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Chair: Mr. Chris Warkentin



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• (1400)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Chris Warkentin (Grande Prairie—Mackenzie, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

This is the 26th meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. Today we're continuing the study with regard to the questions of conflict of interest and lobbying in relation to pandemic spending. The hearings will be webcast and will be available on the House of Commons website.

Today we have an unusual situation where we had a meeting scheduled by the expectation of the House, or the order of the House, but instead of the witnesses who we had planned, we have the Honourable Pablo Rodriguez joining us—

Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I want to clarify that Mr. Rodriguez is not coming instead of the witnesses who were requested, but in addition to them. We welcome him to be here. Whenever a government House leader says he wants to testify at an ethics committee to unburden himself of some things, we obviously welcome that as parliamentarians, but obviously that doesn't replace the motion to have either the Prime Minister or his staff.

The Chair: Yes. I will be taking direction, of course, from the committee. However, we are taking direction as well from the House of Commons, which had that extensive list of requirements. Therefore, you are correct that today does not replace anything that was expected by the order from the House.

I have a bit of a speaking list here now.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): On the point of order, yes—

The Chair: I have Mr. Barrett, and then Mr. Angus, Mr. Fortin and Mrs. Shanahan.

We'll go to Mr. Barrett next.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Thank you, Chair and colleagues.

As you said, this is unusual. There is some precedent for this situation and I would like to address that.

The parliamentary law clerk, Mr. Walsh, had said at committee hearings in 2010:

the Prime Minister, and any minister, has no authority to prevent someone from appearing in front of a committee.

Their ministerial function may present a limitation on what you can ask that political aide when they're in front of you, but everyone has a duty, apart from members of Parliament, senators, and the Governor General, to show up when summoned before a committee.

I think that context is very important for the situation we're faced with here today, and do expect that the committee at a later time should discuss instructions to have the parliamentary law clerk called to speak to this issue.

We were to meet today by order of the House, a majority of members in the House, the will of Canadians being expressed with respect to the appearance of witnesses and the production of documents. That order gave the government an option. That option was to have the witnesses who the committee requires and that discussion had been initiated at committee and then was continued in the House on Thursday, those witnesses being Mr. Rick Theis, Mr. Amitpal Singh and Mr. Ben Chin at this committee, as well as the production by the PCO of the committed due diligence report, as well as an order with respect to the national defence committee and a witness appearing there.

The government House leader did say in the House and subsequently outside the House that the government would instruct individuals who were asked or ordered to appear not to appear.

The motion, passed by a majority of members in the House and representing the will of Canadians to have those folks appear, did provide an option to the government, which was to have one person appear in place of those witnesses: that is, Prime Minister Trudeau.

Those were the options that the government had, and now we're in a situation where we have public statements from the government spokesperson, the government House leader, that they will defy an order of the House. This is preventing Canadians from getting answers, this is preventing committee from doing its work, and it is clearly a violation—

• (1405)

The Chair: Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Chair, on a point of order, I mean no disrespect to Mr. Barrett, but are we in debate or are we actually still doing the points of order? I was listening to your instruction as how we're going to proceed. I think some of the issue he raised could be addressed by the minister in his answer.

The Chair: The point of order is where we are at this point in time.

Colleagues, obviously we have a witness who volunteered. He has not been instructed for us as a committee to hear from him, and committee members have not called this member.

Really, at this point, effectively, the House leader has volunteered to be here, and now I need to hear if in fact it is the committee's will to hear from Mr. Rodriguez.

Mr. Rodriguez was not invited by this committee. He was not instructed by the House of Commons to be here. I guess it is my duty as the chair to recognize whether there is a will of the committee to hear from this witness who has not been asked to be here.

Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: Chair, on a point of order, I thought there was a notice given to Mr. Rodriguez to appear.

The Chair: You are incorrect. He volunteered to be here.

We have a second point of order. Ms. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Yes. On a point of order, indeed there was an amended notice of today's meeting that was sent out that indicated—

The Chair: You are correct.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: —that Mr. Rodriguez would be here.

The Chair: Yes, Ms. Shanahan, I did put a notice out saying that he would be here, but I did not have the committee's agreement to do that. I arbitrarily did that.

It is now my requirement. I'm the servant of the committee. If the committee decides that they don't want to hear from somebody who they have not asked to be here and the House hasn't instructed us to listen to, it is my duty to abide by the desire of committee members.

Going back to the speaking list, we'll return to Mr. Barrett.

It would be nice for us to come to a decision, because we have only three hours in this meeting.

Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, you're absolutely right that this witness was not invited but has requested to be here. We have a member of the Queen's Privy Council, the government House leader, who wants to be here. We have white space this afternoon in our calendar because the witness who was ordered by the House has failed to appear, so let's hear what the government House leader is prepared to or able to offer in answer to our questions, but we will have to review this matter with the law clerk and then look at next steps.

The Chair: Mr. Angus, we'll turn to you.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

I had put my name down to speak on a point of order, hoping that I could get ahead of this debate so that we could get another piece of business finalized, but I will put that on the table at this time and then speak to this issue as well.

I had wanted to raise the issue of the letters that we've been receiving from Victor Li's lawyers, just to make sure that we have a clear path going forward. I was very surprised to find out that Vic-

tor Li's lawyers were responding to the committee through Twitter, as opposed to through the committee. There is a process. I've never seen that before.

I was very surprised by some of the claims in the letters, and I want to say, I'm very hopeful that Mr. Li's health is good. This is not about creating undue stress, but this committee agreed to issue a summons if Mr. Li did not answer. The fact that he says he's asserting his rights under the Canada Evidence Act about responding to us, I find very surprising. Is he concerned about a criminal investigation that we are not aware of?

The letter from the lawyers stated that the questions that he failed to answer were follow-up questions. That is incorrect. These were the fundamental questions we had asked, and we asked questions regarding the corporate structure. After eight months, I think we're all in agreement that none of us has a clue about the corporate structure, the immense real estate holdings, the side hustles, the private companies, the for-profit companies and the shell companies that the WE group has, and Mr. Li can give us that information.

His lawyers stated that the question we had asked about giving us a list of where the schools were built would take months. I find that to be a ridiculous assertion. If you're a charity and you're in the business of building children's schools, that list should be fairly straightforward. In fact, I see that WE advertised that they have a special donor accountability tracking mechanism so that you can track your donor's pledges, so that should be an answer that's easy to give.

I was surprised in the last letter that said there was no one else they were aware of who could maybe find this information at WE. Are we to understand as a committee that an organization that has property and assets worth millions of dollars has had a man off sick for eight months, and there is nobody in that organization who has the capacity to find any of the answers that a parliamentary committee has been willing to actually issue a summons for if necessary?

I'm asking you, Chair. I think it's fair that we ask for a doctor's letter at the very least. We've given extra time. They've said that they couldn't meet the deadline. We said that's fine, but I think we need to take this seriously. If someone has medical conditions and they're posting on Twitter about their medical conditions, then I'm very respectful of that, but I also think we should get a doctor's certificate, so I'd like to ask my colleagues if they could at least agree that we need to get this done and answered. I put that as question number one.

In terms of the issue before us today, I'm a big fan of Mr. Rodriguez. We go back a long ways. I don't know what he has to offer this committee. I'm willing to hear from him because it's a matter of respect, but I also urge my colleagues to remember that time is ticking before legislation comes to our committee. We have to finish this report. I want to get this report finished. It is a priority for me, and it is a priority to get the Pornhub study finished because people around the world are expecting us to do this, so I'm urging my colleagues to do this right.

Maybe a solution is to get a briefing from the law clerk. Maybe that's a way that we can get out of this without breaking down into a filibuster. I'd urge my colleagues, let's hear from Mr. Rodriguez. Let's decide whether it is pertinent to our study, and then decide what to do about the fact that the three witnesses who were asked for by Parliament have not shown up.

• (1410)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus. I'll take that as notice that you're going to move a motion with regard to the requirement of medical proof with regard to Mr. Li's condition.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Can I just do that now? How would you like me to do that?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Point of order.

The Chair: Ms. Shanahan, I think maybe we're settled there.

Mr. Angus, I will take that as notice, and if you want to provide that in writing to the clerk, that would be helpful as well.

We will now move to Mr. Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Something serious is happening here today. I see that the government House leader has decided to appear before the committee. I agree with you, Mr. Chair, that the committee would certainly benefit from hearing what—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: A point of order, Mr. Chair. Mr. Fortin's sound is very low.

[*English*]

The Chair: Madame Shanahan has a point of order.

We have a technical issue.

I'm wondering if we can do another test of your sound, Monsieur Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Sure. Everything seems fine on my end.

[*English*]

The Chair: Maybe move your microphone just a little bit closer to your mouth.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Can you hear me any better?

[*English*]

The Chair: It seems to me everyone can hear it other than Madame Shanahan.

Maybe there are technical issues on Madame Shanahan's end. You may want to look into that.

Monsieur Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As I was saying, this is quite an unusual situation because the reason we're meeting today is to hear from a witness who isn't here.

Secondly, the government House leader says he has things to tell us in connection with our study of the WE Charity scandal. I'd like to hear from him. I think my fellow committee members would too. We'll hear what Mr. Rodriguez has to say, which is fine.

However, there was an order, Mr. Chair. We're not talking about the committee inviting witnesses to appear. On Thursday, there was a debate in the House that lasted almost all day. It was about Mr. Barrett's motion to call certain witnesses. The motion was debated, amended and adopted on Thursday, March 25. The motion ordered Rick Theis to appear before this committee today at 2 p.m. He's not here.

The motion also stated that the Prime Minister could appear instead of Rick Theis, if he wanted. I gather the Prime Minister isn't here, unless he's hiding somewhere.

So, Mr. Chair, before we decide whether to hear from Mr. Rodriguez or anyone else, I'd like to move a motion. I move that the committee note the absence of the witness who was ordered by the House of Commons—

• (1415)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Point of order. A motion cannot be moved during a point of order.

[*English*]

The Chair: Pardon me, Madame Shanahan. I haven't recognized you yet, but I do understand that you have a point of order.

Madame Shanahan.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Mr. Chair, a motion cannot be moved during a point of order.

[*English*]

The Chair: I think you were on the point of order, Madame Shanahan.

Currently we are having a debate with regard to whether or not we are going to hear this witness because that hasn't been approved by the committee members, so I will go back to Monsieur Fortin.

I thank you, Madame Shanahan, for all of your assistance, but if you would just text me with your suggestions, that may be more constructive.

Monsieur Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Chair, that wasn't a point of order. We are starting the debate.

With all due respect, Mr. Chair, the House instructed you to convene the committee for two hours today to hear from Rick Theis. You convened us in accordance with the House's instruction. We're here. Mr. Theis and the Prime Minister are not.

I therefore move that our committee immediately report to the House notifying it that the witness it ordered to appear today is not here, nor is the Prime Minister. I move that the House follow up as appropriate and make any decisions it deems necessary to excuse or sanction the witness's absence.

[*English*]

The Chair: That is a motion, and because it is with regard to the business we're debating, we'll move to a debate on that if anybody wants to intervene with regard to that, and then we'll move to a vote.

It is now debate on the motion, so we will work through the list I have now in front of me. If members had intended to speak about something else and not this, please let me know.

We'll turn to Madame Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Mr. Chair, my hand was up from the beginning on the original point of order that Mr. Poilievre had brought up making a statement, which you had agreed with without discussing it with the rest of us, concerning the appearance of Mr. Rodriguez today. It was that we must respect the parliamentary institution, and part of that parliamentary institution is ministerial responsibility and accountability. What we have before us is a minister who is going to answer.

