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Mr. John Williams

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•(0905)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. John Williams (Edmonton—St. Albert, CPC)): Good morning, everybody.

The orders of the day are pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), governance and accountability within the federal public service, with an emphasis on ministerial and deputy ministerial accountability.

Appearing before us this morning is the Honourable Reg Alcock, President of the Treasury Board, and from the Privy Council Office, Mr. Alex Himelfarb, Clerk of the Privy Council.

Today, of course, we're going to be dealing with report number 10 of the public accounts committee, which dealt with governance and the relationship between ministers and deputies and the oversight of departments. I believe the President of the Treasury Board and the Clerk of the Privy Council will be back to talk about the ninth report at a later date, when we're dealing with the recommendations of this committee for improvements within the bureaucracy.

So without further ado, I will ask the minister, the Hon. Reg Alcock, for his opening statement.

Hon. Reg Alcock (President of the Treasury Board): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I don't know whether it's just the unique acoustical properties of this room, but I was having difficulty hearing you, and you weren't that far away.

The Chair: I can shout louder.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I am pleased to be here, along with the Clerk of the Privy Council, Mr. Himelfarb. I am going to make a brief opening statement, and then I believe Mr. Himelfarb has a few remarks he wishes to add. Then we'll get into your questions.

I want to start by just recognizing the very hard work of this committee. You have been, dare I say, extremely prolific in this last year with the number of reports you've put forward. Each one of them is something the government, and certainly Treasury Board, spends a fair bit of time looking at, not only as we craft our responses to it but to consider the thoughts and concerns you're raising in the recommendations you make to us.

Now, as I understood from the request for my appearance today, you're interested in discussing specifically your tenth report, which is on ministerial and deputy ministerial accountability.

In that report, the committee recommended that Canada adopt a variation of the United Kingdom's accounting officer model,

whereby deputy ministers would be accountable before this committee for the performance of their management duties and for the exercise of their statutory authority. A specific procedure was also recommended by the committee to resolve instances of disagreement between the minister and deputy minister regarding the administration and operation of the department. Finally, the committee recommended retaining deputy ministers in their positions for at least three years and extending their accountability for negligence and wrongdoing even after they have left their positions.

In submitting our response to that report, we deferred addressing certain key issues because we felt they needed to be put within the broader context of the government's management improvement agenda. Today I am pleased to present more complete and direct answers to the issues raised in your report and to provide you with copies of the discussion paper outlining the government's management improvement agenda, which I believe will provide that context.

As you know, I have been working on improvements to the management of government ever since my appointment to this position on December 12, 2003. The current Prime Minister came in with a very clear set of objectives at the time of transition, one of which was to reinforce Treasury Board's role as the central management agency of government and to have it strengthen its internal oversight capabilities. Along with that, I had direct instruction from the Prime Minister to recreate the position of Comptroller General. Rather than review all of that activity, though, I want to make one point at the outset, which is that management change, change in any large organization, is a process, as opposed to a series of one or two major decisions.

I have undertaken, over the course of the last 18 or 19 months, a series of I think almost 158 separate decisions that affect the management of government. They were done by me and my colleagues in PCO and government services. And I have resisted the normal course of putting down a big plan, the grand design, because I felt we were far better served, and citizens were far better served, and the public service was far better served, by simply addressing problems, moving step by step to improve the systems.

On Friday, I made several more announcements on the management agenda. An area we had flagged early on and had done some work on in the Crown's report was this issue of internal audit. I had made announcements almost a year ago of an intention to move to a new, more vigorous form of internal audit. I was able to announce on Friday the completion of that policy, which has been adopted by Treasury Board and is now part of the internal management structure of government. We have other work to do on the senior financial officers, which the Comptroller General is working on now.

But I also announced something that, as we are getting further down the road on this—and in the document I am going to table with you there is a set of about 80 other decisions that have been made as we look to how we frame—

• (0910)

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick (Prince Albert, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: On a point of order, Mr. Fitzpatrick.

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick: The tenth report deals with one specific recommendation and the ninth report deals with the overall matters of governance and accountability. It seems to me, with all due respect to Minister Alcock, that what we're really into is a general discussion of the whole area of ministerial accountability and all the audit changes and everything that he proposed to do.

That's not the purpose of our meeting today. Our meeting is to deal with our specific recommendation that was contained in the tenth report, and I would like the whole deliberation today to be focused on that report.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fitzpatrick.

I mentioned at the beginning that the emphasis is on ministerial and deputy ministerial accountability. Perhaps the president can think about that in his remarks.

Mr. Alcock.

Hon. Reg Alcock: That is exactly what I'm speaking about. We said in our response to the tenth report that there was a broader context for this. One aspect of it is the changes to both the role of senior financial officers and the level of certification. Also, the changes to internal audit are a key provision in how one builds a more rigorous form of internal and external oversight and accountability.

There are other parts to that. On Monday, I made an announcement at the Canada School of the Public Service on the investment that will be made in continuous learning for public servants. This will build upon the professionalism and leadership within the public service, helping us achieve our goal. Hardening up internal processes places a learning and certification requirement on those who carry out those important roles, and to do one without the other would leave us with a system that simply can't meet the test.

Today I am pleased to provide you with the two final reviews I undertook to provide as a result of the announcements by the Auditor General some time ago. You'll recall there were three I made. One was on reinforcing the governance models in the crown corporations; I tabled it some time ago. It contains some 31 measures to strengthen the accountability of crown corporations.

We did that one first for a number of reasons. We had some urgent problems we wanted to address, but also, there had been a great deal of activity and a great deal of research and changes in the governance regimes in very large publicly traded crowns. We drew heavily on that as we made the changes in crown management.

It also informed us—I think it caused us to think more broadly—about some of the practices we had, internal to government, that you will see represented in our approach both to improving internal financial management and also better identifying the accountability relationships.

Today I'm tabling—through this committee, I'm tabling in Parliament—the “Review of the Responsibilities and Accountabilities of Ministers and Senior Officials”, and a second report entitled “The Financial Administration Act: Responding to Non-compliance”. I know the committee has been anticipating the release of these, and I'm pleased to be able to do it.

A significant amount of research went into these documents and has led to many of the measures outlined in the third piece I have with me, which is a discussion paper entitled “Management in the Government of Canada: A Commitment to Continuous Improvement”. What I've attempted to do within that document is gather what is a fairly complex piece of work with lots of specific recommendations and actions into a series of three themes.

I've also today provided Mr. Justice Gomery with this package. We will welcome your views and his on measures included in the discussion paper and we will adjust our activities as a result.

Collectively, these reviews and the discussion paper bring together an enormous amount of work that has been done since this government came to office in December of 2003. Following extensive consultation with public sector experts, politicians, and public service employees at all levels, and with Canadians across the country, we've articulated a plan to improve public sector management around three themes: accountability, responsiveness, and innovation.

In the accountable government section, people and organizations answer clearly for their performance. They have the courage to do the right thing, admit when mistakes are made, and remedy problems when they arise. I'll return to some key details on this theme in a moment.

To be responsive, the government will continue to meet the greater service expectations and ensure that it has the internal processes in place to provide Canadians with easy access to government information and programs. Above all, it means a government that manages itself is a unified, connected organization delivering results for Canadians.

People, supported by the right tools and systems, are at the heart of an innovative government. Through their professionalism and commitment, public service employees ensure that Canadians are well served. The government will provide its employees with the training and tools they need to do their jobs and put the right systems in place to help produce the information that enables sound decision-making.

In the area of clarifying and reinforcing the accountabilities of ministers and deputies, let me briefly outline what will be done to clarify that important relationship.

We had two overriding objectives. First, we wanted to reinforce ministers' accountability to Parliament and to the Treasury Board for management issues. To support them, we wanted to bring greater awareness of ministers to management issues and challenges within their departments and we wanted to provide them with greater assurance that management controls and systems were in place and working well.

● (0915)

Second, we wanted to bring greater clarity to the management responsibility of the deputy ministers for the day-to-day operations of their departments. In the process we wanted to underscore the importance of having deputies focus on the management side of their responsibilities. We also wanted to ensure there was clarity in who was responsible for what and that a clear process would be available to resolve different interpretations of Treasury Board management policies that respected the role of the board and the responsibilities of the deputies and the ministers.

Let me provide you with a brief overview of how we will achieve those objectives.

To give greater effect to their accountability to Parliament, ministers will be expected to attend more parliamentary committees to explain and account for their management performance.

I would make a request here I've made before other parliamentary committees. There's a lot of work being done on reporting to Parliament, the kind and clarity of information that can be made, and keeping information evergreen. I've been encouraging parliamentary committees to call before them the reporting-to-Parliament group to provide us with some advice on how you would like to see information presented. There's a great deal of work to be done there.

The Chair: If I can, I'll just interject for a second, Mr. Minister. We've already consumed almost 12 minutes, and I was wondering if you're going to wrap up or if you're going to read the rest of your report.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I can wrap up. I think it's an enormous piece of work that's taken a very long time to do, and I think it addresses the very issue you're raising.

The Chair: Mr. Holland.

Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.): Mr. Chair, we only have two witnesses today and we do have two hours, which should give us a lot of time to ask questions. I know we've worked a lot on this issue. I think it would be a benefit to hear the whole presentation, if that's the will of the committee.

