



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

OGGO • NUMBER 002 • 2nd SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Monday, November 19, 2007

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Chair

The Honourable Diane Marleau

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Diane Marleau (Sudbury, Lib.)): I'll call the meeting to order, even though there are no members of the official opposition here except for me.

Welcome, Mrs. Barrados.

[Translation]

I know that you like to appear before this committee and I see that you have done a great deal of work. You know how it works: you have the floor for 7, 8 or 10 minutes and then, we can put questions to you. Please begin your presentation.

Ms. Maria Barrados (President, Public Service Commission of Canada): Thank you.

Good afternoon, Honourable Members.

I am here to discuss the 2006-2007 Annual Report of the Public Service Commission and four audits that were tabled last week in Parliament, as well as two statistical studies that were also released at the same time.

I have with me today, Linda Gobeil, Senior Vice-President, Policy; Mary Clennett, Vice-President, Audit, Evaluation and Studies; and Donald Lemaire, Vice-President, Staffing and Assessment Services.

This was the first full year of operation under the modernized Public Service Employment Act. We have had an active year at the commission. While the public service workforce grew by only 1.7%, staffing activity increased by 11%, involving more than 110,000 staffing actions. Included is permanent hiring into the public service, which grew by more than 50%, from 5,090 appointments in 2005-2006 to 7,720 in 2006-2007.

We received more than one million applications in response to almost 5,700 advertisements on the commission's jobs website. There is certainly no shortage of interest in public service jobs, but we do know at the same time that there are specific areas where there are shortages.

Overall, we continue to have confidence in the strength of the staffing system. And we feel that departments and agencies have made progress in implementing new approaches to staffing. Most organizations—88%—have developed human resources plans that cover a good portion of their workforce, but they need to strengthen the link between their human resources plans and staffing actions.

We continue to have concerns about weaknesses in supporting the modernization effort. Departments and agencies must continue to strengthen human resources planning. The capacity of the human resources community and the need for better information to support planning and accountability continue to be areas that must be improved.

[English]

Let me now turn to two areas of particular concern that are in the annual report.

We are preoccupied with a pattern of recruitment that is being done through the temporary workforce. This is not new, but the size of this type of recruitment is of concern.

Over an eight-year period, more than 80% of the 86,000 new indeterminate employees hired for the permanent workforce had prior public service experience—75% either as casual or term employees. We are concerned there is a heavy reliance on building a permanent workforce through hiring of temporary workers. Hiring for short-term needs is not the best way to meet long-term requirements, and it is not a good way to attract qualified people who already hold permanent jobs. It will be important for departments and agencies to improve their human resource planning and how they hire their permanent workers.

We also continue to be concerned about employment equity, specifically the decline in the rate of hiring visible minorities. While overall recruitment rose by 9.5%, the recruitment for visible minorities dropped from 9.8% to 8.7%. We continue to do work in this area to better understand what is behind this phenomenon where we have observed large numbers of visible minority applicants without a corresponding number of hires.

The Public Service Commission, as part of its mandate, continues to be vigilant in maintaining an impartial public service. There is a requirement that public servants come to the commission to obtain permission before seeking elected office. Ninety-five public servants requested permission to be a candidate in a federal, provincial, or municipal election. Of these requests, 70 were for municipal elections. This is a new provision. Not all public servants were aware of this requirement, and one-third of these requests did not meet our requirement for timely application.

●(1535)

[Translation]

Now, let me turn to our oversight role: we conducted four audits in 2006-2007, three of them on small entities.

The findings of our audits on the NAFTA Secretariat—Canadian Section, and of the Canadian Forces Grievance Board were satisfactory.

However, in the third, an audit of the Office of the Correctional Investigator, we found staffing patterns that compromised the values of fairness, transparency and access. Nine out of 10 appointments were not compliant with the delegation agreement and, as a result, we have placed them under increased supervision.

[English]

In an additional audit, we looked at the pattern of movement of public servants to positions on ministerial staff and back into the public service. We examined the years 1990 to 2006. About 157 public servants made these transitions. We examined the nature, duration, and type of work and we retained 58 for further examination.

Of those 58, we found 24 staffing actions dealing with 20 individuals that raised questions. In 15 of these staffing actions relating to 13 individuals, we found a misuse of the staffing system. Special efforts were made to move people into positions in which they had no reasonable intention of staying. This was done to facilitate the movement of the individuals concerned and to ensure they had an easy route back into the public service.

These types of actions create the appearance of a lack of political impartiality and are not in accordance with the values of transparency and non-partisanship. We have concluded there is a vacuum in the policy framework and we have made a recommendation to the employer, Treasury Board, to fill the policy gap and to better monitor this kind of movement.

Treasury Board Secretariat should develop and recommend to Treasury Board a clear policy statement and guidelines based on the principles of transparency and political impartiality to ensure effective compliance and monitoring. We had hoped for a clear commitment on a timely policy statement.

I would now like to update you on the national area of selection policy, the policy that sets who can apply for public service jobs based on where they live. The commission is committed to implementing national area of selection for external recruitment. We have continued to expand access to public service jobs. We have gone from making one in five public service jobs available to Canadians in 2006 to making more than half of them open to the public in 2007. In 2008, we would expand the national area of selection to cover all full-time federal student work experience jobs. We will be launching pilot projects in December to assess the impact of extending the national area of selection to all non-officer jobs.

We have slowed full implementation to ensure we have the human resource support and tools in place to handle the anticipated large volume of applications that will be generated by this expansion. We now expect full implementation by December 2008.

I have one last comment. We have been working hard to implement the provisions of the Public Service Employment Act. We have dedicated a great deal of effort to building up our audit and oversight capacity. We have also invested heavily in modernizing and transforming our services. Under the Public Service Employment Act, we were directed to take on new activities; in addition, our services have continued to grow.

Given our current level of resources, we have now reached a point where we cannot continue to provide all our statutory activities and support the system as required. We have to find alternative funding mechanisms, particularly because the demand for our support and services has continued well beyond what was expected in the delegated regime.

Discussions are currently underway with Treasury Board Secretariat as to how we can meet these funding requirements. We are looking at options to increase our capacity to recover costs from departments and agencies. The government has made public service renewal a priority. The Public Service Employment Act is a key enabler of the government's renewal agenda.

We are continuing to work with deputy heads, their managers, and the human resource community to ensure effective modernization of staffing and recruitment in the Government of Canada.