With respect to the motion to the order from the House, it is this minister who is going to answer the questions we have because this is in accordance with the principle of ministerial responsibility. Staffers are not elected. Staffers are not on the ballot. It is ministers who respond on behalf of the government.

I want to hear from Mr. Rodriguez, but before we do so I would like to address the—I don't know what it was—point of order, or intervention by Mr. Angus regarding Mr. Li.

I am shocked and, yet, maybe I shouldn't be because this is not the first time this has happened here in this meeting where aspersions are cast on a Canadian who is going about his business, who has been drawn into something that this committee is dealing with—

• (1420)

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

The Chair: Pardon me. I will just—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I'm sorry. I am speaking now.

The Chair: Order.

I will go to the point of order, Mr. Angus, shortly, but right now we are debating Mr. Fortin's motion. I think the initial intervention spoke to that.

With regard to Mr. Li, that motion is not currently up for debate. There was notice that that motion would be coming forward, but because it doesn't relate to the business at hand, which is whether or not we will hear from Mr. Rodriguez and the witnesses at this meeting, I don't find it is in order to have that debate at this time. This is not a business meeting. This is a meeting with regard to one specific issue, and that's the witnesses we will hear from today.

Ms. Shanahan, if you want to return to the debate with regard to that, it would be fine, but we are discussing Monsieur Fortin's motion.

Mr. Angus, did you have a point of order?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Yes, thank you, Chair.

I'm raising questions about getting questions and answers. I'm doing this in seriousness. If Ms. Shanahan wants to fight and personally attack all members of the opposition, that may be her business. I don't think it's that wise, but—

The Chair: I'm not—

Mr. Charlie Angus: On Mr. Fortin's motion, whether or not I agree with it, I'm willing to follow the rules, and I think you just made a wise ruling. We are focused on Mr. Fortin's motion and we get to debate that.

The Chair: That's not a point of order.

Ms. Shanahan, we will turn back to you.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Chair.

I will fight on behalf of Canadians any day of the week, you can count on that, but I agree that the motion that is in front of us now concerns the appearance of Mr. Rodriguez in front of this committee in good faith. He is on the amended notice of meeting. He is in front of this committee, and he is expecting to speak to this committee. By that same usual practice of this committee and of other committees in the House, we are flexible when it comes to witnesses, and we certainly want to hear from the witnesses who can be of most use to the study that we have at hand.

In fact, when we talk about responsible government, we know that many on both sides of the House have spoken on the principle of Canada's form of responsible government, and that is that ministerial staff have no authority to make decisions on behalf of ministers. I believe Mr. Poilievre had something to say on this matter, as did former Prime Minister Stephen Harper. They have no authority to make decisions on behalf of ministers; they report to and are accountable to ministers. Ministers are accountable for their actions to Parliament. This is not a new concept. This is from former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, as stated in the document, "Accountable Government: A Guide for Ministers".

This is the principle, and we've spoken about this before, Chair. This is a committee that, from its earliest days, has evolved and has learned how to work around and with these very difficult issues that we have before us. In so doing, I agree that this was an important principle when it was brought forward by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and it is a key principle today. In fact, it is a fundamental principle that we should be responsible for.

I take exception to the first remark made by Mr. Poilievre saying in some way that Mr. Rodriguez's appearance here today was just that he happened to be passing by, so he's here, but this has nothing to do with the matter before us. I, for one, am looking forward to hearing Mr. Rodriguez speak and being able to ask questions of him. That is what I have to say on this motion.

As far as the motion itself goes, I would like to have it reread, but I am against the motion insofar as it casts aspersions upon the appearance of Mr. Rodriguez here today. It is done in good faith and in full adherence to the principle of ministerial accountability and, indeed, respects the wishes of the House. I would like to have it read out again.

Thank you.

• (1425)

The Chair: I wonder if that has been provided to the clerk yet in writing. Do we have a written form of that? No.

Mr. Fortin, I'm wondering if you could provide that to the clerk in writing so that could be distributed.

We'll continue on with this debate until such time as that happens. We are now about half an hour into a three-hour meeting, so we have used a significant amount of time, but we will try to get that circulated in written form.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Chair, I just want to say that you should have received it already. I asked for it to be sent to you.

[*English*]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Can we suspend while we're waiting for it to come to us?

The Chair: We'll turn to Mr. Fergus now. We are now half an hour into a three-hour meeting. I do want to continue to get to the decision as to whether or not we'll hear our witness. Of course, if our witness does get to answer questions, he probably would like to do that sooner than later.

Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

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

You suggested that we might have a little discussion about Mr. Li, but for the moment, I'll just speak to Mr. Fortin's motion, which will soon be provided to all members.

My question is about ministerial responsibility. This is an extremely important question for all of us as members of this committee.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Recognizing a point of order from Mr. Fortin, please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I just want to say that the debate our colleague, Mr. Fergus, is proposing took place on Thursday. Arguments about whether to summon Mr. Theis or the possibility of another minister replacing the Prime Minister or Mr. Theis may be good or bad, but the debate is over. It was over on Thursday when a motion was adopted.

Quite simply, the witnesses are not here today. Let's notify the House that the witness didn't obey the order it gave, period. That's all I'm asking. The House will decide what to do about it.

A debate about whether Mr. Rodriguez should appear instead of the witness the House ordered to appear is not on our agenda. Hearing from Rick Theis is on our agenda. He's not here, so let's report to the House, period. Then let's move on to the next item of business.

I think we should hear from Mr. Rodriguez. It's a good idea.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Fortin.

I think because I get a sense that this debate could carry on for some time, I'm going to take the chair's prerogative and simply ask committee members, does anybody oppose hearing from Mr. Rodriguez at this meeting?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Excuse me, Mr. Chair, but—

[*English*]

The Chair: Monsieur Fergus opposes. Is that correct, Mr. Fergus?

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, I don't want to answer your question because I was sharing my perspective on Mr. Fortin's motion.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It's not being debated right now.

The Chair: Colleagues, I'm taking the chair's prerogative and I'm going to call this meeting to order. I'm going to ask again: Is anybody opposed to hearing from Mr. Rodriguez at this point?

Mr. Fergus.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, can I ask you a very simple question, please?

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Do you object? Are you objecting to hearing from the government House leader?

The Chair: Mr. Fergus opposes.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, what happens to the motion?

The Chair: Is anybody else opposed to hearing from Mr. Rodriguez at this point? Could you please raise your hand.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair—

[English]

The Chair: I'm seeing there is support to hear from Mr. Rodriguez.

We'll turn to Mr. Rodriguez for his opening statement.

Mr. Rodriguez.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Monsieur Fergus, point of order.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, you said that there was a motion before us and that we couldn't raise any points of order.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: No, there's no motion.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Yes, Mr. Fortin moved a motion. I said I would limit my comments to that.

Mr. Chair, I don't understand why you aren't letting me just express my point of view on that.

• (1430)

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: There's no motion being debated.

The Chair: Colleagues, we have a decision to make.

My sense that this is going to be a debate that will extend for some time. The motion had nothing to do with whether or not we would hear from Mr. Rodriguez today. It had everything to do with if or not we would report back to the House the absence of the witnesses whom the House had instructed us to hear from today.

The question that I have for committee members, out of respect for Mr. Rodriguez and the fact that he now only has two and a half hours left for his appearance, is whether we would allow him to speak and we would get back to the motion at hand following his testimony.

I think I'm getting a sense from members that this is the way they'd like to proceed.

Mr. Fergus, I understand that you would not like to proceed that way, but—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: On a point of order, Chair, we want to know if there's a motion on the floor or not.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: There's not a motion on the floor.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I'm sorry—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: No, there's not.

The Chair: Order, colleagues.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Let the chair speak, please.

The Chair: There is a motion that has been brought forward.

I am asking if it's the will of the committee to hear from Mr. Rodriguez, to allow him to provide his testimony, and for members to ask and get answers to their questions. Is there willingness to do that?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, absolutely.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Chair, only if Mr. Fortin retracts his motion.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Excellent. You know, we can debate the other matters later on. There's no reason why we can't look at Mr. Fortin's motion tomorrow or after 5 p.m. today, or some other time, and all other matters related to Mr. Li. All of that can be done later. As I understand, we're not debating any of those things now. We're now moving to Mr. Rodriguez. Strangely, it seems that the Liberals don't want to hear from him after insisting that he be here.

Therefore, what I would suggest is that we simply go to Mr. Rodriguez, let him have his opening statement and we can begin, and if there are any motions that need to be withdrawn quickly so they can be reintroduced later on, so as not to keep our witness waiting any longer, then we should do that.

Let's get down to business. We obviously have a bunch of Liberals here who have something to hide, or else they wouldn't be trying to shut down the debate—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Mr.—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Point of order, Chair. Mr. Fergus had the floor.

Mr. Han Dong: Point of order.

The Chair: Colleagues, order.

Madam Clerk, can you mute all mikes other than mine?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mute the mikes.

The Chair: Colleagues, order. Order.

I'm not sure that Mr. Poilievre ever got to asking for unanimous consent—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You have it.

The Chair: —to adjourn debate on the motion that was being debated, but he had—

Mr. Han Dong: I don't even know which motion that is, Chair. I'm so lost. There are just so many interjections.

The Chair: Mr. Dong, order. Order.

Colleagues—

Mr. Francesco Sorbara (Vaughan—Woodbridge, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Sorbara.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: To all of my colleagues, obviously we are gathered this afternoon to speak to and to hear from the witness we have in front of us, Mr. Rodriguez, our honourable House leader on our side. I would like to hear from Mr. Rodriguez. I think it behooves all of us to raise our hands, to speak when the chair recognizes us, and when there's a point of order to be made by the honourable members, let's make our points of order. Let's get that across, but I think we can all do it in a very professional and mature manner.

Mr. Chair, I turn it back over to you. That was my intervention. I think we need to move forward in a very professional manner.

Thank you, sir.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Mr. Chair, if I may.

• (1435)

The Chair: Pardon me.

Mr. Sorbara, in an effort to be helpful, I'm wondering if you could do me one further favour, which is to ask for unanimous consent to adjourn debate on the motion that was being debated and move to hear from Mr. Rodriguez.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Chair, thank you for asking me. I am one member of the committee. If it is the will of the committee, then the will of the committee will proceed. If it is not the will of the committee, then the will of the committee will not proceed.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: That's right.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Again, I ask for decorum from all members so we can have a productive meeting here with the wit-

ness who was provided, incorporating the fact of ministerial responsibility.

Thank you, Chair.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Chair—

[*English*]

The Chair: Colleagues—

Mr. Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I don't want anyone engaging in systematic obstruction for whatever. In the interest of concluding debate, I'm prepared to accept Mr. Poilievre's proposal. I agree that we should debate my motion, which you all should have received, after we hear from Mr. Rodriguez, who is here with us. I'm not withdrawing my motion, but we'll vote on it after hearing from Mr. Rodriguez. I accept that proposal.

[*English*]

The Chair: I think there's unanimous consent to proceed in that manner. Does anybody oppose that?

Seeing nobody—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: On a point of order, I want to understand what we are doing. You're asking for our consent for Monsieur Fortin to withdraw his motion?

The Chair: Yes, the motion would be withdrawn at this point so that Mr. Rodriguez could speak, and Mr. Fortin reserves the right to reintroduce that motion at a later—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Point of order, Chair.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I would agree to that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Chair, point of order.

