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Chair

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.)): Committee members, we have quorum, so we will begin.

We have before us Mr. Kevin Page, the Parliamentary Budget Officer. With him are Mostafa Askari, who is an assistant parliamentary budget officer; Sahir Khan, who is also an assistant parliamentary budget officer; and Peter Weltman, who is a financial adviser.

I understand, Mr. Page, you have some opening remarks. So we will begin with that. You're available for two hours, right, Mr. Page? Fair enough.

The floor is yours, Mr. Page.

Mr. Kevin Page (Parliamentary Budget Officer, Library of Parliament): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My staff and I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the committee today to answer your questions regarding my recent assessment on the government's third quarterly report on budget implementation.

Before we begin with questions, I want to first take the chance to provide some context regarding, one, the purpose of my assessments; two, key considerations regarding the government's most recent report; and three, where we go from here on quarterly reporting to Parliament.

As all of us are aware, the quarterly implementation reports to Parliament were a key condition for legislative approval of budget 2009. At the time, there was an appreciation across many countries, not only Canada, that the unprecedented level of fiscal stimulus warranted greater transparency on the part of governments. Shortly after this, your colleagues in the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance asked me to prepare assessments on each quarterly report prepared by the government.

The purpose of my assessments is to highlight areas where parliamentarians may wish to push for greater transparency in the reports—in particular, to highlight information and analysis that could help Parliament provide oversight on the economic stimulus package.

From the beginning I have used three principles to guide my assessments. One, members of the Canadian Parliament should be able to expect a level of reporting comparable to that provided to legislatures in other international jurisdictions. Two, the government's quarterly reports should meet the same quality standards as

existing financial reporting to Parliament. Three, the government should only be expected to share data and information that is already collected in the normal course of its businesses.

The last point is particularly important. Whenever we highlight information gaps, it pertains to data already collected and held by the government.

[Translation]

As I mentioned in our first report that was issued in March, the content and quality of reporting to Parliament on public money is a long-standing issue. There have been several reforms and uneven progress over the past decade with respect to the estimates. As such, it is important that we all have realistic expectations regarding what the government could achieve at the outset.

In my first assessment, I highlighted the need for balance in reporting between the level of reporting and the need for expediency. I identified the types of information that are already collected by the government, which could be useful to support Parliament's oversight and answer basic questions like:

- How much money?
- For what?
- How many people will be helped?
- How many projects will be funded?
- How will it be implemented?
- How is success measured?
- What are the key risks?
- How will they be managed?

To help track each of these indicators, my staff prepared a monitoring spreadsheet to capture and organize all information presented in the government's reports. It is currently over 47 pages long.

In my second assessment, after reviewing the substantial additional data presented by the government, I concluded that parliamentarians might benefit from a more strategic approach to reporting. This means: more detail on the larger, higher risk programs; less information regarding smaller, lower risk initiatives; and better organization of the information that is reported.

Drawing on good practices in other countries, my second assessment also included draft templates that could be used to organize the implementation data in a more useful manner. I also attempted to initiate my own analysis of infrastructure stimulus spending using the data collected by the government through its own reporting requirements.

• (1535)

[English]

By the third report we expected there would be some clarity in the links among inputs, outputs, and outcomes.

In my most recent assessment, I noted that the government continues to make progress on improving the quality of its quarterly reports to Parliament; however, this progress falls short on what one might reasonably expect. In particular, the government continues to use a one-size-fits-all approach to reporting, which means that smaller measures have a good level of exposure, but parliamentarians could be left wondering about progress on larger items such as infrastructure.

I also suggested that parliamentarians might benefit from improved organization of the government's reports. For instance, the names of some initiatives change from one report to the next. It's a small thing, but it makes it hard to track progress over a nine-month period if the titles of programs are changing.

Finally, I indicated that parliamentarians might wish to ask the government to establish a comprehensive framework to assess the success of budget 2009 in achieving the government's economic objectives of growth and job creation. By drawing on good practice in the United States, I outlined four potential approaches that you might ask the government to use.

As I have highlighted throughout my assessments, the government's quarterly reports represent a unique opportunity to test drive and improve interim reporting to Parliament. While the reports are not perfect, they do represent a substantial improvement on the current financial reporting regime, where the budget is presented early in the year, the estimates are tabled in March, and the public accounts are presented about 18 months later. During the year and a half between the estimates and the public accounts, Parliament has very limited information to assess whether and how well the money they have appropriated has been spent.

Some in this Parliament have argued that this lacuna undermines the key constitutional responsibility of legislators to provide oversight of the executive. In that spirit, the government is to be commended for beginning to provide legislators with relevant financial and operating information that could be used to exercise oversight of public moneys. For the first time, the quarterly budget implementation reports allow members of the House of Commons and Senate to answer basic questions like the following. Has this program been implemented yet? Are there any results to date? Have there been delays in implementation?

With this in mind, I released another note last week that generally supported the government's proposal to implement a legislative quarterly reporting regime for all departments, agencies, and crown corporations. If this, the legislative amendments in Bill C-51, receive royal assent, Parliament will begin to benefit from this type of

disclosure that's already provided in many other OECD jurisdictions, Canadian provinces, and U.S. states.

At the same time, I have also highlighted several considerations that parliamentarians may wish to debate as this proposal progresses, including the following. What type of non-financial data should be included in the reports, such as staffing figures and disclosures on high-risk, large information technology projects. How will the reports be linked to the budget and estimates to ensure that Parliament has a cohesive view of federal finances? What options are available to minimize the cost and disruption of the new reporting regime on the financial community and the public service, which is currently juggling several other reform efforts?

Thank you for the opportunity to make an opening statement. I look forward to your questions.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Page.

And I understand you have brought the 47-page spreadsheet. Is it available for general distribution? Is that what your intent was?

Mr. Kevin Page: We brought some copies with us. It is certainly available on our website. We understand it's very onerous. There is a lot of very detailed information contained in there. It's probably not something that lends itself well to examination at this type of committee, but it is background information available on our website.

The Chair: Okay, fair enough. The reason I asked was that you had mentioned that 47 pages, and if somebody wants to take a quick look and just understand how your flow chart works or how this spreadsheet works, then perhaps they can. But if you feel that might be onerous or might confuse the committee, then I will leave it.

Mr. Kevin Page: We do have a number of copies here that we can make available. I'm not quite sure we have enough copies.

The Chair: Fair enough. Thank you.

We'll go to our first round of questions for eight minutes, and we will start off with Ms. Hall Findlay.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much, everybody, for being here and taking the time to be with us this afternoon.

Mr. Page, from listening to your comments and reading the report, I think you are being appropriately diplomatic in suggesting that more detail on larger, high-risk programs would be good, with perhaps less information on smaller, lower-risk initiatives. However, I'd like to read from a recent article by Jim Travers of *The Toronto Star*, where he talks about your trying to winkle sense out of the most recent Conservative stimulus report:

Along with noting the critical absence of key data on how billions are being spent and what they are, or are not, achieving, the Parliamentary budget officer points a frustrated finger at the federal practice of creating confusion by changing programs names, definitions, and purposes.

Obviously he's being a little more blunt than you are.

I have two parts to this question. You have indicated frustration in the past due to sheer lack of information. I can assure you that we share that frustration in this committee. For several months now, we have been asking for detailed numbers on infrastructure spending, even before the stimulus package was proposed, because of earlier concerns about the Building Canada fund and money not being spent. I hope to ask a little more about that later.

In your efforts that have been challenged to just get information, what reasons are given for not providing that information? Can you comment a little on this changing of names and changing of departments? We've certainly seen the same thing in the estimates and found it extremely hard to track. If you can comment on that as well, it would be very much appreciated.

Mr. Kevin Page: Thank you for your questions.

On the first question, we have an information protocol that we developed working with central agencies. When we request information in order to do our analysis, we typically send a letter to the deputy minister of the department and give what we think is sufficient time, depending on the nature of the request, for them to provide a response. On the issue relevant to today of the infrastructure stimulus fund, we wanted more detailed information on the quarterly reports the department was getting. We asked for it at the beginning of September. We gave a roughly two-week window. We have not received that information yet. So two months have gone by.

I had a conversation very recently with the deputy minister, who indicated this information will be coming very shortly. I'll likely get it this week and start to roll it out on a province-by-province basis, so we consider that to be very good news. We were told that information will include whether the project has been announced and signed off by both ministers; the total outlays for disbursements at the federal, provincial, and regional levels; and the timelines for implementation of the project. That's really good news, but we still haven't received that information, so we're not in a position today to give you the economic stimulus value of the money being spent.

So we apologize we're not in a position to provide the appropriate briefing to you today on that economic stimulus impact. The reason provided to me by the deputy minister is that it's a substantive data request. In the case of the infrastructure stimulus fund, you're talking about thousands of projects across all provinces and territories. They needed more time to clean up the database, and we expect to get a spreadsheet in a very few days.

