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Chair: Ms. Rachael Harder



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• (1240)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Rachael Harder (Lethbridge, CPC)): Ladies and gentlemen, I call the meeting to order.

At the last meeting, we had Mr. Kurek's motion up for discussion. I have the speakers list from last day.

I'll go to Mr. Kurek, and then to Mr. Fergus.

Go ahead, Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I was asking to continue the debate. I apologize for my ignorance, being a new member, but are we continuing debating the motion that we had adjourned on?

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Kurek, you are welcome to speak to the motion that is currently on the table.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you very much. I appreciate this opportunity to, once again, enter into debate on an incredibly important subject. It has certainly captured much of the attention of Canadians from coast to coast to coast.

The motion that is at hand is very simple. It simply asks that we have full disclosure of the relationship between other members of cabinet and WE Charity and the decision-making process.

Each day, it seems that further information is revealed about this ongoing scandal. Of course, many of us, I'm sure, were watching the testimony yesterday at the finance committee, and I'm sure we will all pay rapt attention tomorrow. The continuing revelations of connections, of lack of consistency in testimony, of the information that seems to be uncovered on a daily basis, I think, speak for themselves when it comes to why a motion like the one I presented last week is so important. It would ensure that the very basic questions that Canadians are asking will simply get answered. What connections exist between members of cabinet and WE Charity, and did members of cabinet know about the conflict of interest that has become increasingly clear?

It's even just the ambiguity between what these relationships look like. Yesterday the Kielburgers mentioned that they had limited contact with members of cabinet and that they wouldn't have called themselves friends of the Prime Minister. We've heard all of these things before in the first Trudeau report that found the Prime

Minister guilty of ethics violations regarding his “friend” the Aga Khan.

I think that Canadians deserve answers. This is a simple process, a simple procedure, that simply asks those who were tasked with making the decision regarding close to a billion dollars for the information requested so that Canadians, quite frankly, will get the answers they all deserve.

I look forward to what I hope will be a productive debate on the issue and to seeing this passed. I would encourage all members of this committee from every party to be productive and proactive to ensure that we have that attitude in mind in moving this conversation forward, to get the answers that Canadians deserve, and hopefully move forward. I would certainly ask that each member consider supporting this motion as it attempts to do that very thing.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Fergus, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm not sure whether this point was raised, but if you could read off the list of speakers from time to time, it would be a good way to let those who wish to participate in the debate know where they are on the list. It's just a friendly suggestion.

I listened closely to what the honourable member from the Conservative Party, Mr. Kurek, had to say, and I read his motion carefully.

Madam Chair, this is a bit unusual, but I hope you'll agree with me. The honourable member called this a very simple motion. Unfortunately, I would say it's not that simple.

In the last comment made at Friday's meeting, the honourable member Mr. Gerretsen showed quite easily that this motion was not, in fact, simple, using himself as an example. He has numerous cousins and a number of brothers and sisters. Are we going to ask all of them to provide documentation to the committee? The third paragraph of the motion reads as follows:

Additionally, the letter should require that all Members of Cabinet disclose whether they, their families or their relatives have connections to WE, ME to WE Corporation....

Madam Chair, what does “their families or their relatives” mean? I imagine it means myself and my children, but does it include my parents, my brothers and sisters? Does it include my cousins, my relatives or the families of my spouse, my children, my grandchildren and my parents? Where does it stop? Frankly, it's not a simple motion, and that's the least I can say about it.

I see that the honourable member would like to respond. Madam Chair, through you, I'd like to ask him a question, if I may.

[*English*]

Does my honourable colleague believe this motion, which seeks to produce documents from my family members, my relatives, will in fact get the information he's seeking from the interested parties in an effort to get an understanding of who has been involved with this organization? If so, in what form should they produce these documents? That's a question I have for my colleague. I hope, in his opportunity to speak, when we're further down the speaking list, he will respond to that question. That would be very helpful to me in my consideration of whether or not to support this motion.

This just bears witness to the idea that it sounds simple but it gets really complicated. I sound a bit like a broken record—and I'm trying to keep everything innovative here; I'm not trying to run down the clock—but I have to ask all of my honourable colleagues around the table what we want. When I look at this motion, which is like the motion that was passed last week, I wonder: Do we really want a situation where members of Parliament are investigating other members of Parliament?

• (1250)

I really believe this is something that we should let the Ethics Commissioner do. We can encourage the Ethics Commissioner. We can call the Ethics Commissioner here.

[*Translation*]

We can ask him questions. We can ask him about the scope of his investigation. We can encourage him to explore certain solutions. We can ask him to dig deeper during the investigation he deems appropriate to set up, as he sees fit. We can make numerous suggestions, but we should let the commissioner do his job.

