioned about.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: To follow up on another point that Madame Thibault raised, the answer had to do with the fact that it's very important for witnesses to go into the commission hearings well prepared.

I know there's an attempt here to make the whole exercise seem sinister, but let's be realistic. If your group didn't exist, how would these witnesses be well enough briefed and prepared to give the kinds of answers that would allow Judge Gomery and his commission's counsel to arrive at the truth? That's the whole point here, to get to the truth of the matter, and that's why you've produced 20 million documents.

If you didn't exist, what would happen to these witnesses? You would have to hire outside legal counsel and they'd have to come to you and say they needed these 20 million documents, and you'd have to set up a coordinating group, so we'd be right back at square one?

• (1555)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: If this group didn't exist, the government would be delinquent in its responsibilities, and we don't intend to be. The government has created this group to ensure that there's a proper coordinated response to the demands of the commission.

Helping counsel prepare witnesses is just one of the numerous functions of this group. One of them is to coordinate document preparation and presentation to the commission.

With all due respect, 20 million pages of documents don't happen because you wish that to happen. Someone had to be given the task to coordinate all of that, and the same thing to make sure that anything counsel wanted, it could have, and making sure that there was question period preparation, which I mentioned. There are a number of functions that this coordinating group has done over the two years that it would have existed, if indeed we see the full two years.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: So without this group, we'd have a lot harder time getting to the truth of the matter, it seems to me. That's my conclusion.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes, because in this instance, a very significant number of cabinet confidences were requested by the commission and provided by the government. That requires a tremendous amount of coordination, because you have to go and verify that all the legal requirements are met for secrecy, for third parties, and so forth. Yet the government did manage to provide and satisfy the commission of its requirements. So this is the work that this coordinating sponsorship matters group did.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Thank you.

The Chair: You have about a minute and a half left on the Liberal side. Does anybody want to take it?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Godbout.

Mr. Marc Godbout (Ottawa—Orléans, Lib.): I have a few brief questions to ask you for clarification.

When do you expect this committee to wind up?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: There's a budget for the current year. Will we make it to the end of the year? That remains to be seen. For the moment, we don't anticipate going beyond the end of the current fiscal year.

As I said, for the first fiscal year, starting in May — and that's no doubt what explains the difference — we're talking about \$534,000. For all of fiscal 2005-2006, it's \$548,000. We currently don't expect to spend more. We'll see whether the group needs to complete the fiscal year.

Mr. Marc Godbout: Theoretically, the committee should wind up as soon as the judge has submitted his report.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It would be premature on the government's part to anticipate the recommendations. Who will be in a better position to coordinate the government's response to the Gomery Commission?

Once it receives the final report, the government will then be able to decide who will have to coordinate the government's response and reaction. The same group might be involved, but, as you said, I believe it's a little too soon to confirm that.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godbout.

We'll go to Mr. Martin for seven minutes, followed by Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Let me just say I'm getting this tingling feeling that I get when somebody is blowing smoke up my kilt. It's just a nervousness I'm sensing here that makes me feel there's something untoward about this particular group. Notwithstanding what I'm being told here, I note in our own briefing notes that the PCOs main estimates have \$8.9 million listed as spending for administrative support to commissions of inquiry. This extra half-million dollars we see as sort of a crack team of spinmeisters doing damage control for the Liberal government more than providing a resource to the Gomery commission. That's already accommodated in \$8.9 million of administrative support to sift through 20 million documents and coordinate the five government departments. This seems like some kind of damage control SWAT team with the specific function of damage control for the Liberal Party as much as the Liberal government, because that's what keeps coming up at the Gomery commission.

My first question is, who are the other principals? The only name I have here is Ursula Menke, the former inspector general of CSIS. Who else is part of this? She's the director, I understand. Who are the other people in this crack team?

• (1600)

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Melanie Tod.

Mr. Pat Martin: What was her background?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: She provides a communication service. Bob Quinn provides monitoring, and he's our external communicator. Doris George is administrative support.

Mr. Pat Martin: Why can't these functions just fall under the normal civil service?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: These are public servants. They are following it.

Mr. Pat Martin: Public servants, but why do they have to be corralled together under the PCO to offer the innocuous functions you've outlined?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The answer to that I've given before.

In previous commissions of inquiry there was always a group in the department, if it can be attached to a department, that provided the coordination to respond to the inquiry. The Krever—

Mr. Pat Martin: You have that covered with the \$8.9 million we voted on.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Martin, may I be allowed to finish?

In the case of Krever, there was a unit in the health department. In the case of the Somalia inquiry it was in National Defence. In this case, there are five departments involved. That's why the decision was made to put it in the Privy Council Office.

Mr. Pat Martin: Who else is spending the \$8.9 million for administrative support to commissions of inquiry?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That is for the following, sir. The budget for this unit is, as I've said—

Mr. Pat Martin: It's \$534,000, I believe.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: For one year, and \$548 million for the second year. The rest of the money is used for legal costs.

Mr. Pat Martin: Legal costs?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: There are a lot of people who have counsel who are being paid. These counsel are being paid.

Mr. Pat Martin: That's government counsel coming in from DOJ, I presume.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: These are costs PCO pays under the Treasury Board indemnification policy, which says that if there are people needing legal support who are either currently working in a department or who previously worked in a department, PCO has to pick up the legal costs. So there are legal costs in that \$9 million; in other words, the cost of those lawyers.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: And there are the translation costs of all the—

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Of the inquiry itself. We're picking that up.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It's administrative and translation costs.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: And legal counsel.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: There is legal counsel being provided on cabinet confidences as well. These are the other costs for this particular coordinating unit, and it is limited to the budget that has been presented, \$534,000 and \$548,000.

Mr. Pat Martin: Most of the interest is in the Department of Public Works and Government Services in terms of accessing documents through the Gomery inquiry, I would think. Do they have their own special fund to provide resources, above and beyond that of the PCO?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: My understanding, Mr. Martin—and I could be corrected—is that they're doing it from their own internal resources.

•(1605)

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: No.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No, that's not accurate? Fine.

You're talking about the overall budget. Then we can get into the overall expenditures that will have been caused by—

Mr. Pat Martin: What I'm getting into is what seems like a duplication. If we're to accept what you're saying at face value—and I'm still questioning whether there's not a more political spin, task, duty to this team—it seems like a duplication for what the other government departments have to do to provide...

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I was under the impression that we were to focus on the coordinating of the sponsorship matter, but the overall Government of Canada bill—not the commission's bill, and it's all in the estimates—for the five departments, including Public Works and Government Services, Department of Justice, Department of Finance, Treasury Board Secretariat, and PCO, is \$32 million.

