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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, April 15, 2008**

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**Chair**

**The Honourable Shawn Murphy**

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## Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Tuesday, April 15, 2008

• (1105)

[English]

**The Chair (Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.)):** I want to welcome everyone here today, especially the witnesses.

This meeting is called pursuant to the Standing Orders. We're dealing with chapter 3, "Human Resources Management—Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada". This chapter is from the May 2007 *Report of the Auditor General of Canada*.

Before the committee today we're very pleased to have Auditor General Sheila Fraser. She's accompanied by assistant auditor Richard Flageole, together with principals Marie Bergeron and Paul Morse. We have, from the Department of Foreign Affairs, the accounting officer and deputy minister, Len Edwards. He's accompanied by Michael Small, assistant deputy minister, human resources. From the Treasury Board Secretariat we have Hélène Laurendeau, assistant secretary, labour relations and compensation operations.

I want to extend a warm welcome to everyone here on behalf of the committee.

I understand, Ms. Fraser, you have some opening comments, so I will turn the floor over to you at this time.

**Ms. Sheila Fraser (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General of Canada):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We thank you for this opportunity to discuss chapter 3 of our May 2007 report on human resources management at Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada. As you mentioned, I'm joined today by Richard Flageole, assistant auditor general, and Marie Bergeron and Paul Morse, the principals responsible for this audit.

The purpose of our audit was to assess whether the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade adequately plans its human resources and manages its workforce with respect to the recruitment, staffing, and assignment of Canadian and locally engaged staff to carry out its mandate. I wish to emphasize that the work for this audit was completed in the fall of 2006, so we are not fully able to comment on how the situation has evolved since then.

Of all the issues raised in our report, we would like to draw your attention to the following three: human resources planning, recruitment and staffing, and the foreign service directives.

On human resources planning, we noted that the department does not have a complete picture of the people, competencies, and experience it will need in the coming years. In our opinion, it is essential that the department develop a strategic resources plan to

prepare for short-, medium-, and long-term staff shortages. We noted that 58% of its employees in the management category and 26% of all employees will be eligible to retire by 2010. The department therefore risks not having the people in place necessary to carry out its mandate effectively.

As for recruitment and staffing, the department was unable to provide us with the exact number of vacant positions it was trying to fill. In our report, we indicated that we had doubts about the reliability and usefulness of the data we were provided. For example, although the human resources information system showed a 35% vacancy rate as of March 31, 2006, the department estimated it at 20%. What's more, neither the recruitment nor the promotion processes were sufficient to find enough people with the required skills and competencies to fill the vacancies in the time required. For example, when the department launched a promotion competition for executives in April 2005, only 39 of the 370 candidates who had pre-qualified based on their experience had been promoted by May 2006, more than a year later.

[Translation]

With regard to assignments for rotational employees, that is, employees who can be required to take positions at headquarters in Ottawa or at missions abroad, we noted that a high number of these employees were in acting positions and had been for some time. On 31 March 2006, for example, 116 employees from non-executive categories were acting in executive positions.

The Department's rotational employees are on the front lines of its program delivery abroad, and their personal situations, as well as those of their spouses and family members, are also affected by these circumstances. Many missions are in environments that compare poorly with Canada in their standard of living, security, safety and health care.

The purpose of the foreign service directives is to compensate employees for living conditions abroad and to provide incentives for hardship postings. They are negotiated by the Treasury Board Secretariat and the National Joint Council. We noted that the directives did not allow the Department to respond rapidly to changing circumstances and to the problems employees face as a result. The ability of the Department to assign staff to missions abroad was therefore hindered.

For example, it took more than one year for the Deputy Minister to get confirmation from the Treasury Board that he could use his delegated authority under the Financial Administration Act to purchase adequate life insurance policies for its employees assigned to missions in countries at war, such as Afghanistan.

Spousal employment is another issue that has been a particular concern for a long time. In fact, the Royal Commission on Conditions of Foreign Service reported the problem as far back as 1981. The impact of these barriers can be significant for the family posted abroad as well as for program and service delivery at missions. With the increase in double-income families, the issue of spousal employment has become even more acute.

Other government departments and agencies who assign staff abroad are also affected by the limitations of the directives. Despite the concerns expressed over the years by our office and by various stakeholders, the issue, which involves the Treasury Board Secretariat and the active participation of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada and other departments and agencies, had still not been resolved at the time of our audit.

• (1110)

[English]

Given the importance of the issues raised in our report, we encourage the committee to ask the government to take concrete action to clarify who is responsible for what, to establish clear timelines, and to report to Parliament regularly on its progress with regard to our observations and recommendations.

Mr. Chair, this concludes our opening statement. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee members may have.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Fraser.

Mr. Edwards, I understand you have an opening statement.

**Mr. Leonard Edwards (Deputy Minister, Department of Foreign Affairs):** Yes, I do, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much, and again, may I introduce Michael Small, who is accompanying me here today. He is the brand new assistant deputy minister of human resources as of April 1.

I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to meet with you today to describe the steps we have taken in Foreign Affairs and International Trade over the past 11 months to implement our response to the Auditor General's review of human resources management in DFAIT. I would like to explain how this response will be accelerated by the transformation of the department, which is now under way.

The Auditor General presented her report in May 2007. In June, the government identified DFAIT as one of the first of 17 departments and agencies to undergo a process of strategic review. At DFAIT we embraced the challenge of strategic review by taking a top to bottom look at what the department's core business must be and how we should align our resources around it to best serve Canadians.

Conducting this strategic review has been job number one for me and my deputy colleague, the Deputy Minister of International Trade, and of course for my department's entire management team

for the past 10 months. Now that our plans have been approved by cabinet and announced in budget 2008, we are ready to begin implementation of our transformation agenda.

Our transformation agenda, Mr. Chair, has six principal themes. First is aligning departmental resources with government priorities. Second is strengthening our key institutional asset as a department, namely our platform of missions abroad. Third is improving service to Canadians seeking passports, consular assistance, and trade opportunities. Fourth is focusing our policy expertise on core foreign and trade policy responsibilities. Fifth is improving our mechanisms for exercising accountability. And sixth is renewing our human resource management systems and renewing our human resource base.

Work on this last theme will be done by DFAIT in conjunction with the broader public service renewal being led by the Clerk of the Privy Council with the support of the Prime Minister. Our responsibilities to act on the Auditor General's findings fall directly under this theme and have picked up new momentum from it. Success in human resource renewal, we believe, will be critical to success under each of the other five themes I've cited in our transformation agenda. We believe we have made some significant progress in some areas, but there's still much work to do.

First, the Auditor General found last year that the department had no strategic human resources plan. Now we do. It was approved by our management team last June and released to all our employees last October. Our human resources strategic plan for 2007 to 2010 sets out the department's current and projected future workforce needs. This plan now gives us a basis for integrating human resource management with business planning for the department. Both will be driven by the priorities of our transformation agenda.

We are now taking this planning process to the next level and have tasked all our missions to develop a post-specific human resource plan that will address the local factors affecting our ability to recruit, retain, and develop our locally engaged staff.

Second, the Auditor General found that the lack of workforce data is hampering human resource planning and management. I agree. This continues to be a major challenge. Last summer we made a significant investment in improving our human resource data systems by establishing a large IT project team dedicated to this task. They are fully engaged in upgrading the software we use to PeopleSoft 8.9, a task that will take until the middle of 2009. A governance board, made up of all departmental stakeholders concerned with data integrity, will oversee this critical process.

Third, the Auditor General found that relying on traditional recruitment methods might not be sustainable. My colleague the Deputy Minister of International Trade, Marie-Lucie Morin, and I both agree, and consequently, over the past year, we and our executive teams have been engaged in non-traditional recruitment methods. This includes a cross-Canada outreach program to explain what the department is and what we do for Canadians.

• (1115)

In particular, we explain to young Canadians at universities why they may wish to consider a career in DFAIT. The Trade Commissioner Service, in particular, undertook a high-visibility campaign last autumn, using younger officers returning to their university campuses and innovative techniques such as Facebook to reach new potential recruits.

Within the department, we have opened all competitions into the rotational foreign service category to all officers in DFAIT in order to expand our pool of officers ready for assignments abroad. Next month, for the first time ever, we are conducting interviews across the country and in three international cities for new recruits, not only for the rotational foreign service—our traditional approach—but also for our CO and ES policy specialists. That's our economists and commercial officers. In the autumn we will launch a comprehensive national outreach and recruitment drive to hire a new cadre of foreign service commercial officers, economic officers, and administrative officers who will start work in spring 2009—just a year away.

These campaigns will be the first steps in implementing the resourcing strategy we have developed to meet the needs forecast in our HR strategic plan. Overall, these methods have worked. In 2007 and in 2008, this last fiscal year, we made indeterminate job offers to 294 new post-secondary recruits—just under 10% of the 3,000-person target the Clerk of the Privy Council set for the entire public service under public service renewal.