If, at his discretion, the commissioner deems it appropriate to probe further, he will. Since we are trying to obtain all this information, not just from the Prime Minister and his family, from Bill Morneau and his family, from Katie Telford and from Seamus O'Regan, but also from all members of cabinet, their families or their relatives, why not ask every member of Parliament? Why not ask everyone in this great country of ours? Where will it all end?

That's what worries me. I hope that gives the committee some food for thought. We can arrive at a motion that isn't as broad and open-ended as this one, but only if it is the committee's will to adopt the motion. I still maintain that the best decision is not to make one. Allow me to explain. What I mean is not to make this decision. Let's let the commissioner define the scope of the investigation. We can invite him to appear before the committee, and we can encourage him to pursue certain avenues, but it is his responsibility to conduct the investigation. If not, if we cross this line, where will it end?

Madam Chair, unfortunately, those questions have never been answered, at least not to my satisfaction. If we continue down this path, we can do the same for any other matter. We can look into anything to keep asking questions in an effort to gain a partisan advantage. That is not what this committee is for. I could argue that this doesn't fall within the committee's area of responsibility. I'm afraid that we're going to start something that will never end.

Just before I wrap up, I do, however, want to applaud the decision the committee made last week. Once a poor decision has been made, all we can do is try our best. The committee decided to limit the study by specifying that the information be reviewed in camera.

• (1255)

That way, given what we've embarked on, here, this fishing expedition, we can minimize the risk of doing harm to people who have practically nothing to do with politics, other than having a politician in their family or having connections to one. As I said, a close look at this motion and the definition it sets out reveals far-reaching implications.

Madam Chair, I will leave it there, and I sincerely hope that my fellow members will think about what I said.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Next on the speaking list we have Ms. Shanahan, followed by Ms. Brière, Mr. Angus, Mr. Kurek and Mr. Drouin.

We'll start with Ms. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I, too, must express my dismay at the motion in front of us. I see that some additional text was written that follows a motion presented retracted earlier. The additional text says, “That pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h)(vii) and to the committee's current study to review”—and I stress the word “review”—“the safeguards which are in place to avoid and prevent conflicts of interest and federal government procurement contracting, grant contribution and other expenditures”.

This is a study the committee has agreed to undertake, but this motion goes on to add to the study's motion, with instructions. I'm wondering if they're even in order. I think there are problems. We're asking the chair to "write a letter to each member of cabinet requiring they disclose whether they had knowledge of the personal relationships between those listed and WE", and there's a list of the WE organizations. There's no framework here. Later the motion says, "prior to the cabinet's decision to award the administration of the Canada student services grant". What does that timeline look like? What are the dates we're talking about? Where is someone receiving this letter to start? What are they to make of this request?

As my colleague pointed out, later on when we ask about families or relatives and whether they have connections, again, what are we talking about? Who is your family? I don't know if we'll have the opportunity to hear from every member here as to who their family members are, but I have a couple of exes and a number of children—although I will not name them here for their own privacy. In my family, I have eight brothers and sisters. It's hard for me to keep track of who the spouses and partners are and the number of nieces and nephews I have. It's a moving target. Families are fluid today; families are flexible. We love every one of them, but they didn't sign up for this kind of disclosure. Who are the relatives? Going out further in the family line, I can tell you, coming from a good Irish Catholic family, that I have over 65 cousins. I've lost track of the cousins, the first cousins. They are all doing well I'm happy to say; thank goodness for Facebook.

However, it's very concerning that this is the kind of net this committee wishes to throw out there. I don't think that Canadians listening to us would agree that's appropriate for this committee to be doing.

I have many concerns about this resolution, and not the least is that I don't see how it's helpful to the work of this committee. We want to review the safeguards that are in place to avoid and prevent conflicts of interest in "federal government procurement contracting, grant contribution and other expenditures".

I think that's what Canadians want to understand, which is that this committee is executing its responsibility to make sure that the Ethics Commissioner, the lobbying commissioner, the different independent, non-partisan commissioners we have in place, who have full powers to compel any document, to question any person they deem necessary...to be able to say that they can undertake their job.

Again, I'm very concerned about this motion, and I hope that the other members of this committee will reconsider it.

• (1300)

The Chair: Madame Brière.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Élisabeth Brière (Sherbrooke, Lib.): Madam Chair, I'm going to continue along the same lines as my fellow members.

First of all, my mother comes from a family of 15 brothers and sisters, and my father, 14 brothers and sisters. Each of them has three or four children. I wouldn't even know some of my cousins if I ran into them on the street. They live all over the province. Some of them are even in the Dominican Republic. My question is this. How do the opposition parties define family and relatives as far as

this motion goes? Why do they want to cast such a wide net for information that is, to some degree, confidential or private?

My second point has to do with the same motion. It states "prior to the Cabinet's decision". What is meant by "prior to"? Does it mean that day, that week? Does it mean two weeks or a month prior to the decision? The motion makes no mention of time frame or timeline in that regard, so it would be worth discussing how to address that, as well.