Mr. Pat Martin: The Department of Justice, PCO, and Public Works and Government Services received a total of \$40 million in funding to support the activities of the Gomery commission in the 2004-05 fiscal year.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: There was total funding of \$40 million, but departments were able to absorb \$9 million, so the incremental dollars were \$32 million.

Mr. Pat Martin: This is sort of the inverse, the antithesis of transparency. This is what's frustrating to me and probably frustrating to Canadians who may be interested in all of this. It's

not clear to people what this is really costing. There are contradictions, etc. Some people feel this million dollars you're spending on this crack team should be really put into the dirty money trust fund that the Liberal Party has been obliged to create. Whose interests are they really trying to defend here? It's the image... People shouldn't need coaching to go before an inquiry to tell the truth. All they're after is honesty. They don't need coaching.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Chairman, the people who—

The Chair: Mr. Bélanger, please wait until Mr. Martin is finished and has asked his question.

Mr. Pat Martin: My only point is, the amount of coaching you're outlining here seems to me to be contrary to the intent of the Gomery commission. All we really want our public servants to do is bring their memory and their honesty, and they shouldn't need half a million dollars' worth of briefing and coaching before a public servant is released. It's almost as if they have to get through the screening process to get to the public inquiry, and be coached as to what to say and what not to say. This is what worries me about its being in the PCO.

The Chair: Mr. Martin, your time is up.

Mr. Bélanger, if you want to give a short response, please do.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The people have rights, and if they are being asked to appear in front of a commission of inquiry, they have a right to counsel, and that counsel has the right to access information. The people who serve the government have these rights. They're not being coached. They have every right to receive access to the information, to understand their rights, understand their responsibilities when they appear in front of a commission, so that the commission can do its work. That is one of the many things this Coordinating Sponsorship Matters group is doing. The other is to coordinate the government's response to the commission so that the commission can go forward.

With all due respect, Mr. Martin, coordinating the response to that 20 million pages of documentation that were provided—and an unprecedented number of cabinet confidences have been provided—

Mr. Pat Martin: Those four staff persons didn't take care of coordinating all that documentation.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: They did. Yes, they did.

The Chair: Mr. Martin, your time is up.

We will go to Mr. Lauzon for seven minutes.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Mr. Bélanger and Ms. O'Hara.

With all due respect here, we're talking about what's been reported in the newspaper as a \$250-million sponsorship scandal. Some people reported it could be up to a \$350-million scandal. The reports say it's not a Quebec scandal, it's not a Government of Canada scandal; it's a Liberal Party scandal.

So I'm having a hard time, and apparently Justice Gomery is having a hard time. He's getting labelled.... People are saying \$100 million of this \$250 million or \$350 million is missing. It's gone somewhere. That's what Justice Gomery's trying to determine—where did it go?

Now the public is saying, hell, we're spending...some people would say \$100 million, but apparently we're spending \$80 million finding where this \$100 million of missing money has gone. Justice Gomery is wearing the tag. Actually, apparently it's \$80 million, so Justice Gomery is getting hit. He's asking, "Why are they saying I'm spending \$80 million? I'm only spending \$24 million on this inquiry." Apparently, it has come out lately that they're actually spending \$32 million.

However, the Government of Canada is spending \$40 million providing the information to Gomery. How the heck is that explained?

•(1610)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Lauzon, I couldn't possibly pretend to comment for Mr. Gomery. If you wish to, that's your prerogative, but I certainly won't.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Mr. Gomery said that, and it's reported. I'm sure you've read it.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Among this total money of \$40 million, \$9 million of which has been absorbed in the budgets of the departments that are involved here, some is to pay for the lawyers for the Conservative Party of Canada. Some of that is to pay for the lawyers for the Bloc Québécois. Some of that is to pay for the lawyers representing all the witnesses who have appeared—or a great number of them, anyhow. Some of that money is to pay for the translation. Some of that money, \$1 million of it, is to pay for the Coordination Sponsorship Matters group in PCO.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: You're telling me that—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Some of it is to pay for the commission itself.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Following up on Mr. Martin—Ms. Menke was the chief of CSIS, somebody mentioned, the inspector general of CSIS? She's the chief of this unit of five people?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: She's the head of this unit, yes.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Four—it's a group of four people.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Four people. Is she here today?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Yes, she is.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: She is the chief, but her background is in CSIS.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Ms. Melanie Tod, she's the director of internal communications for these four people?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: No. Internal communications means within the government; she works with those related departments that are involved in sponsorship, like Public Works and Government Services Canada.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: You need an internal communicator for this unit, is that correct?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: She's not within the unit.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Mr. Bélanger said earlier that you people are photocopying these 20 million pieces of paper. That's what the job of that unit is.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No, I didn't say that. I said "coordinating", sir. I said "coordinating". To provide the coordination—

Mr. Guy Lauzon: So you need an internal communicator to coordinate the photocopying?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: With all due respect, you may be of the opinion that four people to do all the work that they've done is too many people. The government thought it had a responsibility to make sure it provided, in a coordinated and timely manner, the information and documentation the commission requested, and to make sure, in terms of the counsel requesting witnesses being prepared in terms of what they needed to do—what they must do, what their rights were—that this thing would work fully.

Assigning four people to do all that work, the government thought, was quite the responsible thing to do, yes.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Thank you very much.

Part C of the PCO report on plans and priorities states that the PCO will be maintaining and I quote, "the credibility of PCO as a non-partisan advisor". How do the functions you've described here achieve that goal?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That's done, sir, in a non-partisan manner by public servants. If you wish to question public servants and their integrity in doing their job, you may do so. I will be here to defend them, sir.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: I'm not questioning the integrity of public servants. I suggested, and the Canadian public suggested, that this is a Liberal Party scandal. Now, that war room has been set up to provide information. You have a director, you have a four-person unit, you have a director of internal communications, you have a chief with four people, you have an executive assistant, you have a senior adviser—and you don't think there's a little bit of a conflict with what the PCO regulations suggest you should be doing? You don't think there's some partisanship here?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No, there isn't.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Thank you.

The Chair: You have about a minute and a half, Mr. Poilievre, if you'd like to take that.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): You said that you provided coaching for—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I didn't say that.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, you did, for the people who went to testify at the Gomery commission.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: What was the verb you used?

•(1615)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I said the counsel was asked to help prepare the witnesses in terms of what their responsibilities and their rights were.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I believe you actually did say "coaching", but we won't argue over that point.

Can you please give us the list of individuals whom you yourself prepared for testimony?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Sure, we can get you that.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Right now?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No. I don't have it in front of me.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Are we saying any civil servant or former civil servant who was asked to testify was given this option to be prepared?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: All the people, public servants or government people, would have had, through their counsel, access to the services of this group.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Then Chuck Guité had access to the services of the group?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No. It was witnesses represented, as I said, by government counsel. Mr. Guité has his own counsel, and others have their own counsel.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So anyone who has government counsel can rely on this war room to do its preparing?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The counsel can rely on this Coordination Sponsorship Matters group, yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, your time is up.

