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Chair: The Honourable Geoff Regan



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• (1835)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 29 of the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations.

Pursuant to order of reference of Wednesday, September 23, 2020, the committee is meeting for its study of Canada-China relations.

[Translation]

This is a hybrid meeting, pursuant to the motion passed by the House on January 25, 2021.

[English]

Today's meeting is in accordance with paragraph (c) of the House order of Wednesday, June 2, which provides the following:

[Translation]

the Minister of Health shall be ordered to appear before the special committee, for at least three hours, at a televised meeting, to be held within two weeks of the adoption of this order, to discuss the documents and the matters referred to in them;

[English]

As you all know, these documents are related to a transfer of viruses that occurred in March 2019, as well as the revocation of security clearances and the termination of employment of two scientists from the National Microbiology Laboratory.

I would also like to remind everyone that while the witnesses must answer all of the questions the committee puts to them, members have been urged to display appropriate courtesy and fairness when questioning witnesses.

I would now like to welcome the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health, as well as Iain Stewart, president of the Public Health Agency of Canada, and Dr. Guillaume Poliquin, acting vice-president of the National Microbiology Laboratory.

Thank you all for being here.

I will now turn to Minister Hajdu for the opening remarks.

Minister, please proceed. You have five minutes.

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and committee members, for the invitation to appear before the committee today.

As you know, on June 2, the House of Commons issued an order for unredacted documents pertaining to the transfer of viruses from the National Microbiology Lab, or NML, to the Wuhan Institute of Virology in March 2019, and the nature of the departure of two NML scientists.

We appreciate Parliament's desire for scrutiny of this matter and, of course, value the role of parliamentarians in holding government accountable.

At the same time, we are responsible for ensuring that sensitive material is protected and that the proper mechanisms are in place to safeguard any personal and security-related information. In this particular case, we have endeavoured to comply with the intent of the order while also respecting the law and ensuring that privacy and security-related information is, indeed, properly safeguarded.

Accordingly, on June 4, I referred this matter to the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians for its review. At that time, the Public Health Agency of Canada also provided that committee with the unredacted documents requested by Parliament.

I welcome this opportunity to explain how the Government of Canada arrived at that decision. I underscore, however, that there are matters that are under consideration by the Speaker and the House on the same issues. These matters will be addressed in those forums.

I would like to begin with a few words about the National Microbiology Lab, which provides and continues to provide critical scientific leadership for Canada in response to COVID-19.

Right now, for example, the NML is conducting more than 100 research studies on COVID-19, which range from designing and testing vaccines to investigating treatments to understanding the genetic fingerprint of the virus.

International collaboration is an essential part of this scientific work, and throughout the pandemic the NML has worked with its partners, both inside and outside of Canada, to combat this disease.

I'll reiterate that the two former employees named in the order are no longer employed by the Public Health Agency of Canada. Further, as I had noted previously in the House, there is no connection between the transfer of viruses cited in the order and the subsequent departure of these employees, and there is no link to COVID-19.

I cannot disclose any additional information for privacy and security reasons, but I can say that the National Microbiology Lab will continue to play a critical role in protecting the health and safety of Canadians.

The Government of Canada is committed to transparency in its work, and we endeavour to be as open as possible with Parliament and Canadians while at the same time protecting sensitive information. It is a balancing act that requires us to consider countervailing laws and duties and the public interest.

In this case, the Public Health Agency of Canada has appeared before this committee twice to answer questions to the extent possible. It has also responded promptly to all requests for information, while respecting its obligations under the laws passed by Parliament. More broadly, senior officials from the Public Health Agency of Canada have made almost 30 committee appearances since May 2020, and as minister, I have appeared some 25 times since the pandemic began.

We are and we remain committed to being as responsive and available as possible to parliamentarians.

The Government of Canada recognizes that the oversight provided by Parliament is essential to a well-functioning government. We respect the need for transparency and the importance of accountability before Canadians.

However, in this particular case, the information requested has both privacy and national security implications. Complying with the order without having proper safeguards in place would put sensitive information at risk of being released publicly.

That's why I've referred this matter to the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians. This committee has the statutory mechanisms and protections needed to safely review sensitive information while maintaining its confidentiality.

As I mentioned at the outset, I've already provided the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians with the material requested. The Public Health Agency of Canada will cooperate with the committee as it conducts its review.

Thank you very much.

● (1840)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to the first round of questions beginning with Mr. Chong for six minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing in front of our committee.

You said that you sent the documents to NSICOP, so I'd like to ask some questions about NSICOP.

First, when you sent the documents there, did you ask the committee to review this matter?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I provided the documents and referred the issue to NSICOP, as you refer to it, as it is the appropriate committee with the appropriate level of security.

Hon. Michael Chong: Did you provide any instructions to the committee?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: My letter refers the documents to the committee and suggests that this committee would be more appropriate for review of the documents.

Hon. Michael Chong: I'll go to my next question. The 2021-22 departmental plan for the NSICOP secretariat indicates that its core responsibility changed earlier this year from "Assist the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians in fulfilling its mandate" to "Parliamentary review of national security and intelligence activities."

Why was that core responsibility changed earlier this year?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry, I can't speak to the core responsibility of NSICOP and why any changes have happened to that committee.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

Since you sent the documents to NSICOP, you obviously know about the committee. Can you tell us who hires and fires the members of the committee?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I will just say that it's a committee that does have representatives, including from your party, on it and they're very hard-working members of the committee who have the appropriate clearance to be able to review sensitive documents. Obviously that committee is tasked with reviewing documents that are sensitive in nature.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

Minister, subsection 5(1) of the act governing the committee says that the Prime Minister hires and fires the members of the committee and they hold office at his pleasure. Furthermore, subsection 6(1) of the act gives the Prime Minister the power to determine the committee chair.

Do you, Minister, have the right to refuse the committee's request for further information and do you have the right to block a committee's review of any matter?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I will repeat again, through the chair, that that committee is the appropriate committee to review documents that are sensitive. The documents have been provided in an unredacted manner to the committee for that reason.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Minister.

I note that subsection 16(1) gives you the authority as minister to refuse information requested by the committee, and paragraph 8(1)(b) gives you the right to block the committee's review of any matter.

My second-to-final question for you is this. Does the Prime Minister have the power to direct the committee to change reports and remove information from reports before those reports are made public?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm not understanding the line of questioning.

I understand that the Conservative Party has two members on that committee and I'm wondering if there is no faith in their own caucus members to do the work that the committee is set up to do. In fact, that committee has the security clearance and those documents have been provided in full, unredacted form, so clearly there is an interest of the government to share these documents with the committee that is appropriately tasked to do the review.

Hon. Michael Chong: Let me ask you a very simple yes or no question, Minister. Is NSICOP a committee of Parliament?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, NSICOP was established exactly to review documents and matters that have a national security—

Hon. Michael Chong: I understand that.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —or other privacy considerations, and that's why I've sent the letter to refer this matter to that committee and provided the full unredacted documents to the only committee of parliamentarians that does have the security clearance and adequate safety protocols.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you. I'll answer the question. NSICOP is not a committee of Parliament. This is stated in subsection 4(3):

The Committee is not a committee of either House of Parliament or of both Houses.

Not only is this committee not a committee of Parliament, MPs and senators on the committee actually give up their parliamentary rights. Subsection 12(1) says:

Despite any other law, no member or former member of the Committee may claim immunity based on parliamentary privilege in a proceeding against them in relation to a contravention of subsection 11(1) or of a provision of the Security of Information Act or in relation to any other proceeding arising from any disclosure of information that is prohibited under that subsection.

So NSICOP is not a committee of Parliament. Its members give up the rights they have as parliamentarians. Its members and its chair are hired and fired by the Prime Minister. Any minister has the right to refuse the committee information and block the committee's review, and the Prime Minister has the power to change committee reports before they are made public.

It's clearly the wrong committee to hold the government accountable for national security breaches. It's like the fox guarding the henhouse, and more importantly, by sending these documents to NSICOP, you are in violation of two orders of this committee and an order of the House.

Minister, with the greatest of respect, for the last year and a half during this pandemic, you have been telling Canadians they should follow public health orders while you and your agency have thumbed your noses at two orders of this committee and one order of the House of Commons.

So much for the rule of law.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1845)

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

We'll now go to Mr. Fragiskatos, for six minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you for being here today, Minister. Thank

you for the work you've been doing throughout the pandemic. I will say the same to Mr. Stewart. It's good to see you again, sir.

Minister, I have specific questions regarding the National Microbiology Lab just to set the context.

Could you elaborate on the security in place at the lab itself?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Because of the nature of the work that the lab does, there is a focus on security. It's best if I turn this question over to the director of the lab, Dr. Poliquin, to speak about the security protocols.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin (Acting Vice-President, National Microbiology Laboratory, Public Health Agency of Canada): I would like to emphasize the fact that the National Microbiology Laboratory is entrusted with a number of key responsibilities when it comes to the oversight of the precious collections we have here.

The overview of security procedures is an ongoing consideration for us as we continue to review best practices, security needs and requirements in the context of the evolving needs of the day. Through our science excellence initiative, we have a robust manner of reviewing all these security suites as they are needed.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Continuing with questions on the lab itself, Dr. Poliquin, could you elaborate on the security screening that is applied to visitors and employees of the lab.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: All employees and visitors, or visiting officials, are required to undergo a security screening process. The security requirements, or the clearance required, will depend on the nature of the work to be undertaken. This will be assessed on an as-needed basis. All individuals, having access to the lab, will undergo a security clearance.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: This is not a straightforward and simple process. It does require checks. It does require that sort of background work that is necessary to be done.

Would you say that's a fair statement?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: It's core to our business. We take security very seriously and ensure that appropriate screening is followed.

As directives on security evolve, our policies are aligned, and updated to ensure that we are in compliance with both directives and specific legislation as they pertain to the security of biological materials, including the Human Pathogens and Toxins Act.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: What's the process for taking on new researchers at the lab when there's a need for new researchers to be employed? What is the search like? How is that carried out? What could you share with us on that point?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Scientists who will become part of the NML complement, as employees, undergo a very rigorous security screening process. Depending on their particular line of work, they will require not only a security clearance protocol but also very in-depth training that is appropriate to their level of work.

In addition, scientists are sometimes called to work with other institutions or in collaboration, at which point a number of different mechanisms are in place, including the development of collaborative research agreements, or other forms of collaborative research frameworks that are appropriate for the work at hand.

• (1850)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: In terms of collaboration, let me ask you further about that. Where there is a need for collaboration, is it initiated by the researchers themselves, or is it part of a dialogue between you and researchers on the partnerships that could exist with fellow researchers internationally?

How does that come to be?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Mr. Chair, when we are engaging on collaborative research projects, it will depend on the nature of the work and the goal to be achieved. I would like to emphasize the fact that collaboration, both domestically and internationally, is core to our ability to be a leading institution in response to public health. We are dependent on our partners to be able to do our work to the best of their ability. We take great pride in our ability to be a domestic and international resource and pride in those collaborations.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

I only have few seconds left, but I want to thank you for the work that's done. We're very fortunate as a country to have the lab in place in Winnipeg, and it was great to hear that COVID-19 work specifically is being carried out there.

I'll stop there. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

[Translation]

I will now give Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe the floor for six minutes.

Welcome to the committee, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank all of my colleagues who are here, as well as the Minister.

Minister, you said on the CTV program *Question Period* that if China had concealed information from the world concerning its management of the COVID-19 pandemic, it should be held to account. I think that all of us sitting in committee today agree with that statement.

Do you believe that the Public Health Agency of Canada and your government should also be held to account if you conceal information, including by sending redacted documents to a committee that reports to the Prime Minister? There seems to be a double standard.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Listen, that is why in fact we have sent unredacted documents to NSICOP, that committee, because in fact our government does believe in transparency, but in a way that does not put the safety and security of Canadians at risk in any way. This is private information, secure information; it includes information about individuals. That information is best reviewed by a committee that has the appropriate clearance and security mechanisms in place to do so carefully and in appropriate ways that protect that information.

• (1855)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Your 2019 mandate letter says:

You will also meaningfully engage with the Government Caucus and Opposition Members of Parliament, the increasingly non-partisan Senate, and Parliamentary Committees.

In the case that brings us here today, it seems clear that you are refusing to collaborate with the opposition and with parliamentary committees. You are sending unredacted documents to the committee that reports to the Prime Minister.

Am I wrong in saying that you are not complying exactly with what your mandate letter asks of you?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'll just point out that I'm here for three hours. It's likely my 26th appearance before a parliamentary committee. I've appeared at a number of Senate committees as well on a number of other issues. I continue to make myself available to committees to be accountable for the decisions of the government and for the operations of the various roles and responsibilities that I have, and I will continue to do that. But as I have stated, there is an appropriate place for documents of this nature, and those documents have been submitted in a way that can actually protect their privacy, yet have the scrutiny of parliamentarians from all parties.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes. So your opinion is that the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations is not the one that should examine these unredacted documents.

