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Chair

The Honourable Kevin Sorenson

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● (0935)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC)): I call this meeting back to order.

We're all pleased to have consensus that should we come back to the main estimates, we would cede the floor to Mr. Christopherson.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), main estimates 2019-20, vote 1 under the Auditor General of Canada, referred to the committee on Thursday, April 11, 2019, we'll continue our discussion of the estimates and Mr. Christopherson's motion, which he introduced last day—

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): I seek some guidance, Chair. Am I debating the estimates and...do we have a motion to approve the estimates or forward the estimates?

The Chair: No, we're simply doing your motion.

Mr. David Christopherson: It's just on my motion. Fair enough. Okay, great.

Thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to continue on this motion. Members will know how strongly I feel about this issue.

I have to tell you, though, just to warm up to the subject, that it completely wrecked my plans. I want you to know that. If you've noticed, for the better part of this year and a little bit of last year, I've shifted into being non-partisan. It doesn't interest me as much. I wanted to get out of that silo and I have done my very best to almost consider myself as an independent, much to the chagrin of some of my colleagues, and have approached things that way.

I've enjoyed it. It's been a lot of fun to be able to use my experience in whatever way I think might be helpful, as opposed to constantly.... Even though I'm not a hardline partisan, as a member of a caucus I'm always running parallel to the interests of the party and the relative aspects of the politics going on in the House on any given day, but I was very much enjoying everything being nice and calm and there not being a lot of drama, no partisanship. Then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, the government wrecks my plans and decides that they're going to stiff the Auditor General, sending my world into crisis.

I thought back over 15 years on this committee to the heartache and the consternation and the number of meetings at which we would call in the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, all in an

effort to make sure that we got, say, one document that we really needed and that the government was resisting giving to us.

I think about how much effort we poured into those kinds of matters, and here we are dealing with a wholesale slaughter of the work plan of the Auditor General. I'll be returning to this a few times, but I just want to lay the groundwork. At another time, I'll go into the details, because I think they're important.

For now, the overview is that in most of the years from 2011 to 2018, there were anywhere from 12 to 15 performance audits done in a calendar year, in addition to an average of two to seven Crown corporation audits. That's been the historical reflection going back to the last six, seven, eight years. As I've said, later on, I'm going to put this into the record because it needs to be there in detail, but for now, for the purposes of my point, in 2019, if you go to the website and take a look at what the plan is, you'll see that so far there are five performance audits, which is less than half of what was done from 2011 to 2018, and four Crown corporations, which is at the low end of what got done.

But here's the real kicker: For the full report in 2019, there's one performance audit, and no Crown corporations. The first thought is, "What the hell is this committee going to do? What does it exist for? It might as well be part time."

In 2020, in the current plan on the website, there are three performance audits and no Crown corps. Why? It's because their resources have all been sucked up by all the new work they've been given, and the money that they got that the government's bragging about really just gave them catch-up money. It really does almost leave me speechless, which is about the greatest extreme of shock I can have—that I can't talk.

I'm almost left without words, because I don't understand why. I've racked my brain trying to think what the motivation would be.

I was around for the first review of cybersecurity. Did we nail down what year that was? Do you know, off the top of your head?

A voice: There was one in 2002 and another one in 2006.

● (0940)

Mr. David Christopherson: I was here for the one in 2006. As I think I mentioned at previous meetings, it shook me. It shook everybody, and that was 13 years ago. Think what has happened with technology, with the Russians vis-à-vis the American elections, and with our own people and the amount of time and money and effort being put into protecting our systems, let alone our precious election.

One of the audits that will not happen now as a result of this refusal to fund the AG adequately is the planned audit on cybersecurity. It will not happen now.

If someone wants to make the accusation that the Auditor General is playing games, make it early and make it clear, because I'd be prepared to defend their integrity to the end of the world. Without respect and integrity, they have nothing, and it's the same as this committee; it's all based on respect.