On the second point, maybe I'll ask Sahir to highlight some of the areas where we've identified changes in names. It's part of that detailed 47-page spreadsheet. We track every initiative in budget 2009, and there are more than 100 initiatives. For every initiative, we track when the authorities were provided. We go through each quarterly report to see if there are any indicators, output measures, performance measures, or expectations of results. Do we have any indication of what moneys have flowed? It's available to you on a measure-by-measure basis that you can use. We want to make it available. Through that detailed level of tracking we have noticed that things have changed, so we've highlighted that. We don't mind doing that.

I don't know what the reason is, other than perhaps the government thought a better presentation was necessary. It's probably be a question better put to Minister Baird.

• (1545)

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Thank you very much.

You expressed almost an apology for the inability to provide more detailed analysis. And on the record, I will thank you and your entire office for the real efforts in providing that analysis and recognizing that it's really hard to do without the underlying information. So I just want to say thank you, at least for the effort.

Quite honestly, I'm a little bit concerned about letting the government off the hook by saying it needed more time. We have witnessed several countries engaging in the same exercise, recognizing that stimulus was needed and putting money out the door. The United States, for example, on its website www.recovery.org, has an extraordinary amount of information that is detailed.

With regard to projects the municipalities are involved in, for example, we had the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and two municipal representatives from Quebec at committee not too long ago talking about how so many of the projects that have been announced have not yet been started. And that, combined with the timeframe of 2011.... They've been very clear. It is still the policy that if a project is not finished by 2011, then the municipality will be on the hook for the costs. The number that was given was 3,000 projects that have been announced to great fanfare—the government is quite happy to take advantage of announcements. But announcements don't make jobs. And only a third have actually broken ground. We now have lost the construction season.

For the remaining two-thirds of the projects, from a budgetary perspective, if you were in a municipality.... I know it's awkward to put you in this position, but theoretically, if you were budgeting for a municipality and you now saw half of your window disappear because of the construction season being gone, would you not be thinking twice about whether to actually start some of those projects if you knew you were going to be on the hook if you couldn't get them done within only a year?

Mr. Kevin Page: I think this would be a major concern for municipalities in most regions of Canada—their ability to start projects in the fall or winter season, depending on the nature of the project.

Once we get a chance to look at the spreadsheet data provided by the Deputy Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, we'll be able to provide you with some of the timeline-related issues and what the jobs impacts, potentially, could be.

That was our original reason for requesting the data, too. In my position as budget officer, I feel that not only do we need to provide advice on the flow of the money—is the money flowing—but on what is the potential impact both in terms of output and in terms of jobs.

When we look at the economy right now, at third quarter we're going to see very modest growth. We still see that we were losing private sector jobs in this country over the summertime. There are a lot of issues about how strong the fourth quarter will be and even 2010. So it's very important that we.... We agree. We need to track the stimulus spending, particularly infrastructure, because that's where the multiplier is the largest and can have the biggest impact on jobs for Canadians.

But again, when we get the spreadsheet, we'll turn our attention to it very quickly to give you that assessment of what the impact could be.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Hall Findlay, you'll have another chance. We've got two hours.

Next is Madame Bourgeois, *pour huit minutes, s'il vous plaît.*

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Page, gentlemen, good afternoon.

Mr. Page, this is the second time we have had the opportunity to meet. I remember that shortly after you took up your duties in March 2008, you came to see us, in May 2008. We could feel your emotion because you had just been granted enormous powers under the Federal Accountability Act, but also under the Parliament of Canada Act, given that you were to report to the Parliament of Canada.

We would therefore tend to believe that you would provide us with all the analyses, all of the information, all explanations concerning budgets, and more particularly, the Government of Canada's economic stimulus plan. I kept the documents you provided us with when you appeared before the committee. You have an extremely impressive background. You are a tax expert. And despite the fact that we have such an expert before us, the report does not answer our questions. I find it quite problematic. Nor can we discover what the real impacts of the economic stimulus plan are. Unless I am mistaken, there are only estimates in your report.

One thing made me angry. You attached a request for information sent to Infrastructure Canada to your document. It is a very good letter, respectfully addressing the person you sent it to. You wanted access to all of the databases in order to be able to closely follow the development of infrastructure projects under the stimulus fund, which would be key to explaining this famous plan to us. You added very specific elements.

Unfortunately, the answer you received said that it was impossible to provide you with this information with such short notice. You had given them two weeks, which, in my opinion, seems quite appropriate. Furthermore, I did some research on my own about this. When a department has good planning and is well organized, they can easily respond to the questions of the parliamentary budget officer within 15 days and provide these statistics. So your request was perfectly justified.

Then you were told that you would have access to this information in due course. It was a deputy minister who responded to you—personally, I was blown away by that—while copying a Mr. Timothy Sargent, the Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet in the Privy Council Office.

Since you have worked at the Privy Council Office as a tax expert, could you tell us if we can assume that the Prime Minister's entourage knows that you do not have all of the documents required in order to answer parliamentarians' questions?

Mr. Kevin Page: I do not quite understand why I did not receive the information. It might be better to ask those questions to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities' deputy. Recently, I spoke to him and he told me that it would be a huge project and that he already has several projects. Ms. Finley told me that, with approximately 3,000 projects, it is a lot of information, and it is difficult to create a good structure for that information. It may be best to ask Mr. Baird those questions.

• (1555)

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: That is fine, and furthermore, that is what we will do.

Now, if I am not mistaken, the projects should have been submitted in June. In theory, in September, at least half of the infrastructure projects—if not all of them—should have been submitted, so that we would know if there had been a fair, forthright and honest sharing of them between the provinces. However, we do not have them.

My attention was also drawn to your appendix C. This appendix includes plans and expectations, and the right-hand column deals with actual performance. I underlined the names that were all listed. Does that mean you did not receive the answers?

Mr. Kevin Page: Yes, that is true.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Mr. Page, without wanting to put you on the spot, how can you claim that this famous economic stimulus plan has been implemented properly and that all of the projects are transparent and in compliance?

Mr. Kevin Page: Without the information, I am not in a position to state that the infrastructure projects have had a positive impact on the economy.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: So currently, we are relying on estimates. You must feel somewhat uncomfortable in your position. In fact, when you appeared in May 2008, you told us that your mandate included an important provision giving you the right to "... to free and timely access to any financial or economic data in the possession of the department that are required for the performance of his or her mandate."

You have those powers. Are we to understand that the Privy Council, the departments and the people in this government overseeing financial activities are stripping you of your rights and thumbing their noses at parliamentarians? In fact, you must report to Parliament. In short, it seems that these people do not give a hoot about the requirement to report and to demonstrate a degree of transparency.

Mr. Kevin Page: I agree that we need to improve the accountability and that a certain level of transparency is required. It is true that I did not receive some important information to allow me to do my work.

The Chair: Ms. Bourgeois, your time is up.

Thank you.

[English]

We'll now go to Monsieur Jacques Gourde.

Pour huit minutes, Monsieur Gourde.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon, gentlemen.

Your office sent a letter to Infrastructure Canada last September 2nd. Infrastructure Canada responded with a letter dated September 16th. According to your office, you received it on September 23rd. This letter must be subject to the rules of access to information.

It is indicated in the Infrastructure Canada letter that, even if the department worked on providing the information requested, the 10-day deadline—and it must have been 10 business days, in my opinion—was too short a time.

Could you please tell the committee exactly what you were asking for in this letter?

Mr. Kevin Page: If you wish, we could read the contents of the letter. Is that what you are asking?

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Yes.

Mr. Sahir Khan (Assistant Parliamentary Budget Officer, Expenditure and Revenue Analysis, Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, Library of Parliament): In our letter to the deputy minister, we asked specific questions about the database in which the department receives information from participants in the infrastructure program. The answer about the participants was obtained in the usual way, in my opinion.

The Chair: Mr. Gourde, you have the letter, the documents.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: My question was answered. There is no problem.

Do you know how many infrastructure projects Infrastructure Canada is responsible for?

• (1600)

Mr. Kevin Page: I can get the exact figure, but for the Infrastructure Stimulus Fund, we are talking about more than 3,000 projects.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: So you want to get the details on the 3,000 projects within 10 days. I thought it was the provinces who provided the federal government with progress reports on the status of projects so that federal officials can then validate each of the projects in order to make payments, as bills are submitted.

Given the fact that we are responsible for more than 3,000 projects, as you have said, it seems like quite a challenge for a single department. What do you think?

Mr. Kevin Page: In order for our office to estimate the economic impact resulting from infrastructure spending, it really needs to have access to information such as the nature of the project, the amount of money involved and the start and finish dates of the project. I feel that if the government is in a position to say that commitments have been made by the provinces and the municipalities, it can also make this information available.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Do you ask for this information for all projects?

Mr. Kevin Page: In situations such as this, with a massive \$4 billion project over two years, it is done progressively, and new information comes in each quarter. During the month of September, I attempted to get information from the government on projects that were being reviewed during the third quarter.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: If I understand your answer correctly, all municipalities must provide information to the provinces. This information is then sent to Infrastructure Canada, and you are asking officials to forward all of the up-to-date information to you, on 3,000 projects.

Mr. Kevin Page: Yes. The fact that there are 3,000 projects does not frighten me. I have a student who analyzes all of the initiatives in every budget, and there are more than 100 of them in the 2009 budget. So the number of projects is not the only major factor. I know this is difficult and that it represents a lot of money, \$4 billion no less. Then, when you add in the money invested by the provinces and the municipalities...