● (0920)

The Chair: The President of the Treasury Board was quite aware of our five-minute rule for an opening statement and he's now up to 12. He's halfway through his report because he ad libs in various areas. I was asking if he could actually wrap up because we also have to hear from Mr. Himelfarb. We are going to wrap up the entire meeting a little bit early.

So Mr. Alcock, perhaps you can summarize the rest of your remarks and we will table your written report. It will be available from the clerk at any time.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I can certainly table the statement, but I think it does make the point that this is an enormously large, complex organization and this is a very important question. I think it is due the time. We're talking about reframing a fundamental principle of government, and I think to suggest that this gets done simply or easily or through a few small changes is simply false.

Let me paraphrase it this way. At the heart of this are a couple of fundamental changes in the role of ministers and in the support available to ministers and to deputies. On the ministerial side, upon taking office, ministers will receive detailed assurances that management control systems are in place to ensure the sound exercise of delegated authorities by officials. One of the things ministers do when they're appointed is sign a range of delegations that are really the fundamental basis for decisions that are made in the department. We are strengthening the reporting back on that to assure ourselves that those delegations are being carried out in an appropriate fashion.

We are also scheduling a series of quarterly meetings between deputies and ministers to look at the progress of the department on management-related issues through the use of a strengthened internal audit process. What is I think a very important strengthening of that process, the addition of an external committee that provides the reference to the internal audit process, will inform both ministers and deputies of the strength in management control systems and problems that are encountered in the management of the department. The audit committee will also meet in camera with the minister to assure them that the control systems are in place.

The second piece—and this goes to the heart of your report—is that one of the differences between the Canadian system and the British system is the existence of the Financial Administration Act as a legislative base for the accountability of deputies. We intend to reinforce the management role and better define the management role of deputy ministers under the Financial Administration Act to give more explicit statutory authority to the deputy ministers for their management responsibilities, including the signing and attestation of the financial reports of the department.

In addition, we will be streamlining and reinforcing the Treasury Board suite of management policies. Rather than go through that, I can get into some of it in responses to questions perhaps.

The other piece of your report was around the issue of how you resolve disputes. You had looked at the British system, which has a process in it. We felt there were some problems with that particular model in a Canadian context because they have neither the legislative base nor the same traditions, such as the use of the public accounts committee.

We felt that the probity and management issues that arose that were at the heart of the sponsorship concerns were around financial management policies, so we have directed that process to the Treasury Board and to the Secretary of the Treasury Board, who will be involved in litigating disputes between ministers and deputies on financial matters. If they're not able to reach a conclusion on that, it will be brought to the board; the board itself will render a decision, which will be shared with the Auditor General.

So it provides the transparency and openness people desired within that process, but it is an informed process that keeps the focus on the management issues. We also believe the external committees in each department will be a vehicle for resolving those disputes before they become disputes.

Rather than go on with the rest of this incredibly interesting statement, I will simply say we have another piece in this, which is the work of Mr. Justice Gomery. When we appointed Mr. Justice Gomery to do this work, we very much wanted him to take advantage of all the effort he was going to put into this and look specifically at some of the solutions coming out of that, some of the things he'd feel or learn during that process. We've shared this work with him.

He, as you know, is moving into phase two and looking at some issues, consulting with Canadians across the country on this, and we have left some of the pieces of this, particularly in areas we think he is uniquely qualified to comment on. We've left some of that open to yet another process that will arise upon our receiving his phase two report.

Thank you.

• (0925)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. President.

The full text of his opening statement will be deposited with the clerk, and if anybody needs a copy of that, it's available from the clerk.

Now we'll turn to Mr. Himelfarb, the Clerk of the Privy Council. Again, we're focused on the tenth report of the public accounts committee.

Mr. Himelfarb, your opening statement, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Alex Himelfarb (Clerk of the Privy Council, Privy Council Office): Or even less, Mr. Chair. I'll be very brief and make comment purely by way of context. And I won't repeat the comments of Minister Alcock.

Let me just say that I'm pleased and privileged to be here to represent the federal public service. A non-partisan professional public service is, I'm convinced, a significant comparative advantage for Canada. I'm also convinced that the foundations of that public service are sound. Those foundations include a commitment to

fearless advice to elected officials, loyal implementation of their direction within the rule of law, and core values, including ethical values. The rule of law and those values bind all of us in the delivery of public service.

Notwithstanding the strong foundations, the last few years have been difficult for the public service. No one in Canada takes more to heart, or is more unsettled and concerned about, breaches of the public trust than the public servant. The vast majority of hard-working, dedicated, and ethical public servants pay a real price when the actions of a few do damage to the relationship between public servants and those they serve.

I would say in that context that we're full partners in the reforms that are being tabled today. We as public servants want to be part of the solution—our part of the solution—not part of the problem.

In many respects, the public service today is better than the public service I joined 25 years ago. We shouldn't lose sight of that, and we should have this in perspective. We're less hierarchical, we're more responsive, I would argue we're more open and transparent, more accountable, more diverse—but we have a lot of work yet to do. We have not invested or done enough to improve the systems, the tools, and the training we need to meet new demands, to meet new expectations, to meet new needs.

The partnership we've committed to is, yes, to strengthen accountability and to clarify accountability, but within a context that is larger than that, that strengthens the core foundations, that is solid, that is designed to improve how we serve Canadians, bolster our culture of management and accountability, and give front-line workers the tools and training they need to excel. It's in that context that I think we have to examine the questions raised in your tenth report.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Himelfarb.

As the President of Treasury Board indicated, he has tabled before this committee, and therefore before Parliament, three documents: "Review of the Responsibilities and Accountabilities of Ministers and Senior Officials—Meeting the Expectations of Canadians"; "The Financial Administration Act: Responding to Non-compliance—Meeting the Expectations of Canadians"; and a discussion document, "Management in the Government of Canada: A Commitment to Continuous Improvement". These documents are now tabled. If they haven't been distributed already, then they are to be distributed.

As I mentioned, we are going to wrap up this meeting a little bit early. I would like to reserve a few minutes at the end for perhaps questions from the chair.

We will start with Mr. Fitzpatrick, please, eight minutes.

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions will be addressed to Minister Alcock. I commend the minister for embarking on a process of continuous improvement. I see he's been reading books by Jack Welch and other people who are miles ahead of the public service in understanding processes and getting results.

As late as spring of 2004, Mr. Alcock, you stated that governments were kind of stupid in how they've been run and that this has to change. In my view, when you look at audits as a way of discovering bad decisions and bad policies, you're at the end of the process; the damage has been done. More auditors are not going to get to the root cause of the problem.

This committee believes we need mechanisms in place that would prevent problems and bad decisions before they take place, to prevent stupid decisions before they take place. The U.K. has had the experience with accounting officers since the 1870s. From Gladstone through Churchill and Thatcher, and now to Blair, they have managed to operate quite well and provide good government in the U.K. with that mechanism in place. The test of time is good. The British invented the parliamentary system, and I think we should always be looking at mechanisms the British have developed to bring about more accountability and responsibility to that institution.

With all due respect, your response to our report was a technical and a legalistic response. I do not think there was anything of any substantive nature in that response. It was bureaucratic in nature and didn't really deal with the thrust of our recommendation. If we're into continuous improvement, we also have to look at the decisions that are made by this government itself and its ministers. Quite frankly, sir, I think the problems with the sponsorship program start on the political side, not with the bureaucracy and the public servants.

Something that was said in your response is there is no ambiguity, no uncertainty with respect to accountability and responsibility for deputy ministers and ministers. I find that truly astounding, sir. We've had a public accounts commission look at this. We have not found anyone who said, "I am responsible for that matter; I made that decision." We have not found a single person from the government side to step forward to say, "I am accountable for this; I'm going to justify what took place." It's been the ultimate in buck-passing, to the umpteenth degree.

In point of fact, the reason we have the Gomery inquiry today is that it's Justice Gomery's job to find out who in fact was responsible for this sponsorship program. Where did it come from, and who made those decisions, and also, who's accountable for it? This is going to cost a lot of money and take a lot of time. For your response to our suggestion to be that there is no ambiguity just doesn't fly, sir. It just doesn't fly. Quite frankly, I'd say that part of your response is total, absolute nonsense. We have lots of other examples where there's a whole lot of buck-passing going on in this system.

If we want to tighten up the process we have in this town and get things to work, we had better remove uncertainties and make clear who's doing what. Focusing on public servants I don't think is really going to be the answer on this matter. The focus should be on the ministers, yourself, the Prime Minister's Office, and probably the Clerk of the Privy Council, who is probably a lot more an arm of the Prime Minister's Office than a public servant.

● (0930)

I've probably said a whole lot here, but I would like some substantive explanation for why the accounting concept would not work in the Canadian system. I'm not really looking for a technical, legal, or dismissive response. I personally feel that this committee has put a lot of time into this issue and into looking at preventing problems from happening before they happen. This committee came to the conclusion that this measure would go a long way towards preventing the sponsorship scandal and other types of scandals, and we unanimously supported the measure; it wasn't a partisan decision. I still believe that this concept, if introduced into the Canadian system, would go a long way towards preventing sponsorship scandals from happening again.