We'll go to Mr. Szabo for seven minutes, and then back to Mr. Poilievre for five minutes.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Thank you.

Mr. Minister, the question of the political involvement and partisanship is the fundamental motivation for this matter having come forward, and we really should try to address that more fully.

With regard to the activities of PCO generally, how would you describe the relationship of PCO with the party of the government of the day?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: In my experience, and I am a minister in the PCO family, I've found the people who work there, from the Clerk of the Privy Council to everybody who has other responsibilities reporting to him, to be the utmost professionals. They understand their responsibilities—their obligations, as well—to uphold the principles and policies that have been promulgated by the Parliament of Canada and by the executive. In this and in other instances, in PCO there has been exemplary service in a very professional and unpoliticized, or certainly non-partisan, manner. That's not to say that ministers do not, as members of Parliament, benefit from political advice and partisan advice. In the case of the Prime Minister, he'll get that advice from PMO—his own office—but certainly not from PCO.

You'll get objective advice from the PCO, from the clerk to everyone else in that department.

Mr. Paul Szabo: On the issue of the total cost, there seems to be some confusion among some members. If I were to go to Justice Gomery and ask how much money he was given to do his job, and for which he had control over the spending, what would he probably say—\$40 million, \$30 million?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It was \$32 million—

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: He's received the first-year funding, and the second-year funding has just been approved through a separate—

Mr. Paul Szabo: What is the grand total?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: I think we're up to \$34 million.... It is \$35.5 million.

Mr. Paul Szabo: So Justice Gomery knows what his budget is to spend and what he is to stay within, and he authorizes that, and his answer to that question is \$35 million.

If a media person were to ask the Prime Minister how much the Gomery inquiry has cost, would it be fair to say that the Prime Minister, in addition to using the direct spending of Justice Gomery, would have to add to that all consequential costs, and that he would come up with a different number?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes. It would be \$40 million.

Mr. Paul Szabo: It would be \$40 million. I hope that helps some members. I know it's pretty confusing.

With regard to other commissions, you had indicated where it was focused—for instance, Krever would be in health. It's fairly focused. Were any other departments materially involved in Krever?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'm sorry, I don't know the answer to that question. I can see that they might have coordinated a bit, certainly with Privy Council Office, and perhaps as well with the Department of Finance in terms of making sure the costs were covered. Any coordinating function would have also been done there.

There are horizontal functions carried out. There would naturally be a coordinating effort, but the resources to do it are there, so it would just be the normal business that they do, their normal activities.

Mr. Paul Szabo: The point I was hoping to make is that almost any inquiry, I would have thought, would have some involvement with PCO. If it was to coordinate a number of departments, such as the Gomery inquiry, some of it would have to be specifically funded, but even for those that were linear, there would still be a coordinating aspect with regard to communication among all those that might from time to time have the responsibility to make sure they had the right information and were kept in the loop. Somebody has to coordinate it, and it may be beyond the resources or capabilities of the department that is specifically involved.

• (1620)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: You're absolutely right, Mr. Szabo.

I'll ask Madame O'Hara to expand on that, but in any activity there has to be a coordination. There are built-in mechanisms for the Privy Council Office, which must advise the Prime Minister and cabinet of what's happening in the universe of the Government of Canada, whether it be a commission, and so forth. In that sense, yes, there would be coordination, even if there were a linear responsibility in, say, Health Canada. There would be some necessity to coordinate through central agencies or through the Privy Council Office.

Madame O'Hara, maybe you want to expand on that.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Yes. In PCO's DPRs and RPPs, you'll always see that we report the costs of inquiries, because usually it's the Prime Minister who has created, through an order in council, the commission of inquiry, so the costs of inquiries appear in PCO estimates. The administrative support for commissions of inquiry is usually provided by PCO, as it is in this case. Often PCO legal counsel has to become engaged and advise the clerk on issues dealing with any commission. In some cases—particularly this one, obviously, because the cabinet confidences are involved—PCO is the place you have to go in respect to cabinet confidences.

Mr. Paul Szabo: It makes some sense to me that there will always be some coordinating functions. Some will be greater than others; some will require specific appropriations, or incremental appropriations, and in most cases may be able to be absorbed internally.

On the \$40 million, it was indicated that about \$9 million and something was actually absorbed internally. Does that mean that moneys were actually saved? If I got an appropriation of \$40 million and only spent \$30 million because I charged \$10 million of it to other appropriations, theoretically, as projected spending, it was not spent.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: If it is saved by a given department on another function and redistributed internally, that's how they could absorb it.

Mr. Paul Szabo: I understand.

Finally, I'd like to address finally Mr. Martin's smoke concern. We're in a business in which political spin, as it has been characterized, is a fact of life. Every political party—whether it be someone doctoring tapes, or getting secret people to deliver secret envelopes, or whatever it might be—tries to put the best face on it. Let's be frank here. I don't want to have to be specific, but if a matter happened in the Gomery inquiry that directly affected the Liberal Party and, in the absence of some assistance, could be interpreted in many ways, and you wanted to spin it, how does the Liberal Party do that as a party, and how does the Liberal government do that? What is the instrument through which it would do that?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Well, it would be the same way as other parties do. It is through their own resources, offered through the research bureaus, through members of Parliament themselves, and through the party itself as well. In the case of the government side, if you will, you have the Prime Minister's Office and ministers as well.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Is that through PCO?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Not through PCO.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Thank you.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Not through PCO, but through PMO. It is the same way in terms of opposition parties. You will have that function in their own leader's office, in their research bureau, in their own critic's office, so....

But PCO is excluded from that function. PCO will not engage in that and will not advise the Prime Minister on that, and has not.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Mr. Martin's tingling can stop at this point.

Mr. Pat Martin: I've never worn a kilt, and I've never had, wearing a kilt, smoke blown up my ass, so I wouldn't know, Mr. Szabo.

The Chair: Mr. Szabo, you're out of time.

Next is Mr. Poilievre, followed by Mr. Gagnon.

•(1625)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I have to say I really appreciated the subtlety with which Mr. Martin presented his imagery, much more than the bluntness that we're not accustomed to from this minister.