It is important to follow the distribution of expenses under the program. I believe it takes place in the fall. Also, if you compare the level of transparency of the program with the level in the United States, you will notice that, for Infrastructure Canada's projects, the government made a commitment during the fall to provide parliamentarians with information on the kinds of projects and all of the expenses involved. It is more than simply information about a commitment.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I have a question, because I am not sure I really understood. You said that you have a student who reviews the projects of all officials who provided information? Is it a team or a single student? I understood the word "student".

Mr. Kevin Page: Perhaps Mr. Weltman could add something in a few minutes.

I know it is important for the government to obtain this information, because there are program structures for all of the projects that require this information to be supplied. In my opinion, this information is to be found at the Department of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. I know that there are sometimes problems with the quality of information and that officials need to review the quality and perhaps sometimes even to improve it.

I feel that if the government can say that it has made commitments, it is also necessary to obtain the information that supports those commitments.

Mr. Weltman might have something else to add.

Mr. Peter Weltman (Financial Advisor, Expenditure and Revenue Analysis, Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, Library of Parliament): I simply wanted to add that with a program such as this, when an agreement is signed, basic information is provided to the government so that the project can start: the name of the project, where it will be carried out, the costs involved, etc. When the announcements are made and the agreements have been signed, this data base is broadened. That is really what we are asking for. We are asking for the information required under Treasury Board rules, the information that the government requires.

•(1605)

Mr. Jacques Gourde: That is not what I am asking about. The information was sent to you by officials and by Infrastructure Canada. Earlier, Mr. Page said that he had a student who has reviewed all of the projects. Is it one single student or a team that did that?

Mr. Kevin Page: I am sorry. No, we do not have a team, but I am trying to explain that it is possible to follow the information. Three thousand projects is a lot, but if the information exists, it is easy to review it. We can measure the economic impact of 3,000 projects. It was not just a question of... It is entirely possible for a team such as ours to review that number of projects.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: This person prepares a report, you study it and then you add your comments.

Mr. Kevin Page: My entire team, that is Mr. Khan, Mr. Weltman and a student, reviews the projects.

The Chair: Mr. Gourde, your time is up. Thank you.

Mr. Martin, for eight minutes.

[English]

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair, and welcome, Mr. Page.

Let me begin by saying that I think the Parliamentary Budget Officer is about the best friend the Canadian taxpayer has. And I think the single best thing that came out of the Federal Accountability Act was the creation of your office. So you are very welcome here. Canadians are grateful that they finally have somebody in their corner as they wade through the sometimes incomprehensible gobbledygook that makes up our nation's financial statements. I can't figure them out, and I am thankful that you can.

It seems to me that the best way to hide hanky-panky is to make financial reports incomprehensible, and that's what we're afraid is happening here. I also thank you for raising the constitutionality of this. It's our constitutional duty and obligation as an oversight committee to oversee the activities of the executive, and our committee has been collectively denied that ability. You, I think, are being systematically denied that ability to serve that function. At what point, I ask you, does withholding information constitute misinformation? What we've seen is an appalling surplus of propaganda and a corresponding paucity of true information that we can analyze and assess in any meaningful way. It's like some elaborate shell game designed to confound and confuse the Canadian public. That's what has been going on with this stimulus package.

In terms of the specifics I'd like you to comment on, again, I'm grateful for your third quarterly report. You put together very helpful

templates. And you suggest in a very constructive way that if the government would outline its activities on these helpful proposed budget initiative reporting templates, we might be able to make some sense of them. It seems to me that if Wal-Mart can track every pair of blue jeans it sells in every one of its stores and can show us on a real-time graph the status of its blue jeans sales, then the Government of Canada can figure out a way to track, on a real-time basis, the billions of dollars flying out the door at breakneck speed. We're clearly not trying hard enough. It's not an incapability; it's the unwillingness to be forthright with the Canadian people that has been confounding Canadians, I believe.

Could you comment on the templates you suggest, and also, sir, on examples of changes to stimulus reporting, which I believe are also a systematic and deliberate attempt to defraud and confound the Canadian people? There is dropped content in reports. There are renaming measures in reports and recategorizing of those same measures. Measures are removed from summary tables. Item after item after item make it impossible for ordinary Canadians, and even impossible for skilled, trained, professionals like the MPs around this table, to figure out where that money is going.

Could you comment both on the recommended template and on some of these examples of changes in stimulus reporting that have made your job difficult?

•(1610)

Mr. Kevin Page: Thank you for your support, Mr. Martin.

Your first point was about withholding and the link between withholding and misinformation. As budget officers, we're not auditors, so we're not actually using audit tools to go back and say whether appropriate procedures were followed. That's definitely important work, and I'm sure that it will take place at some point in time.

As budget officers, we tend to look forward. We think, as we've said, that there are some good things in the reporting we do. We're thankful that Parliament and the executive have come forward with these quarterly budget implementation reports. We think that the fourth-quarter report can be better than the third-quarter and second-quarter reports. When we first looked at this information in the first-quarter report, with limited information on authorities, we thought, okay. Then on the second-quarter report, we got information on commitments. We were thinking that by the time we got to the third-quarter report on budget implementation, we would start to see some information on expenditures disbursements related to the programs. Is this stuff having an impact that went beyond this commitment? We haven't seen it, but we are hopeful that in the fourth-quarter report we will maybe start to see the turning. We'll start to see in this information on projects not only the level of commitment but the money going out the door. We're hopeful about that.

With respect to the template, sir, we designed those templates based on the kind of information we know Treasury Board demands the departments be in a position to provide to the President of the Treasury Board. So in a sense, there's nothing in those templates, for all programs across the government, that public servants shouldn't want to provide. We think those templates are a best practice. We also looked not just at Canada and Treasury Board policies; we wanted to make sure they were consistent with best practices in other countries.

Mr. Pat Martin: It's a simple one-page template. I can understand it. And at the bottom it says, "outcomes". What were the expected outcomes? What were the realized outcomes? That's all we want to know.

Mr. Kevin Page: At that level, as you go through our more detailed 47-page report that's available on our website, very little outcome information has been provided to date. But again, we're still hopeful we'll see that in the fourth-quarter report.

Mr. Pat Martin: Hope springs eternal, I suppose, but what is the basis of that hope?

Mr. Kevin Page: There are a few good examples in the report right now, things like shipbuilding and work sharing and the Canada graduate scholarships program, where you get detailed information, you can add it up. Again, it goes beyond commitments. These are students who have been affected by it. These are contracts that have been put forward to deal with shipbuilding-related issues. On work sharing, you get month-by-month information on the number of people who are now work-sharing to get access to EI programs. So some examples are really well done. Again, there are a lot of initiatives there. And then there are some that are not very well done, where we've got a total lack of information and no outcome indicators. So we think the template is a good process.

We've outlined some of the changes: dropping content and renaming and certain measures that were removed. They go beyond what's in the annex. I think it's important for you to know that as budget officers we are tracking that stuff at that level of detail. As we notice these things, we will bring them to your attention. We don't see these as large and material things, but it's important to know that at least you have people like us who are looking at it in an oversight context, to do the detailed work for you.

Mr. Pat Martin: It's a great comfort that there are people like you overseeing this, because without that we don't have the tools. We're the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates of the House of Commons and we do not have the tools to assess government operations or estimates in the absence of any decent, reasonable reporting protocol. And if they adopted this simple template, we could do our job without calling you in here, within forensic audits. We could say this was the amount they spent, this was the expected outcome, and there was the realized outcome. Success. Failure. Bing, bang, boom, the public is well served. Without that we're at—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin. You'll get another chance.

We'll go to the next round for five minutes.

Ms. Foote.

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you for being here this afternoon.

I want to repeat what Mr. Martin said, how important it is to have this office and to expect you are there to do a job that needs to be done. But I would expect the frustration you're hearing from some of us around the table is probably only surpassed by your own, in terms of not being able to do the job you're intended to do. I appreciate that.

I know we're very frustrated because we hear time and again of initiatives under way, money flowing, announcements being made, but trying to get our hands on the actual information has been like pulling teeth. So I can understand where you're coming from, because we're feeling the same way.

When we talk about projects being announced and money supposedly flowing, we know that when you enter into an initiative with a province or a municipality you're not going to give thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars unless a definite project and timelines are put in place for the completion of that project. That information should be available. I can't imagine any government entering into any type of project without that being front and centre.

So I find it a little interesting when the federal government, on a Friday afternoon, quietly makes records public for \$900 million in federal stimulus projects, but you're having trouble getting the information. Why that's happening is a million-dollar question, and of course—

An hon. member: It's \$900 million.

Ms. Judy Foote: It's a \$900 million question.

When you talk about having the type of reporting, you say, "Members of the Canadian Parliament should be able to expect a comparable level of reporting provided to legislatures in other international jurisdictions." And, of course, through Canadian parliamentarians, then Canadians would.

I looked at the reporting mechanism used in the U.S. It's user-friendly. Anything you ever want to know about how the stimulus money is being spent in the U.S. is there. It's updated, if not on a daily basis.... I'm looking at one part here. The award progress was updated on October 10, and the distributing and reporting was updated on October 8. You can go through this and find out whatever information you need.