●(1540)

[Translation]

Finally, in 2008, the Public Service Commission will soon be celebrating its 100th anniversary. In 1908, Parliament expressed its will by creating a Civil Service Commission and since then, the commission has acted on behalf of Parliament to safeguard the integrity of staffing in the public service and the political impartiality of public servants.

Thank you for your attention, and I am happy to take your questions.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much. I'm going to start by thanking you for the work you've done on expanding the national area of selection. As you know, it's something that's near and dear to my heart and near and dear to the hearts of many MPs, especially those of us who come from the regions of the country, because we feel that our people should have access to those jobs as well. So I thank you in advance, because I know you're going to finish the job. And if you don't, I'll come after you.

Thank you.

I'm going to go now to Mr. Silva for seven minutes.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank you for your presentation here before this committee.

I found the point you made towards the end—that if the government is so committed to this public service renewal, why is it not providing the adequate resources to make sure that you can in fact do your job—a bit concerning. Of great concern is the fact that on one hand we know the importance of your job and the importance of the renewal, yet if the resources are not there, there really isn't much of a commitment to that renewal.

Ms. Maria Barrados: When the new legislation came in, as I was appointed the head of the Public Service Commission, I was asked if I had enough money. At that time, I said that I felt the resources were adequate for where we were. We went through a process of reallocation, economizing, and smart-sizing everything we were doing, before we felt we could make a conclusion as to where we were on the financial situation. I have concluded now that we need more money. We are having very productive discussions with the Treasury Board. We are putting forward a cost-recovery option, so we're not asking for an increase in the appropriation, but we're asking to recover our costs from departments for the services that we're providing. These have been very good conversations, but I feel it's an obligation for me, given the status of the Public Service Commission, to put these issues forward to members of Parliament, because if they are not fruitful conversations, I will have to come back.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you.

You've outlined quite well, I think, some of the challenges with the new Public Service Employment Act that's come in. But what constraints do you see as problematic for the agencies and the departments that have been assigned the task of implementing the Public Service Employment Act? What is not allowing them to fulfill some of the mandates under the act?

Ms. Maria Barrados: This is a big change. We've gone from a system of, at various times, trying to get managers more involved, but we really now are in a fully devolved system of staffing in which we expect the managers to take the responsibility for taking on the decisions about the kinds of people they need and hiring those people into their organization. This is the objective of the legislation, and it is the objective of the Clerk of the Privy Council, who is heading the renewal initiative. We are only one full year into this. It is a major change. My major preoccupation, frankly, is that we won't stick with it, and that we don't start some other kinds of initiatives and lose sight of making sure that we get the infrastructure in place to see this thing through.

One thing I've observed, which shows how important it is to stick with doing some of this infrastructure work, is that we've started the planning, so this is very good. But now we need to turn those plans to actually drive strategies. That is the next important step. But remember now, that's after the first full year.

We have serious problems with the HR community's capacity to support managers in the way required. We have to do a lot more work to get the data and the tools there to measure progress so we know exactly where we are, and so that managers have the tools they need to be able to do their work.

• (1545)

Mr. Mario Silva: So do you feel then that by next year at this time you'll be in a better position to inform the committee? We've

gone through year one, so by year two will there be a better measurement to assess how progress has taken place with the new act?

Ms. Maria Barrados: When you read the change management literature—and there are many experts on change management—they all say that you really should give something four to five years before you see a significant change. My expectation is that we see change every year. We are doing a lot of work at the commission and doing the statistical work, so you see a lot of numbers in my reports. The idea behind this is to set the benchmarks so that we'll be able to state with more confidence the size of the improvement or where more improvement needs to be made. I expect more improvement every year, and my worry is that we will lose focus and move on to something else without getting the basics in place.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Lussier.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marcel Lussier (Brossard—La Prairie, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Barrados, you were acting president and now you are president on a permanent basis. Is there any limit set on the length of your mandate?

Ms. Maria Barrados: I have a seven-year mandate.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: I see.

In your document, you mentioned visible minorities. You mentioned applications for jobs by people from visible minorities. Have you any statistics regarding the percentage of jobs currently occupied by visible minorities in the public service?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Yes, about 8.7% of positions are held by people from visible minorities. However, the proportion of available persons within the labour force is 10.4%. It is really surprising to note that nearly a quarter of all applications come from persons from visible minorities. These people are showing a great interest in the public service.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: Thus, among a million applications, 25% come from visible minorities.

Is it your objective to reach 10%?

Ms. Maria Barrados: The public service has set some targets, for instance, one position out of five for those entering into the public service and for management positions. However, I am not expecting a great deal from these targets. I do not know whether it is currently being enforced. Currently, we see that there is a gap between these groups and their representation in the labour force.

• (1550)

Mr. Marcel Lussier: Is there any relation with the national area of selection? There are many more visible minorities in areas like Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. Has the target been adjusted to take these large cities into account?

Ms. Maria Barrados: I am not sure, given that a quarter of all applications are already made by persons from visible minorities. Many of those who hold permanent positions in the public service have come through temporary positions. I think that the way in which people enter into the public service is a more significant factor.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: You did an audit of the NAFTA Secretariat. How many people work for that organization? About 1,000?

Ms. Maria Barrados: It is a very small entity. It only has 10 or 12 people.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: How many?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Twelve persons.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: Only 12 persons? Why did you target this group?

Ms. Maria Barrados: We did the audit because we noticed some problems with this small entity. We set some conditions for them regarding delegation. According to our procedure, if any conditions are set before changing back to normal delegations, we do an audit. The audit is held to make sure that there are no further problems.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: Did you also do an audit of the Office of the Correctional Investigator?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Yes.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: You said that 9 out of 10 appointments were not compliant with the delegation agreement. Did you find any other problems with the Office of the Correctional Investigator?

Ms. Maria Barrados: The Auditor General previously carried out an audit, and we did our audit because the Auditor General had done an audit. We are responsible only for staffing and recruiting. These are the only matters that we deal with.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: So you have no spending authority?

Ms. Maria Barrados: No, this falls under the Auditor General's Office.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: I think that you can see me coming.

If my colleague has any questions, I will share my time with him.

Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ): Let me continue.

You spoke about staffing; let me quote what you said:

However, in the third audit, an audit of the Office of the Correctional Investigator, we found staffing patterns that compromised the values of fairness, transparency and access.

Could you tell me more about this?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Pursuant to the legislation, we have policies and regulations. Audits are meant to determine whether every staffing action is compliant with the process provided by the policy and whether it is compliant with values and regulations. We also check that there is a framework for the staffing process and whether the framework is respected, in other words, whether they are complying with their own planning, their own policies, and we look at their relations with the people in charge of training, people who are aware of their responsibilities.

