



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

OGGO • NUMBER 055 • 1st SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, June 5, 2007

—
Chair

The Honourable Diane Marleau

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Diane Marleau (Sudbury, Lib.)): I will call the meeting to order.

We will continue our study of compensation, pay and benefits, throughout the public service. We have before us the Treasury Board Secretariat, and I'll allow them to introduce themselves. As well, we have someone from the Canada Public Service Agency.

You know the rules: you make a presentation and we ask the questions.

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau (Assistant Secretary, Labour Relations and Compensation Operations, Treasury Board Secretariat): We shall proceed.

I'd like to thank you, Madame Marleau, for our being here today.

I am here with two of my colleagues, Phil Charko, assistant secretary of pensions and benefits for the Treasury Board Secretariat, and Rick Burton from the Canadian Public Service Agency.

I'm Hélène Laurendeau, the assistant secretary of labour relations and compensation operations for the Treasury Board Secretariat.

We are representing the portfolio that supports the Treasury Board as a committee of ministers, and we're here as a representative of the employer for the Treasury Board. The division of responsibility—just to give you an idea—between our two organizations is that....

[Translation]

The Treasury Board Secretariat is responsible for compensation planning, collective bargaining, terms of employment, pension and benefits policies as well as refund policies and pay administration.

The Canada Public Service Agency is responsible for human resources planning, including demographic research and analysis, designing the classification policy framework, developing policies for the executive group, developing policies in the areas of employment equity, official languages and ethics.

[English]

We are here today to provide you with some details on a couple of important things with respect to compensation: how compensation is set; how people who perform duties in the public service are paid; and how pay and benefits services are delivered to employees who are performing duties in the public service. You have in front of you a general deck, which will be followed by a more detailed deck to be presented by my colleague Mr. Burton.

In the presentation itself, on page 2, we will go through very quickly how compensation is set in the federal public administration, with a primary focus on core public administration; the make-up of the federal public administration itself; who is involved in the management and administration of compensation, pay and benefits, in departments within the core public administration, and their specific role; and we will also cover with you the two main service delivery structures for the administration of pay and benefits in departments within the core public administration.

Let's start with how compensation is set in the federal public administration. Sound management of compensation is fundamental to attracting and retaining staff and renewing the public service. Recently, the Treasury Board adopted a policy framework for the management of compensation as part of its policy review initiative. That framework sets out specific principles and approaches to manage compensation.

All Treasury Board decisions—and those decisions can be taken directly by Treasury Board or through collective bargaining—with respect to compensation are to be guided by four overarching principles: external comparability, which is basically about being competitive with, but not leading, the compensation for similar work in the relevant labour markets; internal relativity, which is basically about reflecting the relative value to the employer of the work performed; individual or group performance, which is basically about rewarding performance where appropriate and practicable, either based on individual performance or group performance, depending on the types of jobs we are referring to; and the fourth, and not the least principle, is affordability, which is obviously a key overarching principle in determining compensation for the federal public administration. The cost of compensation must obviously be affordable within the context of the commitments to provide services to Canadians.

The compensation framework can be found on the Treasury Board website, and if the members of the committee would like to have a copy of it, we could make sure we send you a copy of the compensation framework itself.

What I just covered is how compensation is set for the federal public administration.

What is the federal public administration and what does it include? That's what we cover on page 4 of the deck.

• (1535)

[Translation]

The federal public administration, in the widest sense, includes five main elements. The core public administration includes all employees of departments named in Schedules I and IV of the Financial Administration Act. The core federal public administration is made up of the departments for which Treasury Board acts as direct employer. These are all departments for which Treasury Board, as central employer, conducts collective bargaining and sets the terms of employment.

The federal public administration also includes 27 separate agencies.

[English]

Those are also known as separate agencies in English.

[Translation]

These are agencies such as the Canada Revenue Agency and Parks Canada which, although they are totally dependent on the public purse, have some latitude to conduct their own collective bargaining. Nevertheless, they must comply with the compensation policy framework.

[English]

and must obey the same principles I just covered. It also covers the RCMP

[Translation]

the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, including both its regular members and its special constables and civilian members appointed under the RCMP Act. As you certainly know, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is not a unionized workplace but its decisions are nevertheless governed by the compensation framework I mentioned.

The compensation framework also governs the Canadian Forces, including officers and non-commissioned members enrolled in the Canadian Forces, as well as Reserve Forces.

Finally, Crown corporations make up the last element of the compensation management framework.

[English]

Our presentation today will focus on the first element, which is the core public administration and its activities with respect to pay administration.

We're trying to help you understand who is involved in the overall management and administration of compensation, pay, and benefits, and their respective roles.

On the top left you start with Treasury Board Secretariat, which manages the compensation reserve and provides planning and reports on compensation. Treasury Board Secretariat also ensures that the government decisions on compensation remain aligned with the compensation framework and the four principles. It also establishes policies and issues directives with respect to how pay is supposed to be administered and how pensions and benefits are supposed to be administered within departments. It also provides

support to Treasury Board in making decisions on compensation, and it performs the activity of negotiating collective agreements.

On the top right you have the Canada Public Service Agency. With respect to the core public administration, it is responsible for designing occupational group structures, that is, for determining how the workforce will be divided into groups with respect to specific responsibilities. It is also responsible for design classification standards. This is how we can prioritize among the various jobs, between the low-level jobs and the high-level jobs, within the various groups that constitute the occupational group structure.

The agency is also responsible for developing the classification policy framework, for maintaining the integrity of the classification system, and for monitoring how the classification system is used. It is also responsible for executive compensation.

On the top left is Public Works and Government Services. It is basically the service provider. It requires that the departments provide administrative and other services that are required for the disbursement of pay, employee benefit plans, and superannuation pension plans. Basically, they are responsible for making sure that policies are applied and that information is properly input in the pay system to make sure that paycheques are issued to every employee and that pension cheques are issued to every former employee who is entitled to a pension, of course.

It operates and maintains the public service payroll system. It is responsible for the system itself, its maintenance, and any coding or development that is needed to meet the requirements that are determined by a compensation decision. Public Works also delivers training on the application of the technical functions of compensation. That's the technical part. The policy part is provided by other training. It also delivers pension administration.

Departments have an important role to play. Deputy heads of the 36 departments that comprise the core public administration are responsible for ensuring that the terms and conditions of employment are administered in accordance with collective agreements and other compensation decisions, directives, policies, or standards. They must as well provide the most suitable organizational structure and allocate the necessary resources to make sure that compensation services are provided to their employees. They of course also have to classify jobs, and they ensure that their internal staff have taken the required training and have the skills and competency to administer pay, pensions, and benefits.

If I were to depict the interaction between those four pillars of activity with respect to compensation, I would say that the Canada Public Service Agency is primarily responsible for organizing the workforce in a logical and appropriate manner. Treasury Board Secretariat is responsible for making sure that once the workforce is properly organized, decisions with respect to how they should be compensated are made. That's true for pretty much everybody except the senior cadre, which is still part of the agency.

Public Works and Government Services is there to actually support the systems and the IT framework that actually delivers and prints the paycheques. Departments, however, are the ones that know what this workforce of 186,000 is supposed to be doing on a daily basis. They're the ones who can determine what their duties are for job description purposes and therefore how they should be classified, because they know the activity. And from that we can determine what their pay should be, based on their experience and where they should be pegged in the pay structure that has either been negotiated or determined by Treasury Board decision.

● (1540)

Departments as well are the interface with that same workforce. They are there to provide the services to make sure that whoever is performing X duties has a proper job description, that this job description is properly classified, and that they are appropriately paid for the classification group and level. They are also the ones who know the individual employees who may have access to other compensation benefits such as specific premiums for duty-related issues. So they're the ones who can use the pay structure and provide who fits in a particular position to be able to instruct Public Works and Government Services to issue the proper cheque. They are the ones who control overtime. They are the ones who know who the supervisors are as opposed to the worker bees. This is pretty much how this big wheel works.

On page 6 you have the two main service delivery structures for the administration of compensation, pay and benefits, within departments. We know two basic models. These models once again have to be decided by the deputy head of each department, depending on their clientele, their level of activity, and what is most suitable to reach out to their workforce.

The first model is the most common, which is the generalist model. An employee has an inquiry; they need to have an explanation on their paycheque or they need to know when their promotion will be processed. They formulate an inquiry to a generalist advisor, who will in turn provide them with advice on pay, understanding the pay structure, or understanding how their paycheque is structured, on insurance and other benefits, and on pension.

The second model, which we call the specialized model, starts again with an employee inquiry or information that is required by the employee. The first level of processing is a call centre for general inquiries. Once the inquiry is determined, the request for information is then channelled to either a pay advisor, who is a specialist in pay, an insurance advisor, who obviously is a specialist in insurance, and the same thing for a pension advisor.

The two models, as I said, currently exist. All the people who are providing these services are known, generally speaking, as compensation advisors, and we have approximately 2,100 of them scattered all over the core public administration.

That pretty much covers my general presentation. I don't know how you want to proceed, Madam Chair. Would you like questions on that before we move to the second presentation?

● (1545)

The Chair: You realize, of course, that the real reason we brought you here was not so much that we didn't understand how it worked, but because there have been some real problems in people getting paid. That's been a challenge. We can't blame Treasury Board, because if they don't get the information, they can't issue the cheques properly. That's really what was at the bottom of the request we made.

While I know Public Works has said they were catching up on a backlog of about 2,000, I wondered whether you looked more closely at this and where the problems really lie. We've had a lot of correspondence that says the bulk of the problems were in those departments where they have become more specialized. But I'm not sure where this is.

