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Tuesday, January 9, 2018

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Chair

Mr. Bob Zimmer

Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

This is meeting number 85 of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. We're here to discuss a letter from Mr. Peter Kent.

Peter.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and happy new year to colleagues around the table.

I thank you for your decision to call this meeting in response to my letter, Mr. Chair.

Just to remind the committee, and for the record, my request to you was to place this motion today to be considered by the committee:

That, the Committee invite the Prime Minister to discuss Commissioner Dawson's finding in The Trudeau Report released by the Commissioner's office on December 20th, 2017, and that this meeting take place either on January 17th or January 18th, 2018.

To explain the logic behind this request, Chair, I'll remind all members that the commissioner released her report, "The Trudeau Report", one week after the House of Commons rose in December. Several hours after that report was released, the Prime Minister did meet with the media in the lobby of the House and held what I think is most fairly described as a disjointed news conference, struggling to answer some very basic questions from journalists with regard to the commissioner's findings.

The Prime Minister did make an apology in that news conference, but it was a qualified apology. In the same sentence, he made clear that he disagreed with Commissioner Dawson's finding against his claim of a deep and lasting relationship with the Aga Khan.

Why today's meeting? Why my motion before the committee today?

Well, most members of Parliament should be back on the clock. We've all had an appropriate holiday break. Just as important, the Prime Minister's schedule this month is somewhat more flexible than it will be, I anticipate, come the end of the month, when the House resumes and when he will have obligations elsewhere in the country and abroad.

Why this motion to invite the Prime Minister? Well, questions with regard to his holiday in the Caribbean, in question periods throughout this past year, have not been met with meaningful answers.

This committee is empowered by the Standing Orders of the House of Commons to respond to the report and the consequences reported by the Ethics Commissioner. This is a calm and respectful setting in which to discuss the commissioner's findings with the subject of that investigation and that report: the Prime Minister of Canada. There is no heckling, questions are respectfully answered, and questions can be put in a relaxed manner over a period of an hour or two. This committee has had a succession of ministers, departmental officials, deputy ministers, and commissioners here in recent months, without mishap and without complaint.

What would such a meeting discuss with the Prime Minister? Well, aside from questions about his initial qualified apology, there are elements of the Prime Minister's testimony contained in the commissioner's report, observations and conclusions by the commissioner in this extensive report of 60 or 70 pages, depending on how you measure them, and comments by the Prime Minister—for example, on the way he sees himself as Prime Minister in situations with stakeholders or those petitioning for favours or financial benefit from the Government of Canada.

I would point to the commissioner's observation that she concluded the Prime Minister felt that he could appear on two occasions with the Aga Khan, for example, exposing himself improperly under the Conflict of Interest Act, on the excuse that he wasn't there on official business: he was there to build relationships.

• (1535)

To come to the motion before us, yesterday the spokesman at the Prime Minister's Office said that Liberal members of this committee were not influenced in the decisions they would take here today, and that they were open to vote with their conscience, to make their own choices on whether to support this motion.

I must say that this morning I was disappointed in the Prime Minister's remarks from the east coast, when he said that he wants to avoid the Ottawa news "bubble", that he wants to take questions on this matter from Canadians at round tables and in town halls across the country.

I would simply respectfully remind the Prime Minister that he has the same duties and obligations as every member of Parliament to be accountable to Parliament and to respect the rules, regulations, and laws of Parliament, particularly the Conflict of Interest Act. Given the unprecedented serious findings of four violations of significant elements of the Conflict of Interest Act, I believe it is his responsibility to make himself available to members of Parliament to discuss the report and his feelings about the commissioner's findings, and there is no more appropriate location, I believe, than before this committee, which is responsible for the ethical practices of the House of Commons.

That said, I'll close here, Chair, and simply invite my Liberal colleagues to walk through the door that was so generously opened by the Prime Minister's Office yesterday and support my motion to invite the Prime Minister to attend this committee in the near future.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent.

I have a speaking order here. Mr. Cullen is next.

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

I share the salutations: happy new year to everyone around the table.

It is somewhat unusual to have a meeting at this particular time, but I think we're into uncharted waters a bit. We've never had a report quite like this from an Ethics Commissioner, so I think our response should also meet the seriousness of what has happened.