You are now telling us officially that the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations is not the appropriate committee to examine these unredacted documents. Is that correct?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: As I said, documents were provided to this committee that redacted personal or security information, but the fully unredacted documents have been provided to a committee where parliamentarians have the appropriate clearance and training and protocols in order to protect that information.

As I further said, I will continue to appear before any committee of the House that asks for my appearance and fully agree with the mandate of the Prime Minister that we as ministers need to work in collaboration with all parties and, indeed, with both houses.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Minister, do you believe that all of the members who sit on this committee are not suitable for examining confidential documents?

Do you doubt the members who sit on this committee?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I would ask if you have the appropriate security clearance to be able to look at documents that are of national security interest. Also, I would say, do you doubt that your colleagues on the committee, who have the appropriate level of clearance, are able to do that job?

Listen, we know that this committee has received documents. Some of the information has been redacted to protect the privacy of individuals and the national security interests. That information is fully available from the unredacted documents at the other committee.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[Translation]

Thank you very much, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Now we will go to Mr. Harris for six minutes, please.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister Hajdu, for joining us this evening.

Mr. Chong asked some questions relating to the legislation for NSICOP. One thing he referred to, of course, was that the members of the committee are appointed by the Governor in Council on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. According to subsection 5(1) of the legislation, they hold office “during pleasure until the dissolution of Parliament following their appointment.”

That means to me, Minister, that if there is an election called, the committee would be dissolved. There would be no members of that committee, and any work that they were doing would, in fact, disappear.

Is that correct?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry. I don't feel qualified to speak to what the procedure of the committee is on dissolution of Parliament.

I can say that the committee has the fully unredacted documents at their disposal now.

Mr. Jack Harris: The legislation says very simply that the committee members hold office during pleasure until the dissolution of Parliament following their appointment, so they wouldn't exist as members of the committee thereafter. That's what the legislation says. I guess anyone listening can draw their own conclusions.

The legislation also provides that the minister may withhold information as well to which the committee would otherwise be entitled if there's information that constitutes special operational infor-

mation and the provision of the information would be injurious to national security.

Has any information been withheld from NSICOP under that provision?

• (1900)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: My understanding is that President Stewart has forwarded a complete set of unredacted documents, but I will turn to him to say a few more words.

Mr. Iain Stewart (President, Public Health Agency of Canada): As Minister Hajdu said, we provided a complete and unredacted package of all materials to the committee.

Mr. Jack Harris: Materials coming from where, Mr. Stewart? Are they materials that were in possession of PHAC? Is that it?

Mr. Iain Stewart: Mr. Chair, and honourable member, if you think about the package of materials we provided to you, parts were withheld and parts were blacked out. The totality of that package was provided to NSICOP.

Mr. Jack Harris: So nothing beyond that package was provided at all.

Mr. Iain Stewart: Exactly the materials that were requested in the House motion were provided.

Mr. Jack Harris: Mr. Stewart, were any instructions provided to the committee by virtue of what they are requested to do?

Mr. Iain Stewart: My material was just a transmittal letter and the materials.

Mr. Jack Harris: So what we have is a committee that has been sent a set of documents with no instructions. They're just there. They're sitting in their inbox. It's up to them what to do with them.

Minister Hajdu, you haven't requested them to do anything with those documents or anything with the issues that have been raised in this committee or raised in relation to this matter. Is that correct?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: As I said earlier to this exact question, the documents have been forwarded to the committee with the suggestion that this committee would be more equipped to perform the review of those documents.

Mr. Jack Harris: They would be, in your view, more equipped to perform the review of those documents, but in terms of what exactly they're expected to do, do you know if they have any investigative powers?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry, I don't have the terms of reference for that particular committee, other than my understanding that, again, the appropriate level of clearance and security clearance is why that committee is better suited to look at these particular documents.

Mr. Jack Harris: So they're only looking at documents. They're not conducting anything that they don't decide to do themselves. You haven't asked them to do anything and no one has asked them to do anything.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Certainly, if they choose to study the issue, that is at their prerogative, and they have the full set of documents from which to do so.

Mr. Jack Harris: So you're just basically passing them off to them, because you don't want to comply with the order of the House.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Well, I wouldn't put words in my mouth, MP Harris. I think that's inappropriate. What I have said is that this committee does not have the level of clearance to handle these documents that have sensitive information.

Obviously, I take my responsibility very seriously, which is why I have provided a fully unredacted set of documents to the committee with the appropriate clearance.

Mr. Jack Harris: We'll have to leave that to another forum.

In the letter to the House of Commons committee, president Stewart said that PHAC had initiated “[a] number of review processes...relating to possible breaches of security protocols at the [National Microbiology Laboratory] in 2018”. I'd like to ask you a question that has been suggested by the Library of Parliament analysts: What prompted PHAC to begin reviewing possible security protocol breaches at the National Microbiology Laboratory?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry, who is this question directed to?

Mr. Jack Harris: It's directed to you, Minister. If you are unable to answer it, perhaps Mr. Stewart can answer it.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I was not the minister in 2018. I certainly will turn to Mr. Stewart, although I believe we're at time now.

The Chair: We are at time.

Mr. Stewart, can you answer in two or three words?

Mr. Iain Stewart: The factors that motivated that are part of the materials that are redacted.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

We'll now go on to the second round.

Mr. Williamson, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister and officials, it's nice to see you here this evening.

Minister, your government had a national security breach at Winnipeg's microbiology lab. What can you tell us about that?

• (1905)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: As I have said repeatedly, the full documents requested by this committee have been submitted in their unredacted form to the appropriate committee for study.

Mr. John Williamson: You objected to MP Harris putting words in your mouth earlier, when he was just asking the question, but you said earlier that you're under instructions to work in collaboration with both houses of Parliament—except you're not doing that. You're thumbing your nose at Parliament and your government's walking into contempt of Parliament by not fulfilling the order from parliamentarians. Why is that?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: MP Williamson, I would disagree with your assessment. In fact, we've provided redacted documents to this committee and fully unredacted documents to another committee, the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentari-

ans, for their full review. As I've said repeatedly in the House and elsewhere, including in front of all of you, I take national security seriously, as well as the privacy concerns that have led to this approach. As you know, those parliamentarians have the appropriate clearance to look at documents like this. Furthermore, I have repeatedly appeared in front of many committees of both houses throughout the pandemic and before, and will continue to do so.

Mr. John Williamson: Yes, except that the government has not been forthcoming. Until June 3, this committee had been told repeatedly that the reason the documents weren't forthcoming was that it was a privacy and administrative matter. It was only suddenly, earlier this month, that it became a national security matter.

Given that you've not been forthcoming, why should Parliament, parliamentarians and Canadians be satisfied when you've not fulfilled the obligation to send documents to Parliament for oversight? The government is accountable to Parliament, and ultimately to Canadians through that Parliament. Instead, you've gone to a committee where members, as MP Chong pointed out, don't have the ability to hold the government accountable, as other committees do. No matter how hard they work, no matter their standing as parliamentarians, they simply do not have that ability to hold the government accountable.

It seems to me, and I think a lot of other Canadians, that this route has been chosen because you want to hide what's in those documents. You don't want to be forthcoming about the government's errors, the national security breach and possibly how you put our nation's security at risk.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: On the contrary, with due respect, I would suggest that your insistence on having documents presented in a way that would not protect national security is exactly that: putting Canada's national security at risk and putting privacy concerns to the side. I have confidence in the parliamentarians on that committee, all parliamentarians from all parties, to do that hard work and analyze those documents and come to their conclusions. That is the appropriate place for a matter of this sensitivity.

Mr. John Williamson: I know you weren't there, nor was I, but in the 40th Parliament, opposition members of Parliament ordered the Harper government to produce documents with respect to Afghan detainees. Were opposition members wrong to do that back then?

I'll point out that those documents were then subsequently released by the government. Was it wrong for parliamentarians to push for those documents? Was it wrong for the government to release those documents?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: You're right; I wasn't there.

I think part of the approach of this government—in participation, by the way, with your party—is to have a committee that has the appropriate security clearance to be able to do those sensitive reviews of documents that have a national security aspect or a privacy consideration. That's why those documents have been provided to the NSICOP committee.

Mr. John Williamson: Chair, do I have time for one more question?

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Mr. John Williamson: If this committee could prove to you that it could fulfill the security requirements you're concerned about, would you have any objection to releasing the documents you're holding back?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: MP Williamson, I'm not interested in trading in hypotheticals. We have a committee that has the appropriate clearance.

• (1910)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. John Williamson: We don't have a parliamentary committee, but okay.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Williamson.

We'll now go on to Mr. Oliphant for five minutes, please.

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you Minister, Mr. Stewart and Monsieur Poliquin, for being with us tonight.

While, you were not there in the 40th Parliament, Minister, I was. I think this may be a question you might have for me if you got to ask us questions—and I sometimes think you should be able to. It's this: why did I abstain on the opposition-day motion that has called you to be here?

I abstained because I believe fundamentally and profoundly that Parliament has the right to call for papers and persons. I also believe that parliamentarians and Parliament has the responsibility not to call for certain papers at certain times. That was the dilemma of the 40th Parliament when the Afghan detainee papers were considered. The Speaker did rule, but he did not give unfettered access to parliamentarians. Instead, he demanded a creative approach to review those papers carefully with certain criteria being placed on them.

That was the 40th Parliament. The 41st Parliament with Mr. Harper as the prime minister did nothing, despite the opposition's call then for a process in that situation. However, in the 42nd Parliament.... While I thank you for your presence here and I thank the former minister Ralph Goodale for his work in ensuring that, should a situation happen like that again, we would have a process by which a minister could refer these requests and papers. That is what we've done. We've set up that process. To honour Parliament, you have actually, in effect, done what Parliament has asked you to do. I want to thank you for that.

As I say, Parliament is supreme. I will argue that forever. I'll also argue that parliamentarians have to be responsible. In our wisdom, parliamentarians set up that committee. What the opposition is asking you today to do is to be in contempt of the previous Parliament that set up this committee.

I think that what you have been able to do is balance the need for information to go to parliamentarians to review—who are not hired and fired by the prime minister. That is incorrect and unparliamentary language. They are appointed as order in council appointments. Yes, they will dissolve when this Parliament dissolves, as will this committee. The argument that was made by Mr. Harris doesn't make sense either because both of these committees will dissolve.

Here we are in this situation in the 43rd Parliament where we're attempting to find out what happened. We're attempting to find out with privacy laws established by this Parliament, with a committee of parliamentarians established by a previous Parliament to do those things. I think it is absolutely appropriate for parliamentarians to be concerned about what happened in the lab in Winnipeg. We are absolutely concerned about that, but at the same time, we recognize that there is a place for that to be done. It is at the NSICOP, where we have one former member of this committee as a member of that committee.

When you're asked whether or not you have doubts about us and our abilities to handle this process, I would say that you don't have doubts—and I don't want to put words in your mouth. It's not about us as individuals. Could you clarify that? This is not about us as individuals. It is not about the parliamentary system. It's about honouring what Parliament has done to create an expert committee with security clearances that will do the work that we want done as Canadians.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: First of all, thank you, MP Oliphant, for a very valuable history lesson. I appreciate it.

• (1915)

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I'm old.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I will also just say that, absolutely, my comments are in no way reflecting upon the capacity of this committee to review those documents, but rather the clearance for doing so. It is about the appropriate security clearance, of which the intent, I understand—and it was further elucidated by your comments—is the entire reason for a committee like the NSICOP. It's so that documents of this nature can be reviewed in a way that protects privacy and security concerns through obligations of the members, by the way, through that security clearance, to treat that information in a specific way. This is not a reflection of people's desires or capacities. It is a reflection of a particular security clearance.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Oliphant.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I would like to go back quickly to what Mr. Williamson said earlier.

Minister, why have the documents that initially could not be provided because of privacy suddenly become documents relating to national security?

What happened?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: The documents, as I have said, contain information that is sensitive. The documents this committee has received are redacted. However, to comply with the desire of this committee to have those documents turned over to parliamentarians.... In fact, a fully unredacted set of documents is with the NSICOP.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I asked you why the documents that initially could not be provided because of privacy have suddenly become documents relating to national security.

Why was that not stated at the outset? Why did it change?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I can't speak to the journey of how and at what time the documents have been shared. I've communicated with the NSICOP and informed the officials that the NSICOP is the appropriate committee to do this review.

Accordingly, President Stewart has provided a fully unredacted set of documents for that committee to do that review.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Minister, when did you first know that these were documents relating to national security?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, to the member, again, these documents are reviewed through the agency and with appropriate legal advice. It has been determined that these documents contain issues of privacy and national security. Therefore, they have been provided to a committee that has the appropriate clearance to review them.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Minister, were you afraid that there would be leaks if these unredacted documents were provided to the committee? Were you afraid that this committee would make those documents public in some way?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: This is not about the character or capacity of parliamentarians to review documents, but rather the level of security clearance that they possess.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Next we have Mr. Harris, for two minutes and a half, please.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Chair.

