



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

PACP • NUMBER 016 • 3rd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, May 25, 2010

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Chair

The Honourable Shawn Murphy

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• (0900)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I will now call this meeting to order and extend to everyone present a very warm welcome.

Colleagues, this morning's meeting is going to be on two things, so we're going to divide it in two. The first part of the meeting will be devoted to a continuation of a previous meeting on chapter 8 of the fall 2009 report of the Auditor General: "Strengthening Aid Effectiveness—Canadian International Development Agency".

As many of you will recall, we started that meeting but because of a vote we only got into it for an hour, so the committee decided to devote another hour or an hour and fifteen minutes to the continuation of the meeting and to questions.

Because we did have opening remarks previously from the Auditor General, Sheila Fraser, who is with us now and is accompanied by John Reed, principal, she does not have opening remarks today.

From the agency, we have with us Margaret Biggs, the president and accounting officer. She's accompanied by David Moloney, executive vice-president. I believe Madam Biggs does have a revised opening statement, although one was delivered previously.

Before calling upon Ms. Biggs to deliver her opening comments, I want to point out that the second part of our meeting will be devoted to a dialogue with six or seven visiting auditors general from countries including Barbados, Guyana, Kenya, Vietnam, and Saint Lucia. Those individuals will be joining us at the table for the last 40 to 45 minutes of the session. I think we can conclude one round and then invite our visitors to the table.

We're very honoured and pleased to have the visiting auditors here. They will be more formally introduced at the start of the second phase of our meeting.

On behalf of every member of this committee and every member of Parliament, I want to extend to each member of the visiting delegation a very warm welcome to Canada and a very warm welcome to this meeting.

Without any further delay, I'm now going to call upon Ms. Biggs for her opening comments. I think we'll be able to do one full round. Then we're going to suspend and invite our distinguished guests to the table.

Ms. Biggs, the floor is yours.

[Translation]

Ms. Margaret Biggs (President, Canadian International Development Agency): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you for the opportunity to return to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to further discuss the 2009 Fall Report of the Auditor General of Canada as it relates to the Canadian International Development Agency.

When I appeared before the committee in December, I outlined the important progress that CIDA has made to implement the government's aid effectiveness agenda. I also discussed how we are first bringing greater focus to CIDA programming, second ensuring stronger management and sustained implementation, and third streamlining business processes. I indicated that CIDA has already completed many of the changes suggested by the Auditor General. Today, I can report that all the major milestones in CIDA's action plan in response to the Auditor General's report have been met.

Let's discuss the first element, which is bringing greater focus to CIDA programming. Regarding our geographic focus, CIDA has already met its target to concentrate 80% of bilateral aid in its 20 countries of focus, and country strategies for all of them have been approved. As planned, summaries of these strategies are now available on CIDA's Web site. They outline how Canada is responding to each country's specific needs, as identified by the national development plan and poverty reduction strategy. In addition, new country program development frameworks were completed for all of CIDA's country programs in March 2010, right on schedule.

As for thematic focus, CIDA is concentrating on three thematic priorities and strategies. The first two, increasing food security and securing a future for children and youth, have been developed and posted on CIDA's Web site. The third, stimulating sustainable economic growth, will be made public in the near future. CIDA has also completed an extensive review of its multilateral and global programs. Following this assessment, the agency developed its first ever aid effectiveness strategy for these multilateral programs.

● (0905)

[English]

Towards the aim of stronger management and sustained implementation, CIDA has put in place its aid effectiveness action plan, which provides the entire agency with clear actions and concrete direction for implementing all key elements of the government's aid effectiveness agenda. The Auditor General recommended that this action plan be taken into consideration in the implementation of each of our country strategies. This was done as part of the preparation of country program development frameworks for individual countries.

As I mentioned in December, CIDA has instituted a policy to guide the use of program-based approaches throughout the agency. Since my last appearance before the committee we have completed a comprehensive assessment of these approaches. This includes the evaluation of programs in Ghana, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, and Vietnam, each of which has a significant PBA, or program-based approach, component. Overall, the findings were positive, and the lessons learned are being integrated into our programming. Once again, this evaluation report was completed on schedule.

Another important commitment CIDA met by the end of March was to ensure that we have a robust cadre of in-house specialists to support the agency's program and delivery of initiatives within the thematic priorities. We did this by defining the skills and expertise we needed, identifying the gaps, and developing a plan to align resources to needs through a work assignment process. This process is being followed by intensive recruitment, training, and ongoing professional development. This meets a further recommendation of the Auditor General.

In terms of streamlining our business processes, which we talked about last time, CIDA is driving ahead with reforms to make the agency more efficient. As I indicated in December, a key element of our aid effectiveness action plan is decentralizing more operations to the field. Staffing more positions in the field will allow the agency to be more responsive to needs, make better choices on the ground, and achieve stronger results. Through decentralization, CIDA is ensuring that investment decisions are going to be timely, effective, consistent with the needs and plans of host countries, and better coordinated and harmonized with other donors on the ground. The first wave of full decentralization will begin this summer in five of our countries of focus: Bangladesh, the Caribbean region, Ghana, Tanzania, and Ukraine. This will involve moving out key program and corporate functions, including contracting support, financial advisors, and subject matter specialists, as appropriate. Tied to decentralization is an ambitious plan to modernize all of our business processes. The aim is to reduce the time and effort required to plan, design, and contract projects. To do this, the agency successfully piloted a new competitive business process that cuts processing times for its bilateral projects by up to 70%. This new business process has been mainstreamed throughout the agency since we last met. The agency has also reduced application processing times for its Canadian partnership projects by 60%.

● (0910)

[Translation]

In closing, all the objectives the agency set for itself, and which we reflected in our action plan in response to the Auditor General's report, have been met or are currently on track.

I now welcome your questions. Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Biggs.

Just before we go to the first round, I want to point out, for the benefit of our visiting auditors and their staff, that this of course is a regular meeting of the Canadian public accounts committee. We're having a hearing on a performance report that was tabled last fall dealing with our Canadian International Development Agency. In the extensive performance report, the auditor made a number of recommendations regarding the effectiveness and efficiency of that agency, and we are now having a hearing.

We heard from the Auditor General previously. We've heard from the Canadian International Development Agency. Now we're going to have questions from the various members of Parliament on the committee, and then after the conclusion, the committee will write a report, and that report will be tabled in Parliament.

I should point out for our visitors that this country has, of course, two official languages. Probably the first and the second member of Parliament will be asking their questions in French, so I'd ask you, if you haven't done so already, to put on your translation devices if you do not speak French. The first and second questions will probably be in French or a combination of French and English.

That's just a little background on the hearing. We'll go now, for the first round of seven minutes, *sept minutes*, to Monsieur Dion.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank you all very much for being here. This is an extremely important issue. Canada is supposed to be a strong country, a generous country, a country that does more than average. But once again, according to the numbers in the report, we are below average in terms of development assistance as a share of the gross national income. That is unacceptable for a country like Canada. But it is not a matter of money; it is a matter of figuring out what is being done with the money. Is it really being used to help develop and build the strengths of these countries?

My first question is for the Auditor General. Madam, in paragraph 8.10, your audit report states that CIDA does not have comprehensive governing legislation that defines its mandate and role. But, in 2008, Parliament passed the Official Development Assistance Accountability Act. Why was the act, which was passed in 2008, not mentioned in the report or included within the audit's scope?

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

We completed the audit, the on-site work, in May 2009, just shortly after the act had been passed. I think we should have mentioned it in the initial context, but it was not in force when we did the audit.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Your report found that the agency is without direction, without bearings, without a plan, that there is a crippling amount of centralization at the top, that it is in the hands of generalists who do not necessarily understand the more specialized nature of what they have to do.

You made recommendations in two of the three areas: more specialists and more specific action plans with more rigorous criteria. Unless I am mistaken, I did not see any recommendations to make the agency more effective and efficient, and less centralized, so that it decentralizes more operations to the field.

If I am right, why is that, and how do you think your report will help the agency solve that problem?

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

When we do audits, we are reluctant to tell departments and the government how they should be structured. So it is really up to CIDA's senior management to determine whether its operations should be centralized or decentralized. Of course, we included in the report statistics on the fact that few operations were decentralized at the time. We can see from the action plan and the remarks of the agency's president that there is a movement towards more decentralization. I think it is really up to CIDA to decide how to structure its operations. Oftentimes—and Ms. Biggs may be able to comment further—financial constraints dictate that operations are centralized rather than decentralized.

• (0915)

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Yes, but when you centralize the agency's functions and operations, it does not work if the centre does not know what to do because it has not set clear priorities. The two are connected. You seem to have been a bit too careful. You should have made some recommendations in that regard. It is really a management issue.