What's more, we don't know the details of all those peoples' lives. My fellow member Ms. Shanahan pointed out that she, too, has trouble keeping track of every single one of her relatives. A family is a work in progress. A family is always changing. Could we not include the wording "to the best of their knowledge" given how broad the motion is and how hard it is to know where the limits are?

I would ask the opposition parties to define the words "their families or their relatives" in the motion and to discuss what is meant by "prior to". Lastly, I would ask them to consider adding the wording "to the best of their knowledge" to the motion.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Madam Chair, I was just going to put forward an amendment to that effect. I think we could agree on that. I have no problem waiting for my turn, but in order to save some time, we may want to do it now.

• (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair: I understand, but I have to be respectful of the speaking order.

I have to give the mike to Mr. Angus next, then Mr. Kurek, Mr. Drouin and Mr. Fortin.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think we can put a few things in perspective based on yesterday.

I think one of the difficulties the government has found itself in is the decision by WE and the Kielburgers not to put their name under the lobbying registry. As a result, we don't know how they engage with government, and I think that's very problematic.

Small charities, all manner of charities, are on the lobbying registry for reasons of transparency. The fact that the Kielburgers felt they didn't need to register with the lobbying commissioner, I think, has caused them a great deal of difficulty, and it has certainly hurt the government.

There is a question in terms of relations that's important. In terms of family, I'd like to put a few things on the table. One is that we were initially led to believe that the Prime Minister's family were paid because Margaret Trudeau is an amazing public figure. I could certainly see why she has a strong career, but what we found out yesterday, which was really shocking, was that the board at WE were told that nobody was paid, and yet the Trudeaus were paid. When the Kielburger brothers were pressed on that, they said that they weren't paid speaking fees, but paid after events, so it was the corporate involvement that becomes very problematic for the Prime Minister.

I think that's something the Ethics Commissioner will follow up, and it is nothing whether the Prime Minister was aware of it or not. It creates the image of trying to use the Prime Minister's family and name to give access to corporate interests. I think it's highly problematic, so it raises issues of judgment, certainly on the part of the WE organization.

I appreciate my Liberal colleagues' mentioning all their families, the Irish Catholics. God Almighty, I hope your family doesn't party with my family; it would go on for weeks, I bet. I understand people saying that they don't want to use families, and yet yesterday the Liberal's research shop came up with my daughter having been involved with the Kielburger brothers, and they mentioned it in the national hearing.

I think I should put on the record how this played out. The fact that my daughter, when she was in grade 7, raised money for Nicaragua, before I was a member of Parliament, does not in any way mean I am going to support this \$900 million deal or oppose it. It's completely irrelevant, but the Liberals did mention it.

That's not the first time my children were named. I'm just putting it on the record that my daughter, who was in grade 5, gave a speech about the children in Attawapiskat to a little St. Patrick grade school in Cobalt, Ontario. I found that mentioned in a briefing note to Minister Chuck Strahl by the Department of Indian Affairs, that my daughter, who was in grade 5, was giving a speech on the conditions of children in Attawapiskat, and her name was listed. I'm only mentioning her as well because it's her birthday today, and I would really like to see her. Family do get drawn in, whether it's right or wrong, so I put that on the table.

I have a problem with this motion for a couple of reasons. One is that what we do here is create a precedent; this is like law. I have been on both sides. I've been in opposition all my time, but I've been under Liberals and Conservatives, and we have to decide, when we make a precedent here, how it could be used in the future, so we have to be careful. Fishing expeditions, I believe, are beyond the purview of a committee.

We have to have a specific reason to ask for specific things, because we have enormous powers here. We're not a court. If we vote on this and decide to go ahead, we have powers that are unique to our committee, as parliamentarians, so there needs to be a judiciousness about them. To cast such a wide cast around cabinet that would draw in family certainly raises questions to me. I don't think that's in order.

We also have a tradition in Parliament, which I sometimes have questioned, of taking an honourable member at his word. That it is the Westminster tradition. We have to have a reason to investigate someone. We can't just say, "Prove to me that you're innocent, and then I'll believe that you're innocent." We have to have a reason, because our parliamentary tradition is based on that principle.

As far as conflicts go, we have to provide those conflicts to the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, which is outside the purview of this committee.

• (1310)

I understand what my colleague is attempting to get here, but I do think that if we set this precedent, this will be used again for other purposes that may be even more nefarious. We have to be careful with the tools that we have, so I cannot support this at this time.

The Chair: Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I look forward to addressing a few of the concerns that some of my colleagues have brought forward.

First, before I go into some of the specifics of that, I think it is foundational that members of Parliament, that Canada's Parliament in general, hold Canada's government to account, that MPs, whether it be in the format of question period or in their role as members of a committee, are able to hold their government to account. This is not asking every MP... It is not asking for a fishing expedition, but rather it's asking for some questions to be answered that are related to a billion dollar decision by members of Canada's government in cabinet.