Minister Hajdu, could you tell us, prior to the security protocol breach review that I discussed, did CSIS or the RCMP or any other entity warn the PHAC about intellectual property being shared with China without authorization?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I can't speak to that question, Mr. Chair. I don't have information in that regard.

Mr. Jack Harris: Mr. Stewart, do you have information on that?

Mr. Iain Stewart: As per my previous answer, Mr. Chair, I'm not able to respond to that.

Mr. Jack Harris: Minister, between 2016 and early 2020, according to media reports this year, seven scientists at the National Microbiology Laboratory co-published six studies on infectious diseases with Chinese military researchers.

Why is it that scientists at the National Microbiology Lab collaborate with Chinese military researchers?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I can't speak to those particular collaborations, but I can speak to intellectual and research collaboration in general.

It's an incredibly important part of understanding infectious diseases, viruses and treatments. As I said in my opening statement, the National Microbiology Lab has a long history of collaboration, globally, to further research, to come up with treatments and to push forward scientific knowledge in a number of infectious disease areas.

We should be very grateful that we have a National Microbiology Lab of this calibre in this country, which has contributed to some breakthrough understandings of a variety of different diseases—

Mr. Jack Harris: Minister, if I may interrupt, the question was, why? Do you have any reason why the National Microbiology Lab would collaborate on infectious diseases with Chinese military researchers? That's the question.

• (1920)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I don't have answers for you. I don't have the history of how collaboration is established at the National Microbiology Lab, but I will reiterate that, in general, the principle of collaborative research is an incredibly important one. As we have seen, the national research on vaccinology, for example, has led to the breakthrough of the mRNA—

Mr. Jack Harris: We understand that.

How many other military organizations has the microbiology lab collaborated with?

Perhaps Dr. Stewart could answer that question.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm sorry, but we're out of time for Mr. Harris. Perhaps at his next opportunity he'll get the chance to get an answer to his question.

We will now go on to Mr. Genuis for five minutes, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): I'm going to give the round to Mr. Paul-Hus, actually, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Paul-Hus, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hello, Minister, and thank you for being with us.

At one of the meetings we had recently, Mr. Garneau, your colleague at Foreign Affairs, said that there was no longer any collaboration between the Winnipeg and Wuhan laboratories now.

Is that the case? If so, how long has it been the case?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I can't speak to that.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Why?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I don't have the information.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Mr. Stewart, is there still any collaboration between the Winnipeg and Wuhan laboratories?

[English]

Mr. Iain Stewart: Dr. Poliquin, do you want to talk about the state of collaborative research?

[Translation]

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Yes, right.

At present, we are no longer collaborating with the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: When did all collaboration end?

Was it when the incidents occurred or very recently?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: In the academic and research communities, collaborations are often led by a particular researcher. When the researchers leave an institution, naturally those collaborations tend to...

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Since when, Dr. Poliquin, have we no longer had any relations with Wuhan?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: To be clear, there are two processes.

First, there are active collaborations. Do we have any joint research plans with them? No, we have not had any joint research plans with that institute for several months.

Regarding the analysis of data from research that has already ended, the process is ongoing.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Thank you.

Minister, you know that Dr. Qiu brought students from China to work in the laboratory.

The *Globe and Mail* recently reported that one of those scientists was Feihu Yan, from the Academy of Military Medical Sciences of the People's Liberation Army.

How do you explain the fact that this person passed the security checks and ended up at the Winnipeg laboratory?

[English]

The Chair: Madam Minister, you're muted.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: My apologies.

Actually I didn't speak to that, but I will turn to Dr. Poliquin to speak about clearances and students, and the lab in general.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: At this point, given how long it has gone on, you should be aware of what is happening in this case. I imagine you have done a detailed summary of what went on there.

Do you, yourself, know what is going on and what happened? Why was accreditation given?

Certainly Dr. Poliquin knows, but I imagine you also know.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Actually, you're implying that I would be directly interfering with the operational aspects of the lab, which would be an overreach on my part. So I will speak to Dr. Poliquin about the processes of the lab.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Excuse me, Mr. Chair.

I am simply asking the Minister of Health whether she is aware that the individual in question, Feihu Yan, was given accreditations. Does she know this? Does she know how it happened?

If she doesn't know it, we can go to Dr. Poliquin.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, I will turn to Dr. Poliquin to speak about the lab processes in general. In terms of individuals, though, under question, those are part of the documents turned over to the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians.

Dr. Poliquin, in general?

● (1925)

[Translation]

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Thank you.

Regarding individuals in particular, we are not able to discuss personal details.

Regarding the accreditation process, everyone who comes to work in the laboratory must undergo a security clearance process before starting.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Can you confirm that at present, no one directly or indirectly related to the communist Chinese regime is working in Winnipeg?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Mr. Chair, if I understood correctly, the member is asking a question about all employees of the laboratory?

The Chair: Absolutely. Perhaps you can answer in three words.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: I would like to reiterate that we have a uniform security clearance process for everyone who comes to work in the laboratory.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Paul-Hus.

[*English*]

We'll now go to Ms. Yip, for five minutes, please.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): This is National Public Service Week, so I want to thank the public servants, which include senior officials from the PHAC, who have made almost 30 committee appearances.

I also want to thank the Minister for her hard work, ensuring that Canadians have been kept safe during this pandemic.

Minister, we keep hearing two different stories from opposition members. On the one hand, they are deeply concerned about national security threats; on the other hand, they are asking for unredacted documents to be publicly shared when it has been made clear that there are clear national security concerns about doing so.

Are you concerned about the opposition's attitude towards national security concerns in this situation?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much MP Yip, and thank you for all of your hard work during the pandemic. It's been an honour to work with you as you work so hard to serve your constituents.

It is, again, important that we respect the documents in a way that does protect the privacy and confidentiality of the information contained within them. We have a committee of parliamentarians that is appropriate to review security documents of this nature.

It is concerning to see opposition members play a game with national security. In fact, Canadians expect us to do a very good job of protecting national security. That's exactly what that committee is designed to do, to review documents that are sensitive in nature in way that protects the information and protects the health and safety of Canadians.

Ms. Jean Yip: In your opening statement, you underscored that there are matters under consideration by the Speaker of the House on the same issues.

What do you mean by the same issues?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Obviously, this committee has asked for those documents. The Speaker is considering those requests. I have attempted to fully comply with the request of this committee to provide information in a way that is appropriate, including by offering my officials to appear a number of times to answer questions.

We will continue to do that. We'll continue to make ourselves available to this committee and any committee of the House and, in fact, any committee of the Senate. We will also use appropriate mechanisms to deliver documents in fully unredacted ways, so that

committees can pursue studies in ways that respect privacy and security considerations.

Ms. Jean Yip: Thank you for making yourself so readily available.

My next question is for Dr. Poliquin. Right now, the NML is conducting more than 100 research studies on COVID-19.

Could you elaborate on some of these studies that you think will be helpful in combatting COVID-19?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: The National Microbiology Lab has sprung into action since the early days of the pandemic and delivered the first functional diagnostic test within five days of the sequence being published by Chinese collaborators. It has continued to work tirelessly to advance the science.

Some of our work has contributed directly to our understanding of the periods of infectivity in individuals who were infected with COVID-19, and during their recovery.

We have developed a national wastewater surveillance system that is able to provide early warnings of resurgence. We were sequencing, in May alone, 30,000 genomes to understand the threat posed by variants of concern. We continue to work on the advancement of a number of potential vaccine candidates should new technologies be needed to meet the threat posed by variants.

That's a broad overview, but we are proud of the work we've been doing.

● (1930)

Ms. Jean Yip: Thank you.

Can you elaborate on any international collaborations with some of the work you just mentioned?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Absolutely. For example, our understanding of variants of concern in particular is contingent on us being open and honest collaborators through global networks, so that as different countries have learned more about variants and isolate them, they are shared freely so that we can advance our understanding.

The Chair: Thank you. Thank you, Ms. Yip.

We'll now go on to the subsequent round, beginning with Mr. Genuis, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I was quite struck by the line of questioning at the beginning by Ms. Yip. She and other Liberal members actually voted twice to demand these documents. These were unanimous motions by the committee to provide unredacted documents that Ms. Yip and her colleagues voted for. It's interesting to see that she's now determined that it would be irresponsible to request those documents.

Minister, I have some specific questions for you.

First of all, could you confirm that the Public Health Agency reports to you and that the decision about which documents are released and how to release them is ultimately your decision?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: The Public Health Agency of Canada I suppose does report to me, although they have a president and chief public health officer, who I am very proud to say give me unfettered advice on a regular basis. I will say that President Stewart released those redacted documents to the NSICOP—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, I really do have limited time.

Can you just clarify—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —and I sent the letter to the committee to—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Was it your direction, though?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: President Stewart and I discussed releasing those documents, and I agreed that it was an appropriate decision.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Minister. That's clear.

In documents we did receive, the former head of the lab, Matthew Gilmour, raised significant concerns about the proposed transfer, saying that more information was needed about what the intended use was and also whether there was a materials transfer agreement. He said there needed to be one, and there wasn't, as far as we know.

Should there have been a materials transfer agreement in place before the materials were transferred?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I can't speak to that question, but perhaps Dr. Poliquin can.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, I'm interested in your view.

Is it your view that there should be materials transfer agreements in place when these things are transferred?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, Dr. Poliquin is responsible for the operation of the lab in accordance with the rules and the responsibilities of the people who work in that lab, and that's the best place to speak to—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, it's a question of law and policy of the Government of Canada as to whether materials transfer agreements are required when we're sending material like this overseas. If you want to get back to the committee in writing about that, I would certainly appreciate it.

Mr. Gilmore raised these concerns, and he asked about how the materials were intended to be used.

Is there a policy, at the Government of Canada level, which requires verification of the intended use of materials that are sent, or is it the policy of the government that we simply trust the requesting lab about their stated intended uses?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, I think Dr. Poliquin is best placed to talk about the relationships with participating research labs.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, I'm not interested in the particular relationships; I'm interested in the policies of the Government of Canada with respect to what is required in these cases.

In general, when there is a proposed transfer to another lab, is it the position of the government that there should be verification of

the intended use, or is it the position that you trust what the recipient says?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, these are relationships that have stringent rules around how samples are used. I will turn to Dr. Poliquin. He can speak to the processes in place to ensure the safe use of samples.

Dr. Poliquin.

• (1935)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, I'm interested in your response on this. Dr. Poliquin can follow up in writing at a later point, and I would welcome that.

Although we're meeting for three hours, it is in my view still limited time, given the issues we're dealing with.

I want to ask you this. Mr. Gilmour, subsequent to raising those concerns, left the lab and the country rather suddenly in the middle of the pandemic.

Do you know why Mr. Gilmour left his job, and did you have any conversations with Mr. Gilmour? Did you have a courtesy call? Did you have any discussions with him around the time of his departure?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I didn't speak to Mr. Gilmour. Perhaps Dr. Poliquin can speak to the renewal of the lab lead.

However, I will also say this. Obviously he is entitled to a certain degree of privacy for why he chose to leave. Again, with regard to people's HR, because personal employment choices are...really, this is private information.

I suppose that's a question you could have posed to him. He would have been more appropriate to answer it.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, I understand that. I wanted to know if you had spoken to him or if you were aware....

Can I ask you, Minister, at a general level: Do you think we should be co-operating with the militaries of states that are committing genocide? Are there sort of moral limits in your view to research co-operation? Should we say that, because of the things those militaries are involved in, we shouldn't be co-operating with them, or is it from your perspective sort of open-ended, and we'll co-operate with anyone on research in the name of research co-operation?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: That's an interesting question. I would say that it's important that we continue to uphold human rights and dignity and a life free of violence, no matter what we do, and have that at the front of our lens.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

We'll now go on to Ms. Zann for five minutes, please.

If we don't have Ms. Zann—

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.): It's my turn, I think.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Dubourg.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is my turn to thank the Minister, who is very busy, for being here. She has even said that she has taken part in 25 meetings since the pandemic began. I also want to thank her for all the work she has done during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also because of her participation and her contribution that we are where we are today.

I want to welcome our witnesses, Mr. Stewart and Dr. Poliquin, too. This is not the first time they have appeared before us, but I would like to come back to a few points.

During this meeting, and even before, in the House, the opposition has often risen to somehow try to put down the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians. It is made up of parliamentarians, and some parliamentarians are sending the message that the committee is of no importance. I was a member myself when it was created, and I can speak to the entire process I participated in to obtain a maximum security clearance. I can speak to the number of questions that each member had to answer and the number of examinations that each member had to pass to be able to sit on that important committee.

The committee is also composed of parliamentarians from the parties in the House. The party leaders, including the leaders of the Conservative Party and the NDP, had to submit the names of the members they wanted to sit on the committee. Those parliamentarians then underwent checks.