Fourth, the Auditor General found that the department cannot fill its needs on a timely basis through promotions. There too we have agreed, and we think we have made major strides on this front. In the past year we have launched or concluded collective promotion processes for every category in the EX level, for a total of 124 executives promoted. The results of an EX-2 promotion process will be released shortly, and we have just launched a new promotion exercise in both EX-1 and EX-5 ranks, with EX-4 soon to follow. At the level of EX-2 and above, we have opened all of our competitions into our rotational ranks to the entire public service. With the support of the Public Service Commission, we have developed an innovative approach to promoting officers who had been acting in EX-level positions and who had demonstrated their ability to perform well at a high level for two years or more. This led to 45 new appointments at the EX-1 level, with 15 more expected shortly. Thus we have significantly exceeded the target in our strategic plan for 2007-08 of 34 new EX hires.

Below the executive level, we have completed the largest round of promotions in all ranks of the rotational group in the history of the department, totalling 469 officers. And we have hired 124 new FS political and trade officers, plus 39 badly needed new management consular officers to replenish the bottom of our rotational cadre.

[*Translation*]

Fifth, the Auditor General found that “the assignment process does not yield the intended results”. Much of this section of the report focused on the large number of officers assigned to act in positions above their classifications. Acting assignments can be, in my view, an important tool to develop promising officers and fill specialist needs, especially in a rotational foreign service. It is a practice we will continue to use.

That being said, we have reduced the number of acting assignments in the past year by promoting many of those who were acting at the EX level, as well as running competitive processes, and by being more vigilant in the assignment process in looking first to fill positions at level. Our assignment procedures are now much more transparent to our employees and the decisions made are much better documented. All foreign services officers' assignments are reviewed by an oversight board of directors general to ensure that corporate needs are met and standards are observed, especially for acting appointments.

Sixth, the Auditor General found that “foreign language needs are not met”. Unfortunately, this remains the case. Our Committee on Foreign Languages has adopted a new process for identifying more accurately the positions abroad that require different levels of foreign language proficiency. But we will need to make significant new investments in language training positions and in backfilling behind officers on language training in order to bring up our performance to a satisfactory level. This will be a major test for my department's transformation agenda.

Seventh, the Auditor General found that “the management of locally engaged staff gets little attention”. To be more precise, while it is a major responsibility of our mission management teams abroad, it gets comparatively little attention in Ottawa, where too many decisions affecting locally engaged staff are centralized.

It will get a great deal of attention in the coming years with the establishment this month of a new International Platform Branch. The new branch will seek efficiencies through building service nodes and networks abroad as a major plank of the department's transformation agenda. We are currently reviewing our service model for locally engaged staff in order to find a more flexible, decentralized approach. In the meantime, we have launched a blitz to update the many out-of-date handbooks governing the employment regulations for locally engaged staff. One contract to consolidate into one and update 23 handbooks for our missions in the USA is now under way; another to update the handbooks in 69 more of our missions overseas has gone to tender.

[English]

Eighth, the Auditor General found that there is little flexibility to compensate and provide timely incentives to staff living abroad. I entirely agree. DFAIT has long found that the foreign service directives no longer reflect the actual needs of Canadian families, and the process of negotiating them is too inflexible to respond to rapid changes in the living conditions facing the staff we ask to serve Canada abroad.

We very much welcome the commitment of the Treasury Board to lead a partnership of departments and agencies to comprehensively identify the challenges facing the public service in assigning staff abroad. In the meantime, the Treasury Board agreed that it was within my authority as deputy head to purchase accidental life and dismemberment insurance for our staff posted to Afghanistan, and at the beginning of the year we received Treasury Board approval to pay special risk allowances to employees assigned to Kabul and Kandahar. But we have not yet found a way to compensate families sufficiently for the extra personal costs they incur when serving in the United States.

Finally, the Auditor General found that barriers to spousal employment are disincentives to working abroad. This will not be news to any normal two-income Canadian family contemplating a foreign assignment on only one income. In addition to the difficulties, and frequently the impossibility of finding work in the foreign country and culture, spouses also face obstacles in collecting unemployment benefits when they return to Canada and start their job searches here.

My department is committed to doing what it can within our own means and mandate to help the spouses of our employees manage the career disruptions that come with belonging to rotational families. We welcome the opportunity to address the issue of spousal employment in the context of the comprehensive review recently launched by the Treasury Board.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I thank you for providing me with this opportunity to address you today and to explain what we have done in response to the Auditor General's report. I can assure you that improving human resource management is an important part of my job in the department, and to do so consistent with the Auditor General's finding, and that will in turn be integral to the success of our transformation strategy in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

Thank you. *Merci.*

●(1125)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Edwards.

Madame Laurendeau, I understand you have some opening comments.

**Ms. H el ene Laurendeau (Assistant Secretary, Labour Relations and Compensation Operations, Treasury Board Secretariat):** Yes, I will be very brief.

Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. I thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today about the Treasury Board Secretariat's response to the May 2007 *Report of the Auditor General of Canada*.

Among many other recommendations that have been reviewed by Mr. Edwards, the Auditor General asked that the Treasury Board Secretariat, with the full participation of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and other departments and agencies, do a couple of things.

First, it was required to lead a comprehensive review of the challenges in posting employees abroad and ensure that mechanisms are in place to allow departments and agencies to respond to changing circumstances affecting assignment to staff around the world.

[Translation]

The Treasury Board Secretariat and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade both agreed with the recommendation and committed to first, establishing a partnership of key departments and agencies and second, developing and implementing a plan of action.

I am pleased to report that this partnership has been established. We have created an interdepartmental committee for the review of the public service abroad, co-chaired by the Treasury Board Secretariat and by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Membership also includes representation from the four major departments with employees abroad: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Canadian International Development Agency, the Department of National Defence and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

[English]

I'd like to take this opportunity on behalf of the Treasury Board Secretariat to thank the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade for its tremendous cooperation in all aspects of the establishment of this committee.

The terms of reference of the interdepartmental committee have been developed and agreed upon. Members of the committee have received a copy of these terms of reference, and work has started. The interdepartmental committee has already met twice, and I am pleased to report on the progress it is already making in mapping out the activities it will be conducting and the direction it will take.

The committee has set up two working groups: one on workforce demographics, chaired by the Treasury Board Secretariat; and one on business needs, chaired by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

At the end of January, over 1,570 Canadian public servants of the core public administration were working outside Canada. About a third of these employees are not working for the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Every year at least \$100 million dollars are spent in payments to address the special needs of employees who serve Canada abroad.

The working group on demographics will be tasked to gather data on public servants who serve the country outside Canada, whether they are employees who are posted abroad on single assignments or employees who have made the foreign service their career. The committee will also study the issues faced by employees' dependants, including spouses. At this point most of the information we have is, unfortunately, anecdotal; hence the reason we need to collect data. The data collected will be the crucial starting point in providing good and sustainable solutions, which we are committed to achieving.

The second working group, the working group on business needs, will examine immediate and future business needs abroad. Its work will include an assessment of how the foreign service directives, the FSDs, are addressing the needs of public servants eligible for international assignments, with the objective of identifying opportunities to respond to changing or urgent needs.

Again, to take proper decisions, good information is needed, and this working group should provide a solid ground towards sustainable solutions.

• (1130)

[Translation]

We believe that the work of the interdepartmental committee has been an important first step towards achieving a long-term solution. It will also provide us with an important opportunity to gather the data we need to analyze the situation properly and find sustainable solutions to address the challenges faced by departments and agencies in staffing Canada's positions abroad.

The interdepartmental committee is first focusing on establishing the building blocks to allow for evidence-based decision-making for current and future issues.

[English]

It should be noted that the foreign service directives are currently being reviewed. The foreign service directives are co-developed by the employer and bargaining agents through the National Joint Council and are deemed part of collective agreements.

The main focus of the current review is to realign the FSDs to better meet the changing demographics. Other priorities are to increase responsiveness of the FSDs and to streamline and simplify the language to ensure consistency in application across the various places where they are applied. We hope this review will be completed sometime in the spring. We're targeting June 2008. Improved FSDs are part of the long-term sustainable solution, and we think we are on the right track to achieve good progress with this current review.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my remarks. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

**The Chair:** *Merci beaucoup, Madame Laurendeau.*

We're going to go now, colleagues, to the first round, for seven minutes each.

The first slot is to the Liberal Party, Mr. Wrzesnewskij, for seven minutes.

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

In an increasingly globalizing planet—and the rate of globalization is accelerating—our embassies and their consular sections' trade desks are to play a critical role for Canada. It's discouraging, when you read this report, that we find such serious human resource issues. They seem to be twofold. We have an attrition rate that exceeds our recruitment rate, and then secondly we're filling slots with people who don't have adequate capabilities.