My colleague mentioned the notion of an opportunity. I would put this to my Liberal colleagues in particular, because I suspect the instinct might be to oppose a motion like this: a political calculation about a sitting Prime Minister appearing before a committee and answering questions. While this is not unprecedented in Canadian history, it is unprecedented to have a Prime Minister who has been found in violation of the ethics act. We have not had that before. I, too, watched the press conference that followed the release of this report, as I'm sure some of my friends across the way did. It was clear not only that some of the questions caused the Prime Minister some challenges in answering directly, but that the average Canadian watching that and looking for answers to some pretty specific points and decisions the Prime Minister and his office made with regard to this trip would have left that press conference still not having those answers.

I don't want to knock down question period too much, Chair, because it does serve a purpose. It allows certain things to be demonstrated from time to time, but as members of Parliament, we all know that when something is of a serious nature that requires time and examination, committees are where the best work of Parliament happens. I think—and I hope my colleagues share this view—this committee works very well, even when discussing issues that have been difficult, issues around access to information and privacy and ethics. Only in rare instances have I felt any of the bad elements of partisanship enter into our conversations. I think this committee works very well in producing our reports, and often those are unanimous.

Now, I want to be completely open about the intention behind such a meeting, for me. Here, I am addressing mostly my Liberal

colleagues. I've heard Mr. Kent's sentiments; I share some of those, if not all of them. I take this incredibly seriously. Influencing office holders—as we all are—is about something that's very important to me, and I think it's important to the people I represent.

I hope it's important to all of us and to the people we represent that, regardless of our partisan interest and regardless of the specific issues we fight on, the issue of not being influenced, of having clear ethical rules and clear consequences for breaking those rules, is important for the trust that Canadians need to maintain in all of us. Regardless of what views those Canadians hold, we hope they all hold the idea that ethics matter, that this isn't a game.

I think there was an unfortunate analogy used by the Prime Minister this morning in referring to this as partisan games. I don't take ethics as a game. I think this is actually incredibly important. I assume the Prime Minister didn't intend the comments to be taken that way, but referring to things that happen here in Parliament as partisanship and games and to everything else that happens as serious is a wrong interpretation of our world, because then it implicates Parliament as being nothing but that.

Prime Minister Trudeau set a very high bar coming into office, particularly in coming out of the previous government—no offence, Mr. Kent and others—in which accountability and transparency were a problem; we saw the affairs of the Senate and other issues, such as the Elections Act and whatnot. The Prime Minister came forward as a candidate and then as a sitting Prime Minister with some very strong and clear directives. I remember being quite taken by some of those commitments around things like conflict of interest, not just in the letter of the law, but in the spirit of the law: not only to not be found in a conflict of interest, but to not even have the appearance of a conflict of interest. I remember thinking, "That's a very high and appropriate bar for us to have as public office holders."

One of the questions—again, being transparent to my Liberal colleagues so they cannot concern themselves about this being some sort of malicious attempt—would be in regard to the Prime Minister's mandate letters, which he set out for all members of cabinet and which I assume applied to him as well: that in entering this Liberal cabinet, one of the clear rules would be not to be in a conflict of interest and not to have the appearance of a conflict of interest, and that's a clear mandate that we are all familiar with. Whenever an organization or a leader sets a rule, if the rule is broken, there are consequences. I assume that in putting that rule down, if a cabinet minister were to fall into a conflict of interest or the appearance of a conflict of interest, there would be a consequence to that action. Otherwise, what's the point of having the rule? The challenge we have in this case is that the boss himself has broken the rule, as has been found by the Ethics Commissioner.

• (1540)

I'm trying to imagine the average Canadian workplace. You go to work for somebody and they say, "If you're going to work here, these are the rules you have to follow." For example, if you're working at a bank, you can't accept gifts from somebody who is doing business with the bank. Then the next day you come into work and you see the bank manager accepting a gift from somebody doing work with the bank. You can draw a couple of conclusions. You can say, "Well, that rule doesn't really mean anything and I, too, can do it," or you want to raise concerns about it.

My assumption is that, in setting these rules, the Prime Minister's intention was good: to restore the public faith in elected office that had been lost, and to combat the cynicism that we often deal with from those who are not in politics saying, "It's all just a game. It's all just people looking out for themselves." We set these rules. If there is no consequence other than a report and an awkward—if I can use that term—press conference, then that doesn't seem to be much of a deterrent for those who are intentionally looking to break the rules.

Another question I would have would be about his choice and decision—as was reported by Ms. Dawson, the now former commissioner—not to recuse himself from meetings that pertained to the foundation that was established by the Aga Khan to lobby the government.