[*English*]

The Chair: Monsieur Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I didn't say I would withdraw my motion. I want to make that clear: I'm not withdrawing it. I'm suspending debate on my motion while we hear from Mr. Rodriguez. I'm not withdrawing it.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair—

[*English*]

The Chair: Colleagues, I need to suspend for one minute. There's a technical question with regard to what we need to do with the motion.

• (1435)

(Pause)

• (1435)

The Chair: I'm calling the meeting back to order.

I did seek clarification. Monsieur Fortin is correct that all we are doing is ending debate on his motion now. He is free to reintroduce it at a later point, either at this meeting or at a future meeting. Is there any opposition to suspending debate on the motion and allowing Mr. Rodriguez to speak? We'll have our questions, and Monsieur Fortin will be free to reintroduce that motion at some point later in the meeting or at a future meeting.

Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

Just to be very clear, when I was speaking earlier on the motion that is now being suspended, you said there was no motion in play. That's fine, but, Mr. Warkentin, please, out of respect, I would appreciate that you at least acknowledge that I was speaking appropriately, patiently, with my hand up, on the motion that Mr. Fortin had presented, which is now being suspended.

• (1440)

The Chair: I do apologize if I misspoke earlier.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: There was a motion that we were debating. It was not the debate as to whether or not Mr. Rodriguez would speak. It was with regard to reporting back to the House on the lack of the appearance by the witness who was expected by the House. That was what was being debated.

Mr. Rodriguez, we'll turn to you now for your opening statement.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. It's good to see you. It's been a while.

[Translation]

I'm very happy to see all of you. It's been a very long time since I last saw some of you.

[English]

It's true, Mr. Angus, we go back a long time. I had black hair when we met a while ago.

Colleagues, and Mr. Chair, I'm here because on our side of the House we have a deep respect for the traditions of Parliament, and one of those traditions is the principle of ministerial responsibility. As I said during my speech in the House last week, we believe that cabinet ministers are accountable to the House of Commons for the decisions of the government, and also for the actions of their own political staff.

[Translation]

This is why, since we took office in 2015, our government has repeatedly shown respect for this tradition in the House of Commons and its committees. Every day, our ministers answer questions. By now, there have been thousands of questions answered during daily question periods and during countless appearances at committee. They've answered lots of questions, as they should. That is how it is supposed to work.

We've always been collaborative with and accountable to members of Parliament and committees. It is our responsibility, and I think we've always fulfilled it professionally and gladly.

Ministers have collective responsibility for the actions of government, so I'm here today because, as a member of cabinet, I speak on behalf of the government and of those who work in it.

[English]

I am aware that some of the members of this committee would rather be hearing from a staff member from the Prime Minister's Office, Mr. Rick Theis, but as I told the House last week and I want to make clear again, we fundamentally disagree with the decision of the opposition to use its powers to intimidate and mistreat staff members who work in political offices. That is in direct contradiction to the very bedrock of our parliamentary system. Unelected political staff members are accountable to members of cabinet, and cabinet is accountable to Parliament.

This is a clear principle that the official opposition believed in more than a decade ago when the government in power was under Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper. I was there. Some of you were there. Mr. Poilievre was there. Charlie was there, and others too.

As I noted last week, it was the Conservative House leader, Jay Hill, who spoke extensively in the House on why the Harper government was refusing to let its staff members testify at committee. As Mr. Hill said quite rightly at the time:

When ministers choose to appear before committees to account for their administration, they are the best source of accountability and they must be heard. Public servants and ministerial staff support the responsibility of their ministers. They do not supplant it. They cannot supplant it.

The Harper government instructed its staff not to appear. Instead, cabinet ministers went in their place.

[Translation]

Unfortunately, the Conservatives under their current leader have changed their minds on the importance of this fundamental principle of ministerial responsibility.

What was so important to them when they were in government has been thrown out the window now that they are in opposition. That is regrettable, and it is dangerous, Mr. Chair, because Canadians need to know they can trust that the very traditions of their Parliament will not be abandoned out of political expediency.

The argument put forward by the Conservative House leader in 2010 was correct. It was the right thing to do then, and it's still the right thing to do now.

[English]

Please permit me to speak briefly about the matter at hand.

In regard to the decisions on the WE Charity, our government has turned over 5,000 pages of documents to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance. We did this in August of last year.

Regarding Mr. Theis, as the documents show, he had one interaction with WE Charity, a phone call. That's it. In fact, this was disclosed by the Prime Minister's Office itself. This should come as no surprise to anyone, many months later. According to Mr. Theis, the call lasted for about 25 minutes. WE Charity raised their ongoing work with diversity, inclusion and youth on the Canada student summer grant, as well as a proposal for social entrepreneurship. Mr. Theis asked WE how their proposal on summer grants would ensure diversity of placements, and for their part at WE, the Kielburgers expressed concern that this type of program would need to get off the ground soon.

• (1445)

In the discussion, in that communication, at no point were expenses discussed. Also, at no point were any commitments or assurances or advice given by Mr. Theis to WE on any subject other than to contact the officials involved at Diversity and Inclusion and Youth.

[*Translation*]

That all occurred in May 2020. It was a normal thing for Mr. Theis to do as a member of the policy staff in the PMO. He spoke to a stakeholder organization. It was one of many conversations he had with a variety of organizations. It was a general discussion.

Mr. Theis directed WE Charity to officials at Diversity and Inclusion and Youth, which was the most appropriate place to get answers to the questions they were asking. This staff member did his job in a professional manner. There's nothing more complicated about it than that.

These were actions similar to those of thousands of people who work hard every day in government, both in the public service and in ministers' offices. I hope you will come to understand this as you proceed with your work.

With that, Mr. Chair, I would be pleased to answer committee members' questions.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, colleagues.

Today, in an effort to maintain order, because we had some difficulty doing that at the beginning of this meeting, I will be looking to give Mr. Rodriguez the opportunity to answer the questions that he will be asked. So, we will provide him with an equal amount of time to answer the question to the duration of the question. We will also do the reverse.

We will turn to Mr. Barrett to begin.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Minister, thank you for joining us today.

Have you talked to Ben Chin about his role in shaping the CSSG, yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Have you talked to Rick Theis about his role in the CSSG, yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I did speak with Mr. Theis to make sure that I could answer all of the questions.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: On a point of order, Mrs. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I'm sorry to interrupt, Chair, but the order before us is regarding the activities of Mr. Theis and no other person, and so we should remain within the context of the motion before us.

Mr. Charlie Angus: That's not a point of order. It's a point of interference.

The Chair: I think that's a point of debate.

We'll turn back to Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Has Rick Theis been contacted by the RCMP about his role in the CSSG?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Not that I know of.

Mr. Michael Barrett: When was the last time that you spoke to Mr. Theis?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yesterday. I called him yesterday to make sure that I would have all the answers, because I would be here as the minister responsible, and I'm here to answer for Mr. Theis.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Has he been contacted by an officer of Parliament about his role in the CSSG?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: About what?

No, not that I know of.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Has Ben Chin been contacted by the RCMP about his role in shaping the CSSG?

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: I have a point of order, Chair.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I am here to discuss Mr. Theis.

The Chair: On a point of order, Mr. Sorbara.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Chair.

Chair, thank you for your work today because I know the circumstances are extenuating.

I do wish to challenge that. My honourable colleague, Mr. Barrett, is going down...asking questions regarding Mr. Chin. We're here to speak about—

• (1450)

Mr. Charlie Angus: That's not a point of order.

The Chair: I'm trying to hear the point of order.

Mr. Sorbara, I'll allow you to get to the point of order.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Today's discussion is regarding Mr. Theis. Minister Rodriguez is here answering the questions about that individual, and not about any other individual.

The Chair: The study before the House is considerably broader than that, and so we will not limit the minister with regard to testimony he may be able to provide with regard to the investigation on pandemic spending, lobbying and the remainder of the study.

We will turn back to Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: The question to the minister was if Ben Chin had been contacted by the RCMP about his role in shaping the Canada student service grant.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, I came here to answer questions about Monsieur Theis, so I don't know about Mr. Chin because I didn't speak to him—

Mr. Michael Barrett: We've heard a lot about ministerial accountability from the minister, but he's refusing to answer questions from a parliamentary committee when it was he who asked to appear.

Has Ben Chin been contacted by an officer of Parliament about his role in shaping the Canada student service grant?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I'm here to answer based on your motion in Parliament regarding Mr. Rick Theis.

Mr. Chair, I'm ready to be here for three hours—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Chair, a point of order. What we're hearing is false.

[*English*]

The Chair: Monsieur Fortin, is this a point of order?

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Yes, it is.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chair, the item on today's agenda was to get Rick Theis's answers to our questions. Rick Theis isn't here, so the matter is suspended. We'll debate that later on.

The minister said he would be happy to testify. We said we would hear from him, but we need to stick to the topic. He's not here to tell us what he thinks Rick Theis would have said had we asked him any given question. That's hearsay, and that's not what this is about.

Mr. Rodriguez wants to testify to the committee in the context of our study of the WE scandal. That's great; we'll hear what he has to say about the WE Charity scandal.

We aren't going to ask Mr. Rodriguez only the questions we would have asked Mr. Theis. We'll ask Mr. Theis those questions if and when he agrees to appear before the committee. Right now, Mr. Rodriguez—

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fortin.

I think for the benefit of all committee members, including the minister, I will now read from the notice of meeting, that, pursuant to the order of reference of March 25 on the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, November 16, 2020, the committee is resuming its study on questions of conflict of interest and lobbying in relation to pandemic spending.

That is from the notice of meeting and so we will expect the minister to be able to provide answers with regard to the scope of the particular study.

Mr. Barrett, we'll turn back to you.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Has anyone in the Prime Minister's Office been contacted by the RCMP with respect to their involvement in the Canada student service grant?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Not that I'm aware of, no.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did you, Minister, have a role in shaping the Canada student service grant?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did you speak with anyone in the Prime Minister's Office in advance of this meeting in order to provide this committee with information?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: With Mr. Rick Theis, yes.

I have to correct something because I did have a further question for him. I called him today for a short conversation.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How many times did PMO staff interact with either Craig or Marc Kielburger with respect to the Canada student service grant?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Those questions were asked before.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'm asking you today, Minister.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: There were so many witnesses. The Prime Minister appeared. His chief of staff appeared. The clerk and many others....

Mr. Michael Barrett: How many times, Minister?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: You can check the files.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

We'll turn now to Ms. Lattanzio.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, no. I have three minutes remaining, sir.

The Chair: Pardon me, I—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Do I have six minutes? Can I start asking my questions?

[*English*]

The Chair: That is correct.

We'll turn to Ms. Lattanzio for six minutes. We'll confirm Mr. Barrett's time was—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'll come back to you, Mr. Barrett—

Ms. Lattanzio.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, point of order. I have three minutes remaining of my time.

The Chair: Colleagues, order.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, I would ask you to speak with the clerk. I have three minutes remaining of my time. I withstood multiple interruptions by members of this committee. I have three minutes remaining of my time.

The Chair: Mr. Barrett, order. I will confirm with the clerk.

I've confirmed that, yes, in fact you do have additional time. We'll turn back to Mr. Barrett. I apologize Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Minister, I'm asking you the question about the number of interactions between staff at the Prime Minister's Office and Mr. Craig and Mr. Marc Kielburger. What is the number of interactions, sir?