Frankly, it's been very disturbing to hear that someone who had an acting position, maybe for one month in December, and here it is now the month of June and they still haven't been paid the extra for that acting position. Most people who work for the public service are not rich. If they are expecting to receive some money, it would be nice if they received it. There have been a lot of stories like this across the public service.

I think it's our job as a committee to make sure the government is operating properly and doing the basics, which is paying our employees. It's very disturbing when I hear that the lowest of the low are not receiving their paycheques, that somehow there's a problem, and when you call they tell you there's a problem and they're working on it. If you don't pay your income tax to the Government of Canada, the day after, you're penalized and you're charged interest.

I think we have to make sure our people are paid, and quickly and right away and in the right amount. That's really what brought this about.

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: The second part of the presentation, which will be provided by my colleague, Mr. Burton, covers in more detail what has been done to try to address some of the issues that pertain to this specific community. If I could, I'd suggest that maybe he could go through his presentation and we could take the questions after, if that suits you.

The Chair: Certainly.

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: I wouldn't want to close without saying that this is something that does preoccupy us at the central agencies, and we are in fact quite mindful of making sure that we simplify as much as we can, at the front end, compensation to alleviate the complexity of having to issue paycheques. We're making every possible effort to actually reduce the burden, but at the same time, we also have taken some measures to work with the communities, and I think Mr. Burton is well placed to speak to that.

● (1550)

The Chair: Could you please proceed, maybe for five minutes?

Mr. Rick Burton (Vice-President, Human Resource Management Modernization Branch, Canada Public Service Agency): I would be pleased to.

My name is Rick Burton. I'm the vice-president of HR modernization at the Canada Public Service Agency.

[Translation]

The purpose of my presentation is to describe the public service-wide compensation capacity-building work and results in the compensation community.

I will describe the context and the capacity-building methodology.

[English]

A few words on community demographics and

[Translation]

priorities and progress to date.

[English]

Finally, I have a short comment on classification of compensation advisors.

Compensation advisors have to be seen in the context of a broader effort that we're undertaking to rebuild the capacity in the human resource community. Compensation advisors we see as part of that community of interest, and we're taking care to make sure they're included in our efforts.

Overall our goal is to develop a healthy, sustainable human resources management committee so that we're delivering relevant quality service based on evolving roles in human resource management, which, as you probably all know, are changing dramatically.

Our key focus in the initial efforts was on the HR specialists themselves, because that's where we actually saw a real challenge that we needed to fix in terms of capacity. Our second focus of the initiative is to focus on compensation advisors, and that work began in earnest in March of this year. I'll have some more to say about that.

The next slide, slide 5, makes the point—I hope it makes the point—that we've taken a very rigorous approach to making sure that we know the nature of the capacity issue. Quite often you hear dramatic stories, but when you dig into them, they don't turn out to be the reality; in some cases they are. We want to be sure that we take a very rigorous approach.

You can see the lists of things we've done here; I won't cover them all in detail. We've surveyed the heads of HRs, those people in departments that H el ene referred to, who actually are the focal point for HR management. We've had an interdepartmental working group with our central agency, going to look at the whole issue of compensation community. We've done a number of focus groups, particularly in the regions, because we wanted to be sure we were getting the regional input and not just hearing from headquarters in various departments.

The most important step in this is that in August and September we conducted demographic analyses of the current and future needs of the compensation community, and we've consulted best practices literature to find out what's going on in the private sector, and so on, that we can bring to bear on the community in the public service.

We've presented our plan to a committee of deputy ministers. I want to make the point here that this is a public service-wide initiative, and deputies are very concerned about the health of this community and the HR community generally. We wanted to be sure

they endorsed the approach we were taking. The plan we've developed is in an annex in your report; I think I missed one annex in my earlier comments.

I've attached three annexes. The first one talks about the general approach we're taking to rebuild the HR capacity, and I can take you through that later, if we want to, in question period. The second one talks about our approach for the compensation community. The third one, when I get to it, will refer to the work we're doing for the professional development of the community, which of course includes compensation.

Finally, we've consulted over 650 compensation professionals across the public service, and we continue to do that.

The next slide covers some of the demographics of the community. I'll just go through it very briefly. As H el ene said, there are roughly 2,100 employees in the compensation community. The community, on average, is 45 years old, which is only a year and a half older than the average of the whole core public administration that H el ene referred to, and 55% of those 2,100 employees in the community are actually at the AS-02 working level, the compensation advisors who we generally refer to now when we're talking to you. The average salary in the community is \$51,700.

We're making good progress in terms of the makeup of the community in terms of representation in the areas of people with disabilities and aboriginal people. However, we're not doing so well on the visible minority representation, which, as you can see, is slightly lower than the workforce availability for visible minorities. The good news is that we're over our target in our recent recruitment campaign in terms of attracting visible minorities, so that is a good news story.

Perhaps the key issue, in terms of some of the earlier discussions that have gone on, is that the attrition rate projected over the next two years is 10%. If we compare that to two years for which we actually have records in the overall core public administration, it's 10.5%, so it's not, in our view, a crisis, but it's definitely something that needs to be managed, and that's why we've taken this public service-wide view to it.

● (1555)

I should say too that training is an issue—and I'll touch on it in a minute—but it does take a considerable amount of time to train compensation advisers, anywhere from one to two years. We've done a lot of work to put new systems in place that ease their work, but H el ene can tell you that when you add up all the collective agreements and all the overtime definitions, there are about 71,000 payrolls that these folks have to deal with.

Then, finally, there are 258 vacancies across the community. Again, that represents the whole 2,100, so when you break it down to the 1,500 or so who are actually the compensation advisers at the working level, it's not that many.

[Translation]

Priorities for action are as follows: attract and retain qualified candidates to ensure community health and renewal; provide common training and career development; and formalize the transfer and acquisition of knowledge, expertise and skills.

[English]

Progress to date on the community. I think when our president, Nicole Jauvin, was here back in April, she mentioned that we were about to engage in a fairly massive recruitment campaign, so I'd like to just give you an update on where we are at this point.

Our first annual recruiting drive is under way. We received 5,800 applications from across Canada, including people inside the public service. We ensured a commitment to build a representative workforce, and as I referred to earlier, we are now able to meet our visible minority targets in those areas.

We've come out, through a very structured assessment process, with 128 qualified candidates, with strong representation, as I said, from the visible minorities: 29%. That breaks out about almost half and half: 58 who are external to the public service and 70 who are internal. So while there has been a concern I think expressed with people moving out of this group, there's a certain healthy vitality of people who want to move into this area. So I think it's good, from a career progression point of view.

Departments have committed to hiring 113 of these candidates, and this we're planning to do every year for the next four to five years until we really build up the capacity. Some of the issues here revolve around how many candidates can a department absorb and train and manage in a year. It still leaves us a few extra, where, if the department has a pressing need, we now have people in a mini-pool who can actually be picked up fairly easily.

We have developed a professional development framework, as I said earlier. The third annex in your package does lay out that framework, and you'll see that we have quite a learning program for the HR community, as a whole, including compensation advisors and including a program for certification.

Curriculum development certification training is under development. I want to say as well that there has been excellent support in the community, across departments and agencies, in this effort, and I want to acknowledge the work that the Public Service Alliance have done with us, who represent these advisors. They've participated in these discussions and held their own. And many of the things that we're hearing are common, and it gives us some comfort that we're tackling the right issues. The next recruitment drive is scheduled for September of this year, so we'll continue the process.

Finally, I would like to just say a word about classification if I could. Classification is about internal relativity, as H el ene said: how do we measure the relativity of work within the public service? Not the work outside, but inside the public service. It's about group and level, so are you a member of this group or that group, and then within that group where do you come in the pecking order?

In the evolution of the work assigned for compensation and benefits advisor, they've been reclassified, as you can see on slide 9, three times, from a CR-04 to a CR-05 in 1989, from a CR-05 to an AS-01 in 1997, and from an AS-01 to an AS-02 in the year 2000. Some of this is meant to track and reflect the evolution of work and the complexity of work. Collective agreements are more complex now; there are more complex transactions. These compensation advisors do play an advisory or an analytical role. I want to make the

point, though, that they are not financial advisors, so there's a limit to where they can go in terms of providing advice to employees.

There has been no significant change to the work since 2000. There was a classification grievance, resolved in 2003, which confirmed the classification at the AS-02 level. This was an interdepartmental grievance committee that looked at the work right across the public service and confirmed that it was at the 02 level.

In our system, classification decisions are final and binding unless it can be shown there has been a significant change in the work, and, as I said, there hasn't been since 2000.

• (1600)

I don't want to get into the details of where we're going more broadly in classification or form, unless you ask me, but we are looking at this group of people who are members of the AS community, who themselves are part of a broader group, the PA community.

If I could take you to the other handout that I hope you have with you, I'll just take you to one point there, just so you see where the compensation advisors fit into the whole job structure of the public service.

Every job in the public service you can find on this page, and the colour code reflects union representation. You can see the numbers in each group and so on. So I'll take you to the very top left-hand corner. In the yellow you will see a group called the program and administrative services, or the PA group, as we refer to it. It comprises many former groups in the public service, including the administrative services group, which is the AS group.

The compensation advisors are within that AS group; they're not exclusively the group, but they're members of that group. So you can see where it fits in the broader context of classification.

Our reform efforts are towards modernizing the standards, one by one, and describing the work in each of these groups, and we're making fairly good progress in doing that. We intend to look at the PA group, because you can see that it's 89,000 strong, which is almost half of the core public administration that H el ene referred to.