I'd like to ask him in particular why it is that not one of the actual members of this war room is here today. I don't see any of them. I don't see Ms. O'Hara's name on the list of the team. I know we do have the chief of the group, who is not at the table with us. Can you perhaps explain why no members of the actual team are answering questions at this committee?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes, Mr. Chairman. It is because it's not a war room.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Whatever you've decided to name it, why are its members not here to answer questions?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That is because, in the traditional parliamentary functions, it is the minister of the Crown who has the responsibility to speak and to be accompanied by the officials he or she chooses. Now, if this group wishes to—

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Why didn't you choose a member—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Let me finish. If this group wishes to invite—

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I'm going to ask you another question. Why didn't you take—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'd like to finish my answer, Mr. Poilievre.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, please let Mr. Bélanger finish.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: If this group wishes to invite someone else, then that's at this group's discretion, Mr. Chairman. I don't intend to tell this group what to do.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You're avoiding the question.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The unit in question reports to Ms. O'Hara, and that's why she's here. She's accountable for it.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Poilievre, continue.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I didn't ask you if you made the decision, I asked you why you made the decision not to bring a member of this team before this committee. Why?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I brought the person to whom the group is accountable.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: No, I asked why you didn't bring a member of this team before the committee.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That was because I chose to bring the person to whom the group is accountable, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. Given that you're not going to answer this question, I'll move on to the next one. Who picked the team members, the actual team members? Was it you who picked them, Ms. O'Hara?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: I picked Ursula Menke, who then built her own team.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay, so you picked her yourself. It was your personal decision? What process did you go through to engage her and, indirectly, others?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Well, in the specific case of Ursula.... What we do, especially when we're hiring at that level, is work through our human resources group. We worked with the Leadership Network, which is part of the Public Service Human Resources Management Agency, to identify people at that level who would have the right qualifications to fill a job, and that's how I staff a job. That's how I found out about Ursula and her qualifications.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: And the group is exclusively responsible to you?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: And you're responsible to the minister?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: I also report to the Clerk of the Privy Council.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You report to the Clerk of the Privy Council. Okay.

I'd like to have a little bit more of a breakdown of this \$40 million that forms a discrepancy between what the government leaked to the media in costs of Gomery and what Gomery considered his costs to be. Before I do, I'd like to ask one other question.

You mentioned you do preparations for those people who are going before the commission. Are those preparations for all the people whose legal services are being covered by the government?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: It is just for those who have government counsel?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Correct.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So they are from the Department of Justice, then?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'm not sure if they're all employees of the Department of Justice, because quite often the justice department will retain people from outside. I'd have to verify that.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So outside counsel might perhaps be involved. Which firms were chosen?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I don't even know if there are any, Mr. Chairman. This is information we can find out: if there are any, and how they were chosen.

The Chair: Mr. Bélanger, if you would do that, the committee will look for that information. Thank you.

Mr. Poilievre, continue.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, we would be delighted. I want it noted for the record that the minister has agreed to share with us the names of the law firms that were retained, if any were.

Out of the \$40 million.... Those are all costs borne by the five departments. Is that correct?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Were there lawyers retained out of that portion, or is that...?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'm not too sure I follow the question.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Law firms outside of the government, of that \$4 million to provide defences....

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: As I said, Mr. Chairman, I don't have information with me as to whether outside counsel was retained by Justice. We'll find out and we'll provide that information.

• (1630)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You see, I think the problem people have with this whole process is that they see Gomery proper—the work he is doing in his commission—as responsible for getting to the truth. But your government is spending more on its response to Gomery, \$40 million, than Gomery himself is spending. In reality, a lot of people would argue that you're spending more money to cover up the truth than Gomery is spending to get to the truth.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Chairman, I've said already that some of that money the member seems to object to having been spent is spent to pay for legal counsel for the Conservative Party of Canada, which has standing there. Some of it is to pay for the Bloc Québécois.

The Chair: Mr. Bélanger, I don't think that is the question that was asked.

Mr. Poilievre, you are out of time.

Mr. Gagnon, followed by Mr. Scarpaleggia.

[Translation]

Mr. Marcel Gagnon (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm learning a lot today about how investigations are conducted. I wasn't aware of that. In an investigation such as this, is it normal for the lawyers and expenses of witnesses to be paid by the government?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Not only is it normal, it's also consistent with the policies established by the government, which are governed in this case by the Treasury Board.

Mr. Marcel Gagnon: Could a citizen who attacked the government request this assistance?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Gagnon, this assistance is provided to people who worked or are working for the government when they come under investigation or judicial investigation. If a citizen were to bring a charge, I don't believe that would be possible.

I'm going far beyond our frame of reference today. There may be other ways for a citizen to obtain assistance for an appearance. There is an assistance program for...

Pardon me?

Mr. Marcel Gagnon: Are you referring to legal aid?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: We're talking about court challenges. A citizen can obtain other forms of assistance. In this case, the Auditor General brought something to the attention of the government, which decided to follow her suggestion and establish a commission of inquiry. All those involved who must come and testify as a result of their present or past employment have certain rights, in particular the right to be represented by legal counsel. They are entitled to have recourse to a coordination unit such as this one, which was established to prepare their witnesses.

Mr. Marcel Gagnon: If one day charges were brought against certain persons, would they have to defend themselves, or would we pay to defend them?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'm not a lawyer, I'm not an expert, but I dare believe that, once a commission of inquiry has wound up, if criminal charges are brought by the competent authorities in the matter, defence expenses would not necessarily be paid for out of public funds. However, the courts can award compensation for costs.

Mr. Marcel Gagnon: That's good.

Your sponsorship management group — that's what it's called — prepared the witnesses. You provided them with the information they needed.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It was the witnesses' legal advisors that we assisted. In the case of the witnesses, we're talking about government employees who were entitled to the services of government legal counsel. They had access to the coordination group. The group helped them prepare the witnesses. The idea was to inform them of their rights, responsibilities and so on.

•(1635)

Mr. Marcel Gagnon: The idea, among other things, was to inform them about how they should behave.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: For example, cases involving confidential Cabinet matters required a great deal of coordination.

Mr. Marcel Gagnon: As I understand it, when the judge submits his final report, the same group will prepare the government's response.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That's not certain, Mr. Gagnon. Depending on Judge Gomery's recommendations, the government could rely on an existing group or establish a new one. It's too soon to determine who will coordinate the government's response. It might also be someone else. In one way or another, the budget estimates only concern the rest of the current fiscal year.

Mr. Marcel Gagnon: Would an eventual report by this group be intended solely for the government, or could this commission ask the group questions? What's the standard in that regard?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'm not sure I understand your question.

Mr. Marcel Gagnon: Let's suppose the judge submits his final report. It's possible the group would then assist the government, if the government so wished, in preparing its response. Could the group appear before us so that we could ask it questions?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Of course. Any group that's part of the public service can come and testify before a committee.

Mr. Marcel Gagnon: The commission will have cost quite a lot of money. In addition, the investigation concerns what appears to have been a theft involving many millions of dollars. Mr. Chairman,

we were wondering who was going to pay for that. It appears the taxpayers will foot the entire bill. As you'll probably agree with me, this political event will have cost society a lot of money. That's what the final report will tell us.