When I look at exhibit 3.1 in the Auditor General's report, under "Foreign language requirement", it says "Required for some postings". For not all foreign postings is language knowledge required.

Then I go to paragraph 3.63, and the Auditor General notes that only 16% of people occupying the posts where there is a language requirement meet that language requirement. In fact, among incumbents, only 33% have undergone language testing.

Then I look and I notice that among western democracies we have the highest rate of hiring locally. I can't help but be puzzled by this disconnect, that certain western democracies are better able to place people. I've travelled to many countries and been to many embassies, and they were able to find people to staff them in the local language, yet in Canada, a multicultural country where we have this huge reservoir of human capacity—you just have to go to any of our urban centres and you'll hear every language of the world being spoken—we can't find those recruits for these critical positions.

Is that an issue of your department, having this residue of a closed-shop, elitist attitude in terms of its recruitment, or is it something like what I encountered in the former East Bloc when embassies were being set up? Over and over I was told, "Well, we can't recruit people who have this ancestral homeland for the top positions, because we're unsure of what particular biases they may have."

I'd like you to address that particular issue: how is it possible, when we have this reservoir of capacity within our country? Have attitudes changed since the early nineties, when I heard on numerous occasions within DFAIT, "We can't hire people from those particular communities, because they may be biased in their points of view if they work in the top positions in the embassies?"

• (1135)

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will respond to that question. There are several points in there and I'll try to cover a couple of them.

If I may, just before I get to the question you asked, you made the point that we're having trouble attracting people to the department, and that we can't recruit higher than our attrition rate. In fact, we are doing just that. For the year that finished in 2007, we brought on about 600-and-some employees and about 330 left, so we are in fact staffing over our attrition rate.

That does not, of course, hide the fact that attracting good people in this day and age is extremely difficult. The public service as a whole is facing competition from the private sector and elsewhere, so as the Auditor General pointed out in her report, the requirement to find non-traditional ways of recruiting and attracting employees is a paramount challenge for us. That's what we are trying to do, and I tried to explain in my opening comments that we are moving in that direction.

With respect to the kinds of people we hire, I have to say that I have not run across, in my time in the department, any rule against hiring people because of their countries of origin. There may be some hearsay around that, perhaps, but certainly we have no restrictions on that. In fact, it's quite the contrary. We are very anxious to hire new Canadians, Canadians who are visible minorities, Canadians who can bring their particular cultural, linguistic, and other backgrounds to the service of Canada's foreign service. The recruitment drives that we have across the country are very much open to recruiting these kinds of people. In fact, I would say they are the future of our foreign service.

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj:** That last comment is encouraging.

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** And of the department, not only the foreign service.

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj:** It would be encouraging to see that sort of attitudinal shift, but do you have some numbers to back it up? Do you have numbers that can show us at the top levels of our diplomacy how many people there are, various types of backgrounds, and whether or not there's any effort made to match them to some of our more difficult postings, especially those who have the language requirements?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** I don't have the information in front of me, but I'd be prepared to provide it to the committee. It would take some research.

I can give you a couple of examples. The one that springs to mind most readily is our ambassador to Afghanistan, Arif Lalani, who comes from a middle eastern background, is familiar with the region and so forth. He's an outstanding younger officer who comes from exactly the pool you're referring to.

The fact is, though, that in our efforts to hire new Canadians and Canadians from the new communities of Canada, it takes a while for them to get to the senior levels of the organizations. In Mr. Lalani's case, I believe he was probably hired in the early 1990s. But we have now a large number of visible minority Canadians coming in who will take over the senior positions, but right now we are, I think, hindered by the fact that we did not have the good recruitment success, I'd say, in the 1980s that we needed to have to get those sorts of persons at senior levels.

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj:** Thank you very much.

On a quick point of order, could you confirm that you'll provide the statistics on that?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** We will.

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Sweet.

**Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC):** Are there printed copies of the opening remarks of our witnesses?

**An. hon. member:** Yes, right here.

**Mr. David Sweet:** I'm sorry, I didn't get it in distribution.

**The Chair:** We'll ensure that you get one of everything, Mr. Sweet.

Thank you very much, Mr. Wrzesnewskyj.

*Monsieur Laforest, sept minutes.*

• (1140)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, everyone. My first question is for Ms. Fraser.

In your report, you identify a number of factors and serious problems with regard to human resources management. You talk about erratic recruitment methods, an ineffective promotion system and problems relating to foreign languages and personnel management. Your report paints a fairly grim picture.

In your opinion, what is the main problem? You also talked about the lack of a comprehensive plan.

**Ms. Sheila Fraser:** In our opening statement, we tried to focus on what we consider to be the three most serious problems: the lack of a strategic plan, inadequate human resources management and the lack of workforce data, so that the department knows who is working in the department and has a more accurate picture of vacancies, for example, and the number of acting positions. The department needs this information. The other problem involves the whole issue of foreign service directives, compensation and so on.

**Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest:** It is difficult to compare this department to others, but in the audits you conduct, you often find that there is a lack of planning, whether in the area of human resources or in another area of management. In this particular case, it seems clear that the lack of a plan certainly has not helped.

**Ms. Sheila Fraser:** The member is quite right. We believe that the fact that there is no plan is a major weakness. We are pleased that the department has since developed a plan. I would also like to say that the Department of Foreign Affairs was not the only department without a plan. It is especially important for departments such as Foreign Affairs and Defence, where traditionally, people at lower levels in the organization rose through the ranks. There were very few lateral entries. It is therefore even more critical that these departments have a good overview of new recruitment methods in order to deal with the exodus that will soon be taking place.

**Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest:** My next question is for Mr. Edwards.

You said in your opening remarks that you now have a plan. I find it hard to understand—and I was talking about other departments partly because of that—why any department would wait until the Office of the Auditor General conducted an audit before it developed something as important as a strategic plan to recruit personnel. I cannot understand why you did not do this earlier.

You speak on behalf of the department. You had not been in your position for very long, but I still wonder why no one thought of this. You also say that you now have a program focusing more on non-traditional recruitment methods. Should a department like yours not have figured out much earlier that traditional recruitment methods are not suitable? To my way of thinking, employment is different, so different recruitment methods are called for. That is my question for you.

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** First of all, regarding a human resources plan, I agree that ordinarily, government departments should have such a plan. We had a plan before, but it was not complex enough and not designed or drafted well enough to meet our current needs.

The same is true of recruitment. For the past 50 years, we had a recruitment system in Canada. Every fall, we held exams to recruit foreign service officers. We had some 5,000 to 6,000 applicants every year, but we targeted foreign service officers. Now, we need to open our doors and our recruitment campaign to other employee groups.

• (1145)

**Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest:** The process of preparing such a strategic plan includes a step where you have to identify your strengths and weaknesses. Did you find at that point that your weaknesses matched what the Auditor General had mentioned in her report? Does your department have weaknesses other than the ones she raised?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Previously or now?

**Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest:** I am talking about the plan you just developed. When you conduct an analysis to prepare a strategic plan, it includes a step where you identify strengths and weaknesses.

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Yes, of course.

**Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest:** In the analysis your department conducted, did you find any weaknesses aside from the ones the Auditor General had identified, so that you could take action and be proactive?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** In the plan I mentioned in my remarks, we identified strengths and weaknesses, as you said, and it is because of those weaknesses that we decided to recruit employees for positions other than foreign service officer positions from now on: commercial officers, economic officers and so on. It is because of the weaknesses we identified in developing this plan that we decided to do that.

**Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest:** Could we have a copy of that comprehensive plan for our information?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Yes, of course.

**Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

**The Chair:** *Merci beaucoup, monsieur Laforest.*

Mr. Sweet, you have seven minutes.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to begin with a question to Mr. Edwards.

The reason I needed your remarks is that I didn't think I heard in the six principal themes the word "security". Particularly in our consular offices abroad, I think it would have to be one of the core focuses, particularly for locally engaged staff. I'm certain there was one incident, and there may have been multiple incidents in the past, of computers in consular offices being compromised by people who were former or present staff.

So it's with great concern that I look at paragraphs 3.66, 3.70, and 3.71 of the Auditor General's report. I notice a distinct lack of any kind of oversight for locally engaged staff, to the point where in paragraph 3.71 we read: "We noted that in recent years, the Bureau visited only four missions per year on average."

With all of that, coupled with the fact that it's not uncommon for us to have people come into our constituency offices with concerns about the way some family members had been handled at some of our offices, do you not have any concerns about any kind of security supervision in these offices at the moment? And what are you doing, as far as your plan goes, not only to get qualified people, because there are plenty of those, but to make sure these people are also not a security risk?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** I think your question has to do with our locally engaged staff, if I understand correctly. When we hire locally engaged staff, we do so just as we do when we hire Canada-based staff. It's a competitive process. We put out ads, we interview, and so forth, and there is always, before we confirm the hire, what we call a reliability check done on locally engaged staff. That means that we talk to the local security and police authorities and so forth to determine, in effect, a security clearance.