That's the end of my formal brief. If at some point you want to go through the three attachments I provided, I'd be happy to.

The Chair: Thank you. Excuse me if I didn't hear it correctly, but I haven't heard what you're actually doing with the departments—and this would be more to Treasury Board—to make sure this backlog doesn't exist anymore. That's really the question.

This is what started this all: the people who weren't getting their transfers. They were getting paid, but they were getting paid based on their ex-jobs; some people weren't getting paid at all if they were new term people. These are the things that have concerned us at the committee, and that's why you're here. Basically, we want to know whether you have done anything to make sure that all people are getting paid right away or within the timeframes that are established.

Ms. H el ene Laurendeau: There are a couple of measures I can point out to answer those questions.

As I mentioned earlier, we are making a lot of efforts to try to streamline at the front end, as much as possible, compensation decisions. I can point to the way we have handled the retroactivity for the CX group, which is the corrections officers. We had a very long retroactivity, and we were able to strike a significant deal with their bargaining agent so that we would simplify the assurance of cheques, as opposed to having to review four years of pay history, as is the normal practice.

We were able to agree with them to actually have a form of lump-sum payment per level, with a view, specifically, to simplifying how the retroactivity would be issued and relieve the community that would have had to otherwise take every CX one by one and review all their employment history for the past four years just to issue their retroactivity cheques. So we try as much as possible at the front end to come up with creative measures, with the help of our bargaining agents when they're ready to actually agree to these things, to actually simplify the front end.

We're also making efforts to try to simplify the measures that will come when we need to address compensation issues—that's really at the front end. In terms of supporting the community, as part of our policy review initiatives, we paid significant attention to streamlining descriptions of the things they have to administer and the advice they have to provide.

This policy initiative is not yet fully finished, but we have consulted with the community extensively to understand the greatest irritants, the biggest areas of lack of clarity, so that we could actually do two things: clarify the rules they have to apply and provide the appropriate training to make sure they are properly equipped to actually administer pay in the best and most efficient way and in the least complex fashion.

The third measure we're thinking about—and we're still pretty much at the study stage—is to facilitate down the road the IT that supports all the pay administration functions. Currently, in every department you can have different IT structures to actually administer pay and speak to the system at Public Works. We're hoping to galvanize the system to actually simplify it so that people would actually not get lost from one IT system to another.

• (1605)

The Chair: A point of order, Mr. Bonin.

Mr. Raymond Bonin (Nickel Belt, Lib.): We've been at this for 36 minutes. We're not talking about the things we asked to talk about. We're concerned with employees who are not getting their money. We want to know if they have their money, how many are not getting their money, how long it's been since they got the money that is owed. Otherwise we're wasting time here. We've heard presentations like this before.

The Chair: Okay. We'll go to the questions directly.

Monsieur Simard.

Hon. Raymond Simard (Saint Boniface, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

In fact, I don't think we are hearing what we're supposed to be hearing here today.

First of all, we're here because there have been problems lately with certain employees not getting their cheques or the proper amounts and that kind of thing. I'm assuming that's not a regular thing in government. I'm assuming there was a hitch or something that caused these flaws to happen.

First of all, I wonder if you could explain to us how long ago this happened. Has it been going on for a year, two years, or the last six months? What kind of a hitch was it? Is it because of a lack of resources? Is it because we're putting in a new IT system? That's what we're here for. You can explain the whole system and how you function in it, but this is why we're here.

I'd like you to define "compensation community". What is it?

Mr. Rick Burton: The compensation community is the group of people directly related to paying people or dealing with their benefits.

Hon. Raymond Simard: Your staff.

Mr. Rick Burton: Yes. Those are the 2,100 folks I was talking about.

Hon. Raymond Simard: Why don't we call them staff? They're the people working who are working with you.

Mr. Rick Burton: You're right.

Hon. Raymond Simard: There have been issues lately of people getting the wrong amounts of money or not getting their cheques. Can you explain to us what has been happening?

Mr. Rick Burton: I can't. It's not something... I hear these things, and I've certainly been approached by one of the unions that was quite concerned about this in a certain area. As far as I know, there were steps taken to resolve that particular issue. I don't personally know where this is or whether it's a problem across the public service. I think we've maybe all had situations where a pay has been late, but I don't know that it's widespread; at least I don't have evidence of that.

Hon. Raymond Simard: Obviously we have the wrong witnesses here.

The Chair: That's right.

From the very first time I brought it up a lot of people have been telling us there are major problems. I think the Deputy Minister of Public Works mentioned there was a backlog of 2,000 people on classifications and promotions. The last time he was here he said that 1,000 of them had been caught up. I don't know if the rest of them have been caught up and whether there's a backlog of others in other categories who also haven't been paid. I know they've addressed some of the issues, but I'm not sure they've all been addressed. That's really our concern. That's why we're talking about this now.

When you hear of term employees working for three weeks and not getting paid for three months, there's something wrong somewhere. I don't know what it is, but there's something wrong. This is what started it. Since we brought it up there have been all kinds of incidents that have come to us. We know it's still happening, but we don't know to what extent. We don't know who's in charge.

What recommendation do we make to make sure this stops?

•(1610)

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: If I may, I will make an attempt to be a little more specific in addressing your concern. In terms of having global figures from every department as to whether there are pockets of problems, we don't have those figures centrally. However, we do know from interacting with these people, from the questions they're asking us on the interpretation of our policies, and also because we interact with our colleagues—the bargaining agents—that there are pockets of difficulty.

You referred to Public Works. I think Minister Fortier explained what was specific to his own department. When I was explaining to you earlier that the deputy ministers are responsible for the delivery in their department, to a certain extent they actually are better placed to speak to the reality of their own department. We, at the central agency, can certainly make every effort to assist, to clarify at our end, to streamline as much as we can, but we do not hold the actual total of all the difficulties that may happen in the system.

It would be inappropriate for me to say that we don't know there are pockets of problems. We know anecdotally where they are. The departments themselves would be able to tell you whether they have a backlog, such as Public Works did when they came and explained to you. We also know that since then they've been working very hard at putting a dent in the backlog. As far as we know they are pretty much up to date. They're slowly, but fairly steadily, reducing the backlog in that department.

That's the limit of what I could speak directly to.

Hon. Raymond Simard: That's interesting. Just so I understand the process, is your organization responsible for cutting all the cheques for the public service?

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: Treasury Board isn't; Public Works is, based on information that is transmitted to them by—

Hon. Raymond Simard: By every department.

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: By every department.

Hon. Raymond Simard: So if the departments are falling behind, Public Works can't necessarily submit the right cheques.

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: That's correct. It's basically what is encoded in the system that will produce the cheque at the end. That's why the effort needs to be all around the wheel—streamlining at the front end, making sure that the people who actually do the coding understand, and that at the tail end the flow of information gets to Public Works so that the cheques can be issued with the lowest risk of error possible.

Hon. Raymond Simard: Can you at least tell us from what you're hearing lately, your interaction with people, whether or not this is normal, or whether there is actually a problem happening right now?

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: As far as I know, and once again I want to be very prudent, there were pockets, primarily due to the fact that we've been having issues of capacity with respect to the number of people who could actually work on these things. That's what Mr. Burton spoke to, making extra effort to make sure that we recruit and train and equip the people so that we do not fall behind in what needs to be produced.

Hon. Raymond Simard: Are you talking about hiring people in your organization?

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: No, in every department.

Hon. Raymond Simard: In every department.

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: That's why we talk about a community that is spread in all the departments but is doing jobs that are very similar, based on the same sets of rules that are set centrally.

The Chair: I'm just going to fall in here. I thought somehow that Treasury Board was responsible for the overall operation. Would Treasury Board not be the one that would look at which departments are having the problems and which aren't, and how big is the problem, or does that just go on around you? I'm sorry, I'm having a bit of a difficulty understanding why you're not aware where the problems are and just how bad they are, if they are.

•(1615)

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: I must admit that at the aggregate level we don't. As I said, we know anecdotally from the interaction we have with departments when we hear about problems, but we don't have a central place that would actually collate all the information on all the pay transactions that happen all across the government so that we could actually press a button and tell you, this department has a high risk of error or is in a backlog situation. Departments have that information at their end.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will continue with Mr. Nadeau.

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Do the Treasury Board ministers and the minister of Public Works ever talk to each other? Do you talk with minister Fortier about problems that arise, for example regarding compensation of government employees?

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: There are regular contacts between officials at the Treasury Board Secretariat and people responsible for pay administration.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Did you know that this was the main reason for our being here today?

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: We were told we should provide information on the role of central agencies in this area.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Here is what has me wondering so much. I met minister Fortier in his office in March. I went there with blue collar employees of the federal government. They clearly explained, in person and in a friendly way, that new employees have to wait for three months before getting their first pay cheque. There are also term employees who for some unknown reason get paid much later than they should. Even some senior executives get paid late when they move to another position.

We raised all these issues with minister Fortier. I am very disappointed to see that you are discussing this situation as if it were inconsequential. You have no figures and no specific information. However, according to our documents, at least 2,000 people are affected and minister Fortier anticipated it would take at least six more weeks to get on top of the problem.

So I would like today to get an update on the pay situation of federal public servants. Is there anything you can tell us in that regard?