As members of Parliament, I believe we are entitled to be able to ask the question very simply, "What knowledge was there first, that each member of cabinet require that they disclose whether or not they had knowledge of relationships between the individuals and WE, and a number of the WE entities?" That's a simple yes or no question: Did they have that knowledge or did they not?

When it comes to the question of prior...I think that there was a decision made at a cabinet meeting, and at that time, was there an understanding of the conflicts of interest that existed or not? It's quite simple. When it comes to the end, that's a question, as MPs, that we need to be able to ask those who are tasked with making decisions for the government.

I would put on the record, Madam Chair, that I find it very interesting that a number of concerns with the motion have been brought up. They're well taken; I appreciate that the members opposite would share their concerns. However, I find it troubling that those concerns were not brought up with a suggestion to make a change that would make it more palatable, whether it be adding "to the best of their knowledge", as Ms. Brière mentioned....

We could be more definitive in terms of a family relationship. I come from a fifth generation in Canada. We were supposed to have a family reunion this summer, and there would have been hundreds of people attending. Now, because of COVID, that's been put on hold.

So that is well taken. However, I find it troubling that they would have cause for concern and yet not bring forward a solution to re-mediate those concerns in the name of transparency. It's troubling. Certainly my constituents are demanding answers on all of these questions, and I think it is incumbent upon members of Parliament to ensure that we ask them.

Certainly I would be happy to entertain amendments that would assuage some of the concerns that exist. I would hope that if those amendments were made, other members of this committee would consider getting on board with ensuring we can get the information that is required.

There was a comment by Mr. Fergus about looking for partisan advantage. I think back to the first number of meetings we had in this committee, and there was a lot of non-partisan work. I think we had a very constructive dialogue back and forth about the direction of this committee, and yet here we are today discussing a series of issues related to an unprecedented scandal that the government faces. It is incumbent upon all of us to get answers. To me, that's the furthest thing from looking for partisan advantage.

• (1315)

You know, you have the Prime Minister having to apologize and you have a whole bunch of cabinet ministers acknowledging a certain level of involvement, with some apologizing and some not. Further questions continue to be raised on a daily basis. That's not partisan. That's called accountability. That's why we're here as members of Parliament.

The comment was made by Ms. Shanahan about the net being cast wide. That's fair. I appreciate that. So let's define what those family relationships should look like. I would hope that if we could do that, we could come up with a consensus and we could move forward in a way that speaks to the non-partisan objective here, which is getting answers for Canadians. Defining that net is something that certainly I would be happy to entertain.

I know that those comments were echoed by Mr. Angus in relationship to the precedent we set. I agree; especially in the Westminster system that we have, precedent is foundational to the way we conduct ourselves. Transparency and accountability are part of that precedent. Certainly, that's the intent of this motion—to ask the questions and get answers on the relationships that may or may not exist. I think Canadians are generally very understanding when the best attempts and efforts are made to simply get those answers.

With that, I look forward to continuing the debate. I would encourage members to consider that offer, and certainly there's a willingness on my part, to entertain some amendments that would make this more amenable. I quite frankly would look forward to support by all MPs from all parties to ensure that we can get to the objective here, which is accountability for Canadians.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Drouin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm not a regular member of the committee, as most of the members here today are, but I have a few comments on what's been discussed, in relation to business, political and family connections.

I know the member opposite is open to certain amendments. We can talk about that later, but it's important that we do our due diligence and establish what counts as a business connection for a politician.

I don't think we should be the ones defining that because it's a conflict of interest for us to do so. We shouldn't be the ones deciding what a potential conflict of interest is, but it's something that could be clarified and codified.

We have a duty to invite the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, or previous commissioners, to appear before the committee to advise us on the matter and, perhaps, propose solutions.

[*English*]

On the word “connection”, I think it's incumbent on all of us to have a lot more information before we even propose an amendment. I think we ourselves can come up with a definition, but I think we should probably have the Ethics Commissioner, and the former ethics commissioner, in front of this committee in order to inform us on what would be deemed a problematic connection when and/or if there is a contract issued, which is the issue at hand that we're dealing with.

I would just say that perhaps we could take it offline and have that discussion, but I am.... I don't know if we would come up with the right definition for what you're looking for in your motion. I would say it would probably be best to have, as I said, a few witnesses here before, and then we could produce the documentation that is requested in that particular motion.

I'd say let's probably take it offline, have a discussion, and then see where this goes, but I do raise caution on us defining the word “connection” by ourselves, without having an informed debate and witnesses in front of this committee.

Thank you.

• (1320)

The Chair: It goes to Mr. Fortin and then to Mr. Barrett, Mr. Fergus, Ms. Shanahan and Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I won't rehash what's been said around the table, but I agree with just about all of it.

It's understandable to want to achieve an effective motion that can be adhered to, while ensuring it's based on common sense, in other words, a motion that doesn't require people to investigate their families.

