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# **Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Wednesday, February 9, 2011**

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**Chair**

**The Honourable Shawn Murphy**



## Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

Wednesday, February 9, 2011

• (1530)

[English]

**The Chair (Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.)):** I call the meeting to order.

I want to welcome everyone here. *Bienvenue à tous*. This meeting is called in continuation of the committee's ongoing study into open government and open data.

We have a very interesting meeting this afternoon. We've had about at least six meetings on this study, but this is the first occasion on which we're actually going to hear from Government of Canada witnesses as to what is being done, what is proposed to be done, and what plans are being worked upon.

The committee is very pleased to have with us Madame Corinne Charette, the chief information officer of the Treasury Board Secretariat. She is accompanied by Stephen Walker, senior director of information management strategies in the chief information officer branch.

We have two departments represented. The first department is the Department of Natural Resources. As you will recall, colleagues, back in an earlier testimony from the Information Commissioner, the Department of Natural Resources was out there as probably one of the better examples within the Government of Canada. We have with us Mr. Brian Gray, assistant deputy minister, earth sciences sector; Mr. Bill Merklinger, assistant deputy minister and chief financial officer, corporate management and services sector; and Mr. Prashant Shukle, director general, mapping information branch.

Finally, from the Department of the Environment, we have Mr. Chuck Shawcross, assistant deputy minister and chief information officer, chief information officer branch.

On behalf of every member of the committee, I want to thank you for your appearances here this afternoon. I want to thank you for your efforts in this regard. We're going to have opening comments from each of the departments and then we will go to questions from members.

I'm going to start with you, Madame Charette. Proceed with your opening comments, please.

**Ms. Corinne Charette (Chief Information Officer, Treasury Board Secretariat):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you on the topic of open government.

My name is Corinne Charette. I am the chief information officer for the Government of Canada. I lead the CIOB branch at Treasury Board Secretariat, which provides strategic direction and leadership in the government for four policy areas: access to information and privacy, information management, information technology, and government security. I am accompanied by Mr. Stephen Walker, senior director for information management at CIOB.

Within the Treasury Board Secretariat, my branch is responsible for establishing the overall government-wide strategic directions across the four policy areas that we manage. We do this....

**The Chair:** Madam Charette, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but everything is being translated here. If you could slow it down by perhaps 20%, it would make it just that much easier for the staff behind you there.

[Translation]

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Very well. Thank you. I'm sorry about that.

[English]

*Alors, I'll carry on.*

Within Treasury Board Secretariat, my branch is responsible for establishing the overall government-wide strategic directions across the four policy areas we manage. We do this in alignment with legislation and in consultation with departments. We also monitor compliance by departments with the policy instruments we publish.

The secretariat plays an important enabling role. We support all departments and agencies through collaboration, the issuance of policy instruments, and by providing ongoing guidance to our communities of practice.

Open government has become a topic of interest to both the public and to public servants in all jurisdictions. As a result, the Treasury Board Secretariat, through my sector, the chief information officer branch, has initiated work to develop supporting strategies.

Open government is a new and broad term. From the secretariat's perspective, we define it as encompassing three key pillars or activities in support of the principles of open government. These activities are already under way across the federal public service. The three activities I will be discussing are open data, open information—for both public servants and Canadians—and open dialogue.

We refer to the ability to provide information that can be easily located, accessed, and, if useful, repurposed or reused by the public online as open data. My colleagues from Natural Resources Canada and Environment Canada will speak to what their departments are enabling in this regard.

The ability of a public servant in one department to easily locate and access information or a knowledge repository managed by another department and to engage in an online dialogue within the government forum—such as in our Government of Canada wiki, which we call GCPedia—will be called open information for public servants.

The ability of the government to engage in online dialogues with the public for the purposes of soliciting input or feedback, as was done by the Minister of Industry this past spring in his public consultations on the digital economy strategy, we will refer to as open dialogue.

The chief information officer branch recognizes that open data can indeed be further facilitated for the benefit of the public, particularly with regard to the ease of locating data sets of interest and the ability to secure access to these data sets in machine-readable formats. We are also aware of the potential economic and social value or benefits of repurposing data sets by and for Canadians.

The Treasury Board Secretariat is developing a strategy in consultation with a broad range of departments to determine if there are specific goals that the Government of Canada should have with regard to open data. These goals would support the identification and development of policies and policy instruments that would help in the management of open government data in the future.

The second area, open information for public servants, is where a forum for knowledge in government has been created. An example is the widespread adoption and use of GCPedia, which now has over 21,000 contributing public servants as users, and which has been a focus area of my branch since 2009. We are very pleased with the engagement of public servants across Canada. In fact, the clerk commented in his *Seventeenth Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada*, and I quote:

Adopting Web 2.0 technologies such as wikis can help us to improve the productivity of our workplaces and better harness the skills and knowledge of public servants across the country.

On the topic of open information for Canadians, the government has made several improvements to ensuring that Canadians have better access to information. Canada has led many jurisdictions in this domain, and it was among the first to adopt federal access to information legislation. That occurred in 1983, prior to the advent of the Internet.

Since then the government has taken measures to continue to regularly make more of its information available to Canadians. For example, in 2004 the government increased transparency with the introduction of its first proactive disclosure initiative on travel and hospitality expenses, and it has made this information available online.

● (1535)

Over the years, this was followed by other online posting initiatives, such as contracts over \$10,000 and grants and contributions over \$25,000.

Subsequently, with the adoption of the Federal Accountability Act in 2007, we added 70 new federal institutions under the Access to Information Act and improved the administration of the act through the implementation of new policies. The most recent policy change to be implemented is the new requirement for the collection of annual access to information statistical data. Starting in April 2011, institutions will start to compile more data, such as the number of pages processed, timelines, extensions, consultations, and delays.

Finally, this year the Treasury Board Secretariat, through the chief information officer branch, has been working with government institutions to post summaries of completed Access to Information Act requests on their websites. To date a number of institutions, including the Treasury Board Secretariat, are posting these summaries.

Today the government is focusing on new ways to initiate online dialogue with the public. As a whole, the Government of Canada has been increasingly using new ways to engage citizens. A recent example is the cross-country and online consultations process undertaken by the Red Tape Reduction Commission. This process started in mid-January of this year. The government is collecting feedback from Canadians and posting their responses online as they come in day by day. Another example, as I mentioned earlier, is the substantive series of consultations held by the industry minister in 2010 on the digital economy strategy, which provided Canadians with a variety of social media platforms to take part in the discussion. Initiatives like these are becoming more common in the government's day-to-day business.

The Treasury Board Secretariat recognizes this and recognizes that we need to address information management requirements for such online conversations with the public. We need to ensure that in accordance with our existing legislation, proper requirements are in place for the retention of records and for the management of any personal information provided through these dialogues.

In conclusion, the Treasury Board Secretariat, and in particular the chief information officer branch, continues to support and enable the evolution of open data and open government, which is consistent with the government's commitment to transparency. However, the wealth and breadth of our information holdings, coupled with the requirements to ensure compliance with a number of our legal and policy areas, including accessibility, official languages, access to information and privacy, and information management, mandates a careful, well-thought-out approach and plan, which we are working on.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my remarks. I would be pleased to answer the questions from the committee.

*Merci.*

● (1540)

**The Chair:** *Merci, Madame Charette.*

We're now going to hear from the Department of Natural Resources. Speaking to us will be Mr. Gray, the assistant deputy minister.

[Translation]

**Dr. Brian Gray (Assistant Deputy Minister, Earth Sciences Sector, Department of Natural Resources):** Honourable Chair, distinguished members, it is a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak with you today about NRCan's experience with open data.

Mr. Chair, as you mentioned earlier, I have with me today Mr. Prashant Shukle, Director General at the Mapping Information Branch, and Mr. Bill Merklinger, Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Financial Officer at the Corporate Management and Services Sector.

We are here to describe the experiences of NRCan's earth sciences sector with open geo-data.

First, let me explain that geo-data are the basic geographic or geoscience data that describe Canada's landmass. Some notable examples include geological information about the interior of the earth to topographic information that includes the location of watersheds and roads.

One distinguishing aspect of these data is that they are all defined by a location or position. Additionally, they are often relevant in multiple applications, ranging from property rights, to government policy decisions, to environmental assessments, to estimating resource potential, to in-car GPS navigation.