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: I read the transcript of Mr. Fortier's testimony. I believe he was talking about Public Work and Government Services employees. Unfortunately, I do not have any more details on this department than what minister Fortier gave you himself.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: You should go and talk to minister Fortier himself or his executive assistant who was also at the meeting. We provided him with a lot more information showing that there is a serious problem. Also, a month ago, I met with Mr. Nantel who was also with us at that meeting. He told me there had been no improvement, that employees still are subject to delays in payment, which is extremely unfortunate. In a society such as ours, with a government as structured as ours and which has all the required processes in place, it is incredible that we cannot manage to give employees their pay cheque in time.

Madam Chair, I would like to have another meeting with those witnesses here today in September or October in order for them to provide us with figures and a progress report.

Another issue that was raised at this meeting is that of the compensation advisors. The government hires employees to become compensation advisors through competitions, etc. Then they are trained, which takes quite some time. We give them training to enable them to do the work. The next thing you know — minister Fortier said so himself — these people take a position elsewhere in the public service because the salary of a compensation advisor is less than that of other positions.

We are not talking here about secondments but about people who want to be transferred. This means that those employees who are supposed to ensure that pay cheques get issued on time move elsewhere. So we have unfilled positions and we must again train other people to fill them. We find ourselves in that situation after having spent so much time training these employees who leave.

I strongly suggest to you to consider whether the salaries paid to those people in those key positions should not be adjusted in order to make all that training they received useful. If there are so many transfers, maybe it is a sign of a problem. I do not know their hourly rate, but it seems to be something that needs a closer look.

I am not asking you for answers. I am simply outlining some potential solutions that have been proposed by employees, people in my riding who have met with Mr. Fortier. It so happens that I live close to them, which is fortunate. These are people working in Gatineau and Ottawa. I imagine that for someone who works elsewhere in Canada and encounters such a problem it would be rather difficult to get the information and to be able to talk to someone who can do something about the problem. We had that opportunity last March.

Madam Chair, I sincerely wish that something can be done along the lines that I suggest. I am not smarter than anyone else. These potential solutions were suggested to me by government employees, people who have this problem or have experienced it. We must find a solution once and for all and pay an adequate salary to those

compensation advisors. New employees, term employees and even sometimes managers who change positions are penalized and must wait a long time for their pay cheques.

As I said, I am disappointed, but I am not asking you to shoulder all the blame. But you should be talking more to each other, because this is an issue that people raise with me all the time and for which solutions exist.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Do you want to answer that first? Do you want to try that?

Mr. Rick Burton: I'll try to answer one part, and for sure we'll come back to update you on progress.

On the whole issue of the health of the staff who performed these functions across the public service in every department, what I was trying to outline is how we're trying to improve and rebuild that capacity. I think we're making fairly good progress on that. It involves a heavy training program, a recruitment program, and so on. With respect to the issue of people moving out of the group because of, say, the perception of low pay, just as an example, I mentioned that there's a lot of movement into the group and there's movement out of the group. From a career development perspective, that's healthy. Many people move out of the actual working level of being the people who do the operational pay and benefits, the transaction part, to become supervisors in the broader staff structure that's in the various departments.

The other thing is, and this goes back to capacity, and it may not be evident, but often departments will offer opportunities to other people to do the same kinds of work only in another department because they don't have the capacity. So some of the movement you see isn't necessarily out of the group. It could be within the group but just from one department to another because they're all dealing individually with their capacity challenges. That's why, in this case, we decided to take a public service-wide view and do this recruitment right across the board on behalf of all departments. We'd be happy to come back and continue to show you progress.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kramp.

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

I'd like to take this right back to a very, very basic principle. We've as yet to determine whether there is a problem. We've heard there's a problem from a number of people, but this committee needs to have that verified. You are a part of that answer. Number one, we need to know if there's a problem. If there's not a problem, then there's no sense us carrying anything any further, once we have identified whether or not there is or not. If there is a problem, then we need to know how to fix it—what plans you have in place, or what suggestions you or other departments should or could make. I think it's almost that basic a principle, and we, as a committee, have not been able to determine that because we have not had the information from the various people. We've had rumour and discussion and complaints, so we need to know if what we're hearing is valid. Somehow, some way, we need some activity from within your organization.

You mentioned how the cogs of the wheel have to work together effectively. Well, wonderful, but if there's no effective communication within all of those cogs, and all that information isn't being disseminated through, you're not going to have that information. I find that very, very difficult when I compare that—and this is not a comparison, but maybe an anachronism between public sector and private sector, and I'm not suggesting one is superior.

Let's just take our banks. They do payroll services for people across the nation. They do hundreds and hundreds of thousands of cheques and transactions and look after that. People don't get their paycheque late. It's there. How? Why? Why can't we do that as a government? Is it because a particular agency or a particular department is falling down, or is it because there's a lack of communication between all departments or because somebody's not doing their job, or we have a system that isn't effectively communicating internally? We don't know. We need to know that so that we can make a recommendation to Parliament to suggest how this place should work so people can get paid.

I think that's a very, very simple request, and I'm just trying to take it to that base guttural level, because people need to get paid. If they are getting paid and you have that information and you can determine that and bring that to this committee, then we'd be thankful, and we can go back to the people who are complaining and say, well, no, there's really not a problem.

We need to be assured. I hope I'm making myself clear on behalf of the committee to suggest that we just need answers. The people have put forward a complaint and we must follow it through. We recognize we're not asking you to bear the brunt of this on your shoulders. We're certainly not here to harp on you as witnesses, to suggest that this is just your problem. If it's a system problem, if it's an overview problem, if it's a communication problem, if it's just simply a lack of direction, or if there's a weakness in any particular area, we need to know that. There are comparables out there. How many people work in the distribution of the payroll system for the government? How many people work in the payroll system for, say, private sources? Is it comparable? Is the efficiency rate similar and/or the same? Should we maybe be hiring this out or farming this out, or should we do more and more ourselves? We need to make intelligent decisions, and with that, we need information.

That's it. Thank you.

•(1625)

The Chair: Thank you.

Did you want to say something, Mr. Burton?

Mr. Rick Burton: I just wanted to say that I agree entirely with what you're suggesting. What we've tried to do today, and it's probably just touching the surface, is demonstrate that we are serious about looking at what the real issue is and at whether there is an issue. We aren't ignoring anecdotal things, because we all get paid too. So we're trying to make sure it works.

What we haven't outlined is that we are looking at service delivery models. We're certainly looking at where the private sector has gone. There has been no decision made on that, but we're looking at various delivery models for improving.

As Hélène said, we're looking heavily to the use of technology, because that's probably one area in which we have fallen behind. We've done a lot of work to help the compensation advisors themselves do their work with an application called virtual pay, which puts it all out there. They can refer to the collective agreements and make those kinds of calculations a lot more quickly.

But we haven't looked at a system-wide HR system that will capture all this from all departments. Many departments have their own homegrown systems. And we have a very powerful initiative under way now to try to consolidate them in one information system.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: It would make sense.

Mr. Rick Burton: It makes perfect sense. That's why I'm saying that I agree entirely with you. We are looking at all those initiatives.

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: I actually appreciate the construct of mind of the honourable MP. You're right. If we can, very simply, properly define the problem, we certainly can work on the elements of a solution. One of the things we're facing is that there are multi-faceted elements that may not be as optimized as they could be within the various boxes I talked to you about. We believe that by working *en conjonction* with all of them, we run a better chance of being able to actually optimize the entire system.

If you were to ask me if there is a widespread problem of cheques not being issued, I would have to tell you no, but at the same time I do not want to minimize the fact that we've been hearing noises in the system that deserve our attention. What we're trying to do with you today is to say what elements we actually have identified. And Mr. Burton talked about the work that has been done with the attrition rate and the training and all that. I've been trying to demonstrate to you that we're trying to work at the front end as well and provide the tools as much as possible.

If there were one single problem, there would be one single solution. There are many components, and we're trying to work on all of them at the same time. I think that's the best information we can provide you with. We are aware that there are pockets, and we're working on those. We want to facilitate, for the entire system, something that will avoid having those types of pockets and have something that runs smoothly.

If I were hard pressed to say whether we have a prevailing problem of cheques not being issued, I would have to answer that with 186,000 people, the noise would be much higher if on a broad scale things were not happening. But yes, there are pockets.

• (1630)

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Might I suggest that you at least have a fail-safe system then? If we have people who are falling between the cracks, and these people depend on that for a variety of reasons—it could be a mortgage, it could be whatever—and all of sudden they don't have that proper funding, there should at least be a fail-safe mechanism to ensure that they are looked after somehow until the transition stage is done so we can successfully deal with all of them.

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: That's why I was saying that it's not because we hear very few noises compared to the magnitude of the organization we're managing that we shouldn't pay attention to it. I agree with you on that wholeheartedly. There are people behind that.

The Chair: I believe there is a problem, and it is a government operations problem, because you can't tell us. Yet you come to us and tell us that there are two delivery structures.

For one thing, can you tell us where the problems are more prevalent and which ones they are? I mean, to me, as a government, that's a government operations issue. You, as Treasury Board, should be able to answer that. If you can't, then find the answers, because it's important. It's not just noise; it's people.

I will go now to Ms. Nash.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): I don't have a question.

The Chair: Okay.

We'll go to Mr. Bonin.

Mr. Raymond Bonin: It's really not a question; it's a statement.

There is a problem. When employees don't get paid, they don't call the assistant secretary, labour relations and compensation operations person. They call their MP, and they've been calling us. I think the problem today is we invited the wrong witnesses, or they sent the wrong witnesses. They're good witnesses. They're good people. They do good work but not for what we want to do.