Some of you will know that my thinking over the years has been that credibility is the currency of politics. If you have credibility and you're respected, it doesn't matter whether you're sitting as an independent or you're the prime minister; you will have gravitas. If you have respect, you have influence, and if you have influence, you have power. Each of us has that ability, but that also applies to committees and departments.

I reject the idea that the Auditor General is playing any kind of games, because if they were found out to be doing that, they would be destroyed. A wholesale clearing out of the whole shop would have to be part of that. It would have to be. I don't believe that is what is going on. I believe they will be able to defend every decision here based on the finances and their triage of priorities.

I began by saying what my thinking was as I searched for motivation. When I look at cybersecurity and I think back to the 2006 report, one of the possibilities for motivation is that the government is arrogant enough to believe that they will get re-elected, and they would rather take the heat for cutting the funding.

I have to tell you that it breaks my heart. I'm doing everything I can to lift this damn issue off the page, and I'm having a hell of a time. It really is hard, and I know what will happen. If we don't deal with it now, there will be a committee sitting here in about six months that will be faced with this dilemma, only it will be too late. The damage will have been done.

One of the possibilities is that regardless of how much political damage the government is taking by withholding the \$10.8-million increase the AG's office needs in order to do their work plan, the pain of this right now, no matter how much it is and how much it might grow between now and the end of the sitting....

Remember, right now the calculation, if I'm right that this is one of the reasons, is that the government is winning. This issue is not on any news sites. Nobody is talking about it. We've raised it in the House, but beyond that, it's not being heard out there. Maybe the government's calculation is actually working quite well so far.

I'm betting that one of the scenarios was that they looked at what the ultimate price could be for attacking the financial integrity of the Auditor General and saw that the political damage was still less than the mushroom clouds that would be formed over Parliament Hill if the Auditor General actually went in and did an update on where we are with cybersecurity. Is that what's going on? Are we in so much trouble that no government wants to have it exposed?

I see that one of my colleagues is not happy with that suggestion. I'm not saying that this is what the government is doing; I'm trying to find a motivation. I'm just sharing my thoughts. That's one of them.

● (0945)

That's one of them. Another one is a real problem, and to her credit my colleague, the vice-chair, Madam Mendès, picked up on this first at committee. What's interesting, Alexandra, is when I was mentioning to Denise about what happened to my plans of nice calm waters, that was the first place she went as well. Her first thought was, "Why are they allowed to do that?"

The second motivation that I'm looking at is retaliation. The very people that the Auditor General's staff had to negotiate with in the process to determine the budget are some of the very same people and the same entity that was severely criticized in an audit.

E-commerce—there's another one.

So, is it retaliation? Remember, this is new. We've never had this. Even Stephen Harper, for all that he gets demonized for around here, didn't do this. I'm actually going to be defending the Conservatives, believe it or not, on this accusation by the government that this is no different from what Stephen Harper did. This is completely different.

Sorry? Was there something I was supposed to hear, or are you just mumbling out loud?

The Chair: I'm mumbling, wishing we could televise these things

Mr. David Christopherson: We have lots of material. This is just the first page he's given me. We're just warming up.

I'm trying to find this motivation. If it's not retaliation, because I find that severe too.... It would break my heart under any regime, but especially under the Liberals, because you made such a big deal about doing government differently and treating committees with respect.

I remember how I had to have a rant at the beginning of PROC in order to get Lamoureux the heck off that committee because he was the parliamentary secretary. It took me a little while. He went from that seat to that seat to that seat to the door, which is where he should be—out the door, and not personally, but as a parliamentary secretary.

What's surprising, Chair, is that this government made such a big, big deal about doing things differently, and they still do. Well, you're doing things differently with the Auditor General, because nobody in the history of this country, including Stephen Harper, has ever denied an Auditor General adequate funding to carry out their work plan. That has never happened, ever.

For some of us who believed that the government at least in part was sincere about wanting to do things differently, how come democratic reform and democracy is one of the files that's going to give you the biggest problem going into the election? It's the easy one.

