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Chair

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz

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Tuesday, June 17, 2008

• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Garry Breitkreuz (Yorkton—Melville, CPC)): I'd like to bring this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security. This is meeting number 38, and we are considering the security issues related to the former minister.

We'd like to welcome to our committee today witnesses from the Privy Council Office.

The usual practice at this committee is to allow you an opening statement of approximately 10 minutes or so. Then we proceed to questions and comments. If you wouldn't mind today, if you'd introduce yourselves and maybe give us an idea of your position within the Privy Council Office, it would be helpful. Just give a brief description of what you do there, and then go ahead with your presentation.

Thank you.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth (National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister and Associate Secretary to the Cabinet, Privy Council Office): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am Margaret Bloodworth. I'm the associate secretary for cabinet and the national security adviser to the Prime Minister. I have with me Ms. Rennie Marcoux, who is the assistant secretary to the cabinet for security and intelligence; and Mr. Marc Tardif, who is the director of security operations for the Privy Council Office.

I have a brief opening statement, Mr. Chair, in which I've tried to put as much information as possible, which hopefully will be helpful. I believe the members have copies. We provided copies in both languages.

Mr. Chair, I am pleased to appear before the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security to explain the role of the Privy Council Office in the matters the committee is studying.

[Translation]

The role of the Privy Council Office is to provide non-partisan advice and support to the Prime Minister, ministers within the Prime Minister's portfolio, the Cabinet and Cabinet committees. Among its many roles, the PCO advises the Prime Minister and Cabinet on national security and intelligence issues.

The PCO works closely with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and other agencies to coordinate security arrangements for the Prime Minister, the Governor General, Cabinet and visiting government leaders, as well

as security for major events such as the 2010 Olympics and the 2010 G-8 Summit.

[English]

To assist the Prime Minister in the exercise of his prerogative to appoint persons to high public office, including cabinet, the Privy Council Office is responsible for conducting background checks, the nature of which I will describe more fully in a moment, on all prospective order in council appointees and all prospective cabinet appointees. At this point it's important to distinguish clearly between background checks and security clearances and to put the usage of both in context.

A background check is conducted on prospective cabinet appointees in order to ensure there are no criminal, security, or other concerns that could affect their suitability for public office. They have always been done only on the prospective appointee, not their spouse or companion at the time of the background check or on immediate family members.

For prospective cabinet members, the background check currently consists of a four-part verification: first, a check of criminal records and suspected involvement in criminal activity by the RCMP; second, a security assessment by CSIS; third, a check for tax compliance issues by the Canada Revenue Agency; and finally, an insolvency check with the superintendent of bankruptcy.

Background checks of prospective cabinet appointees date back at least to the 1960s. For order in council appointees to non-cabinet positions, background checks have been consistently performed since the early 1980s. This government decided last August to update these checks for cabinet ministers every two years, whether or not the minister changes office.

A security clearance is conducted for public servants and for certain contractors and consultants, as a means of determining their reliability and loyalty, before they are given access to classified information required to perform their work. There are three levels of security clearances above basic reliability: confidential, secret, and top secret.

A security clearance process is initiated at the departmental level. It consists of an RCMP criminal records check and a CSIS security assessment. A credit check is performed if the nature of the duties requires it. For a top secret clearance, a credit check is always performed, as well as a CSIS field investigation. The investigation is again done only on the individual, but issues of concern relating to close family members may arise during the process, particularly if there is a field investigation.

Cabinet ministers do not receive a security clearance. This has been a long-standing practice of successive governments in Canada and is consistent with the approach in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia. All ministers and secretaries of state, when they take office, swear an oath as privy councillors that includes a commitment to keep secret all matters revealed to them in their capacity as members of the Queen's Privy Council.

It's also worth knowing that there is currently no provision for the Government of Canada to provide security clearances to members of the House of Commons or to Senators.

• (1535)

[Translation]

Upon taking office, all Cabinet Ministers are provided with written guidance, set out in the publicly available Accountable Government: A Guide for Ministers and Secretaries of State, on the core principles regarding their role and responsibilities as ministers, and the standards of conduct which they should uphold. The Accountable Government Guide underscores their personal accountability with respect to security, including the security of their offices.

[English]

In addition, the director of security operations at the Privy Council Office or a member of his senior staff briefs each minister individually and in person on applicable security requirements and responsibilities as they relate to them, their staff, and their offices. They are reminded of their oath of secrecy in relation to cabinet confidences and the controls around such information.

In addition, ministers are made aware of the security measures to follow when discussing or transporting sensitive information. The briefing includes information about their responsibilities and those of their staff for the protection of sensitive information and assets, appropriate measures to take in that regard, and the role of the departmental security adviser.

With respect to classified documents, the Privy Council Office is responsible for ensuring the security of cabinet documents. Control of cabinet documents across the government is managed by the Privy Council Office's cabinet papers system unit. Cabinet documents, such as memoranda to cabinet, are strictly controlled by that unit. Copies are bar-coded to enable tracking, and distribution of the documents is limited to authorized recipients.

The CPSU requires departments to appoint cabinet document controllers, who are responsible for maintaining a register, ensuring secure distribution of documents within their organization, and returning them to that unit.

A second class of classified documents is made up of those from intelligence agencies. Those classified documents are handled in accordance with the protocols established by the originating agency.

A third category of classified documents originates within departments. These documents are handled in accordance with the procedures established within that department and the standards set out by the Treasury Board.

Security is a subject that senior public servants take very seriously. We continually seek to improve current measures and to learn from experience in order to ensure adequate protection of sensitive information and assets of the Government of Canada. However, no system is immune from human error.

• (1540)

[Translation]

In the context of the confidentiality of the aforementioned security procedures and the privacy rights of individuals, the Committee will understand there are limits to our ability to answer questions about individuals.

[English]

There are some limits, in regard to taking into account the confidentiality of security procedures and the privacy rights of individuals, on our ability to answer questions. However, consistent with that, we would note that background checks were completed on Mr. Bernier prior to his appointment to cabinet in February 2006 and, pursuant to the two-year updating of background checks, in April 2008, in accordance with the standard security procedures outlined above. In neither case were issues raised by the various agencies involved in the process. At no time has the RCMP informed PCO about any security concerns with respect to Mr. Bernier or his relationship with Madame Couillard.

The documents that Madame Couillard's lawyers returned to Mr. Bernier's office were classified at the secret level. They were not cabinet documents and originated within Mr. Bernier's department as part of the classified departmental briefing for their minister for the NATO meeting in Bucharest in April of this year.

With this overview, Mr. Chairman, I would be pleased to take questions from the members of the committee.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll immediately move to questions and comments, beginning with the Liberal Party. The first person on my list is Mr. Dosanjh.

Go ahead, sir.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh (Vancouver South, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you all for being here with us. My questions hopefully are brief. We have very little time. I would hope your answers are as brief and precise in order to fit that time.

You indicate that at no time did the RCMP inform PCO about any security concerns in this matter. You also indicate that the second background checks would have been done in April 2008, in keeping with the requirement that they be done every two years. I'm assuming that those checks were completed by the RCMP in April 2008.

Are you then suggesting to me that even in April 2008, despite the fact that the RCMP knew of Ms. Couillard, knew of her background, knew that she had a relationship with Mr. Bernier by then, they did not raise any security concerns with you after that check?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: As I said in my statement, Mr. Dosanjh, at no time has the RCMP informed PCO—

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: No, I appreciate that.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: —about any security concerns with regard to Mr. Bernier or his relationship with Madame Couillard.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Thank you.

Did anyone in the PCO, independent of the RCMP, know of the Bernier-Couillard relationship and of Madame Couillard's background and any security concerns with respect thereto before the matter arose in the public domain in early May?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: We're certainly aware of Mr. Bernier's relationship with Madame Couillard, at least back to last summer.

I'm not sure what the thrust of your question is.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: The thrust of my question is that the RCMP would have known of the background of Madame Couillard. They recognized Madame Couillard the day she appeared in August of last year with Mr. Bernier; she was known to the police before. You're saying to me that you, despite all of that, did not know of her background or any security concerns with respect thereto, independent of the RCMP?

I'm assuming you've informed yourself about all the matters relating to this issue. I want to know whether anyone in the PCO knew of the background of Madame Couillard and of any security concerns with respect thereto before the matter arose in the public domain.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Mr. Dosanjh, at the moment I don't know of any security concerns about Madame Couillard. I only know what I read in the papers. With due respect, we don't make decisions based on speculation in the media.

I described the process we do with background checks. That was followed in this case. I rely on expert advice from people who are involved in the business of doing that. We do not conduct our own independent investigations.

• (1545)

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: My question is not just directed to you; it's directed to anyone there. Is there anyone in the PCO who, after knowing about Madame Couillard's relationship with Mr. Bernier, raised any concerns within the PCO with respect to national security or otherwise? That's my question.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: And I repeat, Mr. Dosanjh, we do not do independent investigations—

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I didn't ask you that; I asked if you knew.... Were there any questions raised with you or with anyone else? Were there any concerns raised within the PCO about national security or Madame Couillard's background? I didn't ask you whether you checked in these situations.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: But we do check, Mr. Dosanjh, and I described the process by which we check and on which we rely for security information.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I know that. I want to know whether any red flags went up anywhere within the PCO before early May 2008 with respect to this matter.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I think I've answered that, Mr. Dosanjh.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: And what is the answer?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The answer is that we rely on the checks done by professional agencies, not on the media.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: That's not the question. Did the red flags go up or not? That's the question.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I don't understand the question of red flags. I have tried to explain what we do professionally, and that's what we did in this case.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: No, Ms. Bloodworth, you know the meaning of the red flags, and the question I have for you is this: was there anyone within the PCO—the breadth and length of the PCO—who was concerned at any time before early May 2008 about Madame Couillard's background and any national security concerns or other concerns? If you say to me, "No, nobody ever raised it; it wasn't brought to our attention; we didn't think of it", I'd be satisfied.