I misspoke. The foundation exists. There is a lobbying group that has been established to lobby on behalf of the Aga Khan Foundation. Having just a few days prior returned from a trip that was essentially paid for, except for the commercial flights, by the Aga Khan, he was in a meeting dealing with business that affected the Aga Khan Foundation's interests and did not recuse himself from that meeting. That is a question I have for the Prime Minister. It's a question that remains unanswered to this date.

This is the forum to do it. This is the forum where we can have a civil exchange, as Mr. Kent talked about, and find out where the lines are in the Prime Minister's own mind. Clearly, how he interprets these rules and their application affects not just him but everybody in his cabinet, and I would think, by extension, all of Parliament.

I'm trying to imagine a scenario in which we, members of Parliament who are not prime ministers, would find ourselves if somebody offered us a nice painting. We said thank you and we accepted it. It was later determined by the Ethics Commissioner that it was accepted inappropriately. We should never have accepted the painting. The natural justice, to me—I don't know about my colleagues—at a bare minimum would be to return the painting. We wouldn't keep it, would we?

For the Canadians watching, a relevant question I would put to the Prime Minister is this. I don't think he has denied this. I could be wrong, but someone will correct me. He has now admitted that accepting this trip was inappropriate, that to ask for and receive a vacation to a private island for him, his family, and some friends, while the Aga Khan was also lobbying the Prime Minister's Office, was inappropriate and broke the ethics rules that we have. Why hasn't there been a suggestion from the Prime Minister to pay that back?

I'm going to disagree with my Conservative colleagues about the payment back of security fees. I have a different view of things. I think the Prime Minister incurs security costs just by nature of being a Prime Minister, but, for me, the cost of the trip itself remains. What's the difference between accepting that painting on the wall and accepting a free trip? If both of those gifts were found to be against our ethics rules, why does the Prime Minister remain in the enjoyment of that free vacation when that would not be offered to somebody else? As the commissioner found in her report, the argument of friendship—"Hey, do you want to use my cottage for the weekend, old buddy?"—doesn't work. It did not qualify and did not satisfy our commissioner.

I don't want to go on more than this because I'm curious about my Liberal colleagues and what their views are. I believe questions remain unanswered.

• (1545)

The Prime Minister is, by law and nature, accountable to Parliament. Town halls are great. I do them all the time. But they do not substitute for this and should not be seen as substitutions for this. I think Canadians would broadly agree. They enjoy the opportunity to ask their Prime Minister questions. The Prime Minister of Canada is accountable to Parliament, ultimately.

None of us sitting around this table are in the government. None of us are in cabinet. We don't work for the Prime Minister's Office, none of us. Our job, collectively, is to hold the government to account, because the government has an extraordinary amount of power. The founders of our country built this for us to do our jobs.

It is not unprecedented, but is maybe unusual, for a Prime Minister to appear before a parliamentary committee. My commitment, and I hope my colleagues know this of me from our experiences, would be to treat him with the utmost respect deserving of his office and to ask questions that I believe are pertinent and on the minds of Canadians about the rules as he interprets them, about the consequences for breaking those rules as he interprets them, and about the culture that has been created in his office and in his cabinet with respect to ethics and conflicts of interest.

We've heard, Chair, previously, in conversations, that the Liberals are open to the idea of reviewing and strengthening the act, as Madame Dawson has urged us to do in many Parliaments now. I think it would be encouraging to hear from the Prime Minister an actual commitment to make some of the changes. I would be curious about his ideas. What changes could we make that would more firmly and clearly define what the rules are, remove some of the loopholes that have been identified by the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, and move this forward so that it does not simply concern a scandal or an issue raised about the Prime Minister's choices around a trip but actually demonstrably improves Parliament and the trust Canadians can have in it?

I look forward to comments from my Liberal colleagues across the way, and to our resolving this. While I appreciate that the instinct might be to resist such a scenario as calling the Prime Minister, I think he is more than capable of answering questions—hopefully thoughtful ones—from us as committee members so we can understand how we can make things better and understand the decisions that were made.

● (1550)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cullen.

Next up I have Mr. Gourde. Go ahead, Mr. Gourde.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I too would like to wish all of the members of the committee a very Happy New Year.

I want to begin by saying that the motion to invite the Prime Minister to testify before the committee is quite relevant. We owe it to ourselves to go through this exercise. Some may think that the committee is acting relentlessly, but I think that this aligns with the purpose of our committee.

The Conflict of Interest Act exists to help all of the members of Parliament. We need guidelines to help us in our work. If there are excesses, we have the opportunity to discuss things with the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner. If there are things that need to be changed, it is up to the members of the committee to make recommendations and continue the work.