From your observation, would you say that with that type of reporting the American people are fully aware of how their stimulus money is being spent, the types of initiatives that are under way, and what is coming down the pipe for them?

•(1615)

Mr. Kevin Page: I would say there is definitely a gap between what the Parliament of Canada has in terms of infrastructure spending—the timeliness and quality of that information—and what the executive will demand of the United States in terms of reporting on the stimulus spending.

We tried to survey 15 OECD countries, and we were successful in surveying 11. We noticed there were two countries, Canada and the United States, that put in extraordinary measures around stimulus reporting. I think it's fair to say that a number of other countries had more robust quarterly reporting than what exists in Canada today. But of the 11 OECD jurisdictions we were able to survey, the United States certainly had the highest level, and there's a gap between Canada and the United States right now.

Ms. Judy Foote: Based on the information you have, what percentage of the infrastructure projects are under way?

Mr. Kevin Page: Based on the full survey of infrastructure projects, both in the infrastructure stimulus funds and other related infrastructure projects, we're not in a position to really say. I've been told by the Deputy Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities that this week we will get information on the infrastructure stimulus fund. At that point we'll be able to provide you with information and assessment of what's under way vis-à-vis what was committed.

As you've already noted, that is a regular feature of the U.S. report. They highlight the commitments and the outlays or expenses related to those commitments. We don't have that reporting yet, but we hope we might get that in the fourth quarter.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Foote.

We'll now go to Monsieur Nadeau. *Cinq minutes, s'il vous plaît.*
[Translation]

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

Good afternoon, gentlemen.

You have an extremely important job to do in terms of accountability. I understand that there are tools that you absolutely require and that you do not have access to, at least not easily. This is information that is "relatively simple" to obtain because it is basic.

Concerning the request you made to Public Works Canada, which you told us about today, did you finally receive the basic information, that is to say, the contents of the data base that is essential to your analyses?

• (1620)

Mr. Kevin Page: No, we have yet to receive it.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: You have not received it yet?

Mr. Kevin Page: No, we have no information.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Have you received any snippets of information at all?

Mr. Kevin Page: Yes.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Does it come in in dribbles or does it come in at a pace that allows you to proceed with your work?

Mr. Kevin Page: I am hoping that we will receive the information we requested from the Deputy Minister of the Department of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities this week.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: If I understand you correctly, you are asking for things that already exist, you are not calling for the creation of anything new, and you are not getting what you are asking for. In terms of transparency, this may give us something to

think about. We absolutely have to spread the word among all parliamentarians.

In your assessment of the third report, you say: ...“to improve the quality and consistency of reported information...“. When you say this, you are asking the government to distinguish between committed funds and actual cash outlays. Is it not doing that?

Mr. Kevin Page: No, not yet. But as I said, I hope that, in the report on the next quarter, we will be able to see the distinction between committed and actual amounts.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: When you receive responses from government on some aspects, some 4,000 projects are mentioned—over 3,000 of which are underway—you get information, but no distinction is made between the amounts committed and the amounts actually disbursed.

It seems to me that the simple logic of your request is clear.

Do you not think it deserves a clear, consistent and speedy answer?

Mr. Kevin Page: Yes. I have been told that it is difficult and challenging to organize the figures that explain the expenditures, not just the financial commitments.

But, as you said, it is absolutely necessary to have information like expenditures in order to assess the economic impact.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: The government is talking about creating 220,000 jobs, or something of the sort, which seems like an interesting figure. Do you know how the government came up with that figure so that you can say that, yes, we are heading in the right direction, and that, at the end of the day, there will indeed be 220,000 jobs or more created?

Mr. Kevin Page: There are two figures. The government says it is possible to create 220,000 jobs through economic stimulus measures. I do not understand how it arrived at that figure, because, in budget 2009, it gave another figure, 200,000 jobs. Clearly, it looks like the government used a simulation model to arrive at these figures.

It is important for the parliamentary budget officer to closely monitor these figures as they are updated. It is possible that the labour market may be far weaker than estimated in the 2009 budget.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Right.

You are recommending a preliminary impact analysis of the economic stimulus measures. That is more or less what you have just told us. At this point, can you identify aspects of this analysis so that the public, government and the main stakeholders can be told where the government plan will take us?

Mr. Kevin Page: To calculate and assess positive and negative effects of economic stimulus measures, we must get information on disbursements and not just on earmarked funds. We can use various simulation models and correlation techniques. Very simple models exist, linear models like the autoregressive model—

• (1625)

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Can these models tell us where we are headed or will we have to wait five years to get an answer?

Mr. Kevin Page: The models exist and they are being used in the United States.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: All right, thank you.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci, monsieur Nadeau.*

Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): I appreciate the opportunity to thank Mr. Page and the gentlemen for coming. We appreciate your testimony this afternoon.

We were hoping to get some additional clarity. I want to go back to some statements that you made, Mr. Page, with regard to information you are expecting to receive from the Minister of Transport in the coming week. I've been advised that the intention is for it to come this week. This will be project-by-project information. Is that what you are expecting to see in that compilation of documents?

Mr. Kevin Page: According to my very recent conversation with the deputy minister, it would be project by project, but it would also be province by province. As it is made available, she will make it available to me. We are appreciative of that.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I understand that there have been various project numbers thrown around—2,000, 5,000, or whatever. This is not a simple program constructed to make these stimulus dollars flow. There are matching dollars coming from the province, the federal government, and the municipalities.

We sometimes hear members of various groups talking about money flying out the door at breakneck speed. Maybe you could bring some clarification to committee members who might believe this. It is my understanding that money doesn't flow until a project actually exists. There is a certain structure for projects that need money to get started. For the most part, we are talking about communities being reimbursed for projects once the project is complete.

Is that your understanding, Mr. Page?

Mr. Kevin Page: That is correct. Even the data that we expect to receive this week will apply only to portions of those projects that ministers have signed off on.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: We heard information a couple of meetings ago that 75% of the projects that were targeted for construction in this season have been under way for about a month. I don't know if that is information you are privy to, but that's what we heard. There was a suggestion relating to the construction season, and in that respect it is pertinent information.

Mr. Kevin Page: When we get that kind of information, we will be looking at whether we can verify the 75% figure.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I sometimes wonder, Mr. Page, if the people who comment on the stimulus fund have ever gone to www.creatingjobs.gc.ca. These are commitments and announcements that have been made by the government relating to the infrastructure projects. I'm sure your office is fully informed about this. Sometimes people say they are not aware of where the money is flowing, but

there is a compilation at that site. Do you think this is a useful website for members of Parliament and the population at large?

Mr. Kevin Page: I think, for our purposes, more information is better. It may not necessarily be that case for all parliamentarians. They may find themselves getting overwhelmed with information, but I would say there are examples, as I've noted already here today, on specific projects that are very well done. I mentioned a few of them here today, like shipbuilding, the Canada graduate program, work sharing, where there's plenty of information on the nature of the projects, even on some of the federal infrastructure projects, the number of jobs that will be created, bridges, etc.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: What would be optimum? And that's, I think, what we want to get to the bottom of as a committee. What would be your ideal after a commitment is made? In some cases, once the commitment is made, the municipality has the full responsibility of moving forward to execute the project, and until they do so, there's really no information to post.

What information, beyond what has been posted on www.creatingjobs.ca, as it relates to local municipal infrastructure projects, do you believe would be helpful for not only you yourself but also the general population in that interim between the time the commitment is made and the time when we actually see money flowing?

We know there's quite a duration, and in some cases it's actually very onerous on municipalities. I have many small municipalities that will be receiving funds. They're working to execute the project and they're doing it as quickly as possible, but it's very difficult for them to provide monthly, daily, or weekly reports, but I sense there's a desire on your part and a desire on the part of many people to have additional information.

What do you think would be a process that wouldn't create an additional responsibility for the community but still allow all of us to have the information that would be helpful?

• (1630)

Mr. Kevin Page: Very quickly, I think if we can get information that speaks to the kinds of disbursements and to how the disbursements are happening, my understanding is that we may get to see this type of information this week, because it'll have project start dates, project completion dates, levels of over-amounts of money. But I think that is one of the gaps between what we have available in Canada right now and what exists in the United States, and maybe we can close that gap in the fourth quarter, which would be very positive.

Just as background, as budget officers, we look at this in two ways.

One, the economy is very weak right now and we need the stimulus. There are lots of issues about the strength of the economy in the third quarter, in the fourth quarter, and even in 2010, so it's very important that we can provide to you the kind of impact that we see from this very large stimulus package.

Then a second point, from an oversight perspective, is whether these projects are moving forward, whether the money is going to good-quality projects. It's that kind of scrutiny that a committee like this and the public accounts often look at, so we look at it two ways. We're very interested, like you, in wanting to make sure the money flows, but that it flows in a proper way.

The Chair: Thank you.