● (0935)

The Chair: Okay, Minister, you've got a couple of minutes, please.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

You have run around an awful lot of areas that I would love an opportunity to respond to, but let me just go right to the heart of what you said, because I, of course, completely disagree with you. The Clerk of the Privy Council, I must say, is anything but an arm of the Prime Minister. In fact, if the world were as fearless as he, we might be in an entirely different place. He fulfills all of the best traditions of fearless advice; having been the recipient of that fearless advice, I can attest to that personally.

You make the point that it was difficult to determine who did what, or who was responsible for what, and I would agree with you. In fact, in reading your report, that's exactly the point that we've been working on.

The problem I have with simplistic responses to that is, whether you like it or not, this is the largest, most complex organization in Canada, bar none. What Jack Welch manages—and he does it exceptionally well—is trivial in terms of the complexity and size of this organization, and I mean this with full respect to Mr. Welch. Large corporations have maybe five or six lines of business; this thing has 463. We have the largest labour force in Canada. We have the huge responsibilities and accountabilities to citizens here. So to say that there's a quick and easy fix to this is wrong. There are a series of processes.

When I made the comments about government being stupid, it was in the context of smart management. We have not invested in... but this is not a problem of the public service. When Mr. Himelfarb makes a comment about tools, we governments—successive governments—have not invested in the kinds of tools that organizations need to be smart, or the kinds of tools that allow them to gather information, to provide better oversight and better clarity. There are serious problems here that have to do with the management of this very large, very complex, and very important institution.

Now, when we say that the doctrine.... One of the options was to say that the doctrine of ministerial accountability, the way it is currently framed, is broken and that we should throw it out. We looked at that very carefully. I actually started off at that point, but in looking at it, and in talking to the British, and in looking to other examples around the world, such as what they've done in Australia, and in looking at where the world was going on large, publicly traded companies, I came to the conclusion that in fact, no, the relationships were okay. The problem was that there was neither the information nor the attestation in the system...while we said ministers were accountable for things, there was nothing that brought information to the minister's table in a way that the minister could not escape saying, "I knew that"—because while we have the language of accountability, we have none of the systems.

What this does is provide the most robust systems you're going to find, and I challenge you to find a stronger model, including in Britain. We don't need to follow Britain. They've made a tepid step in this direction; we're making a better one.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Fitzpatrick.

Mr. Sauvageau, *s'il vous plaît, huit minutes.*

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau (Repentigny, BQ): Good day, gentlemen. Thank you for the fine submission. I have a few questions for you.

First of all, I want to thank the officials who drafted these documents which, has fate would have it, are being presented one week before the tabling of Judge Gomery's report. I'm certain it's purely a coincidence and that we shouldn't read anything into this.

I also wonder if you've given any thought, or whether the committee is interested, in asking the Auditor General for her views on the issues you've raised. The situation must be serious because when Jane Stewart was Minister of Human Resources and a scandal broke, she drew up a six-point plan. You've presented an 80-point plan. Either the situation is more serious, or the plan is merely broader in scope. In theory, the plan is aimed at improving, or so you claim — the accountability and reporting practices of ministers and Treasury Board.

Mr. Alcock, I don't wish to hurt your feelings, but I'm somewhat disappointed. Did Lucienne Robillard say anything different to the Public Accounts committee when she was President of the Treasury Board? She stated in the House of Commons that she wanted to tighten up the rules, that the government was doing fine, and so on. If we asked our researchers to compare Ms. Robillard's speeches when she was Treasury Board President with the statement you made this morning, I think we would find many similarities. Unfortunately, more often than not, we're disappointed with the results after the fact.

You claim that you want to improve ministerial reporting practices, but when we put questions to ministers in the House, they reply that they have turned the matter over to the Ethics Commissioner and to the RCMP and, if there's a problem, further investigations will be conducted. There is a lack of accountability in Parliament.

Moreover, I wish to remind you that Treasury Board was blindsided by the sponsorship scandal, despite an 2000 internal

audit report that sounded the alarm. It was also blindsided by the scandal that rocked HRDC.

You gave a nice speech, full of what we in Quebec would call "empty promises". I have a concrete question for you. We agree that two internal audit reports were produced, one in January 2004 and a second in May 2004 and that the government promised to respond publicly in December 2005, almost a full year later, on the question of Heritage Canada, the Canadian Unity Council and more specifically, the Centre for Research and Information on Canada. According to these two internal audit reports, there is:

very little connection between the program's objectives and the manner in which the funds were spent;

CRIC improperly channeled funds to the CCU;

Poor accountability [...]

These actions were either ordered in person or by telephone. The reports also note the following:

The CCU hid the source of the federal funds;

The work of the CRIC served no useful purpose.

If you're interested, I can give you the exact page number of these references.

Specifically, the following is noted:

Barely \$276,000 of the \$4.2 million were allocated to research (7 per cent) in 2003-2004!

Given that the internal audit report was released in January 2004 and we're now in October 2005, how will your two, three, four or five fine reports change things, since the government waited 12 months before doing anything?

• (0940)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Sauvageau, we are dealing here with the tenth report of the public accounts committee. I let you make your presentation on the concept that you would ask some questions regarding the framework of accountability. You've actually asked questions on accountability with particular reference to the two audit reports you have. So I'm going to say that your questions, basically, have to be more on the concept and philosophy of accountability, rather than on these two particular reports, because the minister, I'm sure, is not aware of them.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: I'm not good at making "empty promises". The President of the Treasury Board has drawn up a fine 80-point plan, but I'd like to know how he's actually going to implement that plan.

[English]

You don't know?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Let me start by addressing one of the questions the member raised right at the beginning. I can't speak for the Auditor General at all, but I would welcome it if the member would inquire of the Auditor General as to the recommendations we've made in internal audit. I can also direct him to any one of the professional associations that deal with this area, and I'm sure he will receive the assurances I have received that this is a superior way to address exactly the accountability question that you raised, that was raised in your report, and that was raised by the Auditor General. The question was, who knew what was happening with the previous internal audit system?

That was one of the things in the crowns that was of concern. Where it came out, or where we got into it, was when we were looking at what had happened in large private sector companies, such as Enron or Andersen.

Hang on.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: If I could just interrupt you, Minister...

[*English*]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Permit me the opportunity to respond to your question. I realize you wish to go into a polemic about what's happening with Heritage in Quebec, but I'd like to stay focused on answering your question about how this answers that question of who knew when.

The question was that Internal Audit was producing information that was not being shared with the board because it was being stopped by the CEO. So what we did in the crowns was we changed the reporting relationship between Internal Audit and the board audit committees in exactly the same way that was done by the Ontario Securities Commission and Sarbanes-Oxley—all of these very rigorous improvements. Bill Blundell from General Electric—Jack Welch's company, which was recognized as one of the best managed and most ethical companies in the world—said it's a superior report that rigorously addresses all of the key operational issues.

We worked hard on this. We brought that same rigour internally, and we modified it because of the nature of public organizations. But it is designed to do something that had been talked about in public management for decades and that's preferred—

• (0945)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: Mr. Chairman, he's using up all the time allotted to me! He knows how things works in politics.

[*English*]

The Chair: May I interrupt? If you want short answers from the witnesses, you have to ask clear and specific questions. If you ask a general question—

Hon. Reg Alcock: I'm quite prepared to answer them.

The Chair: I will ask the president to be as brief as he can, so the member can have another question.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Sure.

I think the series of improvements we have made goes right to the heart of the concern this committee identified and right to the heart

of the concern the Auditor General identified, which was that there were no clear processes to bring the information to the appropriate people and to ensure there was some follow-up on it.

We have done something that has been talked about in public management for a very long time. It was first recommended in 1979 by the Lambert commission; that is, bring external, non-government individuals into the audit committees of each of the large departments.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: All right.

You can ask a quick question, Mr. Sauvageau.

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: It's more of a quick comment. Your non-response to a concrete example proves that your plan is impossible to implement.

[*English*]

Hon. Reg Alcock: I don't know how to answer that, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Mr. Lastewka, you have eight minutes, please.

Hon. Walt Lastewka (St. Catharines, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to come right to the point with my questioning and stick to the topic that we have today.

Minister, making change in a large organization is not an easy task. You have recommended a number of changes you intend to implement. I would like to understand how you're going to go about that with the public service, with the clerk, to make sure the organizational change does happen across all departments. We can have booklets, we can have policy changes, but unless there's a good implementation to make sure it gets implemented, it'll stay in the book rather than be carried into reality.

Could both of you add to this, regarding how the implementation is going to happen? I think this is some of the questioning from the opposition—that things need to be implemented within the public service. It's a large organization. I come from the school that says simple solutions to complex problems are normally wrong. How are we going to tackle that?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Mr. Lastewka, I think that's an important question. I heard over and over again, as I consulted across the country on this, that the best strategy without a plan to implement is just a hallucination. You've really got to consider both sides of this.

I'd like to say at the outset that the public service is as angry about this as anybody else. It's the public service that wants to drive these changes. They are as hungry for this investment in both management and in giving them the tools to do the job they have to do. This is a superior organization that I keep arguing is the foundation of the quality of life we enjoy as Canadians.

The proliferation of this is really not one of willingness to change, but providing them with the tools, the resources, and the leadership. The training investments we are making in the school—and that were announced yesterday—are very much a part of a process to give people the tools they need to understand how these new accountability models work, and to play the roles they have to play within that.