It's not a formal security clearance such as we have with Canada-based staff, but our locally engaged staff all need to be checked for their reliability. They have reference checks to determine that they are of upstanding moral character, and so on. We don't hire anybody until we've done all of that. That's the first point.

The second point is that all local staff are in fact supervised by Canadian staff, including those who work in the trade sections and consular sections. We even have local staff who work sometimes in our political sections in the non-secure areas, doing work around the provision of local reporting on political developments and so on.

So we have in each of our missions abroad a structure of supervision that we believe is reliable.

• (1150)

**Mr. David Sweet:** But Mr. Edwards, that's exactly what I'm questioning. Let me repeat some of paragraph 3.66 to you:

We found that the Department does not have accurate and complete information to properly manage these employees. We noted instances of staff recorded as working at the wrong mission, of missions without complete employment histories of their staff....

But here's one that really concerns me:

In addition, we found in some cases no record of an oath of office taken by local staff, as required by the LES Employment Regulations, or no record of their security checks.

You're telling me about this great process, but in fact when we check, there's a lack of integrity in the records. How do we possibly know that this is happening?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** We are taking steps to correct those shortcomings identified by the Auditor General. I can't deny that those shortcomings are there; the Auditor General found those shortcomings.

**Mr. David Sweet:** So in a random check today, this would not be found in any consular offices of ours?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** We constantly remind our heads of mission and our people abroad to follow the regulations, which includes security checks and keeping the records up to date.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Okay. And has there been new training, have there been new advisories going out? I notice in a number of other areas—paragraphs 3.66, 3.64, 3.56, 3.59, all in this report—that in various different levels there is a distinct lack of—how would I say it?—professional habit among leaders at the executive level of making good notations in HR reports, whether they're automated or recorded in their file at the local office.

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** I don't deny that what is in the Auditor General's report is what she and her staff found, but I can assure you that we are taking steps to correct it.

**Mr. David Sweet:** But Mr. Edwards, that's the second time you said that. What specific steps are you taking?

I asked whether there was additional training. Have you gone to some kind of advisory where you're keeping these people on a short leash and saying, if these steps are not followed, there'll be consequences?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** We're doing a couple of things, one of which, of course is, as you say, that missions have been reminded of their responsibilities as managers of the staff to ensure that the practices that we insist upon and have insisted upon with respect to hiring qualified people, having the reliability checks done, records kept, and so forth, are followed. So yes, you're right. We've done that.

As to the second thing we are doing, as I said in my comments, one of the areas in which we have been woefully behind is the maintenance of these employee handbooks, which serve the managers of missions, but also the staff, as the framework for their employment. They deal with issues such as these, and we're taking steps to have them updated across the board.

**Mr. David Sweet:** You had mentioned in your remarks that you are tasking the mission leaders with developing their own strategic plan for human resources at the local office. Could you tell me what extra resources you are giving them in order to accomplish this?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** We're giving them no extra resources. This is part of the normal management of missions, and

administrative sections working under the head of mission will need to do that work. It's a requirement, and we haven't given any special resources for that. That's part of their normal work.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Well, I might argue with you on that, but I have only a limited amount of time, because going back several Auditor General reports, in fact that hasn't been regular management practice.

Lastly, in reference to paragraph 3.47 on page 13, we're talking about getting more staff, but there have been consistent problems with having the adequate staff, or should I say competent staff, at the appropriate level. Are you addressing that? It says there, "We found that 35 of those had not demonstrated the competencies to pass the first step of the ongoing process for promotion to the EX-01 level."

Are you dealing with competency as well?

● (1155)

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** The way we're dealing with that is by regularizing people in acting positions. Regarding the process I described to you where we are looking at individuals who have been in acting positions and are confirming them at that grade, again the Public Service Commission has agreed that we can use this rather extraordinary method of doing so. That means the people in those acting positions will be looked at to match the competencies that are required. So if there was ever a question that we had people in acting positions who didn't have the competencies because they were assigned on an acting basis, or in the other cases we discovered they hadn't had the competencies, that will now be confirmed through this process.

I have to say that the work we're doing as a department in this area will take some time. As the Auditor General has pointed out, there are a number of discontinuities, and we are behind in terms of the number of acting staff, and so on. We need to make sure that what we have in place is a good promotion process, that we have a staffing process that includes steps taken by groups....

For instance, all assignments are vetted through a group of managers who look at the issue of competencies: does the individual being suggested for this position have the necessary competencies to fulfill the job, and so on? So we're taking a number of steps.

The other point is, as Michael points out, since the Auditor General's report came out and identified the number of acting positions, we have over the last year reduced those by 30%. I think that's a fairly significant success story and one that we're working on continually.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Black, you have seven minutes.

**Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP):** Thank you very much. It's nice to see you all again.

My first question is to the Auditor General. It follows up on much of what Mr. Sweet was asking at the end.

On page 15, paragraph 3.56, the Auditor General stated, “We observed a practice of assigning staff to rotational positions regardless of whether their level matched the job requirements, and we found a significant number of people in acting positions for periods such as a whole posting cycle.”

When I look at the response from the department, on page 6 of the department's response, it says that a certain level of acting is normal and desirable. The solution seems to be, in the response from the department, that there could be some seminars or a need for better hiring.

So my question is to the Auditor General. I'm curious about what you think of this response from the department. Will it adequately change the behaviours you've identified in your report?

**Ms. Sheila Fraser:** Thank you, Chair.

Our concern, for example, as we note in paragraph 3.58, was that of the 900 Canada-based staff in rotational positions abroad, more than a third were at a level that didn't match the employee's classification level and 100 were actually two levels different. Some were in acting positions for up to four years.

Obviously there will always be a certain number of acting positions in any organization, but this is truly excessive. We think it can be quite detrimental to the success of programs. It raises a lot of questions about a number of processes such as promotion processes. Are the promotion processes adequate? Maybe these people are actually competent and can't get through a promotion process; or if the promotion processes are good, then you have to question why they aren't being conducted. To have that many people acting is not good for any organization.

**Ms. Dawn Black:** I was concerned about the department response.

**Ms. Sheila Fraser:** We would like to see more specifics, perhaps. I mean, if the department says there should be a certain number, what is their target number for acting positions and how are they going to deal with the number that exists?

**Ms. Dawn Black:** Would you like to respond to that, Mr. Edwards?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Mr. Chair, if I may, as I said in a previous response, we have been able to reduce the number of actings by 30% over the last year. We have gone through an enhanced promotion process. We've put this system in place where all assignments are put through a group of managers who look at the issue of competencies and levels. So if we're not assigning a person to a level, then this board looks at it and says, well, under these circumstances this person does appear to be competent.

I agree with the Auditor General entirely that it is not healthy for an organization to have this much discontinuity.

• (1200)

**Ms. Dawn Black:** My second question deals with the issue of spouses of staff. I heard your comment that no one should be surprised by this in this day and age. I think that's very true. No one should be surprised about it. But I am surprised at how long it's taking the department to identify solutions to this problem. It was first identified, I think, in a royal commission in 1981; that's more than 25 years ago.

I want to ask Mr. Edwards why this is so complicated. Why is it taking so long to make some progress on this issue? It seems to be changing at a snail's pace. If we're going to really attract the best employees in Canada to a field that is exciting—a field that I think a lot of people would aspire to—your department really needs to address this issue in a way that works for families. This is 2008; it's not 1981, when it was first identified.

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Let me just say on a personal note, Mr. Chairman, that I am a foreign service officer and I've had six postings, and I have a spouse. I have heard this almost every day of my professional career. So personally I'm very much interested in dealing with the issue as best we can.

There are a number of things we can do inside the department and have done inside the department to provide work counselling, to try to find jobs in the local marketplace where people are posted, to give training on how to find a job, to do all sorts of things like this. Fundamentally, even people who aren't in the foreign service would want to go abroad, as we've heard from Treasury Board. Over a third of the people at our missions abroad aren't from my department now; they're from other government departments, and that is a trend that is going to continue. I expect we'll be down to about 50% of the people abroad being from my department over the course of the next four or five years, given the growth of other government departments.

So for these people who don't join the foreign service and expect a certain lifestyle...many foreign service people expect there's going to be some disruption. They join with their eyes open; let's put it that way. But it's increasingly difficult, because two-income families are now the norm. Second careers or two careers are now the norm, and we're going to have to find a way to deal with it. Perhaps it wasn't as pressing as it was in 1981 and, of course, with these other government departments.