[English]

Throughout the history of our sector, beginning with the founding of the Geological Survey of Canada in 1842, our fundamental objective has been to make geo-data publicly available to Canadians in the most useful form possible. In the early days, the most useful form possible generally meant recording data on paper maps. Over time, we progressed to managing our geo-data holdings as digital files on computers, although the final product was still in paper form, most notably in maps. Today we make raw data accessible over the Internet in forms that can be manipulated, combined, and transformed according to need. While maps remain incredibly useful, the array of tools that can be easily used to visualize trends in multiple data sets is staggering. We have followed this evolution with the motivation of continually enhancing public accessibility, usability, and reuse of the data we collect.

We are proud of our history, which includes some notable milestones. In 1906, we published the first *Atlas of Canada* in book form. The last paper edition of this atlas was completed in 1993, and in 1994, it was freely available on the Internet. In 1925, we created a national repository of aerial photographs of Canada. Although topographic mapping was started in the Geological Survey of Canada in the 1840s, it was not until about 1950 that a program was put in place dedicated to completing the topographic mapping of Canada. We will complete this program in 2012.

In 1998, we opened a digital portal called GeoGratis to distribute various types of freely available geo-data. In 2007, we removed the fees for those few remaining data sets that were not free, and we made the data openly available on GeoGratis. In some cases, we still charge a fee if the data are delivered via a physical medium.

What has producing open data meant to the earth sciences sector of Natural Resources Canada? First, we have realized cost savings, because we no longer require production runs of paper copies. We also do not need physical storage space or a vast distribution network to disseminate physical products. However, there are new costs associated with maintaining servers, dealing with bandwidth and licences, and uploading data files.

Currently we are also responding to the ever-rising public expectation that all data are updated regularly. If the demand for open data increases, such costs are likely to rise. We have learned that accessible, free data are very much in demand. For example, there were fewer than a million geo-data downloads from our site in 2007, but they increased in a three-year period to over eleven million downloads last year. These are impressive numbers, but these are not downloads of interesting pictures or video clips. These are large, complex data sets accompanied by detailed metadata. This means that they are most likely downloaded purposefully by someone who has the tools to manipulate the data and who sees potential benefit from reuse of these data.

While the download statistics indicate that geo-data are considered useful, the economic and social impact of geo-data reuse can be difficult to quantify. Because they are open data, we may not always know who the users are, which data they value, and what they are achieving with the data. Conceptually, if we accept that if the original data acquisition was judged to provide value for money, any additional reuse can only compound the benefits. However, to better understand the impact of open data, we will be contracting a quantitative study on reuse of the data over the next two years.

With more than ten years of experience in open geo-data, the earth sciences sector has learned many lessons, but please remember our starting point. The earth sciences sector of Natural Resources Canada has always intended that the geo-data it collects and manages would be used by governments, industry, and citizens. Hence, we have spent much of our history collaborating with other departments and agencies in the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, along with industry and developers, to build consensus on standards for geo-data. Even when they were displayed only on paper maps, we were doing this.

We have also taken our responsibilities seriously when dealing with issues of official languages, privacy, confidentiality, security, intellectual property, copyright, and attribution. These responsibilities are somewhat complex, as several of our data sets are, in fact, integrated contributions from multiple collaborating organizations. For example, the data we have made available through our GeoBase initiative involves data from federal, provincial, and territorial agencies.

•(1545)

The ongoing broad-based engagement effort has been worth it. The standards and approaches we have today are the key to enabling the accessibility and interoperability of the data and will enable future breakthroughs, breakthroughs that are yet to be imagined today and that make open data so attractive. This work on standards will continue, and it continues today.

The combination of today's technology, standards, and data is fuelling an increased demand for digital information and creating multiple potential new markets, societal benefits, and opportunities. Importantly, this new world is no longer the exclusive domain of highly specialized technicians or technical experts. More and more, it includes members of the general public, many of whom are new to the use of geo-data.

[Translation]

In closing, I want to reiterate that, from NRCan's perspective, our deliberate and intentional move towards open data was neither simple nor was it accomplished in the last few years.

In fact, we had been working through the issues of "open data" for most of our history, long before the Internet community introduced a phrase to describe the concept. Yet, the journey has definitely been worthwhile, and we are beginning to see substantial benefits and new opportunities arising from our efforts.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. We would be happy to respond to your questions.

•(1550)

[English]

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

Finally, we're going to hear from Mr. Shawcross from the Department of the Environment.

**Mr. Chuck Shawcross (Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Information Officer, Chief Information Officer Branch, Department of the Environment):** Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee.

I am the assistant deputy minister of the chief information officer branch of Environment Canada. As a chief information officer, I am responsible for the management of our computer infrastructure, including such products and services as networks, desktop computers, mobile devices, email, databases, websites, and weather prediction systems.

I appreciate your invitation to appear before you today to discuss Environment Canada's current capabilities in making data available to the public. I would also like to provide you with a chief information officer's perspective on the considerations related to technical implementation of these public-facing sites.

Environment Canada has a long history of gathering and making weather information available to the public through the Meteorological Service of Canada. This service dates as far back as the 1870s.

As a scientific department, Environment Canada is a heavy data generator, not only in weather monitoring, forecasting, and research,

but also in subject areas related to biodiversity; ecosystem monitoring; air, water, and ground pollution; and climate change.

Our scientists have a culture of sharing data and an expectation that through collaboration with others they will leverage the value of their research, generate discussion, and expand their knowledge. In addition, Environment Canada has a responsibility to provide information in a timely manner to citizens to protect their health and safety.

Therefore, Environment Canada already supports open data, as evidenced by the 503 data-related resources available on existing public websites run by Environment Canada. Via these websites, applicable environmental data—for example, weather, climate, or hydrology data—are made available free of charge to Canadians. A number of these sites are already configured to provide data in raw machine-readable formats, which means that the data can be easily read by other computer systems.

Weather data, is a vital resource with high economic impact, are made available free of charge to citizens and businesses—a point, I believe, David Eaves effectively addressed during his appearance here last Monday. Weather data are used daily by citizens, airlines, transport companies, farmers, municipalities, electricity generating companies, utility companies, and forestry firms. This information enhances their decision-making in response to changing weather, water, and climatic conditions.

Approximately 50% of all visits to Government of Canada websites come to Environment Canada. Our most popular website is [weatheroffice.gc.ca](http://weatheroffice.gc.ca). This past November, the site responded to 42.3 million visits, representing 1.2 billion hits, with users downloading 11 terabytes of information. Visitors were primarily looking for their local weather forecasts and weather radar data, as well as provincial summaries. The most popular areas visited were the 800-plus city pages; local, regional, and national radar; RSS feeds; and weather warnings.

For the more specialized scientific needs of Canadian industry, including the value-added meteorology or VAM sector, the academic community, and international peers, Environment Canada offers a data distribution service at [dd.weatheroffice.gc.ca](http://dd.weatheroffice.gc.ca). This provides 24/7 access to numerical weather prediction models, real-time radar data, city page information in xml format, and all weather-related text products produced by Environment Canada. Throughout 2010, this site responded to an average of 6.6 million visits per month, comprising 132.2 million hits, and serving up 3.2 terabytes of information.

In addition to weather observations and satellite and radar imagery, a wide array of other public information—such as water levels, air quality, and weather forecasts for the public and marine communities—is also available online.

Another important data set is the national pollutant release inventory, or NPRI, which is Canada's legislated publicly accessible inventory of pollutant releases to air, water, and land; of disposals; and of transfers for recycling. I believe you have already heard previous testimony from other witnesses explaining how private citizens have recently used this NPRI data to create a web-based, zoomable map presentation of pollutants released by location within Canada.

For a chief information officer, there are a number of considerations in the technical implementation of data publishing on websites open to the public. For example, we need to have policies, directives, standards, and guidance in place for implementation of open data covering access to information, security, accessibility, official languages, etc., and ensure that these are respected during system implementation.

• (1555)

We also need to enforce the use of well-structured data and of solid record management. We need to have a well-defined architecture that is scalable, flexible, and standardized. We need to ensure application of open data principles and future systems development and implementation. We need to identify and reserve any needed ongoing maintenance costs. We need to have a realistic schedule for implementation in terms of resource and requirements. Finally, we need to assess the cost, feasibility, and value of migrating existing data sets or information to open data formats.

It is worth noting that continuing advances in computer and telecommunications technologies have made sharing and processing of information easy and affordable in comparison to older methods. The pace of innovation has been and will continue to be rapid, enabled by technology and fueled by easy access to information.