Good morning, Ms. Biggs. From your remarks, it seems that you addressed nearly all the items in the report, and I just want to make sure of that in the few minutes I have left. You committed to doing a full review of program-based approaches by March 31, 2010. Is that review done?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Yes, it is complete. It was something that had been asked of us by Treasury Board. We completed it and submitted it to the Treasury Board at the end of the fiscal year.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

As far as country strategies go, you said that the country program development frameworks would be done by March 2010. Did that in fact happen?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Yes. The country strategies were completed last fall for the countries of focus. They have been issued on our website. In addition, we have completed what are called country

development programming frameworks. They're referred to in the Auditor General's report. These are much more detailed programming guidelines that take into account all the key considerations for what we will actually do, which projects we would undertake, and what results we're trying to achieve. Those were committed to be completed by the end of March 2010 and they were completed in time.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: You have three priorities: increasing food security, stimulating sustainable economic growth, and securing the future of children and youth. On page 22, the report states that “the Agency will complete Agency-wide strategies for each of these thematic priorities by early 2010”.

Was that done?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Biggs: As I mentioned in my opening remarks, two of the three thematic priorities—the first on food security, the second on children and youth—were completed and announced. The details are now on our website. Those were done to the end of 2010. The third, on economic growth, has been completed and will be released shortly.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Finally, you said that you would define “the necessary skills and expertise required to support programming and delivery of initiatives within these thematic priorities”, in other words, the whole issue of specialized expertise. You said that you would “ensure that a robust cadre of specialists is in place through recruitment, training and ongoing professional development” by March 2010.

Where exactly do things stand?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Biggs: As I indicated, that work has been completed as well, although it will be ongoing. We have pooled together all of the specialist cadre in our geographic programs into one place. We've done a needs assessment relative to our thematic priorities and our program strategies for each country, which we have completed. We've done the gap analysis. We've looked at the needs. We've developed a work assignment process to make sure we're matching supply and demand, if you will. Then we will do it on an ongoing basis—the recruitment and professional development of our cadre. As we move forward with decentralization, we will also be looking at where and when we need to put our specialists out into the field to support our programming there.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dion.

Mrs. Beaudin, you have seven minutes.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I do not want to go backwards, but CIDA has set out its country development frameworks. How do you explain—for my own benefit as I was not here last year—the fact that documents or country development frameworks were just as important but were not done?

• (0920)

[English]

Ms. Margaret Biggs: CIDA has always had detailed program frameworks for bilateral countries. I think the Auditor General notes in her report that some of them were out of date. That has now been remedied so that they are aligned with the country strategies that have been approved and are posted on our website. They became out of date as the government was developing its new country focus and its new thematic focus. That work has now been completed, so we have new country strategies and new programming frameworks for each of our countries of focus.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you.

In point 4 on page 2 of the 2009 report, it says that certain weaknesses were identified and that you addressed the needs, requests and recommendations. The report also said that recent years have been marked by frequent changes in policy direction and substantial turnover. I would think that that problem was partly solved and that the agency should not see any major changes in policy direction in the next few years.

In light of that, how are you able to plan operations in the focus countries where you want to take action? How do you plan without specific management frameworks, among other things? Do you have them now?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Yes, there is a framework of action in the government. CIDA has identified three key areas of thematic focus, as I mentioned. In each country we are zeroing in on one or two of those areas of thematic focus, with even more focus within the focus in terms of what exactly we would do in each of these countries and what results we would be looking to achieve.

In response to your question, I think we do have a clear sense of our direction, our areas of focus. Those are also being translated into our country strategies, and our programming will follow suit.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: What are your strengths as compared with other donor countries?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Thank you for that question.

CIDA has a very strong track record with respect to food security and agricultural development, and therefore I think it's appropriate that those make up one of our areas of thematic focus. I think in recent years, many people have zeroed in on the fact that agricultural development, particularly in Africa, has not been given enough attention. It is an area that CIDA continued to work on in the past and didn't neglect, and it's an area of strength for us in terms of expertise and in terms of programming. It is an area of thematic focus.

CIDA also has quite a bit of expertise in many of the health areas and in basic education. It's been a main contributor to education in many countries. For example, CIDA helped Tanzania to achieve universal primary enrolment. We have very strong expertise in teacher training, and we've used that in many countries, including in

Afghanistan, for example. That is also an area of real strength. So those are examples. I think CIDA has also, over the years, been very well known for integrating gender equality into its programming and for being really quite a pathfinder internationally on that issue.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Is it possible that CIDA could provide the same services as another donor country? And if so, why do you think that is?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Biggs: When we are in a particular country we look to harmonize our work with that of other donors, based upon what the country itself has identified as areas of priority. There is a division of labour that follows, based on who's best able to take responsibility for particular issues. So, for example, in the health sector in Mali or Tanzania, we might be working on health issues with a number of other donor countries in alignment with the country's own health strategy, but our focus would be on a couple of areas, such as, for example, health human resources, in which Canada has particular expertise.

• (0925)

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Very well. Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Dewar, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to our guests this morning.

I'm just looking at the summary of Ms. Fraser's recommendations and your action plans. Thank you for giving us this information. It's helpful. I'm looking at the spreadsheet for paragraph 8.54, which says:

Recommendation. To achieve greater sectoral focus, the Canadian International Development Agency should

- clarify, for each of its priority sectors, the specific programming areas that it will support in the future as well as those that it will not;

I'm looking to the horizon a bit here, because as a member of the foreign affairs committee, I note, Ms. Biggs, that when you were in front of the committee, you mentioned that the policy of the department with regard to reproductive health and maternal and child health had not changed. To be fair to you and to give you the date, it was May 4, 2010.

We just heard this past week that another maternal health agency, Marie Stopes International, was one that had fallen under the reproductive health restrictions and had received only conditional funding from Canada. That's what was in the press reports over, I think it was, the weekend.

Sorry, I don't know the time—

Mr. Andrew Saxton (North Vancouver, CPC): On a point of order, we're here this morning to review the Auditor General's report for May of 2009. My honourable colleague's comments have nothing to do with that. They're on an issue that has transpired, as he mentioned, in the last week—

Mr. Paul Dewar: I think we're in debate. I referenced the—

Mr. Andrew Saxton: —so I think we should stick to the report, which is the business of the committee.

Mr. Paul Dewar: —spreadsheet in the report. I understand Mr. Saxton is sensitive to this, but—

The Chair: I think the performance report deals with the overall general performance of the agency, and I'm going to allow the question. Again, I'd like you to more or less stick with the performance report.

There are questions allowed, Mr. Saxton—

Mr. Paul Dewar: Of course.

With all due respect to my colleague, I was referencing recommendation 8.54 by the Auditor General. I'm sure Mr. Saxton has it there. I have an extra copy if he wishes. I'm referencing the fact that one of the goals is to be very specific in the future. I'm reading from the Auditor General's report. The recommendation is to be very specific in the future as to which program areas the government will not fund. I'm referencing the fact that one of the recipients of Canadian funds abroad when it comes to maternal health has already been told that it will not receive funds if it has to do with certain areas of reproductive health.

My question is very simple. I'm trying to square the policy of CIDA with reports from recipients of funds and with the Auditor General's concerns about being very clear to the horizon in the future about whether this is the case. Are there recipients, as was reported by Marie Stopes International, that have already been told they will not receive funds in the future for certain aspects of reproductive health?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I really cannot comment on the specific example Mr. Dewar has indicated. I don't have knowledge of the report he's referring to.

In the children and youth strategy, which is one of the thematic priorities the government has focused on and CIDA is focusing on, there are three elements. The first one is around child survival and maternal health, which is exactly the area of child health, particularly under-five child health, maternal health, and maternal survival, which we're going to focus on for the G-8. Within that, a key element will be child survival in terms of the five major killers of children, particularly what happens with infants, many of whom die before their first month. A big part of that would be building health systems in developing countries, because you need to have the health system to deliver the maternal care and services at the local level.

This is consistent with what we've done in the past. It's an area of some strength for CIDA. We will continue to focus on that even more in our areas of focus where children and youth and maternal and child health are areas of specific focus within the focus of CIDA.

• (0930)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Okay. I'm referencing a report from the weekend, in which it is stated by Marie Stopes International that CIDA is currently funding reproductive health and HIV/AIDS programs in South Africa. It said it is considering renewing funds for health services to vulnerable persons in Tanzania, but unlike previous years, the grants that they would be receiving are now conditional on the agency avoiding any connection with abortion.

That's why I reference it, and this is news to me. I'm just clarifying the policy. If you're looking at the Auditor General's report, it says to clarify each priority sector. We're about to enter into the G-8 and G-20. The question is, with regard to the department's policies, has there been a change since May 4, when you stated that there had been no change in the policy in terms of provision of safe access to legal abortions? Has there been a change in the policy since that time?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: No, there hasn't. As I stated earlier in the month, CIDA has never directly funded abortion services. We do continue to program in the area of family planning, and that's an important area within the area of maternal health.

Mr. Paul Dewar: One of the other things that was suggested is to look towards the focus of certain programs, have certain targets, and that's probably what's been established in the Accountability Act. I'm just wondering, have you been given any sense of how much money Canada will be dedicating towards child and maternal health as we go into the G-8 and G-20? Has there been any ballpark figure about how much money Canada would be investing in this area?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Not yet, no, sir.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I think Ms. Biggs would agree that we have funded child and maternal health, and there seems to be a desire by the government, and I would applaud them on it, to focus on child and maternal health. When we're looking at measurable expectations and performance benchmarks, Ms. Fraser, and when Canada is initiating or perhaps putting more focus, would you expect that there would be some ballpark figure of how much money you're going to invest in a new initiative before you get into dedicating moneys and programs to that initiative?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Chair, we would certainly expect in any program that there be a good estimate and a good costing done of what the initiative would require over the longer term. Unfortunately, we see in many cases, particularly when it comes to issues like infrastructure, that that long-term planning is not done.