You'll nevertheless agree that, in addition to violating taxpayers' rights, this matter has ultimately cost them a lot of money.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Gagnon, you're right in saying that Canadian taxpayers will ultimately foot the bill.

However, the opposition leader — and I don't know whether the leader of the Bloc québécois has issued any comments on the subject — acknowledged that it would cost money to get to the bottom of this matter. The public, for its part, wants to get to the bottom of this. In that sense, I believe we must do what's necessary. Soon we'll have the report in our hands, and then we'll be able to act accordingly. We'll know the facts.

You're nevertheless right in saying that taxpayers will ultimately foot the bill.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Gagnon, your time is up.

Mr. Scarpaleggia, for five minutes.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I've been listening to the deliberations, and it seems to me the crux of the argument committee members from the opposition are putting forth is that the public servants who work in your coordinating group, for one reason or another, are unprofessional in their conduct and are not acting as they should, as public servants. In other words, they're not being unbiased and objective, but somehow are acting as spinmeisters—

Mr. Joe Preston: On a point of order, Chair, we have not said anything along those lines.

The Chair: That's not a point of order.

Go ahead, Mr. Scarpaleggia.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: That seems to be the assumption, and we seem to be impugning the motives of the public servants who work in this group. I find that a bit odd, because we have former public servants here on this committee, and they're fine people.

[Translation]

Mr. Marcel Gagnon: I have a point of order. I wouldn't want to be associated with that. I wasn't referring to the behaviour of public servants.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: I agree, that wasn't...

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Gagnon, you will allow Mr. Scarpaleggia to continue his questioning. You will have a chance to make your points later.

[Translation]

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: That wasn't said, I agree. However, that seems to underlie the remarks, which leads me to ask a question.

Mr. Bélanger and Ms. O'Hara, do the members of your group have any particular personal interest in this matter, which would lead them not to conduct themselves in a professional and objective manner? In other words, are there any public servants among your group of four or five persons who were previously associated with the Sponsorship Program, in one way or another, and who would therefore have an interest in acting in a non-professional and partial manner?

• (1640)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'll ask Ms. O'Hara to supplement my answer.

First, as far as I know, the answer is no. Second, as to their conduct and professionalism to date, absolutely not.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: You've answered my question.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Scarpaleggia.

Is there anyone else on that side who would like to ask a question?

Then we'll go to Mr. Preston for five minutes.

Mr. Joe Preston: Thank you.

Just to carry on a little bit with that, to follow up on an answer you gave to Madame Thibault's question earlier, you stated that it's not a minister's job to tell an employee how to do his job. Sir, I give you that this is what caused all of this in the first place. The whole scandal may not have happened if ministers had been attentive in their own departments.

You also talked about how the PCO is not a partisan organization, and by its own edict, its own rules, they are to maintain their credibility as a non-partisan organization. I think you can say it over and over, and I can ask it over and over, but preparing question period responses and preparing witnesses for the counsel sounds partisan to me and probably to Canadians.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: On the first thing you raised, Mr. Preston, the role of a minister and ministerial staff is not to give orders to public servants directly. The interface is at the deputy minister level. The chain of command, if you will, the flow of responsibility, is from the deputy minister, which in the case of Privy Council Office is the Clerk of the Privy Council. That person, whoever holds it, then can give instructions to the people who work under their direction.

In that sense, it is not up to the minister to direct public servants, other than through the deputy minister.

Mr. Joe Preston: Who may act a little differently there than in other ministries.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I believe this is the norm in all departments.

Mr. Joe Preston: So they would then always work through a deputy minister, and that's where the direction would happen.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Correct. There may be some—

Mr. Joe Preston: But the lack of responsibility taken by ministers is what caused the sponsorship crisis in the first place.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That's one of the reasons we're having this commission, and I presume, or I hope, one of the things—

Mr. Joe Preston: Perhaps I can move on to a question.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I thought there was a second question in your first intervention.

Mr. Joe Preston: There was, about the partisan nature there.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The government has, by definition, in our system of government, a partisan bent to it, because it's from a political party that has elected the most seats.

Mr. Joe Preston: It surely does.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: But there is also a government function that is not partisan, and that is carried out through the public service of Canada. In that sense, we do have an exemplary public service in Canada. There may be the odd problem from time to time. We get to the bottom of things; we find out what it is and we fix it. By any standard, the public service of Canada is seen to be a very solid, very appropriately managed—

Mr. Joe Preston: I agree. The public service of Canada is all of those things. But when we put together a very small group, a little war room of four or five people that includes an internal communications person, it sounds to me like we're spinning information out to the public. And I think the public sees it that way, whether that's the truth or not.

I want to ask a question about the 20 million documents you continue to talk about. Are these all of the documents that were provided for the public accounts committee before Gomery was set up?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: First of all, on your matter of spinning—

Mr. Joe Preston: I had a feeling we were going to hear more.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes, you are, because you have called this coordination group on sponsorship matters something it is not.

The government has a responsibility, once it creates a commission, as we did, to make sure it provides the information the commission needs and that it responds in a timely manner and completely. In this case, there were 20 million pages of documents submitted—

Mr. Joe Preston: Were they the same 20 million prepared for the public accounts committee?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Some of them would have been the same; there would be some overlap. I don't know how much of this—

• (1645)

Mr. Joe Preston: I'm sure your government prepared all of them. The public accounts committee was told it had everything it needed to do its job. I'm sure they were all done.

What have they done in the last year?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: In fairness to the committee of Parliament, maybe the commission of inquiry, led by Justice Gomery, was a bit more thorough and had a bit more time. There may very well have been an overlap, plus, as I was saying, there was an unprecedented number of cabinet confidences provided to the commission. So all of this work, sir, is done by the Coordination Sponsorship Matters unit.

Mr. Joe Preston: You continue to talk about five departments having some horizontal responsibility, but the supplementary estimates only list Justice, the Privy Council Office, and Public Works, for a total of \$40 million under the sponsorship program and advertising activities/Gomery commission. It lists the \$40-million expenditure; we agree that we're at that point. You've said that of that \$40 million, some of the departments absorbed \$9 million. Other than the Privy Council's \$26 million, there's only \$13 million in there, so who has absorbed the other \$9 million?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I believe it is the Treasury Board Secretariat that has absorbed—

Mr. Joe Preston: They are not listed as being one of the horizontal expenditures in the accounting.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It's because they absorbed it. That's why we—

Mr. Joe Preston: Then the \$40 million adds up.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No, it is \$40 million minus what was absorbed. What was absorbed in Treasury Board, if it is absorbed, doesn't need to be reflected in supplementary estimates.