I can also point out to the members that when the committee was created, it was made up of Liberals, Conservatives and New Democrats. Diane Finley and Rob Nicholson, both from the Conservative Party, were members. Murray Rankin from the NDP was also a member. There were also senators from various groups who were members of the committee, which is supported by an independent secretariat.

The committee decides its own procedures. We always held our meetings in camera, in secure facilities, and even my employees could not know where we were meeting. We also considered how such committees work in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, Australia and France. Our job is to ask questions from a government-wide perspective and make recommendations.

In addition, in his news release announcing the creation of the committee, the Prime Minister wrote that it was going to help us ensure that our national security agencies continue to keep Canadians safe in a way that also safeguards our values, rights, and freedoms. The National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians Act received Royal assent. So the committee may review the legislative, regulatory, policy, administrative and financial framework for national security and intelligence. We fulfilled our mandate and met with all members of the security and intelligence community, including members of the RCMP and CSIS.

Minister, you responded to the request from the Standing Committee on Canada-China Relations, but you could not provide us with those documents because the committee members do not have that security clearance. So you did well to send it to the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, whose members have the necessary security clearance to analyze all of those documents and then report on them.

We also have to protect Canadians.

Minister, I want to tell you that you did well to send those documents to the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians.

• (1940)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dubourg.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to continue in the same vein as my friend Mr. Genuis. So that it is quite clear for the Minister, I am going to ask my question as simply as possible.

Is there a connection between the departure of Matthew Gilmour from the National Microbiology Laboratory and the actions of Ms. Qiu and Mr. Cheng?

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, asking questions about an individual's reasons for departure is likely inappropriate for this particular committee. This is a personal decision that the director of the lab made, and I'm not going to speak about his decisions or departure—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Right, thank you, Minister.

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —from the lab.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: There are still...

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Probably it's best to ask that question of the individual, and you had the opportunity to do so.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We know that Mr. Gilmour expressed concerns about sending the Ebola and Nipah viruses to the Wuhan laboratory.

I understand that you can't answer on Mr. Gilmour's behalf, but this question is really about you.

What was the response of the Public Health Agency of Canada, the PHAC, when Mr. Gilmour expressed concerns about sending the virus? Surely he received a response.

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Dr. Poliquin, would you like to speak about this?

[*Translation*]

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Thank you, Minister.

It is important to note that the fact that Dr. Gilmour raised questions about the transfer is a normal part of our transfer process. It is one of the important responsibilities of the laboratory managers, to note those questions.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's fine. What was the PHAC's response?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: A lot of work was done to prepare and obtain the right documents to support the transfer, as you see in the rest of the documents.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So it would have no connection with Dr. Gilmour's subsequent departure.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: I can't speak to Dr. Gilmour's motivations.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So no one at the PHAC and the laboratory knows about it. Even the Minister of Health is unaware of why Dr. Gilmour left. That is the answer I'm getting.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

Now we'll go to Mr. Harris for two minutes and thirty seconds, please.

• (1945)

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Chair.

I'd just like to follow up on the question regarding the collaboration with the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Dr. Poliquin, you suggested that there is no existing collaboration with the Wuhan laboratory, and The Globe and Mail reports that PHAC informed them in May that collaboration on new projects had ceased. Since 2019, there have been no new projects.

Is it a matter of policy, Minister, that the Government of Canada and PHAC will not collaborate with the Wuhan Institute of Virology? Is that a matter of policy?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, the lab pursues research endeavours based on the research interests and categories of its determination, so it's best for Dr. Poliquin to speak about their research collaboration processes.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: To be clear, as we are asked to potentially collaborate on research endeavours by participants from across the globe, we approach potential collaboration requests, or vice versa when we potentially initiate them from the lab, with a number of important questions to ensure that the potential of the collaboration outweighs any potential risk of the said collaboration and, if there are any risks identified, that they be mitigated appropriately.

Mr. Jack Harris: Is it a matter of policy not to collaborate with the Wuhan Institute of Virology? Is it now the policy of the NML to do that?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Any request for collaboration would be assessed on the basis of their merits and of the potential implications thereof.

Mr. Jack Harris: We were told that co-operation with the Wuhan Institute of Virology ended when Dr. Qui, Dr. Cheng and the students had their security access revoked on July 5, 2019. Are you saying there is no connection between those two events and the ceasing of collaboration with the Wuhan Institute of Virology?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: As I mentioned in response to a previous question, research collaborations are often driven by the primary investigator. As investigators move to additional opportunities, collaborations naturally will wind down.

Mr. Jack Harris: I don't think you're answering the question.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

[*Translation*]

We will continue now with Mr. Paul-Hus for five minutes.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, this is the Standing Committee on Canada-China Relations. So we are going to talk a bit about relations with CanSino Biologics. Were you informed that the Chinese army was working with CanSino Biologics?

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry, but that's not within my purview. I don't have that information.

Perhaps Iain Stewart or Dr. Poliquin can speak to this, but it's not something—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Were relations with CanSino Biologics not part of your portfolio as Minister of Health? I know that it falls under the responsibility of the Department of Industry, but I imagine you knew it, as Minister of Health.

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Actually, as the Minister of Health, I'm essentially the purchaser. I wasn't involved in the research arm of the vaccinology but certainly was interested in any and all viable vaccines as soon as possible, and I'm very grateful for the work of my colleagues in the vaccine task force who put us on such a good path of vaccination, with Canada now being the number one in the G20, number one in the G7 and number one in the OECD.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Right, I understand that you are proud.

Scott Halperin, who testified on March 11, said, and I quote: "Yes, I was informed that the vaccine was going to be for emergency use authorization prior to the end of the clinical trials we were planning by the Chinese military."

Consequently, as regards Health Canada and the authorizations that were given, it was well known that CanSino Biologics was connected with the Chinese army. Is that right?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, in the early days of COVID-19, the Government of Canada turned over every stone to look for a viable vaccine early on. We knew that Canadians would expect us to do so, and in fact, the candidates that were selected by the vaccine task force have proven to be very good ones, and we're very grateful for their work. In fact, we have four approved vaccines in the country and there is very promising news about Novavax, which is another one of our candidates.

• (1950)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Right. To conclude the question about CanSino Biologics, I would like to know whether you were shocked to learn that the Chinese had decided to keep the samples at the Beijing airport and not send them to Canada.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, the work on ensuring that Canada had a vaccine supply began early, and we turned over every stone to examine potential vaccine developments around the world. The vaccine task force was critically important in helping guide those early deals and, indeed, out of the seven that they selected for us—

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Right.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —we have four approved and one very viable. Therefore, it's very exciting.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: That's fine, thank you.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I should also mention Medicago, our Canadian candidate from Quebec, which is doing very well and that we're very excited about.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Thank you, Minister. Excuse me for interrupting you, but I only have five minutes. You know how it works.

I congratulate Medicago, a company that is not far from here, just over from where I am.

I want to come back to the Winnipeg situation. In 2018, American officials warned Washington about weaknesses at the Wuhan laboratory in relation to security and management. Were you informed about the Americans' concerns at that time?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, I have stayed focused on making sure that I can help our domestic response to COVID-19 continue to unfold. As the Prime Minister and many other ministers have been very clear, we too are very interested in the origins of COVID-19. Indeed, the world needs to know the origins of COVID-19 so we can prevent an epidemic, a pandemic like this, from happening ever again.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: You are not answering my question.

My apologies to the interpreters.

My question is this, Minister. In 2018, American security officials informed Washington that there was a problem with the Wuhan laboratory. Were you, or the previous Minister of Health, here in Canada, informed of the security issues at the Wuhan laboratory when we were working with them? Was that information communicated to you?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I was not the Minister of Health in 2018 and did not receive any briefing like that, but I can also say that again our focus has been—

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Right. You did not receive any briefing on our security level four laboratory when you took up your position.

[English]

I'm sorry, Mrs. Hajdu, but nobody told you at that time that the—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I can tell you that my focus has been, throughout this pandemic, to make sure that Canada has what it needs to respond to COVID-19 and that provinces and territories are well placed to deliver on their health care responsibilities.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[Translation]

Thank you very much, Mr. Paul-Hus.

[English]

Now we'll go to Ms. Zann for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I want to say thank you to our Minister of Health.

Thank you, Minister Hajdu, for all of your extremely hard work. I don't know how you've managed to do it this past year and a half. I haven't seen you since we were in Ottawa together at the very beginning of the outbreak, and I just have to say that every day that I hear you and see you I'm so grateful that you are there and that you have the best interests of Canadians at heart. I truly believe that, and you prove it day after day after day.

I find it very interesting that the opposition seems to harp on and obsess about the Chinese military and the Chinese army, when in fact we've actually had our army help us roll out the vaccines here in Canada, and also look after our long-term care seniors when they were in desperation.

What would you like to say about that? I'd like to hear your thoughts about that.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: It's so nice to see you too, MP Zann. When I saw your little square, I realized that we hadn't seen each other in a long, long time. I hope you're doing well.

Thank you for asking about the Canadian military. Truly, they have been heroes throughout this pandemic. In fact, we called on them early, as you know, to help out in long-term care. Indeed, not only did they help but they also discovered some atrocities that were occurring due to lack of capacity in those homes to care for elders. We will be forever grateful. I think all Canadians will be for the incredible compassionate care they provided seniors at a time of particular need.

We also heavily leaned on the Canadian Armed Forces to help with the logistics and planning with regard to how to move millions and millions of doses of vaccines to provinces and territories. In the early days we did a lot of role-playing and tabletop exercises with provinces and territories to make sure that people were ready to deliver and manage and store them appropriately.

The military continues to be there for us whenever we need them during this pandemic response. Indeed, they've helped out. For example, Canadian rangers in northern Ontario and other parts of the country have helped with immunizing remote indigenous communities, something that is not easy in this country of ours, which presents such a geographical barrier.

We will be forever grateful to the Canadian military for helping in such a time of need, and I think it's what Canadians think of when they think of the Canadian military service—the men and women and their selflessness in stepping up in these times.

● (1955)

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you so much for that answer.

Before the pandemic, most Canadians had never really even heard of the National Microbiology Lab or did not know that it existed. Most of us don't know much about the work that the lab does or how important it is for Canada, especially during COVID-19. In what ways has the National Microbiology Lab contributed to Canada's COVID-19 response?

Anybody can answer that.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Perhaps I can start, and then I know Dr. Poliquin has a lot of things he'd like to highlight about the great success of the lab. I think he mentioned one that I think is very pivotal, and that was being one of the first on the scene, perhaps “the first” on the scene. I'm always afraid to say “the first”, but I think we were one of the first labs to create a functional PCR test using the genetic sequencing that was provided by China in the early days of COVID-19, which allowed us to start to set up our testing regime very quickly here in Canada.

The National Microbiology Lab since then has been conducting research but also filling in the gaps for so many things. I'll never forget their work in making sure that provinces and territories had, for example, swabs to take samples with in early spring, April or so, of 2020.

Dr. Poliquin, maybe you can talk about some of the sort of quick hits or successes of the lab.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Yes. Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There's a lot to be proud of, but in the early days of the COVID-19 response, testing supply reagents were scarce and difficult to come by. Scientists at the laboratory attacked the problem in a number of different ways, including by working with provinces, territories and industry to find solutions, to bring in reagents, swabs, test kits and PCR. We also developed our very own reagent when we could not buy any on the open market so that provinces and territories could continue to do testing.

We went from capacity being 10,000 to well over 200,000 PCR tests per day in that time. We have built sequencing capacity and wastewater testing and have brought diagnostic technologies to our northern regions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Poliquin. Thank you, Ms. Zann.

We'll now pause for a five-minute health break and then resume.

The meeting is suspended for five minutes.

● (1955)

(Pause)

● (2005)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

We'll go to the first round of our second half.

Mr. Genuis, you have six minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, you've implied that questions about co-operation between the Wuhan lab and the Winnipeg lab are local decisions better directed to lab officials.

I just want to ask you the following. Do you have an expectation, or do other members of cabinet have an expectation, that you would be briefed and consulted about research co-operation with foreign militaries, or would you see those questions of research co-operation with foreign militaries as being ones to be made at the local level?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, the lab plays a very important role in co-operating with research across the world, and of course it has strict protocols by which to do so and a number of policies in place to protect the intellectual property and national security interests. The lab undergoes a thorough process, as Dr. Poliquin has said—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry, Minister. I will sharpen the question because it was a very specific question.

If research at a lab is being undertaken with a foreign military, would you expect that you and/or some colleagues of yours in cabinet would be consulted and given an opportunity to weigh in on that, or would you say that it's *carte blanche* for those co-operations to be negotiated and determined at the local level?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, on the specifics of how the proposed research collaborations are screened, I will turn to Dr. Poliquin—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: No, Minister. It is a question of government policy. I want to know your expectation. Do you expect to be consulted, as the Minister of Health, if a high security lab in Canada is considering co-operation with a foreign military?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Indeed, high-security labs co-operate with each other on a regular basis so that they can further their research on the number of study areas they pursue. Perhaps Dr. Poliquin can speak about some of the processes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, we're not getting an answer, but I think the record shows that, so I'll move on.