I have a simple amendment. I propose wording the last paragraph in a way that's similar to the first.

Where it says, “the letter should require that all Members of Cabinet disclose whether they, their families or their relatives”, I would remove the words “whether they, their families or their relatives” and add “to the best of their knowledge”.

The motion would therefore require members to disclose whether, to the best of their knowledge, their immediate family members have connections to WE.

The honourable member opposite, Mr. Drouin, brought up the possible challenge around defining what constitutes a connection. I don't think we should become too obsessive about this.

Here's the question I would ask myself. If I were a member of cabinet, how would I respond? If I were asked whether every person in my family and everyone I knew, including my friends, had connections to WE, I would find that onerous. Mr. Fergus explained it well. It can be complicated to find out whether the neighbour you go out for beers with once every couple of weeks has a family member with connections to WE.

It's not about asking people to investigate their neighbours or family members. However, if I were asked whether, to the best of my knowledge, members of my family or my friends had connections to WE, and if I knew that my sister or nephew had worked for WE, I would say yes. If I knew that that person had been involved in a cocktail fundraiser, a speaking event or anything else, I would say yes. Keep in mind, I wouldn't even have to ask my sister whether she had connections to WE, because the information would be “to the best of my knowledge”.

Although I understand the concerns raised and I recognize that they are, indeed, legitimate, I think we could quell them by asking members whether, to the best of their knowledge, members of their immediate family have connections to WE.

That's the amendment I propose, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Proceeding to the amendment, the first on my speakers list is Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Thanks, Madam Chair, and I'll thank the Bloc member for his amendment. I think it's very reasonable.

We heard half an hour of interventions by government members, and no amendments were proposed. We got a view of some family trees; we're all richer for having heard about those.

The spirit of Mr. Kurek's motion makes a lot of sense. It's apparent that there's a lack of judgment and adult supervision in Justin Trudeau's office. This is the sad reality that we have to face. He's twice been found guilty of breaking the law—ethics laws twice—and the finance minister once. Now both Justin Trudeau and Bill Morneau are under investigation again.

Media asked cabinet these questions: “Did you know?” We got crickets from them. Who's going to find out? To speak to Mr. Angus's point, we take them at their word.

Okay. Would the Liberal members on this committee vote for this motion if all Liberal ministers who've spoken to the media or on the public record about their knowledge were excluded from the motion? Would that satisfy the committee? It's not a fishing expedition.

“Did you have knowledge of the personal relationships?” is question one. With the amended motion, we're asking whether cabinet members, to the best of their knowledge, knew about their immediate relatives' connections. We're not asking what they are; I'm not asking who your nephew is, where he works, or what his connection is.

They'd respond to the chair and say, “Yes, I do have family connections.” Then it would be for the committee to decide what to do with that information. Do we call that member before the committee, or do we refer that matter to the Ethics Commissioner? We could do that.

The most important part of what we're finding out here, however, is who knew. We're looking at what safeguards are in place. Cabinet obviously isn't a sufficient safeguard.

I knew that Margaret Trudeau was speaking for WE; I knew that Sacha Trudeau was speaking for WE. How did that escape the attention of the federal cabinet and the PCO? How did it happen?

These arguments are a red herring. Mr. Gerretsen sat there last week when the conversation came up and said, “Okay, let's go home.”

If that was genuine, and if there were questions.... There were no questions to Mr.—

I'll look for an off-camera response from Mr. Kurek. Were there any questions to your personal email account from government members looking for clarification or collaboration on the motion?

He has indicated that there were not any.

This isn't collaborative. There's no co-operation here; we're ragging the puck again. We've been through one of your filibusters on this committee already.

It's a cover-up, guys. That's what this is. You're complicit in a cover-up. There's no question that there's a prima facie case on our hands of ethics violations. There's no question that it's under investigation. I wrote to the Ethics Commissioner; he confirmed that he would investigate, based on the facts that were presented. Mr. Angus wrote the Ethics Commissioner. We both raised some of the same points and some different points, and guess what? Investigations are under way.

If a lesson had been learned the first time that Justin Trudeau broke ethics laws, I would believe that he was sorry. If Bill Morneau were really ready to take accountability for breaking ethics laws and if he were sorry, he would have read the Act. He didn't. We heard him say at the last committee, the finance committee, that he thinks they gave it to him when he was first elected.

Yikes! You have to be kidding me. You broke the law and you didn't even take the time to read it? I have to tell you, if I were sitting in the defendant's chair, in the prisoner's box in court, I'd probably take a look at the Criminal Code section under which I was being tried. I would expect the same is true for conflict of interest violations.

They act as if it's innocent mistakes—"Who would know? and "How would I know?" I take proactive steps to ensure that I'm in compliance with the rules that govern us as parliamentarians.