Answer my question.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I'm trying to answer it in a professional way, Mr. Dosanjh.

We certainly read the media reports and are aware of the speculation. We do not make decisions on the basis of speculation.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I did not ask you whether or not you thought of these issues after the issue became public; I asked you whether or not these concerns were present in the minds of anyone within the PCO at the time prior to early May 2008.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: And I repeat that in early April the second round of checks—the second-year checks of all ministers, including Mr. Bernier—was complete and there were no concerns raised.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Thank you.

I have another question.

You must have been aware of the RCMP evidence before this committee that they could not tell us, for reasons of their own—because they say they may be doing something, and it might jeopardize something they may have done or may be doing—whether or not they contacted the PCO with respect to this matter. After that the PCO went out and clarified that, to the effect that the PCO didn't hear from the RCMP with respect to these concerns at all.

First of all, how did that come about? Second, did you consider at any time that by going public with that information you might be jeopardizing something the RCMP may have done or may be doing, which is what they said to us?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The PCO did not comment on anything the RCMP may have been doing. I did read Assistant Commissioner Souccar's evidence, and I certainly think it was appropriate that he didn't tell what he tells us about background checks. We do not normally reveal background checks.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: No, that's not the question. The question to the RCMP was whether they had contacted the PCO in this matter. They said they couldn't tell us that because it might involve jeopardizing something they may have done or may be doing.

The question I have for you is this: did you consider, before going public, that you might be jeopardizing something the RCMP may be doing or may have done?

The Chair: Seven minutes goes by very quickly. Let's have time for a brief answer here.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Well, let me try once again to answer that.

I agree with the RCMP that it is not the practice in this government, or indeed in any previous government, to talk about the results of background checks.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I didn't ask you that. I asked whether or not they raised any red flags with PCO. They flatly told us they couldn't tell us that, yes or no. They weren't going to answer that question.

You answered it for the public. Did you consider at that time that you might be jeopardizing any investigation that they may have undertaken or that they may be undertaking? I ask because that's what they said to us.

The Chair: Okay. Now we're going to go over to Mr. Ménard, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, BQ): Thank you, Madam, for having come to appear before the Committee. It is my understanding that you are not the highest ranking official within the Privy Council Office, that there is someone above you.

• (1550)

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Pardon me?

Mr. Serge Ménard: I believe it is Mr. Lynch.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Yes, it is Mr. Lynch.

Mr. Serge Ménard: In a very delicate situation where the RCMP is of the view that a minister, for temporary matrimonial reasons, is engaging in relations that could be dangerous for him and for

security, would the matter be dealt with exclusively by Mr. Lynch at the Privy Council Office?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Mr. Lynch would certainly be involved in anything involving cabinet ministers.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Yes, but if Mr. Lynch were warned by the RCMP that a minister was placing him or herself in a dangerous and delicate situation, would you be aware of it?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The norm would be for the RCMP to contact me. It's not impossible to contact Mr. Lynch, but they didn't.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: It therefore would go through you.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: It would go through me.

Mr. Serge Ménard: This information would necessarily go through you.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: It generally speaking would, but not necessarily.

[English]

It's usually the case that it would come through me. It's not a rule that it has to; if I was not available, they could talk to Mr. Lynch.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: It is a very delicate matter for the very reason that it pertains to the matrimonial life of a minister. This could represent a danger for security. Is it possible that at the Privy Council Office, one person only be aware of the situation, without you yourself being apprised of it?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I suppose anything is possible. It's possible.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: It is in accordance with the procedures.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: But it's not the case in this case, if that's your question.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Fine, but how do you know that? Let us move on to something else.

You say that you provide information and advice to ministers with regard to the way in which they should handle secret documents entrusted to them. That is the case, is it not?

What do you tell them with regard to secret files? What precautions should they take when studying such documents elsewhere than in their office?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Well, there are several measures, and I'll turn to Mr. Tardif if I forget some.

In general, there are, first of all, locked briefcases provided to ministers. Second, they can have safes in their homes and locations, and a number do. Third, they have staff who can transport documents for them.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: It is not really that aspect that is a problem for me. I can well imagine that ministers tend to work after dinner and to spread documents out on their dining room table, for example, or to open up documents in their hotel room, go and do their ablutions, and then come back to them, etc.

I would like to know what you tell them when you give them specific information as to the way of guarding these documents vis-à-vis those people admitted into their private life.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: They are certainly advised to use great care when they take documents outside of the office, not to leave them in public spaces, and to be careful about talking about things in public areas, if that's your question. I'm not sure I—

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: No, indeed, my question goes a little bit further, but I imagine that you will answer it willingly. It is indeed possible that the person sharing the minister's private life see such secret documents, is it not?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Yes.

Mr. Serge Ménard: From what I understand, you have never felt the need to investigate ministers' spouses. I also believe that you never in fact had any reason to want to launch any such investigation.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Just to be clear, we don't investigate anyone. What we do are background checks through the various agencies. Those background checks are done—yes, if that's your question—on the potential appointee or, in the case of the updates, on the person in the position, not on their spouses.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: In fact, no incident has ever in the past prompted you to carry out a summary investigation on a person involved with a minister.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: It still wouldn't be us who would do the investigation. It would be either the police or the security agency, depending on the circumstances. We're not an investigative agency. That is what I'm trying to say.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: I believe that, theoretically, you are in agreement with me on the fact that a person having had intimate and continuous relations with several members of various criminal organizations would represent a security risk and that such a person should, to the greatest extent possible, not be exposed to secret documents.

• (1555)

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: If you're asking me in theory if that could represent a danger, yes, it could. I'm not commenting on this case because I don't know enough of the facts to comment.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: I know. I understand that you are limiting us to the world of speculation because you cannot tell us the truth. But we would like to know the truth. In any event, there is a part of the truth that we are certain of knowing.

You say that, by experience, you always strive to improve...

[English]

The Chair: There's a point of order. Just wait.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Oxford, CPC): I hope my colleague didn't say that the witness wasn't telling the truth, because if he did, that's—

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: It is a translation error, Mr. MacKenzie, it is not what I said. I will explain to you what I said later on, in English, and you will understand. Ms. Bloodworth understood me perfectly.

[English]

The Chair: You have one minute left.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: You seek to improve your security check procedures based upon what you experience, correct?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: After every incident we would do that, yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Do you not think that it would be appropriate to carry out a more in-depth check when you discover, at a given point in time, that a minister has become intimately involved with a person who for many years had serious and continuous links with various members of organized crime? These are exceptional cases and it is easy to carry out such checks through the databases we keep on criminals.

[English]

The Chair: That will have to be the final question.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Again, I don't do investigations, and it is always possible to change the procedures for background checks. Governments, from time to time, have in the past.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Ms. Priddy.

Ms. Penny Priddy (Surrey North, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have several questions. One is just a clarification.

I think it says in here that if it is a cabinet document, it is marked. Or what did you say?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: They're bar-coded.

Ms. Penny Priddy: Okay. But the document referred to here was not a cabinet document, but a document that was generated within the ministry of Monsieur Bernier.

Do you know, or do you have responsibility for, how ministries then track documents that are classified as secret? Or does everybody just do their own thing?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No, they don't just do their own thing. Deputy ministers in departments are responsible for setting out the procedures in their department, but there are standards set by the Treasury Board within which they do that.

Ms. Penny Priddy: Would you know what those are? Since this a secret document, and it was still left in a place where anyone could have had access to it, whose responsibility would it have been to trace this to know that it was missing? Would it have been the deputy minister's? Would it have been Treasury Board's? Whose responsibility would it have been?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The short answer is that I don't know, because the review has not been completed in this case. But if I can try to be a little more helpful, deputy ministers are responsible for setting out the procedures for handling documents in their departments, but the ministers are also responsible for things that are within their office. In this case, we have a former minister who took responsibility for the fact that an error was made, and he has resigned.

Ms. Penny Priddy: But only after the documents were missing for a period of time—five weeks. So I'm puzzled that there is a system in place that has secret documents missing for five weeks and does not have a trace done to at least alert the deputy minister to that. That is not your responsibility.

Do I understand you to say—and I'm not arguing your point—that you would only initiate further background checks if the RCMP alerted you to the need to do that? Would you accept information from any place else, or would it only be from the RCMP? I ask this for other than the regular background checks that you do; I understand that part.

•(1600)

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Let me say, first of all, that if there's any reason to do any criminal investigation or any security investigation, that would not involve me—and in fact, it would be inappropriate to involve me in that. I don't control any of that, nor should I.

The purpose of background checks is to provide advice to a Prime Minister when a Prime Minister is making decisions about his or her cabinet. The purpose of what we do is to provide that information to the Prime Minister in order for him to decide whether he wants that person in the cabinet or not. That's the whole purpose of background checks.