I suggest we move on to item 2 on our agenda and bring people here who can answer the questions that we want to ask. There are people who aren't getting paid, and we want information on that. Nothing else. If you want to know what department, his problem was with Public Works. My problem is with Canada Revenue Agency. If there are others, members of Parliament will speak out on it, but somebody must read these blues from the departments. Maybe tomorrow somebody from the department should contact the chair and say, we're going to put somebody on to this in Public Works and in Canada Revenue Agency, and we'll get you your answers. No. They always send us the high-level management who aren't the ones we call when we have problems.

Again, the bureaucracy sent the wrong people. That's not the first time it's happened here. That's why I'm not that loyal to being here because it's a waste of time. We've been wasting an hour. That's not what we want to talk about.

The Chair: We have a motion on the floor to adjourn this debate. That's not subject to debate or amendments.

I'll call the vote on the motion to adjourn on this particular subject. All those in favour?

(Motion agreed to)

• (1635)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Can we ask more questions?

The Chair: Not on this agenda item.

[*English*]

Not on this issue.

Thank you. I hope you'll take our suggestions. Frankly, we need to find out who's in charge. That's our biggest problem with this. And who's in charge government-wide? I think it's Treasury Board, or should be. I hate to tell you that.

We will suspend for a few minutes.

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_____ (Pause) _____

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[*Translation*]

The Chair: Madam Bourgeois, you have the floor.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Madam Chair, I explained the reasons for my motion the last time. I maintain my motion and have no other explanations to provide. It is very clear.

[*English*]

The Chair: Debate.

Mr. Moore.

Mr. James Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam, CPC): Thank you very much.

It seems the die is cast, but I'll make the valiant effort anyway to maybe shake a vote or two loose. Who knows? You never know.

This is a really bad idea. This motion is not in the best interests of Canadian taxpayers in any regard. Every single witness that this committee has called before it from the private sector and the public sector has suggested that what our government is doing is in the best interests of taxpayers. There has not been one witness who has said that what we've suggested is not in the best interest of taxpayers, that it is not fully compliant with all the measures of accountability, that it is not above board and gets value for dollars for taxpayers' money. In fact, I can quote some of the witnesses who were before the committee.

James McKellar, who we will recall is the professor of real property from York University, said that what this government is doing is “really a practical solution”. He asked himself a rhetorical question: “Is it a good time to sell? It's a great time to sell.”

We've had submissions as well. Sandy McNair from Altus InSite, which is a division of the Altus Group Limited, experts on commercial real estate, said that our government's plan is a prudent and appropriate approach to best meet the immediate and long-term needs of the federal government.

Paul Hindo, who is the vice-president and general manager of Cushman & Wakefield LePage, said the government strategy is the way to go.

Stan Krawitz, who is the president of Real Facilities Inc., one of Toronto's leading authorities in commercial real estate, said the timing of a possible sale couldn't be better.

Ms. Nash, before the committee when Michael Fortier was here—not the last time but the time before—said, quote: “This all sounds very good. Minister Fortier has been before the committee twice on this subject, and both times he was—”

• (1640)

Ms. Peggy Nash: Read the full quote.

Mr. James Moore: That was the full quote. When Minister Fortier was before this committee both times specifically on this subject, this committee ran out of time for questions to him on this subject.

Also, what we're discussing here...this is all coming from the RBC and BMO study that is not going to be released publicly because it's not in the best interests of taxpayers. That has been repeated time and time again.

Passing this motion as an attempt to get the government to stop doing what is clearly in the best interests of taxpayers and what the Liberals were prepared to do multiple times over—24 times over, if my math isn't failing, in terms of the size of sale-leaseback that the Liberals were prepared to do—is absolutely in the best interests of taxpayers. It is a lay-up. It is obvious, and this motion encourages the government to violate the confidentiality agreement that we've signed with two banks. It encourages this government to abandon a process of saving hundreds of millions of taxpayers' dollars and would jeopardize our bargaining position to get the best value for taxpayers' dollars. So the idea that any member of this committee would in full sobriety actually vote for this motion is astonishing to me.

The Chair: Mr. Turner.

Hon. Garth Turner (Halton, Ind.): Well, I'm very sober at the moment, Mr. Moore, and I think the intent of this motion is sound to the extent that we all understand and recognize that what the government is trying to do is a practical solution to a real-world problem. We all understand that.

There has been a frustration on the part of my colleagues, and certainly myself, that as custodians of these assets, which we all are, all of us around this table, it has been very difficult for us to ascertain the information that would really lead us to the conclusion that this in fact is the best outcome for taxpayers. It may well be, but we have been systematically prevented from knowing enough information to come to that conclusion.

You quote Mr. McKellar and other experts. They talked about it with no more certainty or no more knowledge and certainly no more

facts than we have. The witnesses from the two banks were helpful to a certain extent but provided no information that we could not devise from published information. The minister, being as helpful as I'm sure he felt he could be, did not really provide us with any other information—

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): The meeting was in camera...[*Inaudible—Editor*].

Hon. Garth Turner: No, I wasn't here, but I've been—

Mr. Chris Warkentin: The meeting was in camera.

A voice: It doesn't matter.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: So what do you know? Nothing.

A voice: So who's interrupting?

The Chair: Mr. Turner is speaking and—

Mr. Chris Warkentin: On a point of order—

The Chair: Mr. Turner has the floor.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: On a point of order, Madam Chair, I just want to clarify again to ensure that I haven't misunderstood the process of in camera meetings.

The Chair: A point of order is not a clarification.

• (1645)

Mr. Chris Warkentin: This is, because it cuts to the chase of the in camera meeting that we had. I just don't want any breaches of confidentiality to happen here.

The Chair: It's not a point of order, thank you.

Mr. Turner, continue.

Hon. Garth Turner: You're blowing smoke, Chris. I'm not breaching any confidentiality. I'm simply saying that the—

Mr. Chris Warkentin: How did you find out about it?

Hon. Garth Turner: Because I've been briefed on it.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: You can't. You can't be briefed on it. That's the point.

The Chair: Mr. Turner, keep going.

Hon. Garth Turner: I do not believe the minister provided enough information to this committee for us to arrive at a conclusion as to whether it's in the best interests of taxpayers. The motion before us right now reflects the fact that committee members on this side of the table feel they do not have enough information to arrive at a conclusion. That's simply all it says.

Yes, the government side entered into a confidentiality agreement with the two banks. That was the government's decision. Yes, the minister feels he cannot breach the confidentiality agreement with those parties. That's the minister's decision. It was the government's decision to take those actions and enter into those particular agreements. It is our responsibility and our duty to represent the people who sent us here, and who actually, as taxpayers, own these buildings for all Canadians. You can't suck and blow at the same time. We have to get the information to understand whether the sale price is reasonable, the leaseback is reasonable, and this is the most prudent financing arrangement possible.

I asked the bank representatives when they were here if they'd examined the alternative of using bank capital to loan to the government, to be financed with the money we use for repairs every year, so we'd retain ownership of the buildings and perhaps hire a property management firm. Is that a reasonable option? Did they look at it? The answer from the witnesses was "Yes, we looked at it." To the question "Can we see the numbers to see what your work-up was?" the answer was "No, that's confidential."

Without that kind of information, we're relying upon the expertise of another party when it is still our responsibility as representatives of the people to reach a conclusion so we can go back to our constituents who may ask, "Was that a good deal that you guys sold those nine buildings for a billion and a half dollars and leased them back for 25 years? Tell me about that." Well, I'm sorry. I don't have any information. I'm sorry, the minister couldn't tell me anything. I'm sorry, the expert witnesses couldn't provide us any facts. You as a taxpayer were deemed by the minister and the officials not important enough to have the information. I, as your representative, was deemed not significant enough to have the information for us to arrive at a conclusion as to whether this is in the interest of taxpayers.

That's the only point of this motion. That's why we're here. It's not to screw you guys over. It's not to hold the government up. It's not intended for that.

We've tried six ways by Sunday to get to this information and have been denied it. If we're going to continue to be denied it, you're asking us for a leap of faith, and I, for one, am not going to make it.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Simard.

[English]

Hon. Raymond Simard: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

In fact, that is exactly the point. When the motion came up last week, I was very hesitant to support it because of the moratorium issue, and we spoke about that. After I looked at it over the weekend, I figured, you know what, we have a responsibility as members of Parliament for oversight of Public Works.

The other thing that's important here I think is that this is a precedent. This is the first nine buildings of how many—maybe 40, maybe 100, maybe 200? If we haven't done—

An hon. member: [Inaudible—Editor]

Hon. Raymond Simard: Not 360, because some of them are defence buildings, I believe.

I think what you have to look at here...and my colleague here is precisely right when he says in ten years or in five years somebody could look back and say, "You know what? This was a terrible deal, but you know what we based our decisions on?" And I quote the minister here. I think it's important that we have to be basing our stuff on facts. When the minister was asked on what information he made his decision, he said, "Well, based on information. But you know, it might come as a surprise to you, but there are a lot of people in cabinet who have private sector expertise and have a lot of common sense. And it came across to us, all of us, that being in

bricks and mortar isn't necessarily something that we need to be as a government."

Well, you know what? I'm not sure I'm prepared to make my decision based on the fact that there are a couple of private sector guys in cabinet who think it's a good idea. It seems to me the reason we invited the minister here in camera was to be able to share some of the information with us with regard to the study.

• (1650)

Mr. Chris Warkentin: We've broken that confidentiality.

Hon. Raymond Simard: No, no, in camera. Sorry, we invited the minister to come to speak to us in camera so that he could inform us what reason his decision to sell these buildings was based on.