I think it leads to the broader question, which has been studied in this committee and in other committees, about multi-year funding, multi-year appropriations. It raises a much bigger issue about how government finances are appropriated.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Chair, through you to Ms. Biggs, what's happening to your funding next year?

The Chair: Mr. Dewar, your time is up. I'm going to have to shut you off. We'll come back to you.

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

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My initial questions are for Mrs. Biggs. You stated in your previous appearance before this committee that all donor countries have been struggling to try to figure out how best to put their dollars to use. Then in paragraph 8.15, page 8, the report highlights that, “CIDA continues to be influenced by international developments.”

Can you please explain what these international developments are and how they will be or are influencing CIDA?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Thank you.

Since 2000 there have been a number of re-evaluations and reflections on what actually leads to effective assistance that actually can garner the strongest results. I think there's a strong evidence base to show that short-term individual projects do not build sustainable results.

Beginning with the Rome conference, the Paris Declaration, and then in 2008 with the Accra Agenda for Action, there has been a strong focus on a number of key principles, and all donor countries are working to align with them as best as possible. That would include, first and foremost, that a country needs to take ownership for the issue and have a plan to address its poverty reduction requirements and its goals in a particular sector. Without that you can't really galvanize and coalesce your assistance efforts.

For donor countries like Canada, there's a strong recommendation that we be more harmonized and more aligned and coordinated on the ground. That leads to an effort towards what we call program-based approaches, which is where you work together as a donor community with the country in question to try to support them, whether it's in their health sector, their education plan, or their economic agenda. That's meant to avoid the individual project scattergun approach that has led to some failed efforts in the past.

I think the section you're referring to shows that all countries over the last number of years—beginning with Canada, with the Auditor General looking at the policy of the Government of Canada since 2002—have been trying to do better at this. In our aid effectiveness agenda, in which we have talked about greater focus, more decentralization, more alignment, we're taking it up to another level.

• (0935)

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you.

In paragraph 8.16, the report mentions both the Paris Declaration as well as the high-level meeting in Accra, Ghana. Following these, several donor countries committed to provide “more predictable and transparent aid that would flow over multiple years”.

Can you explain how CIDA has taken action on these commitments?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: What we're doing, first and foremost, is being very clear about where we're going to focus our efforts in terms of the geographic concentration and our areas of thematic focus, and then very detailed country programming frameworks that will lay out over the medium to longer term where exactly CIDA is going to be placing its efforts. That will give the agency and also our partner countries and those we work with a greater degree of predictability and clarity about where we're going to be focusing our efforts.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you.

In our previous meeting on CIDA, toward the end of the meeting, the Assistant Auditor General, Mr. Flageole, said:

Despite everything, we found the action plan prepared by CIDA to be very encouraging. It contains important aspects. Things appear to be moving. However, we did point out in the report that many good intentions had been expressed in the past, but that a certain number of them had never materialized.

Ms. Biggs, could you please address these concerns and explain the measures taken to ensure that under this government real results will materialize?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: One of the main criticisms of the Auditor General's report was that there had been a policy in 2002 but there hadn't been a clear management plan to give effect to those directions. I believe that in our reforms, which we laid out in December and again today, there has been a clear action plan identified, but the steps we've committed to take have been taken. Many of those had been taken at the time the Auditor General's report was released; some further ones had been completed by the time we met with you in December.

The ones we set out to complete by the end of March—for example, on the country development program frameworks, the CDPFs, the evaluation on program-based approaches, and the development of the specialist cadre human resources plan, which were some of the key commitments for March 2010—were committed and were all achieved on time.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you.

The audit notes that CIDA has a complex administrative and decision-making process, and CIDA has acknowledged that this is a problem, but the issue still remains. Can you explain what action CIDA is taking to address this administrative and decision-making process?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: The primary issue, again, is a management issue, where, for a variety of reasons, it had come to take far too long from the conception of a particular initiative to the actual execution of the project. As I indicated in my remarks, we've undertaken a complete re-engineering of our business model and our business processes and have reduced the processing times by 70%. We would now aim, in our countries of focus, in our geographic countries, to have that take place, from initiation to execution, on average around 12 months, maximum 15 months. We have piloted that, we have done it successfully, and we are now mainstreaming it throughout our organization.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have no more questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Saxton.

We're going to go to the second round. It's going to be four minutes each.

Just before we go, I just want to address an issue, Ms. Biggs. When you review the performance report, it's obvious that CIDA has had some serious problems, which have been identified by the Office of the Auditor General. I think you're taking very earnest, sincere efforts to correct this, as indicated in your performance report. But CIDA, in the last eight or nine years, has had five ministers and it's had at least four presidents. It's always been the view of this committee that the tenure ought to be much longer. Imperial Oil can't operate with a new president every two years, Penn West Energy can't operate on that basis, and we don't think CIDA can either. Do you have any opinion on that point, which we've raised on a number of occasions?

The point I'm making is that you've churned the presidents every two or two and a half years, and as a result you do not have the corporate capacity or the corporate memory to really effectively and efficiently operate the agency's business.

• (0940)

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I take your point, Chair. I would also add that I think what the Auditor General's report indicated was that no matter who was at the helm, there were some weaknesses in terms of the management processes within the agency.

Although I would personally hope to stay and be able to see a lot of this through, that's not my decision. But it is my responsibility to make sure that the management processes inside the agency are sound and that the directions that are set out will stand the test of time. The kinds of things we're doing now are not really contingent upon who's the president or the minister; these are just good management practices. A government always has the right to make policy decisions about where it wants to put its effort and its emphasis, etc., and the agency would follow through on the political direction it is given. But the agency can take charge of the management issues underneath the policy.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to go to the second round.

Mr. Lee, four minutes.

Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for opening up the envelope I actually wanted to discuss.

This has to do with who really leads the agency: who develops the strategic goals, and how do they get communicated? Because CIDA is an agency, it has a president, and there is a minister. Is there a deputy minister?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Yes, that's me.

Mr. Derek Lee: But you are the president of an agency.

Ms. Margaret Biggs: It's a nomenclature issue. We are an agency, but we have a minister; we are within the portfolio of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. For your purposes at this committee, I am the deputy head, as would be the Deputy Minister of Transport or...

The Chair: You're the accounting officer.

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Yes, I am the accounting officer.

Mr. Derek Lee: I'm just trying to establish where parliamentarians would look for the strategic direction. Normally we look to a

minister, but in this case I'm getting the sense that we would look to the president of the agency, or others in management.

I commend the agency for responding to the Auditor General's report. It shows you how far you can come with a good performance audit. It can help. But you've mentioned that there's some decentralization of some functions, so I'm seeing this whole organizational flow chart mutate, and I wonder where the authority actually is. Do you feel it's on your desk, or is it your minister, or is this decentralization going to delegate the thing further away from the minister?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: CIDA is like another government department, and I'm the deputy head and the accounting officer. The minister and the cabinet set the policy directions for the agency, through cabinet, so the thematic priorities were approved by cabinet. As you would expect, the countries of focus were approved by cabinet. If they were to change, that would be a cabinet decision as well. Our minister has indicated that.

In our role, we would advise on those priorities and directions, but the government would make the decisions and we would implement them. The other issues are management issues. They are the follow-through on the directions we're given from the minister and from the government, so we would develop the follow-through strategies on how to implement the directions the government has given us.

On decentralization, as I indicated, we are moving forward in waves, in five countries beginning this summer, to fully decentralize our operations into the field. Those decisions have gone to our minister, but the implementation would be done by me with David and through the agency. That would be our responsibility.

The further question you asked has to do with delegations of authority. That, as with other departments, is the decision of the minister in terms of the minister's prerogative, in terms of the extent to which the delegations of authority for approvals would be delegated into the department. That's a ministerial decision.

• (0945)

Mr. Derek Lee: That is approvals for writing cheques. Have I got that right?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Yes, to take the decision. The actual administration of those would be done by our officers in compliance with the FAA.

Mr. Derek Lee: Okay. What about learning from mistakes?

It looks from the Auditor General's report as if the agency wasn't really good at doing an analysis of the effectiveness of its aid programs. What methodology has the agency generated itself or imported? I'm asking if you have imported it or have generated this yourself for the purpose of analyzing the agency's work and learning from mistakes.

Ms. Margaret Biggs: The Auditor General's report didn't actually look at our evaluation and performance function. The Auditor General's report looked at the extent to which the agency had followed through on its aid effectiveness plan from early 2000 or 2002 and whether or not that had been followed through in terms of actually embedding into our planning documents and our programming documents, etc.

I think the Auditor General's report shows that, although there was good work going on the ground, there were some weak links in the chain of command. We have remedied that. In terms of its evaluation performance, the agency actually has an extremely strong evaluation function, as recognized in its management accountability framework results. We do 100% evaluation of our programs. We are leaders within the OECD DAC in terms of our evaluation function, and we are trying to get joint evaluations with other donors so that we can aggregate and magnify our results and also have less transaction costs on our donor countries.