So point one is that we're going to do our best within the department. I have certain authorities; we can do certain things. Secondly, we're working with Treasury Board in the review of the FSDs this time around to engage very, very seriously on this, and I'm hoping we will find some ways to go forward.

There is one issue that has been particularly difficult for spouses, and that's the issue of employment insurance, which has stood in the way of their ability to claim employment insurance either while they're preparing for a posting or when they come back and are searching for a job. This is an issue that goes beyond my department and beyond Treasury Board. It goes to the legislation that has to do with our employment insurance system.

So this thing has to be tackled at a number of levels, and it is an enormous—

**Ms. Dawn Black:** They need a better competitive job environment. The department really has to do a lot better than they've done and make some demonstrated progress on this issue.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Black. Thank you, Mr. Edwards.

Mr. Holland, for seven minutes.

**Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses.

I want to come back first, if I can, Mr. Edwards, to this issue of the Auditor General finding that in some cases there were no records of oaths of office being taken or security checks for locally engaged staff. Your comment, as I understood it, was that one of the actions you've taken is to remind them that they're supposed to do this.

I want to know what the consequences are, because if an incident occurred where there was a security breach or a major incident had occurred, and you went back and you asked them to show you the security check for the individual who was involved in a leak or some sort of problem, and there was no file, you can imagine that would be a devastating situation. I know that in the financial services sector, where I was, there's a requirement for employees to keep all kinds of detailed information in the files, and if it's not there, they know they're going to be shown the door.

So to me, just reminding them to try to have these things on hand isn't good enough. What's the consequence? This has been identified. Obviously this committee finds it very serious. You have individuals who don't keep these files. What do you do? Hopefully it wouldn't take an auditor's report to uncover this again, but let's say there's another auditor's report and people still aren't doing this. At one point, is there a consequence for this?

•(1205)

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** First of all, as a deputy, I believe the problem has to be fixed. Secondly, I don't think you go around fixing it by threatening to fire people because they haven't filled out these forms, and that sort of stuff. My purpose in sending out instructions is to regularize the situation and to ensure that all future hires are done the same, and that we look back at the records and make sure they are complete where they haven't been complete. I haven't received a report back, so I can't tell you the success rate on this, but that's how I believe we can partly solve the problem.

Now, the fact of the matter is that the occasions of misdoing by locally engaged staff are extremely rare. The ongoing supervision that is given to locally engaged staff by Canada-based employees, particularly if you're working in sensitive areas where you're handling money, the immigration program, the administrative program, consular programs where there might be some fees exchanged and so forth, the supervision is very thorough.

We have had cases of fraud; yes, we have, but they are very rare. I haven't been able to check whether or not they were done by people who hadn't had the security clearance or the reference check, but my guess is that they probably were.

**Mr. Mark Holland:** To pick up on that, you guess that they probably did have those files, but the reality of most of the bad things that happen in this world is that they're rare. What we want to ensure is that we minimize their occurrence and, when they do happen, that everything was done properly. I'm not looking for you

to say you're going to go out and fire these people. That's not what I'm asking. I'm asking, what are the consequences?

So you communicate back to the staff, and you expect this information to be conducted, first of all, and then held in file. Then I would expect that there would be a consequence for a first instance of being found not to comply. Then there would be a consequence for not complying a second time or a third time, or however many times you're going to catch them not doing it. But my point is that the organization, as you would see in other organizations where there's an expectation to keep information, would have clearly defined consequences, because that then informs them that you take the matter seriously.

If you simply say, "Hey, try to remember to do that", then I'm not sure this conveys any degree of seriousness. If you say, "If this isn't done, there will be this consequence; and if you are found to make that mistake a second time, there will be this consequence", then I think it communicates intent more clearly and I think we, as a committee, would have greater assurance that protective measures are being put in place to ensure this doesn't continue to happen.

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Do you want a comment on that?

**Mr. Mark Holland:** Yes, please.

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** That's what we are doing.

•(1210)

**Mr. Mark Holland:** Okay, maybe you can provide us, either now or at a later date, with what those consequences would be and what—

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** I'll tell you what the consequences are.

Managers have accountabilities up the line. That's the way the system works. They're expected to do certain things. Certainly we take our security responsibilities very seriously. We have a section in the department that is responsible for ensuring that security clearances, both locally and for Canada-based staff, are kept up to date and so on. They will be pursuing this with the managers locally to ensure that these things are kept up to date.

If this is not being done, there will be consequences for the manager in question. Issues around performance will be recorded for future promotion; in the case of EX, it could involve issues of performance and bonus pay, or not, at the end of the year.

These are the ways the public service normally ensures that accountability is carried out. So those are the kinds of consequences that would be brought to bear in this case.

**Mr. Mark Holland:** I guess what I'm getting at—and I don't want to belabour the point, because I do want to quickly go to another one—is that I would prefer some sort of clear communication that states very unequivocally what the expectations are and what the consequences are, and that this has been taken seriously.

In your response, saying it's rare and it doesn't happen that often and we guess that when there is a mistake we do have a file—those things don't give me a lot of assurance. I'd prefer there be something clearer on this, with clearly laid-out consequences. So I'll leave it to you to come back to the committee with that.

The other issue I wanted to quickly touch on was that of language proficiency. I want to talk about a couple of things that were found in the Auditor General's report. One is that only 180 positions are deemed to require a working proficiency in a foreign language.

What surprised me is that only 16% of the people occupying those positions actually met the language requirements. What was even more astounding is that 33% of the people occupying those positions have never even undergone language testing of any kind. Obviously our efficacy in different places of the world is reliant upon our ability to communicate in those languages. Can you tell us what the problem is there, and specifically, concretely, what you're doing to rectify that? This is disturbing to me, and I go back to the comments that my colleague made about the type of multicultural country we're in and the people we are able to draw from.

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** I think part of the problem here is an historical one that has to do with funding for language training particularly. It has tended to be one part of the department that has been easiest to cut whenever we've had budget cuts. So it is starved for resources, first of all.

Second, as I think I explained, we are about to review each of these positions abroad to see to what extent the language requirements are still applicable. We may have been a little ambitious in identifying these language positions. They may not all require that. If you're working in a non-anglophone or non-francophone foreign environment, you usually need to have language facilities. But English or French is often well spoken in most capital cities of the world now, and there's not so much a need for the language as there perhaps was in the past. So updating that list of positions is a good first step, and we want to do that.

Third, I absolutely believe and agree with you that where we have language requirements we must make sure we are providing staff with those language skills. That's absolutely essential. You're dead right that we need to be able to field officers who can deal with those languages. It's important when it comes to critical negotiations in dealing with a consular case, and in promoting a trade mission or accompanying a business on a trade call. So we want to ensure, as part of the transformation agenda I described earlier, that we make some big reinvestments in our language training.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Holland.

Thank you, Mr. Edwards.

Mr. Williams is next for seven minutes.

**Mr. John Williams (Edmonton—St. Albert, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Edwards, it's nice to see you again.

Madam Fraser, I would like to thank you for the work you do, because it seems that you kick-start many things to get done. We certainly need to ensure that our foreign public service is working well and up to par. There seem to be some problems there.

I noticed something in your report, Madam Fraser, that I think is worth quoting because it demonstrates the size of the problem. I'm looking at paragraph 3.4 where it says: "The Department is organized into two operational and eight functional branches, as well as two administrative branches, one of which is dedicated to supporting the management of human resources (Human Resources Branch)." And then it goes on to say....

I'm sorry, I lost my train of thought there. Let me start again, Mr. Chairman.

I'm concerned about this "no strategic human resource plan", Mr. Edwards.

Mr. Small, I understand you're new at the job. Are you going to address this issue right now? I know you're starting to work on the development of the plan. Will that go ahead and get done? What date will it be done by?

• (1215)

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** We have here our human resources plan that was prepared and released subsequent to the Auditor General's report. It's been requested already, and we'll circulate it to you.

When it comes to our Canada-based staff, this human resources plan is up to date. It will need to be renewed and refurbished on an annual basis, and we're going to make sure we do that. I expect that as we get into this a bit more we'll find ways to improve it. It's now one of the key documents for our executive committee in managing the department.

What is really new is the work we have...and it was referred to in an earlier question. We have asked our missions to prepare plans for themselves, on a mission-by-mission basis, that will focus on the locally engaged staff community, because that's where locally engaged staff reside.

Are we asking for them by June?

**Mr. Michael Small (Assistant Deputy Minister, Human Resources, Department of Foreign Affairs):** We're asking to have them by later this year.

**Mr. John Williams:** Because circumstances differ from country to country, are you able to delegate a reasonable amount of authority to the heads of missions to actually make some decisions regarding locally engaged staff, or is it all so centralized that they can't do a darn thing?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** You raise a very good question. This is one thing we're looking at right now. We have a group that is reviewing how we manage locally engaged staff.