If it's not fear of the findings of a cybersecurity audit and if it's not retaliation for critical audits by the same people.... We're going to get to that a little later, that letter from most of our agents of Parliament. It speaks to their need for a new funding mechanism. The ministerial mandate letter, which I also have a copy of, speaks to that very issue that the officers of Parliament were reminding the government of back in January of this year.

Why wasn't that done? If they were really sincere, that would have been in place. It would have been in place for this fiscal planning year, meaning the work we're doing now for the fiscal year coming. Instead, we have the government hardlining on \$10.8 million. I mean, come on, colleagues, it's \$10.8 million. That's an "m". They spilled that much in a week when I was at Queen's Park. That much probably gets spilled in a few days around here.

Therefore, it can't be the money. Remember the framework for what happened in 2011? The framework was that there was a new government elected with a mandate, and whether the bureaucracy liked the mandate or not, the people had given them one. When the new government put in place an austerity program that cut things across the board, the choice of the Auditor General at that time was to attempt, as much as they could, to be a team player as one of the major entities of Parliament.

Here's the key thing, Chair, and I will be repeating this a lot, because there's no way this government is going to continue to get away with saying that what they're doing is the same as Stephen Harper or not even as bad. That's totally wrong and not acceptable.

The key difference is that the Auditor General said that he could still provide Parliament with everything that he had before. I think I was in the chair at the time. I went to the Auditor General—and you'll appreciate this, Chair—confidentially, so there were just the two of us. I asked, "Can you really do this, or is there something going on in the background that I need to know?"

● (0950)

The answer was, "It's going to sting, but we can do it, and we can still provide Parliament with everything that we promised and what we normally would"—and they did.

The minister—I couldn't believe it. I know Joyce. I've travelled with Joyce. I don't know whether she was just under the gun and felt the pressure, but I was very shocked and disappointed that she made it personal. I work really hard at not doing that. Even publicly, if you take a look at all my election campaigns, you see very few criticisms of my opponents. That's not my style.

She, the minister, made it very personal. She said, "Mr. Speaker, our government is committed to supporting the important work of the Auditor General. When an officer of Parliament, such as the Auditor General, makes a request for additional budget, we take that request very seriously."

Well, the evidence would be that no, they don't, but here's the part I'm going to focus on for now. She said, "My question for the member of the NDP is this: Where was he when the Conservatives cut 10% out of the Auditor General's budget", and then she went off on a rant, "as well as cutting half a billion dollars out of the RCMP" and blah-blah. It was a personal attack on something that I have

committed heart and soul to: the work of public accounts, accountability, oversight and transparency.

Over the years, this became a bigger and bigger part of why I stayed and why I ran again. For a minister of the Crown to accuse me of being asleep at the switch, I take personal offence, especially since this was a minister who was swanning around for a couple of years when she was parliamentary secretary trying to be an honorary member of public accounts committee.

I remember that we went to a conference, and she was there. I heard her introduce herself as an honorary member of the public accounts committee. What the heck is that? There is no such thing. I said to her, "If you want to be a member of the public accounts committee, great. You're smart. You care. You have good experience. Resign the PS and join the committee, but not both."

You will recall—and you know where I'm going, Chair—

● (0955)

The Chair: Steps of the—

Mr. David Christopherson: —that on the steps of Parliament, back when it was a real Parliament—spoken like a true curmudgeon, eh?—we were having a committee photo. Normally when you have a committee photo, it's the members of the committee who are in the photo, and hence the name "committee photo".

It's pretty straightforward. The chair touches base with a few folks and finds a time that works. I think it was after or just before QP. It was one of those times when, if you can grab all us cats and get us herded into one place, you can actually make it work, because we're in transit with committees and QP and things like that.

Okay. That's fine. No problem. I put on my best tie and combed my hair really nicely. I got all ready to go into the photo—the "committee photo"—and Joyce was there.

Okay. Well, you know, it's always nice to see Joyce. She sort of was hanging around a lot in those days. We gathered on the steps under the leadership of our chair, who said, "Hey, gather on the steps." We did—and Joyce was there. I looked at the chair and I indicated with my eyes, "Skeezix is here", and the chair very politely leaned over and said that this was a committee photo, so it would be restricted to members of the committee. She wouldn't leave.