• (1455)

[Translation]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I believe those questions were asked regularly throughout the process. You can check the questions and the notes that were taken about that.

[English]

Mr. Michael Barrett: I appreciate that you haven't been at committee in awhile, Minister, but that's not how this works. You're required to answer the questions that are being asked of you. Whom did Rick Theis communicate with in the Prime Minister's Office after his contact with the Kielburgers?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: What I know is that Monsieur Theis had that conversation of 25 minutes with WE, in which they explained their services, this and that, and he referred them to Diversity, Inclusion and Youth. That was his interaction.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Who did he speak to in the Prime Minister's Office afterwards? Who did he report that conversation to?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: He was not involved. I know where you're trying to get to.

Mr. Michael Barrett: To the truth.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I'm sorry, but inventing things....

I always tell the truth. The thing is that he was not involved. He had that phone conversation, and that was it.

I don't know why we're having—

Mr. Michael Barrett: He never spoke of it to anyone in his reporting structure again?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I don't know why we're having a three-hour meeting on a 25-minute conversation, by the way.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Minister, the question is this. Who did Mr. Theis speak to in his reporting structure following his conversation with the Kielburgers?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Nobody that I know of. I don't know.

Mr. Michael Barrett: It would be helpful if Mr. Theis were here to answer that question.

As the minister responsible, you should know the answer. Who did he speak to?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: As you know, ministerial responsibility is extremely important. That's why I'm here.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You're the responsible minister who's unable to answer the questions.

Did Rick Theis authorize the WE organization to start spending on the Canada student service grant on May 5?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, not that I know of.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Was the Canada student service grant authorized retroactively to May 5?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No.

Mr. Michael Barrett: On May 5, Sofia Marquez spoke with Rick Theis. Did Mr. Theis give the WE organization any permission, authorization or indication about the approval of the program?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Who was on the call between the WE organization and the government on that day?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Do you mean when Mr. Theis was on the phone?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Yes.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I believe it was Mr. Theis, and from WE, from what I understand, Craig and Marc Kielburger and Sofia Marquez.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Who told the WE organization it was allowed to incur expenses as of that date?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I'm sorry, who told...? I don't even know—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Who told the WE organization it was allowed to incur expenses as of May 5?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I can't answer that question.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You couldn't answer a lot of questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

Now we will turn to Ms. Lattanzio.

I do apologize again, Mr. Barrett, for intervening early.

Ms. Lattanzio.

[Translation]

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here with us today, Mr. Minister.

I'd like to begin by thanking you for talking about ministerial accountability. It's really important that we all know that.

Earlier, my colleague, Mr. Fortin, talked about how we might get some answers if the witnesses who were supposed to be here didn't show up. You mentioned the House of Commons tradition whereby ministers appear at committee to answer MPs' questions. Thank you for that.

Mr. Minister, did Mr. Theis play a role in negotiating the contribution agreement with WE Charity? If not, who did?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you for your question, Ms. Lattanzio. I'm happy to see you.

As I said earlier, Mr. Theis had one interaction with WE Charity. It was a 25-minute phone call with Ms. Marquez and the Kielburger brothers. It was a very general discussion during which WE Charity representatives talked about their work. Mr. Theis then directed them to officials at Diversity and Inclusion and Youth so they could talk to the people with the information they wanted. At no time was he involved in contract talks.

That kind of negotiation is carried out by public officials in the usual way.

• (1500)

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Mr. Minister, I'd also like to talk about one date in particular: May 8, 2020.

That date was mentioned repeatedly in testimony by witnesses in other committees.

What concerns were raised on May 8, 2020, about WE Charity's proposed Canada student service grant agreement?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Many questions were asked about why that organization was recommended. Why weren't any other organizations involved? Why couldn't we have our own government organizations do the work? There were other questions about whether the organization in question was able to deliver these services and whether it could do so consistently everywhere in both official languages.

A number of questions were raised about all that.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: On May 8, we also learned that the grant was removed from cabinet's agenda.

Why was the program withdrawn?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Questions were being asked. That was the first time it was submitted. The Prime Minister wanted to know why officials were suggesting that organization and why it couldn't be done internally.

There were several questions to which there weren't enough answers, so it was withdrawn from the cabinet meeting, but it came up again later.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Did Rick Theis talk to WE Charity representatives? If so, when did he do so, and what did they talk about?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: On May 25, there was a 25-minute conversation with WE Charity representatives. The conversation took place at the request of WE Charity representatives. They contacted him to talk about their organization and its services, among other things.

As always, Mr. Theis did the right thing at the time. He directed them to the appropriate officials at Diversity and Inclusion and Youth.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: At what point was Mr. Theis made aware of WE Charity's involvement?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: If I remember correctly, it was in late April or early May, when the cabinet committee was getting ready for a discussion about COVID-19.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Mr. Minister, did you ever meet with WE Charity representatives? To your knowledge, did Mr. Theis ever meet with WE Charity representatives on a more personal level?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, he didn't meet with them. I asked him that because I was coming here to answer questions about that. He didn't meet with them. There was no further communication between them after the 25-minute conversation on May 5, which was a general discussion.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Did they communicate with you, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, never. I don't know them.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Okay.

WE Charity sent its social enterprise proposal to the government in April 2020. Were you aware of the proposal in April 2020?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I wasn't personally aware of anything to do with that.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: How about Mr. Theis?

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to turn now to Mr. Fortin for his six-minute round.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, can you tell us why Mr. Theis isn't here today?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: It's because of ministerial responsibility, a principle you are very familiar with and one that we uphold here just as the National Assembly of Quebec does.

• (1505)

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Who instructed Mr. Theis not to be here today?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: As I clearly stated in the House of Commons the other day, staffers will not appear before committees and will be replaced by the ministers who are responsible.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: If I understand correctly, Mr. Theis isn't here today because you told him not to come. Is that right?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Based on the instructions I gave the other day, it was clear to Mr. Theis and other individuals that they wouldn't appear before committees and would be replaced by the appropriate ministers, which is how our system is set up, and which is what the Conservative government quite rightly did in its day.

I am here to speak in his stead.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Minister, what gives you the authority to contravene an order of the House of Commons or to take precedence over the House?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: As I said, Mr. Fortin, it's the principle of ministerial responsibility, a long-standing tradition. We can also operate according to tradition. Traditions are often absolutely essential to the operation of our institutions. This is a very important one.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: If I understand correctly, there's a tradition that gives you, Mr. Minister, precedence over any decision or order of the House of Commons.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: What I was trying to say is that we have a tradition that's deeply rooted in our way of doing things and that's essential to the workings of Parliament. That tradition is called ministerial responsibility.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I'm not aware of that tradition, Mr. Minister. I've never heard of it.

I'm probably naive, but I was under the impression that the House of Commons is the highest authority in Canada and that nobody can contravene an order of the House without being liable to severe penalties. Now you're telling me that there's a tradition that allows ministers to contravene obligations imposed on them by the House of Commons. That's news to me.

Does this same tradition authorize you to encourage people to disobey orders of the House, or rather, to instruct them to do so? Is that the same tradition?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That's a very fine point, Mr. Fortin.

I'm not saying that ministers can do whatever they want, generally speaking. That's not at all what this is about, and that's as it should be. However, it's a prevailing tradition that a minister can replace an employee who is called to testify in committee. In 2010, Mr. Poilievre fought for that tooth and nail when Mr. Baird appeared before a committee instead of an employee. The Conservatives did that in all the committees in 2010.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I wasn't here in 2010.

There was a debate on Thursday, March 25. What I know is that, four or five days ago, on March 25, the House ordered Rick Theis to be here. Today, you are here with us, Mr. Minister. You're telling me that you told Rick Theis not to obey the order because you would appear in his place.

So be it, but I'd like to know what gives you that authority. What is the basis for it, the rationale? I still don't understand. You said that you can't contravene an order of the House under just any circumstance. Can you tell me what those circumstances are? Under what circumstances does the minister take precedence over the House of Commons?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Ha, ha! Don't twist my words—

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: You're laughing, Mr. Minister, but I'm taking this seriously.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, I'm being very serious—

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Sure, but—

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: You know how much I respect you, Mr. Fortin.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I respect you too, Mr. Minister, and now that I know you take precedence over the House, I have even more respect for you.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: This isn't about taking precedence.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Tell me in what areas you take precedence.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Please let me answer.

It's not that ministers take precedence over the House, but ministerial responsibility means that a minister can replace an employee who reports to the minister, not to Parliament. The minister is the one who is accountable to Parliament.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: The House did not summon a government representative. The House summoned Rick Theis specifically. It authorized the Prime Minister to replace him if he so desired. I didn't see anything in the motion about Mr. Rodriguez or the government House leader replacing him. I've never seen anything anywhere in any rule or any tradition about a minister ordering someone to disobey an order of the House. I've never seen that.

This seems serious to me, Mr. Minister. I'm sorry to tell you that. With all due respect, I think what you've done, what you're telling us about today, is really serious. As I see it, it's unprecedented.

• (1510)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: May I answer you, Mr. Fortin?

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Go ahead.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Here's what the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* says on page 30:

...Ministers must be accountable or responsible to Parliament...

In terms of ministerial responsibility, Ministers have both individual and collective responsibilities to Parliament.... The principle of individual ministerial responsibility holds that Ministers are accountable not only for their own actions as department heads, but also for the actions of their subordinates....

That's extremely clear.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I agree that you're responsible for what happens in your department—

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fortin. Your time is up.

Mr. Angus, we'll turn to you for six minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Rodriguez.

Yes, we have many traditions and conventions in Parliament. Usually it's about protecting the prime minister no matter what, doing what has to be done to make sure that you can beat scandals down.

I was around. My hair is as grey as yours, so you and I go back a long way. Maybe some of your other colleagues don't remember the old days, but I remember Stephen Harper, and I remember—was it May 2010?—when this committee called Sébastien Togneri, a minister's staffer, to this committee to testify. I remember my good friend Wayne Easter said he smelled a cover-up. Paul Szabo issued the order and a minister's staffer came, so obviously there's a precedent.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes, and then the minister replaced the staffer based on the principle of ministerial responsibility, and what—

Mr. Charlie Angus: But he came.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: At the beginning, but then the staffers were replaced, as you know, by different ministers, including Mr. Baird and I think Madam Finley and others, and that was defended, of course, by Mr. Poilievre, who was there at the time.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Don't get me in with Mr. Poilievre; otherwise, Madam Shanahan's going to shut me down and start attacking me. I only have six minutes, so I don't want you to provoke anybody on your team. I—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Sorry; I have a point of order, Chair.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Oh, there we go.

The Chair: Go ahead on a point of order, Mrs. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I would like Mr. Angus to withdraw that remark. That was very unparliamentary.

The Chair: I didn't make a ruling with regard to parliamentary language and I don't think that the language that was used was considered unparliamentary.

We'll turn to Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

I'm hoping Madam Shanahan isn't doing this to interrupt my time, because I really want to talk with my old friend Pablo. We sat on a number of committees together. I hope that's not coming out of my time.

I think what's really fascinating here is about Mr. Theis, and I'm going to put my cards on the table: I want to get this study finished. We have to get this thing done. There's not much that I don't know now that I didn't know before, because of the 5,000 pages of documents, but what I do know is that Mr. Theis is the director of cabinet affairs, so when he meets with Marc and Craig Kielburger on May 5, they're discussing the plan that's about to go to cabinet. That's what they're discussing in that 25 minutes.