My personal view is that we have tended to over-centralize and that we probably need to do something on a more regional basis perhaps, because of the local conditions, in terms of employment and so on. I think what we need at the centre are some common rules and guidelines and so forth on how to manage staff, and a common caring environment so that locally engaged staff see themselves as a critical piece of our human resources and a key piece of our department and our department's success.

**Mr. John Williams:** I agree, and if we trust our ambassadors and high commissioners to represent Canada abroad, I think we can trust them with a reasonable amount of human resource management too, so they can make these decisions locally.

For example, you mentioned in your own report, Mr. Edwards, that there are 23 different handbooks in the United States alone. I know it's not your problem, because you're relatively new to your position as well, but how on earth did this ever happen? We had 23 different handbooks with 23 different sets of rules just for the United States, Mr. Chairman, which, out of all the countries, has to be as close as possible to us in the way it does its business. I can't imagine how moribund the human resources management has become.

The Auditor General's report, getting back to HR, in paragraph 3.33 says, "We found no clear link between recruitment levels and long-range planning, demographic analysis, or vacancy-trend analysis". Now, are these issues going to get resolved?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Mr. Chairman, these are being dealt with and are dealt with in this plan, and indeed they are being resolved. We now have in this plan projections of our needs and so forth.

Now, let me add a little caveat on that. Because of our transformation, because of the strategic review we've just gone through, there are going to be some changes, and those changes will now need to be put into this and updated. So I think—

**Mr. John Williams:** I don't have a problem with changes as long as they're tied to a strategic plan, a long-range point of view and so on, rather than just being ad hoc, such as having somebody who quit yesterday and having to fill the job tomorrow, and not knowing what to do.

I am concerned about the fact that it's taken you a long time to get authority from the Treasury Board regarding accidental death and dismemberment insurance for the staff in Afghanistan.

The reason I ask, Mr. Chairman, is that unfortunately, as we all know, we lost one of the foreign service officers in Afghanistan. I'm wondering if his family was able to benefit from whatever changes have been made to the accidental death and dismemberment; or are we talking about people who, unfortunately, are killed or injured on the front line?

What happened with that particular foreign service officer, Mr. Edwards? Is he going to get the benefit of sacrificing his life for Canada?

• (1220)

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** I'll have to seek clarification on that. I can't answer your question. My impression is that this occurred, unfortunately, before this plan was put into place. But I believe there was a settlement worked out with his family.

**Mr. John Williams:** Do you feel it was in line with the current policy? I'd like to know that it's in line with the current policy and deemed to be adequate and fair, because our soldiers are doing a very difficult job, and our foreign service people are doing a very difficult job in a very dangerous area.

My next point is that you've made this arrangement for Afghanistan and Kandahar, but does that apply if there's a flare-up or trouble anywhere else in the world?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** It would apply just to Afghanistan and, I believe, to Iraq if there was an incident there. For the time being, it applies just to those areas, but we will see how it performs, and it could well be applied elsewhere if it's needed.

**Mr. John Williams:** I would certainly ask that you give some serious thought, Mr. Edwards, to ensuring that we have adequate death and dismemberment insurance for our Canadians abroad who are putting their lives on the line anywhere. I don't think it's appropriate that we restrict it to specific places that we know after the fact are dangerous. There may be dangers in other hot spots around the world that haven't been classified as such, and I'd like to know that we are going to address these issues for our staff.

**The Chair:** I believe the Auditor General has a comment, Mr. Williams.

**Ms. Sheila Fraser:** Mr. Chair, I think it's important the members realize that the department itself does not have the authority to do this, that it's Treasury Board, and that the department was seeking that authority for over a year before it got it. So I think we should be fair to the deputy, and you might want to ask the Treasury Board Secretariat representatives a few questions about what they're doing on foreign service directives.

**The Chair:** That will have to wait for another round.

Thank you, Mr. Williams.

Thank you, Ms. Fraser.

**Mr. John Williams:** I'd like to ask a question.

**The Chair:** I'm sure you would. In the next round, Mr. Williams.

We're going to go to the second round, but I have a question for you, Mr. Edwards, and you may want to comment, Madame Laurendeau.

It seems to me this report is indicative of a problem within the Government of Canada, and I think the auditors point out that you're probably not the only department that has this human resources and recruiting issue they're facing.

You've been around Ottawa a long time—I believe you came as the Deputy Minister of Agriculture—and there seems to be a problem. Most people, I think it's over 80%, start in the public service either as a temp or on contract. Whether the system is broken or not, they don't seem to be able to recruit, and it takes about eight or nine months to fill a job if you have a job opening. This is going to get worse because we have an aging workforce. The statistics the auditor gave vis-à-vis your department, I think, are reflected right across every department in Ottawa. You probably also saw that in Agriculture when you were there. Is this a problem that's being discussed at the deputy minister level?

Also, Madame Laurendeau, do you have any comments on this? I think this is probably one of the biggest issues facing government operations: the difficulties in recruiting, the large percentage of people who start as temporary or on contract, and then of course that leads to acting people, vacancies, and the whole problem you're seeing right across the force.

Do you have any comments, Mr. Edwards?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** I have a very quick comment.

First of all, I think this is very much at the top of the list of the Clerk of the Privy Council and the deputy community generally under public service renewal, the challenges we face as a public service and bringing in the very best people for what we believe is one of the great careers you can have in Canada. And we simply have to do better to make access to that career quicker, easier, and to make it a career full of challenge going forward.

I would suggest perhaps you should ask that question to some other deputies who are involved very much in this public service renewal effort.

• (1225)

**The Chair:** Do you have any comment, madame?

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** I would echo what Mr. Edwards is saying. There is certainly a big push through PS renewal to make sure all DMs in town are seized with this problem. The colleagues from the portfolio, the Canada Public Service Agency, also have been leading the way in making sure there is an alignment of HR planning and business planning, of which the prime example is the new plan Mr. Edwards got for his own department.

There is definitely an awareness through the exercise led by the Clerk of the Privy Council, and action is definitely being taken to make sure this problem is addressed.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Bélanger, you have four minutes.

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.):** Ms. Laurendeau, I have a few questions for you about the mandate of the interdepartmental committee.

You said in your remarks that the mandate had been approved. When and by whom?

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** It was approved quite recently—at the beginning of the year—by the committee itself and the deputy ministers in place.

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger:** The committee has met twice, so it has been in place for about three months.

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** Correct.

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger:** So in the document you circulated, the word “proposed” should be deleted, because the mandate has not only been proposed, but approved.

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** It has been approved and is in effect.

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger:** Was the Office of the Auditor General consulted before the mandate was approved?

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** There was no formal check with the Office of the Auditor General, but the terms of reference were circulated after they were approved.

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger:** I saw the Auditor General shaking her head.

**Ms. Sheila Fraser:** Mr. Chair, I wanted to say that we were not consulted before approval was given, but we did receive a copy afterward.

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger:** Once the mandate had been approved, you saw it, but you were not consulted beforehand.

**Ms. Sheila Fraser:** Yes.

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger:** Could you please tell us who is co-chairing this committee?

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** Yes. The co-chairs are Dan Danagher, a director general with the Treasury Board Secretariat, and Ms. Mignault from the Department of Foreign Affairs.

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger:** All right.

I am trying to understand the timing of what you are doing, the review of the foreign service directives that is under way and will be ending soon, because the new directives are to take effect on June 1, 2008, a month and a half from now, in relation to what the Department of Foreign Affairs is doing with its two-year project to adopt the PeopleSoft 8.9 personnel management software. How do those two things fit together?

I also have another question, this time for Mr. Edwards, in case I should run out of time.

[English]

Mr. Edwards, you mentioned that last year you set up a group that is looking at improving your IT capacity—over two years, because it's scheduled to finish next summer—and you've chosen PeopleSoft 8.9. I'd like to know how you arrived at that—whether it's commonly shared across all agencies or was by a competitive process.

That's one question.

[Translation]

Lastly, I have a question for the Treasury Board about an issue that the Auditor General may not have raised, but that concerns public servants who have to use a United Nations flight to travel abroad. I know of a case where an employee unfortunately died in the crash of a United Nations flight. The United Nations does not provide life insurance for our employees and is refusing to do so.

I would like to know who is looking at this issue, because it is a very important issue that must be dealt with, and I would like to know whether or not it has been dealt with. I do not believe it has. When our employees use United Nations flights abroad, they have no life insurance in case of a crash or accident. I hope this situation will be corrected.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Let us have very brief answers, please.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** First of all, you asked how the cyclical review of the foreign service directives fits in with the other work the department is doing. Certainly, a number of activities are under way. The cyclical review began in October and will be completed in June 2008. It is focusing on the most pressing issues that need to be looked at in discussions between the employer and its union partners.