So basically what we have is this. The minister is saying, "You know what. Trust me, guys. We'll get the information. We'll make the best deal possible." Then in five years or seven years they're going to come back and say, "Whoever was on the committee, they were a bunch of idiots because they did not do their job." I'll tell you, I don't want to be one of them. We need to know exactly what it's based on.

As I was saying, I think it's probably not a bad deal. I think the government may have to get out or maybe should get out of owning their own buildings. It's a possibility. But we haven't got the information.

And you haven't got the information, by the way, to make that decision either.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Moore.

Mr. James Moore: Ray Simard has always been a good man and a good friend, but I quote:

The truth is, being a landlord is not a core business of government, nor should it be. Studies show that we spend more to operate our properties and, in fact, on top of that we have more space per employee than the industry average. We've simply not as efficient.

We shouldn't be in the bricks and mortar business. That's what the Liberal Minister of Public Works said. Ray, you were on side when the Liberals were doing this. Now you're saying it's a bad idea when we're doing this.

Hon. Raymond Simard: How do you know I was on side?

Mr. James Moore: We're going to be voting for a motion. Let me quote the motion. Hold on.

The motions asks "That...the government place a moratorium on the sale of the proposed buildings..."

You're going to be voting for that.

Hon. Garth Turner: It's until we get the information.

Mr. James Moore: The problem with that, Garth, is that as we are sitting here, the government—right now—is marketing the buildings. The marketing is going to be going forward, and it closes on June 12. I don't know what the timeline is for concurrence in the House and for a vote after that. There are three hours of debate, and then a concurrence vote.

Right at the peak point when we're taking in offers as we're marketing these nine buildings, you're asking the government to lay all our cards on the table in terms of what the two banks assessed the value of the buildings at and why we chose those particular buildings for a sale and leaseback. This is a fundamentally basic stupid moment to be suggesting this type of proposal. If the government actually followed this, it's a really dumb idea for taxpayers.

Hon. Garth Turner: It's not the first moment we've been asking for this; we've been asking for this for a couple of months.

Mr. James Moore: There's a confidentiality agreement, Garth. You know that. This has been explained many times. Minister Fortier has been before this committee twice on this particular subject; both times committee members ran out of questions, and he satisfied every single question that committee members had.

The clerk has been great in searching for folks who are genuine experts, and to my best recollection, out of every single witness we've had before the committee, there hasn't been one, not one, who has suggested that this motion is the right way to go. I'm not slicing and splicing phrases here. Not one witness who came in here as an expert said that this committee should put a halt to this and really take a look at it. Nobody has suggested that.

Hon. Raymond Simard: Those witnesses don't have ultimate responsibility over this sale, my friend, but we do.

Mr. James Moore: Yes, but they also have objective analysis. Their objective suggestions to us as committee members aren't that we may want to put the brakes on this because there's something we haven't thought of. Every last one of them, every single one, said to go ahead, and that this is the right thing to do. They have said that.

Hon. Garth Turner: With respect, I understand what you're saying, but I think you are putting a spin on it that doesn't exactly match what happened. We didn't ask a lot of witnesses. We were not able to provide the witnesses—

Mr. James Moore: That's fine. That's fine. I'm finished.

Hon. Garth Turner: I'm just saying we were not able to provide—

Mr. James Moore: We can move to the question—

The Chair: There are other people who want to speak; I'm sorry.

Mr. Moore, if you're finished, I'll go to Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. James Moore: I'll finish by saying that we are currently in the process of marketing the buildings.

The Chair: Madam Nash has a point of order.

Mr. James Moore: I have my time.

The Chair: But she has a point of order.

Ms. Peggy Nash: I'm just asking what the rules are. Do we have a particular time allotment or is it just a free-for-all? I'm wondering how we get a chance to speak.

• (1655)

The Chair: It's by whoever puts a hand up. We don't follow the rules that we have for witnesses. The person speaking can speak as long as he or she wants. This is different from the normal rules.

We'll go back to Mr. Moore.

Mr. James Moore: I won't be long. This is not a filibustering moment. We can take the vote soon, and that's fine.

For those who are genuinely interested in the best interests of the taxpayers, and I hope it's everybody, at this moment we are marketing the buildings. The bidding closes on June 12, and right at the moment when we're in the process of accepting bids, committee members are asking the government to release publicly the private, confidentiality-enclosed studies by BMO and RBC, which....

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. James Moore: Yes, it's confidentiality, precisely; it's exactly how it was done when you were in power, Ray, but now you have a problem with it. It's bizarre to me.

Look, this is a profoundly dumb idea. I think if this motion passes, which I suspect it will, this is a case study on how one wastes taxpayers' dollars unnecessarily by jumping to partisanship in a really foolish way. I look forward to the three hours of debate in the House.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I just want to make one point and I don't want to belabour it. I think we all agree that confidentiality on this issue is essential and paramount. It is absolute. Obviously we're at the tail end of possible submissions coming in, and the bidding is coming forward.

Reading from Marleau and Montpetit, confidentiality is not assured simply because a matter is heard in camera. That is something that's an understanding of committees. This whole idea that we can discuss in camera confidential matters that the bank has signed on to and the government has signed on.... Even Marleau and Montpetit has guaranteed us that this can't happen. That's the first point.

The second point is one Garth made earlier. He said that even though he wasn't in the meeting, he had been briefed on what happened in the meeting. That is an indictment of somebody in this committee who divulged information that was categorically confidential and was to be kept in this committee meeting. It essentially speaks to just the severity of the issue: that you cannot have the minister coming here divulging all of the information and then expecting to keep it in this room.

I understand that conversations happen, and that's exactly what Marleau and Montpetit identified, and it is essentially what the minister identified as being the necessary insurance to ensure that this confidentiality is not broken.

The Chair: Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I understand the concerns of my colleagues on the other side, and I share some of those concerns as well. But to me this whole argument is about striking a balance. We're asked to pass judgment on this right now. If we have every bit of information and we scuttle a deal, perhaps we've made a wrong decision. If we have no information or not enough information and the deal progresses and isn't satisfactory to the taxpayer, then perhaps we've made a wrong decision.

We are going to be subject to a right decision or a wrong decision, regardless of where we go with this. We are assigned, and we ran for this office, to make some decisions and to gather the best information we have at our disposal.

I'm going to vote against this, not because I don't want more information—of course, I would like more information—but with all respect, Madame Bourgeois.... It's not because I just don't want the motion; it's because, from the testimony that has been given at this committee, I have a deep concern that if more information were to come out, we could just tip that balance to where it could adversely affect the deal and/or the taxpayer.

So I'm going to make a decision. You may make the decision otherwise, and I respect that. But I hope you would also recognize that my, or perhaps our, thoughts on this are not to simply counter a motion so much as to recognize and try to do what is best for the taxpayer.

I really believe that if we mess up this deal and/or the potential of this deal—because this deal is not a done deal.... This deal is only accepting proposals, and then the minister and staff and deputies are going to assess the information. They don't necessarily have to go ahead with this. As they've said, they're only entertaining proposals.

As this information comes forward—information that has to be collected with a fair bit of confidentiality, for competitive reasons—they're going to pass judgment. I'm satisfied that we've had enough information from the various witnesses here that there is a level of protection for the Canadian taxpayer and a level of expertise in place to guide the minister and/or the departmental officials, regardless of which party they are, to making a right decision.

Their duty is to not do something wrong for the Canadian taxpayer. There isn't one member or one minister here who's going to deliberately make a wrong decision and adversely affect the Canadian taxpayer. They would be held wholly and highly accountable for it if they made that wrong decision.

Quite frankly, I'm personally satisfied that there has been enough information given, not to give me a 100% level of surety and/or security, but that I'm inclined to let the process proceed. If I take a look at the other option I have, with this striking of a balance, and go the other way such that we stop the process basically in its tracks and the Canadian taxpayer loses out, then we have made the wrong decision. We're all going to have to come to terms with that decision.

I don't know whether I've adequately explained my position on this, but it is certainly not a partisan position, not a political decision, but a decision based on what we feel would be a good decision for the Canadian taxpayer in the long run.

Those are my thoughts on it.

• (1700)

The Chair: Madam Nash.

Ms. Peggy Nash: First of all, Madam Chair, I'd like to correct the record. Mr. Moore quoted me earlier, and I'd like to read the entire quote so that the record is clear.

My comment to Minister Fortier was:

I guess the concern is that we don't have the study that was used to justify the sale in terms of it being a good deal for Canadians. That's still an open question. Because it is such a long-term lease, I guess it's a fair question: is it in the interest of Canadians? We don't have disclosure of the contract with the banks. We don't know what their gain will be. We don't know who chose these two banks to handle this deal. And while you're talking about a fairness assessment, we don't yet have that. Which of these documents are we going to be able to get? Will we get the fairness assessment [...] ?

And it goes on. It's more questions.

So I want to correct the record. I do not believe this is a good deal for Canadians. No one who has only the limited information that this committee has been allowed to receive can make that assessment on this committee. I think that's the nub of the question. We don't know if it's a good deal for Canadians.

Not only do we not have the specifics of this particular transaction, as my quote says, we don't have the assessment done by the two banks that would even justify why the proposal for sale has gone forward. We don't even have an overall analysis of why, in principle, a sale and 25-year leaseback, with similar kinds of conditions, is a good proposal. We've not seen examples of other situations where—

An hon.member: Yes, we have.

Ms. Peggy Nash: —this has been a success with these specific conditions.

There are so many open questions here. I know I asked Minister Fortier—I have asked him—about confidential information. We have not been given that. Now others have spoken as to why. But there is not enough for us to say that after 25 years, if that is indeed the term of these leases, Canadians will judge that this has been a good deal.