Mr. Joe Preston: So it's above the \$40 million then. It's saying these departments—Justice, the Privy Council, and Public Works—have spent \$40 million. If some more was absorbed, would it show that as a credit, or show Treasury Board as being credited that amount?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'm not sure I follow you here, but let me see if we can work through this math.

Mr. Joe Preston: I understand that both of us think that way about the estimates book.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I do confirm that sometimes they are difficult to understand. I would agree with you on that.

Mr. Joe Preston: The \$40 million still got spent on behalf of Justice, on behalf of Privy Council, and on behalf of Public Works. Under this, there are only three departments listed.

The Chair: Mr. Preston, you're out of time.

But could you give an answer, Ms. O'Hara?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: I don't have the document you're referring to in front of me, so I'll have to get back to you on the specifics. I know that the total is \$40 million for those five departments, of which \$9 million got absorbed—

Mr. Joe Preston: There are only three departments listed in the supplementary estimates.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: That's because, as we said, Treasury Board absorbed—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: If you put the estimates and the supplementary estimates together you may have the full picture, and that's what we'll do.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: We'll get that for you, yes.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Godbout, for five minutes.

Mr. Marc Godbout: If I may ask, just for clarification, you did talk to us about the function of this particular group, but could you maybe be a bit more specific—if not the minister, Mrs. O'Hara? What, in fact, was the liaison with the Gomery commission? What did it entail? You've talked about producing 20 million pages of

documents, but it's a big commission and it must have entailed more than that.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: There was the documentation, the requirements of the commission. There were also the cabinet confidences, and on that one we're maybe not aware or underestimate the work it represents.

Perhaps, Madame O'Hara, if you could elaborate on that one a bit, we may get a better sense of the work that was carried out and the workload of this group.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: That was an area of liaison with the commission when the documents were produced. When there were cabinet confidences, we would have to do work with them; in some cases, documents had to be redacted. So we provided some of the documents, but some of them were protected by cabinet confidences, and there was liaison with the commission counsel on that issue.

Mr. Marc Godbout: When the commission wanted a piece of documentation, was it automatically referred to that body or to the individual departments?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: My information is that it was automatically referred to that body.

You see, everyone at the commission, whether they be counsel for the commission itself, counsel for the government, counsel for the various intervenors, or counsel for the various witnesses who retained their own counsel, would be aware of the existence of this group. That's how the information would have flowed: contact through this group, information obtainment coordinated via all the departments, and then back to the commission.

Anything else?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: I just want to be clear that Public Works provided boxes and boxes of documents to the commission that didn't go through our unit. But when there was a cabinet confidence in a box, our group had to look at it.

• (1650)

Mr. Marc Godbout: Did you have any regular meetings scheduled with the commission to attend to their needs?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: It was more informal than that.

Mr. Marc Godbout: Okay.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Boshcoff, if you'd like to finish the time, there are about two minutes left.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you.

Is any of the correspondence that you prepare on any type of partisan letterhead?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Okay.

Is any of the work exclusive to the government's Liberal Party perspective?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'm not sure I follow that question.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Is the work of this office only for one party?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It's for the government, not for any party.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: You had mentioned that there were legal services for other parties?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Correct. That's paid for publicly; it hasn't anything to do with this coordinating sponsorship unit.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: I see. Okay.

The staff of the PCO in general continue, whether there's a change in government or not. How are they hired? Is it through the Public Service Commission?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Yes, that's right.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: I'm just trying to determine the bias that's been alluded to here.

Do you have any nicknames for your own operation? Would you call this the "peace room" or...?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: We call it the coordination unit.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: So you don't have any self-deprecating names.

In terms of many of the affectations that have been put on this, it seems to me that we've proved conclusively today that this is an unbiased public service operation here.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Members will draw their own conclusions.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: I hope so.

Thank you.

The Chair: Are you finished, Mr. Boshcoff?

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Yes, I am.

The Chair: Madam Thibault, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'd like to understand the roles a bit better. I'm going to call witness services, preparation, coaching, what's done so that people are well informed.

What links are there or were there, if there were any, between the Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council Office? I'm going to give you an example. Mr. Dezainde, former Director General of the Quebec Section of the Liberal Party of Canada, appeared. This is someone who, in his testimony, talked about events during which he was not a public servant, a minister or a deputy minister. So he played a partisan role. He testified to that effect. He's now working in the office of a minister. He definitely wasn't prepared like a public servant who works in a minister's office. He was prepared with respect to the role he had played. If you want to correct me, do so right away.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: He didn't receive any assistance.

Ms. Louise Thibault: He didn't receive any assistance?

I'm going to read you part of his testimony. This is the excerpt from Mr. Dezainde's testimony before the Gomery Commission,

where he said he had been prepared by the Prime Minister's Office. I quote Mr. Lussier, the government's counsel:

[...] When [did] you decide[...] to request a hearing with the Commission[?]

MR. DEZAINDE: I'm glad you asked me that question. Mr. Commissioner, as soon as I heard Mr. Brault's testimony, like many other people, that day, Wednesday morning to be precise, I met with someone in the Prime Minister's Office and said, "You know, if you want, you can ask me for my help. I would be happy to oblige." The following Saturday, I got a call from Michel Décarie in the Prime Minister's Office, and he asked me if I would agree to meet with the Party's lawyer and help out, if I had any information. I told them I'd be happy to. The following Monday, I met with Mr. Perron and spent three or four hours with him. I told him what I knew. That same night, Mr. Mitchell called me back, saying, "We have to meet." We met the next day in the Prime Minister's Office, and that's when Mr. Groulx came into the picture.

Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Groulx are lawyers. The reference is pages 22036 and 22037, if you want to have it.

Unless you're telling me that the excerpts from the Gomery Commission that I just read to you aren't accurate, there was a link between the Prime Minister's Office, the Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council to — if you don't call that "preparing", I don't know what word to use — arrange for a person to meet with people, lawyers in this case, before going to testify. If that's not preparation, I don't know what euphemism you want to use.

I'm asking you a basic question. What's the link? I don't mean that the Privy Council Office is partisan from the get-go, sir, but since there is such a close tie with a former director, it seems to me it is partisan.

• (1655)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Ms. Thibault, I'm not saying you're wrong about the quotation, but it's entirely consistent with what I'm saying.

The witness didn't receive any assistance from the Privy Council Office. He received assistance from the Prime Minister's Office. We acknowledged earlier in our testimony today that the Prime Minister's Office has a partisan function. The same is true of Mr. Duceppe's office. I recognize that. The witness was not directed by government lawyers, but by the Liberal Party's lawyer.

Ms. Louise Thibault: So there was no government lawyer who spoke to Mr. Dezainde in any way.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you, that was my question.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: You're welcome.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, you have five minutes.