The purpose of the interdepartmental committee's work is to enable us to create benchmark data on an ongoing basis—but you have to start somewhere—so that we have a good idea of what our future needs will be, as well as demographic information about the people working abroad. In this way, we can continuously adapt the rules that apply to these people and support them better in future.

So the two activities do fit together. Perhaps one has a longer-term vision, while the other is slightly more immediate, because the cyclical review is under way right now, but because it is cyclical, there will be future reviews. Clearly, the way in which we compile the data we need and for which the Auditor General found there was a need will enable us to respond to pressures abroad in an even more sophisticated manner.

I am not aware of the specific case you mentioned in relation to the United Nations. I will have to do some research. I cannot give you an answer right now.

•(1230)

[*English*]

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** With respect to PeopleSoft 8.9, it's the new common standard across government. When I was in Agriculture, we were implementing it there, and it must be implemented there by now. I don't know who else is doing it, but it's the common standard.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Edwards.

Mr. Fitzpatrick, you have four minutes.

**Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick (Prince Albert, CPC):** We're in a global village today, certainly in the world of business and commerce, and it occurred to me that if we have really top-notch, competent people—let's say, in a place such as Beijing—who are very competent in the language, understand the country, and have a real network of important contacts in that country inside the government and outside the government, their skill set would be very attractive to people who want to do business in a country like China and who have plans for growth in that country.

Is it an ongoing challenge, Mr. Edwards, to keep these kinds of people in the foreign service?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Yes, it is, but the frequency of people leaving the foreign service to work for private companies in those sorts of situations has varied over time and usually sometimes has to do with the terms and conditions of service inside the government. For instance, we had a high attrition rate in the mid-1990s, when there was a pay freeze in place, and it's interesting that you mention China, because that's one of the places where we were losing people.

I would say that now that our attrition rate is pretty low, 1.6% for rotational FS. That is quite low.

**Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick:** Thank you.

Something that has occurred too is that Mr. Holland and Mr. Sweet have asked about the clearance process and the local hiring practices and so on, and I always get concerned. It's easy to crank up plans; it's another thing to have plans that actually are alive and are performing and are being executed and so on.

My way of thinking on those sorts of matters is that if I was reviewing what was going on in the personnel files, whether it was hiring somebody on a low level or in a senior position, the first thing I'd look for is something that simplifies the whole process, because the memory isn't that good a thing to rely on in this world. I'd be looking for a checklist that really targets the key areas to make sure that major concerns have been addressed and have been dealt with.

If a person checked personnel files today, would you expect to find something as obvious as a checklist on each of those personnel files?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** I'm not sure what you mean by a checklist.

**Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick:** When hiring somebody in the local market for working in the department, you say you have a variety of things you look at. I'd like to think that there's a consistent approach to this, and that on there would be things such as that you checked with local police, you checked with other things, and so on, and with maybe some briefs or attachments to that checklist just to confirm that a quality analysis went into place, and a systematic approach to it.

•(1235)

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** I can assure you that is what the system does. The process starts with a job description and then, through a competitive process that's posted in public, with interviews and so on, ensures that the individuals who are looked at meet that profile; so there's a check. Then they're interviewed and you choose the best person; there's a check. Then you do the reference check. There should be also a check, and the reference should be attached to the file, and so on. If the data system is working well, which it obviously hasn't been, all of that material should be present.

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

Thank you, Mr. Edwards.

*Monsieur Lussier, quatre minutes.*

[Translation]

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

Mr. Edwards, in 2003, your department went through the difficult process of being split into two entities: the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of International Trade. These two departments merged again in 2006. You did not go through these events, but does your strategic human resources management plan allow for the possibility that the department could be divided in the near future? Are you prepared for the possibility that the department could be split again? Do you have a strategic plan B?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** No. I believe that the department went through a turbulent time when it was divided in two, as you mentioned. The employees of the department do not want to go through that again. Our plan is based on the assumption that the department will remain as it is now.

**Mr. Marcel Lussier:** Thank you.

Ms. Laurendeau, does the amount you mentioned—the \$103 million every year for payments—include locally engaged staff?

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** No. The \$103 million represents only payments under the foreign service directives. Those payments apply to the 1,570 people who leave Canada and are deployed overseas. It does not include their salaries.

**Mr. Marcel Lussier:** Do you have an idea of the annual cost of locally engaged staff?

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** Unfortunately, I do not have those figures.

**Mr. Marcel Lussier:** Does the department know the cost of locally engaged staff?

[English]

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** I missed the first part of the question.

[Translation]

I do not know. We have nearly 5,000 locally engaged employees and the salary budget—

**Mr. Marcel Lussier:** Did you say 5,000?

[English]

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Yes, 5,000.

[Translation]

**Mr. Marcel Lussier:** Ms. Laurendeau, I would like to pick up where Mr. Williams left off about your foreign service directives. The difficult conditions in Afghanistan have been mentioned. Are there any other countries that are being looked at now? I am thinking of Haiti and Darfur. Are these countries being looked at now?

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** It is important to understand that the foreign service directives include five levels of security against which all countries where people are deployed are evaluated. The evaluation looks at issues such as access to care, the quality of that care and, obviously, whether there are any problems in the country. The steps that were taken specifically for Afghanistan go beyond the top level, level five, for specific reasons, because Canada was considered to be at war in that country. The other countries where

there are serious security issues are already covered by the current foreign service directives.

[English]

**The Chair:** *Merci beaucoup, Monsieur Lussier.*

Mr. Lake, you have four minutes.

**Mr. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Mill Woods—Beaumont, CPC):** There are lots of things I could ask questions about, but I'm just referring to your opening statement today, Mr. Edwards.

In the fifth note that you make when you're going through the different things the Auditor General found in terms of the assignment process, you say, "Acting assignments can be, in my view, an important tool to develop promising officers and fill specialist needs, especially in a rotational foreign service." In my view, there would be a difference between strategic acting assignments that would be based on learning and improving your staff and competencies, versus emergency placement acting assignments that would be the result of bad planning on the department's part.

When you talk about the acting assignments as they have been in the past, which would you characterize them as?

• (1240)

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** I think I would characterize them as a mix—a mix of the first kind, which, as you say, are good ones. They are the ones where you provide promising officers an opportunity to perform at a higher level to see how they can perform, to be exposed to a mentor, or something like that. That's part of that plan. Indeed, we plan to continue with that quite deliberately through one of our promotion programs that would be developed for a small number of officers.

The second area is when you're in a position where you have an event. In the foreign affairs and international trade department, there are a lot of events. Often we have to pull together task forces and set up special teams and so on. In finding people available at that particular moment there may well be cases, and there are cases, where we have looked for the most competent people who may not be at level and put them into jobs. So there's that sort of situation, which I think is pretty hard to avoid, and, in fact, where you need to act promptly. Those are the sorts of situations where I think the flexibility we have in the foreign service, or the rotational service, is actually a major strength for us in dealing with emergencies.

The third one is, as you say, bad planning. That's what I think we have been dealing with here in the Auditor General's report. Setting aside those other two instances, there simply has been inattention to promotions and recruitment, the sorts of things that would ensure we have at level the right number of people to fill the same number of level jobs in the department, and then to be able to rotate them around. If you have a platform like that—and I think that's what the Auditor General has been asking us to do—then you can build in these other two mechanisms to deal with emergencies or to build in some kind of learning plan.

**Mr. Mike Lake:** I want to move to your comments regarding the Auditor General's finding that the department cannot fill its needs on a timely basis through promotions. And there's a whole lot of EX-2, EX-3, EX-5, and whatever, that I don't totally understand. You say, "Thus we have significantly exceeded the target in our Strategic plan for 2007-08 of 34 new EX hires."

I guess the first question I would have is, how is the target determined? And secondly, how much have you exceeded it by?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** I'd have to look at the figures on the second question. Michael, maybe you could tell me what those figures are.

In the original plan—this goes back to when the plan was being developed—34 was the number we thought was realistic. Obviously it is not. So in light of the Auditor General's Report and the fact that, as a new deputy, I felt something needed to be done on this score, we accelerated our promotion—

**Mr. Mike Lake:** I guess the natural follow-up to that is, if you exceeded it, obviously the target wasn't ideal. I think you just mentioned that. So what is the new target? What is the ideal?

**Mr. Michael Small:** Based on projected retirements, which you can never completely predict, the average growth in the government, which is small now, and projected departures, the plan we'll distribute to all members gives a five-year projection out from 2006 to 2011. In the EX category, we calculated 34 new hires we needed to fill for this past year—so that's new people joining the EX category—and 42 for next fiscal year.

This past year, we undertook this particular process, alluded to in Mr. Edwards' remarks, of looking at people who were already acting and performing at level, and we have made 45 appointments and 15 more. So we've overachieved that target, and we're taking a harder look at the number of acting assignments.