Regarding the Correctional Investigator, we concluded that they made some progress since the Auditor General's audit, by setting up a framework and a better policy. However, there are still some

problems with staffing. This case really provides an example of the problems which arise when people are hired although they have no experience in the kind of work concerned, and when these people are given the opportunity to get training by assigning them to temporary positions and by following through with a permanent staffing process that requires experience in the field.

We have a problem with that. It is contrary to principles of accessibility and fairness for all those who apply for such positions and who expect that their application will be considered.

• (1555)

The Chair: Mr. Vincent, we will come back to this later. Then you will be able to put further questions about this matter, if you wish.

Mr. Kramp.

[*English*]

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

Let me do something a little unusual. A lot of times when we have witnesses before our committee we find fault and make recommendations as to how you do this and that, on everything from transparency to accountability. But, Madam Barrados, let me give you and your staff, all the way through the system, a total thumbs-up. And I say that with great sincerity.

In all our deliberations there have been challenges, and for the most part you've acted very, very strongly on these. You've acted in a proactive and accountable manner, on everything from the phantom positions to temporary staffing issues, the problems identified as correctional and others, the language evaluation, employment equity, which you've demonstrated is still a challenge—and I expect my colleagues will go to that if I don't have a chance, to see what your recommendations are for the future—to the pay and benefits officers, which we recognize still present a bit of a problem. Overall you've made remarkable progress.

I hope I speak for most of my colleagues when I say it's rare that a department has such a handle on both problems and solutions. On behalf of my colleagues, thank you for the work you have done on this. It's refreshing to see that we have such a significant portion of government that appears to be not only in good hands, but is running fairly smoothly—as smoothly as can be with all the hiccups and burps you would expect to have.

I have a small question before I hand it over to my colleague. I notice on the staffing services volumes page that you have internally advertised, externally advertised, and non-advertised positions for your executive staffing. I'm curious as to what you use for criteria to decide the category. In other words, why would it only be advertised internally, and why would it be advertised externally? Could you give us some parameters on that so we have a bit more transparency?

Ms. Maria Barrados: First off, thank you very much for your comments about the work of the commission. It really is only possible because I have a great team. They have gone through an enormous amount of change, and they are working very hard to move on new directions. I must say I'm encouraged by the kind of support we're getting from the deputies and the departments, even though they sometimes don't like to hear my little lectures. But we are working and making progress, so thank you for those comments.

On the question about the internal, external, and non-advertised positions, you will note that the years are on top. This chart reflects a very big change that occurred with the new legislation. The first two columns are entirely the old act, the third column is partially the old act and partially the new act, and the last column is entirely the new act. Under the old act you had to do everything internal before you could go external. You had to come to the commission before you could go outside. That was the law. That was dropped, so you see the external advertising shows quite a rise. The last column has a bigger number in it. That was a legislative change. It was a parliamentary decision that you go outside if you want, or you do it inside, but it wasn't a requirement.

The decision as to whether you look for a position—and these are all executives—inside the government or outside is entirely the hiring manager's. I think that's appropriate. It should be the hiring manager who decides. The hiring manager has to make that determination based on their needs and what they think the availability is.

In terms of the non-advertised positions, if you refer to the last column, under the old act this was very much controlled. Under this new act, non-advertised positions are allowed. The commission doesn't encourage them, because I think it violates transparency, but there are cases where it makes sense. These numbers reflect the work that comes to the commission. It's optional. You don't have to come to the commission.

With the past two columns, you had to come to the commission. Now you don't. If you're doing non-advertised positions, why would you come to the commission? There's not much we can do to help, except to discourage you from doing it.

•(1600)

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Thank you.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

I just noticed in the first page of your comments, you outline the fact that it's the first full year and you've also highlighted that as you explained these columns to us. Are you fairly confident after one year that we're on the right path in terms of implementing this?

Then possibly second to that, what are some further actions you envision in the next couple of years?

Ms. Maria Barrados: So far I would say I think we are on the right path. I worry about losing momentum. That is part of one of my jobs, to make sure that people don't lose momentum. There has been a tendency to talk about renewal instead of talking about public service modernization implementation. These are very consistent;

you can't do renewal without public service modernization, but I'm not sure people always realize that. That is a concern of mine.

We have found going in that some things in the legislation don't work quite as well for us as we had thought, so we are trying to make some of those adjustments to the extent we can within the powers we have. If we have some things we really can't do within our powers, we would have to come back to Parliament before the five-year review or at the time of the five-year review, but a few things in there we're thinking haven't really helped the way we would like.

I think we're doing pretty well as long as we don't lose momentum, as I say, which I think is our main job. Big challenges, though, really are that we make sure the human resource community has the capacity to give the managers their support. Managers in the government, particularly the ones we call middle managers—and they tend to be more out in the regions—have a lot of responsibility, and for many of them it's another set of responsibilities, wondering if they are going to be given more to do, yet we all know if they can get the right people around them, if they can get a good team, they can do so much more.

It's so important, but they have to be supported. We have to work on that HR community to make sure they have the capacity, the tools, and the knowledge to provide the support to the managers to do the work.

On the system side, I worry, because I think overall, if I could put it in a rough way, we haven't paid that much attention to the back room. We've done a lot of worrying about the front room, but for the back room systems, I think we have to make sure we get those things in place.

The Chair: We'll come back.

Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for this excellent report. My first question, because I'm new on this committee, is are you establishing baseline data with this report that will be used in future years, or do we have baseline data that you could compare it to so we have a sense of whether we're making progress in these various areas?

Ms. Maria Barrados: That's very much what we're trying to do. The other thing we're trying to do, and Mary Clennett may want to talk a little bit about it, is we have undertaken an international benchmarking study, because it's not only for us to see how we're doing over time, but it's also an effort to see how we're doing vis-à-vis others.

Mary, did you have anything you wanted to add to that?

Ms. Mary Clennett (Vice-President, Audit, Evaluation and Studies Branch, Public Service Commission of Canada): Yes.

We haven't really progressed very much on the benchmarking study, but what we want to look at is other countries that won't be set up exactly like the Public Service Commission but have a similar way of staffing in their governments. Then we want to look at them and we will also consider looking at the private sector as well to establish those benchmarks.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

You certainly identified a number of the common red flags that would come up if we were at least thinking of a review. The one I'm interested in is the whole movement of public service employees to political staff and then back again. You point out that you looked at 157 cases where this happened and 24 raised questions and 15 you felt were "...a misuse of the staffing system. Special efforts were made to move people into positions in which they had no reasonable intention of staying. This was done to facilitate the movement of the individuals concerned and to ensure they had an easy route back into the public service".