With respect to co-operation with other labs or security policy, have any policy changes been made at your level since the events of 2019?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, Dr. Poliquin would be best positioned to speak to policy changes at the lab.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, have you made any policy changes? Has the government promulgated any policy changes?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, the lab has a responsibility to protect intellectual property and national security. That's why they have the processes in place. Perhaps Dr. Poliquin could speak to any evolving changes at the lab.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, I'm getting the impression that you are comfortable not making decisions about co-operation with foreign militaries or about security protocols because you believe that those decisions should be made at the local level, as opposed to by the Government of Canada. Is that correct?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I think, MP Genuis, that you should not put words in my mouth. What I'm saying is that the lab—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Am I correct or incorrect?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I would say that it is important that the lab follows national security protocol and protects Canadian intellectual property, as well as ensures that people have the appropriate screening to work at the lab. In fact, if you gave Dr. Poliquin a chance to answer, he would be able to speak to—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, that didn't happen in this case. There was some kind of a failure. We don't know what that failure was because you won't release the documents. However, there was some kind of a breakdown here, and I'm asking you, as the minister who's talking about the importance of national security, if you said that we needed to have a policy change here, or if you said that we'll just keep leaving things the way they are.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: MP Genuis, in fact, I fully released those documents in an unredacted fashion to the appropriate committee, so those documents are fully available for the House of—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. I don't want to come back to that, Minister. I understand your view on the release of the documents.

The Chair: Order.

I'm sorry, Mr. Genuis, but I need to hear one person at a time. Of course, it is your time. I've stopped it for a moment. You get to do with it what you wish. If you ask a question, I do expect you to give a reasonable time for an answer, and up until now, I've been very happy with the way it's gone. Please proceed.

• (2010)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

Minister, I want to ask you a question about values. Do you think it's consistent with our values to engage in research co-operation on military applications with the military of a state that is currently, in the view of Parliament, committing genocide?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: First of all, I think I've stated my values, and I would feel safe to say that the values of the government are that human rights matter; a life free of violence matters, and a life of dignity matters. The work we do as a government is to try to push forward those values in everything we do.

In terms of collaborative research, again, there are protocols in place to protect Canadian researchers and Canadian research, and to do so in a safe way that protects the health and safety of Canadians.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, I appreciate that affirmation of values, because we—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: MP Genuis, you actually asked me what my values were—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes, and I'm responding. I said I appreciate that affirmation of values.

Let's make this practical, though. If we are transferring deadly viruses to military labs, and if we're allowing the presence in Canadian labs of Chinese military officials when that same military is involved in committing genocide, don't you think that co-operation conflicts with the value statement that you just made?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: There's a lot of conjecture in that question. I will just say that the fully unredacted—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Where's the conjecture?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —documents have been provided to the appropriate committee for their review.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, please, where is the conjecture in my question?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: As I've said, the documents regarding this particular request from this committee have been provided in an unredacted way for NSICOP to review—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, that wasn't my question. Is it consistent with our values—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: —to be supporting the research efforts of a military—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: —involved in genocide? You haven't answered.

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, I'm sorry. Your time is up.

We're now going on to Mr. Fragiskatos, for six minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Chair, thank you very much.

Perhaps I could go back to Dr. Poliquin.

Dr. Poliquin, can you speak more about the collaboration aspect of the lab and the work that's done between researchers? Is it the case that collaborations form between researchers at the lab and one other country, or is it the case that collaborations happen with researchers from across the world?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Mr. Chair and honourable member, thank you for the question.

Research collaboration occurs on a number of different levels. It could be at the level of individual researchers collaborating on a particular project or a particular question, and there are broader overarching collaborations.

To be clear, the National Microbiology Laboratory has never had an institutional-level collaboration with the Chinese military. As has been highlighted, there are a number of publications where there has been overlap of research interests, but that is not equivalent.

The research endeavour of the laboratory is always to collaborate, to advance public health for Canadians, but also to advance public health on a global scale since we have seen that as infections arise in other places they can readily spread and reshape our societies. Therefore, we are all stronger through collaboration.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, please raise your mike a bit. Thank you.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Mr. Chair, it will soon be at eye level, but whatever is needed.... It's no problem. I'll hold it up here. I'm not sure what the issue is.

Dr. Poliquin, thank you for that.

This has been touched on, but I want to be direct about it. Forgive me; maybe a direct answer has been provided already.

It's about research itself. How is it being kept safe and secure? What can you share about the rigorous protocols around that and how seriously that is taken at the laboratory?

Again, I've been getting up and getting some water, coming back and forth, things like that, so if it has been put on the record already, my apologies. However, so far, I haven't heard a direct answer on that, so it would be helpful.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Some of the protocols that are in place are sensitive by their nature, and therefore, I'm not at liberty to necessarily disclose them in detail. What I can say is that we look at security through a number of lenses. That includes physical security, it includes human security, it includes biological security and it includes informatic security. All of those are overseen and reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that they are fit for purpose and that they are meeting the needs of the evolving environment.

That process has been assembled under what we term our science excellence initiative, which includes other aspects, but security is one of the core aspects of that initiative and it is work that is ongoing since the work is never done in this space.

• (2015)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

Again, on this issue of security, are you in a position to share with the committee anything on the extent to which the laboratory collaborates with other laboratories and other democracies in terms of security, best practices and keeping up to date? How does that dynamic play out?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There's a number of.... Collaboration, as we mentioned, is an essential part of it. That includes the sharing of best practice, and is essentially a communicative practice in many ways, particularly when we think about the high containment laboratories. We have regular dialogue with our counterparts, including through a number of enshrined initiatives, such as the global health security action group laboratory network which meets on a regular basis to discuss issues of pertinence, including security.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Do I have time remaining here?

The Chair: One minute.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Okay. I thought I had five, so thank you very much for that.

You split security into various categories. I wonder if you could repeat those. I know I haven't given you enough time to provide more information on what each amounts to, but I guess if I'm going to be fair to you, the importance of that classification of security not seen.... You talked about human security. You gave other examples too. Could you elaborate on that?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Security is a multifaceted aspect of our work and we take it seriously across the spectrum of questions. That starts with physical security, which is the securing of buildings and assets, including biological security, our ability to care for and be responsible with the pathogens with which we're entrusted, including computer security, IT security, a number of different aspects.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

[*Translation*]

I will now give Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I paid close attention to your last exchange with Mr. Genuis and a question came to my mind. Given that this is the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations and you are a member of the executive of the government, I would like you to tell me whether, in your opinion, the fate of the Uighurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang amounts to genocide under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I think that's beyond the scope of this inquiry actually, but I will just say that I stand by my comment earlier, which is that all people have the right to live a life free of violence and have the right to live a life that is comprised of dignity. I stand against human rights violations no matter which country they're happening in, even if they're individual on that matter.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So you are not prepared to say that what is currently happening in Xinjiang is genocide.

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, I feel—

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, there is a point of order.

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Yes, Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. I think that Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe should stick to the subject.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: No, but, wait...

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: We invited the Minister to discuss very specific questions and I think it would be a good idea to question her on those subjects, which are matters of concern to all of us. Thank you.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: But it is important to know whether she considers—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. Please, wait until I give you the floor. When a point of order is raised, you have to wait for me to give you the floor to debate the point of order.

I will now give you the floor so you can debate the point of order and I will then give the floor to Mr. Oliphant, who also wants to debate it.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor.

• (2020)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I apologize without hesitation and from the bottom of my heart. Because I am new, I sometimes forget procedure. I'm sorry.

In fact, I think my question is entirely related to the subject we are discussing today. As well, there was an exchange between the minister and my friend Mr. Genuis, who talked about the fact that there was a genocide happening in Xinjiang at this moment. If Canadians are working in laboratories where a foreign government is committing genocide, I think it is important to know whether the Minister considers there to be a genocide in Xinjiang, yes or no.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe

[English]

Mr. Oliphant, is it on the same point of order?

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Yes, Mr. Chair, I am in support of this as a point of order, which I think is duly raised.

It was actually not the committee who requested the minister to come before us for three hours tonight. It was a House order and the House order requested some very specific things for us to deal

with today and it did not include.... I think the minister, to her credit, has answered appropriately with respect to the genocide, but I would ask that the chair ask the questioners to move on. I almost raised a point of order when Mr. Genuis was raising the issue. I let it go, but if it becomes the topic of the evening, I don't think we will be fulfilling the House order that we're acting under tonight.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Genuis, on the same point of order.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes. Mr. Chair, the documents in question deal with questions of research co-operation between Canada and China. We know that in cases where countries have committed genocides in the past, there have been horrific experimentation and violence in the name of research that has happened to those who are victims of that genocide. I think it is squarely germane to clarify the minister's view about human rights violations that are taking place and for her to respond to whether or not she thinks it's appropriate for us be engaging in research co-operation with a foreign military that is involved in genocide.

We know about the horrors that happened to innocent victims in the past in the name of research in concentration camps of the past. We have concentration camps in China now. This is the question. I think it's duly raised and should very much be allowed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

[Translation]

The motion adopted by the House asks:

(c) the Minister of Health shall be ordered to appear before the special committee, for at least three hours, at a televised meeting, to be held within two weeks of the adoption of this order, to discuss the documents and the matters referred to in them;

I am therefore asking the committee members to talk about these matters.

I give Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe the floor and ask him to talk about the subjects referred to in the motion.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We have tried to get the answer we wanted to get, but we have been unable to.

Minister, since the start of the meeting, you have kept telling us that you sent the documents to the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians because the composition of that committee reflected the parties in Parliament.

Are you aware of the fact that the Bloc Québécois is not represented on that committee? Not one member from my party sits on that committee.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry, but I can't speak to how the membership is composed.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You said that the fact that that committee reflects the parties in the House of Commons had influenced your decision. The fact is that the second largest opposition group does not sit on the committee.

I don't understand your logic.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, that committee has the appropriate clearance to be able to review these documents in a way that protects Canadians' safety and national security. The documents have been provided to that committee fully unredacted.

• (2025)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Right.

In that case, I suggest that you stop using the argument that the committee represents all parties in the House. I am telling you that to help you make your argument, because that argument is false.

Some documents that were provided to the committee say that the Public Health Agency of Canada adopted a new scientific integrity policy in 2019.

Was that new policy adopted in reaction to the events surrounding Ms. Qiu and Mr. Cheng?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, I'm not at liberty to speak to those particular individuals due to privacy concerns and, obviously, the security issues that have been raised. The documents regarding their employment and departure are with the appropriate committee.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Right. Can you tell us why it was thought necessary to update that policy in 2019?

I did not talk about anyone. I simply want to know why...

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'll turn to the head of the National Microbiology Laboratory to speak to the policy development and—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: As Minister of Health, are you not capable of answering that question?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: We have here, as you know, the head of the National Microbiology Laboratory, who's responsible for our regular and ongoing review of policies at the lab. I'm not sure if the member opposite has ever been responsible for running an organization, but I have. I can tell you that policies are ongoing, reviewed by senior teams to make sure they reflect the needs of the organization as it evolves.

Dr. Poliquin, would you speak to the review?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I am not talking about the laboratory, I am talking about the PHAC, which adopted a new scientific integrity policy in 2019.

That is the Public Health Agency of Canada. Are you not responsible for that, Minister?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Luckily we have Dr. Stewart here to talk about the running of the Public Health Agency of Canada and the policies as they evolve.

Mr. Iain Stewart: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you honourable member for the question.

It's normal and routine for the Public Health Agency of Canada to review all of its policies on a regular cycle. This is truly the case.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: My next question will be for Mr. Stewart or Mr. Poliquin.

We were told that the couple being escorted out had nothing to do with the fact that four months earlier, Ms. Qiu had been responsible for a shipment of the Ebola virus and the henipavirus to the Chinese Institute of Virology in Wuhan.

Do you still maintain that position?

[English]

Mr. Iain Stewart: Mr. Chair, and honourable member, I have written several times in letters to you, as well as in my previous testimony, that there is no connection between the two. Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

In the written answers you sent to the committee on March 26, you said that a number of review processes at the PHAC had been initiated in 2018 concerning possible breaches of security protocols at the National Microbiology Laboratory, or NML.

How many processes were initiated in 2018?

[English]

Mr. Iain Stewart: Mr. Chair, and honourable member, I don't believe I was before this committee on March 26.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, your time is up.

[English]

We will now go to Mr. Harris for six minutes, please.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Chair.

I just have one follow-up question concerning the legislation.

Minister, you have made a great deal of hay about the fact that the documentation was sent to the national security committee of Parliament. There's an exception to the committee's entitlement to have access to information. It's found in section 14 of the act.

One of the items here is “information relating directly to an ongoing investigation carried out by a law enforcement agency that may lead to a prosecution”.

We know that this information or this activity relates to individuals where there were concerns about security information being released to the Wuhan lab. We know there's an investigation going on, so clearly the committee that's supposedly looking at all these documents isn't entitled to access to them.