We now go to Ms. Hall Findlay for five minutes.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Page, I'm going to quote from the Federal Accountability Act, provisions that I'm quite sure you're very familiar with, section 16.4, and this relates to the accountability of accounting officers within the framework of ministerial accountability. It reads:

Within the framework of the appropriate minister's responsibilities and his or her accountability to Parliament, and subject to the appropriate minister's management and direction of his or her department, the accounting officer of [the relevant department] is accountable before the appropriate committees of the Senate and the House of Commons for

- (a) the measures taken to organize the resources of the department to deliver departmental programs in compliance with government policies and procedures;
- (b) the measures taken to maintain effective systems of internal control in the department;
- (c) the signing of the accounts that are required to be kept for the preparation of the Public Accounts pursuant to section 64...

I had a fourth one, but I actually don't need it because I think it speaks for itself.

Given your past history in various senior positions in the government, I have two questions.

First, given those responsibilities of individuals within the government, how is it possible that there is not in fact significant detail on all of these expenditures and all of the processes within these departments? The second part of the question is, how is it possible that there isn't that detail that would be collected and overseen by this obligation?

Secondly, it begs the question of why that information hasn't been provided to you. I would also ask, given those responsibilities and those obligations under the law of the civil servants who are involved in these various project departments and in efforts to get this money out—and we heard from Madame Bourgeois about a certain suggestion that the instructions to prevent the disclosure of information came from relatively on high—what position does that put those civil servants in, when they know their obligations are in fact ultimately to this standing committee, for example, and yet they are being asked by...it sounds like political masters, not to do so?

Mr. Kevin Page: As to the reasons behind why we have not yet received information, I think you'll have an opportunity later this week to speak to the Minister of Transport and Infrastructure and perhaps the deputy minister as well. Certainly those responsibilities in the Financial Administration Act are very significant around controls, around compliance with Treasury Board policies, and the need to put together information for statements.

I think it's fair to say that these are extraordinary times. This is a large stimulus package: \$47 billion over two years. A large part of it, one-third of it, is infrastructure related. These are a lot of projects to

cover across the country. There are different levels of government involved. There are timing issues here.

While it's true and we said quite clearly in the report that we thought we would be further ahead in the third-quarter report, we are hopeful that in the fourth-quarter report we'll start to see the gap close between what American legislators see and what you see, so that we will start to see disbursements relative to those projects.

● (1635)

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Mr. Page, I don't mean to interrupt, and I really appreciate your effort to put a diplomatic light on this. I realize that some of these questions may put you in an awkward position, and it's by no means a comment on the talent and desire of our civil servants. We get the sense that there's significant frustration all the way through this. But it is simply not acceptable to have an answer of, well, it's a big project and lots of dollars and it's unusual.

I go back to the situation in the United States. I'm looking at a screenshot from the Recovery.org website. This has been available for months. It hasn't just come out. In Canada, we're now looking at close to a year now of some of these things starting. On the Recovery.org website, the information in the United States, which has been available from very early on in the stimulus package program, has been thorough and accessible. It has shown a tremendous effort of transparency and accountability on behalf of the American government.

I will reiterate that I appreciate your effort to be diplomatic. I will stress that our comments are in support of all of the people in the civil service who are trying. Our sense is that there's a very strong frustration with what appears to be instructions from the political side that this information not in fact be disclosed. We cannot imagine that this information is in fact not in the government somewhere, and that begs the question, why is not coming out?

I thank you very much, but you can understand our frustration as well.

The Chair: Do you wish to respond, Mr. Page? No.

We will go to the next person, Mr. Holder, for five minutes.

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Page, it's a pleasure to see you again, sir; and I'd like to thank all of our guests for attending here this afternoon.

Mr. Page, can I just put it out there: do you feel that you're put in an awkward situation in relation to this?

Mr. Kevin Page: I don't understand the question, sir.

Mr. Ed Holder: I'm just building on the previous question. It was quoted—not by you—that you're being very diplomatic. I've always thought you to be diplomatic in any representations I've heard you make—very polite, very thoughtful, and very honest. So I'm asking you, as you are responding to these questions, do you feel that you've been put in an awkward situation at all?

Mr. Kevin Page: No, sir.

Mr. Ed Holder: All right. I appreciate that.

Look, I've only been in politics a little over a year—a year and two weeks—and I feel that when we go around the table there's a lot of “gotcha” politics. That seems to be the tenor. While some people might laugh and scoff at that, I would suggest to you that in taking this as seriously as I do....

I come from a 30-year business background, so I look at balance sheets and I understand them. I haven't read your 47-page report yet, but I think I'll probably get it, and I think I have some sense of that.

Mr. Martin made a comment, and I'd like to acknowledge it. I guess he was crediting the Government of Canada, through the Federal Accountability Act, for creating the role of the PBO, but I don't want to do that kind of “gotcha” politics. What I want to ask you, if I can—and again, I'm going to reflect on some of his comments, because I think inappropriate comments or thrown out comments without responses aren't fair—do you have any evidence that in relation to the information you are getting and will be getting from the Minister of Transport and Infrastructure, there's any hanky-panky going on here?

Mr. Kevin Page: Sir, we've not yet received anything on infrastructure related to our information requests, so I can't say one way or the other. I don't start with an assumption that there are bad practices at play.

Mr. Ed Holder: Do you have any sense that this is somehow an elaborate shell game that's being created by the federal government?

Mr. Kevin Page: The way I approach this issue is that Canada has gone through a very serious recession. We've lost 400,000 full-time jobs across this country. Outputs declined upwards of 4% real GDP. So the stimulus is very important, and as budget officers we want to make sure it's put to good use.

Mr. Ed Holder: I think properly said. Do you have any evidence to suggest there is the intention—and I'm not asking for opinion, but evidence—to defraud the Canadian people?

Mr. Kevin Page: Sir, again, as I said, we are budget officers, not auditors. At a later stage of the game, people may ask the Auditor General to look at these issues, but we're not in a position to provide.... We don't use financial control information to look at issues of fraud or otherwise, or issues of that nature.

• (1640)

Mr. Ed Holder: So you don't have any evidence to that end.

Mr. Kevin Page: It's not my job to look at those types of issues.

Mr. Ed Holder: I appreciate that. I find that helpful. What I don't find helpful, though—not from you, sir—is innuendo, innuendo that frankly doesn't get us to any positive place. I think that comes back to my comment about “gotcha” politics.

As part of your assessment, sir, you said you wanted to make sure that the projects that are in play are good projects. I need to ask you, so I can clarify it in my head, first of all, who came up with the projects to begin with, infrastructure projects?

Mr. Kevin Page: It's a government proposal. It's the government's proposal to put together a range of programs, including.... I think a lot of the conversation today has been around the infrastructure stimulus.

Mr. Ed Holder: Yes, and that's what I'm referring to. In terms of that, who would come up with the list of the projects to be

considered by all three levels of government? Which level of government?

Mr. Kevin Page: These are tripartite programs, so they involve three levels of government in most cases.

Mr. Ed Holder: Ultimately, in terms of decision-making, that's correct. I guess I can only refer in my own case, in my city of London, Ontario, where we looked at it and we relied on our municipal government to come up with a list of a variety of projects that we could somehow come back and assess. Is that not your understanding of how it was done across the country?

Mr. Kevin Page: I'm sure a lot of them were generated at the municipality level. In fact, my staff and I briefed on the economic and sort of fiscal...we spent some time with the municipalities as well. I think a lot of the projects were driven at the municipality level.

Mr. Ed Holder: Ultimately, who is responsible for delivery of these projects, seeing them to completion?

Mr. Kevin Page: All these projects are paid for by Canadian taxpayers, and a lot of the delivery will be done at the local level.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Holder.

We will go now to Madam Bourgeois for cinq minutes, s'il vous plait.

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Page, I would like to refer you to the top of page 2 of your presentation. You state “The last point is particularly important: whenever we highlight information gaps, it pertains to data already collected and held by the government.”

What exactly do you mean? Does this mean that, when you highlight information gaps, this is information the government has but does not want to share? Can you give me an example, please?

Mr. Sahir Khan: In our report, the requirement we established was tied to those made by Treasury Board policies. In most cases, the figures are in the submissions to Treasury Board. There is information on the amount, the objective of the project and the expected results.

We have advised parliamentarians to concentrate on the type of information that is already available within the system. Departments are losing Treasury Board submissions, which already contain this type of information. Our goal was to not increase the costs of implementing this budget; our goal was to focus on existing information.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: If I understand correctly, you would like parliamentarians to approach the government in order to obtain the information. Is that correct?

Mr. Sahir Khan: On the Treasury Board website, there is a guide for the completion of submissions to Treasury Board. We feel that this type of information is very useful and it is available.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Is the information that our questions are asking about today available on the Treasury Board site? Can we find out, for example, how many infrastructure projects have been granted to Quebec?

Mr. Kevin Page: If that information is on the website, you may use it.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Very well, we will check.

Still on page 2, on the issue of reporting, you ask how much money will be involved, for what, how many people will be helped, how many projects will be funded. That is a minimum. That is basic planning.

• (1645)

Mr. Kevin Page: Yes, it is basic, but it is the most important.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Have the departments whom you have asked for an accounting of the infrastructure stimulus fund provided you with this basic information? Can you answer? This has to do with planning. In other words, were they doing the basic planning requested here?