In historical perspective, the first-ever email in Canada was only in 1985. The first-ever web browser in the world became operational in 1992. Facebook has only been around since 2004, and Twitter since 2006.

Further in the future, there are other increasingly important considerations, notably the requirement for machine-readable formats, which enable machine-to-machine communications.

In closing, I will say that Environment Canada has been a leader in the domain of providing data openly and freely. We remain committed to continued leadership and to ensuring that the public has access to Environment Canada data.

I'm delighted to have been invited and I look forward to your questions.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Shawcross. We're now going to start the first round of questions. We will have seven minutes each.

Please go ahead, Dr. Bennett. You have seven minutes.

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.):** Thank you very much. It's great for you to come and give us an update on the progress.

I think you won't be surprised by this first question. Is there really an open government strategy for the government? If so, could you table it with us in terms of what, by when, and how?

Everything we've heard is that unless it really comes from the top that "thou shalt be open", that nothing seems to happen. I think we're a little concerned that without a real strategy—what, by when, and how—we're not getting anywhere.

I think we're a little concerned that the *Government Information Quarterly* says that we were the best in the parliamentary democracies and are now the worst. As well, the OECD paper from last November, in the chapter on Canada, states that in the fall of 2010 there will be a launch of a new portal providing one-stop access to federal data, a single window, yada yada, but it also says we are "exploring the development of open data policies".

Does this mean we do not have an open data policy? When can we expect the single portal, which the OECD document says was going to be last fall?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. There were a number of questions, so let me just try to take them one by one.

Yes, we have been working on an open data portal. We have been inspired, in fact, by the good work and the significant experience of colleagues at NRCan and Environment with their data sets, as well as the terrific response they have had and the experience they have in making this information available.

We did start working on this open data portal early in the fall, towards late summer. At first we were perhaps overly optimistic as to our speed of delivery.

We had hoped to be in a position to come up with a one-stop access that would allow us to consolidate data sets in machine-readable format from a number of departments and make them more easily findable by Canadians for the purpose of reusing.

As we did this work, we uncovered the fact that there are departments making quite a bit of information available from their individual websites. Not all the data is in machine-readable format, so while it's accessible from individual department websites, it's accessible mostly from a read perspective—i.e., I can read it online or print it out and read it—but it is not in the machine-readable format that would allow people to download it and use it in applications and so on. We started to delve into what would be involved in making a greater number of data sets available in this form.

• (1600)

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** But is there a Treasury Board policy that "Thou shalt have all your data in machine-readable format, and in 30 days"?

A strategy is what, by when, and how. What we learned from the municipalities is they actually were able to do this pretty quickly—put up a single portal, populate it with the easy stuff first, and then keep going. I don't know what the holdup is.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Well, there is no existing policy that says, "Thou shalt put all your data up in machine-readable format", but that's exactly what we've been working on, and the—

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** So you're saying there is no open data government policy for the Government of Canada?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Open government in...?

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** No, I mean open data. Here it says, "exploring the development of open data policies". That means there isn't one.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** There is an access to information policy and there is an information management policy, but an open data policy that specifically says departments that publish data on their websites must do so in machine-readable format is not currently developed. We are working on it. It has a number of ramifications.

For instance, if we take other departments—not including NRCan or Environment, which have a long and successful history—most departments that publish data don't necessarily publish what we call the metadata with it. The metadata has to be crisp, has to be to standard form, and has to be bilingual, so that when downloading, computers can easily reuse this data. Otherwise we're downloading data that couldn't really be interpreted or used properly by any programmer or computer.

We're looking at the implications of doing that. In a period of fiscal constraint, how can we do that so that departments can release more and more data in machine-readable formats without having undue financial burdens placed upon them in a time where they're asked to do quite a bit more?

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** I thought there was going to be a release last fall on a digital economy policy for the government. It seems what we've been hearing is that we're just falling farther and farther behind, in that when the U.K. put its data up, it added £8 billion to their economy.

Obviously these are the *deux étoiles* of the government, and I thank them. I am thrilled at the cottage to be able to go on your website and find out whether I need my boots or not. It's fantastic.

However, what are the laggard departments and what does the government do about the laggard departments? If there's not a policy, how on earth do you encourage the other departments to get going on this?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** I would say that departments are making an awful lot of data available online to the public, in either PDF or standard web format. Departments, I think, are publishing—

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** But they don't want PDF. Nobody wants PDF—nobody. You can't search PDF—

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** That is true—

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** —so that's not on. Can they stop doing PDF?

**The Chair:** The seven-minute period is up, and we'll have one speaker, please.

The person who has the microphone right now is Madame Charette.

Go ahead, Madame Charette.

• (1605)

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Departments are making quite a wealth of information available online. Not all of the information is in data sets

that can be repurposed by computers. Obviously NRCan and Environment are both departments with a lot of numerical data. There are other departments with numerical data, and we are working with them to assess the implications of their making metadata available, which is a prerequisite to making this available in machine-readable format—translating their metadata and ensuring that they are able to publish both in that format as well as the format that their current website visitors and citizens are accessing and want to continue to access today.

It is actually important and an area of great interest. We have a lot of collaboration from different departments, but we have quite a wealth of information published online and we're determining what are the priorities, what should we move to, how can we respect our official languages, and how can we do our information management within cost-control environments. We're making good progress.

Yes, we thought we would be ready in the fall, but as we continue to work, we know that we've made good progress. We are hopeful. We're advancing quite a bit and we're confident that when we are ready, we will be able to provide a product of value, but we don't want to set expectations that we can't meet. We're being thoughtful and careful; we have to work through all of our policy areas.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Bennett.

We're going to move now to Madame Freeman.

Madame Freeman, you have seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Carole Freeman (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, BQ):** Good afternoon Ms. Charette and all the witnesses. Thank you for your presentations.

Ms. Charette, allow me to say that I am extremely shocked. It was decided on April 1st that the committee would study the issue of open government. When did you find out that we were working on this?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** We regularly follow the committee's work. We read the minutes of meetings and testimonies.

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** Did it occur to you at some point that you should inform us about the work you were doing? You know that this committee deals with issues related to the Treasury Board and the Department of Justice.

If a department is part of an open government and there is a committee that is interested in this issue, it would be appropriate for the department the committee's study concerns to provide us with information on the work it is currently doing.

You announced in October, on the international stage, and later at a conference in Ottawa that you had begun working on creating a portal, which would perhaps be ready in the fall.

However, you failed to let parliamentarians know about this. Does your behaviour not strike you as somewhat unacceptable?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Madam, I must point out that we had planned to meet with this committee before Christmas.



**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** Yes, it was supposed to be on December 16, but you had made all your announcements before then. You made your announcements during the summer and in October and November.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** We have not made any announcements. We are basically working internally. Some information was included in a report submitted to the OECD in preparation for a meeting.

When this report was drafted, we thought we would make headway more quickly than we have. After submitting the report, we unfortunately realized that there were a lot more elements, more work and more consultations needed before we could announce a date, determine the scope of a pilot project, and so on. So, because we were a little...

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** I have a question about that, Ms. Charette.

As Chief Information Officer, could you commit to providing us with a step-by-step progress report on your work involving open data?

• (1610)

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** I apologize. Could you repeat your question?

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** Are you currently working on this issue?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** We are developing a portal...

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** Would it be possible to give us regular updates on your progress? We don't like getting this information through the OECD or the newspapers three months later.

Would it be possible to provide us with a step-by-step progress report on your work?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** We could certainly meet with you again in three months to bring you up to speed.

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** Where do you think you'll be in three months?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** It is very difficult to anticipate exactly, but...

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** You know, there is some precedent in this field. If you have been following the work done by the committee, you know that there is precedent in many countries. In the United States, President Obama decided that the government should become more open, and they have moved toward achieving that. In the United Kingdom, the same decision was made, and there has been progress. In Australia, they are making headway. In all the provinces, things are moving ahead as well. Yesterday, Government of Ontario representatives explained to us how the situation is progressing in that province. All municipalities have also reported to us on the matter. There are many examples for you to follow. What's more, it was all done very quickly.

How do you explain the fact that the federal government has still not gotten very far? Why is it that we lag behind with regard to information?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** As far as municipalities go, we are extremely...