How can it be that this is an appropriate body to provide information to, with the expectation that somehow or other that all of this is going to be reviewed, looked after and determinations made that this committee is interested in pursuing, if they are not entitled to access those documents?

• (2030)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: As I have said, through the chair, the committee has received unredacted documents. They are there with the committee should they choose to study them.

Mr. Jack Harris: You're saying that's regardless of the fact that they are not entitled to have access to those documents. There's something wrong somewhere, Minister. There seems to be a bit of sleight of hand going on. You say they have the documents, but the act says they are not entitled to them. You're basically saying that this is something that solves the problem.

How can that be?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: As I have said repeatedly, the committee has the full, unredacted documents.

Mr. Jack Harris: They have no instructions as to what to do with them.

Let me move back to the question of information sharing and collaboration. When did you first become aware, Minister, that the Winnipeg laboratory researchers were conducting research on infectious diseases with the Chinese military researchers?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I think I had a sort of peripheral awareness, even prior to being Minister of Health, that the National Microbiology Lab has collaborated with a number of researchers from around the world, leading to some pretty important discoveries.

I understood that part of the role of the National Microbiology Lab was to collaborate.

Mr. Jack Harris: I think you're being purposely vague and general, Minister, if I may say so. You haven't referred to the fact that... Were you made aware or when did you become aware that there was direct collaboration with Chinese military researchers on infectious diseases?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, my understanding from the beginning of my appointment and prior to it was that the National Microbiology Lab collaborates with a number of researchers from around the world in pursuit of answers—

Mr. Jack Harris: Yes, but you're getting to be a bit of a broken record, Minister. I don't mean to insult you—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —to very challenging infectious disease problems.

The Chair: Order. Let's have one at a time, please.

Mr. Jack Harris: I don't mean to insult you, Minister, but this is getting to be a bit of a broken record. I asked you about when you became aware that the lab was collaborating with military researchers in China.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: MP Harris, there's a lot of conjecture in that question. Again, I will just reiterate that I fully understand—

Mr. Jack Harris: So, you're not aware. Are you aware that they have?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, MP Harris, your question—

Mr. Jack Harris: No, there's no conjecture in that.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —poses a conclusion. In fact, what I'm saying is that the lab has an ongoing relationship with researchers around the world to answer questions of infectious disease that affect Canadians and, indeed, global citizens. Clearly, it plays an important role in COVID-19, but it also did before that in coming up with solutions to many threats to Canadian and global health.

Mr. Jack Harris: Let me get this straight: You're not even prepared to admit that you are aware that the research lab in Winnipeg collaborates with Chinese military scientists. That seems to be a pretty straightforward question. I don't know how you can avoid answering that.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I can, yet again, reiterate that the National Microbiology Lab collaborates with a number of researchers from around the world, all with the goal of ensuring that we have the best possible knowledge and contributions to the science that help protect global and Canadian health.

Mr. Jack Harris: Maybe I can help you out if you want to answer a yes-or-no question. Are you aware of whether any of that number are Chinese military researchers?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, Mr. Harris, as I said, the lab has a very important role in protecting Canadians' health by producing research and collaborating on research that unlocks the mystery of infectious disease, treatments for that infectious disease, how to prevent the spread and how to better understand these viruses that pose such a threat to all of our health.

Mr. Jack Harris: Minister, you seem to be offering us all an object lesson in stonewalling. Is there special training for that?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I assume that question is sarcasm, and I will just say that I am answering to the best of my ability and have fully provided unredacted documents to the appropriate committee.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Again, I would ask the chair to remind the committee of decorum. There is very much in the Standing Orders the expectation that respect will be accorded to any witness, whether they're a minister of the Crown or not. Earlier in the questioning, there was an accusation of deliberately avoiding saying something, and I think, actually, that that's not parliamentary. I would just ask that all the members be reminded by the chair about decorum being very important in committee and about respect being accorded.

We will remember the same thing in the House of Commons. People may not like the answer, but the answer belongs to the person answering the question. It doesn't belong to the person asking the question.

• (2035)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Harris, on the same point of order...

Mr. Jack Harris: Yes, Mr. Chair.

I do not think it's unparliamentary to suggest to a witness that she or he is deliberately avoiding answering the question, because I think that was clearly obvious, I suppose. Maybe stating the obvious is a bit much in some cases, but it's certainly not unparliamentary to do so when you ask one question and you get another answer. You can point that out.

I think that the decorum has been maintained. The fact of the matter is that we did have a witness who was stonewalling—it's just an adjective that is well known and understood—and I don't think there's anything wrong with pointing that out to a witness. I don't believe the point of order is, in fact, valid.

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

On the one hand, of course, we have the right of free expression of all members.

I see Ms. Zann on the same point of order.

Ms. Zann, please.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On that point of order, I would like to ask this: Is there a school where parliamentarians can go to learn how to be as rude as the ones tonight are being to this minister? As a female, I'm really offended by their attitudes and their mansplaining to our minister.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zann.

Of course, members have the right of free expression, but they also know that there are rules of decorum. I expect them to stay within those rules and, as Mr. Oliphant points out, to show respect to all witnesses who come before the committee. At the same time, the House, of course, is an adversarial place, and there are differences of opinion. We try to express those while continuing to show respect.

Mr. Harris, your time is concluded if you don't mind, and I'm going to go on to Mr. Williamson for five minutes. We're going to the second round now.

Mr. Williamson, please.

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, I do appreciate your being here tonight. I know it's a long night.

Some of the questions about policy aren't being answered as we'd like, so maybe you can tell us your philosophy about scientists. Is it your contention that scientists are scientists, regardless of where they come from? You have no concerns, say, if a scientist comes

from France or China—as we're talking about this at the Canada-China committee—and you believe that these are people are working for the betterment of mankind, or humankind, and will do just that and there's no security concern?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Perhaps I'll start with, yes, there are scientists in every country. I'm sure there are good scientists and “less good” scientists, or bad scientists in every country.

I will say that the scientific tradition is one of collaboration. In fact, it's how we push the understanding of very challenging problems forward. The world has accelerated collaboration during this time to understand COVID-19 and the tools that we all desperately need to get out of this global pandemic.

Mr. John Williamson: Fair answer. I'm going to cut you off, because I only have a few minutes.

I think, based on your testimony tonight that it's your belief that the Winnipeg labs make decisions on foreign coordination based on protocols, as it understands those protocols. That seems to be your testimony tonight. Is that accurate?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, the lab has specific policies and procedures in place to protect the national security and health security of Canadians. Those procedures are in place and used in a rigorous way to do so. Maybe Dr. Poliquin can speak more thoroughly about those procedures.

Mr. John Williamson: I'll come back.

My next question is for Dr. Poliquin.

Dr. Poliquin, in an earlier appearance at this committee, you told us that when determining intent, your lab relies on the promissory note that you receive from the foreign institution. When I asked if any follow-up occurred if the letter came from a government that is not transparent, or that is suspect, you didn't confirm that was the case. You pointed back to the letter saying that you rely on the letter and that if good intent is written in that letter, then you assume good intent.

Do you stand by that characterization? Is that accurate? That seemed to be the testimony you offered to us some weeks ago in response to some of my questioning.

• (2040)

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We must be compliant with three essential pieces of legislation or standards—the Human Pathogens and Toxins Act, biosecurity standards, as well as the Transportation of Dangerous Goods Act—in our dealings with foreign laboratories.

It's important to note that there's no unified global accreditation body for high containment laboratories. Therefore, we have to operate in a context where we must be compliant with our own legislative standards. Similarly, other countries have their own legislative standards that when we are interacting with them we will operate within provided that they do not conflict with ours. It is under that framework that we engage in our collaborative endeavours with other laboratories.

Mr. John Williamson: And if you're suspicious, what do you...

Actually, no. I'm running out of time.

Dr. Poliquin, did your team know that the military scientist who worked in the Winnipeg lab was affiliated with the People's Liberation Army before or after his admittance?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Affiliations are a complex system. Affiliations can be listed at the time of a publication in terms of where the initial research was done, as well as where the affiliation of the individual is at the time of publication.

Mr. John Williamson: We have a PLA scientist here who has done research in the lab and has produced a paper. I'm just asking if you knew you had a PLA scientist before he was admitted, or did you find out after the fact?

Mr. Iain Stewart: We can't comment on the people being referred to at this time.

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you very much. That's our answer.

You guys had no idea who you were letting into that lab and that is why we're seeing the stonewalling. That is why these documents have been referred to parliamentarians who are not a part of a parliamentary committee and have no teeth. That is why we are seeing this example and bureaucratic butt covering, because a serious, serious—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Williamson.

We have a point of order. I'm trying to see who the point of order is by.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: It was by me, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: If Mr. Williamson wishes to infer that answer, I suppose that's up to him, but I did not hear that articulated by the witnesses—and this is not a point of debate.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

We'll go on now to Ms. Zann, for five minutes.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have to say, again, that this feels like people desperately trying to throw spaghetti at the wall and trying to make it stick instead of just sticking to the point of why we're actually here. It's for the health of Canadians and the safety of Canadians. That's why I am here, and I hope that's why every other member of the committee is here.

Mr. John Williamson: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, if the government members are going to take offence when we question the minister, I will point out that it is only because of the probing of this committee that we have discovered that this is a national security matter.

The Chair: Mr. Williamson, that is certainly debate.

We go back to Ms. Zann.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you, Chair.

I'm sorry that the members are trying to waste my time here.

I would like to ask the witnesses, especially the doctor—and I feel, again, like a broken record—whether the viruses in question have any relationship whatsoever to COVID-19?

Can you expand on the biological differences between these viruses and the SARS-CoV-2 virus?

Thank you.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Thank you, Mr. Chair and member, for the question.

I would like to be categorical that coronaviruses are not at all related to the Ebola virus; nor are they related to henipaviruses. They are not in any way related, and one cannot be used to generate the other. That is a biological fact.

• (2045)

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you.

Does it astound you that some of these politicians are constantly harping on about this particular issue, when in fact the viruses have absolutely nothing to do with the coronavirus?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am aware that a number of reports have surfaced in a number of different media about the potential links with SARS-CoV-2 and different theories of origin. I would like to advise all Canadians to find trustworthy sources of information when it comes to these questions, and I would like to reiterate that the coronavirus, henipavirus and Ebola viruses are not in any way related.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you. So in fact these are basically conspiracy theories that are going around.

Could you also tell us whether it is common for the National Microbiology Lab to collaborate with laboratories outside of Canada?

How many other laboratories around the world do we work with?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: The National Microbiology Laboratory collaborates closely with a number of laboratories across a number of containment levels, including high containment or level 4 containment. These are extremely fruitful collaborations.

The development of a number of vaccine candidates and therapeutic treatments, including for terrible diseases such as Lassa virus and Ebola virus, have all come from collaborative engagement, and they help to make the planet a safer place.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you.

I think I would be remiss if I didn't mention Dr. Bethune here, who certainly collaborated with a number of people to try to make lives better for many people, including the people of China.

Also, can you tell me about material transfer agreements—what they are for and when they are actually used?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: A material transfer agreement is essentially an agreement that is put in place to help articulate the exchange of a material between two institutions. They are concerned primarily with protecting intellectual property rights, though they can also include additional clauses regarding things such as the rights to redistribute or transfer viruses or the handling of these viruses.

In the context of risk group 4 pathogens, it's important to know that most of the non-IP provisions are actually covered by other parts of the legislative requirements, and as a result, MTA's, in this case, are focused exclusively on IP rights as they pertain to the risk group 4 pathogens.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zann.

[Translation]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have the feeling that we have made some progress in the last five minutes.

Mr. Stewart, I think you misunderstood my question earlier, because you told me that you were not before the committee on March 26. But that is not what I asked you.

I was talking about the written answers you sent the committee on March 26. Do you remember that? Well, that is what you did.

[English]

Mr. Iain Stewart: If I misheard or misunderstood you, my apologies. I think you said that I appeared on March 26. I wasn't actually here on March 26, so if I misunderstood you, my apologies.

What was the question?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Right.

So I will start over.

In the written answers you sent the committee on March 26, you said that a number of review processes had been initiated by the Public Health Agency of Canada, or PHAC, in 2018, concerning possible breaches of security protocols at the National Microbiology Laboratory, or NML.

I want to know how many of those processes were initiated in 2018.

[English]

Mr. Iain Stewart: As I mentioned, in government, everything is on cycles, and it's very normal that we instigate reviews, so it would depend on the particular item at hand.

As it relates to the questions we've been examining through the discussions of this committee, as you know from my past answers, I won't be able to respond any further in that area.

● (2050)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You can tell us that processes were initiated, but you can't tell us how many. You are allowed to tell us that there were processes, but you can't tell us how many.

Have I understood correctly?

[English]

Mr. Iain Stewart: If I remember, I said that a number of reviews were undertaken relating to possible breaches of security protocols, and that's—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I know that, Mr. Stewart. Excuse me, I don't want to interrupt you and look rude. That is not at all my intention, but I really don't have a lot of time.