Afterwards Craig writes to Rick Theis and thanks him for the conversation about “streamlining the contribution agreement.” What was streamlined in the agreement as a result of that conversation with Rick Theis, the director of cabinet affairs?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I would say nothing. I spoke with Mr. Theis about this, and he said that the conversation was very general. WE took the time to explain everything they were saying, and he directed them to Diversity and Inclusion and Youth—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Yes, but you see, that doesn't make sense, because this is happening three days before this is going to cabinet. This isn't something that's just....

You said earlier that his job is to talk to many groups; there was only one group. This was the plan on the table. It was finalized on May 4; they talked about it on May 5, and it was going to cabinet on May 8, and he said he helped to streamline it.

When we look at this report, this plan, we see lots of holes and lack of due diligence. Obviously, he did something in the streamlining, because Rick Theis also said, “Will loop back if I have anything additional on this doc. Let's be in touch soon regardless.”

What did they streamline in that meeting before it went to cabinet?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: On that last email, I asked Mr. Theis, as a question of courtesy, to connect. You say that generally. In a conversation—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —you say this and that. It was not specific.

• (1515)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay, but were you given a copy of that document? You're here as the minister in charge. I mean the Kielburger document entitled “Government of Canada & WE - Revised proposal: iwanttohelp - COVID-19 Youth Service Initiative”. Do you have a copy of that?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, I don't, Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay, because what surprises me is in that document, there's a photograph of the Prime Minister's wife and mother, and I find that really surprising. It's not just that the Kielburgers knew them; everybody knew the Kielburgers know the Trudeaus, but this is being given to all the senior cabinet ministers. Did Rick Theis say to them, “Whoa, guys; don't put the pictures of the Prime Minister's family in there, because you're putting him in a conflict of interest”? Did Rick Theis or anybody at cabinet say it was really over the top to be that brazen, to use the Prime Minister's wife in order—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I have a point of order.

The Chair: We are recognizing a point of order.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Rick Theis is not a member of cabinet.

The Chair: I don't think that's a point of order.

Mr. Angus, we'll return to you.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I was asking about the director of cabinet affairs, who was given a document in which the Prime Minister's wife and mother were being used as the sales pitch. Didn't he say that if this is going to go to cabinet, it is inappropriate?

Mr. Rodriguez, you've read the Conflict of Interest Act. It puts the Prime Minister in a very clear apparent conflict in subsection 5, subsection 6, subsection 7 and subsection 8.

Mr. Theis's job is to protect the Prime Minister from getting into trouble. Did he say to Craig or Marc, "Do not use the Prime Minister's family as a selling deal when we're talking about a deal between \$500 million and \$900 million"? Did that happen in the conversation?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Well, Mr. Theis was not aware of the connections, or whatever you want to call it, between WE and the family—

Mr. Charlie Angus: That the mother—

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —and again—

Mr. Charlie Angus: But they're listed as "celebrity ambassadors". That means they work for the organization—and he wasn't aware?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Can I answer?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Yes, for sure. Go ahead.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you, Charlie.

In that conversation—and I did speak about this with Mr. Theis, because it was very important for me to be able to communicate to you what had been discussed—again, there was nothing of that sort, and there was no discussion about money or—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —whatever, and as you know, it was—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay. I'm just wondering, because his job is to protect the Prime Minister, so I would have thought that he would have answered that.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: As you know, the—

Mr. Charlie Angus: My time is running out. Can I ask you one more question?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Please do.

Mr. Charlie Angus: You're not really here for the Canada summer service grant, because you weren't there, but you are the director of the House, so when is Bill C-11 coming? I know it's going to upend all our work. Are you bringing it in a day or two days? If your Liberal colleagues are going to filibuster, I'm trying to fit my calendar in and see how long I have to listen to them before we get to the legislation. Could you tell us when we're going to get Bill C-11?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you. That's a very good question. Normally I get that from your House leader, which I appreciate very much.

We did call it on Friday, and I hope we're going to be able to call it back again soon.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus.

We're going to turn to Mr. Poilievre now for five minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Rodriguez, you said that Mr. Theis did not know about the Prime Minister's family relationship with WE. Did he get this document from the Kielburger brothers in May, yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I don't know.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, you talked to him. You're here to testify on his behalf, so tell us yes or no, please.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I am saying I don't know, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, if you'd read even the publicly available correspondence, you would know that he did receive the package.

In that package there is this promotional document with pictures of Sophie Grégoire and Margaret Trudeau. They are the spouse and mother of Justin Trudeau, so did Mr. Theis know that his boss's wife and mother were in a working relationship with the WE Charity, yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: From what I understand, no.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: He didn't read the package they sent him?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I didn't ask him if he read the package, Mr. Poilievre, so if I didn't know he had the package, I didn't know if he had read it or not.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, you're here to answer on his behalf, so you're the person the government says has the answers, so answer.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I did ask if he had knowledge of WE, had met with WE—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right. That wasn't my question.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —had dinner with WE, or whatever, and he didn't.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: As my next question, Mr. Chair, did he know that the Prime Minister's family had been paid by the WE organization?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: From what I know, no.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: He did not know?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: From my understanding, no.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: He was under the false assumption that the Prime Minister's mother and wife were doing their celebrity ambassadorial work for free?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Well, Mr. Chair—

• (1520)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —this is the type of attack we want to avoid for our staffers—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: He is implying stuff that is not real and he is—

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead on a point of order, Mr. Sorbara.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: The minister is here to speak about Rick Theis. The honourable member for Carleton is repeatedly bringing up the Prime Minister's mother and the Prime Minister's family, and you all know that my view on that from prior meetings is that is inappropriate in regard to what we are debating today.

Mr. Michael Barrett: That's not a point—

The Chair: As I have made clear, we are studying the lobbying with regard to pandemic spending. I do believe that it's within the order of the study.

Mr. Poilievre, we'll turn back to you.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes or no? Did Mr. Theis know that his boss's mother and wife were paid by the WE Charity, yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Based on what I know, no. I have already answered your question, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: He got the document. It showed the family members in it. The Kielburger brothers sent him this document, and he apparently did not know, even though it was right in this document.

Next point—

Mr. Han Dong: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead on a point of order, Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: My understanding of conduct in a committee is that it is the same as in the House, so no props can be used during the committee. Is that true?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: No.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Absolutely not.

The Chair: That is not true. I've seen props being used many times, including documents.

We'll turn back to Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: A moment ago you were asked clearly if the Canada student service grant was retroactive to May 5. You answered, "no".

I have here the contribution agreement. This is the date on which it was signed: June 23. It says here, "Effective date and duration: This Agreement shall come into effect on May 5th, 2020".

Were you simply ignorant of the facts or were you deliberately misleading the committee when you said that it wasn't made retroactive?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I never mislead committees, Mr. Poilievre. Those are—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Why did you state a falsehood?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Those are things that are negotiated by public servants. I'm not aware—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It says right here.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Well, then, that's what it is. Those are things that are negotiated—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You said it wasn't retroactive. Are you now saying it was retroactive? Let's be clear.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I don't know.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You don't know.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: You have—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You don't seem to know very much about this, yet you're the minister responsible.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Well, I do. Ask questions on what you called the meeting for, and—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You're the minister responsible. You don't know, so let's get on to the next point.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Poilievre, just a second—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You said you don't know. That's your response.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: We have a point of order.

I did make it very clear that I did want the witness to have the opportunity to answer and to use the same length of time that the question took, but I do recognize the point of order.

Go ahead, Ms. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Well, it's on that point exactly, that the member should please allow the witness to respond to the question.

The Chair: Thank you. That isn't a point of order, but I did make it clear to the member and the witness that this was the case.

Go ahead, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did Mr. Theis tell public servants to get the program out the door?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Not that I know of.

Regarding your previous questions, I understand that they were asked at finance, and you have the necessary—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you very much, Mr. Rodriguez.

I have here a summary of a phone call that Mr. Theis had with the public servants on whom your government has blamed this entire debacle.

According to this summary, it says here, "Rick, critical path to get this out the door."

You're saying he did not say that he wanted to get it out the door, and here we have a summary of his phone call in which he says, and this is reading directly from the summary, "Rick, critical path to get this out the door."

Why would you testify that he hadn't told public servants to get this out the door when the call logs show he did?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: As I mentioned to you, I spoke with Mr. Theis yesterday and again quickly today, and I asked those questions. I asked about his involvement, and I told you what it was. It was 25 minutes and it was more general than anything else.

I know that you want to point the finger at him and other staffers, but—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —that's not the case.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did he tell you when you spoke to him yesterday that he had told public servants to get this program out the door, yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Can you repeat, please?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did he tell you when you spoke to him yesterday that he had told public servants that he wanted a critical path to get this out the door? Did he tell you that?

• (1525)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No. I don't think there was any reason for that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: No, he didn't tell you that. Okay.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: There was no reason for him to—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You're testifying on his behalf here today, but you claim not to know anything about what he did, so it's hard to understand what you're able to share with us.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That's false, Mr. Poilievre. I'm telling you what we discussed.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You just failed to confirm whether or not he said we should get this out the door, and I'm telling you it's right in the call logs that he said that, so you were ignorant of those facts, yet you're supposed to be testifying on his behalf. Either you don't know or you're hiding things. Which is it?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I have a point of order, Chair.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Speaker, you have known me a long time. You know I don't hide—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: On a point of order, Chair—

The Chair: Go ahead on a point of order, Ms. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: The witness is here on behalf of the government. The witness cannot say a person—

The Chair: Ms. Shanahan, that's not a point of order. If you would like to be asked to be a witness, you're welcome to make that request, but we'll allow the witness to testify.

Mr. Rodriguez, if you want to give an answer to that question, we'll allow you to answer, and then we'll turn to Mr. Sorbara.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Again, the questions that have been asked and raised by Mr. Poilievre were answered at the finance committee. He has the answers there.

I think that Mr. Poilievre is looking for information that he already has, and there is nothing new here.

The Chair: Mr. Sorbara, we'll turn to you.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and obviously it's nice to see my colleagues this afternoon. Welcome again, Minister, to the committee.

Minister, I want to make sure we're very clear on the information at hand and clear on the facts that we're dealing with.

Minister, did Mr. Theis have any role in negotiating the contribution agreement with WE or any of its associated entities?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Absolutely not.

As you know very well, and you know it well, Mr. Sorbara, we've had many discussions on finance files. It's the public servants

who do that. It's their job, and they do it very well. They're professional, and they did that.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: In this case, who was responsible for negotiating the contribution agreement?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: It was the public servants.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: The public servants being ESDC?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: During our lengthy questioning with the Kielburgers—I think they have come to two committees, for approximately seven hours, and probably even more than that if I have forgotten a day or two—Marc Kielburger made a statement. I'm going to read verbatim what he stated:

The agreement technically began on May 5. We were working in advance with ESDC, putting in resources to help develop the program. The turnaround time was so tight and we were, of course, so passionate about helping young people at this time, that we got to work right away with the full risk and understanding that if this agreement did not go forward, we would be at the financial risk of doing so. We accepted that risk because we really wanted to help.

Minister, is that comment from Mr. Kielburger your understanding of how the process was undertaken with regard to ESDC in its negotiations and vice versa, in WE's negotiations with ESDC?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Excellent.

My understanding is that Mr. Theis had one 25-minute call with the Kielburgers. In that call he listened. I have met Mr. Theis two or three times. He's a very affable individual, very personable and very nice. He follows up very quickly with all stakeholders, including me. He is someone who will respond when he needs to respond and when it's appropriate to do so.