This is a serious issue for anybody wanting to make sure that our public service isn't tainted with partisanship in any way. Can you tell us in what departments that happened?

• (1605)

Ms. Maria Barrados: We actually put a list of the departments in the report. They're actually spread all over the government. It's a long list of the departments. Do you want me to read them or do you want me to just give them to you?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Were there a few highlighted more than others?

Ms. Maria Barrados: No, this was spread pretty well across.

Mr. Charlie Angus: So it was a general pattern.

Ms. Maria Barrados: Yes.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay, because when we were talking about the Office of the Correctional Investigator, you found staffing patterns that compromised the values of fairness, transparency, and access, and that nine out of ten appointments were not compliant with the delegation agreement and as a result had to be placed under increased supervision.

I notice that the Auditor General looked at that same department before you took on the role and found serious problems in that department. Are you telling us there has been no real progress in there and we still need someone to go in there and hold their hands?

Ms. Maria Barrados: The Auditor General has a different mandate from what we do. The Auditor General went in and did a broad-based audit on management, with a focus on financial management, and made some observations about questionable staffing activities up to 2004. We were just going through the transition of going to the new act and redoing delegations. Since the Auditor General had raised a question about staffing, we then decided that it was important for us to go and see whether we had appropriately delegated. We had done a first analysis and asked, "Are the conditions in place to delegate?" We thought they were. We wanted to make sure that this was a correct judgment, based on the Auditor General's audit.

Our conclusion was that they had made a number of significant improvements but there were still problems. So we imposed a

condition on the delegation, but a lower-level condition, which requires them to report more frequently to us so we can make sure they get the staffing on the right track. As we could see, they had a number of the elements in place, but they weren't actually getting the decisions right. So we're now asking that they come and report back more frequently so we can make sure their follow-up actions are correct.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I guess the question I'd have, though, is if nine out of ten appointments were not compliant, and you found problems that compromised values of fairness, transparency, and access, wouldn't you feel there would be a need for more immediate remedial action to be taken with that office?

Ms. Maria Barrados: What we do—and there are some cases where we have actually removed the delegations and people aren't allowed to do any of their staffing—is we look to see if they have the policy framework in place. The answer was yes. Do they have plans in place? The answer was yes, they did now have plans in place. Do they have a service provider and are they clear on the relationship with the service provider? They were not, but they have that now in place. Then we looked at the specific transactions and we were not happy with those transactions. They agree there are problems; they've committed to correcting them. Now we're going to watch to make sure they're following through on their commitments.

Mary, do you want to add to that?

Ms. Mary Clennett: Maybe I could just add that when the Auditor General did their audit, they found problems with the service provider. We subsequently found that the service provider had improved the quality of their service, and that was a key part for us as well. It wasn't just having a good framework. They also had a service provider who was now challenging them on the way they were doing things.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Silva.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have a question for the president of the Public Service Commission of Canada. Words like "renewal" and "modernization" are obviously very important and are key missions of responsibility. They're also, I think you would agree with me, not just words, but they illustrate the importance of transparency and accountability. When we talk about the merits and integrity of the staffing system, I'm a little bit concerned when we hear about things like a lack of specialists in the payroll department and that there are phantom positions. So how do you reconcile those issues with the whole issue of transparency and accountability and integrity of the system?

• (1610)

Ms. Maria Barrados: It's a difficult question, and I'll try to not give you a lecture and not answer the question.

Our problem is that we have a very large system that involves many people. It will never be perfect, so we set standards. We have a set of values. We will have cases where things are not perfect. Our job is to identify the things that are perfect and try to get correction and take corrective action.

You'll see in the reports that on the one hand we flag those things that were not done correctly that we want done better—specific transactions. We'll also go after systems issues. But overall my conclusion is that the system is really quite robust—perfect, no; there are issues we have to work on, absolutely, and there are some warning signs, yes. But do I have fundamental worries about the system? I would say no at this point.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you. Those are all my questions.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Vincent, it is your turn.

Mr. Robert Vincent: In the text of your presentation that you handed out to us, I see that you examined the years 1990 to 2006, and that there were about 157 public servants who were assigned to transitional positions. More specifically:

In 15 of these staffing actions, relating to 13 individuals, we found that there was a misuse of the staffing system. Special efforts were made to move people into positions where they had no reasonable intention of staying.

Who are the people who appoint public servants to positions that they do not want?

Let me continue. A little further on in your text, you say:

This was done to facilitate the movement of the individuals concerned and to ensure that they had an easy route back into the public service.

These types of action create the appearance of lack of political impartiality, and are not in accordance with the values of transparency and non-partisanship.

You reported this to Treasury Board and it was expected to produce a plan. Was a plan actually produced, and what did Treasury Board do to prevent such things from happening again?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Our procedure requires us to do an audit. This audit was performed in response to questions put by members of Parliament. Last year, we discovered two cases. We investigated both cases, and we took corrective measures. We had many questions. We had to find out whether there were any other similar cases. We began by doing an audit to find out if there were any other cases; we came up with 15 more cases.

Pursuant to this, we handed the cases over to investigators. I cannot give you any names. I do not know the names of the persons involved. We handed the files over to investigators, and it is up to them to decide whether these cases deserve a full investigation. Then we will see the results of the investigations and we will decide what to do next. I will certainly report the investigation results to Parliament, but the disclosure of names depends on specific situations. I must comply with principles of privacy—

Ms. Linda Gobeil (Senior Vice-President, Policy Branch, Public Service Commission of Canada): Principles of privacy and protection of personal information.

•(1615)

Ms. Maria Barrados: That is it.

Regarding this kind of movement, I had a problem with people setting up positions without any intention of using them. Ms. Mary Clennett may give you a more detailed explanation of how this is done.

Before giving the floor to Ms. Clennett, let me say that we concluded that the Secretariat of the Treasury Board must monitor this kind of movement, and that it is not doing so at this time. It must work out a better policy and make a recommendation to Treasury Board to implement this policy. In our opinion, this kind of movement is not adequately monitored.

Mary will give you more details about this kind of movement.