There is a lot of concern surrounding the Prime Minister's trips to the island belonging to the Aga Khan. There were, in fact, three trips, two of which were quite complicated. They were prepared by the Office of the Prime Minister. The decision to make these trips was not made at a moment's notice. Those who took the trouble to read the report will know that the preparations for the December 2016 trip began in the summer of 2016. Those who did this preparatory work would have been very aware that transportation to the Aga Khan's island posed challenges and required special means of transport. There were surely other ways of arranging these transfers while avoiding conflicts of interest.

Throughout this whole affair, I've been wondering how the Prime Minister could have avoided this type of conflict of interest.

What is unfortunate is that he breached not one, two, or three sections of the Conflict of Interest Act, but four. A Prime Minister breaking a federal law is an unprecedented situation in the history of this country. We expect our Prime Minister to be above reproach and to respect our federal laws, and all legislation. The Prime Minister has to set an example for all Canadians.

I have other concerns regarding his last trip, when he was accompanied by members of his family and other guests. We do not know who these guests were. Did they receive special advantages?

Moreover, we have to realize that the Aga Khan heads certain foundations, and the Government of Canada has a relationship with them, as it invests over \$15 million dollars in them.

Why did the Prime Minister benefit from so much attention on the Aga Khan's island? We were told during 2017 that they were close friends. However, it is hard to believe that persons who have not spoken in 30 years are close personal friends. Suddenly, now that Mr. Trudeau occupies a high position in our country, he has become very interesting and much sought after. Unfortunately, the person who invited the Prime Minister is also registered as a lobbyist. Gifts of a value far superior to that prescribed by law were given to him.

Could these gifts have influenced a future decision? We aren't privy to that, but that is the sort of question we could put to the Prime Minister when he appears before our committee. These are very interesting questions.

In the report, certain aspects of the Prime Minister's defence are bizarre. It even says that the English and French versions of the act are contradictory. In light of that, people may use the version that suits them. If the two versions of the act are really inconsistent, we could examine that situation and make sure that the translation is accurate and that the law is fair in both official languages. This is something we need to look at.

What is peculiar in this story is that the Prime Minister and his government proposed changes to the Conflict of Interest Act in 2015 in order to strengthen its provisions pertaining to trips, and these amended provisions are the very provisions breached by the Prime Minister's travel. So, must we conclude that what is good for all MPs is not necessarily good for the Prime Minister, and does not necessarily apply to him? I doubt that that is the case. The act is clear: it applies to all members of Parliament, including the Prime Minister. There is no provision excluding the Prime Minister from its application.

● (1555)

The Prime Minister's role in connection with the act is really important. It is incumbent upon him to set an impeccable example. He may have had good reasons for what he did, but it would be courageous of him to come and explain himself; it would be his duty to do so. He would not just be explaining his actions before committee members, but before all Canadians. It is the Prime Minister's duty to explain his actions in this case. If he has valid reasons, Canadians will accept them. If not, we will see what the future holds for him politically.

This morning I was disappointed to learn that the Prime Minister seemed to say that being asked to appear before the committee was petty politics. I am very disappointed by that. We are all members of Parliament and we are all equal. We don't all have the same duties, but basically, we all get elected in our ridings and it is incumbent upon us to represent all Canadians to the best of our ability, while complying with the laws of the land. I hope that Mr. Trudeau will have the courage to come here and that the members of the committee will permit us to invite him to appear.

I don't want to belabour the point any longer, but it is my duty to speak out here. If there are loopholes in the provisions regarding travel, I hope we will be able to make recommendations together. We accept the Conflict of Interest Act, as we should, but we can strengthen it so that this kind of situation does not arise again. All Canadians have to understand that we are here to work for them and that we don't use taxpayers' money for our personal holidays. I think we are all able to pay for our own holidays.

When it concerns issues that affect our nation, taxpayers are ready to spend money so that we can travel to other countries. However, when we travel for personal holidays, we must be more circumspect.

I will yield the floor to my Liberal colleagues.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gourde.

Up next we have Mr. Erskine-Smith.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. I don't begrudge you for holding a special meeting and bringing us all back from our ridings, but I was the child care this week, so my wife begrudges you just a little bit.

Over the last few years, as those across the aisle may recall, I have not been shy, on occasion, about calling out our government and calling for greater accountability. I read the Ethics Commissioner's report with interest, twice, and I came to the conclusion that the report speaks for itself. The commissioner found four contraventions of the act, though it is important for Canadians to understand that she did not find that the Prime Minister acted improperly to further the Aga Khan's interests. The Prime Minister, as everybody knows, immediately apologized and noted that something like this would never happen again and that precautionary measures would be put in place. He used the words "I take full responsibility", which I think is important.