• (1325)

I hope there is an opportunity at some point, if anyone doubts that.... Perhaps I can ask my adviser in the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner's office if she could provide an indication, with my consent, of how often I contact her to confirm compliance with regard to correspondence, meetings and people offering me invitations to events. All are legitimate functions in my role as an MP.

Am I being overcautious? Maybe. I'm also not under investigation. I've also not been found to have broken the Act. I would expect the same of any of the 337 other members who occupy seats in the chamber. Is it too much to ask the same of the federal cabinet?

None of you is in cabinet. You aspire to be, as I do. I hope that in the next election we form a Conservative government.

I see that Mr. Drouin doesn't think that's going to come to pass. I don't know, but we're going to—

Mr. Francis Drouin: My hopes for cabinet? I don't have any.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Oh, he says he doesn't have hopes for cabinet.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Neither do I. I've burnt all my bridges.

An hon. member: Is that on the record?

Mr. Michael Barrett: As members, we have an obligation to be a check against the power in the executive. That's our job. That's our job.

I imply that there has been no offer made to any of you in exchange for your defence of the government today. That's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is that you don't have to do it.

What you do have to do, for Canadians, is exercise your role to ensure that there's transparency and accountability. Immediate family, to the best of your knowledge, yes or no? It's basically a yes or no question to "disclose whether they had knowledge of personal relationships between those listed and WE". That is what that sentence says. That's a yes or no question. It continues: "Additionally, the letter should require that all Members of Cabinet disclose whether they, their families or their relatives have connections to WE". It doesn't ask what those connections are.

These are eminently reasonable amendments to a well-intentioned motion that is consistent with the study this committee is undertaking. It's absolutely in the public interest that this go forward. Not supporting this motion is to be complicit in a cover-up. That's what we're faced with here.

Canadians have heard your point. You believe the motion was too broad. Mr. Fortin has proposed very reasonable amendments to

tighten it up. I think they're very appropriate and will support them. I hope that the members opposite will support them and that we can get to voting on the main motion.

The meeting is to adjourn at two. It would be unfortunate to have to carry this motion into a third meeting. Have the courage of your convictions. If you don't like it, vote it down. If you think that it should be amended, if you think there are changes warranted, make the amendment. Let's not just fill the speakers list for the sake of running out the clock. Everyone has important things to do.

It's Mr. Angus's daughter's birthday. My gift to Mr. Angus is that I am going to encourage everyone to move forward expeditiously with this motion and vote for it. I obviously hope that you vote in favour of it, but if not, stand up and be counted. That's show business.

• (1330)

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, and then Mr. Kurek, will speak.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Madam Chair, usually, I think most people, if they were to describe me, would consider me a pretty mild and a pretty even-keeled fellow, but I have to admit that I find the most recent statements by my honourable colleague across the way, frankly, insulting and I also find them presumptuous and wrong-headed, and I don't say that lightly.

How dare that member ascribe to me what my intentions are, that I or other members here want to go to cabinet? You don't know.

You can speak for yourself and you did. Good for you. You want to be in cabinet? I don't care.

Madam Chair, I've always felt—and I've been mocked by the member opposite before—and I mentioned how much I'm a student of Parliament and I love the parliamentary tradition we have. I've followed it from a very young age. To me the highest honour I have was the one that I got on October 19, 2015, when I became the member of Parliament for Hull—Aylmer, to represent the community in which I have lived for almost 30 years.

So I hope the member will stick to his knitting and not choose to try to speak for other people, and I also find it particularly rich—in an ironic sense—criticisms of he would says is talking out the clock when it was the very same member for two full meetings of this committee—

Mr. Michael Barrett: During your last cover-up.

Mr. Greg Fergus: —who talked out the clock because he wasn't able to get his way on a motion he was introducing.

Mr. Michael Barrett: What was the motion?

Mr. Greg Fergus: And Madam Chair, it's very rich that he would make that accusation of other people who, I think, for a lot more substantive reasons and one that seems to be convincing other people, and even he, to be willing to try to put some barriers on a motion that is so wide and large.

So Madam Chair, I think again that he should speak to the issues and not try to put words in other people's mouths.

He also indicates that he's looking.... He criticizes people for trying to fix a mistake that his colleague introduced. When I think, if somebody had given some thought, given consideration—let me correct myself—given more consideration to the issue, they would have come to the point of saying this is just too big and too wide, and it's a bit of a fishing expedition. And if the motion were presented on its own merits, it would have failed at this committee.

So Madam Chair, I find it to be important that when we are here, we try to stick to the issues, we try to address those concerns, and not try to assume or mock people's backgrounds or the issues they raise or the families they may have, in an attempt perhaps to cover up for the things they didn't do so correctly or with due diligence, and that would have received more support from people around this table. I hope this is the only time, Madam Chair, that I will ever have to make such a personal intervention. Thank you.

• (1335)

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, thank you.