My understanding is that this was the only interaction that Mr. Theis had with the Kielburgers. There were follow-up emails from the Kielburgers that Mr. Theis did not answer. Is that correct?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes, it is correct, based on my conversation and all the information that was provided to me. There was only one 25-minute phone call. Again, it was mostly general conversation, and Mr. Theis directed them to the diversity and inclusion department.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Exactly. My understanding is that 5,000 pages of documents were disclosed to the finance committee and the members on that committee during that time—and I was one of them—and then on to the ethics committee. There were 5,000 documents. Mr. Theis had that one 25-minute conversation with WE and then directed them to a minister's office for that program.

That is correct?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Absolutely correct. Yes.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Is Mr. Theis a minister?

• (1530)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No. Maybe one day.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Maybe one day. At this current time, he is not a minister; he's an individual who works in the Prime Minister's Office for the Prime Minister.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: On that note, the principle is extremely important. One of the reasons to protect our staffers....

If I may, I'm going to quote someone here, who said:

Ministers' staff who have appeared before committees have been denied the accompanying support of their ministers. They have been denied the opportunity to get basic treatment of due process. They have been stripped of the ancient tradition that guarantees ministers are responsible for the function of their ministries and their departments.

I'm quoting Mr. Poilievre directly here.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Absolutely. We know Mr. Poilievre is quite the eloquent speaker in the House of Commons and on committees, and those were his words just a few years ago.

I want to ask a question about Mr. Theis and his social relationship. In my time that I have been blessed to walk on this earth, I did not know about the WE Charity. I didn't know about them until last summer. I did not know who Marc and Craig Kielburger are or were. I still don't really know them. I have no social relationship with them, nor any ties. I have never been to a WE event and have never been invited. I was just not there, and frankly, it doesn't cause me to lose any sleep at night.

Does Mr. Theis have any social relationship with either of the Kielburgers?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No. He never had a meeting with them, not dinner, lunch, drinks, whatever. I did ask all those questions.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Does he consider them to be personal friends?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Absolutely not.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Mr. Rodriguez, have you ever had dinner with the Kielburgers? I know I certainly have not.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No. Actually, to be honest, the first time I heard the name "WE", I thought it was *oui* in French. I was wrong.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: On that front, just to respond, I do want to put on the record that when I first heard about this WE Charity, I had to ask local principals and teachers what this organization was, in fact, and receive the pertinent feedback for me to make decisions on what I thought about this charity or did not think about this charity, or what I thought or did not think about this organization.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sorbara. Your time is up.

I'm not sure if that was a question, but if you want to answer that question, Mr. Rodriguez, you may, if in fact you felt there was a question there.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No. I just thank Mr. Sorbara for his work.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Very good.

We're going to turn to Monsieur Fortin for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Rodriguez, to your knowledge, has Rick Theis ever refused to obey an order of the House of Commons or of a court?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, not to my knowledge, Mr. Fortin. In this case, it's a directive—

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Good.

Are you aware of cases other than this one, in the history or customs and practices of the House, where a minister ordered cabinet members to disobey an order of the House of Commons? Has that ever happened, to your knowledge?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes, a number of times.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Can you give me an example, please?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I believe Minister Baird testified at committee. I think he did so in place of Mr. Soudas or Mr. Togneri. It was one or the other.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Did he order the witness to disobey an order of the House? I'm not talking about an invitation. We often invite witnesses. We agree on that. I believe it's a lot rarer for the House to order a witness to appear.

Do you know of any other cases in which a minister forbade someone from obeying an order of the House? Has that ever happened?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Personally, what I've seen is ministers telling their staff not to respond to a committee's invitation and replacing them.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: They avoided appearing before a committee that invited them. We've seen that a lot. I get that.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes, the minister appeared in their place.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Right, but I'm not talking about invitations, which are common. There are hundreds of invitations a week. Well, maybe not that many, but lots. I'm talking about an order—

• (1535)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: So you agree with me about the principle of ministerial responsibility.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: We could go on and on about ministerial responsibility. We did so last Thursday. We spent the day talking about it. We had that debate. We could go on forever, but that's not the issue. The debate ended with an order. The House gave an order. As I see it, the House is the supreme authority, and even the government must obey the House.

Now I'm discovering that ministers have precedence over the House. I'd like to know of other times when a minister, any minister, had precedence over the House and asked someone to disobey an order of the House.

Can you give even one example?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I can name one. Once again, it was in 2010. The government House leader rose in the House and said that no ministerial staff member would appear in committee, no matter....

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Was there...?

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fortin. Your time is up.

We're going to turn to Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Mr. Rodriguez, for appearing. I've always considered you a good friend. I don't feel that you're much of a witness to help us today, but I thank you for showing up.

I want to just say that I have been committed to getting answers, because this is our job at committee, and it is our job to ask tough questions. It is why the ethics committee has always been chaired by a member of the opposition, because it is about holding government to account.

I've never seen a committee on which government members are happy. They don't like asking tough questions. Occasionally we see them launch bitter personal attacks because we ask those questions. Today I asked a question about documents that we've been trying to get, and I was subjected to a personal attack by Mrs. Shanahan. It worries me, because I've had my family targeted for asking questions in this committee.

I think we need to stay focused here. I think we need to stay focused on getting this committee report to Parliament. I don't think the government will like the report, but it is our job to get those answers.

I've appreciated having you here. I don't think it's added very much. I would like to ask my colleagues to stay focused on what this committee has to do in the time that's remaining—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: On a point of order, Chair—

Mr. Charlie Angus: These personal interruptions and interference—

The Chair: We are recognizing a point of order. Go ahead, Mrs. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: My name has been used again by Mr. Angus, and he has in the past used the mention of his name to interrupt a member who was speaking. Using the word “attack” is unparliamentary. It is in no way representative of the discussions—

Mr. Charlie Angus: That is debate.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: —that we're having here, and I would ask that the member withdraw his remarks.

Mr. Charlie Angus: That's debate.

The Chair: Thank you. That is debate. That is not a point of order. We will return to Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Well, so much for that, Mr. Chair. I was actually trying to suggest to my colleagues that maybe we could stay focused and work together to get something done here, because we do have the Pornhub study, which is very serious, and I would like to see ministers come for that.

If we are going to have these continual interruptions and interference and go to the wall over stuff like that, at this point I'm ready to get the report done. That's my feeling.

I thank you for coming, Mr. Rodriguez. You may not like the report, and the government may not like the report on Pornhub. They may, but it is our job to get it done, and regardless of the blocking and interference I've experienced over the last year at this committee, with the endless filibusters and interruptions, I will continue to do my job. That's what I do as a parliamentarian.

Thank you very much for coming.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you.

Can I say something?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Go ahead.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you very much, Mr. Angus. I have to say that I always appreciated working with you. You have asked me tough questions; that's your job, and it's fine. My job is to try to answer.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, we'll turn to you now for the next round of questions.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did Mr. Theis brief the Prime Minister on the Canada student service grant to WE, yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did he tell the Prime Minister that the employment and social development department had perused evidence showing that WE could actually deliver the program, yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes.

Do you mean the recommendation from the public service—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: No, not the recommendation. I mean evidence that we could deliver the program.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: That's funny, because I have in my hands another document that you have just contradicted. It's from Treasury Board. It says, “Finally, Treasury Board Secretariat notes that employment and social development has not provided evidence to suggest that WE Charities possess the capacity to undertake this work, especially under accelerated timelines.”

Did Mr. Theis lie to you and say that he briefed the Prime Minister that there was such evidence?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: After they made the briefing, the due diligence, is when the information was transmitted, Mr. Chair.

I'm not sure what Mr. Poilievre is trying to do here.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, you claim, and I'm asking you—

• (1540)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: He's accusing Mr. Theis of doing something bad.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You claim that Mr. Theis told you that the department gave evidence that WE could deliver the program, and I have here, from your government's own Treasury Board Secretariat, a report that was filed on the same day, saying that there was no evidence to suggest that WE could even deliver this program.

Did Mr. Theis tell you that, yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Poilievre, the document was removed from cabinet for due diligence, and the Prime Minister had many questions. They were answered by the public servants, and the public servants, as you know, said that it was the only way to do it. That's it.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: But I have the public servants saying here that they couldn't, that WE actually couldn't, or that there was no evidence that WE could deliver it. The documents say exactly the opposite of what you are testifying.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Poilievre, the documents are a little bit small for me to be able to read on the screen. Sorry.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right. Maybe you should have read them before you got here. The Boy Scouts' rule: be prepared.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I have 5,000 pages that we gave you, Pierre, 5,000 pages, my friend.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Come prepared, my friend. If you're the minister responsible, own up and know what you're talking about.

Did any public servants raise concerns about the integrity of the program?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, I have here a document—

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: But you—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you. No, you answered the question.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: But you did have those conversations and questions, Mr. Poilievre—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you. Thank you. You said no, that no public servant raised concerns about potential integrity. Well, here I quote from the Treasury Board Secretariat:

Furthermore, the tracking of hours by a third-party could be challenging and result in potential integrity concerns should the students not be honest about hours accrued.

Again, you testify to something, and I present to you, in real time, contradictions to what you say, so how is it that you're the minister responsible for this file and you can't answer the most basic questions accurately?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Poilievre, maybe it's because you just want to hear some answers and you don't like some of the answers and then you say that they're no good, but the answer doesn't depend upon whether you like it or not. An answer is an answer, and you know me. You have known me for a long time. You know I always—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay, we'll go to the next question, then. Did Rick Theis—

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —I'm going to answer that question.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Good, let's get to it, then.

Did Rick Theis suggest that the WE organization might need more funds? Did he tell public—

M. Greg Fergus: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We are recognizing a point of order.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, I'd like to ask you how much time there was for this round. I have 3 minutes and 38 seconds on my clock.

The Chair: That's why I haven't called the time yet. It's a five-minute round.

Thank you, Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Thank you, sir.

I apologize to Mr. Poilievre for interrupting.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, we'll turn it back to you.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Theis is the Prime Minister's cabinet director. He spoke to public servants about this program. Did he suggest that WE might need more funds than the public servants originally suggested, yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, not that I know of, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, when it comes to the—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you. Thank you for that direct answer. I appreciate it.

If I can follow up—

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —meeting of the ethics committee, we both heard directly from the—

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, I think we're going to give Mr. Rodriguez the opportunity to answer.

Mr. Rodriguez.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's important to mention, Mr. Chair, that the finance committee and the ethics committee have both heard directly from the non-partisan public servants—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —who are responsible for this program, and no one raised flags about—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right. That has nothing to do with my question.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes, it does.

No one raised flags about WE Charity's finances and resources. No one.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right.

I have here a call log. You just said that Mr. Theis, top adviser to the Prime Minister, did not suggest there might be a need for more funds. In fact, on May 25, in a call he had with senior officials at Finance and Employment, he said, and I quote here, "Potential for a second wave - but will need more funding to do that."

He's suggesting that the WE organization might need more funding than the officials were originally recommending.

Again, it's exactly the opposite of what you just testified. Why do you keep testifying the opposite of what the documents your own government has released say?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Poilievre, you're suggesting things that you think he's suggesting, right?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: "but will need more funding to do that."

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, your time is up.

Mr. Rodriguez, we'll give you an opportunity to answer that question, and then we're going to turn to Mr. Dong for five minutes.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Again, Mr. Chair, Mr. Poilievre is suggesting that someone is suggesting something. I could be suggesting that Mr. Poilievre is suggesting that somebody is suggesting...and we go on and on and on.