Ms. Penny Priddy: Yes, I spent 10 years in a cabinet and I understand that.

So if there were a reason for the RCMP to be concerned about someone's background from a criminal perspective, or from an attachment to a criminal perspective, if that is not your responsibility—and I take your word that it is not—whose is it?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: It's the RCMP's responsibility to conduct criminal investigations.

Ms. Penny Priddy: If they conduct a criminal investigation on someone who is a partner of a minister, does it just stay within the RCMP? Is the Prime Minister never informed?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No, but that's a different issue. I would expect that if there was a significant security concern relating to a minister, the RCMP would inform me, but not in order to do something about it. They would inform me so the Prime Minister could do something about the cabinet minister.

Ms. Penny Priddy: I perfectly understand that you would not be doing something about it, that you would simply be alerting the Prime Minister. I realize it's the Prime Minister who's accountable for doing something. But that information would be passed to you, and you would then pass it to the Prime Minister.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I would expect that if there was a significant security concern involving a minister of the cabinet that the RCMP was aware of, they would tell me or, in my absence, Mr. Lynch.

Ms. Penny Priddy: Okay.

I want to reaffirm a statement that I think you made earlier, that it is possible that Mr. Lynch would have information that you do not.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: It's certainly possible, but I said that in the case before the committee he didn't. I know that because I've discussed it with him, and he doesn't. But it's not impossible—in fact, it's quite probable—in some cases that Mr. Lynch could have information I don't have.

Ms. Penny Priddy: All right. So your expectation would be that if the RCMP had security concerns or criminal concerns about someone who was connected in a significant way to a minister, that information would be transferred to you to transfer to the Prime Minister.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: That's not quite what I said. If I could correct that, I said I would expect that if the RCMP had significant security concerns relating to a minister of the cabinet, they would let me know.

Ms. Penny Priddy: That's what I thought I said, but perhaps it's a matter of words.

Is it only the RCMP that would pass information on to you? Would there be anybody else?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: If it's criminal, yes. It's not impossible that if it were a national security concern of some kind, it might have been CSIS. It depends on the nature of the concern.

Ms. Penny Priddy: That's fine for now. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. MacKenzie, please.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Bloodworth and folks, for being here today.

I think your answers have been very clear and understandable. I'm not sure if everybody wants to look at it that way. But what I think I heard you say, and perhaps you can clarify it for me, is that these procedures have been in place for a number of years. The only exception is that this government, this Prime Minister, has asked that those checks for cabinet ministers be updated every two years.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Background checks have been in place for a number of years. There have been amendments made over the years to the way in which background checks are done. For example, they did not involve a tax compliance check at the very beginning, and they now do. I'm not sure if there was always a check about bankruptcy; that has been added. But the checks themselves have been conducted since at least the early 1960s, some form of background check.

• (1605)

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: So there has been no change. It has been basically the same for a number of years. Sometimes if people want to believe it's another way, they can believe that, but in fact that's the way it is. And if we wanted to change it going forward, we could change it, I'm sure, if that was the desire.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I've tried very hard to stay with what the facts are related to this—

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Absolutely.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: —and that's what I did set out in my opening statement. But of course processes can always be changed.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: If I understood you correctly, you did not have any information that your office went to the Prime Minister with. There have been allegations that PCO must have told the Prime Minister about this situation, whatever is perceived to be wrong with it, but that in fact is not true. You have not had information provided to you by the RCMP, so you have not gone to the Prime Minister with something you don't have.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I'm not sure I followed all of that, Mr. MacKenzie, but I'll repeat: PCO has never at any time been provided by the RCMP with any security concerns related to Mr. Bernier or his relationship with Madame Couillard, so by implication, we could not have gone to the Prime Minister with that.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Okay. I think that's one of the issues we've been dealing with.

The other issue is that somehow—and I understand fully what you're telling us—you do not investigate. You take your information from the investigative agencies, such as CSIS and the RCMP.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: That's right. Our role is an advisory role, not an investigative role.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Yes, and I think you've made it abundantly clear through today's appearance before this committee.

I guess the only other thing is that I think you've made it clear that PCO, not doing investigative backgrounds, would not get into the areas that some of my colleagues have talked about and that it seems the world knew—except that most of us didn't—about individuals who might or might not associate with a cabinet minister. That's not your role.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I've tried very hard to stick to just what facts I know and the processes that are in place, and not to

speculate. I'm not sure whether that answers your question, but that's what I've tried hard to do.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Fair enough.

Those are the only questions I have.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Those are the processes as they exist. Obviously things could change, but that's how they exist.

The Chair: Ms. Jennings, please.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Ms. Bloodworth. You say that you are not very informed about this situation in particular, but when exactly did you personally become aware of Ms. Couillard's murky past? You stated that you had known since last summer that Ms. Couillard and Mr. Bernier were together. When exactly did you learn of her shady past and on what date did the Privy Council Office learn of it?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Learn of what?

Hon. Marlene Jennings: I am talking about Ms. Couillard's shady past and her links with organized crime and biker gangs. On what date, exactly, did you personally receive this information about Ms. Couillard? And what exact date did the Privy Council Office become aware of this?

[*English*]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The difficulty I'm having with your question is that what I know to date is what I read in the newspapers. I am not privy to anything other than what's in the newspapers, and I don't know the exact date it started in the newspapers. That's what I know.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marlene Jennings: If I understand you correctly, within the government, no matter the department or agency, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the RCMP, Foreign Affairs, the Privy Council, the Department of Transport, the Department of Public Safety or the Prime Minister's Office itself, no one was ever officially informed by the Privy Council Office of Ms. Couillard's shady past. You yourself stated that you were aware last summer of her relationship with ex-minister Bernier. He was minister at the time and you stated that you had done a biennial check in April 2008. You therefore were aware that these two people were involved in a relationship. You therefore were not formally informed by anyone of her murky past, and you only learned about it through the media.

• (1610)

[*English*]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I think I've answered that question.

[Translation]

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Is that a yes or a no?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: To this date, I have not been informed. I don't know for a fact what's in the newspapers; I know the allegations that are in the newspapers.

[Translation]

Hon. Marlene Jennings: And what about the Privy Council Office? You say that in your capacity as a representative of the government, you were never officially informed by anyone of Ms. Couillard's shady past, and that all of the information you possess in this regard has come from the media. You do not even know if this information is correct or not. Was anyone within Privy Council officially informed at any point in time of Ms. Couillard's murky past?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The difficulty I'm having with the question is that you are premising that all of that is fact, and I don't know if it's fact. I've tried to be helpful about what we do know and the process we use to find out.

I can say, if you're asking whether there's somebody other than me

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Okay, I'll make it simple for you.

The RCMP came here and testified that Madame Couillard was a person known to them. That's fact. They came here; they testified to that. So I'm asking, at any time, has anyone in the Privy Council been informed formally by anybody, from any department, that Madame Couillard was known to the police?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No, I heard Assistant Commissioner Souccar's testimony—but no one else.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: And the answer is no? Not you, not anyone else at Privy Council, at any time, not even to this date?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Well, to this date, I've heard Assistant Commissioner Souccar. That's all.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: So the first time that anyone at Privy Council knew officially that Madame Couillard was known to the police was when officer Souccar came and testified here and made that statement and affirmation.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: And I don't know yet what he meant by that, nor would it be appropriate for me to know. I'm not blaming him for not telling me, because they don't tell me about all criminal investigations, or any other investigation.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Ms. Bloodworth, when you keep saying "I", are you speaking for yourself personally, or are you speaking for yourself and everyone at Privy Council?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I'm speaking for the Privy Council Office.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Thank you. I'm glad you made that clarification.

So your statement is that the Privy Council only learned that Madame Couillard was a person known to the police on the day and

as a result of the testimony of officer Souccar of the RCMP, when he appeared before this committee Tuesday of last week.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I know what he said then.

The Chair: Okay, we'll move on to Monsieur Ménard.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: I know that you do not wish to respond to certain questions because you do not have authority to answer or because it would in your view not be appropriate for you to do so. I will therefore put some of these questions to you and ask you to answer by saying "yes", "no" or "I am unable to answer".

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I will try. Not all questions are answerable by a yes or no, but I will try.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Or "I am unable to answer".

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No, no, I meant that sometimes a yes or no answer is not sufficient, but I will try.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Did Privy Council concern itself with the relationship between Mr. Bernier and Ms. Couillard?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: At the present time? No.

Mr. Serge Ménard: At any point in time? If you are not concerned by it at present, then we do not view notions of security in the same way. Were you concerned by it before?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: No? Very well. The answer is not "I am unable to answer".

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I think I answered that.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Fine. Why did you release the latest communiqué, the one stating that the RCMP had never communicated with you?

• (1615)

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Well, that's a good question, because it's not normally something we would answer, as Assistant Commissioner Souccar said. It is always a difficult slope to go down in talking about security clearances. But the decision was made in the Privy Council Office that, given the speculation, it would be better in this case to actually say. But you're right to point out that it is not normally what we would do; we normally do not speak about background checks, whether it's for this government or any other government.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: But you knew that you were going to appear before the Committee.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Actually, I'm not sure I knew at that stage. I may have, but I can't actually recall. It wasn't really part of the decision. Anyway, I'm sorry, I can't remember when I knew.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Does the Privy Council have access to criminal databases?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: I also understand that the response you gave with regard to the RCMP also applies to CSIS. Did CSIS ever inform you of Ms. Couillard's past?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No.