Mr. Kurek, and that finishes my speaking list.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

To the amendment, I appreciate my Bloc colleague's amendment, because that has been, I think, the conversation of this debate thus far. I'm not speaking with regard to the debate on the amendment, but rather to the debate on the motion. Largely, according to the members of the government and the NDP, it's too broad, so I appreciate that my Bloc colleague would take action to solve the problem.

Certainly I will be supporting it. I think and I believe that it is the role of committees to work together and to come up with solutions when there's disagreement. We can make a collaborative effort to ensure that the job gets done.

I will make a comment. This was prior to being elected. Being a student of politics and passionate about our democratic institutions, when I would hear of friends or family visiting, or now when I invite constituents to come visit in Ottawa, I tell them very clearly, "You need to come and check out question period. It's fun. It's back and forth", especially since we're from probably the most Conservative riding in the country. There's a lot of fun to be had when it comes to the jabs and whatnot that are traded back and forth in question period, but I always tell them, "Don't simply go to question period if you're not able to stop in for a few minutes and listen to committee", because that's where a lot of the substantive work of Parliament gets done.

My Bloc colleague put that into action by proposing an amendment, which, if I am to take the members opposite at their word, addresses the concerns they brought forward regarding this motion. I appreciate that, and I plan to support it.

I would make one note, Madam Chair. I've heard numerous times from members opposite that this committee's.... I've heard a lot about the committee mandate. Conveniently, the last paragraph of that mandate is often omitted from the conversations we have had

over the last number of weeks, which is unfortunate. We need to look at the mandate in its entirety.

Time and time again we have members opposite suggest that we let the Ethics Commissioner do his job, and then we invite the Ethics Commissioner to the committee. I'm in a hundred per cent agreement with that. However, I was appalled—although that's a strong word—that when we brought forward a motion to do just that back in, I believe, the beginning of February, the members opposite voted against having the Ethics Commissioner come to testify regarding the "Trudeau II Report".

It is incredibly unfortunate that.... In fact, I look forward to being able to bring up the number of times that the members opposite have simply suggested that it's this committee's job to bring the Ethics Commissioner back to sit in that chair to testify, because that's simply not what happened.

We have an opportunity here to shed light on, to open the doors on, the issues of a scandal that is rocking the confidence that Canadians need to have in their government. Until we can shed light in the darkness, so to speak, I think there are further questions that need to be asked about anybody who wouldn't participate in that process.

I thank the Bloc member for his amendment, and I will certainly support that. Again, I encourage all members to look at this as a solution to the challenges they had with the initial motion. Hopefully, we can, in an expeditious manner, move forward to shed light where light needs to be shed.

• (1340)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Barrett, the floor is yours.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks, Madam Chair.

I want to respond to Mr. Fergus and make sure it's on the record that in February, this committee had the opportunity to bring the Ethics Commissioner to sit and testify on the "Trudeau II Report". That was the second time Justin Trudeau was found to have broken the law during his time as Prime Minister, which is a national shame.

We keep hearing that it's historic that the Prime Minister has agreed to testify at committee. Well, it's historic that he's under investigation for a third time for breaking the law.

Yes, I filibustered against the Liberal cover-up in February. You tried to cover up the report. You didn't want it read into committee, which is highly unusual, and then you filibustered for your next cover-up.

Mr. Greg Fergus: We have a minority on the committee.

Mr. Francis Drouin: We're a minority, by the way.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I hear Mr. Fergus and Mr. Drouin saying that they're now in the minority. That's because your Prime Minister broke the law last time. You had the distinction of having your wings clipped from your majority government when Canadians put you on notice for having a government that could not follow the rule of law. That's your legacy in supporting the Prime Minister.

I am proud to say that I filibustered against a Liberal cover-up, and I'm proud today to call out your filibuster in favour of your next cover up. That's for you to reconcile with yourselves.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I sleep well at night.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'm glad you sleep well at night, Mr. Drouin.

That's your shame, and Canadians listening can ask Mr. Drouin about that when they contact him. For my part in this committee, I will make sure that it is heard and that there's a reasonable motion put forward—

Mr. Charlie Angus: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I know, as a male MP, that we all get hot under the collar, but I don't think it's fair for someone to be told they have to live with shame for making a decision. The member can present the opposite. I've heard all the arguments, but I don't think people need to be ashamed of why they're here, so I just ask him to temper his language.

The Chair: Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: It is a shame. People should be ashamed of covering up corruption. They should be ashamed of covering up for a prime minister who has broken the law. That's not language that needs to be tempered. That's contrition that needs to be offered by those who support it.

The Chair: We'll now vote on the amendment put forward by Mr. Fortin.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'd like a recorded vote, please.

The Chair: Yes, I'll allow the clerk to conduct that.

(Amendment negatived: nays 6; yeas 4)

The Chair: Moving back to the motion, currently on my speaking list I have Mr. Barrett, Mr. Fergus, Ms. Shanahan and Mr. Kurek. Ideally we should be able to bring this to a vote within 10 minutes. I leave it to the committee.