Mr. Robert Vincent: You mentioned two specific cases. I gather that these people were appointed although there were no positions for them nor any work for them to do. They did not use any pejorative terms, but they wanted to find some way of shelving these people. They invented positions to which they could appoint these people.

Ms. Maria Barrados: These people have positions, but they do not intend to do the work.

Mr. Robert Vincent: There are positions, but there is no work to do.

Ms. Maria Barrados: They do not intend to stay in those positions or to do that work. In fact, if you have a position in the public service, you normally keep it.

Mr. Robert Vincent: I understood that in the two cases you mentioned earlier, there were positions without any work assigned to them. Then, the investigation showed, perhaps not as clearly as you did, that there was some abuse in connection with this.

Ms. Maria Barrados: Regarding these two positions, these were people who worked in ministers' offices. When a public servant has worked for more than a year in a minister's office, there is a priority system provided for his return to the public service. A person following this system receives no pay while awaiting an available position. Thus, while there is no position, the person retains priority but is not paid.

In both cases, these people used their positions in the minister's office to create positions in the public service so that they could come back to it. They were planning to get paid immediately by coming into fictitious positions which led immediately to other positions. They had no intention of doing that work. It was simply a way of getting around the priority system.

Mr. Robert Vincent: Ms. Gobeil, have you anything to add?

Ms. Linda Gobeil: We are basically saying that these people should have been entitled to what we call an administrative priority, which is a priority over others for getting positions in the public service. Now, to get these people around the priority, positions were created that they could immediately occupy. This is how they got around the priority. In both cases, the priority system was entirely sidetracked and this is why we took corrective measures last year.

The Chair: Let us now continue with Mr. Albrecht.

[English]

Sorry. Go ahead, Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you again, Madam Barrados. It's fantastic that you have undertaken these different studies. Many of us have anticipated this report, because we discussed these issues at length at an earlier date. On October 3, 2006, we talked the first time about these phantom jobs and speculation that this activity had taken place within the civil service.

You and I had a discussion at that point, and you explained what your actions would be. In fact, you have undertaken that action to a large extent. You found at least twenty people who were abusing the system in terms of these phantom jobs. Your investigation is not complete, but I understand from some media interviews you have given that you will be investigating whether some type of disciplinary action will be necessary, specifically if revocation of appointments will be appropriate.

I wonder if you could elaborate a little on that and give us some information as to what a good reason for revocation would be—exactly what the abuse would need to have been. If it isn't so serious that they should have their appointment revoked, please explain what other type of action you might take to rectify the situation.

• (1620)

Ms. Maria Barrados: We identified 24 transactions that were a problem, involving 20 people. Fifteen of these were what we were calling the facilitated positions that involved 13 people. We turned all 24 transactions, involving 20 people, over to the investigators.

We have a range of corrective actions that are available to the commission under the legislation. These are serious steps. That's why we go through an investigative process. In the two cases we investigated last year, we revoked the appointments. So that meant we examined the appointment that was made; we felt it was an improper appointment, and we revoked it. That meant the appointment no longer stood. So that, at one extreme, is something we can do.

There's a whole range of other things we could do. What we can do to correct depends entirely on the circumstance. In some of these cases, which were not the facilitated positions, there was nothing that indicated there had been a proper evaluation of language or security or whether the person met the qualifications. Perhaps the requirement is that that be done. It could be something like that.

In some of these cases, when all the facts are looked at, it may have been justified. There was something missing. Or in some cases, we take some form of corrective measure, or there is some form of discipline. For instance, we actually will send a disciplinary letter. So there is a range of things we can do.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I guess there are two major problems. There may be other problems with this as well, but it really cuts to two things. One is the impartiality of the public service. I think all of us would desire to see it rectified on that front. There is also the issue of the folks who were legitimately entitled to these types of positions. So on those two fronts, of course, we want some assurance.

Maybe you can comment on this, but my understanding was that, for the most part, these positions involved people who were moving

out of the communications portions of the ministers' departments—obviously those are highly partisan positions—and then moving into high-level bureaucracy or high-level public servant positions. So perceived or real, that shakes the trust that Canadians have in their public service as being non-partisan.

I'm wondering, number one, how we rectify that to ensure that these people are dealt with in an appropriate manner to ensure that partisanship hasn't played a part in their current roles. And then the other part is how we reassure the people who would have otherwise been entitled to these positions that they weren't overlooked even though they may have been more qualified.

I think we have to reassure them that in the future they won't be dealt with in this way. And I think we maybe need to remove these people, but maybe you need to continue your investigation before you can comment specifically on these cases.

• (1625)

Ms. Maria Barrados: We have a chart in our report that shows the occupational groups that were involved. IS—communications—is the largest group, but there were some EXs—executives. And there is a range of different kinds of groups, so there's quite a variety in there.

I agree, absolutely, that it's very important that we do everything to protect the impartiality of the public service and the whole structure of the legislation, and how we have defined “exempt staff”, and have specifically exempted them from the public service. We have the public service requirements and we have to do everything to protect that.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I know my time is running out here, and we'll probably get to continue on that line of questioning, but I do want to just specifically ask something. In the media, I again read that ministers were directly involved in the creation of these phantom positions. It wasn't your impression to me, and maybe the media has it wrong, but that would lead me to question who was involved. A person in a minister's office can't go and strong-arm their way into a department to force a job to be created for them. So if ministers weren't directly involved, somebody has to be facilitating this. So are we looking at deputy ministers? Are we looking at other mid-level bureaucrats, or are we possibly looking at other folks within the minister's staff at that time? I'm wondering if you could comment a little bit on that. Who facilitated this process?

Ms. Maria Barrados: What we did in this audit is we tried to look specifically, on the basis of what we had, to see whether there was anything directly implicating a minister, and we could not see that. We did see ministers' staff directly involved. All the authorities are in the name of the deputy, so the deputy is the one who holds the authority. So the deputies are ultimately accountable.

I think Justice Gomery said in regard to anybody who works in a minister's office that the minister is ultimately accountable. But for us to do the investigation, we have to actually trace the transactions.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: So would it be your assessment, essentially, that the people responsible for this are the ministers and the deputy ministers, because they are responsible for the activities in their offices?

Ms. Maria Barrados: That's where the authorities are.

But if I could just add one comment, we have two issues, I believe. One, we have to look at the individual transactions. Now, some of those are quite old, going back to 1990. So when we have very old transactions, one has to be realistic in terms of what one can do in 2007-2008. You can undo a transaction in 1990, but is this going to have any relevance? So we have to be realistic about what we can do here.