Now, I appreciate there's never 100% certainty in life, but there's nothing that even says that going forward with this kind of deal in principle is good for Canadians.

Mr. James Moore: Every witness said that. Every single witness said that.

Ms. Peggy Nash: To me it seems fairly basic that the banks have done a study and that we should be able to get access to that study, and yet we don't have that information. I just feel we don't have enough to move forward on here. When we're talking about Canadian assets, so much money is on the line that we want to be sure we're trading carefully with the money of Canadian citizens.

The Chair: Madame Bourgeois.

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Madam Chair, this motion does not say that we are opposed to the sale of the nine buildings. However, without this motion, we would be giving the minister a blank cheque. It is not a matter of political colour or party. This is not partisanship. It is simply about giving proper respect to the members of this committee.

We do not know how the decision was made. We received a press release on March 5, 2007 where the minister said: The government should do what governments do, that is concentrate on its priorities, and ownership of its buildings is clearly not a priority for Canadians...

Can he prove that? What is the basis for this assertion? Has a study been conducted on this? Since March 5, we have been questioning the various departments, the deputy ministers. We asked questions of the minister. He had the nerve to come here and to waste our time. He did not answer any questions. In the motion we use the word “moratorium”. A moratorium implies that we stop everything until the minister deigns to provide us with a minimum of information on what he is up to.

I would remind you that the much vaunted federal Accountability Act is now in existence. We, around this table, have to account for the use of the property of Canadians. Even I, a member of the Bloc Québécois, have to be accountable to the voters in my riding. People talk about losing a good deal. I am not so sure. Nevertheless, the minister will have a choice. He will have to be responsible for whatever happens. If he decides to sell these buildings without giving us any information, I wash my hands of the whole business. It could just as well be a good deal as a bad one.

In terms of image, he will have to live with it. As of now, it does not look very good. Who is going to buy these buildings? The minister said he would use the proceeds of the sale to renovate other buildings. Furthermore, he announced that he would build more office space on the other side of the river, but he will not be the builder, it will be a public-private partnership. So the building will be done by the private sector. See how muddy this whole business is.

We have to be accountable and the government says it wants to be transparent. If you are so transparent, you will vote for this motion.

This is why, Madam Chair, I call for the vote immediately. Right now!

• (1705)

The Chair: The debate continues.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: No, I call for the vote immediately, Madam Chair.

Mr. Raymond Bonin: Point of order.

[English]

The mover has the first word and the last word. And the mover just had the last word.

An hon. member: I want to debate as well.

[Translation]

The Chair: I must let the debate continue. The rules have changed quite a bit.

[English]

Mr. Raymond Bonin: Madam Chair, there are members who want to speak for the third time on this issue. At least we should ask new members to speak. This is only a recommendation to the House. It's not changing everything.

The Chair: Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Thank you.

I want to get to the end of this as well. I'm wondering if we can't together do something constructive here. What I'm wondering is if we can make some amendments to this motion that we can all maybe

live with. The way I would propose this is we would change the reading to:

That because this committee is not yet convinced of the benefits of leaseback for taxpayers, the committee ask the Department of Public Works and Government Services to provide the committee with additional relevant studies and information on the impact of these leasebacks.

The thing is, we take out the moratorium and we ask for more information. We aren't yet passing judgment, but we'll continue on the investigation with the hopes of getting additional information. The problem with saying that we're going to pass and push forward with the moratorium is this. If tomorrow certain members get additional information, they may be convinced, but they've already said there should be a moratorium. I think this is a positive alternative.

The Chair: Could you read your amendment?

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Yes, I hope to do it the same way again. It is:

That because the committee is not yet convinced of the benefit of leaseback for the taxpayer, the committee asks that the Department of Public Works and Government Services provide the committee with additional relevant studies and information on the impact of these leasebacks.

I've put in “yet” in the first sentence after “not”. Then after “taxpayer” I scratched out “the government place a moratorium on the sale of the proposed buildings so that the”. Then I interject instead:

the committee asks that the Department of Public Works and Government Services provide the committee with additional relevant studies and information on the impact of these leasebacks.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you.

On the amendment, Mr. Turner.

Hon. Garth Turner: I thank my friend for an attempt to have a constructive compromise. However, I think the fact remains that because the process is now fully engaged and that I think it's June 12.... But the point is, if we say, gee, we'd like some more information to aid and assist in our study to arrive at a conclusion, the horse will have been long gone out of the barn by that time.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: The third party still has to come forward with their recommendation. There's a lengthy process, Mr. Turner.

Hon. Garth Turner: In a real-world sense, we may be out of this place later this week, and it may be awhile before we actually get back to looking at some of this information. It could be three or four months from now, for all we know, in which case this process is going to be essentially completed. Therefore, it's a moot point. We should have gotten to this point two months ago when we started looking at this.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Bingo!

Hon. Garth Turner: Instead of you guys sitting there and saying, “It's confidential; we can't breach this. No one can talk to you about it. We can't provide any numbers.”

Now we get to a point where it's the eleventh hour. What other levers do we have at this point? I think the amendment is not a realistic one at all.

The Chair: Mr. Warkentin, on the amendment.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I would just like to say that we should get to the vote on the amendment, and probably everything. In terms of the committee not sitting, I think my understanding is if we want to sit even after the House rises, we have the opportunity to do that. Am I correct in that, if I can just ask the clerk?

If we decide that even after the House rises we want to sit as a committee, are we able to do that? Is that your understanding? Okay.

The Chair: If the House is prorogued, we could not.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Right, but if it just rises, and I suspect that's what we'd be looking at.... So I guess that's the only point.

I think we still have an opportunity for some discussions, and I don't have an agenda here, other than to simply say that it's inappropriate or we compromise something by saying that there should be a moratorium. If we can get around this and be constructive as a committee, rather than destructive, I think we should be responsible in that respect too. Remember that there's a possibility of millions of dollars going up in smoke if we mishandle this in terms of the sale of this, as the bids are coming forward.

The Chair: Are we ready for the vote on the amendment?

Madame Bourgeois.

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: No. I simply want to be sure I understand correctly. What bothers you with my motion is the word "moratorium", which implies that we stop everything, while we wait for the information. That irks you. Am I right?

[English]

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Yes, that is the issue. Because we're right in the process of still collecting the bids, I think we compromise the bidding process. Bids may not come forward if people feel this thing is going to be derailed. So the effort wouldn't be for private individuals. If indeed this does continue, even with our doing this, whatever we're going to do, calling the government to do this, we may jeopardize some of the bids that may be coming in over the next number of days.

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: In your amendment, you are proposing to provide the information we wish to have, correct?

[English]

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I'm proposing that we continue to ask for the information.

Now I don't want for a moment to tell you that I think the minister is going to divulge everything. I think there are confidentiality issues. But even in the discussions I've had with some of my colleagues who want to vote in favour of this, there are questions that haven't been answered. I think they are questions that could be answered because they are questions that I seem to have settled in my mind.

• (1715)

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Are you proposing that we ourselves ask for this information?

Forgive me, but I want to understand fully what we are talking about. What are you proposing in three or four words? Might I be told?

[English]

Mr. Chris Warkentin: That we request the—

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: It is a matter of demanding information.

[English]

Mr. Chris Warkentin: —additional information that individuals have requested. I don't believe there's one simple question that people have.

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: What do you mean by "additional information"?

I will not vote in favour of your subamendment if I do not have the assurance of obtaining the information I wish to have.

Mr. James Moore: What information?

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Four times now, people have appeared before us. In two of these cases, it was the minister. The deputy ministers have, they too, appeared. We have asked the same bloody question to these people. What are the percentages? What is the result? What direction are you taking? We have never been given answers.

The purpose of the moratorium is to ensure that the minister finally grants us this information. Are you telling us that if we do not enforce this moratorium, he will do as he pleases this summer and we will be short-circuited?

Mr. James Moore: I am not putting into doubt your sincerity, but it is constantly a matter of information and numbers. It is important to be very precise and to put to paper specific questions. Some questions will remain unanswered and others will be the object of confidentiality agreements, which we will have to abide by.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Could we not suspend the work of the committee? We could write down all of the questions that we wish to put to the minister and for which we want to obtain answers. Thursday, we could resume our discussion.

If we do not receive answers to our questions, we move on to the motion. Could we proceed in this fashion? Does that suit you? To my mind, this is an advantageous offer.

The Chair: There is the amendment.

[English]

We have the amendment before us. Do you want us to deal with the amendment?

Some hon. members: *Oui.*

An hon. member: We have to.

(Amendment negatived)

The Chair: We're back to the main motion.

Mr. Simard.

Hon. Raymond Simard: Are we still debating?

The Chair: It's up to you.

Hon. Raymond Simard: I guess my concern is this. We keep talking about this confidentiality agreement, but not everything is linked to that. I agree with you that the minister came to us and said there are some issues that are very touchy. We understand that. At the same time there has to be enough information for us to be able to do our jobs.

The minister could have told us why they selected these nine buildings for sale. Why was it appropriate? He refused to answer.

The Chair: We're on debate.

Hon. Raymond Simard: Exactly.

We didn't get the information we were requesting. You can use the argument of confidentiality to a certain extent. At the same time we have to have balance. I think Madame Bourgeois hit it right on the head when she said that we also have responsibility, as members of Parliament, to make informed decisions.