CIDA has also been very strong in terms of performance management and results-based management. Again, it's an area of strength for the agency. The Auditor General wanted to see more evidence that this is integrated into all of our planning documents, which is a very fair comment. As a function, however, we are very strong.

I would also like to add that CIDA has an independent evaluation committee drawn from people outside the agency—which is, I think, novel inside the Government of Canada—so that we can better challenge and critique ourselves and learn from our results.

The Chair: Mr. Kramp, you have four minutes.

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

Like most Canadians and people around the world, we're encouraged with the government's approach to clearly establishing a priority for maternal health at the upcoming international group of meetings. You mentioned in your earlier comment, Ms. Biggs, the priorities in dealing with improvements in maternal health, be they from the various agencies or from the government itself.

Particularly from CIDA, you mentioned that you had five priorities in dealing with maternal health. Would you happen to know or could you tell this committee what those five priorities are?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I'm not sure, Mr. Chair, if I said five priorities.

Maybe I'll just amplify. In terms of maternal and under-five health, if you take under-five health in terms of the leading causes of mortality, first and foremost, it's with newborns. Many of them don't survive the first 24 hours or the first 28 days, and that often is a function of not having the kind of care needed at birth.

Babies die because of—

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Are you talking about clean water and sanitary conditions?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: At birth, it's really to do with having obstetrical care and that kind of care in terms of making sure that the baby survives.

In terms of under-five health, there are five leading disease—malaria, infectious diseases like pneumonia, and those kinds of things. We know what they are and we also know how to address them. The best way to address them is to do them in an integrated fashion so that all children get access to the bundle of interventions that are needed. They're very cost effective and they can be bundled together. You need a primary care worker to be able to deliver them to the children.

In terms of maternal health, we do know what the main causes of maternal mortality are, and the majority are in and around birth, again because of the lack of obstetrical care that is required to ensure there's a safe birth and safe delivery in the treatment for mothers. You can't do that with a bed net. You need to have a proper health system and the local backup for the health system so that mothers can get the kind of care they need at birth. Those are some of the main factors. Across a continuum of care it's well known internationally what the main areas of intervention are. There's a broad set of areas there. We do know what the diseases are that kill children. We do know what the main causes of maternal mortality are.

•(0950)

Mr. Daryl Kramp: So you have some expertise that you're bringing to the fore to make solid suggestions as to how we should move forward.

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Yes, we are.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Fine. Thank you.

I'm going to ask you to grade yourself in layman's terms for us very quickly on a few points—A of course being excellent and D meaning failure.

The organizational weaknesses that had been identified in the Auditor General's report, in particular the one about there being “little...direction and no...targets to country desks on how and when to use program-based approaches.” How successful have you been with that?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: We have a program-based PBA policy now. It gives very clear direction to our agency as to when and how to use PBAs and when to stop them. I would give us a “good” because I think we have to make sure we follow through and it actually takes place—

Mr. Daryl Kramp: My concern, going back to Mr. Saxton's questions, is that good intentions don't pay the bills. Having a plan in place is one thing, but ensuring that it works is also crucial. The recommendation the Auditor General has made here...we want to find a way to ensure that the results are there—not just acted upon but actually producing results. I suspect we'll probably have to wait a little bit, because there's a completion date in there.

If there are any serious weaknesses, they should be identified to this committee now, as they are obviously a work in progress that needs significant work. If we have a further audit and we come back a year later and you say, “Well, it was all fixed”, but it remains a problem a year from now, then we would have a very serious problem with your administration.

Could you tell us if there's anything outstanding that is problematic for you at this particular point, that requires a tremendous amount of work?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kramp.

Go ahead, Madame.

Ms. Margaret Biggs: As I indicated, for all of the items the Auditor General identified, action has either been taken or it is on track. So I would say in terms of where we are right now, we're in very good shape. Further, I would say on program-based approaches the Auditor General noted that although in programs and in countries people had a good sense of when and why to use them, there was no consistent corporate policy on that to give guidance to our staff. That is now in place. I would expect that we are going to monitor its application. As I indicate in the spreadsheet, we will have a full reporting on the first year of our aid effectiveness action plan in a month or two.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kramp.

Madame Beaudin, quatre minutes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you very much.

I want to again come back to recommendation 8.54. I see that the agency accepted that recommendation. First you carried out priority-based consultations across Canada—if I am reading this right—and in focus countries in order to develop strategies that reflect your three priorities.

It says that measurable expectations and performance benchmarks will be set as appropriate—in the French version of my document, that is, the book—but your new document says as needed in French. Why? How will we evaluate the results?

[English]

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Thank you for the question.

The performance targets, the results we're looking to achieve, are embedded inside what's called our CDPF, our country development programming frameworks. They are now done and completed. Each country's program—Tanzania, Mali, Vietnam—will have a clear set of expectations and results, towards which it is directing its programming. We look at those every year to see whether things are on track and whether we need to adjust. As you would expect, if there are things that are completely off track for whatever reason, we would adjust and make course corrections. Those country development programming frameworks, CDPF, have been developed, are in place, and are directing our programming as indicated in our action plan. Those were done before March 31, 2010.

• (0955)

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: I want to be sure I understand. For all the country programs that you have put in place, there are automatic expectations to evaluate them.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Yes, that's true.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you very much.

It is also my understanding that before establishing strategies based on the three priorities in recommendation 8.54—increasing food security, stimulating sustainable economic growth, and securing the future of children and youth—you led consultations across Canada and in focus countries.

[English]

Ms. Margaret Biggs: On the thematic priorities, we did have consultations in Canada and we're talking to people in countries all the time. But we did have specific targeted consultations on the thematic priorities late last summer and into the fall. The three thematic priorities were developed as a result of the in-depth advice we got.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci, Madame Beaudin.*

Mr. Dreeshen, you have four minutes.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer, CPC): Thank you very much.

I have just a couple of things. I'd like to go back to paragraph 8.36 of the AG report, where it notes that the level of use of program-based approaches varies significantly from country to country. That is in part because of the nature of the recipient government, but it's also because of the participation of other donors.

I've had the opportunity to speak with different groups, specifically Rotarians, and to look at the types of things they've done. They've given glowing reports of the type of work and cooperation they have had with CIDA. They have spoken particularly about the International Development Agency's \$60 million toward the World Health Organization's polio eradication, and specifically what is happening in Afghanistan. There's also the work that has been done in Belize with the distributed learning program that CIDA has been helping with.

On page 15 of your report, I notice that access to clean water in Kenya was also included—looking at 20,000 people and rainwater harvesting that has the potential to last for 25 years, to assist in that area.

I wonder if you can comment on how you tie in with the local organizations from Canada, and also what you find for support when you reach these other countries.

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I think I understand your question, sir.

In our country programs, in our bilateral programs, we look first and foremost at what that country has identified as its priorities and where it is looking for assistance in allowing it to deliver on its objectives. This goes back to the principle of ownership I mentioned earlier. We have of course chosen these countries on the basis of their need and where we think we can make a difference because of the quality of their governance.

Then we look at where Canada's comparative advantage is, where we have strengths, where they need us, and what other donors are doing. Then we align around that. Within that we figure out how best to deliver on our objectives and who best to work with. Sometimes that will be with an international organization like WHO in terms of polio eradication; sometimes it may be with a Canadian non-governmental organization that is present on the ground and is best placed. But it's all based upon what we're trying to achieve and how best to achieve the results we've set out for ourselves.

I hope that answers your question.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you very much.

In paragraph 8.44 you speak of the geographic programs, the multilateral and global programs, as well as your Canadian partnerships. You mention the harmonization with external parties and demanding internal coordination and cohesion.

I wonder if you could explain how these three branches coordinate their efforts. What are their respective roles in developing and implementing these harmonized plans with our other partners?

• (1000)

Ms. Margaret Biggs: As you indicate, CIDA has three channels to deliver its assistance, all in aid of helping us achieve our mandate, which is poverty reduction. Our country programs are in individual countries, and there, as I said, we are aligned with the plans of those countries. On our multilateral investments, of which we have just undertaken a complete review, we work through international organizations to achieve poverty reduction objectives. That extends our reach in terms of the number of countries and people we can get to, and oftentimes they are better positioned to deliver on results. For example, in fragile states quite often that's the best way to work. In our partnership programs, we focus on our work with Canadian partners. That is both aligning with our priorities but also responding to what they can bring to the equation—their skills, their expertise, and their initiative.

In our country plans, we look to try, across these three channels, to ensure that we're maximizing the effect, particularly in terms of our country programs and our multilateral programs. Our partnership programs also have to respond to the initiative and the objectives of the partners themselves, our Canadian partners. So we are cognizant of what they're doing in country. We try to link them up and join them up and create synergies as much as possible, and they are captured inside of our country program frameworks that I indicated we have completed.

The Chair: Mr. Dewar, four minutes.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you, Chair. I just want to finish up where we left off.