[Translation]

Ms. Rennie Marcoux (Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Security and Intelligence, Privy Council Office): It confirmed publicly that it had no role to play with regard to the Bernier-Couillard affair.

Mr. Serge Ménard: Now, you say that your role is that of advisor to the Prime Minister with regard to national security and intelligence matters.

When did you discover in the paper that Ms. Couillard had been involved with members of organized crime?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I honestly can't remember when.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: I imagine that you read the papers.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Yes, and when it was in the papers, I noticed it.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: It came out quite soon, namely in May 2008.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I just don't know the timing of the print. It's whenever it was in the papers.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: I understand that you rely only on facts and that you do not take into account speculation, but it does happen that worrisome speculation is later confirmed, would you agree?

When the newspapers say that Ms. Couillard was involved with members of the Hells Angels, one of whom was assassinated and the other flipped, is there not reason to believe that the minister's relationship might be worrisome security-wise? Consequently, would it not be appropriate to speak to the RCMP?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The first point I will reiterate, because I'm always leery about insinuations being made when I don't know the facts. I don't know the facts of Madame Couillard's background. I only know what I read in the paper.

Secondly, when I did read it, as you recall, the second round of checks had just been done—

Hon. Marlene Jennings: On a point of order, I believe Mrs. Bloodworth would like to make a correction. She just made the statement that she doesn't know the facts, that she only knows what she reads in the paper. But she just testified that she was aware of the testimony of officer Souccar before this committee, on the record officially, that Madame Couillard was a person known to the RCMP.

The Chair: You'll have an opportunity later. That's not a point of order.

Go ahead, Monsieur Ménard.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: That's certainly correct. I have read Assistant Commissioner Souccar's testimony and, I guess, I know what he said in that testimony.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Thank you.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I'm sorry, I have forgotten the question.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Ms. Bloodworth, based upon the way in which you lay out the problem, you seem to me to be quite rigid, to simply follow procedure and to not have the necessary flexibility to adapt to a very unusual situation involving security risks. I am nevertheless convinced that you have this ability. You even have the duty to adapt to exceptional circumstances.

You therefore read in the papers that the person who is sharing the minister's private life had important links with organized crime, with dangerous people.

[English]

The Chair: You'll have to wrap it up, Monsieur Ménard.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: You yourself recognized that this could lead to security breaches. At that time, even though it was perhaps only speculation on the part of the media, were you not tempted to ask the RCMP to verify the facts so as to determine if it was true that Ms. Couillard had had such connections?

•(1620)

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I do remember the second point I was going to make, which was, as you recall, that the second round of checks, which included something from the RCMP as well as CSIS and the other checks, had just been completed when that came out. They were completed in early to mid-April. So I had just recently heard from the RCMP.

The Chair: We'll go over to Mr. Norlock next, please.

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Thank you.

Thank you for coming today, witnesses.

This question will, unfortunately, again be for Ms. Bloodworth.

Did you receive or have you received from any political party, the official opposition or any opposition party, a call, or did they write you or let you or anyone at PCO know in any way that they personally had some serious national security concerns regarding the relationship that the Minister of Foreign Affairs had with Ms. Couillard?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No, I didn't.

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: No.

Mr. Rick Norlock: Thank you. At any time, from the beginning of this issue to the end?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No.

Mr. Rick Norlock: Thank you.

That's all.

An hon. member: You all knew her.

The Chair: Mr. Cullen, please.

Hon. Roy Cullen (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Ms. Bloodworth, Madame Marcoux, and Mr. Tardif.

I find it amazing that when the RCMP did their updated background check in April 2008, they didn't flag this as an issue—but we'll have to leave that for the questioning of the RCMP—because at that point in time, they knew about the relationship between Mr. Bernier and Madame Couillard, and clearly Madame Couillard was a person of interest. She may not have been convicted, but she certainly was on their files. So we'll save that for the RCMP.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Excuse me, Mr. Cullen. I haven't heard anyone say that she was a person of interest. The reason I interrupt is because, as you know, those terms can be used differently. I did hear Assistant Commissioner Souccar say that she was known.

Hon. Roy Cullen: I'm sure she was. I'm concerned about the documents. I know that these particular documents were departmental documents. And there's a review going on in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

My concern is that, first of all, if this particular set of documents was left there for four to five weeks, I don't know, and I don't know who knows, what other sets of documents may have been left at Madame Couillard's apartment. Hopefully the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade report will comment on that.

I know these documents are secret. They were prepared in advance of a NATO meeting. My concern is that anything in there could have put in jeopardy the safety of our troops or NATO troops in Afghanistan.

I'm not trying to be an alarmist, but we've just had a major break-in at a prison in Kandahar. It's that sort of thing. You're probably not

at liberty to comment on that, because the information is secret. But I would expect that within the PCO there's a lot of information floating around right now probing into what actually was in the documents.

Let me ask a more specific question. If you can comment on what was in those documents, I'd appreciate it. You may not be able to do that. Have our NATO partners been informed of this security breach and potentially other security breaches? What has their reaction been? Are you aware of those facts?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: You're quite right, Mr. Cullen. Obviously any inappropriate handling of secret documents is of concern. Indeed, the minister in this case took responsibility and resigned.

But there were several steps taken afterwards. There is a review ongoing, which includes an injury assessment. There was a quick assessment made initially. There were the briefing books, and they are fairly thick. So the review is to do a thorough assessment.

NATO was informed. There was not anything that either I or Foreign Affairs saw, in a quick review of them, of the nature you are talking about. That said, they were secret documents, and they were clearly inappropriately handled.

NATO was informed. There was also a check to see if there was any information that had been provided by our allies in confidence. Again, the preliminary review, which stands to be confirmed in the full review being conducted now, showed that, no, there was not. So the only one informed was NATO.

• (1625)

Hon. Roy Cullen: Thank you.

I don't know what the timeframe is for the DFAIT review, when we might see those results, the kind of timelines the Privy Council would be looking at to come to grips with some of these facts, and whether they will reveal that sort of information. I hope they do or that they will at least touch on those factors.

I'd like to come back to the role of the PCO—

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Would you like me to answer?

My expectation is that the review will be completed by the end of July. We obviously are concerned about finishing the review of everything involved with this, and that's the expectation. It will be by the end of July.

Hon. Roy Cullen: I'd like to turn now, quickly, to the role of PCO versus the PMO. You talked about the update of Mr. Bernier's background check.

By the way, I find it somewhat ironic that in the conflict of interest guidelines, through the Ethics Commissioner, an officer of Parliament, I have to go through this rigmarole all the time with my wife's assets and what have you. When I was Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, they tried to have my wife set up a blind trust. They couldn't require it. In other words, in terms of spouses, there seems to be a different set of guidelines. Nonetheless—

The Chair: Do you have a brief question?

Hon. Roy Cullen: I have a quick question.

In terms of the role of the PCO versus the PMO, you got the briefing by the RCMP in April 2008. The RCMP basically said, "Not a problem." But within the PCO, and even in the newspaper reports and what have you, or within the PMO, someone somewhere must have said, "There's something we need to be careful about."

Would it be possible that someone in the Prime Minister's Office, for example, said, "Well, we see this, but we don't think it's a problem, because these are private matters"? Or would you take it upon yourself, Ms. Bloodworth, to flag it, notwithstanding the positive report you had on Mr. Bernier, and talk to the PMO people and say, "I know we have a clean report, but I've been reading the stuff in the newspaper. Is everything copacetic?"

The Chair: Okay, do you have a brief response?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Well, I'm obviously not speaking for PMO. Look, I've tried very carefully to stay with the actual facts. We had the clearance and we go by background checks; we go by information we get by the agencies qualified to do so. That's not any different with this government from what it was with the government you were a part of, or any government prior to that. That's what we rely on.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. MacKenzie.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Thank you, Ms. Bloodworth.

It is ironic that you said you just want to deal with the facts. I get the feeling that other people want to deal with supposition on what people might or might not have known.

In response to this whole area, you've made it very clear what the role of PCO is, where the information comes from. Somehow my friends seem to have the idea that if you saw a picture of somebody you should recognize them as either being okay or not okay. I don't think that's the role PCO is in. If I'm wrong on that, please tell me, but it seems to me that all of my friends opposite seem to know an individual I didn't know, and I don't think my colleagues on this side knew. I have this difficulty in that if they knew they didn't tell anybody. But that's not the role of PCO, as you've explained it to us here today.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I'm not sure whether that's actually a question. I've tried to explain what we do with regard to background checks. PCO does provide advice on a whole range of things. I have not talked about any of those things today. I don't mean to suggest that what we do with regard to background checks is the only thing PCO does.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: I think in regard to this issue we're talking about one particular cabinet minister and his association with one particular person. My colleagues have indicated that everybody knew that person and have made certain assumptions about whether or not red flags should go up. I saw perhaps pictures similar to what you did and others did, and to what my colleagues on this side did. We didn't know the individual. I don't know why they would assume you should know the individual, or that the PMO should know the individual, or that anyone else should, and they should have done something about it. It seems that if they knew, they should have brought that issue forward and certainly didn't.