We need facts, and we don't get this from what—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It's right in the documents.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dong, we'll turn to you now for five minutes.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you very much, Chair.

I've been listening carefully on the question and answer...and I must say that there's not much new information coming forward. The fact of the matter is that we've been at this study going back to last year.

Viewers should also understand that there's a parallel investigation taking place right now by the Ethics Commissioner, who, by the way, in my opinion, has the most appropriate authority in looking into it. I look forward to his findings and his recommendations.

I was told in the beginning of joining my colleagues in Ottawa that committee work is non-partisan in nature, but more and more what I've been seeing is that it's similar to what's taking place in the House of Commons during debates and question period. It has really, I would say, threatened the work and the outcome of this committee.

I echo what Mr. Angus said earlier, that we have a very important study that is being stalled, quite honestly, by the Conservatives.

We all knew what the schedule of the committee was going to be. We have the Pornhub study. We are also anticipating Bill C-11 coming forward, which was mentioned earlier. Also, there is the new information that we may be able to get through our conversation or correspondence with Mr. Li. To me, that's the most productive part. That's the contributing part to the study that we're talking about today.

I don't know why the Conservatives are so addicted...or believe so much that they are going to gain their positive political objec-

tives through this process of endless questioning. I haven't heard anything new that I haven't heard previously.

With that, since we have the minister here on behalf of the government, I want to clarify something.

First of all, Mr. Shugart testified that no one in the public service raised any red flags about WE Charity's financial well-being and resources before the CSSG proposal went to cabinet on May 22.

Did Mr. Theis see or hear about any red flags being raised about WE Charity's finances and resources? I think it was talked about previously, but the minister didn't get a proper chance to respond to that.

● (1545)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: As I was trying to answer, Mr. Shugart mentioned very clearly that there had been no red flags raised. If I may go back to your initial comments, I agree that there's nothing new here. I think that we're trying to create stuff or maybe invent stuff. I don't know what it is. The Prime Minister testified in committee, as did the Clerk many times, as well as ministers. There's nothing new coming out of this. I think the committee does extremely important work, especially in these times of COVID. I think we should concentrate on that more than anything else.

Mr. Han Dong: I couldn't agree more. I think we owe the witnesses we heard during the Pornhub study a report. That report should come in a timely fashion.

In Mr. Shugart's testimony to the committee, the Clerk of the Privy Council said that given the importance of the issue to the pandemic response and the scale of the contribution, he did not see how the PM and the finance minister could not have been involved in the CSSG policy development and approval.

Can you comment on that?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: From my understanding, it was a major financial decision with lots of implications, a huge program involving important amounts of money. That's what I understood from what Mr. Shugart said.

Mr. Han Dong: In your experience, is it common for unsolicited programs, ideas or proposals to be sent to the government, and is there anything improper in government considering and even acting on those kind of proposals?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, it's not uncommon. Actually, it happens all the time, especially in the period of COVID, when you have to be creative, when you have to think outside of the box, when you have to create new programs, when you have to do things very quickly to help Canadians. That's what we did. Sometimes we get comments and suggestions, such as from you guys, from MPs, from organizations, from groups, from unions, from businesses. It happens all the time, but it has to follow a due process.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you.

Your time is up, Mr. Dong.

I know that some members have been asking for a short break before we begin the third round. We will suspend the meeting for approximately four minutes.

• (1550)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1555)

The Chair: I'll call this meeting back to order.

We'll turn to Mr. Barrett to start the third round of questions.

Go ahead, please, Mr. Barrett, for five minutes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Minister, what would have been the consequence of Mr. Theis obeying the House order? Would he have been fired?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No. Why are you asking that?

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'm asking because he was instructed not to appear, presumably by you, against an order by Canada's Parliament.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I explained to you very clearly—and you heard me in the House—about ministerial responsibility. It's based on that, which Mr. Poilievre was defending very hard in 2010. That's why I'm here.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Who did Mr. Theis refer WE to at ESDC?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I don't know. It was just referred to the department.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did Mr. Theis speak to anyone at the WE organization before or after May 5, 2020?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, he did not as far as I know.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How much in expenses was WE told, on May 5, that it could incur?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Can you repeat the question? How much on May 5...?

Mr. Michael Barrett: How much in expenses was the WE organization told it could incur on May 5?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I don't know. I think it was zero, but I'm sure those questions were asked in other committees.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'm asking you questions today, Minister.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I understand that—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Marc Kielburger told the finance committee that he got to work right away. "Right away" implies that he was tasked to get something done and that it was expected of him. Once again, who told Mr. Marc Kielburger that he needed to get to work in the absence of a signed contract from the government?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: You know it wasn't Mr. Theis, because I've said many times that nothing was discussed about expenses—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Don't tell me who it wasn't; tell me who it was.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That was very clear.

I'm sure it was reported in other committees, in other places, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Minister, on what dates did Rick Theis communicate with the WE organization?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: It was on May 5.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How many times did he communicate with Craig and Marc Kielburger?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: They communicated with him that one time. They sent emails but he didn't—

Mr. Michael Barrett: How many did they send?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I don't know.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How many times did he communicate with Sofia Marquez?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I think you have all the documents, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How many times did he communicate with Sofia Marquez?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: He had no further discussion with WE, according to my conversation with Mr. Theis. He had that conversation of 25 minutes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: So you're saying zero, that he communicated with Sofia Marquez zero times?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Do you mean if they had a phone conversation? They had one phone conversation—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Minister, I mean communicate—via email, text message, social media, conversation in person, telephone, fax, you name it. How many times was it?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: There were maybe a few emails, I think, courtesy emails. You have all that in your documents.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Minister, we're not here to find out what's in documents. We're here for you to answer questions from the committee. That's your obligation. You've claimed to be the minister in charge. You're the minister who knows very little.

How many times did he communicate with Dalal Al-Waheidi?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Barrett, if you want I can take lots of time and go through the documents that you have.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You should have done that before you appeared, Minister.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I cannot guess your questions, Mr. Barrett. Be respectful, please.

You have all the documents and all the same answers that have been provided to everyone.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did the government vet the WE organization for the Canada student service grant?

• (1600)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: What do you mean by vet?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Was there due diligence completed on the awarding of this half-a-billion-dollar agreement to an organization that had paid members of the Prime Minister's family half a million dollars? Was there due diligence, Minister?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: The officials did. The officials had those conversations at the meetings. They—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Which department was that?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —analyzed the departments and then made that recommendation for the government to move along with [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Mr. Michael Barrett: You don't know who conducted that process?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Do I know the name specifically? No, but I'm sure many people worked on that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Minister, who approved the incurring of expenses by the WE organization?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I can get back to you on that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, the minister has undertaken to provide information with respect to who approved the incurring of expenses by the WE organization. I want to ensure that that's recorded in your notes. I'm looking for the return of that undertaking by the minister.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I can tell you that it's not Rick, by the way, Mr. Barrett.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll turn to Ms. Shanahan for the next round of questions.

Ms. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Chair, I've ceded my place to Mr. Fergus.

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, we'll turn to you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the minister for being here today.

It's very important to make sure we know why we're here today, March 29. I'd like to refer to the motion adopted in the House of Commons:

...

(a) regarding the study on questions of conflict of interest and lobbying in relation to pandemic spending by the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics,

...

(ii) Rick Theis, the Prime Minister's Director of Policy and Cabinet Affairs, be ordered to appear before the committee on Monday, March 29, 2021, at 2:00 p.m.,

Minister, you are here on account of this motion, correct?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Absolutely, Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead, on a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Chair, we already debated this earlier, and we agreed that Mr. Rodriguez was here to answer all questions related to the WE Charity scandal, and not to engage in hearsay by repeating what he thinks Rick Theis would have answered to any given questions. The minister is not here to speak on behalf of Rick Theis. He is here to answer for himself.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Fortin. I believe that's a point of debate rather than a point of order. Monsieur Fergus has an opportunity to ask the questions he'd like answered.

We'll turn back to Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, thank you for the opportunity to ask a question.

Perhaps Mr. Fortin doesn't think I can rise to the occasion, but I'm sure I can, as a member of Parliament. I can ask whatever questions I would like the witnesses to answer.

Minister, you are here to answer questions about Mr. Theis, since he was summoned to this meeting. Is that right?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes.

Mr. Greg Fergus: You are not here to answer questions about anyone else.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes, that's right.

I'm here because of the motion that was debated and adopted in the House of Commons, a motion that calls on people who are completely outside the purview of Parliament to appear here. Often that means being rushed and pushed around. You can see the tone of today's meeting. It's fine for me, I'm used to it, I've been around for a while. However, it is unacceptable for employees to be treated this way.

That's why we decided to apply the principle of ministerial responsibility, as the Conservative government has done in the past.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Indeed, Mr. Poilievre had this to say in 2010 regarding the principle of ministerial responsibility:

Prime Ministers typically do not testify before committees—that matter is not in dispute. Therefore the Prime Minister does send a designate to represent him. In this case we have Minister Baird.

That was on Tuesday, May 25, 2010. He also said the following that day:

However, ministers are accountable and answerable to Parliament for government policies, decisions, and operations. Ministerial staff are ultimately accountable through their minister.

Do you agree with Mr. Poilievre's statement and this long-standing parliamentary principle?

• (1605)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Absolutely.

Mr. Poilievre was quite right at the time, but that might be less true today.

As I recall, at the time, when my hair was a little less grey, he defended the fact that the Prime Minister wasn't invited to committee meetings, as you pointed out, and he said it was not up for debate.

As you so eloquently put it, he went on to say that ministers are accountable to Parliament, to committees and ultimately to Canadians.

Mr. Greg Fergus: I could go on and on, but I'm almost at my last question.

I would once again like to quote Mr. Poilievre from the same day:

The committee should respect the centuries-old tradition that the minister is responsible and let him answer those questions.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: You're quite right.

In fact, the official opposition at the time, which was the Liberal Party of Canada, subsequently changed its position and agreed with the Conservative government on ministerial responsibility, and that is what we subsequently applied.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Minister, this is my last question.

Do you think political staffers should be intimidated by political posturing, political attacks from MPs for partisan purposes, rather than having these questions put to the ministers responsible?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, absolutely not. I think we must protect the employees of all political parties, including Mr. Angus's party, Mr. Fortin's party, Mr. Warkentin's party and Elizabeth May's party.

These individuals come here to do their best and to serve Canada, certainly not to be pushed around and bullied before a committee.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Minister.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you very much, Mr. Fergus.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll turn to Monsieur Fortin, for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, it's important that we not confuse matters. Ministerial responsibility means that you, as ministers, are responsible for any mistakes that may be made by the employees who report to you,

but that shouldn't prevent the committee from calling them to testify in order to establish the facts and determine what happened.

In your testimony, you said several times that you knew nothing and that we need facts. The only way to get the facts is to hear from the people personally involved. It's not a matter of bullying them, as you've been saying, but simply hearing from them.

That said, Minister, I would like to quote a passage from page 137 of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* dealing with parliamentary privileges and immunities:

By virtue of the preamble and section 18 of the Constitution Act, 1867, Parliament has the ability to institute its own inquiries, to require the attendance of witnesses and to order the production of documents, rights which are fundamental to its proper functioning. These rights are as old as Parliament itself.

Minister, can you comment on that?