Ms. Biggs, next year, according to the government's budget, what will happen to your funding envelope?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: For this year, for 2010-11, as Budget 2010 indicated, there's a further increment, and after that the budget indicated that the international assistance levels would be capped for the time being, until we hear further direction from the budget in terms of the fiscal situation of the country. So we have one more year of growth to meet our commitment to double assistance, the Gleneagle commitment, which the Government of Canada will meet.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I ask that, Chair, because of course as we enter into the G-8 and G-20 and the government wants to take on the issue of child and maternal health, I think it's important, as was indicated by the Auditor General, that we have an idea where the money is going to come from.

I also note that just a year ago there was a multinational fund. I think it was coordinated by the U.K. It was \$5.3 billion that was collected for maternal health. My information is that Canada did not contribute to that fund. Ms. Biggs, is that your understanding as well? This is a \$5.3 billion multinational fund that was coordinated, I believe, by the U.K., but I might be wrong on that. It was for child and maternal health. I'm just wondering if you can clarify if we contributed to that fund or not.

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I'm not sure exactly which fund you're referring to. I could get back to the committee, Chair, in terms of what the details of that are.

The Chair: You could provide the details to the clerk and we'll circulate that.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Yes, I'd appreciate that.

I'd also like Ms. Biggs to clarify my question on the funding of Marie Stopes International. My reference was from the media, and they might have had that wrong. I don't know. It would be helpful if I heard it from the agency, because what has been reported is that they will not be able to receive funds having to do with certain aspects of reproductive health.

I'm hearing from you that there's no change in the policy of CIDA when it comes to reproductive health. We're hearing something different from government. My question is, have there been other partners—because you mentioned just a couple of questions ago—

The Chair: There's a point of order.

Mr. Young, you have the floor.

Mr. Terence Young (Oakville, CPC): Chair, I'm wondering how this relates to the report we're currently examining. It's really off topic. It's really not fair to ask the deputy to come in and report to the committee on this report and then start asking a whole lot of other questions on current events. It's not relevant to the work we're doing today.

The Chair: Well, again, Mr. Young, the questioner questioned the objectives and certain issues.

Now, I want to point out to Mr. Dewar that this committee does not deal with policy. If it's a policy of government to fund certain aspects of maternal and child health, that is not an issue the Auditor General will comment on, and it's not an issue that will be part of our inquiry.

You've asked Ms. Biggs about funding of a specific NGO, and she has indicated she's not aware of that particular group. I don't know how far we can take this.

• (1005)

Mr. Paul Dewar: I was off that question.

Mr. Chair, if I may, first of all, Mr. Saxton had a point of order and Mr. Young had a point of order. My questions denoted certain recommendations by the Auditor General, and Mr. Saxton is aware of that.

Mr. Kramp asked his whole series of questions on reproductive health. I don't know, Mr. Kramp, and you might correct me on this, but you didn't reference the AG's report in your questions; you asked about maternal health policies. Is that correct, through you, Chair, to Mr. Kramp? It's just to the consistency here.

The Chair: I will just tell you that we do not get into policy issues in the committee. So I will allow you to continue, but just reference yourself to the performance of the AG.

Mr. Paul Dewar: You asked about maternal health? That's all I'm asking.

Can I carry on?

The Chair: Mr. Dewar, you have 94 seconds.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you for the clarification—I think. I didn't know the gag order extended so far.

Mr. Chair, I just want to know from the head of CIDA if she can tell us, in terms of working with partners on the ground...can she reference any other partner in the G-8 that she is aware of that has a similar point of view as our government when it comes to reproductive health, very specifically that it tags dollars for reproductive health? Is there any other partner that you are aware of that does that?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I don't have that information.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Was it a recommendation—

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I don't know if I agree with the characterization that you're indicating, though. I'm not sure quite what you are referring to.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I'm just looking at our partners—the U.K., the U.S., France, and others—who have just funded programs like the Global Fund, where the previous U.S. administration put tags on dollars to the Global Fund that said that certain moneys wouldn't go to certain programs in reproductive health.

So my question, through the chair to you, is this. Are you aware of any other partner that we're working with on the ground, and G-8 partners, who use that form of funding when it comes to reproductive health?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Chair, maybe I could clarify. The Government of Canada and CIDA are major contributors to the Global Fund, as an example, and we do not put any caveats or earmarks on that funding, nor will the government do so in the future. We haven't done it and I don't think we will be doing it.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley, four minutes.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you for coming out and being a part of this.

Clearly, as we went through the December report, these are significant issues for Canada. I think one of the things that has been good, actually, is that the committee asked you to come back five months later. We have seen significant changes, and I want to

congratulate you for making those happen. I think one of the things we are seeing is that if you have ineffective strategies, where you try to be everything to everyone, with exception, I suspect—but not many—it fails. That seems to have been the case. Now what I think we're trying to do is refocus around a business process, quite honestly, for not only a competitive business process but your application process times, which were consistently raised.

I want to be clear, though. As we move forward, we are basically starting to decentralize our issues so that we can be more focused in terms of direction, guidance. Can you give us some sort of a comment as to whether you are satisfied? We need to be sure, if there needs to be more direction, a mandate, to be effective. Are you satisfied that you've got that type of direction and mandate to be an effective agency?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Yes, I am.

Just further to your comments, I think there was criticism of CIDA in the past. The Auditor General made the comment, but the OECD did a peer review in 2007 of CIDA and it said CIDA was spread too thin, as you indicated. Now we have a much greater degree of focus within the agency and down into our programming. So I think those corrective measures have been taken. I wouldn't take from that, though, that everything CIDA did in the past was necessarily a failure. I just think we can have much stronger results if we are able to really zero in on where we can add the greatest value.

So I think we now have clarity on what it is we're going to focus on, where we're going to focus. We are working on much speedier, streamlined business processes so that we can be more responsive on the ground. We are also taking action, beginning this summer, to move more of our staff into the field, so that we can again be more effective on the ground. I do believe that all the major steps that one would hope for an agency like CIDA, as indicated by the OECD and again confirmed by the Auditor General, are now in place. We just have to follow through on them, sir.

• (1010)

Mr. Bev Shipley: Do you see that as a bit of a moving target? Because this is a process where nothing around here or anywhere in business actually ever stays constant, do you see the upgrading, the policy, and the communications with the minister as ongoing? My next question would have been, if you'd needed something else in order to be more effective, what would it be?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I do believe that to be effective, and as the Auditor General's report indicates, development is a long-term process. It's not something you can stop and start. It doesn't happen in a couple of days or weeks or even a couple of years. So you do need to stay with it and you do need to follow through on what it is you're looking to do.

Now that we have our frameworks in place, I believe it's important to follow through on those.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you.

One of the things we often hear about is how somebody got a grant, or somebody new was getting it before but now they aren't, or somebody else who's new is getting it and they've never had it before. Do you see grants actually becoming a form of sustainable funding for any organization, or do you see it as important that they actually meet the mandate of the particular agency, or it may be of the government, that it is an application that goes forward and in competition with others in terms of being able to provide a service? Is that how it should be, or is there a different way of doing it?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Yes, I would agree with you, sir.

In our country programs we would look to do programming that aligns very specifically with the objectives and the targets, results that we've identified in a country to achieve, and then we would pick the very best means we can to achieve those ends.

In terms of our Canadian partnership programming, again, we get numerous applications. They are reviewed on their merits and decisions are made on that basis.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shipley.

The last questioner is *Monsieur Dion pour quatre minutes*.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Madame Biggs, you said the process of decentralization that is so needed is happening now. I would like to invite you to describe it more concretely to the committee, and I will choose the example Mr. Kramp used in his questions to you, child and maternal health.

Assume a country asks CIDA to help the country build safe abortion services. Will the staff on the ground in that country have the latitude to say yes to this request under the new system?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: In our country programs we have identified children and youth as a thematic area of focus in a number of our 20 countries of focus, and within that, maternal and child health specifically are areas of focus. We would primarily be focusing on building the country systems required to deliver the kinds of programs that I indicated would be important on the ground.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Yes, but the country is asking you specifically to make it safer, saying that many women are dying because the way abortions are done there is not safe at all. Will the staff on the ground have the ability to say yes?

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Mr. Chair, it's a hypothetical question and it's not relevant to the discussion this morning. I think it's out of order.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: It's certainly relevant to this discussion because we are asking if the process will be decentralized enough to address the requests that countries will make of CIDA.

The Chair: Keep your question to the decentralization—

Hon. Stéphane Dion: It's what I'm doing.

The Chair: Mr. Dion, I don't think we need to get right into the actual—

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I'm inviting Madame Biggs to be—

•(1015)

The Chair: I know where everyone wants to go, but we're not going there, so continue on.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: What is your answer?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Whether or not the responsibilities are at headquarters or decentralized in the field, it is the same issue. It is a hypothetical question. I don't believe it's a question we've ever faced. These issues are usually aligned in the context of a health system, not on specific aspects, and that's where we have focused our efforts.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I understand your answer to the question is no, they will not have this latitude because of government policy.

On the ratio of full-time staff here in Ottawa and on the ground, the report of Madame Fraser said the vast majority are here at headquarters. Will that change with the new decentralization process?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I'm going to ask my colleague, David Moloney, to speak to this. He's leading our work on decentralization and business modernization.