Mr. Kevin Page: As I said, it really is a minimum. Once we get an opportunity to look over this information...

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: You hope that you will find it.

As my colleague said, you are very diplomatic. In your report last October and in your speaking notes today, you expressed a great deal of frustration, as an auditor, either because you are not obtaining some documents or that the figures are not correct.

However, I would like you to explain why you would change your tack on page 3 of your notes to say "... the government is to be commended for beginning to provide legislators with relevant financial and operating information that could be used to exercise oversight of public monies...". Yet, you know full well that the government has not yet implemented the accrual accounting that we on this committee requested. Perhaps that would answer some of your questions about quarterly accounting. It would allow you to determine how much was committed to and how much was actually disbursed.

[English]

The Chair: Madame Bourgeois.

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Yes? Can he answer? Thank you.

Mr. Kevin Page: I believe the quarterly budget implementation reports are a positive innovation. Attempting to improve the quality of this information through a report was a good idea. That is what I commended the government on.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci.*

Mr. Martin, for five minutes.

Mr. Pat Martin: Thank you.

It strikes me when listening to some of the exchanges, Mr. Page, that we need to remind ourselves that it was the culture of secrecy that allowed corruption to flourish under the Liberals, and it was the staggering dishonesty in the budget-making process in those years

that gave rise to the call for the creation of a parliamentary budget officer. The former Minister of Finance used to deceive Canadians blatantly and then, at the end of the year, like pulling some sedated rabbit out of a tattered top hat, he would say "Ta-dah, here's \$10 billion that nobody knew about." That was the dishonesty that gave rise to a growing movement to have you put in place in order to check the veracity of the promises made—at the estimates instead of the public accounts stage. The Auditor General can read the entrails after the animal has been killed and we can assess them then, but it's at the front end that we need to know if they're being truthful and honest with us.

I think you can lie in a number of ways. There are lies by omission and lies by overt commission. But the misinformation associated with denying you the information you need is just as damaging as if they had just completely false numbers. I don't differentiate between the two.

By the way, I think the only time you were put on the spot today was when Mr. Holder put those questions to you. We appreciate what you're doing, and I think it's fundamentally wrong that the government rations out little tidbits of information when it's advantageous to them, but is not completely forthright with Canadians in plain language. There was movement afoot years ago, in the interests of inclusiveness and egalitarianism, that bills and legislation and things like that would be rendered down to plain language so that everybody would have, in the sense of natural justice, access to them. We need plain language in our financial statements in the same spirit of egalitarianism.

Maybe I don't even have a question.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Pat Martin: I'm just really pleased that you're here, Mr. Page.

When you do get down to some of the information you need, I think you're going to find there was a tendency to use this free-for-all spending.... No one can deny that billions of dollars were flying out the door at breakneck speed, at unprecedented breakneck speed, because in all the years I've been an MP, it's been a period of belt-tightening and cutbacks—anything but spending. So one would be silly not to acknowledge the room for abuse when that kind of money is flying out the door at that rate of speed. I'm not implying that anybody is lining their pockets; I'm not implying anybody is stealing or even misusing money. But the ways of spending that money to political advantage are irresistible, I believe, and I think we're going to find that the money has been sprinkled around in a partisan way to advantage certain areas, and that the outcomes are in fact questionable.

Maybe I do have one specific question, sir. Some of the stimulus package involves EI. The federal government doesn't pay into EI; it isn't their money. Do you believe that should be part of the equation in terms of the economic stimulus package? The money from the EI fund is contributed by employers and employees. The federal government hasn't contributed since 1985 or 1986, when Mulroney changed that. Is it being transparent to have EI factored in?

●(1650)

Mr. Kevin Page: Actually, we think there's a relatively high degree of transparency around these EI expenditures. I think that from an economic point of view some economists were concerned there wasn't a lot of stabilization existing in the some of the social programs we have in Canada and that it was necessary to supplement them. So we've seen supplements: the extension of EI benefits, the additional moneys for training—

Mr. Pat Martin: But that doesn't come from the public purse.

Mr. Kevin Page: No, but I think it does provide some support for a number of Canadians who desperately need those moneys, and it will some help soften the blow of the downturn we've seen in the economy.

In terms of counting it as stimulus, we made some comments a long time ago about whether or not we should be counting, for example, the freeze on the EI premium rate for the first two years. We've raised some issues around that from a stimulus total point of view, but—

Mr. Pat Martin: We'll you've been bang on about the Afghan war and the national deficit projections, so we appreciate that.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go over to Mr. Anders, and he might be sharing his time with Mr. Brown. I will watch. I'm just protecting you. If you wish to ask a question, do so. If you want to wait for your next round, it may come.

Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC): Okay. I just want to point out that I think what's going on here is that in the big picture, our economy is doing better than most of our economic competitors, so I notice that a lot of the debate today seems to be over semantics and statements, but not so much over details. I don't hear the chair or the opposition members taking issue with \$333 million being spent in her riding in Don Valley East.

The Chair: There's \$333 million?

Mr. Rob Anders: For the LRT expansion.

The Chair: In my riding? This is going to be really fun.

Mr. Rob Anders: I don't hear criticism about the business credit availability program and the \$5 billion there. I don't hear about the Export Development Corporation, and taking issue with the \$350 million there. I don't hear them taking issue with the auto industry and the \$2.7 billion there. I don't hear them taking issue with the \$300 million for the Canada small business financing program. I don't hear them taking issue with the \$14 million for aviation security. I don't hear them taking issue with regard to the Olympic Games and the \$20 million there. I don't hear them taking issue with the industrial research assistance program and the \$170 million, plus \$30 million, there.

I think it's largely just semantics, because they've had an opportunity to go into the budgetary estimates, the supplementary estimates, and the opposition did not want to spend a lot of time on that. So it's not the details the opposition's interested in. It's just the semantics.

With that, I now pass it over to my friend Patrick Brown.

●(1655)

Mr. Patrick Brown (Barrie, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Anders.

My question relates to the comments I've heard about secrecy. I think it's never been more obvious that spending is going on and what that spending is. Whether it's the website that illustrates it or whether it's the fact that in every community in Canada where you go, you see giant signs. It's not like anyone's trying to hide which projects are going on. If anything, the issue we have is that this is the most well-publicized, least-secretive campaign ever to create jobs. That's why I find it unbelievable when I hear some suggestions that there is secrecy to the reporting or to what projects are being undertaken.

My question is this. With the three reports to Parliament, is there any other OECD country that has had more reporting on stimulus spending than Canada?

Mr. Sahir Khan: As we noted, the United States has had what we consider to be the highest level of disclosure in terms of stimulus reporting, but one of the things we also have written about since last February is that while other jurisdictions don't necessarily report in a different manner, or a heightened manner, for stimulus, they may have more sophisticated quarterly reporting standards that allow parliamentarians in their jurisdiction to maybe have an improved connection between budget and estimates in the context of this committee.

Mr. Patrick Brown: Given that, do you think an explanation for that could be that we do have three levels of government in Canada, where in other countries the federal government may play a much larger role in their federalism? I know if the government wanted to get updates on projects in Barrie, the riding I represent, they'd have to check with the municipality, and the municipalities tend to have their own reporting mechanisms.

So we have 5,000 projects, and I imagine to get reports from municipalities across Canada, that's a big project. I think it's incredible that we've seen three reports, we've seen signs everywhere showing exactly what's happening, so I think Canadians are very well informed.

Do you know if there have been three reports to Congress from the President, or have there been other countries where we've seen such an incredible level of reporting given the federalism we have in this country?

Mr. Sahir Khan: Sir, we actually had that discussion with the Office of Management and Budget in the United States. They indicated they have a similar level of complexity in dealing with multiple levels of government, including the county level, which added another level of complexity to their reporting.

We've tried to outline in our report the nature of reporting that the U.S. government does provide. One of the other aspects we learned from their practice is that it's not necessarily done by institutional arrangement between the executive and the legislature in the context of their constitution, but it has been done by executive directive, so it's a choice they made to provide that level of transparency.

Mr. Patrick Brown: The last question I have is on remarks that the funding hasn't been equitable. I look at the knowledge infrastructure program, for example, and no one likes to ask questions on that, because 62% of the projects in the knowledge infrastructure program have gone to opposition ridings.

When you look at the programs in their entirety, do you have any concerns with the statement made by Ontario's Deputy Premier George Smitherman that the program is equitable?

Mr. Kevin Page: As budget officers, we don't necessarily look at the question of equitability from a partisan point of view. We've not been asked to do that. We tend to look at the stimulus more from the point of view of the impact on the economy, the impact on the nation's finances. We leave it at that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Foote, for five minutes.

Ms. Judy Foote: Thank you.

I know you're being asked to provide answers on information you obviously don't have, and I can appreciate that, but I'd like to go back to this announcement made on Friday. The federal government made the records public for \$900 million in federal stimulus projects. It released numbers for 1,100 infrastructure projects, even though the details for many projects remain scanty. Were you given this information?

Mr. Kevin Page: We have not been given it, but in my conversations with the deputy minister this week, I suspect I will be getting some of this information as soon as tomorrow.

• (1700)

Ms. Judy Foote: So this information was released to the media but not to your office?