From your evidence to Mr. Norlock, I think you were not informed by them, if in fact they knew this person and were concerned about security. If that is in fact the case, I don't know why we keep sitting here and trying to beat you over the head, and the RCMP and everyone else, about something that they think they knew but didn't tell anyone. I don't know if you can tell us that there's some magic thing out there that—I think it's a UFO kind of thing—that PCO would then assume that they should be concerned about a security issue about something they don't know.

I'm afraid there's probably not an answer in there, or a question, or whatever, but the whole thing seems to me to be ludicrous. We're looking at some kind of conspiracy theory among the RCMP, PCO, PMO, and the only people who seem to know all the dangers are the members of the opposition. I do respect you here and I don't know how you can answer, but try.

• (1630)

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Well, what I've tried to describe is what is done with regard to background checks, which is one input to prime ministers as they decide on cabinet formation. And it is for this government as it was for previous governments. I certainly didn't mean to suggest, when I said the opposition had not written to me or called me, that they were under an obligation to do so. That wasn't the import of my answer. If it was taken that way, that wasn't the way it was meant.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Nor was I trying to suggest that. All I'm saying is that since this has occurred they've certainly been in the press indicating that everybody else should have known. All I'm saying is that they didn't tell anybody. I don't know how you could know these kinds of things and how you could then tell somebody else. It's just a mystery to me how everybody on that side seemed to recognize it and nobody else did.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go over to Ms. Brown, please.

Ms. Bonnie Brown (Oakville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Bloodworth, I identify with you. I too only know what I read in the papers. Perhaps we're both related to that American comic Will Rogers, who used to start every show with that particular line and then pull things out of his pocket about what he had read in the paper.

There will be some things that I think you probably do know that are factual. So I'll go on those questions.

Could you tell me on what day and at what time of that day—whether it was morning, afternoon, or evening—Madame Couillard's lawyer contacted the Government of Canada about the classified documents in her possession? When did that information come to the attention of the government?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I can tell you when it came to my attention. I don't know when it came to Mr. Bernier's attention. That presumably will be looked at in the review. I learned some time mid-afternoon on May 26. You're talking about the documents now?

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Yes. Was that a Sunday or a Monday?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: That was Monday.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Thank you.

Do you know the name of the person who contacted the government on her behalf?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No, I don't. I'm sorry.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Do you know who, from the Government of Canada, communicated with her lawyer on the government's behalf?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: In other words, it's our understanding that they contacted the government, and then the government contacted them to say what to do with the documents—to give instruction, in other words.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: My understanding is that it was through Mr. Bernier's office, but I'd qualify that by saying I don't know that. That's part of the review.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Thank you.

Do you know how the documents were retrieved from Madame Couillard's lawyer?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Do you know to whom in the Government of Canada the documents were returned? Who actually received them on behalf of the government? They were the property of the government, so I assume somebody in the government had to receive them.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No, I don't. I know that the Department of Foreign Affairs got them some time during the Monday afternoon as well, but I don't know about before that.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Thank you.

On what date and at what time were these classified documents finally back in the possession of the Government of Canada? I think you've already answered that. You're saying some time Monday afternoon the Department of Foreign Affairs said they had them.

Now, did you watch the French television interview with Madame Couillard on Sunday night?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: So no alarm bells would have gone off about that?

• (1635)

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I didn't watch it, but I thought, actually, it was Monday night. I may be wrong on that.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: I'm not sure either. I thought it was Sunday night.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The only reason I'm saying that is that I thought it was the same evening that the ministerial change actually took place, but I stand to be corrected.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Okay.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: That was Monday night; that's why I said that.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Yes.

Considering these were NATO documents and they were briefing papers for a meeting that was yet to come, do you know of any mitigation efforts that have gone on with regard to our NATO partners in case our reputation as a country capable of securing documents is tarnished now? Did any envoys go to the capitals of Europe or did any envoys go to NATO headquarters, or was it just a phone call to NATO?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: First, let me make a correction to the first part of your question. They were not NATO documents; they were our documents.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Yes, but in preparation—

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: They were about the NATO summit, which, by the time this happened, had already happened. The NATO summit was in early April.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Yes, I know.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Those two points being corrected, as I understand it, there was a phone call made to NATO and a subsequent letter to NATO. There was a check made to see if there was any information in there that had come from one of our allies, that was their information, and the first cut—and I premise it by saying the review will assess that more thoroughly—was that, no, there was not. So there were not formal representations made to other capitals beyond NATO.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Thank you.

Now, you said yours is not an investigative agency and you don't do investigations. I understand that. In your capacity as national security adviser, do you ever ask for an investigation to be done of something that may be worrying you as the main adviser to the Prime Minister? Do you ever ask for an investigation, have you ever done so, and did you do so in this case?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: We would do it in relation to cabinet documents. If there were cabinet documents missing or something, usually that's an investigation that a department would do, but I could in that case.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: But you didn't ask for one this time?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: On the cabinet documents? There was no reason to do that.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: So you're really concerned only with cabinet documents?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No, I was trying to recall and answer your question. I was involved in the investigation of the unauthorized release of information with regard to the NAFTA issue. That was an investigation.

So when I said we're not an investigative body, I meant that we're not an investigative body like the RCMP and CSIS. All departments conduct a form of investigation, if you like. They look into things within their own purview and they may hire people to help them with that.

The Chair: You're going to have to wrap it up, Ms. Brown.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: As national security adviser, supposing you heard something about some other department, some other case altogether that was going on in a department, and you weren't sure that you wanted them to do the investigation, might you call the RCMP and ask them to do it?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: What I would do is call the deputy minister of that department, because ultimately they are accountable. And if I thought it was wise because there was some indication of a crime, that's when the RCMP would be called. I might suggest it to them, yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

I believe that completes the first round. We'll start over again now.

Mr. Dosanjh.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Thank you.

Ms. Bloodworth, you did indicate to us that there was a concern in your mind, and that prompted the statement in response to the RCMP testimony before us. That concern prompted your statement that the PCO issued.

What I want to know is, who first thought that the PCO should do this statement?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: First of all, I don't think I used "concern". It's not an inappropriate "concern". I don't think it was my word. My word was a lot of speculation, and we did decide.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I appreciate that.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I can't recall, between Kevin Lynch and me, who first suggested it, but it was between the two of us.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Did you consult with the RCMP before issuing the statement?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Yes, we did.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: And who did you consult with in the RCMP?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: By the time I talked to the commissioner, I was telling him what we were going to do.

But I think, Rennie, you talked to...

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I spoke to Assistant Commissioner Souccar and I told him we were issuing a statement.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: And what did Assistant Commissioner Souccar say to you?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: We talked at length about the pros and cons, but I don't recall his saying to me that it would impair an investigation.

• (1640)

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Right. What were the pros and cons?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: Well, it was one day after they testified.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Yes, and what do you mean by that? What do you mean by that?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: Essentially, it may look as if we were contradicting the RCMP. We talked that through, and I said we were not contradicting the RCMP; we were trying to clarify media speculation.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: So did he tell you it would not impair an investigation?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I don't know if we even talked about the issue of an investigation.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: You just actually said that he said it would not impair an investigation.

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: No, I said we did not talk about that.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: No, no. You actually said that he said to you, "It would not impair an investigation".

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I don't think I said that, sir.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I would like the time to stand still, and if there is—

Hon. Marlene Jennings: What she said was that he didn't say it would impair an investigation.

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: That's what I meant exactly.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Yes, he did not tell you that it would impair an investigation.

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: Okay.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: What else did he say, though? In terms of the pros and cons, what else did he say?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: Just what I explained, sir.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I can tell you what the biggest con from my point of view is. The biggest con is that we do not normally talk about background checks at all.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: This wasn't about a background check, madam. I'm sorry, you keep bringing it to the background check. This is about whether or not they raised any concerns with the PCO —

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Which they would do through background checks.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: No, they wouldn't. They don't have to only talk to you about background checks. Am I right?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I'm sorry, I was trying to answer your question.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: No, I appreciate that.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: If you don't want an answer, that's fine.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Thank you.

Now, how long did this conversation last?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: Not very long.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: How long, madam?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I would say less than 10 minutes.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Less than 10 minutes. What you have said could be said in less than actually two minutes. What were the other eight minutes spent on?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I said we spoke for less than 10 minutes. I don't recall if it was for two, five, or ten minutes.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Do you have the notes of that conversation that you made at that time?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I don't know if I do.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Did you make notes?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I honestly can't remember.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Would you go back and check?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I will.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: And whether or not you kept those notes.... If you kept those notes, I would like you to advise the clerk—

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I will.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: —and forward us a copy with any deletions that you might want to make because of national security.

The question I have is this. On the Foreign Affairs review that is being done right now, is the PCO being asked to assist? And if so, in what capacity and in what way?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Yes, we are assisting. The letter that went from the clerk to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs asked them to do it in close cooperation with the director of security operations, with PCO, which is Mr. Tardif.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Okay. Who is actually heading that investigation now?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: That's the director of security operations at Foreign Affairs, who is....

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: Paul Meyer.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Have they enlisted the assistance of any forensic experts, including the RCMP?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: They have hired a firm of investigators.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Have they asked the RCMP to assist?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Thank you.

The Chair: We have to move over to Monsieur Ménard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Bloodworth, if the RCMP had told you that a government minister was romantically involved with a person having had

important and sustained links with organized crime, would you have informed the Prime Minister of this?