As to the specific question of whether this committee ought to invite the Prime Minister to attend, I've heard some of the questions that the opposition might be interested in asking the Prime Minister. The opposition will, of course, have every opportunity to ask questions in question period when the House resumes. Every Wednesday, you will have a full question period to ask questions of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Kent, you noted that the Prime Minister is criss-crossing the country, and Canadians will also have the opportunity to ask questions of our Prime Minister. On a number of occasions in the past, we've discussed not turning this committee into another question period where things can get more partisan, this being one issue I worry about as well.

I note, Mr. Cullen, that you mentioned getting to the substantive reform of the act. I look forward to having the Ethics Commissioner before us tomorrow and asking her questions about her 2013 recommendations and about possible reforms of the act, but that's it. I think this committee should be focused on that substantive work and not on relitigating issues that we're likely to see in question period.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Erskine-Smith.

Up next is Madam Fortier.

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to reiterate the comments of my colleague Mr. Erskine-Smith. I also read the report with close attention. This has to be clear: the Prime Minister collaborated and cooperated fully with the commissioner, Ms. Dawson, all through the inquiry.

The position of Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner was created pursuant to an act adopted by the House of Commons. It is

the commissioner's mandate to conduct this type of investigation. I believe Ms. Dawson fulfilled her mandate.

As soon as the conclusions of the report were released, the Prime Minister gave a press conference at the earliest opportunity, and answered the questions of the media. He also accepted full responsibility, and apologized to Canadians. He even agreed to continue to collaborate with the office of the future commissioner, with regard to the recommendations that were made and his future family vacations.

In my opinion, he has answered all the questions. He has apologized. He will no doubt be answering further questions during his tour or during the next question period when the House resumes at the end of January.

For these reasons, I do not think it is necessary that the Prime Minister be asked to appear here, at this table. However, we will be meeting with the commissioner tomorrow, and we will be ready.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: I have another comment from Mr. Cullen.

[Translation]

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's a bit troubling to note that the comments made were very similar in both English and French. I find this interesting but troubling, because of the fact that the comments made by my colleagues were not precisely accurate. First, the apology was what might be called a qualified apology.

[English]

This is a personal pet peeve, Chair. When people in public life "kind of" apologize, it always drives me nuts. A straight apology, taking full responsibility, would have been welcome, because, in my experience, Canadians are very forgiving people. It was completely qualified. As was said earlier, the Prime Minister actually did disagree with the commissioner about one of the main points of her report, as to whether the Aga Khan was a friend or not. In that same press conference my friends referred to, "personal family friend" were the most commonly used words, other than "um" and "the". The Prime Minister was disagreeing with the conclusions of the report, actually, without saying it. You can't half agree on something like this. There has to be full agreement, and there was failure in that regard.

One other small point, Chair, which is something we would want to raise with the Prime Minister, is that the commissioner was unable to find whether the Prime Minister did further the Aga Khan's personal interests or his foundation's interests, because she was not privy to the conversations that happened. As my friends know, no minutes of those confidential meetings were taken or offered to the commissioner, so she was unable to say whether he had or had not, and she had to conclude that she had no evidence that he had. My direct question to the Prime Minister would be, "Did you?" That has not been answered yet.

In terms of suggesting that the press conference was the opportunity for the Prime Minister to be clear, he was asked a direct question by Rosie Barton, I think—I'm not positive, because I couldn't see who was off-camera—about what this decision said about his “moral compass” or “ethical compass”. I think she said one of those two. This was the “answer”, and I use that in quotations: “The fact is we work—sorry, let me just try to reorder the thoughts—we, um, work with the Lobbying...no, the Conflict of Interest Commissioner on a regular basis on a broad range of issues when the issues come up. On this issue of my family vacation with a personal friend, it wasn't considered that there would be an issue here. Obviously there was a mistake.”

The question was about an ethical compass. The “answer” didn't answer the question, and also contradicted the Ethics Commissioner about the whole issue of a friend.

On a personal note, colleagues, I find it a bit bizarre that if she determined he was a closer friend, this would all be okay. That you could accept pretty lavish gifts from somebody who is also lobbying your office individually is a loophole that people could exploit, and maybe that was why the Prime Minister thought all of this was okay.