Mr. Barrett.

• (1345)

Mr. Michael Barrett: Madam Chair, we heard suggestions by Liberal members that the scope of the main motion should be narrowed. That was proposed by the Bloc, and they voted against it, so I think we know that a productive discussion is not going to be had. I encourage all members to stand to be counted. Let's vote on the main motion.

The Chair: Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus: I'm going to stop making this personal.

I'd like to point out that this is the second time the Conservative members have put forward a motion like this. The first time, they withdrew it. They essentially moved the same motion, which, once again, was really poorly written. I commend the honourable Bloc Québécois member for trying to make it better, but the fact remains, Madam Chair, that the motion is really poorly drafted.

I can speak only for myself, but I imagine some of my fellow members feel the same. It's not my responsibility to fix the second version of a poorly drafted Conservative motion. I'm going to do my best, in any case. Sometimes, a mistake can be corrected, but this is the second time. It's understandable to make mistakes the first time around. Everyone makes mistakes. No problem, just try again. This is the second time, though, that the Conservatives have put forward a motion that I think is problematic or that the committee deems inappropriate—not to presuppose the outcome of the vote.

[*English*]

What's the expression? Make a mistake once, shame on me; make a mistake twice, shame on you. Fool me once, I think the expression is.

[*Translation*]

That's precisely what's happening here. I am asking my fellow committee members, imploring them, even, to vote against this motion for a variety of reasons. We don't want to see history repeat itself, with the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics being used to conduct a witch hunt, as was the case under previous governments.

We should be bolstering the work of our independent officers of Parliament to help them do their jobs properly. We should be asking them what they need to make sure they have the tools and resources to do their jobs. I think it's crucial that we support them in their roles.

Doing so ensures they, not we, are the ones conducting the investigations into the members of the government and the honourable members of Parliament. That's the best course of action, but I know it isn't as satisfying for those with something to gain politically.

• (1350)

Nevertheless, that's how we should proceed because it's in everyone's interest.

Madam Chair, I'll be voting against this motion for the reasons I've just outlined. Above all, I want to make sure we get to a place where, rather than playing partisan games, the committee supports and bolsters the work of the individuals to whom the responsibility has been entrusted.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: I have Mrs. Shanahan and then Mr. Kurek.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I have nothing further, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I have a couple of final comments to make in the last few moments.

I find it interesting that the members opposite have changed their tack. They went from looking at the motion for a few technical things that could be adjusted, to talk about the scope of family, a few definitions and whatnot, to now. They just don't like it and won't be supporting it.

I took very seriously some of the issues that were brought to my attention in the initial motion, and asked that it be withdrawn from the committee, because I wanted to ensure that it could be palatable when brought forward again. As was mentioned earlier, I didn't receive any feedback on that matter from any members outside my own caucus. There was an opportunity, and it wasn't taken advantage of.

We heard the debate at the beginning of this meeting, the debate at the last meeting, talking about the motion's scope, and family and whatnot. They didn't propose an amendment. My colleague from the Bloc did. The members opposite voted against it. I would note that the previous motion was withdrawn with unanimous consent. So the Liberals opposite agreed to that, I would note for the record.

They've changed this tack, and it's obvious. What could have been an opportunity to shed light on the ethical failings of the government and to simply ensure that light be shone on all aspects of where these relationships may or may not exist, Canadians deserve to know. My constituents are asking very clearly that I get answers as their representative in Canada's Parliament, and I don't want to speak for what the other members of this committee may be hearing from their constituents, but I have a suspicion that their constituents would like answers as well.

What started as a gesture of goodwill, a willingness to adjust the motion so it would be more amendable to some of the concerns raised, has now turned into, as my colleague suggested, something that looks like more of a cover-up, and I think that's incredibly unfortunate.

We had the opportunity, and still have the opportunity, to see light shone on a decision by cabinet. This wasn't every member of

Parliament. These were decisions by cabinet, by members of the Queen's Privy Council. They have a responsibility to understand conflicts of interest, understand family relationships in that regard and, quite frankly, even with the wording, although I did support the amendment, I think that Canadians understand what we're trying to accomplish here, and that's to get answers.

So I would encourage all members of this committee from all parties to take a good, hard look at what they are going to say to their constituents on their doorsteps when they had an opportunity to shed light on such an important issue.

With that, I will close my comments.

Thank you.

• (1355)

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Kurek.

We will now allow Mr. Kurek's motion, that a letter be sent by the chair to the members of the cabinet, to stand for a vote.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Can I get a recorded vote?

The Chair: Mr. Barrett, we would love to make that a recorded vote.

(Motion negated: nays 6; yeas 4)

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, the floor is yours.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Madam Chair, I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize to you for making some of my comments very personal today. I will endeavour not to do so in the future.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fergus. That was very kind.

With that, ladies and gentlemen, this committee is now adjourned.

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