I appreciate that you're hoping you're going to get this information tomorrow, but what recourse do you have if it's not forthcoming? I mean, you have a job to do. Your office exists for a purpose. You're asking for information. If it's not forthcoming, what recourse do you have?

Mr. Kevin Page: We rely on committees like this to put pressure on the necessary people to ensure we have information so that we can do the analysis for you.

Ms. Judy Foote: We appreciate that. Without the information we're looking for, obviously we can't do our job, as a committee.

Even though my colleagues sometimes question the approach we take and the questions we're asking, clearly for us to do our job of dealing with the very purpose for the stimulus package in the first place, which was to create jobs and deal with ailing infrastructure throughout the country, we need to be able to find out exactly what is happening, the amount of money being spent, what it's being spent on, and the number of jobs being created.

That's precisely why we're here and why we're asking these questions. It's difficult for us to do our job when you don't have the information we can ask you about.

I have a problem with the deadline for March 2011 and the fact that we're already one year into the stimulus program. Have you

been told this is a definitive deadline? Is there any chance, at all, that this deadline could move?

Mr. Kevin Page: We follow the Budget Implementation Act and what was said in budget 2009 with respect to the timing. Again, as budget officers, we will look at the impact of this on the economy. We know that the economy has been severely hurt in 2009. By most estimates we'll still be operating well below Canada's potential in 2010. If this money flows to a significant degree in 2010, it still will have a significant impact.

One of the things we, and I think the government as well, addressed earlier on is principles of timeliness and it being targeted and temporary. By the finance minister's own admission, we are looking at a deficit for this year of about \$56 billion. It's somewhat smaller next year. I think there was an effort to try to target this money and also to make sure it was temporary. Those would be trade-offs that the government will have to make.

Ms. Judy Foote: My apologies. I said 2011; it should have been 2010.

My concern, as well, is for the smaller municipalities. Based on the bit of information you do have, do you have any indication that smaller municipalities are reluctant to get involved? With what you've seen, are there many small municipalities engaged in this process, or are these bigger initiatives in the larger municipalities and cities? Has it become more of a cities initiative versus a rural type of initiative?

Mr. Kevin Page: I think if your question is directed at the ability of smaller municipalities to launch these types of projects, competition among construction firms, what have you, it's something we will definitely keep an eye on.

Again, when we get this data, as I've been told by the deputy minister, we'll have start and finish dates on these projects and we'll be looking at that carefully too, and we'll be monitoring that as the data get updated from quarter to quarter. So we can come back to you and brief you on that.

Ms. Judy Foote: At this point, based on the information you have, can you tell us whether or not there seems to be a predominance of contracts or initiatives being undertaken in cities versus in rural communities?

Mr. Kevin Page: As we go through the data, we can sort that out for members. It's obviously something you'd be interested in. We could do that, and we could sort it out by different types of projects too, because some of the projects will have a bigger economic multiplier, so to speak, as well. So we will do that.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Foote.

I'll go to Mr. Holder.

Mr. Ed Holder: Thank you very much for giving me a second opportunity to ask a few more questions.

Again, I want to thank our guests. This has been exceptionally helpful, and your candour and sincerity is quite appreciated. I want to come back to a couple of things that have been said and that I want to clarify for my own understanding.

Since my round of questioning, a member talked about lies by omission. I'm not sure if that was meant—and I'm not here to ask the member opposite what he meant—to somehow imply that by virtue of the fact that you don't have the information, it's deemed to be a lie. Do you sense the government is lying, or is it too early to say that the government is lying? Have you any thoughts on that, sir?

• (1705)

Mr. Kevin Page: As a budget officer, I don't think I'm put in a position to make those kinds of comments one way or the other, sir.

Mr. Ed Holder: And I wish members opposite wouldn't either. So thank you for that.

I guess the other question is about another reference that was made about this free-for-all of spending, but I thought I heard you say in your opening comments something along the line that you noted that the infrastructure funding is the biggest job multiplier. Could you elaborate? Why is that so important? I could imagine it's because you've got three-for-one spending, if you will, and that you've got municipalities contributing, provinces contributing, and the federal government contributing. Is that what you meant by that?

Mr. Kevin Page: From an economic point of view, I think if you even just walk down the street—for example, Bank Street in Ottawa—you could see the incredible amount of work that's taking place and the different types of tradesmen who are involved. I mean, you are employing people who may not have been employed, when you provide that kind of stimulus money. When those people are employed, they're purchasing things at grocery stores and other types of stores too. There is a second round of economic effects that are making sure we have people employed during this period of significant economic weakness.

Mr. Ed Holder: I think that's great. It's great to hear that as a comment. In fact, I take some comfort when you indicate that your view of the level of tracking, report over report, is getting better. You have some hope and expectation that it will be stronger in this fourth report, and I agree.

Again, someone earlier made a comment about dollars being spread around in some partisan way. I would like you to give us some sense, perhaps after you've had a chance to look at the fourth-quarter report, whether you believe—and I'll take my own province of Ontario and maybe my own city as an example—that somehow the mayor of London and other mayors across my province, the Liberal leader of Ontario, and the federal government have somehow conspired to spread around things in a partisan way.

Are you going to respond, because we've heard a lot of that, and I would appreciate it if you might make some comment about that once you've had a chance to assess your report.

Mr. Kevin Page: Actually, I don't think that's really in my job description, so I would probably stay away from that one, sir.

Mr. Ed Holder: Finally, based on the dialogue that has taken place between you and the department, do you have any reason to believe you'll not receive the information as you've requested?

Mr. Kevin Page: I'm hoping we will see this data starting to roll out towards my office as early as tomorrow on a province-by-province basis. That was the nature of the commitment.

Again, if we get the information the way it was described to me—a description of the project, the amounts, project start and end dates—we can come back to you and give you a sense of what the potential economic impact could be too. I'm sure the Department of Finance will be doing the same.

Mr. Ed Holder: And we appreciate that.

Here is a final question—and thank you, Madam Chair, for this.

A lot of the questions seem to me to suggest you're here almost a week early in terms of being able to give us a report, frankly, because you don't have the fourth-quarter report to respond to. Is it fair for me to assume that the concerns expressed by members opposite are premature?

Mr. Kevin Page: I have no comments there.

What I hear are some of the concerns relative to the gaps between the kind of information reporting we have on stimulus in Canada vis-à-vis what they have in the United States. To be honest, there is a gap. The U.S. is actually outperforming us. I think we can close the gap in Canada, and maybe we'll close it in the fourth quarter. We'll start to get at not just the level of commitments but disbursements, and we'll start to do an economic report. In the U.S., the Council of Economic Advisers has already started to estimate the impacts on the economy, starting in the third quarter. We have lots of smart people at the Department of Finance. I'm sure they'll be all over the data from Transport and Infrastructure, and we'll be doing the same.

Mr. Ed Holder: And you'll be able to report more thoughtfully about it once you've received it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Holder.

As chair I don't normally ask questions, because I want to listen to how the questions are coming. The purpose of this meeting was for the committee to have a look at government spending, because that's your responsibility, and for you to give us the state of the nation's finance.

You are the Parliamentary Budget Officer. We can get a minister, and the minister can give us any political spiel he wants to, because that's his job. That's his *raison d'être*. For us to get information from you, we have to ask you these questions. I am an accountant by trade, a consultant by trade as well, and I'm listening to what you're saying. You say you look at the planning and determine the outlay, from A to Z. What is the process for tracking the money?

I'll give you a classic example. The Comptroller General came before the public accounts committee. I used to sit on public accounts. We asked him to explain how \$3 billion—this was unprecedented money, not part of the budget—had been spent and whether it really stimulated the economy. The frustration of this committee is not that infrastructure money does not stimulate the economy; the frustration of this committee is that pie-in-the-sky assumptions are made. If you commit \$3 billion, you are going to spend \$3 billion. If you don't spend \$3 billion, then the stimulus that you claimed was going to happen is not going to happen.

My question to you is, who controls the data? You said you do not receive the data. Who controls the data? Is it the Treasury Board? Finance? Where do you get the data to help you make decisions and to help us follow the money?

• (1710)

Mr. Sahir Khan: It depends on the source of the inquiry. It could be from this committee or from other parliamentarians. We might ask the Department of Finance for information we need for economic and fiscal forecasting purposes. To get a better understanding of the implementation of the budget vis-à-vis infrastructure, our request would go directly to the deputy minister at Transport and Infrastructure.

The Parliament of Canada Act says that the Parliamentary Budget Officer must make the request to the relevant deputy minister of the department from which the budget officer seeks the information. In some cases, that information is going to be in a line department. In other cases, the information may exist within the central agencies—Treasury Board, Finance, PCO. We would direct requests to departments according to the nature of the inquiry.

The Chair: As Parliamentary Budget Officer, you are the person we rely on. Why is it so difficult to track the dollars? Why is it so difficult to track, whether I commit \$1 billion or \$3 billion, what I have used? You're following accrual accounting. The government is following accrual accounting. It's not cash or modified cash, which is what the departments are using. If the departments are using the cash-basis system, and the government is using accrual, what's so difficult about tracking those dollars?