The other piece I also announced on Friday—although it's not specifically this—is a process of oversight for myself in Treasury Board and the government. When I read the reports of previous attempts to reform...unfortunately, what you find is the only time you see movement to change is when you've got a problem—and I think this is as much the fault of the political class as anybody else—because we don't get engaged in management issues, because we don't sit and do proper oversight on the management side. As soon as the problem goes away, the movement to change drops off. You can go back in the Auditor General's reports, read them in detail, and find great announcements about reforms that never quite made it because the will to drive them disappeared.

What we announced on Friday was a process that will be reported on annually by an external group that will hold myself and the government accountable—as long as I'm in this position—for the implementation of the various reforms and changes we're making. So it's a combination of giving the public service the tools and of holding ourselves to account publicly to make the changes.

• (0950)

Mr. Alex Himelfarb: Let me very briefly add that deputies are fully engaged in the implementation of this rule. We're meeting on it and we're making sure we're part of the implementation. The secretary of the Treasury Board is meeting with every deputy in every department to develop specific action plans and to set targets that are incorporated in performance management in the contracts that I set with deputies, so that we will in fact be accountable for making these changes happen. That will be department by department, agency by agency.

Hon. Walt Lastewka: There's another area that we talked about in some of our preliminary work, when we had various witnesses. Because the public service and the government are so large, sometimes when we have programs that cover a number of ministers' areas, it is very clear to us that the government has a hard time or the public service has a hard time operating in a matrix organization, where all of a sudden one deputy minister has to be the lead and the other deputy ministers have to be part of the team. I'd like to hear some comments on how you're going to make sure we learn to operate in a matrix organization when we have programs that cut across a number of ministers' areas.

From the large organizations that I previously worked in, I can tell you that it took a while before people understood that you had to work in a matrix-type fashion, that sometimes one deputy minister is the lead and sometimes another deputy minister leads, and that you need to be part of that team and you can't work separately.

What do you think is now going to happen as a result of your various programs, to make sure that we in the public service and government know how to operate in a matrix organization?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Mr. Lastewka, your experience in the management of a large organization is showing, because you put your finger on the heart of an incredibly difficult problem, one that's made more difficult by the enormous size and variability of the government, and still more difficult by the lack of needed investments just to provide....

The first thing in establishing the matrix is to have the information tools presented to you that allow you to see it and manage it. When I talk about all of the decisions that have been made, some of them in the early days were simply starting to organize things in a fashion that allowed us to see the organization comprehensively. There has been very good work done over the last decade or so as people have tried to adjust to this, but we still have seven different financial systems and fourteen different HR systems.

Information is the currency of management, and doubly so in public management. Trying to build the tools that allow public servants to see what they're managing in that fashion is incredibly important.

Because of the accountabilities that we have to the House through legislation, we are also very vertically organized by department, so driving things that....

In fact, I'm doing this with the smart regulation, which is one of my responsibilities: how do we get multiple departments collaborating on changes that require changes across a whole range of departments? Rather than take the time in this committee, I can tell you it's a challenge. I can tell you we're seized of it. We're doing work in aboriginal affairs, in climate change indicators. The smart regulation is very much directed at that, but we have a way to go.

We would be delighted to come back here to talk about some of the accountability instruments that would identify these things and to allow committees to get involved and help us with this. I think it is a challenge we simply have to address, and I can tell you that in this organization, at this size, it's a serious problem.

Hon. Walt Lastewka: That leads me to my last question. It's very short, Mr. Chairman. I'm sure the committee members will be interested.

You said you need systems and tools and so forth as you make this change. This will cost money in order to have organization change. Will that project be under the Treasury Board? Will you be able to come back to us with the clerk to explain that there has been so much money set aside for organizational change, for supplying the public service with the systems and tools, and will you be able to report on the progress of that implementation?

The Chair: A very brief response, please.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I would be delighted to come back here to have that very conversation.

The government will provide the resources that are required to make sure each step is done properly. I do not believe, Mr. Lastewka, that Treasury Board should be the one doing all the implementation. That would get us back to the days when there was too much central command and control. But Treasury Board will be the guarantor of quality, the one that provides the oversight, policy, and resourcing.

• (0955)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lastewka.

Mr. Christopherson, please, eight minutes.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, and the Clerk of the Privy Council for showing up. We appreciate it.

I have to say I'm not quite as clear on this as I think the minister is hoping we all might be at the end of this. Deputy ministers have not just delegated responsibilities and not just oversight, but they have actual statutory responsibilities, and yet the position of your government is that when deputies appear before this committee they're here representing their ministers, not being held to account in their own right.

That leads us to this circular problem, and it showed itself when we went through the sponsorship scandal, and that's why we're where we are. I'm still not clear how things are going to improve. The situation as it stands now—and either the chair of the committee or the minister can correct me if I'm wrong—is that the deputies have rolled in here and.... Basically, when the tough questions are put to them—why was that done, who made those decisions—the deputy says, “I can't answer that; it's up to the minister. I can't speak to that; it's ministerial responsibility.” The minister rolls in, we ask the minister exactly the same question, and the minister says, “Wait a minute, I don't run the department. The deputy minister runs the department. I don't make those decisions. I'm not the one held accountable.” And we're left no further ahead than when we started.

So I'm still not clear on where the parliamentary responsibility of this committee to get answers is attained. So help me, Minister. Help me understand how things are going to be better in that people are actually going to be held accountable, and when questions are put by this committee, there are real answers from folks who are really responsible.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Right. I think that's a very important question, and I appreciate it. You need to parse it into two pieces. You talked about deputies who have particular responsibilities that are statutorily assigned to them. The doctrine holds that the minister is still accountable for those responsibilities, regardless. But in those cases we are suggesting that we follow not the British practice in terms of accountability—there is a difference between those two terms—but that deputies can be called and are answerable for their activities in those areas where they have statutorily assigned responsibility.

The other piece of your question, though—and in fact if you hearken back to the questions about the efficacy of the British model, there's a great *Yes, Minister* episode on the very point you raise, with exactly that particular example.

But what this does is lay out not just more rigorously the accountabilities of ministers and deputies; it also underpins it in

legislation—and this committee would presumably be involved in debating and passing that legislation—and it provides information mechanisms that take away the ambiguity. And it does it not only in terms of a requirement, but it creates another process, which is the independent committee, which, it is argued by us and certainly by those who believe themselves to be expert in governance, provides a check and a balance from which nobody can step aside.

Mr. David Christopherson: I appreciate that. I have to say, though, I'm still not clear where we're going to get answers in the future that we couldn't get in the past. It doesn't serve anyone any purposes to try to fudge it here, because this is not just an academic exercise. We will have deputies who will roll in here after the changes have been implemented and we'll know whether or not things have actually changed.

But I'm still not getting where the pivotal point is where deputies are no longer going to come in and say, “That's not my decision; that's the minister's responsibility”. They can do that, and they do it in the absence of the minister being here. Then the minister comes in, in the absence of the deputy being here, and says, “That's not my decision”.

I know the federal government is a little different, but I was a minister at the provincial level, so I have some understanding of how all this works. But in terms of that accountability, I don't see where you're breaking the tail-chasing we're in now.

The Chair: Mr. Himelfarb, I believe you will answer this question—clearly, I'm sure.

Mr. David Christopherson: And concisely to boot.

Mr. Alex Himelfarb: Concisely for sure.

I reread the government response to the tenth report, and I share the view that it was a technical answer. It's clear, number one, that accountability deserves to be clarified. Deputy accountabilities do exist in statute, both on the human resource side and the financial management side, and those need to be clarified. I think you'll see in the documents tabled a commitment to clarify those accountabilities.

Both ministers and deputies are accountable. I know that sounds like an unsatisfactory answer, but ministers are accountable to Parliament and deputies are accountable to the executive—deputies can't duck their accountability—and would be accountable before this committee, if I understand that to mean they will answer openly to this committee about their accountabilities. It's a question not of who's accountable, but accountable to whom. Ministers are accountable to Parliament and deputies are accountable to the executive.

By the way, my understanding is that's exactly how the accounting officer concept works; that's exactly how it works in the U.K. In the U.K. they use the language differently, and they don't have a Financial Administration Act equivalent to ours, but ministers are accountable to Parliament; deputies are accountable to the executive and accountable before Parliament.

• (1000)

The Chair: I think Mr. Christopherson has another question.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

First of all, to you, Chair, to help me by way of background, is there anything that precludes the committee from bringing in ministers and deputy ministers at the same time, or are they like Clark Kent and Superman—it just never happens?

The Chair: No, there's absolutely nothing to stop our committee asking that. This committee, as you know, normally does not bring in ministers, but there's absolutely nothing to prevent our bringing them both in at the same time.

Mr. David Christopherson: It seems to me something that practical is almost the only answer.

I respect the answers you're giving; I understand. I have to tell you, it's wonderful talk, but it doesn't mean anything when the crunch is on and everybody is heading for the high ground and is worried about CYA. That's when we start getting these answers that take us around and around.

I'm sorry, gentlemen, I still haven't heard anything that adequately answers that question.