Mr. David Moloney (Executive Vice-President, Canadian International Development Agency): As part of the decentralization work, we are looking at every single program-related function to determine where it's most effectively carried out, whether it's at headquarters in Gatineau or in the countries where we are working. We expect to move a substantial portion of the functions out of headquarters and into, in particular, our countries of focus. So yes, that ratio will shift noticeably in terms of a smaller proportion of the total staff at headquarters and a larger proportion in the field.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: You have as a priority sustainable economies. Can you define "sustainable"?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Sustainable has two meanings. First, it's sustainable in the sense that it's going to be self-sustaining in terms of being private sector led and inclusive in terms of making sure that the economy isn't just being fuelled by assistance dollars but that it is going to be self-generating. Secondly, it means sustainable in terms of its impact on the environment, ensuring that it is environmentally sustainable, making sure that it is part of a sustainable environmental framework for the country in question. So it would have both an economic and an environment aspect to it.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dion.

[English]

That, colleagues, concludes the second round.

We are now going to call for any closing remarks from both the Auditor General and Ms. Biggs. I want to thank you for your attendance here today.

Ms. Fraser.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Thank you, Chair.

I'd just like to thank the committee for their interest in this report and for this second hearing. As we indicated in the first hearing in December, we believe that CIDA's action plan will address the issues that have been raised. I must admit that I was very pleased to see that the commitments have been met and much has been done in the last six months.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Biggs, do you have any closing comments you want to make to the committee?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Chair, thank you very much for the opportunity to come back and take you through our action plan and the steps that we've been able to accomplish since we met in December. In December, I believe I tabled with you an interim report card, if you will, from the OECD on the steps that CIDA had taken to make many of the same changes the Auditor General indicated in her report. I think at the time I gave us a B-plus in terms of the interim report from the OECD, but I think the proof will be in the pudding, and we aim to follow through on all of these commitments.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: On behalf of all members of the committee, I want to thank you for your work and for your attendance here today.

Colleagues, what we're going to do now is suspend for one minute. During the suspension, we're going to ask the visiting auditors general to come to the table. We're going to spend the last 40 minutes in a dialogue with the various auditors general. I believe our auditor is going to stay.

So the meeting is suspended for one minute.

- _____ (Pause) _____
-
- (1020)

The Chair: I will now call the meeting back to order.

On behalf of all members of the committee, I want to extend a very warm welcome to some very distinguished visitors we have from various countries in Africa and the Caribbean. To conduct a formal introduction, I'm going to turn the floor over now to Mr. Ron Thompson. Ron is the chair of the Canadian Comprehensive Auditing Foundation, and that is the organization that is organizing this trip of the auditors general.

Mr. Thompson, the floor is yours.

Mr. Ron Thompson (Chair of Board of Governors, Canadian Comprehensive Auditing Foundation): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Distinguished members of the PAC, Ms. Fraser, I'm very grateful to all of you for inviting our visitors from abroad to see first-hand how the federal PAC interacts with the Auditor General to help close the accountability loop in our country.

Joining us at the table are Mr. Leigh Trotman, Auditor General of Barbados; Mr. Deodat Sharma, Auditor General of Guyana; Mr. Anthony Gatumbu, Auditor General of Kenya; Ms. Averil James Bonnette, Auditor General of Saint Lucia; Mr. Hoang Hong Lac,

Deputy Auditor General of Vietnam; and Mr. Nguyen Van Quoc, Director, International Relations, and Mr. Lac's translator.

Our colleagues are in Canada to help us celebrate the 30th anniversary of the fellowship component of something called the international legislative audit assistance program. They're also here to learn from each other, as we seek ways to strengthen this program in the decade or so ahead. It's a working trip, if I can put it that way, Mr. Chair.

Under the fellowship component, auditors from developing countries come to Canada for 10 months to study how we do legislative auditing in this country. Upon returning home, they work with their auditors general to implement what they've learned here. The program is funded by CIDA, with CCAF, the organization that I chair, as executing agent.

The Office of the Auditor General of Canada has been very supportive of this program for a very long time, providing both technical and on-the-job training for participants. Over the past 30 years, we've had well over 150 fellows from over 45 countries visit Canada as part of this fellowship component. The office of the Auditor General of Quebec and, more recently, legislative audit offices in Alberta and British Columbia have also supported the program.

With that, Mr. Chairman, perhaps I will turn things back to you. As I understand it, we're going to have an informal question and answer period up to about 11 o'clock.

Thank you once again to all of you for having us with you this morning.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thompson.

Again, a very warm welcome to everyone.

I've circulated a brief PowerPoint presentation on the role and responsibilities of the Canadian public accounts committee. I plan to go over that and spend about six or seven minutes to give you a framework of the workings and role of this particular committee. Before I do that, I want to say a couple of things.

First of all, in my preliminary remarks I did say that we have a number of visiting auditors from countries in Africa and the Caribbean. Of course, one member pointed out that Vietnam is neither Africa nor the Caribbean, so I want to extend my apologies.

Second, and more important, I want to preface my remarks by saying that in any discussion we have here, and we've done this with many different countries before, we've found it very helpful to have a dialogue as to how our individual political systems operate, exchange best practices, and learn from each other. Certainly, there's no right way or wrong way. We can all learn from each other as to how the systems operate and how we can make our own particular system better.

What you've seen in the last hour and fifteen minutes is the Canadian public accounts committee in operation. That, again, is simply the way we do it, and I'm not pretending for a minute that this is the right way or the wrong way, but that is the system that has developed in this country. I'm going to take you very quickly through it.

I want to point out, first of all, that all the countries that are represented, with the exception of Vietnam, are members of the Commonwealth and are based upon the Westminster system. I understand Vietnam has a more congressional system.

I don't intend to read this, but I want to go over this PowerPoint very briefly.

On page 2 we have our system of democracy, which is similar to that of a lot of the other countries represented at this table. The government is comprised of a prime minister and a cabinet. The executive council is accountable to the prime minister and Parliament for the operations of every individual department. The prime minister and cabinet are collectively accountable to Parliament, and through Parliament to the Canadian people, and to continue to govern, the government needs the confidence of the House.

On page 3, in the Canadian system we have the accountability of the expenditure of funds, and I divided it into two areas. The pre-expenditure accountability, of course, starts with the budget document and is tabled by our Minister of Finance. It is the political financial agenda of the government. We then have the estimates, or the appropriations, which are approved by Parliament. As part of the estimates process, we have the individual departmental performance reports and individual departmental reports on plans and priorities; in other words, what they plan to do over the next two years.

On the post-expenditure accountability, after the money has been spent, we have the departmental and agency financial statements. We have the consolidated financial statements of the Government of Canada, which are usually tabled in Parliament in October of each and every year. That's audited by our Auditor General. Then we have the various performance reports, usually between 25 or 30, that are completed by the Office of the Auditor General, and many, usually around 60% to 70%, are reviewed by this particular committee. Over the last hour and fifteen minutes you saw one being reviewed, that of the CIDA agency. The public accounts committee is very much concerned with post-expenditure accountability, and it works very closely with the Office of the Auditor General.

On the next page you will see the members of the House of Commons. I'll not get into that, except to say that in our system it's certainly not the role of a member of Parliament to govern. We're here to approve legislation, approve the raising of money through taxation, approve appropriations, and, perhaps most importantly, to hold the government to account for its delegated and statutory authorities.

The public accounts committee, as you can see, is comprised of 11 members of Parliament and is reflective of the composition of the House of Commons. We have two members of the Liberal Party, two members of the Bloc Québécois, one member of the New Democratic Party, and on this side we have five members from the governing party, the Conservative Party.

• (1025)

I, the chair, am from the Liberal Party. That is the practice that's adopted in most Commonwealth countries, I believe, that the chair of the public accounts committee be a member of the official opposition.

On page 6 we have an overview of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. Our mandate and structure is, of course, to review reports of the Auditor General of Canada and to report and inquire on any post-expenditure of the taxpayers' money. We are fundamentally different from any other parliamentary committee in that we do not have a policy focus. We're dealing with the administration of government and we're not dealing with policy. You've probably seen an example of that in the exchange over the past hour, when I think some of the members wanted to go in certain areas that might have been classified as policy, which is not part of the mandate of this particular committee.

This committee meets twice a week. Each meeting lasts two hours. We're assisted by three staff individuals. To my right are two analysts who work for the Library of Parliament, which is not part of government. It's funded by the Parliament of Canada. To my left is the clerk of the committee, and she's in charge of all scheduling, arranging for witnesses, etc. She, like the analysts, works for Parliament, not for the Government of Canada.

The role of the committee, as I said, is to hold public hearings. They are open to the public. Anyone can attend. We hold hearings on the public accounts of Canada. We hold hearings on approximately—this varies from year to year—60% to 70% of all performance reports issued by the Office of the Auditor General.

We don't normally deal with estimates, but one exception is the estimates from the Office of the Auditor General. She comes to this committee for her recommended appropriations. She presents to this committee her office's departmental performance report and her office's report on plans and priorities.