Mr. Kevin Page: To add to what Sahir said in terms of the difficulty, if it weren't for the budget implementation reports, which we think are a great innovation—we're getting more reporting now than we've had in previous years—we would basically be relying on the Receiver General to see how money is going out the door in real time. For example, the latest information we have from the Receiver General is for the month of July.

Thanks to the budget implementation reports, we're now getting more up-to-date information on projects, so we can get a sense for you—which, again, I think is really the nature of your question—of what the impact is going to be on the economy, on output and on jobs, and we can estimate that for you.

Again, the overall demands for reporting are set by the Treasury Board's executive. The Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure will follow those demands. They will provide the data to the Receiver General. We have a new level of reporting with this budget implementation report. Again, if I get this information this week, we can start looking at project start dates, project completion dates, how much money federally, and how much money at the provincial and municipal level. We can start aligning that relative to construction schedules. We can see it's going to have an impact on the third quarter, the fourth quarter, the first quarter in 2010, or whatever, and we will start that for you.

Is it difficult? I don't think it's difficult because, you're right, the information is there and the accounting procedures are well established. The chart of accounts is there and is being followed by departments. I think we've made significant progress in the

budget implementation report. We think we need to make more progress in the fourth quarter.

The Chair: Are you asking for financial statements from departments, Mr. Page?

• (1715)

Mr. Kevin Page: The Receiver General asks for financial statements from departments, and they're provided to the Receiver General. We see them at a very aggregate level through fiscal monitors and things of that nature during the course of the year. Otherwise, we're waiting for the public accounts, which is 18 months later, after the authorities have provided them.

What we're trying to do is something quite different, actually. It's to use these budget implementation reports to give you something that's more real time. But what are we asking for? We're asking basically for the kind of information that's provided under Treasury Board guidelines to the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure.

The Chair: For my last question, you told us what Canada's fourth progress report could include. Have you suggested that to the government, because that's what the U.S. is using? The outlays to date from government commitments would be easy to maintain. Would you respond?

Then I'll take your point of order, Mr. Holder.

Mr. Ed Holder: Madam Chair, on a point of order, does a point of order not take precedence over a response to a question? I think that's the protocol.

The Chair: Fair enough.

Mr. Ed Holder: Thank you.

If I might, that was your third question. I know my time was cut short because there wasn't—

The Chair: We gave you five minutes.

Mr. Ed Holder: No, you gave me four minutes, Madam Chair, respectfully. That's what you told me. But if you've given me five, then—

The Chair: But I went to five minutes, sir. I did. I actually looked at the time.

Mr. Ed Holder: All right.

So my practical question is—because it seems to me that we're having a series of questions again—would the government side have an opportunity to ask more questions again, as a result of this?

The Chair: Mr. Holder, normal practice is for a chair to ask questions. I sit neutral, I listen to what is being asked, and you have not. You got into partisan questions. All I'm doing is trying to find the flow of process, follow the money. If you had asked the follow-the-money question, I wouldn't have had the need to ask the question. That is why I was asking the question, for clarification. I made no practical statements.

Mr. Ed Holder: Perhaps, Madam Chair, you might have directed that question through members of your party, but in the—

The Chair: No, sir. I stay neutral. I have the right to do it.

Mr. Ed Holder: You might, but you talked in terms of the frustration of this committee and I'd suggest that this whole committee is not all frustrated. That was a direct quote of what you said. Actually, I don't feel particularly frustrated. I share the confidence of this—

The Chair: Fair enough.

Mr. Pat Martin: Well, you're in the ruling party. You have access to all the information.

The Chair: Fair enough. Okay.

Mr. Ed Holder: But Madam Chair—

The Chair: Your point of order is taken, yes.

Mr. Ed Holder: If it is taken, I would simply say that in the committees I've been involved with—again, as the newest member—I've not seen the chair be so participatory. So I'm only trying to understand if that's the case.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Holder, but you are probably too new to committees. If you sat on public accounts, in the public accounts committee the chair asks the questions in between everybody else's questions. And we're being courteous to each other.

I listened intently. I went down to the final point until I wrapped up, and I wrapped up because you had not asked the relevant questions. It is important for the chair to listen to everyone and see what is missing, and when the chair realizes what is missing, the chair has to summarize that this is what she heard, the frustration from everyone.

The question I needed to pose to Mr. Page was why it was difficult to track the money. He has 3,000 projects. How many departments are responsible and what is the confusion, so that when next time we ask a budget officer to come before us, we need to know the flow of process. It is important for us to know, because otherwise we are asking questions that sometimes the officer cannot answer. If we understand the flow of process, we will be able to ask the questions.

Mr. Page, would you mind answering? What is the number of departments that are involved in those 3,000 projects? Do you have any idea?

Mr. Sahir Khan: In terms of administration of the program, our understanding is that this falls within the rubric of the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure, so it would be one department administering the program under the policies of the Treasury Board.

The Chair: So now, to avoid confusion, could you do us a favour and show us how the budget officer approaches following the flow of money by giving us a flow chart, so that we do not go into this confusion? We need to understand so that it makes your job easy and our jobs easy, so it facilitates our thinking. It's important for us to ask you the right questions. We do not need to go into partisanship; we need to know that you, the budget officer, are protecting and are giving us the health of the nation's finances. There has been speculation that this money will go back to the consolidated revenue fund so that the deficit that is projected will be reduced. If that's the speculation, we need to know that.

With that, I would like you to have the final remarks, and then we will suspend the meeting for a little while.

Mr. Page.

• (1720)

Mr. Kevin Page: We'll be happy to provide to the committee a flow chart that starts with the budget, with the provision of authorities, with disbursements, how those disbursements are tracked through the course of the year, how they're reported on in plans and priority documents through the estimates process and the department performance reports, how they're reported on through the public accounts, and the role that is played through these budget implementation reports that we have now. As well, as we look forward, under Bill C-51 there's a new provision now for departments to provide additional quarterly reports, which might be impacted as well as this flow chart.

We would be happy to provide that flow chart for you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Do you have any final remarks to make?

You have a point of order, Madam Findlay?

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: I just want to add to the point of order, in support of you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the concerns, but in the finance committee earlier today the Conservative chair of the committee asked some very helpful and extensive questions. It is appropriate for the chair to ask questions and to participate. I just wanted to say that. It does happen with all parties.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'll suspend the meeting for 20 seconds. We have some committee business we need to finish. I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here and for doing a fine job. Thank you.

• _____ (Pause) _____
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The Chair: I am just going to take three minutes to remind you that on Thursday we have Minister Baird and Minister Merrifield, along with their officials, and Finance officials will be there. It will be covered by CBC and CTV, and we will need to ensure that the officials stay. If the ministers are busy, they are free to go, but the officials need to stay because we had staged that we needed the minister first and the officials next.

On Tuesday, November 3, we have the President of the Treasury Board and the current and former Clerks of the Privy Council, and the subject is the advertising component of the stimulus package.

For Thursday, November 5, we had stated that, if we couldn't get anybody, we'd get the Public Service Commissioner to come before us and present her findings, and she would like to do that. So November 5 was an open meeting. We had requested that all of you submit your suggestions for studies.

Mr. Anders, you had some wonderful suggestions, but you didn't submit them. You verbally articulated them here. Please submit them in writing so we do not forget what it is that you want the committee to study.

With that, are there any questions or concerns?

Yes, Mr. Martin.

Mr. Pat Martin: It has been a constant source of frustration to me that lately, when we invite ministers to come to our committees, they're only available for one hour. That's actually relatively new. In the 13 years I've been here, usually a minister has stayed with you for the meeting or for as long as you need them. Even if he has to dash away after one hour, I think we should let it be known that we're not impressed with that.

• (1725)

The Chair: Fair enough, and when the meeting starts on Thursday, I will communicate the member's concern that we need the ministers and the officials to stay for two hours. That helps us.

The clerk has given me....

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Marc-Olivier Girard): It's just a quotation from Marleau and Montpetit: "Questions may be asked by any member of the committee; the Chair may, on occasion, also participate..."

The Chair: That's concerning your point of order.

Mr. Ed Holder: Then, Madam Chair, if I might, if you're going to indicate that a member is concerned that the minister is only going to give an hour, I would hope you would also indicate that there are some members, certainly one at least, who appreciates the fact that the minister is here for the hour, and that's appreciated. So for proper balance, I would ask that this be accommodated as well.

The Chair: As you can see, Mr. Holder, I am very balanced, and we just had Marleau and Montpetit justifying my right to ask questions at any time I want, so there is a chapter in there. But I will be very balanced. I will thank the minister for coming, because we appreciate the minister's time. Ministers are busy; we appreciate that, and if you could talk to the current Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, she will tell you that I am a very responsible chair. I do not put any minister into trouble.

Mr. Ed Holder: Believe it or not, Madam Chair, prior to this meeting, I have had one or two Conservatives who said nice things about you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I was just going to suggest that the clerk might reference the Standing Orders as they relate to points of order as well. There's some instruction that would be helpful.

The Chair: Fair enough. Absolutely. Thank you, Mr. Warkentin, for a point well taken.

Is there any other business?

The meeting is adjourned.

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