Maybe, Chair, one of the simple things is to bring both in at the same time, no longer allowing ourselves to have one playing against the other, but something a lot more practical than what I'm hearing today from the minister, which to me still doesn't answer the question directly. It sounds nice here, but my sense is that if we get into another crunch situation and the heat is on and the media are here and everybody is worried and scared, we as a committee are going to get caught doing this again, around and around and around.

We haven't even addressed the problem of how many times we have faced deputies who've come here and said—it's a related issue—"I wasn't there at the time." If you do finally get to narrow them down to a specific, where they almost have to take some responsibility, then the answer we get is, "Well, I wasn't there; I'm not the deputy who was there at the time, so I can't answer it." That may very well be true, but once again we're left in the lurch, with no answers and nowhere to go, because as soon as we drag the minister back in, the minister says, "That's the deputy's responsibility; the deputy manages the department, not me."

I'll give you an opportunity to respond, but I have to tell you, I'm still not satisfied that the words we're hearing are going to translate into real accountability; I'm just not yet satisfied, Minister.

The Chair: Very briefly.

Mr. Alex Himelfarb: I think the accountabilities—I hate to say this in contradiction—are clear and getting clearer. Many of the questions you're raising have more to do with the will to take responsibility. That's a larger issue, an ethical issue. I understand how frustrated Canadians are when senior officials, including the

clerk, don't stand up and take responsibility. That is a moral and ethical issue, and I agree with you that we have to inculcate a sense of responsibility. That's not done through rules and procedures; it's done with absolute commitment to take responsibility for what happens within a program or an area.

The Chair: You've just been telling us, Mr. Himelfarb, that ministers are accountable to Parliament and the deputies are accountable to the executive, but it's not the case. We know full well that after a cabinet shuffle, a minister can only answer for what happened in his department in Parliament before he or she arrived there. To tell us that ministers are accountable to Parliament is absolutely and fundamentally false. We haven't seen a resignation over the sponsorship scandal; we haven't seen a resignation in the 12 years I've been around here, hardly, on the basis of someone being held accountable, and this government goes to great lengths to ensure that they slide it off.

Let's go back to this question: are ministers accountable to Parliament, yes or no? I say they're not; they're only answerable to Parliament. So let's get the language clear. Are they surely accountable to Parliament? Those are your words, Mr. Himelfarb. Tell me how they're accountable to Parliament.

• (1005)

Mr. Alex Himelfarb: In a sense that they have to earn Parliament's confidence, and that is the basis of our system.

The Chair: The Prime Minister has ignored calls for resignations when there have been blatant problems within a department. I think back to the HRDC problem where there was a new minister, Ms. Stewart, and she said, "Well, it all happened before I arrived; how can I take the blame?"

Nobody ever did take the blame, so who was accountable? Who was accountable on the sponsorship program?

When you come here with language such as "Yes, ministers are accountable".... They're not, so let's just acknowledge the fact that they are not.

Mr. Anders, for eight minutes.

Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC): I have four points to raise.

The first is to the minister. Does the minister believe that ministers who resign, respecting principles of accountability, should receive severance?

The Chair: I'm not sure. Are you talking about a minister resigning his ministerial responsibilities and reverting back to being an ordinary member of Parliament?

Mr. Rob Anders: Well, if the minister wishes to comment on an individual member of Parliament....

The Chair: Just clarify it. You're not talking about resigning the seat?

Mr. Rob Anders: I'm referring specifically to a minister who resigns, but of course I'd love to hear a response to a member of Parliament's resignation.

But I'd like to get all four questions on the table, if I could.

The Chair: Okay, go ahead.

Mr. Rob Anders: That's the first question, should they receive severance?

Regarding my second question, I think the third recommendation of the tenth report is the most straightforward. That is, a deputy minister must set out his or her objections to a course of action in a letter to the minister stating the reasons for the objections, and then if a minister still wishes to proceed, he or she must instruct the deputy minister in writing to do so. If the instructions to proceed are received in writing, the deputy minister must send copies of the relevant correspondence to both the Auditor General of Canada and the Comptroller General of Canada.

I think that's a pretty good mechanism myself. Paul Martin, in his statement of April 21, 2005, said responsibility is about more than just words. I think the third recommendation is a pretty good way to go. The British seem to see some value in it. You yourself, Minister, have said you'd like to see it gone teeth to tail, and I'm wondering if you can comment specifically on the third recommendation.

The third question, Minister, is with regard to any of the comments you have concerning a number of these issues. What you've stated this morning about the information...confirmation is important. You yourself went on national television and dismissed the cost of the sponsorship scandal, saying it was based on a non-existent audit, and then you were forced to retract. Some of your own colleagues within your own caucus said you were a bit of a cowboy who's being loose with the facts. So I'd like to ask you, given that, how do we take anything at face value?

Fourthly, you also, just in your statements today, said a lot of the failures for implementation were due to the political class not implementing them. The last part of the fourth question is that you've had 12 years to do it. So if the political class, such as yourself, has had 12 years with your party to implement the changes and it hasn't happened, what's up?

The Chair: Okay, four questions. We'll take them one at a time.

On the first one, Mr. Alcock.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Let me deal with the first one and the third one in the same statement. The problem is that it actually relates to the last one.

I stand by the statement I made, because frankly, if the debate around this table—particularly at the public accounts committee, but I would certainly say the same thing at the government operations committee, which is also there to be dealing with these important matters of management—is simply allowed to drop off into the froth of public debate and perception and innuendo and all of that, you do a real disservice. You do a disservice to Canadians, you do a disservice to the public service, and you do a disservice to yourself.

I would argue—and I've argued this publicly, this is not new here—that one of the fundamental problems in the management of government is that politicians don't spend enough time thinking about it. One of the changes inherent in this, and it's been said many times on the public sector side—not the public service side, but on the public analyst side—is that people are rewarded on the public

management side for policy decisions, because that's the coin of public debate, and there have not been the same expectations around management.

There have been expectations about management—don't misunderstand what I'm saying there—internally in the public service, but they've not had them in a way that has them visited at this table. When you come to the table, what you end up with is endless debate that is really based on perception as opposed to fact. I think you do a real disservice. I think one of the reasons is everybody's really excited at the time of a problem and wants to run around slandering anybody they can get within their sights, but nobody wants to do the hard grunt work of solving these problems and seeing that the public service has the investment.

This committee comes out regularly with reports that attack public servants because they receive for excellent work a bonus of three percent. Oh, horrors! Do you have any idea of the problem we are going to have recruiting people to take charge of this incredibly important organization if we around this table and on every side of the House don't get better engaged in the management, to understand it so we can offer proper oversight? Do you wonder why people come before committees and you can't get straight answers? It's because they don't get straight questions.

One of the problems in public management, unlike private management, and where the private sector has it all over us, is they have very clear indicators of success or failure. A public servant or another individual can be hung out to dry strictly for perception, and then you expect people to take that seriously. The whole debate about it is all about somebody's perception of something, and it's just wrong. We owe it to the public service, we owe it to the people of Canada, to get engaged in the reality of this. The reality of this is to look at where excellence lies, and that is what we have done here. Yes, there is a whole bunch of decisions here, because this is the largest, most complex organization in Canada. You don't fix it with a snap of the fingers. You fix it through a lot of concerted effort.

Also, the priorities change. When I came into this place in 1993, one of the biggest crises facing this country is that we were considered to be a third world country in our finances. So yes, the government didn't focus on these investments I would like to have seen, because it was focusing on getting our books in balance. We achieved that, and when it was done we sat down and started looking at some of these issues. One of the pieces—and this is not my work, but it was done by one of my predecessors—is the reform of the human resources management act that looked at, finally, some of these incredible problems we have with recruitment.

And do you know the other thing? None of this information is new. I'm not revealing secrets. These things have been reported by public servants over and over again, and this House and these committees will never get seized of them.

If you spent a little more time on management, you'd get better management, frankly. I'd guarantee you that.

•(1010)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Just briefly—

Hon. Reg Alcock: Now, on your third recommendation—

Mr. Rob Anders: Well, let's at least deal with the first one first, regarding principles of accountability. Do you think somebody should receive severance if he has resigned?

Hon. Reg Alcock: You want to draw me into the current dance that's going on with Minister Dingwall. I think people enter into particular positions with certain agreements. I think there are certain understandings about members of Parliament who resign from the House. I don't even know what they are, frankly, but I'm going to assume there is some provision, as there is with our employees. To the extent those agreements are clear and transparent in existing policy, they should be respected. I believe a minister who resigns.... I don't think there is any severance or anything for that.

But let's deal with the substance of the issue.

Mr. Rob Anders: Mr. Minister, you talked about having clear indicators. If somebody has resigned over principles of accountability and yet gets severance, you're obviously not sending a very clear indicator with regard to severance and principles of accountability.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think I just said that I don't think ministers have any severance. I don't think there is any such policy.

The Chair: Time is up, I'm afraid, Mr. Anders.

Mr. Holland, for eight minutes.

Mr. Mark Holland: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you very much to Minister Alcock and to Mr. Himelfarb for coming before the committee. We're very appreciative of the work they've done and of the time they've taken, not just to appear before us but also in response to the work and the report this committee has done.

I just want to come to the first point, which is that I think, Minister, you're right and that we all share responsibility for how this accountability process goes forward, not just in terms of following up on the government side but in terms of the committees, as to the type of focus we have and also the types of questions we have.