For next year we have a goal of 42. We'll be revising these numbers based on our iteration.

•(1245)

**Mr. Mike Lake:** You indicate, though, that you're lowballing your target?

**The Chair:** Okay, we're going to move on.

Mr. Cullen, four minutes.

**Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses today. Ms. Fraser, it's nice to see you again.

With respect to this plan that's being put forward by the department today, when did we first identify that this was a problem? How long ago in this country did we take notice of the issues you raised in this report?

**Ms. Sheila Fraser:** Mr. Chair, I believe we first raised the whole question of human resource planning at Foreign Affairs in an audit in 2000 and then in a follow-up audit in 2003.

**Mr. Nathan Cullen:** Have there been any human resource plans made in the interim, between when you first raised it and the presentation today by the deputy minister?

**Ms. Sheila Fraser:** As we noted in the report, the department had started working on developing a plan at the time of the audit, but the plan was not complete and was only completed after the audit.

**Mr. Nathan Cullen:** So from your first indication in 2000, it is not until now that the response to your audit arrives. Something I've raised with you before as an auditor is whether you have been able to find.... I assume when you first raised it, the government committed to doing something about this. They didn't dismiss your audit.

**Ms. Sheila Fraser:** That's correct.

**Mr. Nathan Cullen:** Have you been able to find any consequence to anyone involved at the time or since then for having not performed it over those seven years?

**Ms. Sheila Fraser:** That is not something we would have looked at. I presume that might have been a consideration, could be a consideration in performance reviews, for example, but we do not specifically look to see if there is any consequence for not doing that.

**Mr. Nathan Cullen:** To you, Mr. Edwards—and I mean this question with all respect for the position and the difficulty you face in terms of arriving at this—has it ever been part of any contracts, either yours or your predecessor's, with government to deliver this type of plan? It seems that it's highly critical, that this is a bottleneck. This is important to how Canada conducts itself abroad. Is it ever part of that performance review?

I'm trying to find out if there's any consequence to it having taken seven or eight years.

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Well, I can't speak for the seven or eight years. Let me just comment.

I think that what we have here from the Auditor General is an extremely useful evaluation and criticism of our system inside the department. It has provided us with a valuable piece of advice about what we need to fix. As a deputy, I would regard any report by the Auditor General as a starting point for fixing something.

**Mr. Nathan Cullen:** That I appreciate, and I don't doubt the value of Ms. Fraser's work and the sincerity with which you look at it. I've seen the reports before; I've seen government, with all great sincerity, address them before. Yet the effectiveness, and not necessarily just in your department but in other departments, has been wanting. There's an initial energy and enthusiasm, but yet, whether because of silo effect or lack of funds, we return to the table four, five, eight years hence and have another deputy minister saying that this is a great auditor's report, and we're going to get right at it—here's our first step at it. And we return to the same conversation.

What I'm trying to find out is whether there is a mechanism being considered to show throughout your department the seriousness of this, and that if it's not performed and if certain markers are not hit, then the consequences are on performance reviews, on financial remuneration—something to give us assurance in the House of Commons that this thing will actually happen.

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** First of all, I think that senior managers such as deputy ministers will take audit reports very seriously. I hope the report card we have provided today indicates that we have taken the last report very seriously.

Second, as the Auditor General has said, the ability of deputies to respond to these reports is limited by a number of factors, one of which is the availability of financial wherewithal to be able to do some of these things. There are the internal regulations and negotiations that are often required to deal with them. These may affect the speed with which some of these things are done.

Then finally, there could well be the Auditor General coming back and having another look at human resources a year or so down the road to see how we responded to that report; that's a form of sanction, I guess, if you say you're going to get a report card. There's this committee's work, which is certainly ensuring that these reports are followed up with action and so on. Finally, within the government there is what the Auditor General referred to: the performance review systems, which are pretty clear as to what public servants are expected to do when faced with a challenge like this.

• (1250)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Cullen and Mr. Edwards.

We're going to go to Mr. Wrzesnewskyj and then Mr. Williams for three minutes each. That really is only a one-minute question and a two-minute answer, not a three-minute question.

Mr. Wrzesnewskyj.

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj:** Mr. Edwards, coming back to the language issue, the department noted 180 positions that have a local language requirement, which seems like a strangely low number to me, but once again 16%—which anyone would, as a measure, see as a very low failing grade—actually meet those language requirements. When you extrapolate it, this means that 29 diplomats actually meet the language requirement.

We live in a country of 30 million people in which more than seven million have a first language other than English and French. There were two parts to your answer to the question previously: you said you were going to look at whether or not you should lower that number of 180, and I think that's a wrong type of approach; but you said you've reached out into our multicultural communities for recruitment.

How have you been reaching out? I've seen other government departments advertising in the multicultural press. I've never seen your department doing it. How in fact are you doing that reaching out?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Actually, you're making a very good suggestion in the course of your question, because we are in the process of designing our recruitment program for the autumn, which I would certainly like to see have much broader advertisements, such as the kind you are referring to, so that we are in fact reaching into the local communities a lot.

Traditionally what we have done is, I think, rather limited. We have gone to university campuses basically and tried to recruit from some very traditional sources—the political science departments, arts departments, the law schools, commerce, and so on—to attract people. I think we need to be much more inclusive in our outreach to get people interested in working in the department.

The interesting thing is that we have no shortage of people who want to work for our department; we have thousands of applicants

each year. But are we getting the right applicants? That's the question I have.

I think you've put your finger on an important point.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Wrzesnewskyj.

Mr. Williams, three minutes.

**Mr. John Williams:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to continue on where you cut me off, but that's okay.

Ms. Laurendeau, we unfortunately lost a foreign service officer in Afghanistan. It was identified that we had a problem with our death and dismemberment insurance policies, yet it took a whole year for the Treasury Board to give authority to the deputy minister to get the issue fixed, while we still had foreign service officers in Afghanistan doing very dangerous and difficult work on behalf of Canada. Yet it takes the Treasury Board a year to get around to delegating the authority. Why?

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** There are a couple of things. The good thing is that now we have put the mechanism in place.

**Mr. John Williams:** Why the year? That's my question. Why did it take a whole year?

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** The biggest reason was the fact that because we already had, as I said earlier, a five-level security continuum, we needed to make sure we were not doubling existing authorities. From the moment we came to the conclusion that we were not, we freed up the authority to actually do what needed to be done.

Looking forward, the second thing we've done is keep the mechanism in place. Should we face a similar situation and need to react more quickly, we will have the capacity to do so when the need occurs.

**Mr. John Williams:** Following up on that same issue, if we happen to lose a foreign service officer—and I hope we never do—in some other part of the world that has not been designated by you as a war zone, are the families going to get short-changed?

• (1255)

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** Rest assured there are protections that currently exist.

**Mr. John Williams:** So one, two, three, four, five, plus the extra bonus for the war zone. But if we lose a foreign service officer in a hot spot that later on turns out to be a war zone, it seems to me, because you're caught up in the rules, that it'll be too bad, so sad for that family, because you haven't designated it a war zone.

I'm trying to say that when we lose a foreign service officer, it is bad for Canada and absolutely tragic and horrific for their family, and they should get what they deserve. It seems to me that the Treasury Board is coming along after the fact and saying, "We'll change our policy now that we see things are going off the rails." I want to know there's an assurance, before things happen, that we are there for our people.

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** That is why we are constantly reassessing what we have in place in order to make sure that in particularly difficult areas we have the level of protection. The delegation, as it is, can be used by the deputy minister in areas where he feels it is needed, and if there are extra measures that need to be done, we have put the capacity in place to actually react more quickly.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Williams.

Thank you, Madame Laurendeau.

That concludes the questions. On behalf of the committee, I want to thank all of the witnesses who appeared before us today. This is a very important and challenging issue facing not only Foreign Affairs but probably every department and agency in government.

Before we conclude, I'm going to invite the witnesses to make any concluding remarks, if they have any.

Mrs. Fraser, I'll start with you.

**Ms. Sheila Fraser:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the committee for their interest in this report. As you said, it is a very important issue. And as the deputy alluded to, at

some future point we will be going back to do a follow-up audit to see what progress has been made.

**The Chair:** Mr. Edwards, do you have any final comments?

**Mr. Leonard Edwards:** Not really. Again, I'd like to thank the committee for its interest in this very important matter. We are going to be moving forward with our transformation agenda, and this will feature as an important part of it.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Madame Laurendeau, do you have anything to say?

**Ms. Hélène Laurendeau:** I would like to thank the committee members and you, Mr. Chair, for the very important questions raised today.

**The Chair:** Again, thank you very much.

There is another committee coming here at one o'clock, so I will adjourn now. We'll deal with the steering committee minutes on Thursday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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