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** No. I do not want to get on the topic of municipalities. We are going to focus on the work that has been done.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** I am not trying to shift the focus to another topic. What I am trying to say, if you will allow me to finish, is that municipalities have created their portal. However, we should also mention that the scope of their data and their legal obligations is somewhat less extensive. Based on our information and based on what we understand of the situation, the provinces have still not launched their portal. They have done a lot of the work required, but they have still not launched their portal for reasons that are similar to our own. They are currently assessing and considering the extent of the data, the impact on policies, on costs and capacity—as pointed out by my colleagues from NRCan—and on keeping data up to date. It is not a matter of publishing data indiscriminately and quickly and not being able to ensure that the information is digestible through the use of metadata, through a localized and predictable refresh cycle, and so on. So, yes, we are taking all these elements into consideration, but the scope of the data the federal government must process or can make available is extensive. It is very extensive. We have a government that generates many very interesting products, but we also have a policy and legislation framework that we definitely need to comply with and...

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** We have heard from other witnesses, such as Mr. Eaves. People have reported to us and told us that the work of our committee is slowing down the transmission of data with a view to establishing an open government. Do you feel that your approach would be better prescribed by legislation?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Not necessarily. We must comply with a legislative framework on official languages, information management, privacy, security, and so on.

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** I will tell you something that could perhaps help you move forward. We heard absolutely amazing testimony from the Government of Ontario, where those in charge deal with issues involving personal information and access to information from the outset. They're doing amazing work. So, I suggest that you speak to your colleague from Ontario.

Would it be possible to get a report on what you have done so far, including what you mean to do with data within the next six months?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** We could certainly get back to you with a six-month plan on what we are trying to do...

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** I would like you to submit to the committee a written plan and a report on the work you have done so far. You made a presentation that lasted a few minutes, but that doesn't give us any details on what you have done so far and what you plan to do in the next few months.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Yes, we...

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** We would like you to give us a timetable, an action plan and some data.

[English]

**The Chair:** Madame Freeman, your time is up.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Yes, we could certainly submit our overall plan, which has five components, and we could tell you in more detail how we intend to work on this issue and move it forward.

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** We want assurances on a regular basis that you are performing your duties.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** It would be our pleasure to keep you informed on our progress.

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** So, the committee will be expecting a document describing the work you have done so far. We would also like you to provide us with a timetable and to tell us what you intend to do in the coming months. Is that clear? That's what we expect from you.

•(1615)

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Yes.

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** When do you think you'll be able to provide us with these documents?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** I think it will take at least one month, so that we can take stock of what we...

[*English*]

**The Chair:** I'm going to interrupt, because we have to move on to the next member.

Madame Charette, I want to clarify that as part of that last undertaking, your office will provide the committee clerk—not Madame Freeman—with the full details of as to what has occurred to date in your overall plan, which you call the five-point plan. You'll give a detailed summary on what has been accomplished to date, and you'll be able to do that within one month.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Yes, we'll be able to come back within a month on what we've accomplished to date on that five-point plan.

**The Chair:** Okay, then; thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** Ms. Charette has committed to submitting the plan of what she just announced. She has also promised to give us a timetable of what she intends to do during the coming months, which is very important so that we can keep track of the work being done. So, there are two things we need. We need information on what has been done so far and on what will be done. In other words, we need a very clear timetable so that we can keep track of the situation.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You can also provide the future plans on this initiative and the timeframe that you expect to do that in also.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** We will try.

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

We're now going to go to Mr. Siksay.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** I want to wrap up by congratulating the representatives of the Department of the Environment and the Department of Natural Resources for the work they have done.

You are both an example for the Chief Information Officer. I hope that she will be inspired by your work.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mrs. Freeman.

[*English*]

Mr. Siksay, you have seven minutes.

**Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP):** Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here this afternoon and for your presentations.

Madame Charette, where did you get your mandate to do this work on open government? As chief information officer, who gave you the mandate to work on an open government plan?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Last summer we did not proceed on a mandate of open government; we proceeded on a five-point plan for open data. The Treasury Board Secretariat CIOB is the custodian of the policy on information management. We're also the custodian of the policy on access to information and privacy.

Open data is an extension of our long history in access to information and privacy and proactive disclosure. In fact, we are still a very strong world leader in this regard. We've published much more information on access than many other jurisdictions. In fact, we have been publishing access to information since 1983, whereas the U.K., for instance, only enacted its freedom of information regime in 2005. I think Canadians have been well served in this regard.

We are initiating our work on open data specifically. We are also continuing our work on open government for public servants. That is our GCPedia initiative, which we're very pleased with. While it has only 21,000 contributing users, it is used very widely by a large number of public servants to keep abreast and to find, use, and repurpose information and knowledge and so on.

**Mr. Bill Siksay:** Which minister in government comes to you and asks, "How are we doing on open data? How are we doing on our open government plan"? Which minister said that we need an open government plan and an open data plan?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** The Treasury Board Secretariat provides advice to our minister, the President of the Treasury Board. It is our job to stay abreast of the trends and the work done in other jurisdictions, as well as by our colleague departments, and from that awareness to propose potential policy areas and initiatives to consider. That is what we do.

**Mr. Bill Siksay:** Do you have a relationship with the Clerk of the Privy Council? I think you mentioned the clerk in your statement at one point; what's that relationship in relation to how this is implemented through government?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** The clerk has been a fantastic supporter of GCPedia. GCPedia is our wiki within the government for public servants. He has a page of his own on GCPedia where he shares some information, which all public servants can access freely from their desktops; they can even initiate some form of dialogue with him and so on. The clerk is a strong fan of the internal wiki and believes it to be a key catalyst for public service renewal.

•(1620)

**Mr. Bill Siksay:** We've certainly heard how important that sharing of data among public servants is.

We've seen how the access to information process has been very unevenly implemented across government. Different departments have different records on that. Are we headed in the same direction on this? Is it going to be up to individual ministers or individual deputy ministers to drive this open data process within their departments, or is there an overall government impetus with political leadership that will drive this process in accord with an even and coordinated standard across government? Are we going to have the same uneven record in open data or open government that we have with ATIP?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** I have to say that our access to information community has done a fantastic job in keeping up with an ever-increasing volume of access to information requests. While the resources assigned have grown, there's always a limit to what you can assign. The policies, the best practices, and the instruments we publish in this regard are meant to allow the community to perform in the best way possible and while respecting all of the requirements of the legislation.

In the area of open data, our goal is to come up with a policy direction and standards and best practices that departments will be able to adopt. This outcome will in fact be inspired by the fine work of our pioneer departments, such as Environment and NRCan. However, not all departments have the resources, the skill, or even the experience base that some of the scientific departments have in stepping up to the plate. Not all departments published the *Atlas of Canada* in 1906, or the first meteorological survey. Clearly the science departments have a huge leg up on some of the other policy departments.

**Mr. Prashant Shukle (Director General, Mapping Information Branch, Department of Natural Resources):** Mr. Chair, I would like to add that we have collaborated with the Treasury Board to implement a geospatial standard. In terms of the data around the geospatial data that are provided, we've had some excellent work go on with the Treasury Board Secretariat. We have implemented a geospatial standard that allows for interoperability, the sharing of data, and the use and reuse of data. We've addressed issues of privacy and those types of issues.

In that context there is some really good work going on.

**Mr. Bill Siksay:** Madam Chair, I'm still concerned, however, that we've seen this uneven application of ATIP across departments.

Madame Charette, you said that there's been an ever-increasing demand, and I appreciate that. I have a feeling that we're going to see ever-increasing demands for open data from government as well, so it sounds to me as though we're going to be in exactly the same position—that it's going to be uneven, that it's going to be underfunded in some departments, and that there are going to be some departments that don't get it, because they've never done it. They don't have a century's worth of experience about why this is important.

What is the strategy developing, then, to ensure some kind of consistency across government with regard to this kind of policy?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** In fact, that's one of the reasons we've had to step back and carefully review our policy instruments and our strategy in this regard: because we do have to try to get a strategy that works for the wider community. It's not easy to reconcile all the variables that you mentioned.

However, I have to say that we're quite aware of the focus in this area by this committee and we continue to work on it. It is interesting; I don't think it's quite parallel to ATI, in that the value of the open data portal is that having done some important work up front to create metadata, translate metadata, and make information available in reusable format, the ongoing constant work is not as high, if you will, because the hard work is getting that data set available to begin with. After that, it's a question having the machine resources available to serve it up.