Today, unfortunately, we're seeing part of the problem. Mr. Sauvageau, without opening the document or listening to most of what has been said, condemned it and said it was a bad report. We just received it and he hasn't opened it, yet he condemned it.

Then we have another question on an unrelated issue, with someone trying to score partisan points as opposed to asking some questions that need to be asked around how this is actually going to improve accountability. The reality is, I haven't been able to look at this in enough detail—I would suggest probably none of us have—to be able to render a decision on whether I should be praising it or condemning it.

The question I want to go to is one you didn't get a chance to answer. It does have to do with a deputy minister who would have a responsibility, if they had an objection to a directive they were given by a minister, to write a letter to the Auditor General stating that in writing. If they didn't, then basically they would hold the responsibility because they were obligated to notify the Auditor General and the Comptroller General of their concern.

Again, I haven't had a chance to read all of this, but I'd be interested in how you deal with that particular recommendation and what your thoughts are.

•(1015)

Hon. Reg Alcock: Thank you, Mr. Holland. I appreciate the question and I appreciate your comments.

I want to say I take this stuff very seriously. I was talking about this before I became a minister, and I think there is a huge challenge to democratically elected governments around the world that are trying to adjust to the tremendous changes that have been visited on organizations. It's largely because of this thing that gets popularly known as the knowledge revolution or the communication revolution, where decisions are demanded more quickly and where agility and responsiveness are so incredibly important. I think Canada has an opportunity to lead the world there.

These issues of how you mitigate disputes are incredibly important in organizations that need to be moving and responding faster, and they are very difficult for governments, both because of the complexity of the organizations and because of the nature of governance. What we are trying to do here, because our system is different from the British system in that we have a more legislatively based approach, are two things. By defining in legislation, so you've got a harder accountability, those responsibilities for the deputy, it gives you exactly the kind of map Mr. Christopherson was talking about in terms of being more explicit about that accountability relationship.

There are two kinds of disputes you can imagine. There's a policy-related dispute, which is a bigger policy question. Ultimately, the clerk is, dare I say, the first among equals, but it is true that deputies and ministers are accountable to the clerk and the Prime Minister, and the final word on dispute resolution rests with the clerk and the Prime Minister. However, along the way to that, particularly in issues of financial management and probity, it is the Treasury Board that carries all that policy.

Mr. Williams, I am told you had a conversation with the Auditor General about her feelings about being involved in this, and I think she gave you an opinion on it that was not supportive of the model. I can tell you that we decided we would focus it on hardening up the financial accountabilities of the senior financial officer, the certification process, the internal audit process, and the role of Treasury Board in guaranteeing probity.

So if a deputy has a concern because he's being asked by a minister to do something he doesn't think is proper, then he goes to the secretary of the Treasury Board. The secretary and the president may get engaged in a discussion with the minister or the deputy. The first line is that the deputy works it out with the minister, that he offers fearless advice and says, "Minister, you can't do this, and if I can't resolve it with that, then I'm going to go to the board". The board, then, is the final arbiter of that decision, but to guarantee the kind of independent oversight that I think is inherent in the model, that decision would be registered with the Auditor General. So it's a different route to get to the same place.

You want the independent oversight, but you want a management solution to resolve the problem, because at the end of the day, we're all better served by good management rather than by this symbolic debate, frankly. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could actually get a bunch of those things off the table just because they were being done with a level of excellence that was first class so we could actually focus on some of the larger policy questions?

That's what the goal of this is, and I suspect, if you go out and talk to professionals about this, you'll hear exactly that.

Mr. Mark Holland: I just want to make sure I'm clear on this, because I think it's a very important point.

In the example where a deputy minister is uncomfortable with a recommendation or thinks a minister might be heading down a wrong path, I think we would all agree that the first thing that should be done is he should try to work it out with the minister. If it isn't resolved there, then you're saying it goes to the Treasury Board—

Hon. Reg Alcock: First it's the secretary of the Treasury Board, who is in essence the deputy minister responsible for Treasury Board, but he has statutory responsibilities. Treasury Board is the only cabinet committee that actually has a legislative base under the Financial Administration Act.

• (1020)

Mr. Mark Holland: Then a decision will be rendered there as to the appropriateness of the direction the minister wants to take, and that decision will then be registered with the Auditor General.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Correct.

Mr. Mark Holland: I think that's important, because one of the things that gets to the point I think Mr. Christopherson was getting to and asking about is that if we have a deputy minister who comes in here and says, "Well, I didn't agree with the minister", we'll say, "Well, did you take it to the Treasury Board?"

Hon. Reg Alcock: And what action did you take?

Mr. Mark Holland: If they say they didn't, then it's pretty clear they've got responsibility. If they had taken it to Treasury Board, then a decision would have been registered with the auditor and it should have been caught right there. So you have one of two outcomes in that situation, which I think is important. Either you have the deputy minister who didn't follow that process and who clearly would bear responsibility or, alternatively, you have a decision registered with the auditor.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Let me give you a further example, and it comes up in the British model also. There are times when the disagreement between the minister and the deputy has been taken to the committee and the minister has said, "I disagree; I think we should do this". The committee has upheld him or her in the British model—again, not having the same basis we do. We've had that experience where at times an issue has come up where it is actually the right thing to do but the existing policy framework hamstringed the deputy. They'll bring it to the board and we'll render a decision. It's the value of a policy-setting board on the management side.

Mr. Mark Holland: I think that's important, because in our deliberations I don't think the intent was ever to create a mechanism where universally the concerns of the deputy minister would triumph. Rather, it's to have a mechanism where they can float those concerns so they can be viewed objectively and recorded. Then

if something did go wrong later down the road, the responsibility would be clear.

Hon. Reg Alcock: It's an external oversight. To have no unchecked authority is really the principle within a lot of these changes, where everyone at each level has an accountability to someone, and that prevents you from being in the place....

Mr. Christopherson's experience as a minister, I suspect, would parallel some of the experiences others have had, where having a level of clarity and accurate information available and the like would be of assistance in this.

Mr. Mark Holland: I have one very quick question on the question of ministers appearing before parliamentary committees. I think having that happen with greater frequency makes sense. Is it the intent that it would be the committees that made that request, or is it the intent that there be a regular schedule whereby ministers would appear before the various committees on a predetermined schedule?

Hon. Reg Alcock: When I was first here, in 1994, we went through an exercise with the Auditor General's office and others to reform reporting to Parliament, to give Parliament actual tools to hold departments to account for their strategic plans and the outcomes of those plans. To the best of my knowledge, no committee has ever taken us up on it. I've said over and over and over again to committees, call us; we have better tools for more information and better information; engage with us.

I'd love to appear before committees to talk about substantive management issues. That's what's missing in government.

The Chair: That's very good, Mr. Minister. I've called the departmental performance reports self-serving—

Hon. Reg Alcock: Exactly, so let's make them better.

The Chair: We are getting into that here at the public accounts committee.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Call me. I'll be there.

The Chair: Mr. Kramp, five minutes, please.

We're in round two now, so it's down to five minutes.

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Thank you.

Of course, Mr. Minister, I wasn't here for the sponsorship investigation by this committee, but I understand they spent a couple of million dollars in the process. I, like a number of Canadians, watched it unfold, all the televised performances, I'll guess we'll call them, and/or whatever. I also recall the purpose and that Mr. Martin said we'd leave "no stone unturned".

Yet now we have this entire report, the unanimous report from this committee, basically just being rejected. Was that an entire waste of \$2 million and of all the time and effort? It was rejected by your committee; basically, you did not accept any of the recommendations. Now we're on to the next report. So we spent all of that money and you just rejected that and said no, that really doesn't matter; I will do my own thing in my own way.

Now, of course, we have the Gomery report coming on. What are you going to do, reject that too?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Is that the question? I think that's a very useful question, frankly. Given that you were not a member at the time prior to this, let me tell you that I was the founding chair of the government operations committee. We went through an investigation of a parliamentary office that had gotten themselves into some trouble, so I know a little bit about what it is to manage a committee. I told Mr. Williams this privately: I thought this committee failed because this committee lost track of its purpose, and instead of staying focused, rigorously focused, on the findings of what went on, you started to play political games—not in the reports, but in those hearings that were done. I thought it was a shame, because I was the

• (1025)

Mr. Daryl Kramp: What is? There was a unanimous report that went from this committee.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Let me answer your question. I allowed you to pose it.

You, yourself, used the term “performances”. The dilemma was as soon as the committee.... I'm one of the ones who was sitting in the cabinet room saying, give it to the public accounts committee. I know House committees can do good work. I know members can discipline themselves. I know they can stay focused on the findings. They didn't. You started conspiring in the corners to get the best clip. That was a failure. I know it's possible because I did it. I sat there when members from all sides of the House worked hard on those solutions.

Now, on this report, we haven't rejected this report at all. Absolutely not. There's a whole bundle of reports that have come out. This is the tenth. I think we're up to 15 or 16, now, John, right?

The Chair: Something along that line.

Hon. Reg Alcock: And I have looked at each one of those—

The Chair: There are 20, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Reg Alcock: —very carefully, and I've considered them, each one of them. But just because you're focused on this aspect.... There are other pieces on the management of this thing. This thing is huge.