Yes, go ahead, Mr. Lauzon, for a minute.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Thank you. I just have one quick question.

I assume you people are familiar with Ms. Hali Gernon of the PCO. I'm just quoting what Ms. Gernon said regarding Ms. Menke: "Ms. Gernon said Ms. Menke has been providing advice to the PMO and Mr. Himelfarb in regards to the inquiry".

Do you know that for a fact?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That's what we've been saying she's been doing. That's the job of the PCO, sir, not partisan advice. The government has a responsibility to make sure that if it creates a commission, as we did, it provides the advice, information, and whatever help is required for the commission to do its work. The Privy Council Office has a responsibility to provide impartial advice on governmental matters to the PMO via the Clerk of the Privy Council. That is exactly confirming the quote you've just read.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You indicated, Minister, that the line between governmental and partisan is often hazy, and that oftentimes it's difficult to—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I don't recall having said that, Mr. Chairman. It's the second time this—

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Excuse me, I'm going to continue with my question. You're not going to interrupt me. I'm going to continue.

Oftentimes, because the party in power has the most seats and controls the government, there's overlap between the partisan and the governmental. That's in fact what you said.

I want to ask a very quick question about translation, because it was my understanding that the simultaneous translation provided to the media at the Gomery commission was provided by the Gomery commission itself. Is that correct?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It's funded through the public.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: No, no. Is it provided out of the \$30 million-plus the Gomery commission is covering itself?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: My information is that's not the case.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: It's provided out of which department? PCO?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The Privy Council Office.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay.

PCO covers all of the translation costs, so when citizens are watching the coverage on Radio-Canada or CBC live, they are getting the translation from a PCO service and not from the Gomery commission's in-house translation?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: We're talking about translation, not necessarily interpretation.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay, the interpretation then. When I turn on Radio-Canada and a witness testifies in English, who provides that simultaneous translation on the spot? Who does it?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It comes out of the same PCO envelope.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay, good.

Now, the particular office we're speaking of, which I call the war room and you call the coordination office, does it ever communicate directly with ministers of the Crown themselves?

• (1700)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No, I don't believe it does.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Never.

With their political staff?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No, that would be through PMO.

You see, there's a chain here. The interface is done between the Prime Minister and the Clerk of the Privy Council. If there are any communications with the ministers' offices, they would be done through the Prime Minister's Office.

Yes, there would be communications. That's part and parcel of their functions, just as there are communications between the leader of the official opposition and the members of his shadow cabinet. That's part and parcel of the way matters are conducted here. But in terms of this group providing advice to ministers or ministerial staff, no.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. So they obviously provide, as you've pointed out, advice to the Prime Minister's Office and, I guess, to the Prime Minister himself.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: As your colleague has just quoted, it's through the Clerk of the Privy Council, through Ms. O'Hara, who reports to the Clerk of the Privy Council.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, of course, that's right. So the office helped prepare the Prime Minister for his testimony, for example, before the Gomery commission.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The counsel would have.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So it did help with preparations for the Prime Minister?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Counsel would have received or contacted this unit.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: The Prime Minister's counsel?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The government counsel.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: The government counsel acting for the Prime Minister?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. So this Gomery war room was effectively used to prepare the Prime Minister for his testimony before Gomery.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Ah, Mr. Chairman, the—

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: That's what you've just said.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No, it's not what I said.

Mr. Chairman, at some point I know what I've said, and I've never used the expression that the honourable member attributes to me. I've always—

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You said that it provided counsel—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It's my turn to respond now. I've always referred to this as the coordinating sponsorship matters—

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Can I ask a question?

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, we're going to allow Mr. Bélanger to respond briefly.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I've said that Coordination Sponsorship Matters, as one of the numerous functions it carries out, helps government counsel prepare witnesses in terms of their rights, their responsibilities, and documents.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Including the Prime Minister?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Well, the Prime Minister is the head of the government, yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So this office has helped the Prime Minister prepare for his testimony in front of Gomery?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Through counsel.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Through counsel, but either way, helped him no less.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Through counsel, as are all witnesses represented by government counsel.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So to date, we've had two witnesses, then. There are \$40 million in costs by the government outside of the real costs of Gomery to do its work. Then we have this million-dollar war room that actually helped prepare the Prime Minister for his testimony before Gomery. It's very interesting that the taxpayers were forced to pay for that.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, you're out of time.

Is there anybody on the Liberal side to ask questions? Mr. Szabo.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Minister, for your attempts at answering the questions.

A voice: He had a chance.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Yes, but it's hard to get through when people are talking over your answer. I wanted to see if we could address some of the points that the honourable member has alluded to.

The word "preparing" witnesses could have more than one meaning, depending on who.... For clarification, could you please advise the committee what constitutes preparation in the context that preparation of witnesses is done?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It's again through government counsel, because these people are represented by government counsel.

Mr. Paul Szabo: So the payment may come out of the PCO budget, but the delivery of that functionality is through a person who is called the government counsel, and that government counsel would.... With regard specifically, say, to the Prime Minister, what would constitute preparation of the Prime Minister by the government counsel?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: As for all other witnesses in that category, it's to make sure he's aware of what his obligations and responsibilities are and what his rights are, and in terms of whatever documentation is being referred to, make sure his counsel has access to it so he can be prepared. It's the same as in any such proceedings. I mean, there's nothing sinister here. All the people who are involved with the commission, and all the parties that are represented there, are perfectly aware of this.

Mr. Paul Szabo: So it's basically to facilitate smooth activity within the operations of the inquiry.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes.

Mr. Paul Szabo: With regard to again—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Szabo, we have an offer. Ms. O'Hara testified. Perhaps she can explain how that worked for her.

• (1705)

Mr. Paul Szabo: If it would help members to understand what actually happened, I think that would be helpful.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Well, witness preparation does involve, as the minister said, some sense of your rights and responsibilities, because it is a process that most of us have never been through, and there are rules involved—for example, who you can talk to and who you can't talk to, why you're there, why you're appearing.

More importantly, it is to facilitate the process. You're told which documents you're going to be asked about in advance, so you have a sense of the kinds of questions you're going to be asked, and then when you get there for the actual hearing, you're given all the documents. There's a pile of documents in front of you, and both government counsel and commission counsel can ask you questions. They refer you specifically to documents. Through the preparation process, you know what the document is and you have a sense of what the question is. Otherwise, you'd be fumbling around every time trying to read a document that you haven't actually seen for seven years.

Mr. Paul Szabo: May I ask you to clarify who has decided the aspects on which you are going to be examined? Is that a collaboration or a cooperation between government counsel and the inquiry counsel and other lawyers?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: You're alerted as to what the commission counsel is going to be asking you.

Mr. Paul Szabo: The commission counsel?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Yes.