The second thing, though, is that I really believe we have to put a very clear policy framework on this, because a lot of people can honestly say, "Ah, but you didn't tell me and now you're saying you think it's really important. Why didn't someone tell us this wasn't correct?" It's because the policy framework isn't there. I really would like to see that.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I have just one follow-up question, although my time is probably pretty much finished.

The Chair: You're right into Mr. Albrecht's time—

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I do apologize.

It would be helpful to us if there were an opportunity at some point for us to at least learn the timeframes in which these transactions in question happened, if available to us.

Ms. Maria Barrados: From 1990 to 2007?

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Of the 20 transactions, what were their dates?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Of the 20? I think we'll have to write you to tell you that, because if I start reading you numbers, all my little charts are so complicated, I'm sure I'm going to get them wrong.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I do appreciate that. We'd appreciate having that.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Albrecht, there are no Liberal questions, so this round goes to you. You now have about three minutes left of your time.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Just to follow up a bit on that line of thinking, you indicated there were 157 over a 16-year period, or roughly 10 per year.

Without going into detail of each year, were they bunched in any given year or years?

Ms. Maria Barrados: They tended to be bunched around changes of government.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: That was it. Shocking!

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Just to clarify this, you used the term "misuse of the staffing system", which is not the same as what we were referring to in our last session when we discussed phantom positions. They're not necessarily the same.

These 13 are not necessarily phantom positions?

• (1630)

Ms. Maria Barrados: They have many of the features of the phantoms.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Only the two that you spoke of last time were revoked.

Ms. Maria Barrados: That's right.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Now, many times today you've spoken about the need for a clear policy framework—and certainly I don't think we'd have any disagreement on that. I have two questions surrounding that.

Number one, has the Federal Accountability Act resulted in any improvements to this issue? Is it improving the issue?

Secondly, if we're asking the Treasury Board Secretariat to produce these policy statements, it would seem to me they would be helped by a lot of input from people like you who work with this, as this is your mandate. Have you given thought to developing a skeleton policy framework that could be advanced to the Treasury Board for their consideration and possibly implementation?

Ms. Maria Barrados: At the time of the discussions on the Federal Accountability Act, I had actually proposed that the legislation address this, because as you may remember, the Federal Accountability Act was very concerned about ministers' exempt staff moving into the public service, giving them priority over other appointments, and removing that priority. I had no objections if the desire was to do that, but I had also suggested that we had to worry about flow the other way. At the time of those discussions, there was a view that this could be addressed through policy. So there could be a policy solution to that. I had been satisfied that if there were a policy solution, I wanted the solution. I was then told that the policy solution would occur, in due course, when, as Treasury Board was reviewing its policies, it came up. So I said okay. But we're doing our audit, and now another year has passed, and I've had a similar response, which is that in due course, as they review the policies, they will get to it. I really think this should be specifically addressed.

In earlier stages of these discussions we had actually put forward proposals on how this could be done. I think the Public Service Commission, under the current legislation, with our current approach, wants to be very respectful of what the employer's job is. We don't want to move in and do the employer's job. I think this is an employer responsibility, given the current legislative framework, but if anyone has any suggestions as to how we can move it, I'd be happy to do that.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: I would just like to follow up, because I think you indicated, in terms of my first question about the implementation having been for one year now, that you've seen some areas that maybe aren't working as well as was intended on paper. It would seem to me, from that experience and also from your experience working with this on a day-to-day basis, that you'd have some valuable input. And it would be my hope that there'd be some level of dialogue between the various silos so there would be better communication. That's really my only point.

Thank you.

Ms. Maria Barrados: I think we do have reasonably good discussions, actually. I'm just sometimes a little more impatient than you are.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: I think it's just good that the Canadian public is made aware that there are discussions and that there is dialogue towards working at this cooperatively and collaboratively.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Monsieur Lussier.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marcel Lussier: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to come back to the subject of public servants who want to get into politics. According to your figures, 70 of the 95 public servants in that situation went for municipal politics. Have you any statistics on those who were elected and on those who were not elected?

Ms. Linda Gobeil: No, certainly not.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: You found fault with these people because they did not comply with the deadline for submitting their application. What is this deadline? Does the application have to be submitted one or two months ahead of time?

Ms. Maria Barrados: No, we ask that people provide us with all the information 30 days in advance, but if possible, we try to reduce that period. Perhaps Linda could give you more details.

• (1635)

Ms. Linda Gobeil: The regulation stipulates, when people submit their application, that we have 30 days. This allows us to analyze the application, which we do on a case-by-case basis, and to receive comments from the departments concerned, to determine to what extent this affects their operations.

However, in the case of municipal elections, which is a new phenomenon since the act came into force, we have been very flexible. In other words, in many cases, the period was much shorter than 30 days. We have made an effort. The departments and the authorities have also made an effort to try to reach a decision often in a much shorter time than 30 days.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: Is this 30-day period a period of non-remuneration, Ms. Gobeil, or a period of 30 days before the election?

Ms. Linda Gobeil: That depends. There are all sorts of cases. There may be some cases where people are not remunerated. But in general, people have 30 days to submit their application to us. Then we decide, given the circumstances of that particular case, whether the person should take leave without pay or not. It depends on the case, it is not always the same thing.

Ms. Maria Barrados: It's 30 days before becoming a candidate.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: Are there rules for public servants who seek to continue working during the day and be involved in politics during the evenings?

Ms. Linda Gobeil: There are always rules. As I said earlier, each case is studied individually. The circumstances depend on the individual's profile and also on the municipality in question. In some larger municipalities, to all intents and purposes, it is impossible to do both because the duties of municipal councillors or mayor constitutes a full-time job. All this is taken into consideration. Earlier, I mentioned the comments of the department concerned. We must determine to what extent the department can, on an operational level, accommodate these employees.

There is no magic bullet. Each case must be studied individually. In certain circumstances, people can work on a part-time basis. Obviously, I'm referring to the municipal level, because at the federal and provincial levels, once elected, employees must resign. The question does not even come up. At the municipal level, it varies, depending on the circumstances.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: You're saying that people must resign from their positions for the duration of their term in office?

Ms. Linda Gobeil: The act is very clear in that respect: once elected, a person is no longer a public servant.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: Does the 30-day rule also apply to public servants who transition from the public service to a minister's office?

Ms. Maria Barrados: No, this only applies to the election process.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: Why are the rules different? Isn't there this replacement period which is important? Isn't there a period during which the position must continue? It's cut short.