How many processes were initiated in 2018? If you are able to tell us that processes were initiated, you are able to tell us how many. Let's not get crazy.

[English]

Mr. Iain Stewart: A number were undertaken, as you're pointing out.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Right, you are not able.

How many processes were completed or how many are still underway?

[English]

Mr. Iain Stewart: This is a question of the nature that we've discussed in the past, and I'm not at liberty to answer these questions.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Right, fine.

What motivated the PHAC to look into these possible breaches of the security protocol at the NML?

I have the feeling I will not be getting an answer.

[English]

Mr. Iain Stewart: I'm not able to provide the answer to that question.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Right. The Minister could maybe answer, as long as we're not getting an answer.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: As President Stewart responded, he would be the best person to answer that question.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It seems that the Minister would be the best person to not answer my question.

I am going to try one last thing.

Minister, do you think that—

The Chair: Excuse me, the time is up.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Is it over? Oh, thanks.

The Chair: I apologize, I wasn't keeping track properly. It's my fault.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: No problem.

The Chair: It's terrible!

We will continue now.

[English]

We will now go to Mr. Harris, for two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have a question for Dr. Poliquin.

There's a lot of interest in the Wuhan lab and how it operates. These questions are not all conspiracy theories. I understand that the G7 is particularly interested in ensuring that a proper investigation takes place with respect to the origin of the coronavirus, so the Wuhan lab is of great interest.

Dr. Poliquin, you said that when you collaborate with another institute, you identify the risks and make sure you can mitigate them.

Could you tell us what risks were identified when you decided to collaborate with the Wuhan Institute of Virology? What did you do to mitigate them?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: With respect to the question in play, the review would have identified any potential work to be done. It would have sought, as per our HPTA and TDG, as well as virus security standards, the appropriate documentation to support the potential transfer of the viruses.

Mr. Jack Harris: So this was only in relation to transportation of the viruses. The only risk assessment that you did had to do with the transportation of the viruses and not what happened to them when they got there, how well they were protected, or anything like that

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: The ability to safely handle a pathogen, in its appropriate risk group category, is one of the essential pieces that we must satisfy ourselves on prior to transfer.

Mr. Jack Harris: So you were quite satisfied that the practices, the protocols and everything else that would happen at the Wuhan Institute of Virology were in keeping with the standards that you have established for yourselves.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: To be clear, there's no global accreditation system for high-containment laboratories. Within the requirements that are applied to us as an institution, we did our due diligence.

Mr. Jack Harris: So there were no risks that needed to be mitigated. Is that the conclusion you reached?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: The transfer of a high-containment pathogen has a series of risks, including during the transportation event, which—

Mr. Jack Harris: No, no, of course the transportation is clearly important—

• (2055)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jack Harris: —but you had no concerns about what would happen when [Inaudible—Editor].

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris. Your time has concluded.

We'll go on to Mr. Chong for five minutes, please.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Dr. Poliquin, if I heard you correctly, you said that collaboration with the Wuhan Institute of Virology had ended recently, only several months ago. I'd like to confirm whether there is any other current collaboration between the NML and China.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: That is a broad question.

Hon. Michael Chong: Let me be more specific. Is there any current collaboration between the Winnipeg lab and any researchers affiliated with the People's Liberation Army?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Mr. Chair, that question involves a fairly broad question. We collaborate through a number of networks on a number of key initiatives, which includes the WHO R&D Blueprint.

Hon. Michael Chong: I understand that. The question was about the People's Liberation Army and with institutions affiliated with the People's Liberation Army. If you can't answer the question, that's fine. If you don't know, that's fine. If you don't want to say, that's fine. I'm taking some other—

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Mr. Chair, on the question of whether the National Microbiology Laboratory has institutional-level collaborations with institutes that are potentially associated with the People's Liberation Army, we do not have, and have not had, institutional-level collaborations.

Hon. Michael Chong: Do you have individual collaboration currently with anybody affiliated with the People's Liberation Army?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Mr. Chair, that question is difficult to answer, because as I've stated before, there are a number of large-scale collaborations as it pertains to the COVID-19 response.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay. Thank you.

Dr. Poliquin, as you know, President Biden ordered U.S. intelligence to investigate two likely theories about the pandemic's origin. One is that it emerged from human contact with an infected animal. The other is that it was an accident at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs has indicated that the Government of Canada supports this U.S. investigation. Given that the Wuhan lab and your lab worked closely together until recently, are you assisting U.S. investigators in the investigation?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: The Government of Canada has been clear that it supports a thorough investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are four potential hypotheses that have been advanced, and—

Hon. Michael Chong: Yes. The question was about whether you are co-operating with U.S. investigators—for example, making government scientists available to them, making documents, including lab notes, available to them that pertain to the Wuhan Institute of Virology and that are resident in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: To be clear, the transfer of materials was for Ebola and Henipah viruses. They were not for coronaviruses.

Hon. Michael Chong: Yes, but I'm not asking about the transfer of materials. I'm asking about any lab notes that might shed light on the kind of research and the kind of work that was taking place at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

I have another question, Dr. Poliquin. We know from public documents that a People's Liberation Army scientist, Feihu Yan, worked at the Winnipeg lab. How long did he work at the Winnipeg lab?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Mr. Chair, I am not in a position to be able to discuss non-employees.

Hon. Michael Chong: Can you tell us whether or not he received a security clearance, or was he admitted without a security clearance?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Mr. Chair, I'm not able to discuss details of non-employees.

Hon. Michael Chong: Non-employees, I guess, can just walk into the lab and it's not really a concern to the management of the lab. That's what I'm inferring from these answers here.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Mr. Chair, I would like to be clear that we have a number of security processes, which include non-staff. However—

Hon. Michael Chong: Why can't you tell us whether or not... Why can't you tell us how long he worked at the lab for, then? He's not covered by the Privacy Act.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Mr. Chair, non-employees and people who have been here as visitors or non-public servants...that would be considered personal information, and therefore, I think—

• (2100)

Hon. Michael Chong: That's exempt, by the way. Mr. Chair, that's exempt from section 8 of the act—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chong. Your time has concluded.

We'll now go on to Mr. Oliphant for five minutes, please.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to return to the minister to clarify something. Was she ordered by the NSICOP, the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, to produce papers?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, MP Oliphant, for the question.

No. Indeed, we provided them proactively [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] appropriate.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Thank you, Minister.

One of the largest ironies to me is that the opposition was very critical of the act at the time it was developed because of the exceptions, and if the committee wanted certain papers, there were exceptions made that ministers could decline to give them, including, as Mr. Harris said, under section 15. However, am I right in saying that you have submitted all relevant papers, unredacted, to that national committee?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: That's correct. They have all of the papers now.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Thank you.

That's the first irony.

[*Translation*]

The second irony concerns Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe's question about the members of the Bloc Québécois.

A member of the Bloc—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I have a point of order.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: —sitting on the committee, the member for Saint-Jean, was appointed by—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Order.

There's a point of order, Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: —Governor in Council—

The Chair: Mr. Oliphant.

I don't think Mr. Oliphant can hear me.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Oliphant: —but she resigned. Now, no member—

[*English*]

The Chair: Order.

Mr. Oliphant, can you hear me?

Order, Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Oliphant, can you hear me?

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Yes.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: There is a point of order.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

I wonder whether Mr. Oliphant needs a new headset. The Chair asked him six times to stop talking, since there is a point of order.

We have gone completely off the topic, as was the case when it was pointed out to me earlier. Mr. Oliphant is making a comment on my question and it is completely off topic. I would like to continue to address the subject before us this evening.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Dubourg, is this about the same point of order?

[*English*]

Mr. Jack Harris: I have another point of order, Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Dubourg, you have the floor.

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Mr. Chair, I know that Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe is not a regular on committees, as he said himself. However, I don't understand why he is saying that the member's comments are off topic.

Mr. Oliphant is talking about the NSICOP, which is related to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe's comment about the fact that there are no Bloc Québécois members on that committee.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

[*English*]

Mr. Harris, do you have a different point of order?

Mr. Jack Harris: Yes, my point of order is a technical one, and I thought Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe was raising it, because I was unable to hear what Mr. Oliphant was saying. I think he was speaking through the English mike and the French and English were coming together and I couldn't hear either language. I thought Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe was having the same trouble. I couldn't get anything that Mr. Oliphant was saying.

The Chair: Madam Clerk, do we have an indication from the interpreters or the technicians that there's an issue they can correct?

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Mr. Chair, it was my mistake. I was on the English channel and I was speaking French and I heard both languages at the same time. I moved to get rid of my English. It was my mistake.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Oliphant. Hopefully that will correct the issue with the language.

Earlier, I did read the section under which this meeting is being held.

I'll go back to Mr. Oliphant to proceed.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The point I was raising was about the irony. Earlier in the meeting, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe had raised the problem of the minister who proactively referred these documents to the NSICOP, yet he was concerned because there was not a member of the Bloc Québécois on that committee.

I wanted to raise the irony of that, because there was a member of the Bloc Québécois nominated by their party, appointed by the order in council on recommendation of the Prime Minister, yet this member, the member for Saint-Jean, quit the committee. That's a matter of public record. There is no longer a member on the committee. She was appointed in 2020 following the election. She's not a member.

Because I'm not privy to this, I have no idea what the situation is, but the reason there's not a member of the Bloc Québécois on NSICOP is not that we didn't appoint one as a government. The Prime Minister did appoint one, but she quit.

That was the point I was attempting to make. The criticism of the minister referring these documents to that committee was simply inappropriate if the basis was that the committee didn't have a member of the Bloc Québécois on it.

That was that second irony that I wanted to raise. That was all I wanted to do with those two points. The minister has proactively given all of the documents, even though, if demanded, she might have had grounds to refuse based on the legislation, but she chose to give all of the documents to ensure that a full hearing is made.

There was another issue raised. Because she referred them to NSICOP, that was absolutely taken as a breach of national security.

I want to ask the minister this. Did she refer the documents to NSICOP to request if there was a breach of security, and if so, was it handled appropriately? Would that be a reason to refer something to such a committee?

• (2105)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much for the question.

Of course, I can't comment about what's in the documents, but the documents have items that are considered to be issues of privacy and issues of national security. That is why the documents are with that committee.

Of course, as you well know, probably better than I do, the process for that committee requires not only a specific security clearance but also adherence to a commitment to keep some of these details private.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Thank you.

Is that the end of my time? I still have a minute.

I have a question, really, for the folks from the lab and the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Am I right in understanding that the lab pre-existed before the Public Health Agency of Canada was formed?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: That's a good question for probably Dr. Poliquin or President Stewart. I don't know the answer to that.

Dr. Poliquin.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: The National Microbiology Lab has evolved over time from previous organizations, including most recently in 2014, I believe, when a number of other laboratories merged in.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: But the decision was made in the 1980s to develop a large, major secure facility in Winnipeg, and that was made by the Conservative government to establish a world-class lab.

Am I correct?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Oliphant, but that concludes your time.

We'll have to wait for that answer, I guess.

We'll now go on to the subsequent round, and to Mr. Chong for five minutes, please.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As you know, Mr. Chair, we are permitted to use the time allocated to us for questions or comments. Therefore, I'd like to let you know that I want to use my five minutes not for questions to our witnesses but for commentary about the matter at hand, which I am permitted to do under the rules.

There has been plenty of talk of NSICOP at this committee. NSICOP is not a committee of Parliament. Not only is it not a committee of Parliament, but MPs and senators on that committee actually give up their parliamentary rights.

Its members and its chair are hired and fired by the Prime Minister. Any minister has the right to refuse the committee information and to block a committee review, and the Prime Minister has the right, the power, to change committee reports before they are made public, so it's clearly the wrong committee to hold the government accountable for national security breaches. It's akin to putting the fox in charge of the hen house.

It's also not the same committee, as was previously mentioned today, as committees in other countries like the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom's Intelligence and Security Committee is a committee of Parliament. Its members are confirmed by the House of Commons, not by the Prime Minister. It has substantial powers to compel the government to provide it with information, and it has full power to produce reports and to access information concerning national security.

The Minister of Health and the Public Health Agency of Canada are defying an order of the House of Commons, dated June 2, 2021.

That order said in clause (a):

these documents shall be deposited with the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, in both official languages, within 48 hours of the adoption of this order;

That was to be have been completed by Friday, June 4. That deadline passed, and the government did not comply with the order. The Minister of Health and the Public Health Agency of Canada failed to deposit these documents with the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel by the end of day, Friday, June 4, as the order required.

That order explicitly put in place provisions to protect national security and the details of any ongoing criminal investigation.

The order said in clause (d):

the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel shall confidentially review the documents with a view to redacting information which, in his opinion, could reasonably be expected to compromise national security or reveal details of an ongoing criminal investigation, other than the existence of an investigation;

A question of privilege has been raised in the House of Commons on this issue, and the Speaker has been asked to rule whether there is a prima facie case of privilege. The Speaker is expected to rule on this in the coming days. The precedents are clear, especially the precedent set in Speaker Milliken's ruling of 2010.