Unlike in other countries, the Office of the Auditor General is not part of this committee. She does not set our agenda. Likewise, we do not set the agenda established by her office, although we can make recommendations.

If you want to thumb to page 8, you'll see that for most hearings before this committee, the witnesses are the Auditor General or, if she is not available, a senior designate. In most hearings, we do have the deputy minister, the most senior public servant, representing the department or agency. It's very unusual for this committee to call in ministers. It's usually the ministers who set the policy, but the actual administration is the responsibility of the senior public servants.

After each hearing, the public accounts committee will prepare a report. We do that in camera, in private, and that report, once it's agreed upon by the committee, is tabled in Parliament. The government then has 120 days in which to respond to the report of this committee.

I should point out also that this committee has developed a fairly elaborate follow-up process in which we follow up on the recommendations as to how the government is doing. They agree to do a number of things—as you could see with the previous witness—and we as a committee follow up to determine whether or not they actually do what they agreed they would do.

We have a smaller group comprised of five individuals representing all parties. That is referred to as a steering committee. They recommend future committee business. Those reports have to be adopted by the committee at large.

The second point is that approximately 95% of our committee time is devoted to dealing with, inquiring into, and reporting on reports from the Office of the Auditor General. On occasion, we get into larger issues that might take us multiple meetings, but in most instances we devote one two-hour meeting to a report. Then we take at least one meeting or half a meeting to write the report.

• (1030)

I should point out—and I don't know the situation in your own individual countries—that approximately four years ago, Canada adopted the accounting officer concept, which states that every deputy minister or agency head is designated as an accounting officer, and that person is personally accountable to Parliament for the three points, basically, on page 10: ensuring that all funds are spent in compliance with all government policies and procedures; that proper accounts are maintained and prepared; and that the effective systems of internal control are established and maintained.

Because of this provision, we want the accounting officer before us dealing with any performance report, because the accounting officer is personally accountable to Parliament for the compliance of the expenditure of government funds. It's my view that this concept has greatly assisted the committee and public servants in delineating personal responsibility and answerability.

The relationship between the public accounts committee and the Office of the Auditor General is close and mutually supportive. The public accounts committee is there to support and provide a public forum or an interface for the findings and recommendations of the Office of the Auditor General. The committee has an obligation to ensure that the Office of the Auditor General is independent and remains independent and that the office has sufficient resources to do the work that it is mandated to do.

On the other hand, both the public accounts committee and the Office of the Auditor General are separate institutions with separate roles, and we govern ourselves like that.

As I indicated previously, the Office of the Auditor General is accountable to Parliament, and that is done through our committee. Once a year, we devote at least one committee meeting to dealing with the estimates from the Office of the Auditor General and her performance reports and her departments' or agencies' reports on plans and priorities. Of course, that meeting would be reported to Parliament.

The challenge this committee faces, and I'm sure you face the same challenge—maybe, maybe not—in your own countries, is that there is a declining media interest, I find, in the work of the public accounts committee. The media seem to be more focused on opinion rather than reporting or providing informed analysis on what is going on in Parliament. There's not a total lack but a limited understanding of the oversight role of Parliament. And of course, in my view, there's a lack of alignment between the accountability and the motivations and the resources of most members of Parliament.

That's just a little bit of background on the role of this committee.

You have seen us in action for an hour and 15 minutes. I'm now going to throw it open for discussion and dialogue and any questions. We can keep a list, but perhaps before I do that, I might ask Ms. Fraser if she has any comments to follow up.

Ms. Fraser, is there anything you would like to add?

• (1035)

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I would just add, Chair, that our appearances before this committee and the attention the committee gives to our work is absolutely crucial to us. We see that government does respond and actions are taken.

I think we had a good example today of an action plan being presented, which is something the committee started to ask for a few years ago, and commitments being made. Through the follow-up work that we do and that you do, we see that government responds to our audit recommendations. Changes are made and management is improved, which is what we're all here about in the end.

So I would confirm that we have a very good and close working relationship, and that working relationship is absolutely critical to us.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Thompson, do you have anything you want to add before I throw it open?

Mr. Ron Thompson: Not at this time, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

The Chair: We have 20 or 25 minutes. We'll just have a dialogue and we'll keep a list here. Please keep your comments relatively brief.

I'd certainly like to hear from some of the visiting auditors too. So perhaps we can go back and forth.

Mr. Dewar, you have the floor.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As noted by my name tag here, I'm not usually on this committee. I'm on the foreign affairs committee. I will apologize in advance, because I have to leave from here to go to the foreign affairs committee.

I actually have a question for you, Mr. Thompson, through the chair. I'm impressed with this. I'm really glad to see that this is happening and has been happening for a while, because as we look at strengthening capacity overseas in countries we're involved in, I think one of the areas where we have an expertise is this area.

I'm just curious as to how you go about finding partners or choosing people to work with. Presently, how many are you working with?

• (1040)

Mr. Ron Thompson: There is quite an extensive process, and we're going to make it a stronger process to select countries and candidates. We go out, working with the Auditor General and others, and interview not only candidates from countries but also the office in those countries to ensure the office wants to change, that it's at a point in its development where change is possible, and that the candidates who are being looked at are people who can come and bring about that change once they go home.

There is a fairly strong process of interviewing before we select a country to invite here. We want to have several people from one country over a period of years to build a critical mass in that audit office, and of course we are guided a bit by CIDA and whether the government of the day wants to have development take place. CIDA funds this, and of course we want to work along with them.

Currently we have quite a few fellows here in Canada, and we have about 11 this year, not all with Ms. Fraser's office. Some are with the Auditor General's Office in Quebec. Certainly in Alberta we have our colleagues from Vietnam there, and others. This is a bumper year in terms of spreading the involvement with legislative audit offices. That is just starting, and it has been quite successful.

The Chair: Does anybody at the table want to comment?

I've met the Auditor General of Kenya, Mr. Gatumbu, before in Kenya. Can you bring us briefings from Kenya on how things are going there?

Mr. Anthony Gatumbu (Controller and Auditor General, Kenya National Audit Office): Thank you, Chairman.

I have two inquiries that I would ask the committee to share with us. I am aware that the public accounts committee has an effective mechanism for monitoring implementation of its recommendations. However, what are the ultimate reprimands and other ways available in the unlikely event that an agency does not implement its recommendations?

Mr. Chairman, I also have a second question relating to the role of the public accounts committee in its relationship with the Auditor General's Office. To what extent does this committee influence the audits that are taken by the Auditor General?

The Chair: I will attempt to answer that.

First of all, we have a system of follow-up, and we do follow up with the recommendations and we follow them for two, three, four, five years to determine whether or not the government department or agency has done what it has agreed to do. First of all, if they don't agree to the recommendation, that's the end of it. But I want to make it absolutely clear that we are a committee of accountability. We have no way of enforcement. All we can do is bring publicity to it. We can report to the House. We can report to the media, but if the government does not do it—and of course it has happened that they've agreed to follow certain recommendations of the public accounts committee and we find out five years later that they haven't—we can't enforce it; we can bring a lot of publicity and we can report to Parliament. The Auditor General herself can go back and do follow-up audits, which could possibly bring more embarrassment to the department for not doing what they agreed to previously.

Regarding your second question, Ms. Fraser is probably better able to answer that, but it is my understanding that all we can do—and we have done on occasion—is make a recommendation that she look at this. Sometimes she does, sometimes she doesn't. She has her own criteria and her own protocol as to what audits are undertaken by her office and what are not.

Perhaps I will get her to answer that question.

• (1045)

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I would say, Chair, that it has happened on occasion that the committee has made recommendations. The most recent example was when we were reviewing the operations of the passport office and the committee asked us to go back and do a follow-up sooner than we normally would have. Generally when the committee makes a request like that we try to accommodate it.

We tend to get requests from other standing committees. In addition to the public accounts committee, we appear before other standing committees of the House and the Senate. In a typical year we will do as many hearings before other committees as we do with public accounts, so often we will get suggestions for audits from these other committees as well.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Mr. Chair, I want to warmly invite our guests to ask us questions, because they are here to study our system. I'm sure they have questions to ask.

[Translation]

I warmly invite you to do so. Please.

[English]

Mr. Hoang Hong Lac (Deputy Auditor General, State Audit Office of Vietnam) (Interpretation): First, I would like to thank the chairman for his presentation, and the other members of the PAC.

Today our delegation is very honoured to take part in this discussion. After the discussion in this morning's session, we realize that the relationship between PAC and the AG's office in Canada has many things similar to our country. We would like to discuss and share our experiences to clarify these details regarding the relationship between the PAC and the AG's office.

Our national audit office, our state audit office, in Vietnam was set up 16 years ago, in 1994. In 2006, a new law was adopted by the National Assembly concerning state audits, and this came into force on January 1, 2006. The office, which was established by the National Assembly, is an independent office. We always operate in accordance with the law.

We have a centralized office of the central government to the district level, to other countries. At present we advise the units under our control and we have 1,500 staff. Our functions mainly focus on three types of audits: financial, compliance, and performance audits. We follow principles in our work; we are fair in our work and we only follow the law.

We now mainly focus on two types of audits. We are looking for work to focus on and perform audits on in the near future.