Ms. Maria Barrados: That's an interesting question. The act talks about support for a political party. That's the role of a public servant who works in the political arena, but in the context of a political party. Another section of the act talks about public servants who work for the public service and in a minister's office. I don't think these sections are related.

Mr. Marcel Lussier: All right. That completes my questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Merci.

Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

I would like to follow up on Mr. Warkentin's line of questioning. I'm not sure what I find more disturbing, that a minister would directly make a call to get a member of his staff parachuted into the public service, or that someone lower than a minister would have that power. In either case, we need to have a clearer sense.

Are you saying that a deputy minister would have the power to make a call and create a position for someone?

Ms. Maria Barrados: The cases we looked at in greatest detail last year involved members of the exempt staff, or members of the ministers' staff, who had positions created for them in departments that we described as soft landings so they could go back into the departments around the priority system.

When we did those investigations we did not see ministers directly involved. The exempt staffers act on behalf of the ministers because that's their role. All the appointment authorities are in the hands of the deputies. So it is up to the deputy ministers how to delegate—which ones the deputy ministers keep for themselves and which ones they don't.

From my experience, how deputy ministers and ministers' staffers and offices relate is quite individual. In some places it is only through the deputies' offices, and in other places it's another part of the organization. Those are fairly unique circumstances. So for me to generalize would be inappropriate, because we really would have to look at the individual cases.

• (1640)

Mr. Charlie Angus: You've put it down to the fact that there is a vacuum in the policy framework, and you say that Treasury Board hasn't acted on your suggestions to fill that vacuum. Have you given them specific recommendations on closing this vacuum? If so, what are they?

Ms. Maria Barrados: We've had quite a bit of discussion with Treasury Board. The policy that was used up to this point was a leave without pay policy. That policy is a bit of a problem because it allows these kinds of actions to occur but it doesn't speak particularly to the importance of the specific directions that have to be given that any of this kind of movement has to take into account the non-partisan nature of the public service. Anyone who leaves has to be confident they will have a place they can come back to, a type of work they could come back to in the public service that wouldn't be compromised. There has to be quite a bit of specificity on how that occurs and how they come back. In a period that is less than a year, they would come back to a job, their job would be kept open. But after a year, how do they come back?

My suggestion is they come back through the priority system or through a competition so they can compete for any job. It doesn't have to be a long, complicated policy, but there has to be a clear set of expectations about how it's done.

Mr. Charlie Angus: You've done a fair bit of work, it seems, on the issue of casual employees and how they're being drawn into the public service. Have you had a chance to look at the issue of turnover in various departments? The question I would raise is that I know there are certain departments where there's bidding for jobs between an urban centre and say a large rural region like Timmins—James Bay, where we have a very low turnover of federal employees. The argument we always put forward is that when you invest in a federal employee in one of the regions you have someone who is committed there for life. Yet some of the anecdotal evidence we're hearing is that we're putting a fair amount of cost into training workers in some of the large urban centres. You're seeing higher levels of turnovers because there are a lot more opportunities: once they're trained, they can move on.

Have you looked at the issue of turnover and what effect that has on the efficiency of various departments?

Ms. Maria Barrados: I do raise a concern about the area of turnover. I have to say that it's turnover within the public service. Overall, we see an increase in departures from the public service more at the senior levels and the executive levels than at the lower levels, but nothing that is unusually alarming to any other workforce. It's just that we're not used to it in the public service, so it's something one has to pay attention to.

I do raise the issue of the overall level of movement I'm seeing within the public service. That is a concern. We took a rather rough estimate because we use the Hay system. We looked at the job that people had at the beginning of the year and the job they held at the end of the year and we asked if there was a change. It could be a lateral movement, it could be the same level, it could be up or it could be down. We've seen a steady increase in this movement.

This year, 2006-07, we saw it at 40%. The year before it was at 35%, and the year before that it was at 30%. So we've seen a steady increase. We've seen some of the occupational groups much higher. The human resources group, personnel group, is 76%. The executives are sitting there at 58%. For us, this is a lot of movement. As a manager of an organization myself, I really feel this, because you always worry about training your staff and making sure you have the complement of people to be there to do the work. When you have a lot of rotation it builds in inefficiencies for you.

• (1645)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I'd like to build on that same topic. It comes around, actually, to one small point that is part of this problem of reshuffling—the snowball effect and the lack of institutional memory and so on. The chair can recall when we had the problem that people couldn't get paycheques and categorization wasn't accommodated in a reasonable period of time. And when I hear the numbers you're talking about now....

I also refer to an article in the *Ottawa Citizen*. You were quoted, Madame Barrados, along with David Zussman and Ms. Duxbury, I believe.

We're talking about 40% of the entire workforce changing categorization in a year. In particular, some of the actual categories, such as HR, which of course was responsible for administering a lot of this, is changing, with 76% of them moving to new jobs. We wonder why we can't handle it. It's almost astounding. I couldn't imagine it. I worked in the private sector for years. If I'd had a 20% changeover in staff, I'd be going ballistic. Here we have a 40%, 50%, 60%, and in some cases over 70% change of staff.

How can we continue to operate like that? It's been categorized as a swamped system, a broken human resources system. I think we have to be reasonable here. Are we placing unbelievable expectations on, for example, our pay and benefits people because it's just too much of a workload?

You are quoted in here, and I'll refer to it, but there are enough questions raised on this issue to warrant further work. I think this is an area that... Whenever there's this massive turnover, we're losing efficiencies, we're losing effectiveness, we're losing key people, as we've said, and we're losing everything from institutional memory. Somehow we have to find a way to reverse that.

We cannot increase by 5% a year. We have to be decreasing by 10% a year. So we need, as Mr. Angus said, more full-time people. We need long-term employees here. That's the great benefit to a corporation. In this case it's the corporation of the people of Canada.

I'd like to know what initiatives and/or investigations you possibly have in place to see if we can start to reverse this slide to ineffectiveness and inefficiency.

Ms. Maria Barrados: The only good news is that this is within the public service. The other part of it is that we are not growing the public service as a result. We've seen only a very small growth in the public service, so that's an important part of this picture.

I am concerned about this. With the division of responsibilities between the employer and the Public Service Commission, this is not entirely our problem. Part of it is with us, but not all of it. We have been talking to the public service union, or its management agency, and we are undertaking joint work to look at the problem.

I've also initiated a piece of work to identify the areas in the policies where you can see there's direction and guidance. Of course, the simple thing in this is that if every manager decided not to do it, it would stop, but it's not that simple.