[*English*]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I would inform the Prime Minister about any significant information about his ministry.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Because you would have considered, in the circumstances, that there was a security breach risk, would you agree?

[*English*]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No, because I would have felt that the Prime Minister should know information that I know about his ministers and have that. In the end, it is the Prime Minister's decision as to who is in his cabinet, and he should have the information that I have about that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard: If Ms. Couillard's past is such as it has been portrayed in the papers and if she did remain in regular contact with at least four members of organized crime, at the very highest level, do you believe that that would present the possibility of a security breach?

• (1645)

[*English*]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I'm not going to engage in speculation, Mr. Ménard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Because you believe that you do not have confirmation that Ms. Couillard had close relationships with members of organized crime?

[*English*]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No, because I have enough real issues in my job to deal with without dealing with hypotheticals and speculation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard: You however consider that your role is to inform the Prime Minister and to give him advice in matters of security.

[*English*]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: That's right.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Do you believe that the message to members of organized crime might be that if they are able to introduce into the private life of a minister a person capable of providing them with information, that pathway will always remain open, and neither the RCMP nor the Office of the Privy Council will bother to inform the Prime Minister or the minister?

[*English*]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Obviously I don't believe that, and I haven't said that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Excuse me?

Do you understand our concern with regard to security? Do you believe that it is commonplace for a minister to take up, rather suddenly I would add, with a person having had close links with organized crime?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I have tried very hard—and I hope I have succeeded—not to treat any concern raised by any member of this committee as trivial. I'm certainly not suggesting any concern is trivial. I have tried to be as accurate as I can about the involvement we have, and what we do, and what our role is in terms of advising the Prime Minister. If I have suggested in any way that this means I think anything you're saying is trivial, I apologize. That has never been my intent. I've only been focusing on what I do and my role.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: For the future, then, would you have advice to give? For example, before launching a more in-depth investigation, checks could perhaps be made in the criminal databases to see if the spouses or new flames of a minister have had ties with organized crime.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: It's always possible to change the process for background checks or security clearances, indeed, and I think I've tried to indicate a couple of times when it has changed over time. There is always a discretion to operate, as to how much you do, because all of this takes time and effort and delays the formation of cabinets, and so on.

I am not suggesting, and I've tried not to suggest anywhere, that somehow the existing system is perfect and never should be changed, but there are costs to changing processes. What I think Mr. Cullen referred to, the idea of looking at all at spouses and so on, has some implications for it that any Prime Minister would have to consider. Depending on the circumstances and what was being considered, I would give appropriate advice to the Prime Minister.

The Chair: Your time is up. I'm sorry.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: I began at 4:44 and it is now 4:49.

[English]

The Chair: You've had five minutes and eleven seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: We therefore have five minutes and not seven.

[English]

The Chair: Yes, five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: You are right.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry.

Ms. Priddy.

Ms. Penny Priddy: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to clarify something. If it is the deputy minister for each ministry who sets up the system of how documents are treated,

retrieved, marked, etc., would it then be the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs we should be calling—and I'm not asking you if we should call that person—to explain why classified documents could be gone for five weeks without the ministry having noticed?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: What I said was that the deputy minister is responsible for the system within the department of how secure documents are classified, handled, and stored. Ministers are also responsible within their offices as to how they are handled once they come into their office.

• (1650)

Ms. Penny Priddy: I understand that. But I'm getting the sense, given that they were missing for five weeks, that perhaps the deputy minister could offer us some insight on how they could be missing for that long—albeit that Mr. Bernier took them to and left them in an unsecured place. But for that length of time, you'd think the system would notice.

Could I ask who does your—

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: If I could just add, that's one of the reasons for the review. You're quite right, there is concern about these documents. That's why there is a review being conducted.

Ms. Penny Priddy: Who does the background checks for you?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The RCMP, CSIS.... I'm sorry, is your question which agencies or who in the Privy Council Office?

Ms. Penny Priddy: I'm sorry, no. I take it that somebody in the Privy Council Office has a list of potential people the Prime Minister is looking at for cabinet, or whatever, and provides that to you. I'm asking which agencies you request to provide those background checks.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I'll refer to my opening statement. As I said, there's a four-part verification.

Ms. Penny Priddy: Yes, I saw that.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The first part is by the RCMP. The second part is by CSIS. The third part is tax compliance with regard to the Canada Revenue Agency. The fourth part is insolvency, which is in fact the Office of the Superintendent of Bankruptcy.

Ms. Penny Priddy: So what we know, then, is that in April 2008 both the RCMP and CSIS looked at the background check that was being updated on Mr. Bernier. I expect that is correct.

In regard to ministerial appointments as opposed to appointments by the Prime Minister—and this may be an unfair question for you—do you know if there are background checks done on those people?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: There are background checks for all order in council appointees, many of whom come from ministers. But it's a two-way check, not a four-way check. They do the RCMP and CSIS. They don't do the other two.

There may well be ministerial appointments that don't go through the order in council process, where they may or may not. I don't know.

Marc or Rennie, do you know?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I suspect there are, but I don't know for sure.

Ms. Penny Priddy: Mr. Chair, it would be interesting for the committee to know at some stage whether Ms. Couillard's mother underwent a background check from both CSIS and the RCMP.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I believe she was an order in council appointee.

Ms. Penny Priddy: She was? Oh, I see. So she would have had a background check by the RCMP and CSIS that said there was no reason to be concerned. Okay.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: All order in councils have a two-way check done.

Ms. Penny Priddy: Therefore, I can presume from what you've said that CSIS and the RCMP said that we had no reason to be concerned about any of Ms. Couillard's mother's connections, ties, or whatever. That's interesting.

This is not a critique of the Privy Council, but it feels very passive to me. Perhaps that's the way it's set up. If the RCMP brings something to you, you certainly pass it on to the Prime Minister. If you are given background checks to do...and I realize you have a compendium of other things that you do. But the PCO is not a proactive organization in that if they were to see something, they would ask someone to do something about it. I don't mean that disrespectfully, but they wait until something is brought to them.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Well, I don't feel particularly passive these weeks.

Ms. Penny Priddy: I'm sure.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I've described what we do in regard to background checks. I'm not sure I can answer any more than that.

Ms. Penny Priddy: Okay.

The Chair: You'll have to wrap it up soon.

Ms. Penny Priddy: I have one more, and it's about speculation. I'm not asking you to speculate; I guess I'm just giving you a scenario.

If the scenario we're faced with turns out to be accurate...and all of it may not be accurate. The whole thing may not be. There may be no truth in any of it. I'm not sure that's true, but still, there may be no truth in any of it. I'm not asking you to make some determination based on what you've read in the paper. But if it all turns out to be accurate, would you have expected the RCMP to inform you of that?

•(1655)

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I'll repeat what I said before: I would expect the RCMP to inform me about any significant security issue involving a cabinet minister.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Jennings.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: You've stated before the committee, Ms. Bloodworth, that you learned about the missing documents late afternoon, early evening, on Monday, May 26. That's correct?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I think I said afternoon. It wasn't evening; evening was when the cabinet switch occurred.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Okay, it was the afternoon.

Who informed the Prime Minister of these missing documents, and when was he informed?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I don't know exactly when. My understanding is that he was informed by the minister.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: By the minister.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: That's my understanding; but I was not there.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Are you aware that the then minister, now former minister, has made two statements about that—one where he says that he informed the Prime Minister on Monday, May 26, and another where he says he informed the Prime Minister immediately that he learned of the missing documents on the Sunday evening?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I'm aware of his letter of resignation, which I think referred to a date.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: You've said that a private security firm is doing the investigation on the forensic police and security side for DFAIT into the whole issue of the missing documents. Do you know why the RCMP is not conducting this part of the investigation and review?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: First of all, the review is being conducted by Foreign Affairs. They have hired a security firm—

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Yes, I know.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: —to help them in that.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: And I'm asking you, do you know why Foreign Affairs decided to hire a private firm to assist them in their review of this entire affair of the missing documents rather than ask the RCMP to assist them?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The RCMP are called in for criminal investigations. At the moment, I'm not aware of any particular criminal issue related to the documents. The review will determine what the facts are, and that's what it's doing. I think we may well have suggested the assistance of some professional investigators in the effort to do that.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: In fact, Ms. Bloodworth, the RCMP investigate to determine whether or not there's sufficient evidence and reasonable grounds to believe a criminal act has been committed and, if so, whether they have sufficient evidence to determine who committed the act, and then whether the evidence is reasonable and sufficient to support criminal charges against them.

So I do not see why... But you may not be the right person to answer this, because you don't know what the term "a person known to the police" means.

I fail to understand why Foreign Affairs would not ask the RCMP, who are expert investigators, to assist them in that review. If evidence of criminal activity came up, then the RCMP would clearly be well placed to do that.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Let me make two points on that.

First of all, the review is about the documents—what happened to the documents, who did what, who had access, what injury, and so on. Actually, on the injury assessment the RCMP wouldn't be very helpful, because it's not something they have expertise on.

The second point I would say is that nothing stops the RCMP from investigating anything at any time. They don't need my opinion, my permission, my request, or Foreign Affairs' request. None of it precludes anything.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Thank you.

My question relates to something Ms. Priddy was asking about, whether or not PCO is passive rather than being active.