He was telling us basically, "Take my word for it. We're a bunch of private sector people on cabinet and we'll make the right decisions. We'll come back to you with information later on." He said, "We'll give you all the information once the decision is done." Well, I'm sorry, we're ultimately responsible. Once the decision is done and the deal has gone through, if it's a bad deal—it may not be—who are they going to come back on? They're going to come back on the committee that was responsible for oversight of this deal.

If you have five or six or seven members of the committee who are still not satisfied with the information we've received, it seems to me that everybody on the committee should be concerned.

Does that make sense?

The Chair: Mr. Albrecht.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Madam Chair, I want to correct a couple of statements that were made earlier, that no other government...and that he couldn't give us any other examples of positive outcomes of this. Certainly, he did. Many national governments—the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, provinces—have done this, and they have excellent reporting on it. Also, Professor McKellar said that most governments do not do a good job of managing their buildings. We have all kinds of independent information there.

I think if anybody should know that we can't divulge all the information that Mr. Turner would like, it should be Mr. Turner. They're in negotiations. If we divulge this information, it jeopardizes the entire sale.

I don't understand why we're debating this. In the interest of Canadian taxpayers, it's time to move on.

• (1720)

The Chair: Mr. Moore.

Mr. James Moore: I want to make a short comment in response to Mr. Bonin—also my third—and then I'm glad to go back to Madame Bourgeois for her final arguments. And then we can call the question.

I wanted to respond to Mr. Bonin when he said this is just a motion that doesn't really matter and it's not that big a deal. As I said, I think in the second intervention, we are still—

Mr. Raymond Bonin: I said this is only a recommendation.

Mr. James Moore: Correct. Yes, it is only a recommendation to the House, but it comes with the imprimatur of a standing committee of Parliament, the majority of whose members....

Now, as I said, we are still in negotiation. We're still receiving bids on nine government buildings. Words matter, votes matter, motions matter. They do have consequences. This is a minority Parliament. Polls go up, polls go down. We have a budget vote tonight. Who knows how long Parliament sits? Who knows who's going to win the next election? These things change dramatically.

It is I think inconceivable to successfully argue that having a vote of a standing committee of Parliament to say that this is not in the best interests of Parliament, that we should cease.... You really don't think that will have a chilling effect on the quality of bids that will come to government for these nine buildings? Of course it will.

The idea that the majority of this committee would suggest we're going to cease this, that it's a bad idea, that we're going to stop doing this because we don't have enough information at the very moment when we're receiving bids...you don't think that's going to have a chilling consequence? I think that's a huge mistake.

Hon. Garth Turner: You can change it.

Mr. James Moore: I think that's a profound misunderstanding.

The Chair: Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Madam Chair, I want to ask if there is some mechanism we can go to, even further than in camera. Obviously, in camera doesn't work. Is there some kind of personal guarantee that everyone can sign? Obviously we know that the confidentiality of the last meeting was breached. Is there some mechanism that these people can be...?

Madam Chair, or can I just ask the clerk, are we allowed to divulge what happens in camera to other members of Parliament?

The Chair: To the clerk.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: To the clerk.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Bibiane Ouellette): No, absolutely not. But the member does have the right to see the blues. One copy is locked in my office.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Could you assure us that Mr. Turner was in your office reading the blues?

Hon. Garth Turner: That's none of your business. It's none of your business what—

Mr. Chris Warkentin: No, it is, because the argument has been made.

I think this goes to the heart of it, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Ask the member yourself.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Could I do that? Would that be appropriate?

Mr. Turner, did you read the blues of that meeting? Did you go to the clerk's office, and is that where you were briefed?

Hon. Garth Turner: None of your business.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: The only reason I believe this cuts to the heart of the matter is that the other side is claiming confidentiality will be assured. Apparently, there was some type of breach even in the last meeting, so how could we have some even more sensitive information come in front of this committee and then not go outside this committee meeting?

I think there was an admission here that he was briefed by somebody, and obviously the confidentiality was breached at the last meeting.

The Chair: Madam Nash, then Mr. Bonin.

Ms. Peggy Nash: I just want to make the point that this is a huge real estate deal that's being proposed. There have been comments made about the size of this, the scale of this. It's really quite massive. And it is a significant departure from what the government has done in the past.

I want to say clearly that I don't think it's up to us to accommodate this. I think it's up to the government to make the case for why this is a good deal. And to say that somehow we are sworn to some locked-down, ironclad secrecy on something where the government, frankly, has not made the case.... Could they make the case? I haven't made a final decision on this, but so far I think it's frankly been insulting to the members of this committee that there hasn't been an effort to be more specific about the positive outcome of this kind of sale.

I want to say first of all that I think the onus is on the government to make the case. Studies are floating around that we have not been privy to that are not specifically part of this deal, that are making the case, that are giving the rationale. There is the study of the banks, for example, that we have never had access to.

• (1725)

Mr. James Moore: Because of the law. You cannot access it because of the confidentiality agreement.

Ms. Peggy Nash: The confidentiality agreement of the two banks that did a study and advised the government that it was a good deal to sell these buildings?

Mr. James Moore: Yes. That's been explained ten times, Peggy.

Ms. Peggy Nash: To me, it's basically close your eyes and jump off the bridge; take a leap of faith and trust us that everything's going to be okay.

Well, frankly, I don't think that case has been made, and that's the nub of this debate. It's not whether people can be sworn ironclad to secrecy. We're talking about a lot of money. These are assets that belong to the Canadian people. If they're going to be sold off to the private sector, it might be a very good deal for the private sector, but we've not been assured that it's a good deal for Canadians.

That's the case you folks have yet to make.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Bonin.

[*English*]

Mr. Raymond Bonin: Madam Chair, the concern my colleagues have is legitimate. The concern the supporters of this motion have is certainly legitimate.

I'm not moving an amendment, but I will suggest a friendly amendment. It will not please the government, but I think it will solve the problem. If it's not acceptable, I suggest we vote and live with it, and let the House deal with it.

So I suggest we start with, "That because the committee is not satisfied that it was provided appropriate information of the benefit of leasebacks for the taxpayer", and so on from there. Because that is our concern, that we didn't get any documents. We asked for documents and we didn't get them.

The process that has started already will continue. It's evident that our concern is that we did not get the information we want in order to make such a decision. It's not everything the government wants and not everything you want—

Mr. James Moore: If I may, Monsieur Bonin is not far from where Madame Bourgeois was maybe 10 minutes ago. We always say "information" and so on, using very vague terms here. If committee members are looking for precise questions and precise information, that's fine, but information to ease Ms. Nash's mind may be something very different from what would ease another's mind, or Mr. Turner's mind. And that's fine. Frankly, we're almost debating here entirely out of vacuous understanding of what it is we're dealing with here.

If committee members want to put together a list, as Madame Bourgeois just suggested, of very precise questions—about commissions, about timelines, about dates, about when RFPs are going to be going forward, and so on—then put together a list of very precise questions. If this committee is actually suggesting that the federal government should put a cease on what we are already in the process of doing, then I think that is a political statement rather than an information-searching decision about whether or not this is, as Ray Simard said, in the best interests of taxpayers.

So if committee members want to get a very specific list of questions, then let's do that.

The Chair: Do we have a motion on the floor?

Mr. Raymond Bonin: No, we have a suggestion for a friendly amendment. That is legitimate.

The problem with that, Mr. Moore, is that you may get what you ask for—i.e., we will ask for a list of information and documents and still vote for the motion. If I were in your chair, I would at least want to draw attention to the fact that we don't have enough information to make a decision.

Mr. James Moore: We are a minority in this committee. The opposition will do what it wants to do. But if this is a sincere effort to get information, and you're not satisfied with the deputy minister being here three times, the minister being here three times, and the head of real property being here four times, and you're not satisfied with our verbal presentations to the committee and you'd rather have it written—

Mr. Raymond Bonin: Madam Chair, if you're not satisfied with my suggestion for a friendly amendment, we can just go back to the main motion.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: I would ask that you repeat it.

• (1730)

Mr. Raymond Bonin: I do not have the text in French. I will read it in English.

[*English*]

“That because the committee is not satisfied that it was provided appropriate information of the benefits”—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: No, it is completely different.

Mr. Raymond Bonin: Would you please listen, for a moment?

[*English*]

It starts, “That because the committee is not satisfied that it was provided appropriate information of the benefits of leasebacks for the taxpayer”, and the rest stays the same.

It draws attention to our concern, which is that we don't have enough information to make that decision. We're recommending to the House that this is going on, we're concerned about it, and you'd better deal with it. And the House deals with it; we only recommend here.

So you have that amendment or we go back to the main motion.

The Chair: Mr. Warkentin.

We have an amendment on the floor. Basically the amendment—if I'm correct—

Mr. Chris Warkentin: It just clarifies why you're not convinced.

The Chair: —says that because the committee is not satisfied the information was adequate...and that the government place a moratorium on the sale, and so on.

Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Obviously I'm not in favour of that amendment, because it still says the same thing.

Some hon. members: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Folks, folks....

The Chair: Ladies and gentlemen, we have a speaker.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I think it's important or incumbent on you if you're not convinced as of yet, for some reason or some unspecified information, to mention what information is not provided. I'll tell or guarantee you we already have—

The Chair: Do we have unanimous consent to continue debate? We can continue if we get unanimous consent.

Is there a motion to adjourn?

An hon. member: I so move.

The Chair: The motion carried, as nobody voted against it.

Okay, who's against adjourning? For and against.

We can't stay on. I don't know how.... There's a new—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Madam Chair, when will we be resuming this discussion?

The Chair: We could resume it Thursday afternoon.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: In the meantime, we will prepare questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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

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

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