We don't want to create a more rule-bound system. I'm not looking for more rules. That's the last place we go. We try everything before we go to more rules. But we definitely have to get a better understanding and move on this.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I'd like to see a specific plan of action at some particular point. Obviously, it's going to take more evaluation, but it would be nice to see if we had some form of operational plan to try to reverse this trend.

Ms. Maria Barrados: Mary Clennett advises me that we should be able to write back to the committee in February or March with more specific plans on what we're going to do. We have to work with the others in government. We can't do this on our own.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Thank you.

The Chair: Are there any further questions?

We'll go to Monsieur Vincent.

• (1650)

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Vincent: Thank you.

I'd like to get back to the case of the two people who could not be identified.

You said a little earlier that these investigations were conducted between 1990 and 2006. Are these recent cases or have they been the subject of an investigation for a few years?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Those are two recent cases. These two individuals put questions about priority entitlement to the Public

Service Commission. At the same time, they found other ways to obtain the positions. This is recent.

Mr. Robert Vincent: In light of the answers that were given to questions asked earlier, it's my understanding that a deputy minister, minister or a ministerial assistant can ask a specific person, that they selected themselves, to join the minister's office. Is that how things unfold in reality?

Ms. Maria Barrados: In these two cases, people from the minister's office had conversations with the public servants, and the result of their actions was the establishment of positions for them, unique and inappropriate positions. That was the only [Editor's Note: *Inaudible*] that we obtained. The conclusion was that this was not right, and that it was not a proper use of the staffing system. We revoked those positions. We obtained enough information to conclude that this was inappropriate and that these positions had to be abolished.

Mr. Robert Vincent: Was that when you decided to ask Treasury Board to establish a new policy to prevent the reoccurrence of such a situation?

Ms. Maria Barrados: It was following my report last year that I had conversations with Treasury Board. Treasury Board agrees with this and accepts the principle, but there is no new policy. It's the same response for the auditor's report: Treasury Board accepts the principle, has promised to develop the policy, but what is unclear is when it will do so. That's what concerns me.

Mr. Robert Vincent: I imagine that they will have told you what we've already heard, namely that it may do something soon, but that nothing has been decided yet.

Ms. Maria Barrados: The exact terms are in the report. It's positive insofar as it will do something. It's made a commitment under the principle of neutrality in the public service and the need for that. The Treasury Board Secretariat is reviewing all of its policies within the context of a policy renewal initiative. It must take this audit and its ensuing recommendations into account in its review of the Treasury Board policy on leave without pay.

Mr. Robert Vincent: According to my interpretation, that doesn't mean anything. They're going to think about it, but they're not sure. They're going to study it, but they like the practices that they can use today. They wouldn't want to change them. In order to make themselves feel better, they will study it; they won't go any further than that.

You said that you discussed this with Treasury Board a year ago now and that you told them that they needed to amend their policies because things can't work this way. In that year, you haven't received anything in your office that could suggest any sort of change? You haven't received anything yet?

Ms. Maria Barrados: I expressed the same concerns during discussions on the Accountability Act. They made a commitment to establish a policy. I got the same sort of response. I published that in the annual report last year. They made a commitment to do something, but I can't tell you when it will be done.

•(1655)

Mr. Robert Vincent: It could still do these things and ask a few public servants to establish phantom positions somewhere and recruit people to fill them, as we've read. Right now, if I understand correctly, departments could still do this. Treasury Board has not intervened. Therefore this practice could continue. If you're not made aware—

Ms. Maria Barrados: For us, monitoring the system is just as important. We at the Public Service Commission intend to monitor it. If there are other cases, I'm sure that we'll be able to detect them. I think that the ideal thing would be to clarify how it should be done. It isn't a negative thing for a public servant to work in the office of the minister. It can be a good experience. But the way to do so, the way of going from one to the other should be clear.

Mr. Robert Vincent: According to competence, I imagine?

Ms. Maria Barrados: According to competence, but there is also the procedure to be followed.

Mr. Robert Vincent: Yes, because people can be mobile but also partisan. Earlier we talked about communications, but people could be chosen for their allegiance, for services rendered during an election campaign or whatever. When you're elected, you can say that you need these people, and have them come in without taking into account established procedure. Is it normal to proceed this way? Is it normal for a deputy minister or a minister to go hand-pick anyone in the public service, even if the people don't have the required skills to fill the position they want to establish?

Ms. Maria Barrados: It's up to the minister to decide how he picks his people.

Mr. Robert Vincent: It's not by competition?

Ms. Maria Barrados: It's the minister's choice. It's not up to me to tell the minister how he needs to pick his staff.

Mr. Robert Vincent: No, but this was a question. There's no competition to obtain the position—

Ms. Maria Barrados: Public servants are non-partisan, but the work they do in a minister's office is often highly partisan. A minister's office is partisan by definition. To my mind, it's important that we be careful with the type of work that they will have to do when they go back to the public service, and the way they go back.

Mr. Robert Vincent: That's fine. Thank you.

The Chair: You know, Mr. Vincent, you will have an opportunity to put the question to the President of the Treasury Board, because he will appear before the committee. Perhaps you can ask him those questions, if you're interested.

[English]

Are there any more questions?

I'm going to end with my payroll problem.

You were before the committee at some point and said you were recruiting large numbers of people to work in the pay and benefits sections. Subsequent to that we heard from others who said they really didn't hire very many people in that area.

I don't know if you've followed through on whether we are getting enough new people in these areas and what more we can do to recruit and to keep additional people. I think the other big challenge in that area is retention.

I'm going to keep coming back on this. I really find it's a challenge for those who are trying to offer that service, and there's more than one problem in the area.

Ms. Maria Barrados: I'm not sure their retention is unique when you've seen the turnover we've had in other groups.

I know we assisted in doing a collective pool. There were over 6,000 applications. We ended up with 110 candidates who were fully qualified and ready to go, but I can't tell you how many were actually given jobs.

•(1700)

The Chair: Okay, thank you. I'm going to pursue it, because I think it's a particular problem for public servants. They have to be paid, and they have to be paid in a timely manner, or else the whole system will break down.

Thank you very much.

To the committee, we haven't been able to get any guests for Wednesday. I suggest that we have our meeting on Wednesday at 3:30 to discuss future business. There are a few things we have to do, but there are other things we should be doing. I'll ask all parties to come with ideas for things they want us to consider, and we'll get the clerk busy on getting us candidates for our committee.

I'll call the meeting to an end.

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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