Given everything you've told us about the background checks on candidates to be appointed ministers, members of cabinet, secretaries of state, if anyone in PCO learned from a newspaper, TV, radio, or some Internet site that an individual who had an ongoing and close relationship with a minister was known to have been married to someone who is part of organized crime, was on the point of marrying someone else who is part of organized crime, had other relationships and business dealings with Monsieur Pépin, etc., do you think it would have been appropriate...? Suppose you heard about it that way or somebody in passing mentioned, "You know that Julie Couillard. Did you know that one of her former husbands was a close associate of Mom Boucher?" And you say "Who's Mom Boucher?" The person explains to you who Mom Boucher is and then says, "And that person also was getting ready to marry Monsieur Sirois." "Who's Monsieur Sirois?" And the person explains that to you. Would you at that time have thought it appropriate to say, "Hmm, ministers never told us any of that; I wonder if he knows that, first"—

• (1700)

The Chair: I think it's time for a brief response.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: —"and second, if he knows it, why didn't he tell us? And third, I don't know if any of this is true. Perhaps I should contact the RCMP and ask them to do a check to see whether or not any of these allegations are true, first. Second, if they are, does that have any implication for security?"

The Chair: Mr. Ménard, it's your turn.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Can I answer the question, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Sure.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The first point I would make is what I have tried to say throughout: we provide our advice based on analysis and facts, not media speculation. We of course read newspapers; we read more newspapers than we ever want to read at

the Privy Council Office. We do not base our advice on what is in the media.

The second thing is that the RCMP were contacted at least twice about Mr. Bernier, as I explained, in regard to the background checks.

The Chair: Ms. Thi Lac.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: On a point of order, Chair, I would just like to make one point. All the information regarding—

The Chair: We will have time to come around to you again.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: —Madame Couillard's background became public after the second and most recent background check.

The Chair: Ms. Thi Lac, go ahead.

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): I made that point.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: And I've just made it again.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac: Welcome, Madam.

In your statement you say that last August the government undertook background checks on the members of the Cabinet and that this updating exercise is done every two years, whether or not the minister has changed portfolios.

Before the month of August, in other words before that rule was changed, how often were these checks done?

[*English*]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: The norm had been, before that, to do checks when ministers changed offices or when cabinets were formed, which could mean that if a minister stayed in office for four years or five years there would not have been any check done. There had not been any particular problem. This was just a sense of regularizing it more systematically. But they would have normally been done, before that, at the time a minister changed office or when a cabinet was formed initially.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac: Previously, this was done when the minister changed portfolios. However, in theory, if this rule had not been put in place last August, a new security check for all ministers having changed portfolios during the last Cabinet shuffle would have been done in August. That was not done given that, according to the rule, the timeframe is two years and the previous check dated back to 2006. The next check was therefore going to be done in 2008. That is how I see it.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: It's true that if the rule had not been changed, we would have done background checks on the few ministers who changed office last August. Instead, background checks were done on all ministers in the March and early April period. It's true that some would have been done last August, but none of the others would have been done until they changed office.

[Translation]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac: Several ministers changed portfolios last August. Had this rule not been changed, checks would have been done for several of them. In Mr. Bernier's case, the previous check dated back to 2006. But in 2006, he was not in a relationship with Ms. Couillard. When the second check was done in April, he was no longer seeing her, according to him. In any event, no check was done when he changed portfolios. There nevertheless was a gap since he dated Ms. Couillard during this two-year period. He changed portfolios within that period, but they were not covered by the background check because of that two-year period.

• (1705)

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I think all I can do is repeat the facts. It is a fact that if the norm had been passed historically we would have done fewer background checks. We would have done them last August. Instead we did them all and we did them in March-April. That's a fact.

[Translation]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac: Mr. Ménard will continue. Thank you.

Mr. Serge Ménard: I think you sense what concerns us. I hope that is a good reason to provide us with an answer, instead of going around in circles. We are concerned because the papers are saying certain things. You obviously read the newspaper. I understand that before reaching a decision, you wanted another source of information. Newspapers, however, can say worrisome things if they are true. I believe that if newspapers talk about a relationship with a person who had important ties with organized crime, there is something worrisome there.

Would you agree with me on that?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: We had just done the background check. I'm not sure what more I can answer. I think I've already answered the question. I'm trying not to repeat what I've said.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: When things are as worrisome as that, would you not think to ask the RCMP to verify the information, to verify if indeed it can be confirmed in our criminal databases? As a matter of fact, the newspapers that came out at the time also confirmed that this person had had close relations with organized crime.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I've explained what we did, and at that time we had checks that were complete in early April.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Would you do this in the future, should a similar situation arise?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: In the future I will follow the system that is in place. No system is perfect, and it can change, no doubt. I've described how they can change.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Do you not have the...

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: It's not up to me to change the system. I give some advice, but in the end it's prime ministers who decide. I'm not talking about just this Prime Minister. It's this Prime Minister and all previous prime ministers for whom I've worked. It's they who decide who is in cabinet and what measures they want to take, of which background checks are one small part.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: I will suggest to you something that is easy to do, that does not require much time and that costs nothing. It pertains to spouses. Would it not be appropriate to ask the RCMP to check if ministers' spouses appear in criminal databanks. If they do, then you could ask why.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: There are always things that can be done in relation to spouses. I think, as Mr. Cullen has pointed out, those have been of considerable debate. So it's not up to me to do that. That would be up to a government to decide it wants to enlarge what it does.

The Chair: Mr. Cullen, please.

Hon. Roy Cullen: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to come back to Mr. Tardif. You are the director of security operations at the PCO.

[Translation]

My apologies, but I will speak English.

Mr. Marc Tardif (Director, Security Operations, Privy Council Office): I also understand English. I will express myself in French, if you do not mind, but I do understand English as well.

[English]

Hon. Roy Cullen: So you're director of security operations at the PCO. You're responsible, then, for the processes of security within the cabinet operations and within the PCO itself. Is that correct?

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Tardif: Yes, my role as Director of Security Operations at the PCO involves several facets. That is one of them.

• (1710)

[English]

Hon. Roy Cullen: If I was guessing, I would think that you probably also have a network of people you work with—law enforcement, security people—an informal network. Is that correct or not? Or are you focused solely on the processes?

Mr. Marc Tardif: I have a network, yes.

Hon. Roy Cullen: Okay, because I'm coming back to this point that the background checks were updated in April 2008. I can't remember the exact timing, but the stories, I think, started to come out in the press after that. That's fair enough. And I know you don't believe everything in the press, but there were some photographs there, and some other evidence that someone, somewhere, within the PCO or the PMO must have asked a question.

It's quite a sensitive matter in the PCO to raise this with the Prime Minister or the Prime Minister's chief of staff, but could a conversation have occurred, notwithstanding the fact that you had a background check in April 2008 that cleared Mr. Bernier? But with all the other stuff coming up subsequent to that, did it happen in this case, or could it have happened, that you briefed Mr. Tardif and Ms. Bloodworth, then Ms. Bloodworth might have discussed, with either the Prime Minister or the Prime Minister's chief of staff, that notwithstanding this clean security clearance, there seems to be some noise out there that someone might want to check out? Would that kind of discussion occur?

Mr. Marc Tardif: No. This discussion didn't occur.

Hon. Roy Cullen: In this particular case it didn't.

Mr. Marc Tardif: No.

Hon. Roy Cullen: Is there any particular reason why it didn't?

Mr. Marc Tardif: No. The background check, as explained, had already been done on Monsieur Bernier.

Hon. Roy Cullen: Yes, but in May, I think, when these stories started to surface...? I know it's only a newspaper report, but there were photographs of Julie Couillard with all sorts of organized criminals. As the director of security operations, would you not have a network of people who could try to substantiate that—notwithstanding the clean background check in April 2008—just to make an assessment—you know, there's something that doesn't seem to add up here? That never happened and might not ever happen?

Mr. Marc Tardif: It didn't happen. My role is to manage the background check policy in place, and that's what I've done in this regard.

Hon. Roy Cullen: So then you and Madam Bloodworth were working on the assumption that, given the clean background check, these stories, these photographs were fictitious or not believable? I'm just talking about the reasonable person. I read the those newspaper articles as well, I saw the photographs, and I don't believe everything I see in the newspapers, but if I saw those, I think, as a national security adviser, a director of security operations, it would have twigged something that said there might be something of concern here. That didn't happen, is that right?

Mr. Marc Tardif: Yes, that's correct.

Hon. Roy Cullen: It didn't happen. Okay.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I think we've answered that, Mr. Cullen. All that presumes that there's something illegal going on and something we haven't agreed to. I think we have answered.

Hon. Roy Cullen: No, I understand that. I understand there's a process and you did the updated background checks in April 2008. And certainly I know you can't answer for the PMO—and we'll have a chance, hopefully, to do that—but someone in the PMO who's responsible for making sure the Prime Minister doesn't get into trouble because there's a minister who has some relationships that are a cause for concern must have flagged this. I just find it impossible to believe that no one flagged it. I find it surprising, frankly, that the PCO didn't flag it at some point in time to someone in the PMO. To raise it with the minister would be a bit delicate, I agree.

So that never happened. With the newspaper reports and all the photographs of all these organized criminals with Ms. Couillard, you concluded that there's not any evidence to suggest that has any substance to it, and therefore we're not concerned?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Our concern is always with cabinet ministers, as it always has been. I was not making any judgments on anyone else, including someone who might be talked about in the newspaper.