She wouldn't leave. Now, I don't like doing this, okay? I really don't. You'll find, if you take a look, that there's not much of me doing this, but damn it, when a minister of the Crown stands up in question period and attacks my integrity, this is what you're going to get.

She would not leave the stairs. Do you know, colleagues, how this ends? A couple of people do.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Tell us.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'll tell you how it ended. We had to forgo the committee photo because a non-member of the committee wouldn't get out of the photo. At the end of the day, our scheduled committee photo didn't happen.

This is the person who wants to attack my integrity on public accounts, which I've been on for 15 years.

More importantly, had the Auditor General in any way—and you'll appreciate this, Chair, because I...

By the way, I can't say enough about the fantastic chairing that you have done, and I'm not just blowing smoke. You came in out of nowhere. You were a minister of the Crown in a previous government, so partisanship is a legitimate part of your DNA. You rolled into this committee....

When I first arrived, I didn't know too much about public accounts. I want to just say, sir, that in a very short period of time, you have deserved to be our leader, and not just by virtue of having been designated. You've earned that right by how you've led us and in the way you've let us function. A lot of credit that we're getting has to go to you as the leader, because without that leadership at the top, the rest of it can't happen.

● (1000)

The Chair: Thank you. I just wish I had a committee photo.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Carry on.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

When I spoke to the AG, had I received any signal, either directly from the words or... I'm a politician; I wordsmith. If I had been getting words that were telling me something, or even just a straight-up "We're really under the gun here, and this is really bad".... If I had been given that in any way, shape or form.... Go ask Mr. Albas what I did and threatened to do as the chair of the committee on a couple of occasions. I can't go into it too much, because we're in public, but suffice it to say that I took any attack on the work of the Auditor General very seriously and was prepared to do anything legal to counteract it, to fight it.

But there was no need. Where was the fight? Had I done that, I would have been violating the golden rule of public accounts: I would have become partisan. I would have tried to take a scenario, as the government is doing right now, and as that minister, Joyce Murray, is doing in the House right now, and playing right into that kind of politics. Had I said, "This is a cut; you're going after the

Auditor General" and tried to make a great big deal of it, I would have been violating that sacred rule that we have to have to make this committee work, and the rule is that when we walk through that door, we leave our party membership at the door and we are in here as parliamentarians, providing oversight and accountability regardless of the colour of the government in power. To me, that's what I would have been doing.

Colleagues, you know me. I was busting for that fight. I was not happy. However, the Auditor General said, publicly and privately, that they could manage and—most importantly for me, meaning me as the parliamentarian—that all the work that they would normally provide to Parliament would continue. He said they could do it, and they did. If you look at the number of audits through those years, and the cuts, you'll see that they managed to live up to their word.

Now, to my mind, I made the right decision. I accepted it, as did the rest of the committee, and we moved on. That was that. We've had no problems since then—until this year, until about two weeks ago. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, the government is denying the Auditor General a requested \$10.8 million so that their office can do the work for Parliament.

I'm going to keep coming back to that, especially when there are more people paying attention, because unless that minister gives me a personal apology, I intend to—

● (1005)

The Chair: I know it's 10 o'clock, but there is a vote, so we need unanimous consent to carry on. We need five minutes to get up there. We're at 30 minutes, so do we want to carry on, or do you want to come back?

Mr. Darrell Samson: I think that's just the opening of the House, isn't it?

The Chair: No, no, it's a vote. The vote is at 10:30.

Mr. Darrell Samson: They said 11:00. The bells are at 10:30 for 11:00.

The Chair: No, bells are ringing now.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm still upset that we're not going to get to that committee photo.

The Chair: I'm in the committee's hands here. Do we have unanimous consent? Otherwise, we'll come back to this on Thursday.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.): We'll have to come back on Thursday, because I really have to go. I have to park my car before we vote, because parking will—

The Chair: We will adjourn, then.

Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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