Mr. Paul Szabo: But what if the government counsel also wants to ask you questions that are beyond—

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: They do that, too. They will tell you what questions they will ask.

Mr. Paul Szabo: So you will have the papers there. So the prep work is basically to find a ballpark in which you're going to play at the commission, and all of that material could be subject to questioning by some legal counsel.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: A lot of your testimony is related to the document you table in advance that is called a will-say. So they're actually helping you to walk through what your will-say says—I think you've been through this too, and actually there's another member of the committee who's been through this—because you'll be asked about your will-say.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Let's get back to the political influence. For a prospective witness before the Gomery inquiry who's going to be called, would the PCO ever communicate directly with any witness with regard to advice on how to deal with a particular politically sensitive matter?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Thank you.

Would the PMO discuss with—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Maybe—

Mr. Paul Szabo: Okay.

Would government counsel?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Just as others in a political realm would, as well.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Sure.

Would government counsel have a pre-examination or pre-discussions with a witness coming before the inquiry?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I don't know.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Yes, that's witness prep.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Did you have discussions with the government counsel before you appeared?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: That is what witness prep is. Government counsel is doing the witness prep.

Mr. Paul Szabo: He's doing the prep. But beyond that, to counsel you on any political landmines or other risk areas, were they giving you political advice, or was this with regard to the areas of examination only?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: The latter.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Szabo, you're out of time.

Mr. Paul Szabo: The answer was no.

The Chair: Mr. Preston, five minutes.

Mr. Joe Preston: Yes. Staying on the topic that Mr. Szabo was just on, you talked about government counsel being the person the prep would be with. What would the role of this group be then in that scenario?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: It was in helping the government counsel find the documents that were going to be used.

Mr. Joe Preston: So it's simply, "I am going to be asking X, Y and Z. Find me the documents". They're not playing a hands-on role in the witness preparation, as was said earlier?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Yes, they are. They've been following the hearings, so they can also provide some advice about what questions may be asked.

Mr. Joe Preston: How many of these witnesses would fall into the category you talked about? I won't hold you to within 10 or 20, but how many witnesses were there?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: There were about 100, but we have committed to providing the full list.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: You said the Prime Minister had access to the witness preparation. Did former minister Gagliano use it?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I believe he has his own counsel.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Did former public servant Chuck Guité use it?

• (1710)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I believe he also has his own counsel.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: There is a discrepancy. You said 20 million documents, and the Minister of Public Works and Government Services suggested there were 10 million documents. So there is only a 10-million difference here.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: There is not necessarily a discrepancy. There may be 10 million from Public Works, but in total, because it's a coordinating unit for five departments, it is over 20 million.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: The minister, in representing the government, says to let Justice Gomery do his work. But here we're spending \$40 million making it hard for Justice Gomery to do his work. It's a contradiction.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The member's own leader doesn't seem to have a difficulty understanding that when we launched the inquiry we knew it was going to cost, and that whatever it cost we had to do it to understand what happened.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Which of the members of the communications or coordinations team are lawyers?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: Ursula Menke is the lawyer. I think she's the only one.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You've said that this body has prepared 100 witnesses for testimony. Is that right? Where do the 100 come from?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No, that's not what I said. We said that this group helped counsel prepare about 100 witnesses. Counsel for these 100 witnesses are of course all lawyers.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Right.

As was described earlier on, you're preparing them to understand their rights and responsibilities before the commission, but only one member of the team is a lawyer, someone who would actually have any qualifications to discuss rights and responsibilities of witnesses before a government commission.

So you have one lawyer. The other members of this team are not lawyers. They obviously do not have the legal qualifications to provide preparations for witnesses as to their rights and responsibilities.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: In terms of the work of this coordinating sponsorship matters group, Mr. Chairman, helping counsel prepare witnesses is just one of a number of functions we're carrying out. And in terms of the relatively small size of this group, I would say they've done a great job.

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: In witness preparation, the majority of the work, 80% to 90%, is done by government counsel. When we talk about supporting prep, this group is actually doing a small job of providing the documents. It's government counsel that's doing the witness prep.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay.

I don't think my colleague got an answer to his question earlier. Did Mr. Gagliano get preparations from this?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Guité?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Did any minister other than the Prime Minister get preparations?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I suppose so, yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Can you name them?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I don't know.

Madame...?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You don't know. Well, you know that the Prime Minister got them.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Chairman, we've agreed to provide the list of those, and we will.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: That's fine.

Did the former Prime Minister, Mr. Chrétien, get preparations?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I don't believe so.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So the only minister that you can tell us about who received support for his testimony, or preparations for his testimony, is the current Prime Minister.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Yes.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Chairman, there's a pattern here, which I'm actually not very fond of, of having words put into my mouth by this member.

I didn't say that. We've been asked for the list of all those who were prepped by government counsel with the help of this coordinating unit, and we will provide that list. Perhaps the member should wait until he receives that list before drawing conclusions.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: The only minister that you are able to tell us about today, which is what I just said, is the Prime Minister.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No.

• (1715)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You've not told us about another minister.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: You've got madame, a member of your own committee, who's....

I would presume that Minister Dion, who appeared before the committee, had it, and Minister Goodale, who appeared before the committee, had it.

We'll get you the list. You can't draw these kinds of conclusions, with all due respect.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I'm just asking questions.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: And I'm providing answers.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You're doing so very defensively, I'm afraid. There's no reason to be defensive. There's nothing to fear here.

Thank you very much for that. I do look forward, with great anticipation, to your providing that list to our committee.

Thank you for your testimony.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Poilievre.

I have a few questions.

In terms of the total spending of this government on the Gomery inquiry and related activities, it seems to me, Ms. O'Hara, that you may be in a position to give me a number. What would that number be? Is \$40 million the complete number, or are there other costs borne by the government that haven't come out yet and haven't been divulged?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: That's the complete number for those departments over two fiscal years. It includes what they absorbed, the \$9 million, and the \$32.5 million that was incremental money.

The Chair: What about other departments?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: No, they're not affected by this.

The Chair: Okay.

Your said your group—it's called the coordination group—coordinates the activities from other departments in government?

Ms. Kathy O'Hara: No, we just coordinate the five departments affected by the issues under study by—

The Chair: Okay, the five departments. If your group coordinates, then there must be some work done in these other departments. Is the cost of that work done in these other departments accounted for in this figure of \$40 million?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes.

The Chair: It is. So any time any department does work related to the Gomery inquiry, that amount is allocated to this figure, which is now \$40 million.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes.

The Chair: We're not going to find down the road that there are other costs that just aren't showing up for one reason or another.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I don't believe so.

The Chair: Okay.

Thank you very much. I appreciate both of you coming today, and I appreciate your answers.

I don't believe there's any other business before the committee.

This meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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