My colleague, Chuck, may add to that.

**Mr. Chuck Shawcross:** Perhaps, Mr. Chairman, I will give a historical perspective on where we are in Environment Canada.

Technologically, people set up these accesses to scientific data on their own portals. They ran them themselves, across the department, in a very siloed manner.

As the chief information officer, I'm providing the best and most efficient services I can to the Canadian taxpayer. As part of that, we amalgamate data onto fewer servers, because putting them on these servers means lower costs. However, a natural consequence is that these previously available sources of data, which people knew the location of, get amalgamated into this centralized area.

As part of that progress, last year I realized we had to start putting some sort of registry together so that people could find the data, which now had to be in accessible format and in both *les deux langues officielles*. As a result, I was exploring setting up a registry. As you start to look at the technical side, which is relatively easy, you start running into all of the issues of metadata, official languages, all the other policy issues.

That's what was happening last summer. In terms of actually setting something up technically, it's reasonably straightforward, but there are a number of issues that come from that.

From a technological perspective, that's basically how we got there.

Thank you.

•(1625)

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

Mr. Calandra, you have seven minutes.

**Mr. Paul Calandra (Oak Ridges—Markham, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, all of you, for coming.

Ms. Charette, I'm a little more optimistic than some of my colleagues. When you consider how new everything is relative to how old the country is, I think we've been doing a tremendous job in getting a lot of data out there, and what I've heard today has been very encouraging.

We know from the testimony from provincial and municipal governments that their types of data are obviously miles apart. We heard from the municipal governments that the most popular data relate to bus scheduling and garbage collection. That's very important to a lot of people, but that's a heck of a lot different from some of the data that are being accumulated by the federal government. Also, I'm suspecting that some of the data that we do collect or that might be available would also have impacts on provincial and municipal governments.

By virtue of that, you must have to work closely with them or develop a policy that respects their jurisdictions so that we're not ultimately releasing data that could impact negatively on a provincial government. Am I correct in assuming that because of those interjurisdictional elements, it's a much more difficult process to release data at the federal government level?

I have a final comment and then I'll ask another question. I'd rather we get it right than rush it and get it wrong.

First, are we working with the provincial and municipal governments in releasing data?

Then the comment is that I want to offer congratulations on what we've done so far.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** You raised two points. I will ask Prashant to talk to the issue of provincial jurisdictions.

In fact, there is an awful lot of data. Info Source has been fairly long-standing and widely available on the TBS website. These are data that reconcile a lot of information from different government sources. We do get quite a bit of traffic to Info Source. Info Source itself may not have any provincial implications, but certainly some data do.

**Mr. Prashant Shukle:** One of the examples used by the honourable member was the issue of bus schedules and garbage pickup. There's one fundamental defining element to those, and that is roads. Our GeoBase initiative, which has been a federal, provincial, and territorial collaboration, has been in place for a considerable period of time. It works at a multi-jurisdictional level to collect road data and try to make the data as available and as open as possible. In fact, we have road data that are open and are shared with municipal governments or whoever wants to go onto our GeoBase website and collect those data.

Is the federal, provincial, and territorial process a robust one? Yes, it is. We've had a number of successes in this area. With respect to how we've engaged our provincial and territorial colleagues in this context, it's been a very productive effort.

As to our other federal colleagues, they rely on road data as well. Departments such as Elections Canada and Statistics Canada also use the road data, and the use and reuse is generated a number of times across multiple levels of jurisdictions.

**Mr. Paul Calandra:** Mr. Gray, I'm glad that you're here, because there are a few questions I have for you.

I think I'm correct that you were with Environment Canada and that you issued a statement with respect to the muzzling of individuals. You explained that there's a process that we go through in responding to public enquiries, that it's timely and orderly, that the

policy has been in place for years, and that the policy was used throughout government.

I wonder if you can say that you've experienced the same type of timely and orderly process at Natural Resources Canada?

• (1630)

**Dr. Brian Gray:** I'm in my fourth week at Natural Resources. We have had several media events since then, and I think they have gone quite well.

I remember what Environment did, but I have a few statistics from NRCan as well. I am proud to say that Natural Resources Canada publishes about 900 peer-reviewed scientific papers a year. These come from our scientists. These scientists collectively gave about 600 media interviews last year. We also publish a range of non-peer-reviewed reports that come out either through our Internet site or through printed media.

**Mr. Paul Calandra:** That's quite astonishing. David Eaves mentioned to us the other day that he'd been able to get a lot of information handed over for access to his website. I note that he worked on Mr. Ignatieff's leadership campaign, so he's not somebody who would necessarily be out to praise the government or the individuals who work at NRCan. Now you've clearly said that a lot of information is getting out, such as 900 peer-reviewed papers. I am consistently hearing a lot about media interviews and press releases getting out. At NRCan, they always seem to be available when they're asked to be available, which doesn't square with the suggestion that people have been muzzled.

Could you confirm for me that the scientists are able to speak, have their information reviewed, and approach the media to talk about their findings?

**Dr. Brian Gray:** Yes. I don't have our statistics off the top of my head for NRCan, but the system is in place at Environment Canada and it is in place at our department. The first thing is that there is a media request. These are usually time-sensitive. We don't get, "We would like to talk to somebody in the next week"; we get, "We'd like to go to press by such-and-such a time and we want to talk to somebody about topic X".

We take great pride in the public service in having expertise. We've earned that expertise and we guard it accordingly, so our job is to make sure we have the expert speaking to the question. Sometimes these questions aren't simple; sometimes they're multi-disciplinary. You need a couple of experts to come together, and it takes time. Then, like any well-run organization, you have to ensure that these people are media-trained.

In that process, occasionally something's going to slip through the cracks, but all in all, I know that when I was at Environment, our stats were very good as far as being able to meet these timelines was concerned.

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

I have a question for you, Madame Charette. We've been at this for about four or five weeks. We've looked at other provinces and at some of the cities, but we've also looked at what's going on internationally in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. They've made a lot of strides on this issue. It seems to have been driven from the top. When David Cameron came to power, he made the statement that "We're going to do it", and when Obama came to power, he made the same statement: "We're going to do it". Within 30 days, they had a sizable number of databases on their websites. Within two years they had over 200,000 databases, all in a reusable format, within this principle.

I've listened to your testimonies and I'm not even clear if we have a policy on open government, or open data, as it's called. Do we or do we not? Are you getting any direction from your superiors, whether it's your deputy minister or the President of Treasury Board, that this is something we should be doing?

• (1635)

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Certainly the secretary and the President of the Treasury Board are aware that we are working on a strategy for an open data portal. There's no question about it. We briefed on our five-point plan in the summer and we embarked upon this process, which we will report on.

There is no open data policy instrument today. However, we are assessing the requirement for one so that we can potentially provide an open data portal that goes beyond two or three scientific departments and provides information of a wide enough range and in a sufficiently consistent and suitable format to enable us to also be more present in the machine-reusable space. We do continue to publish, and have for a very long time, quite a bit of information. It is simply not all in machine-reusable format, nor is it from one point of entry.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for that answer.

That concludes the first round.

We're now going to go to the second round. We're going to suspend at around 5:15 to deal with another item before the committee.

The second round is for four minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Dhaliwal.

**Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Charette, I was on this committee earlier, five years ago, and I didn't see anything to do with open government. This is the most secretive government that I have seen in Canadian history. When we talk about this today, there's nothing about open government. All we're talking about is open data. That has nothing to do with open government principles.

There's one question I have, one issue. Why is it that the Prime Minister's Office can mash data on Google Maps to promote itself, but other departments can't do so to provide useful information to Canadians?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Every departmental deputy head is accountable for the information holdings of his or her department

and has responsibility for determining what they want to publish on their websites and how they want to publish it, provided they are compliant with our classical policy instruments for websites—that is, they're compliant with official languages, they're compliant with the common look and feel 2.0 standards, they're compliant with the federal communications policy, and so on. It's up to every department to decide that, and they do.

The open data portal we're exploring is slightly different, because it is not one deputy head. It's a portal that would encompass and bring together, through one logical front door, data from a number of departments. The issue of accountability is certainly one that we need to work through, because we're going through one front door and could be seeking data from multiple departments.

However, every department deputy head is accountable for determining what they publish and how they publish it, within policy guidelines.

**Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal:** Why did Canada fall behind so many countries when it comes to the open data process?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** I don't believe that Canada is behind many countries. We are behind the U.S. and the U.K. on open data. The U.S. went out very strongly shortly after President Obama was inaugurated, and the U.K. followed shortly afterward with their open data initiative; however, from a freedom of information or an access perspective, Canada was there long before the U.K. was. Our access to information and proactive disclosure regime is really outstanding. We continue to make a lot of information available to Canadians.

**Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal:** That is not what we see.

My next question is for Mr. Gray.

Mr. Gray, you say that there is data available that you can GPS in your car. When I have my Blackberry and iPhone sitting here and can have Google Maps accessing that information, why do I have to come to your portal to access that information? What information do you have that is different from those maps?

• (1640)

**Dr. Brian Gray:** I'll start off and then I'll let my expert to speak to this.

The two examples you gave are applications of open data. They are applications or end uses of it. You're seeing a tool that's using open data that someone has acquired when you use your GPS system, for example. The data there are data that an end user puts together to provide value, and you can navigate in your car with it.

That's the distinction. Open data is raw data. It's readable, but it's not something you can pull up on your BlackBerry or your cellphone. It's something you're going to have to download, and companies have used that to make end use applications for your iPhone or BlackBerry.

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

We're now going to move to Mr. Abbott.

Mr. Abbott, you have four minutes.

**Hon. Jim Abbott (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses.

I want to spend a couple of minutes putting this into context.

I've had the privilege in the last few months of working with the president of the Public Service Commission on a project in a developing country. The developing country has the capacity to add probably 30% to its GDP per capita—right now, today, immediately—except that they don't have a professional public service. I want to commend you and the people in the public service for the fact that because we have a professional public service in Canada, we have the ability to take advantage of all of the opportunities we have in Canada, both socially and economically.

I salute your professionalism, and the fact that—and this is not a barbed statement, but the straight goods—when people approach a public servant in Canada, that person sees himself or herself as a public servant—somebody who is serving the public in Canada, somebody whose job is to keep confidences and to make recommendations to the people who are their political masters. The politicians are in charge in Canada, as should be the case in a democracy. The public servants make recommendations, but those recommendations stay behind closed doors. With very rare exception do we find any crossing of that boundary.

Today you have outlined for us the reasons, the background, and your caution on behalf of the people of Canada in terms of maintaining this very important element that we have in our society. Ten per cent of our workforce in Canada, in one way or another, are directly related to the public service or are members of the public service. It is they who make this place go, so I thank you for that.

That doesn't mean we don't have friction from time to time. Of course we do; that's the human condition. Of course we have friction. There's not quite the level of friction that my friends on the other side of the table would like to see, I'm sure.

**An hon. member:** Oh, come on, Mr. Abbott—

**Hon. Jim Abbott:** Well, I couldn't—

**The Chair:** Mr. Abbott has the floor. There's no point in our yelling across the floor here.

Mr. Abbott, continue.

**Hon. Jim Abbott:** Taking NRCan as an example, I'm interested in coming to the point of releasing findings. In the testimony I've heard up to this point, in the time I've been on this committee, there has been a desire to allow dissemination of information that can then be easily manipulated, and I don't think that's necessarily a negative word. In other words, you can't move stuff in a PDF document.

What is your caution with respect to that? If you have data out there, what would the limits be on the manipulation of the data?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** We're not studying or preoccupied with what Canadians would do or how they might use data sets that we would render accessible in machine-usable format from this portal.

There certainly is no end to the imagination and the creativity of programmers. They can take either geospatial information, statistical information—any kind of information—and come up with a good idea, as they've done. They've proven at the municipal level in Canada, and they've proven in the U.K. and the U.S., that there are a lot of interesting and good ideas out there.

We're not concerned about how people will use data. We're concerned about making sure that we can promote data with integrity; that the data that we put out can be correctly interpreted by people of both official languages; that in doing so we are not going to be, for instance, introducing any security issues into our government cyberframework; that we are respecting accessibility, which is an important requirement for government websites; and that we are doing it at a pace and in a way that departments can continue to fulfill going forward. We don't want to be in a position of publishing a portal with a certain inventory of data sets on one day and then having to perhaps take them down because we can't refresh them or because the costs of refreshment are too onerous, and so on.

We're not really preoccupied with how the data might be used. I don't think that NRCan or Environment Canada spends a great deal of time worrying about that. It's really about ensuring that if we make an open data portal available, it will be compliant with our legislation as well as one we can stand behind and one of enduring value.

• (1645)

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

Next is Madame Thi Lac.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ):** Good day, Madam, gentlemen. Thank you for joining us today.

My first question is for Ms. Charette. As the person responsible both for formulating policy and strategies on open government and for protecting personal information, how do you draw a line between these two areas?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** The line is fairly clearly defined in the act. The legislation is quite specific as to the issue of privacy. Personal information cannot be disclosed and can only be stored after permission has been obtained, because this a program requirement. Personal data must be stored very safely and securely. We are required to publish so-called personal information banks, to let Canadians know what type of personal information we have about them and why it is being maintained. Furthermore, the government must turn over any personal information it has on file when the person that information is about so requests.

The Privacy Act is fairly clear. In terms of personal information, the Access to Information Act provides for a number of exemptions from disclosure. If we receive an access to information request concerning personal information, such as the name of a particular person or other information about that person, obviously, obviously we cannot disclose that information and we must deny the request.

**Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac:** I have a second question.

You mentioned your office's GCPEDIA initiative. Can public servants share any kind of information using this platform, as is the case with Wikipedia? How do you ensure that controls are in place? Do public servants have access to more information than we, the elected representatives of the people, actually have?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** There are guidelines in place governing the use of GCPEDIA.

First, anyone who posts information or a document on GCPEDIA—because anyone who registers is free to do so—can be identified, through their e-mail address. If I post a document online, I post it under the name “Corinne Charette, Treasury Board.” A person cannot share documents or information while keeping his or her identity secret. A whole series of guidelines for posting information must be followed, along with our ethical practices code.

• (1650)

**Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac:** I see, Ms. Charette. But, as elected officials, can we register to use this website?

Also, if someone posts information, can it only be removed from the website by that individual, or can another user remove information posted by someone else?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** GCPEDIA is not a public website in that it is intended exclusively for the public service. It is an internal website, albeit one accessible to all departments.

A document posted by an employee of one department can easily be consulted by other employees in other departments.

**Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac:** You misunderstood my question. Can anyone remove a document that has been posted, or is that something only the person who originally posted it can do?

You also said that the general public could not access GCPEDIA. So then, if I understand what you are saying, elected officials cannot access GCPEDIA.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** GCPEDIA is a tool designed specifically for employees of government departments and agencies.

**Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac:** So then, you are better informed than we, the elected representatives, are?

**The Chair:** You're out of time, Mrs. Thi Lac.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Users share information on GCPEDIA about products under development. For example, we are currently working on all kinds of initiatives, including information management and the directive on information management. We post documents that are shared by a broader community. Officials from different departments who are often called upon to work together can thus consult and work with the same version of the document.

[English]

**The Chair:** *Merci, Madame Thi Lac.*

Please go ahead, Ms. Davidson, for four minutes.

**Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC):** Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

To the witnesses, thanks very much for being with us this afternoon and giving us the information on what actually is happening in government. I think we were all under some misunderstanding about what is being done, so it will be good to have an outline and to see where you're going.

Although we've not talked to anybody who is doing anything on a national scale at this point, we hope to. We have talked to municipalities and to the Province of Ontario, and I think they all said that the consultation process of getting the public involved and knowing what they want to be able to access was the most important thing. I also agree with the statements made earlier that totally

different kinds of data are being collected at the municipal and the federal levels.

However, all of them indicated that there are some easy things to start with. Maybe that's where we are now; I'm not sure. It seems to me that we've got mapping and some other data that are very readily available and maybe easy to put on, and we don't need to worry about translation for most of these things.

Can you comment on that? First of all, how do you think the public will be consulted as we continue with this process? Are we picking the low-hanging fruit and getting started that way, which is what everybody to this point has recommended is a good way to get going?

As well, as you continue forward in your process and your planning, do you have consultations back and forth with the U.K., for example, or Australia, which have done things on a national level?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Thank you. You have a number of questions.

First of all, there's no doubt that we're trying to work with the low-hanging fruit first, as you put it. That's absolutely the case, because the data that are readily available already in machine-readable format with translated metadata are fantastic, and we certainly will be looking to put that online first.