• (1050)

We do audits in all organizations and agencies, and we use the state booklet.

Coming back to the relationship between the National Assembly in Vietnam and our office, we are pleased to clarify more details. We have an executive committee that functions similar to the PAC here. We submit the audit report to the National Assembly and also to the government and the other agencies. We submit the audit report to all members of the National Assembly. First we make the report to the executive committee of the National Assembly. We have a very close relationship with the financial and executive committee of the National Assembly, but we are totally independent of each other. We also have many relationships that are similar to the relationship between the PAC, the national assembly, and the Office of the Auditor General of Canada.

I would like to ask a question. Can you give more detail about what kind of work the PAC and the Auditor General's office cooperate together on? For example, on consulting to make audit plans, could the PAC make requests to the Auditor General's office during the process of the audit planning?

Thank you.

The Chair: Although it's a little different political system, it certainly sounds like the office of the Vietnamese Auditor General operates similar to our system, and the Vietnamese public accounts committee operates similar to our system.

Again we're talking about the relationship. I believe every country does it differently, but in some countries the auditor sits right with the chair, asks questions, and is there when the agenda is being set by the committee. But in this jurisdiction the relationship is more independent. We can only make recommendations to the Office of the Auditor General. That office has its own criteria, and sometimes those recommendations are accepted and sometimes they're not. Other than making recommendations, we cannot influence the agenda of that office.

Mr. Shipley.

• (1055)

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you.

Welcome to our committee. Just to comment, I was glad, when I looked at it, that you were able to be a part of our earlier discussion.

One thing that has happened at this committee, and I've been involved now for just two years, is that the Auditor General—and you represent that function or you are the Auditor General in your country—has to come to Parliament, which includes the representatives of all parties, with an incredible amount of credibility.

Our Auditor General—I say this not because she's sitting here, but just because she is our Auditor General—has that, and she has the respect, I believe, of all parties because she is thorough, she is reasonable, but she also brings a business sense and reasonable, understandable recommendations, which come to this committee through the agency or the ministerial departments that she is auditing.

When the Auditor General came to the agency with recommendations, recommendations sometimes were done and sometimes were not; nobody was seeming to ask why or why not. As I think you would see this morning from the agency in front of us, there is a lot of respect for the recommendations and a lot of movement on those

recommendations, because now they know that the public accounts committee, if they fall behind, is going to ask them back to be accountable for why they didn't. Maybe they're going to have a good reason to explain why they couldn't, but that's all part of the accountability.

I just want to say that putting an action plan in place, recording what your status was, and then reporting back to the parliamentary committee has been very substantial in this, and it has come about by working together. I think, as the chairman has described, the independence of having the Auditor General not sit up with us and not be a part is very good, because it tells you that she's not collectively arm in arm with the public accounts committee but is actually independent and comes with those recommendations to an agency or a ministry.

The Chair: Does anyone else at the end of the table wish to speak?

Mr. Lee.

Mr. Derek Lee: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And I welcome the visiting professionals.

We, in this committee, sometimes take a lot of things for granted as we go about our work. In order to make the work of the Auditor General effective, there are a number of things that have to be in place, and it's all interconnected.

These are some examples. We need an Office of the Auditor General that is professional, non-partisan, and highly skilled. Without that, the quality of the audits is not there. We need a professional public service that is capable of understanding and implementing the guidance and scrutiny offered by the Auditor General. We have a very good professional public service in Canada—not the politicians, the public servants.

We need a free press so they can shine the light on these issues, report the issues, and show Canadians what is happening.

We need a government in power that is accountable to Parliament. The government must be present in the House of Commons to be accountable for all that it does.

Lastly, on our end there must be a committee that has a quality work plan that involves shining the light on many of the issues the Auditor General raises—not all of them; we don't have the time to do them all. We look for the important ones and we listen to what she says. We shine the light, we have public hearings, and we follow up.

Our chair and our staff ensure that when we take on an issue we try to follow up. Months later we follow the progress of the public service to the recommendations of the Auditor General. Sometimes we have our own recommendations, but usually they coincide with those of the Auditor General.

Those are about half a dozen separate things that must be in place in order for the three-headed audit procedures you have to work effectively.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

• (1100)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lee.

It is close to 11 o'clock, and I believe Mr. Trotman has some remarks.

Mr. Trotman.

Mr. Leigh Trotman (Auditor General, Office of the Auditor General of Barbados): I want to ask a question. How does the public accounts committee measure its impact? And do you have research staff supporting the public accounts committee?

The Chair: I don't know if I can answer the first question, but I can answer the second. Yes, we do have research staff.

The lady and the gentleman to my right work for the public accounts committee. Prior to every meeting they do probably a five- or six-page briefing note on the performance report, and they prepare suggested questions. Then after the hearing they will do up a draft report. After the hearing we've had here today they will take all the questions and answers, which are all transcribed, and do a draft report. That comes back to the committee, and the committee will change it and adopt it. The committee will usually spend at least one and a half hours on each report. Then it becomes the committee's report. So we do have research staff.

To question the effectiveness of the committee, that's for others to determine or adjudicate upon. I speak with a certain amount of bias, but I think it's a reasonably effective committee. But again, others can decide that. I think it's a very important and fundamental role of Parliament to hold the government to account. The whole area of post-expenditure accountability is the role of the public accounts committee.

As I say, we couldn't do it without the work of the Auditor General. But again, that office needs us to be the interface between that office and Parliament, and through Parliament to the Canadian people. I think we perform a very vital function in Canada. Others may disagree.

Madame.

Mrs. Averil James Bonnette (Director of Audit, Office of the Director of Audit of Saint Lucia): Good morning, everyone, Mr. Chairman.

I have one question and I just want to ask it really quickly. Looking at your slide presentation, I noticed your challenges, and I got particularly interested in the ones relating to the role of Parliament, particularly the limited understanding of the oversight role and the lack of alignment.

Is anything being done, or what measures have been taken, to address some of those challenges?

Thank you.

• (1105)

The Chair: If we had two or three days we could go into that discussion. It's a very lengthy and complex issue.

We operate on the Westminster system.

These are my own thoughts alone. It's always been my view that the fundamental role of a member of Parliament—and I'm talking about a government member and an opposition member—is to hold the government to account. Sometimes that does not really align with the motivations, the abilities, or the resources of a lot of members of Parliament, but not all. The government members, of course, are concerned about making the government look good. The opposition members are concerned about exposure of scandal. Sometimes the whole accountability gets lost in the equation.

What can be done to correct the problem? I'm sorry, I really don't have a very simple answer to that question. Again, it's just to continue to work on it.

Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Just further to Mr. Murphy's comments, we find that whenever there is either a new member and/or a replacement member who does not necessarily understand the role of public accounts, we can sometimes shift towards more partisan issues. This is why I personally believe the committee would work better if we had members in the respective parties who were firmly entrenched with the responsibilities of accountability and oversight and who clearly understood their role as one that clearly demonstrated the faith and the confidence in the authenticity of government, rather than simply the partisan role, which is normal in a democracy.

We've seen that over a number of occasions. I can honestly say the majority of our members here on this committee, and people I've been associated with in the past, have handled the responsibilities of this committee very well. It's only occasionally when a member comes in, in a fill-in role, that they think of it as following the normal operation of the committee they're on. The public accounts committee works totally differently from any other committee on the Hill. That is why it just takes a little bit of understanding and moving it forward.

If we can pass that message along to more and more parliamentarians, then I think we will probably have a more effective committee of public accounts.

The Chair: It is after 11. I'm going to call upon Madame Beaudin, then Mr. Thompson.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you very much.

I would like to know what you think of initiatives such as the one that Barack Obama recently implemented in the U.S. through the White House site. It has to do with establishing a direct line with the public and creating an open government. What do you think of that initiative?

Should that kind of initiative be used elsewhere? Should there be open and direct sites such as that one, so that the government is open to the public?

[*English*]

Mr. Ron Thompson: Mr. Chairman, we're having a little trouble with the translation. It didn't come through, I'm afraid, for our colleagues.

The Chair: What I think I'll do.... I'm going to ask Mr. Thompson for his closing remarks, and perhaps after the meeting, Madame Beaudin, you can continue this discussion. It is 11:10. I apologize for that.

Mr. Thompson, do you have any closing remarks?

Mr. Ron Thompson: I apologize as well, Ms. Beaudin. We did have a little technical difficulty, so perhaps we can talk a bit later.

Very simply, Mr. Chairman, we're past 11 o'clock by quite a little bit.

Thank you very much, Mrs. Fraser and committee members. Really, accountability comes to life here in this country of ours, colleagues, and I think it's done very, very well. It's been quite unique for our colleagues to see an actual hearing being conducted

and then to have an opportunity to interact with members of the committee afterwards.

Thank you so very, very much. I know they'll take back the lessons learned here to good effect in their countries.

● (1110)

The Chair: Before I close, I want to again thank you for coming. As I said before we started, there's no right way or wrong way. We all do things differently, but we can all learn from each other.

I want to thank everyone for being here. Enjoy the rest of your trip in Canada and have a safe trip home.

Voices: Hear, hear!

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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