The Minister of Health and the Public Health Agency of Canada are defying an order of the House of Commons to produce information that Parliament has requested, just like the government did in 2011. In the 2011 case, the government was found in contempt of Parliament for refusing to deliver the documents requested.

I supported Speaker Milliken's ruling at the time, and publicly indicated this. While I maintained confidence in the government at that time, I supported the finding of contempt. That's unlike the current Prime Minister, who said one thing in opposition and does another thing in government.

The Minister of Health, the Public Health Agency of Canada and the government are violating a House order of June 2. I believe they all are in contempt of Parliament.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (2110)

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

[*Translation*]

We will now continue with Mr. Dubourg.

Mr. Dubourg, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am really insulted to hear parliamentarians here in Canada, from the House of Commons and the Senate, say that other parliamentarians are not eligible to consider situations in which national security is threatened.

I hear that the Prime Minister has the power to do this or do that. Since when? Since that committee was created, has he interfered?

I said just now that that committee was entitled to manage its proceedings. So it does its work and produces reports. The reports we receive, that are tabled in the House, are necessarily redacted, because national security is in issue.

We are told that the parliamentarians waive their immunity. We have no immunity, that is true. It is important that we keep the information we analyze secret. Myself, and I am no longer a member of that committee, Mr. Chair, if I were to disclose some piece of information I had learned during the work we did while I was a member of the committee, I would be risking life in prison.

I am therefore being very careful when I speak today on the work of that committee. Even after my term in office, on whatever date it may be when I have to leave politics, I will still be subject to that law and I am still going to risk prison. Former parliamentarians and committee members always have that sword of Damocles hanging over their heads. Do you think that means nothing?

That is why I would like to ask the Minister, since she sent those documents, whether she really trusts the parliamentarians who sit on the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, or NSICOP.

What do you think, Minister?

• (2115)

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, MP Dubourg. You've really explained the special nature of this committee—that it's not just a matter of now that they have clearance with the appropriate level of security to review these documents, but it is in perpetuity.

Of course, there are some things that need to be kept private, people's private information, for example. We've talked a lot publicly about the individuals, but, of course, they are individuals who have a certain degree of right to privacy, as all employees do, as all people do.

Again, it's very useful for you to explain the nature of that committee. That's why we've released those documents fully unredacted to that committee. The committee can review those documents with the appropriate clearance. It will, indeed, protect the privacy considerations; it will protect considerations of national security; and it will give confidence to Canadians that we will follow the appropriate processes to handle information of this nature.

[Translation]

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Thank you, Minister.

I would now like to ask Mr. Stewart a question.

I would also like him to answer publicly and for us to hear him. In his letter, he says that he can confirm that, to his knowledge, the transfer of the Ebola and Nipah viruses to the Wuhan Institute of Virology by the National Microbiology Laboratory is not connected with the departure of the two employees.

What can you add to that, Mr. Stewart?

[English]

Mr. Iain Stewart: Mr. Chair, honourable member, that is exactly the case; there is no connection between the two.

[Translation]

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Thank you, Mr. Chair. That's all.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dubourg.

We will continue with Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am going to have to come back to the depressing remarks by my colleague Mr. Oliphant. He didn't get to the heart of the story of the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians.

My colleague from the riding of Saint-Jean resigned from the committee in February 2020 for personal reasons and has not been replaced since she left, in spite of a proposal by the Bloc Québécois. The government has therefore not done its job. Mr. Oliphant is trying to exploit the resignation for personal reasons of one of my colleagues. I find that depressing.

Now, knowing that, does the Minister still believe that the committee perfectly reflects all parties in the House of Commons?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry, I wasn't sure there was a question. I thought it was more of a statement.

I obviously can't speak to your member's reason for departing the committee. I will just say that this is the appropriate committee for, as I've said before, reviewing documents of this nature—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Your government has not named anyone from the Bloc Québécois to the committee, even though it has made a proposal. I want that to be on the record, because Mr. Oliphant is talking nonsense.

We won't take any more time up with that.

I have one last question for you, Minister—

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Order. Mr. Dubourg has a point of order.

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: I think committee members have to be careful about the words they use, whether in French or English. We have to behave respectfully.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You're right.

I apologize.

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Fine.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I apologize. I meant to say "foolishness".

Mr. Chair, I have a question for the Minister.

As Minister of Health, would you approve of nationals who work for a government that is committing genocide working in our laboratories or with our military?

• (2120)

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry, I didn't understand the question. What was the question?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I will be happy to repeat it.

Would you agree to have nationals who work for a foreign government that is currently committing genocide against its own people being able to work and collaborate with us, in our laboratories or with our army?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, I think this question has been asked and answered.

First of all, I'll just say that all human beings deserve to live—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: No, the question has never been asked. It is a hypothetical question, Minister.

If a government—

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry, you asked a question. Would you like me to answer the question?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You may have misunderstood my question.

The Chair: Order. Unfortunately, your speaking time is up.

Mr. Harris now has the floor.

[English]

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Chair.

First of all, I want to thank Mr. Chong for his very clear and correct interpretation of the role of the NSICOP and the fact of its existence. I know there's disagreement here between what's being said by the minister and by Mr. Dubourg, but clearly, according to the act, it is not a committee of Parliament. It reports to the Prime Minister. It keeps secret all of the things that the minister and a prime minister do not want reported.

The order of the House was very clear that the documentation should go to the law clerk of the House for his determination as to what's appropriate or not. That procedure was there and designed to do exactly what was pointed out.

I think it's also very clear that the government has not followed the order of the House. That's on the record. I want to thank Mr. Chong for elaborating that point and making it clear that what's being said here tonight is not correct in its description of the role of the NSICOP—a committee of the government that is appointed to report to the prime minister, who has control over the documentation and the release of the report.

I want to briefly ask a single question of Dr. Poliquin.

In addition to investigating the transportation of the viruses with respect to risk assessment, did they also do a risk assessment of what goes on at the lab in Wuhan? Was that part of the risk assessment? Was there any necessity for mitigation as a result?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Yes, Mr. Chair, as part of the letter that was received from the Wuhan Institute of Virology articulating the reason for the request, it stipulated that the intended use was to develop medical countermeasures and that there would be no further transfer of pathogens. This would be for research only.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

We now have about seven or eight minutes left.

Mr. Genuis, we go to you for four minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, do you think it's a good idea for Canadian labs to be collaborating with the Chinese military?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, let me just point to my earlier comment—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, can you just answer the question? Do you think it's a good idea for Canadian labs to be collaborating with the Chinese military? It's a simple question.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, let me just point to my response about the need for ongoing collaboration and research in the area of infectious disease, and I think—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: With the Chinese military...

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I think if we've learned anything over the last year, it is that it's important that we commit to ongoing collaboration internationally to understand not just COVID-19, but certainly other deadly risks to Canadians' health.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. Thank you, Minister. I understand. Let me move to my next question.

Is there any country, anywhere in the world, with whose military you think we should not be collaborating on matters of research?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Again, I will speak to my overarching belief, and not just belief, but of course, approach by scientists internationally to work together, and to work together on pressing and urgent problems that are not only posing great risks to Canadian citizens, but international citizens.

I will also speak to the incredible work on vaccine development that was really—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Minister, that is not the question I'm asking.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —as a result of international collaboration. We will continue as a government to support the national microbiology lab to have processes in place—

• (2125)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, it's my time, so let me ask another question, because you're not answering the question I'm asking at all.

The Chair: Order. Could I have one at a time, please?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, I would love to be able to answer the question.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, we're not talking about general research co-operation among civilians. We're talking about a military that is in the process of committing, according to the House of Commons, a genocide.

Members of this committee and the public understand that viruses can be used in military applications. The Government of China is involved in gross violations of human rights and is taking an aggressive posture towards us and our allies, yet you seem comfortable with us co-operating in terms of virology research with the Chinese military.

Let me ask again: Are you prepared to put in place a policy to block—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, excuse me. I don't know if a witness can have a point of order, but I think it's inappropriate for the member to suggest that I have said something that I have not.

The Chair: Okay—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, I will finish my question and give you the balance of my time.

Viruses can be used in military applications. We know that there has been collaboration between Chinese military scientists and the Winnipeg lab. Dr. Poliquin has told us in response to the question of current co-operation between Chinese military scientists and the PLA, well, it's a complicated question to answer.

Are you prepared to tell this committee that you would put in place a policy to block research co-operation in cases where that co-operation risks enhancing the capacity of a foreign military involved in gross violations of human rights or threatening the security of Canada? Would you be prepared to take that position, or are you comfortable with the status quo in which, clearly, that co-operation has gone on with hostile foreign militaries, and by all indication, is continuing to go on? Are you prepared to put in place a policy to stop this once and for all, or not? The time is yours.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Okay. I will turn to Dr. Poliquin to talk about the extensive—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: No, Minister. I want you to answer. You wanted to speak; I want you to answer the question.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry. I understand that the member of Parliament gave me time to do with as I wish, and I will tell you—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, it is my time, and I want you to answer the question.

Are you prepared to put in place a policy to stop this very dangerous situation for our country?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Well, first of all, in your question there is premise that there is this kind of activity ongoing. It is a premise that you're making without any foundation in evidence.

Therefore, I will say this: The lab has processes in place to make sure that the research is done in a safe way that protects the health, safety and security of Canadians. I am happy to turn to Dr. Poliquin to repeat the processes that—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, you think everything is fine the way it is.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: No, you're putting words in my mouth.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Is everything fine the way it is?

The Chair: Order. In any event, the time is up.

Ms. Zann.

Ms. Lenore Zann: On a point of order, I want to say, again, I can't believe the rudeness of our—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: It's debate.

Ms. Lenore Zann: It's very rude. They are being extremely rude to our minister, and I really take offence at that.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Chair, on this same point—

The Chair: Thank you. Order.

A question of rudeness is a question of decorum, and that is a point of order.

Mr. Genuis, is this on the same point of order?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes, Mr. Chair. Thank you very much.

I'm asking very pointed, and I think, important questions of the minister about national security. I just want to say to the chair that

this isn't about how I feel; this isn't about how Ms. Zann feels; this is not about how the minister feels. This is about trying to get answers—

M. Emmanuel Dubourg: The time is up.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: This is about trying to get answers about people's lives and national security and the risks to people's health.

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, this is not a point of order. You're now debating. This is debate.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I think it's a legitimate—

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, you're out of order.

That's enough, Mr. Genuis. We're going on to Ms. Yip for the last four minutes. Thank you.

Ms. Jean Yip: I want to thank all of the witnesses for staying late and for their patience.

It's not necessary to badger our witnesses. They come here wanting to share information, and we need to give them their due, their time to answer a question. There has not been proper decorum.

Minister, what would you say to anyone concerned about the integrity of the National Microbiology Lab and the work they do?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: It is important that we continue to have as our foremost consideration in all the work the lab does the health, safety and national security of Canadians. That is why I have repeatedly turned to Dr. Poliquin and President Stewart to speak about the processes in place and the ongoing review of those processes and policies, so we can ensure that the lab can continue its stellar international research.

Finally, it is very important to understand that the National Microbiology Lab is indeed a crown jewel. It is something that all Canadians can be proud of. It has served our country well and has contributed to international breakthroughs on major disease fronts, to a better understanding of COVID-19 and to the development of tools for COVID-19. It is important that we don't play politics with the importance of having a lab like this and the importance that the lab places on ensuring that processes are robust to protect the health, safety and security of Canadians.

Dr. Poliquin, do you want the closing word on this?

• (2130)

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Thank you, Minister.

I would like to emphasize that the work that has been done at the laboratory over the past 16 months has been born out of a long-standing history of responding to important events, be it domestically or internationally, through the outbreak support we have gotten. The research we have done has advanced our knowledge and our ability to respond to these diseases. It's the day-to-day toil of our staff that makes the work possible, through collaboration.

Through that collaboration, there are a number of achievements I want to read into the record, including the development of a Sudan vaccine candidate, which is a subtype of Ebola. There has been the identification of losmapimod, which is able to block Lassa virus entry. There has been the characterization of Tanageretin, which is a novel blocker of cellular entry for viral hemorrhagic fevers. There has been the development of treatment for potential Rift Valley fever, and novel treatments against Ebola and other high-consequence pathogens.

All of that work is something we are very proud of, and it is born out of the work of our staff, who collaborate to advance the health, safety and security of Canadians and the rest of the globe.

Ms. Jean Yip: Variants have very much been on the minds of Canadians. Have you done any research that can assure Canadians and give them some peace of mind?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: We have dedicated, as part of the Government of Canada's broader variants of concern strategy, \$53 million, including a great deal of resources—

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Poliquin. Pardon me, but Ms. Yip's time is up and so is ours.

Thank you very much, colleagues. Thank you to the witnesses.

The meeting is adjourned.

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