One of the strategies we're considering for the portal is the ability to use it as a vehicle for users to ask whether we have information on X or Y if that information is not available whenever we launch. We certainly would be using that capability as a way to gauge feedback from the public. As well, we would be able to see the most popular topics or departments or combinations of areas that the public might be interested in by what they are accessing.

Certainly the behaviour of the public on existing sites is definitely a key indicator of what they're interested in. For instance, we can look at Info Source statistics to determine the most visited sections within Info Source. While Info Source doesn't make data available in machine-readable format, it's certainly a source of information we are studying to see where the visits are. After the homepage for Info Source, where they go is usually a kind of telltale as to what they're interested in.

It's definitely a multi-phase strategy. We do want to start with low-hanging fruit, in a limited way, and carefully assess progress, assess how the reaction is, and use that as a basis for justifying, from a cost-benefit perspective, the need to extend that to more data sets, and perhaps spend more time and effort getting a broader base of data that we could publish one day.

• (1655)

**The Chair:** Mr. Siksay, you have four minutes.

**Mr. Bill Siksay:** Thank you, Chair.

I wonder if Mr. Gray and Mr. Shawcross could tell us a bit about how the official languages policy impacts their ability to post open data in terms of their operations, what kinds of challenges that policy presents, and how you meet those challenges.

**Dr. Brian Gray:** I'll start. Natural Resources Canada provides the geospatial metadata we've been talking about. That's the data about the data we have and the documentation relative to it in both official languages, compliant with the Treasury Board guidelines and policy.

Natural Resources Canada also provides the ability for Canadians to search, discover, and access our geospatial data in the language of their choice. NRCan has worked with Treasury Board to implement what is called ISO standard 19115, which is mandatory for federal departments by 2014.

The difference, once you get down to geodata, is that geodata is alphanumeric. It's numbers and letters. That is raw data that is not accessible to either language. The computer expert at the end of the table would say it's computer language.

**Mr. Chuck Shawcross:** Let me just perhaps expand on that. At Environment Canada all the information is made available to citizens in the language of their choice. A lot of the data is behind what I'd call API, which I think you've heard before: the application programming interface. There would be a screen where you could put what you're looking for, such as the maximum and minimum temperatures for your city in the last century. You'd put in your city and stuff like that. That's the interface, in both official languages, that accesses the database behind it with the numeric data, which, as Dr. Gray mentioned, is not readable; it's just computer language.

Just as a data point, when we were looking at the amount of data we've published, we have about 503 data sets, if you will, that we publish through the APIs or make available in raw format. Of those, about 42 are in what I'd call open data, machine-readable format that we can publish as a true open data type of data set.

Most of our data are accessible in both official languages, but behind an API or programming interface.

**Mr. Bill Siksay:** Dr. Gray, you mentioned that all fees were removed in 2007 from the data sets that had not been free up to that point. Then you also said that in 2007 the geodata downloads were fewer than one million, but that they increased to over 11 million last year.

Is it directly related to removing the fees, or is there something else going on?

**Dr. Brian Gray:** I'll let Prashant answer that one. Thank you.

**Mr. Prashant Shukle:** Certainly, the policy work we had done in previous years indicated that price was a barrier to the use and reuse of data. We are of the view that the price was a factor in limiting the potential download capabilities.

The fact that it increased elevenfold speaks to the policy decision.

**Mr. Bill Siksay:** So you think it is directly related—

**Mr. Prashant Shukle:** That's our current thinking, yes.

**Mr. Bill Siksay:** I wonder if you could expand a little on the official languages policy and how it's affecting the work you're doing in putting this policy together.

• (1700)

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Just to build on Mr. Shawcross's comments, Environment Canada has roughly 40 reusable data sets on a total inventory of 500 potential data sets. Making it available

through his programming interface allows them to limit the translation and the metadata to a much smaller subset, which they reuse to all 500.

When we're making data available directly, one data set at a time in a downloadable format, then that particular data set has to have translated metadata. This means that somebody has to take 450 data sets and potentially say that this data set contains this in both languages, the originator is this in both languages, these are the key characteristics of the data in both languages, it will be refreshed on this periodic frequency in both languages, and so on.

While the vast body of data is numeric, which obviously does not require translation, the key preparatory work needs to be translated or it will be just a mishmash of numbers that no one can really use successfully, no matter how creative they are.

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

Dr. Bennett, you have four minutes.

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** Thanks very much.

I was a bit surprised to hear they're using a policy in terms of open government. We did hear hearsay evidence that federal officials, when at conferences, are only allowed to talk about open data and are not allowed to talk about open government, because of the lack of policy.

It's almost as if a voluntary activity that you're supposed to help with is happening in a number of departments. What would it look like if there really was an open government policy? What would be the plan? Would cabinet have to be involved in this? How would you be able to ensure the data sets were available for your portal in a timely fashion?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Policies are issued by Treasury Board ministers; our job as a secretariat is to study, provide advice, make recommendations, and so on. Clearly, if a policy is adopted, then we work with departments on how to comply with the policy. We enable them and we work with departments regularly on assessing compliance.

Our community of departments is very rigorous, and when Treasury Board issues policy instruments, they work very hard and comply. It's a question of time. We have to phase in policy instruments, and so on. I have no doubt that we would—

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** So at the moment there's not a policy directive from Treasury Board to departments. People who are providing stuff to the potential portal are doing it in a voluntary way.

I had another question. Could you tell me why the website for access to information, where people could apply to access to information online, got taken down two years ago?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** That wasn't a website to apply for access requests online, but a website that was summarizing a very small subset of access requests. Unfortunately, it was very outdated and it had only a very small subset. In fact, the data were collected in an inconsistent format and fashion, thereby making the information more misleading than valuable. That is why—



**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** Is there work being done to improve that, and is there work being done so that people could actually not have to put a cheque in the mail to get an access request?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** We are currently assessing what can be done to foster greater ease of making an access request online and paying with a credit card. Some departments allow that today—not many, but some departments do allow you to make an access request online and pay by credit card. We are looking at making that broader and more accessible as Canadians are more at ease in dealing that way today than they were even five years ago. We are working in that regard to see what can be done and how we can enable departments to go that route.

• (1705)

**The Chair:** There is just one point I want to clarify, Madame Charette.

On the organizational chart, do you have organizational responsibility for the other departmental access to information offices, or do they answer to you? How does that work?

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** We are the policy centre for access to information. What that means is we issue policy instruments and best practices and guidelines. We work with the community on rolling these guidelines and best practices out, ensuring that they're able to support them. We support the community periodically.

We are tasked with producing the Info Source reports, one of the big components of which is the annual roll-up of access to information and privacy requests and so on. However, every department and agency has its specific access to information office and its designated head.

**The Chair:** We did get the last report card from the Information Commissioner. Of course, as you know, a number of departments are having real problems in dealing with this legislation. They got Fs. One department was so bad that it actually got off the radar screen, but you're saying it is really the responsibility of the deputy minister of that department to straighten those issues out, not your responsibility.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** Absolutely. It is the deputy head of every department who is responsible for complying with the access to information policy.

**The Chair:** That concludes the questioning.

The committee has another item we have to deal with, but before we suspend this part of the meeting, I'm going to first of all thank you very much for your appearance here today. Your testimony certainly was helpful to the committee.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** Since we are talking about open government, I would like to move an impromptu motion calling on the President of the Treasury Board to meet with the committee to explain in greater detail his responsibility and the gist of the directives issued by his office to Ms. Charette.

[English]

**The Chair:** You can do it, Madame Freeman. Would you not want to bring that up with the steering committee on Monday and go from there?

[Translation]

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** Since we are here and we are dealing with this subject, it is time for us to meet with the minister responsible for Ms. Charette's operations. She is, after all, the link in the most important chain of open government data. She oversees these operations and so, I think we should invite the minister here.

[English]

**The Chair:** No.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** It requires some political will, Mr. Murphy.

[English]

**The Chair:** Okay, you're quite within your rights to make the notice, except that is a notice of motion, Madame Freeman. It's a simple motion, so we'll put it on the order paper, and once your 48 hours expire, it will come before the committee for it to be debated and voted upon by the committee.

Thank you very much. We appreciate all the testimony.

What I'm going to ask—

[Translation]

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** You're saying that 48 hours' notice is required? I am moving the motion as we speak. There is no 48 hours' notice. We should debate it immediately, in accordance with the rules verified with the clerk.