The intention of what you've put forward, we accept. The basis on which you put it forward, i.e. just borrowing something from Britain, I don't think works. I think we can get to exactly the same place, respect the intention of your report, but do it in a Canadian way, in a Canadian context, taking advantage of the Canadian history and tools.

In fairness, Mr. Chair, this report just came out today. I'd be more than willing to return here frequently to discuss it. And don't take my word for it. If you can get outside to the community of professionals who understand what we've done—

The Chair: We're going to wrap up here. I'm going to get back to Mr. Kramp because we're just going to carry on.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Thank you.

And I hear you—

Hon. Reg Alcock: Good.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: —but my concern still goes right back to Mr. Christopherson's concern as well.

You've just rejected as not even a consideration or a possibility the committee's recommendation to seriously take a look at the U.K. model, because what it did is provide a definitive example of accountability. The buck had to stop somewhere. It stopped somewhere. Here we do not have that. Here we have more and more slide, we have ifs, ands, or buts. To me, I see nothing in this... and of course I have not read the entire report yet, but I will; I will. If somewhere in there it says the buck stops somewhere and somebody's going to have to bear direct responsibility for their actions or misdeeds, then at that particular point I might say, sir, I think you may be onto something. But at this particular point I don't see that. I think it's a cop-out yet.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Thank you, sir. I look forward to that conversation.

The Chair: You've got 20 seconds left, Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I've had enough. I didn't get an answer.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Wrzesnewskij, please, five minutes.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): I thought Mr. Kramp was going to say thank you in that 20 seconds.

I'd like to return to a comment made by Mr. Fitzpatrick. Just for the sake of clarity, you said the reason we have the Gomery inquiry today is because so many things went wrong. Just for the sake of clarity, we talked about the fearlessness of the bureaucracy and our civil service, but it was quite a fearless act by our Prime Minister. He could have swept things under the carpet. He fearlessly threw the curtains wide open. That's why we have that inquiry. I think it's important to clarify that point.

There were some comments made about timing and responsibility, as they relate to time, and the timing of when these recommendations take place. You get caught in a situation where if you don't act and you wait for recommendations, and you act at some point after them, you get criticized for not acting expeditiously, but if you act, you get criticized for acting with some sort of hidden agenda. There are, I believe, 158 decisions that the minister has mentioned have taken place. This shows a government that not only called an inquiry because it wanted to get to the bottom of what transpired, but also a government that's committed to action and acting, making sure that this sort of thing doesn't transpire again.

Would it be possible, Minister, to get a listing of the 158?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij: Thank you.

I'd then like to go back to your opening statement. I need a little clarity on one paragraph. Unfortunately, the pages are not numbered, but at the bottom of page 4 the last paragraph states:

...Deputy Ministers will not be accountable to Parliament, but they will answer to parliamentary committees.... They will be accountable through the Clerk to the Prime Minister, the Minister and the Treasury Board.

In case of differences, it goes on to explain what the mechanisms will be between the minister and Treasury Board.

I'm not quite sure under what set of circumstances the accountability flows through the clerk to the Prime Minister's office, as opposed to Treasury Board and the minister. Perhaps it's these reports that clarify further the sets of circumstances in which a deputy minister would be accountable through the clerk to the Prime Minister, as opposed to his own minister and the Treasury Board.

• (1030)

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think there are a couple of aspects of that worth mentioning. I appreciate your comments.

I get a little exercised at times, because I think these things are so important and it's easy to get lost in the details. Nobody has more difficulty than I do in trying to explain some of these things; you can just imagine how many journalists I put to sleep doing this. But the reality is that this is an enormously complex organization, and these are enormously difficult questions.

I put the report on the crowns down very early, but when we got into the issue of the doctrine and the accountabilities of ministers and deputy ministers, I ended up with a couple of problems. One was—as the Auditor General herself said in her report—this was a very difficult area. I agreed to take it on, but then we've also got Justice Gomery, who I think is doing tremendous work. We put him in place with two very specific mandates: to get to the bottom of this and, based on all of what he was going to learn, to help us think this through.

Then I thought, well, one thing I can't speak about as confidently is, what are my accountabilities? Right? There isn't the same credibility if I'm talking about my accountabilities. That's really something that we're going to look very closely to Justice Gomery for, because it's his mandate; he's a third party, or outside.

So we got into a discussion with his staff. I had made an agreement to put down a thing on the doctrine and the accountabilities, and we took it as far as we thought we could responsibly go. The reason for the timing is that his staff asked us to try to have all this information to him by the 28th of this month, which is why there's this crossover with his first report—but he's turning his mind to that report.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: Thank you.

I just have a quick question for Mr. Himelfarb.

The Chair: Five to ten seconds.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: Thank you.

On the third page of this report, you've highlighted three themes: accountability, responsiveness, and innovation. Mr. Himelfarb, I think, made a very important point when he talked about personal ethics. I would have liked to have seen that point highlighted somewhere in the report. When we talk about the Canada School of Public Service and investment in continuous learning, perhaps that can be an important component part of the learning process.

The Chair: Very briefly.

Mr. Alex Himelfarb: I think you'll see it in the large report, and you'll see it built into all of our training.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: Yes, excellent.

Thank you.

The Chair: I'm trying to get all the questioners in before we close the meeting.

Monsieur Guimond, *s'il vous plaît, cinq minutes.*

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Minister, I'd like to begin with a comment. In my view, with the testimony you've presented this morning, you've used the committee for PR purposes. We invited you here to respond to the committee's unanimous May 2005 report. In August 2005, you informed us that the government had decided not to provide a detailed response to each recommendation. You arrive here at the last minute carrying three documents. This is a PR exercise on your part engineered solely to show your credentials.

Minister, you showed no regard whatsoever for committee members on both sides of the table. You could have held a confidential briefing. You could have submitted these documents to us in advance, since they are already in print form, unless of course they were only printed during the overnight hours.

This is unacceptable. Your PR exercise is totally unacceptable.

Let me give you a specific example, one that shows that whereas you're proposing an administrative solution, the problem is actually more political in nature, as was noted in the case of the sponsorship scandal. I'd like to quote from the document entitled "Review of the Responsibilities and Accountabilities of Ministers and Senior Officials". The excerpt in question can be found on page 23, just before the paragraph with the heading "Role of Deputy Ministers".

The focus is on the minister's exempt staff, that is on political staff. I'd like to read the last three lines of this paragraph:

However, to the extent practicable, relations between exempt staff and public servants should be conducted through the deputy minister's office. It should also be noted that the minister is accountable for anything done in his or her name by exempt staff.

You deliberately used the words "to the extent practicable" in this paragraph. You still allow yourself sufficient latitude to do things that are totally unacceptable.

I haven't had time to read all of these documents, since I haven't taken a speed reading course. I've had time to read only one.

How would the contents of these documents have given us the ammunition to fight political interference during the sponsorship scandal? Let me give you three examples: would these documents have helped any when Jean Pelletier, the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, got involved in selecting neckties, or when Jean Carle, who worked in the Prime Minister's office, got involved in choosing which agencies and events would receive funding, or when Jean-Marc Bard, Chief of Staff for...

I'd like the Minister to explain to me the meaning of the words "to the extent practicable" found in the document. Most likely, he wouldn't be able to provide an explanation.

When Jean-Marc Bard, Chief of Staff to the Minister of Public Works, got involved in selecting agencies, unbeknownst to Deputy Minister Quail...

●(1035)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Guimond, your time is running out. If you want the minister to respond, I'd suggest you ask him to respond now.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: You're attempting to resolve a political problem by imposing an administrative solution.

[English]

The Chair: A point of order.

Hon. Walt Lastewka: The member talks about a PR function, and he's doing it during all of his time. Let the minister have at least 30 seconds to answer the question. The biggest PR is right over there.

The Chair: The member is entitled to use his time as he sees fit. It's not a point of order, but—

Hon. Walt Lastewka: We've asked the minister to be here to answer questions.

The Chair: I have asked Mr. Guimond to give the minister his time.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: I've nothing further. The Minister can answer.

[English]

The Chair: A brief response, Minister.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Precisely. I am not going to comment on testimonies before Mr. Justice Gomery. He will report on that. That's for him to decide. But the issue of the role of exempt staff is something that was identified, and something that we are attempting to address in part through that statement, in part through recommendations on stronger guidelines, better training for them. To the extent that "practical" simply means in the day-to-day operations of a department, there are interactions around all manner of things that staff are trained for and work with the deputies and the other officials on. The policy is as stated here. What this is—contrary to Mr. Guimond's comment—is part of addressing the very concern he's identifying.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Carr, please, five minutes.

Mr. Gary Carr (Halton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for these reports. I will be reading them over the last little while. I never cease to be amazed by politicians who have admitted that they haven't read the report and they immediately come out swinging with all the self-righteous indignation—and they haven't even read the report. They may or may not be good. You put a lot of work into them. I think what happens is they end up losing credibility because people say, it's just the opposition again. As Mr. Guimond pointed out, you couldn't possibly read them in the time.

I see they've got their little people behind and they're working there, the people who are 20-year-old somethings, rushing to try to grab something out of there so they can try to get the questions—

●(1040)

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: On a point of order, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Michel Guimond: I have a point of order.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Carr, we have a point of order.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: Excuse me.

Is the age of employees relevant, one way or another? Did we say anything about Mr. Carr's staff or the team of people working behind him?