To the point about whether we would have the opportunity in question period, particularly on Wednesdays, I've asked the Prime Minister questions about this issue in that forum. My 30-second question was not given, really, the decency of a 30-second answer. Let's be perfectly clear. When we've asked very simple, straightforward questions on this issue, we have gotten back, almost verbatim, a non-answer.

The opportunity we have at a committee, as my colleagues know, is that we can have—occasionally and, I think, more than occasionally—a thoughtful exchange with a witness to talk about specific things. It may be shocking to some, but this isn't just about Justin Trudeau. This is about the system we have in place in Canada and whether it is sufficient to protect public interests when they cross over with private interests. There was a private interest to go on a trip. The Prime Minister's office was reluctant to reveal that trip. It was only because the media dug and dug and dug, and they found out. I can understand why there was reluctance.

This isn't just about this one trip. It's about the culture that's created around a leader. We know how important that is. My colleagues across the way had concerns with the previous prime minister and the culture he created around himself with regard to accountability, secrecy, and control.

This would be an opportunity for this Prime Minister to demonstrate, not through words but through actions, how he is different. It really would. I honestly believe it. I also honestly believe he'll be capable of answering in an excellent way all the questions that I've outlined for you today. I don't doubt it for a minute. He's been a sitting Prime Minister for more than two years now, and he's been in politics for a while before that.

These are real concerns. If my friends don't think they merit an hour of our time at a committee, I'm not sure what would. Put yourself in our shoes. For the first time, you have a sitting Prime Minister who has been found in violation of the ethics rules that guide us all as parliamentarians.

●(1605)

He is the most powerful elected figure in the country. Not only should the standard be the same as it is for all of us but, I would argue, it has to be even higher because of the power and influence he holds. It's worrisome to me that we're going to suggest that question period and an awkward press conference are enough when it comes to accountability for this government over what is obviously a pretty serious issue. I'm just imagining my Liberal friends across the way if this exact scenario had played itself out for Prime Minister Harper. I'm sure they would be raising some of the same things I have.

As it may seem like a risk, I will offer this. I think it's far riskier to deny this opportunity, because the signal that is sent is that they can't be bothered to answer our questions; they don't find this troubling enough to answer questions at a committee hearing in what has been, as Mr. Erskine-Smith has said, an overwhelmingly well-chaired and collegial affair. Of course, the energy or intensity might be up when we have a Prime Minister in front of us, but he is also a colleague. He is also an elected member of Parliament, just like us, but he has higher responsibilities and has laid out for himself and all of his cabinet a higher standard, and that standard was broken. Does anyone deny that?

My colleagues are going to suggest that the press conference and the 30-second questions in question period are a sufficient response to having broken one of the central tenets of this government's promise to the Canadian people when it was elected. I profoundly disagree.

I can understand the pressures my friends might be feeling from other colleagues, the Prime Minister's Office, or whoever, but I would suggest that they resist those pressures and see the larger goal here, which is the confidence Canadians seem to have in us when they elect us, whoever they elect, whatever the party stripe.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cullen.

Up next is Mr. Kent.

Hon. Peter Kent: I would just like to come back briefly to some of the broader questions raised by the commissioner's report, specifically in the area of the Prime Minister's testimony to Commissioner Dawson regarding the bilateral meeting on May 17, 2016:

Mr. Trudeau testified that, despite his relationship with the Aga Khan, he did not have any concerns about attending the May 17, 2016 bilateral meeting with him.

The commissioner wrote, quoting the Prime Minister's testimony in the meeting with the commissioner:

The meetings he attends as Prime Minister are not business meetings. Rather, they are high-level meetings centred on relationship building and ensuring that all parties are moving forward together. Specific issues or details are worked out before, subsequently or independently of any meeting he attends.

I think this raises questions far beyond the meetings with the Aga Khan. It raises questions about any meetings he may have in the future, in the almost two years remaining in his term, with those seeking favours or funding from the federal government. The fact that he didn't find that he was attending a meeting improperly on official business, because he was just there to relationship-build, the commissioner found was in violation of section 21. It was one of the four violations she found.

I think it's important for this committee, for the House of Commons, for the government, and for Canadians to know how this Prime Minister sees his role as Prime Minister in important meetings and with regard to the obligations every member of Parliament and

every public office-holder has under the Conflict of Interest Act and the code.

● (1610)

The Chair: Is there any further discussion? I have no other names on the list.

Hon. Peter Kent: Can we have a recorded vote, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Certainly.

(Motion negatived: nays 6; yeas 3)

The Chair: We'll reconvene tomorrow.

The meeting is adjourned.

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