[English]

**The Chair:** We've accepted your notice of motion. You'll be given an opportunity to move the motion at the next meeting.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** This is not a notice of motion. I am moving a motion. There is no requirement to give 48 hours' notice when one moves a motion about a subject under discussion.

There is no requirement to give 48 hours' notice.

[English]

**The Chair:** The ruling of the chair, Madame Freeman, is that we're dealing with open government. The business of the day was the continuation of the study into open government, and we had six witnesses before us. You have made a motion, which you're entitled to do, but I'm accepting it as notice. We will have the motion, if you want to move it, at any time after the 48 hours' notice has expired. That's the rule of the chair and that's not debatable.

• (1710)

[Translation]

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** I wish to challenge your ruling.

[English]

**The Chair:** You challenge the chair. That's not debatable, so I'm going to turn that over to the clerk for a recorded decision on that challenge to the chair's ruling.

**The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Chad Mariage):** Shall the ruling of the chair be sustained?

(Ruling of the chair sustained: yeas 6; nays 4).

**The Chair:** Okay, the decision remains.

Now we'll go back to the witnesses, please. I'm going to give you the opportunity for any closing or final comments you want to leave the committee with. Again, thank you very much for your appearance here today and for your work on this initiative.

We'll start with you, Madame Charette.

**Ms. Corinne Charette:** I would just like to say thank you very much to the committee for showing an interest. It is an important and exciting area and we're committed to continuing our work in this regard.

**The Chair:** Mr. Gray, would you comment?

**Dr. Brian Gray:** Thank you for the opportunity to be here. It's a pleasure sharing our experience with the committee.

**The Chair:** Would you like to add anything, Mr. Shawcross?

**Mr. Chuck Shawcross:** I'd just like to echo the same comments. It's been a pleasure to appear here and to demonstrate some of the great work that public servants have been doing on behalf of citizens. Thank you.

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

The only item of business we have is to deal with the motion of Mr. Calandra. For the record, I will read it:

That February 16, 2011 be reserved to commence the study on Access to Information at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, pursuant to the motion adopted on December 14, 2010; And, that the Clerk of the Committee be directed to call Mr. Hubert Lacroix, President and CEO of CBC/Radio-Canada, to appear before the Committee on February 16, 2011.

I'd like to give Mr. Calandra two minutes to speak to his motion. I'll entertain up to six interventions of one minute; then we'll go back to Mr. Calandra for the last minute, and then I'll put it to a vote.

Mr. Calandra, first of all, I'll get you to move the motion.

**Mr. Paul Calandra:** I move the motion, Mr. Chair.

I thank both you and the clerk. You have been working very hard on trying to accommodate this request for the committee, and I thank you for that. I know how difficult it's been to try to get Mr. Lacroix to modify his schedule to come to meet with members of Parliament with respect to access to information.

As I said earlier, it's something that is extraordinarily important. It's what we review. It's what our committee is mandated to do. As I said, I have heard from a lot of individuals who want us to look at this. If we could do it, I would certainly appreciate the opportunity to get started with this on the 16th.

Again, I thank both of you for your hard work in attempting to have the president of the CBC come to answer parliamentarians' questions about access to information.

• (1715)

**The Chair:** As I indicated, I'll entertain up to six interventions. We don't need six interventions, but I will entertain up to six interventions of one minute each.

Go ahead, Mr. Dhaliwal, for up to one minute.

**Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal:** Mr. Chair, it is my understanding that the president and CEO of CBC/Radio-Canada will be appearing before us on March 16. He is not available on February 16. Is that true?

**The Chair:** It is on March 21.

**Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal:** It is on March 21, but he's not available on February 16. Is that true? If that is the case, what is the urgency? Why can't we wait until March 21?

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Siksay.

**Mr. Bill Siksay:** Mr. Chair, I did support Mr. Calandra's motion when he brought it to the committee back in December, and I believe this is an important issue.

However, I have struggled for a long time to get the issue of open government onto the agenda of the committee. I have been on the committee longer than some other members, and it kept getting bumped by other things. I am pleased that we've scheduled the study about access to information and the CBC for March 21; I really hesitate on bumping anything from our open government study. There was one witness on open government confirmed for February 16.

Unfortunately, I'm not able to support today's motion to take February 16 to begin the study on the CBC.

**The Chair:** Are there any other speakers to this motion?

Go ahead, Dr. Bennett, for up to one minute.

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** I agree with Mr. Siksay. We're doing our best to get this study done, and the clerk was trying his best to do the scheduling. I just don't agree with motions like this one. That isn't the way committees work best, which is by consensus and by a steering committee that looks at a schedule. We have been trying to work well at the steering committee to accommodate the information as it comes forward from the clerk.

I won't be supporting this motion.

**The Chair:** Mr. Abbott is next.

**Hon. Jim Abbott:** I've been rather interested in the comments of the members of the opposition. I'm thinking that if they were to not try too hard, they probably would be able to come up with any number of topics upon which they would want a person like Mr. Lacroix, who has something to say about a problem, here sooner.

While I respect what Mr. Siksay has said, I hardly think the dent that one day of hearing is going to cause in this open government study is going to be quite as big a problem as he's saying. It's darn well time. When we have the president and CEO of a corporation that's taking over \$1 billion from the Canadian taxpayer saying, "No, no, no. Well, I'll get around to it", I don't think that's quite good enough. We need him here sooner just to exert the authority of Parliament over a crown corporation.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Madame Freeman.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** Thank you for letting me speak, Mr. Murphy.

I would like to understand Dr. Bennett's position that here in this committee, we work by consensus and the steering committee sets the work agenda. If I've misunderstood, please explain it to me. The steering committee sets the work agenda and the other members cannot intervene at all to have that agenda changed? Is this in fact what she is saying?

Governing by consensus is rather difficult.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Just to clarify that, Madame Freeman, the steering committee is not a decision-making body. The steering committee for this particular committee meets once a week. We discuss the committee's agenda, we talk about potential witnesses, we talk about a whole host of things, and we make recommendations to the committee.

The committee is the master of its own agenda and future, and any decisions the steering committee recommends have to be ratified by the committee as a whole, so any member is within his or her rights, as Mr. Calandra is, in moving a motion to change. Obviously the recommendation of the steering committee was that it be on March 21, but committee members are within their rights to amend the decisions of the steering committee.

I think we've gone around the table. I think people have—

● (1720)

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Carole Freeman:** I'm not finished, Mr. Chair. I was simply commenting on something that Dr. Bennett said, because I wanted an explanation as to how the committee operates. As I see it, Mr. Calandra's motion is in order. He is entitled to move the motion, even if the steering committee feels differently. We will go ahead and put the motion to a vote. We'll see what happens then.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Okay, then. Thank you very much, Madame Freeman.

All in favour of Mr. Calandra's motion, which I previously read, please raise your hands.

All those opposed to Mr. Calandra's motion, please raise your hands.

The vote is five in favour and five opposed.

The chair will vote against the motion, and I'll give you my reasons. I've got three reasons.

One is that I've done this a lot when I chaired the public accounts committee, dealing with witnesses that sometimes were reluctant to come to the committee. I think I'm fair, but I'm firm. People are very busy. You have to give them a few options, but you have to make it very clear that they are coming and they're coming within a short period of time. Over the years I've had every excuse thrown at me for why they can't come.

The second issue is that in this case we did make a decision to try to have both Monsieur Lacroix and the Information Commissioner here, which I think is important.

Third, we are informed by the Office of the Information Commissioner that the office's report card will be tabled. CBC is mentioned. I hate to quote media reports for their authenticity, but if they're correct, there will be some negative comments in it. That report will be invaluable to the committee when we do have the hearing with the CBC, because there has obviously been an audit and research done on the various issues. As a result, we would not be dealing with a politically charged discussion; we would be dealing with an actual audit that's been done and with some empirical evidence as to their ability to meet the requirements of the Access to Information Act.

That said, the motion is defeated.

(Motion negated)

**The Chair:** Seeing nothing—

**Mr. Paul Calandra:** I have a point of order.

It strikes me as somewhat sad that this committee has before it an opportunity to seize on access to information with a crown corporation—

**The Chair:** Mr. Calandra, I'm going to rule that out of order.

**Mr. Paul Calandra:** —before the courts—

**The Chair:** Order.

The meeting is adjourned.





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