Mr. Michel Guimond: On the same point of order...

[English]

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

Mr. Carr, you brought this committee into disorder. You do not speak across the floor. You should not make references to the age of staff in this room. I would suggest that you direct your questions and your comments to the minister and to the Clerk of the Privy Council, please.

Mr. Gary Carr: I apologize, Mr. Chair, but I get so mad when you see the people here...that the members can't even ask the question.

The Chair: Direct your comments to the minister and the clerk.

Mr. Gary Carr: I will do that. The reports aren't even out there, Mr. Chair. The reports haven't even been read and they're criticizing. I say to the members, and I've said this on many occasions—

The Chair: Direct your comments through me or to the clerk.

Mr. Gary Carr: Through you, Mr. Chair, I've said to the members on this committee on a number of occasions that this should be non-partisan. We are the legislative branch, which holds the executive branch in check. When we lose credibility by having political statements...let's save that for the House. There's enough politics, Mr. Chair, that can go on in the House. And, Mr. Chair, the honourable minister was right. The last committee that had this disintegrated when the people looked at this and said, it's a disgrace, what are you guys doing? You have a report come in and members don't even have an opportunity to read it and they're criticizing it.

I think at least we should wait for the report to come in and read it. Now, what we should do, in fairness to us, is maybe a scheduling issue, Mr. Chair. Maybe next time we should have the report before the questions come in. That's something I would suggest the honourable members look at, instead of the situation now where we try to run around, grab a couple of things out of the back here, and try to throw things out there. We lose all credibility on this committee, Mr. Chair.

Having said that, let me say this. One of the things in the report that I looked at coming out of the U.K. is the accountability of the accounting officers.

The Chair: Mr. Carr, we have a point of order.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: As far as credibility goes, Mr. Carr, if the President of the Treasury Board had bothered to ...

[English]

The Chair: Direct your comments through the chair.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau: Fine. Let's get back to the credibility issue raised by Mr. Carr. If the President of the Treasury Board had bothered to show respect for parliamentarians and had distributed these reports yesterday, we would have had time to read them.

[English]

The Chair: This is not a point of order. The chair will maintain.

Mr. Fitzpatrick.

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick: I think it's a point of order. But the purpose of our meeting today is to deal with our report, the tenth report on accounting, not on the minister's report. That should be an issue for another day. Our issue is dealing with our report.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fitzpatrick. That is not a point of order. Address your comments through the chair.

Mr. Gary Carr: What I'm saying is this may be in there. We might have our accountability in this report. We may or may not, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The minister is here. Direct your questions through me.

Mr. Gary Carr: Let me say this. Let me be specific about what we asked and recommended in the report. Let me ask the minister about that. One of the things we asked for was the accountability of the accounting officers. What I liked in the U.K. report—which is very specific, and I want to hear it addressed by the minister—is the signing authority and the personal responsibility of those accounting officers. This is one of the things this committee liked in that report.

I haven't had a chance to read this report; it may be in there. But let me ask you specifically, what are your feelings about that? What are you going to do about the signing authority of accounting officers, which we all agreed we were going to do? How do you see that happening?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Thank you, Mr. Carr. It is an important point, and we agree with that recommendation; we've incorporated it. The deputies will have a responsibility for attestation and signing the financial accounts. We're actually going further with that, and I would encourage you.... I do recognize it's an awful lot of information here on short notice, but then it wasn't my decision to call this meeting. It's the first time I've ever been called before public accounts. I'm more than willing to come here as frequently as you want to talk about these things. I'm begging committees to talk about this stuff, so I would appreciate the opportunity to do that.

But it is there also...work on the senior financial officer. This is why looking at one report is difficult, because there's a whole series of activities. There's a process for attestation and certification that goes right down to the organization. It is something that is in active policy discussion right now, the senior financial officer program. There's a process here on internal audit that hardens it up.

The U.K. has started to bring external members into their oversight committees for internal audit, but they have not gone as far as we have with a majority of independent members. The U.K. has a requirement that allows a bit of oversight in the relationship between the minister and the deputy. We have it as an expectation. This is a superior model, and this is the point I've been trying to make. This is not a dismissal of the work that's been done. It's looking at it, extracting the value, and I believe building a Canadian model that meets every single test.

Don't take my word for it. Step outside and talk to the professionals who are knowledgeable in this area. I just don't think you'll find a stronger model anywhere.

• (1045)

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Minister. I did say we would have to wrap up early and I'd have a couple of questions of my own.

You made a statement in your opening comments, for example, that ministers are accountable to Parliament, and you make that statement without qualification. Mr. Himelfarb says that ministers and deputy ministers can come here and answer questions openly.

Mr. Himelfarb, when you were here before this committee before, you indicated that on three occasions you had been approached by deputies who had some concerns—not illegal concerns, but concerns about the direction the minister wanted to go in. I asked you specifically through a question on the order paper what was going on and you refused to answer the question.

So for you to come here and say that deputies answer questions openly is misleading this committee, I believe. I find that your statements here have tried to push the whole situation away, saying we're dealing with it. But Parliament is being treated as if it's irrelevant. I haven't heard anything in the minister's comments that would suggest that they are engaging Parliament in oversight. That is Parliament's role. That is why democracy exists, because we know that government left to itself will go off the rails. You're suggesting, Mr. Minister, that the Treasury Board will be the final arbiter of what is ethical and what is not ethical. You are not engaging Parliament at all, and I believe you're making a fundamental mistake, Mr. Minister.

I look at the private sector and I see Bernie Ebbers is off to jail for 25 years. I see Ken Lay likely heading off the in same direction. We have Lord Black with allegations of impropriety, and he will have his day in court. We have this \$100 million scandal here in Canada in the government, and nobody has been held accountable; there's nothing going on.

Who in the Government of Canada has been held accountable on this issue, Mr. Minister? Given your new rules, who would be held accountable? And when you talk about the review of your responsibilities and accountabilities of ministers and senior officials, let's remember, you're a year late in bringing in this document, which you promised this Parliament a year ago. Now we have it, and we have no time to read it in order to question you properly.

So again, your accountability has been negated.

How do you address the fact that Parliament has to be the central oversight mechanism of the Government of Canada?

Hon. Reg Alcock: It's very simple, Mr. Williams. I think in the first place, the doctrine of a responsible government is that the government has to maintain the confidence of Parliament in order to exist. We've seen that—

• (1050)

The Chair: Is that all?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Mr. Williams, I'll answer the question if you'll allow me the time to do so.

The Chair: I will let you.

Hon. Reg Alcock: The problem is, you talk about respect for oversight. I—and I can show you chapter and verse—more than I think any other person around here, have come forward over and over again asking to come before committees to talk about these things, to get committees engaged in them. But as long as you have a world where a person can be slandered and vilified, on perception, not on fact, you are going to have a great deal of difficulty exercising those accountability and oversight relationships. I'm sorry, but that is just a reality.

Now, what we have done, looking at the very things that dealt with the individuals you mentioned in the private sector, is we have looked at the most robust, the strongest internal and external oversight mechanisms you can find in order to do a couple of things that were expressly identified in the sponsorship issue. One was that no one could say they did not know. There is no process that can be avoided when a problem is identified.

Now, the goal is, remember, that at the end of the day we want to create a management system that allows senior management of these organizations to run them properly.

One of the problems we have in the management of government, I would argue, is that because of successive interventions in response to short-term crises, we have created a body of laws and policies that make it almost impossible for government to function. We have to reform the governance.

I think Parliament has a role to play, and if Parliament would get engaged in that—I have been begging Parliament to get engaged in that—I think there is a huge range of conversations we should have here. But to suggest that the way committees function today is the

way to do it, Mr. Williams.... I think you have to rise to a higher test. I'm sorry, sir, it just....

Now, it's one thing for me, because I can deal in these debates, but it's others who get slandered under the guise of privilege when there isn't a substantive body of information. When we acted on the crowns—and some crown heads were dismissed—it was because there were substantive pieces of information put down by independent third parties who called them into question, and we acted on that. But today, it seems like anybody who comes into your view can be called anything, without any substantive information base. I think that's disgraceful, personally.

The Chair: You have to wrap here. I'm going to have a very brief comment by—

Hon. Reg Alcock: I'll come back any time you want.

The Chair: That's fine. We're running out of time. I just want to say that when you attack the committee, just remember, it was the Prime Minister who called an election, and the 175 witnesses who did not come before this committee were not here because of the executive.

Mr. Himelfarb has a comment.

Mr. Alex Himelfarb: I have just a brief comment on the deputies seeking confidential.... Deputies can turn to the clerk—historically have turned to the clerk—for confidential advice and assistance to resolve disputes.

The idea here is to resolve disputes and to avoid disputes, and the confidentiality of that is what gives comfort and protection to deputies to do that. Where the dispute can't be resolved, we now have a very clear, transparent, and open process—a recorded process—to ensure that those issues are dealt with. The protection of the confidentiality of that process is more about avoiding disputes than about keeping anything from Parliament.

The Chair: Then you have to be careful when you come to this committee, Mr. Himelfarb, in saying that you answer all the questions openly, because you have a conflict.

Anyway, I mentioned that we have to wrap up this meeting early, so on that basis the meeting is adjourned.

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