Hon. Roy Cullen: I guess I'm coming to the point that hopefully out of this review someone is going to be looking at spouses and significant companions.

• (1715)

The Chair: Your time is up.

Hon. Roy Cullen: Can I ask one quick question? I'm hoping that the Department of Foreign Affairs is not limiting their review to the documents that were left in Madame Couillard's apartment, because we don't know how many other documents may have been left there over time. Their review is not limited, hopefully, just to that set of documents. Is it?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: No, that's not the only thing we have done. We did call for cabinet documents to be returned from Mr. Bernier's office, which is the normal thing when a minister leaves cabinet. And they will review all of the process for dealing with secret documents. I agree with you. I would hope that if there are other documents missing, that would become part of the review as well.

The Chair: Ms. Brown.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Ms. Bloodworth and Mr. Tardif, despite a general concern in the media, and certainly in the opposition, that maybe something was awry, all we've heard so far from you is that essentially after conducting the background checks it seems as if your work was over.

What is it that you do advise the Prime Minister about from a security perspective? Maybe you could give us a couple of topics that you're working on right now, because a viewer who's watching this program on television must wonder what the national security adviser and her staff do other than background checks. Surely there are other security issues. Are they of a geopolitical nature? Are they of a personal safety nature? What are they about?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: First of all, background checks are a very small part of my particular day—any day.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: That's why we want you to tell us a bit about what you do.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I tried to not take too much of the committee's time, but the beginning of my opening statements say there are a large number of security issues confronting this country. I gave a couple of examples of security preparations for the G8 and for the 2010 Olympics. Those are certainly things that I would be involved in coordinating with other government departments.

There are issues with regard to national security on terrorism. There's an advisory committee on national security meeting this week that I will be involved in.

I'm not trying to suggest, and that was not the intent of my remarks, that I spend lots of time on background checks. I was just trying to explain what we do with regard to background checks and the difference between them and security clearances, which is quite significant.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Have we exhausted all our questions?

Ms. Jennings.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Thank you.

[Translation]

On page 2 of the document you tabled with the Committee, you discuss background checks and state the following:

A background check is conducted on prospective Cabinet appointees in order to ensure that there is no criminal, security or other concerns which could affect their suitability for public office.

You say “ou autre”,

[English]

in English, “or other concerns which could affect their suitability for public office”.

Would allegations that a spouse of a minister had possible close links to organized crime, if it came to your attention either during the actual background check or subsequent to the background check, be a concern that you would investigate or have checked into in order to determine whether that would affect their suitability for public office?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: “Or other concerns”, in this particular case, refers to the fact that we also do a tax compliance check and a bankruptcy check.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: So in that case, your answer is no. Any allegation that came to your attention, by whatever means, that the spouse of a minister had close links and ties to organized crime is not a concern that would possibly call into question the suitability of that minister for public office and require a further check?

• (1720)

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I was just explaining to you what “other concerns” means.

When it comes to crime and security, which are two inputs to cabinet-making, prime ministers consider, as those of you who have

been cabinet ministers will know, many, many other factors besides what comes from the background check. So there are many things that affect whether a Prime Minister decides to make someone a cabinet minister. What I have tried to do is explain to you the process with regard to background checks as one input into that process.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: And my question remains: if an allegation that a spouse of a minister had close links and ties to organized crime came to the attention of Monsieur Tardif as director of security operations, or to you or to any other member of Privy Council, would that lead you or Monsieur Tardif to ask for a verification of those allegations?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Organized crime is obviously a concern in this country, as it is in many western countries. I would expect that if there was a significant concern about a minister's connection with organized crime, that would come out of a criminal or security check.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Given that you've told us that at no time have the RCMP informed you that they have any concerns regarding Mr. Bernier's relationship with Madame Couillard, I have to suppose, then, that either the RCMP is keeping information from you or the RCMP has not conducted an investigation into that situation, or it is at this time conducting such an investigation but has not come to any conclusion.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I wouldn't necessarily come to those conclusions.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: You wouldn't know.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I wouldn't necessarily come to those conclusions.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Thank you.

I find it interesting that an average person, hearing about the possibility that a minister was involved with someone who has clear ties or is alleged to have had clear ties and links with Mom Boucher... I don't think there's a person in Quebec who doesn't know who Mom Boucher is. People have died because of Mom Boucher, including people who worked for the state, who worked for the Province of Quebec.

The Chair: Your colleague is waiting for you.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: I find it interesting that they would think that was not worthy of somebody saying this needs to be checked out.

The Chair: Order.

Mr. Dosanjh, you are the last person on my list, so I guess you're batting cleanup.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Thank you.

Ms. Marcoux, I want to take you back to the conversation you had with the RCMP. Can you, to the best of your memory, recite that conversation for the committee? We have some time. How did it start?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: Well, it started with my advising Assistant Commissioner Souccar that we were planning on issuing the statement that we did issue.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Yes, and...?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: And explaining the reasons why, because media speculation following his testimony suggested that we knew something or that they had advised us of something.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: And his response was that it was so soon after their statement to the committee?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I think so. I don't have a precise recollection of what he told me, but as I indicated earlier, that's what it was.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Then during that 10-minute conversation he indicated to you that, whatever the statement, it would not impair any investigation.

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I believe I said he did not indicate that to me.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Was he silent on that issue with you?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I believe he was, but—

• (1725)

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: When you told him you were going to issue a statement—

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: The reason, sir, I think I can tell you this is that if he had said it would impair an investigation, I would have probably gone back to Mrs. Bloodworth and said it was probably not a good idea.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: So obviously he was silent on that particular point during the conversation. That's what I understand from what you just told me.

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I think so, yes.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: If he was silent on that issue, did you ask him about his evidence before the committee and point out to him what he had said before the committee?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: He said that Ms. Couillard was known to the RCMP. I believe he explained to me what “known” could mean in that sense.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Did he also indicate to you that he would not reveal to us whether or not the RCMP had contacted the PCO, for fear of possibly jeopardizing an investigation in the past or the future or the present?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I spoke to him after his testimony.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Yes, but did he raise that concern with you? Or by saying, “I'm concerned that your statement comes so soon after my evidence before the committee”, did he mean that you would be outing the RCMP on that issue, when they themselves wouldn't out themselves?

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: I'm not sure I understand that. I'm sorry.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: They would disclose to you but not disclose to us. They would allow you to disclose their position, but they would not disclose directly to us.

Ms. Rennie Marcoux: Our statement did not disclose the RCMP position on whether or not they investigated Madame Couillard.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Your statement disclosed the fact that they did not contact the PCO, and they would not disclose that to us.

Let me ask you another question, the last question. Why is Mr. Lynch not here? He was invited to be before us. Why is he not here?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Because the committee indicated he wasn't necessary.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Absolutely not. The committee—

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I'm sorry, that's the information we have.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I want to know who in the committee indicated to you that he wasn't necessary.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: All our—

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: The committee put him on the list; I put him on the list. There was no objection. He was asked for. Your name was added subsequently in addition to Mr. Lynch's name, Ms. Bloodworth. I want to know who from the committee told you he wasn't needed.

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: What I'm saying is that Mr. Lynch was very willing to come today—

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: That's not the issue, madam. Who told you—

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: Well, I'd like to answer the question.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: The question is, who told you he wasn't needed?

Ms. Margaret Bloodworth: I am trying to answer the question. I am saying Mr. Lynch was very willing to come to the committee. The indication we got back, I presume through the clerk, was that the committee was quite happy to have the three of us.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I'm sorry, that's not my understanding. His name was at the top. We had the list yesterday, and his name was still at the top of the PCO individuals to appear here.

The Chair: We had an in camera meeting yesterday, and I can't reveal the results of that, but we agreed to invite the PCO officials, and that's what went forward.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: No, I'm sorry, during the meeting you told me the PCO is coming.

The Chair: That's right.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: You didn't tell me Kevin Lynch wasn't coming. His name was on the list. I want to know why that is the case. I was not told Kevin Lynch wasn't coming. I want to know why, when it was discussed in the committee—the list was with you—the chair chose to omit him.

The Chair: Mr. MacKenzie.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Mr. Chair, I find it rather ironic. We've been here two hours and all of a sudden we have an eruption about the witnesses.

I think you've heard from perfectly good witnesses. If you had an issue with the witnesses, I believe you should have brought it up at the beginning of the meeting.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Sir, that's not the issue. I can satisfy myself, but I want to know why the committee chair would—

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: I don't know whether you just woke up or not, because Mr. Lynch wasn't here when we started.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Why would the committee chair take it upon himself to say that a certain witness is not required, when that witness tops the list?

The Chair: I would like to refer you to your original motion, which we are carrying out. Please go and read it, and then it will contradict exactly what you're saying today.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: No, the question is that a list of witnesses was given, sir, in this committee, and Kevin Lynch's name was topping the list of individuals in the PCO. The question I have is this. Who decided Lynch is not required?

•(1730)

The Chair: Sir, that list of witnesses was not yet approved.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Who approves that list, sir? There is no process. The committee approves the letter.

The Chair: Your own people are contradicting you, sir. Your own people were at this meeting, and we agreed that the Privy Council would be here.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: We did not agree. Kevin Lynch was not disapproved.

The Chair: I would like to thank the witnesses very much. We appreciate your coming before the committee.

This meeting stands adjourned.

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