Is Parliament's right to conduct inquiries and call witnesses more limited today than it was before this government came to power?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: The previous government operated in exactly the same way, Mr. Fortin.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Perhaps the authors of the book, Mr. Bosc and Mr. Gagnon, need to be told that. In the 2017 edition, they seem to indicate that that is not the case. They say that, since 1867, under section 18 of the Constitution Act, Parliament has the right to require the attendance of witnesses. Perhaps you should tell them that you disagree with them, to avoid confusion.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I gave you concrete examples, for instance when the official opposition party at the time, the Liberal Party, in collaboration with the Bloc Québécois and the NDP, invited several Conservative employees to appear, but the Conservatives refused to send them and sent ministers in their place.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I'm not talking about invitations. You're talking about invitations, and I agree with you on that. I'm talking about an order. Parliament has issued an order. It may have been appropriate to invite these witnesses, but that's another matter. Parliament saw fit, rightly or wrongly, to summon them by order last Thursday. Now you're saying that you told those witnesses not to follow the order. I think that runs counter to what is set out here in *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* in the chapter on privileges and immunities. I even wonder whether you're not in contempt of Parliament yourself, Minister. I'm really shocked to read that, but that's how I understand what I read.

What do you think? Doesn't that bother you?

• (1610)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Coming back to what happened in 2010, it's not a question of...

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Forget about 2010. I'm talking about 2021.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, it's very important. Those witnesses were summoned to appear. It wasn't an invitation. I just wanted to correct what you said.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: You are the one who said...

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Fortin. Your time is up, but we'll allow the minister to answer the question.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Rodriguez. Then we'll turn to Mr. Angus.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

As I was saying, this is all extremely important. Producing documents is vital. That's why I'm saying these documents must be produced, but we have to respect the fact that the public service, which is neutral and professional, prepares them.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll turn to Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

Again, thank you, Mr. Rodriguez, for making time....

You said before the meeting that you talked with Mr. Theis. Before the meeting, did you talk with Ms. Shanahan, Mr. Fergus, Mr. Sorbara, Mr. Dong or Ms. Lattanzio?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: If I spoke to them?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Any of them.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, no. I'm sorry; no, I didn't.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I was just wondering, because obviously there's a concerted plan here to interrupt and interfere.

These people are not rude. I adore them. Whenever Mr. Fergus speaks.... Mr. Sorbara and I were in Italy together. Mr. Dong and I were going to learn to sing together. I just got to meet Ms. Lattanzio. Ms. Shanahan is a good Irish Canadian. I spent my life growing up with Irish Canadians.

Yet, whenever we go to talk, there's interference and disruptions. We went for I think 40 straight hours of filibustering meetings. I'm wondering who coordinates that, because it doesn't seem natural.

Because you're the House leader, would you have that obligation to make sure, when difficult questions like the WE Charity come up, that they get their instructions to interrupt and to filibuster? Who would handle that?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, Mr. Angus. I have a lot of things on my plate, but that's not one of them.

Mr. Charlie Angus: You don't do that. Okay.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, I don't.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I was surprised, because at the Canada-China meeting, they're doing the same tactics of interfering, getting angry and interrupting. It doesn't seem like the Liberals I know, so I'm thinking there has to be a plan here.

So that's not the House leader's office that would handle that.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No.

Mr. Angus, committees make their own decisions. I'm sure they have reasons. You guys do an amazing job and—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Well, we made our own decision and you guys overruled it. You're filibustering PROC. You're filibustering foreign affairs on the COVAX vaccine. You interrupt your people. Not you personally—you would never do that, I know—but your Liberal colleagues.... I'm thinking, what is it about the Liberals that make them feel that committees are such a threat?

Again, I can't believe that Mr. Fergus and Ms. Shanahan just come here to pick fights. I mean, they have a job to do. It's a hard job.

In the Canada-China committee, there are interruptions and points of order. It's a gong show there, and it's a gong show here.

I'm just wondering, given that this is a political issue that relates to the Prime Minister, the Prime Minister's judgment.... It cost you a finance minister. It has raised a lot of political scandal. Isn't there someone whose job it is to say, "Go in, guys, and make this day really difficult and shut it down"?

Personally, I want to get things done. I want to get beyond this. I'm kind of done with this issue. I want to get this thing filed, but I can't, because I try to reach out to your Liberal colleagues and it's the angry stone wall.

Is there someone there you could talk to and maybe get them to work with us? You're the negotiator, Mr. Rodriguez.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes, Mr. Angus, and I spend more time talking to Mr. Julian than talking to—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus. Your time is up.

We'll—

Mr. Charlie Angus: The time is up? I was just getting started.

The Chair: We'll let the minister answer.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I have to say, my colleagues are extremely professional and—

Mr. Han Dong: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Minister. We have a point of order interruption here.

Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: With all due respect, I waited until Mr. Angus was finished with his time. I didn't want to interrupt him.

I just want to point out to the committee that we are here today talking about this not because the Liberal members wanted it. It was a motion that we voted against.

Mr. Charlie Angus: That's not a point of order.

The Chair: I don't see—

Mr. Han Dong: I just feel that I'm being targeted and—

• (1615)

The Chair: It's not a point of order.

Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Chair, on the point of order, the issue was that Mr. Dong didn't interrupt me, he interrupted the minister.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I thought the minister was given a chance to answer, so if the Liberals are interfering with their own minister, I would—

The Chair: Again, that's not a point of order.

Mr. Rodriguez, we'll turn to you.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I just want to thank my colleagues for their extremely hard work and the professional work they've been doing, and all of you, actually, for the work you're doing on behalf of Canadians. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll turn to Mr. Poilievre for the next five minutes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did the Prime Minister's cabinet director who recommended this program, Rick Theis, know that in March 2020, the WE organization paid for the Prime Minister's wife to go on a trip to London, yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: If I may, Mr. Chair, I want to go back to Mr. Poilievre's question, because he's picking documents here and there. The critical part—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —he's referring to was after the cabinet decision, so I don't know why he wanted to go there.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The question was, did Rick Theis know that the Prime Minister's wife had her expenses covered by the WE organization to go to London, yes or no?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, not that I know of.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: He didn't know...?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Not that I know of.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. She went, with her expenses covered by the WE organization, to London, England in early March of 2020. Two months later, the Prime Minister's Office was approving a half-billion dollar grant to the WE organization, and you're saying that Mr. Theis, who is Trudeau's top adviser on this, didn't know.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: What are you insinuating, Mr. Poilievre?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I asked a question. I'm asking a question.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I think those are serious attacks or—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did he know?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: [*Inaudible—Editor*] on people—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did he know?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —who are doing their best to help their country.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did Mr. Theis know that—

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Based on what I know, I don't know. I don't think so, but again—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'm sorry. You don't know or you don't think so? You've gone from no, you don't know, to you don't think so. Which is it? Pick your right—your favourite—answer.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Pick one? The answer's no, Mr. Poilievre. You know it. I said it—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I have to say that I've never had that happen, where the witness gives multiple contradictory answers and says “you can pick your favourite one”. It's like Liberal principles—if you don't like my principles, I've got others.

Anyway, we'll move on. We'll move on.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: The thing is, Mr. Poilievre, I answered your question right from the start, right?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You're saying that Mr. Theis didn't know that his boss's wife had had an all-expenses paid trip to London two months before his boss gave that same group that paid for her trip a half-billion dollar grant. That's what you're saying.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: What I'm saying is that you seem to be insinuating that Mr. Theis should be aware of all kinds of stuff when you don't—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, I'll tell you why he would know: because it was in the news.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: You don't know what he would know—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It was actually in the news that his boss's wife had taken a trip with the WE organization only two months before Mr. Theis was allegedly recommending that Trudeau hand a half-billion dollars to the same group. That's why he would know.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: What does this have to do with his interaction with WE? I've told you that it was one interaction of 25 minutes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That's all. So why don't you want—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'll tell you. I'll tell you what it has to do—

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —to listen to that, right?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You asked me a question, and I'll answer it. I'll show you how to answer a question.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Try to do that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: If the Prime Minister's wife is getting all expenses paid trips from a group, then he shouldn't be giving that same group a half-billion dollars of our money. That's a conflict of interest. That's why.

Once again, for clarification, this is something that was submitted to the Prime Minister's Office. It was from the WE organization and it highlights that Sophie Grégoire and Margaret Trudeau were called "celebrity ambassadors" to the WE organization. Are you telling me that Mr. Theis, who received the document in which this promotion was contained, did not know that the Prime Minister's wife and mother were being paid by the WE organization? Yes or no.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, he didn't know.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: He didn't know. Okay.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, he didn't know.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: All right.

Right, so he assumed that the trip for London was free. He assumed that their work as celebrity ambassadors was free. Right....

Okay. Let me ask this very quickly. The contract says here that the half-billion dollar grant began being spent on May 5.

On what day did Rick Theis talk to the WE organization over the phone. On what date?

• (1620)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: On May 5, the same day.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, what a coinkydink.

Is that what it is? A coincidence that the same day the Prime Minister's adviser spoke to the WE organization, they started spending money...?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No. It's the same day he went—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It's not a coincidence? It's not a coincidence. There you go.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: It's the same day he went.... Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It's not a coincidence.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I think you should sometimes listen to the answers, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You gave me an answer.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, you didn't.... You're trying to go around the simple fact that there was only one conversation. You're trying to put things on Mr. Theis—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right, so to be clear—

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —who's a remarkable staffer who's there for the right reasons.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: To be clear, you say that the PMO had nothing to do with giving this money over.

On May 5, Rick Theis, top adviser to Trudeau, talks to the WE organization, and on May 5, without even a contract being signed,

the WE organization starts spending a half-billion dollar government grant. Big coincidence, right?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Poilievre, the agenda for the cabinet is set way before.... You were in cabinet.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right, okay.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: You know that. Don't say that it's not the case.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It's all a coincidence, right?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Poilievre, the agenda is set way before that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did Mr. Theis, the top adviser.... You said earlier that Mr. Theis, top Trudeau adviser, spoke to the Prime Minister about the WE program. Did he talk about the money that the Trudeau family had received from the WE organization in that conversation?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Poilievre. Your time is up.

We're going now to Ms. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you very much, Chair.

Before I continue, I just want to say a word about our conduct here at this committee and our treatment of witnesses. We have seen this before in this committee: that witnesses are browbeaten, that they are interrupted frequently and that aspersions are cast on their conduct and on their answers. This is unworthy of a parliamentary committee. We have seen this here and in other committees. It is badgering the witness and—

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

The Chair: I'm recognizing the point of order by Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

I would like to ask Mr. Rodriguez.... I have not browbeaten him or attacked him. I want Madame Shanahan to retract her comments. I think I treated Mr. Rodriguez with respect.

The Chair: I'm not sure that is a point of order. It's a point of debate, obviously—

Mr. Charlie Angus: I let Mr. Rodriguez—

The Chair: We'll turn back to Madame Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Chair, because indeed I did not mention the name of the member. He took it upon himself to think that I was referring to him.

What I am talking about is the general conduct at this committee in this meeting and other meetings.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to continue asking the minister questions, since he's here as a representative of the government.

I wonder if Minister Rodriguez could come back to what he was saying earlier in his testimony regarding page 30 of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*. It had to do with the roles of ministers and their subordinates.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you, Mrs. Shanahan.

I see this as fundamental. One principle is clear, and that is the principle of ministerial responsibility.

We have staff working here to help us out. These employees work hard. In some cases, they've left very lucrative jobs or passed over other opportunities. They advise us, they help us and they serve the nation. That said, at the end of the day, they are here to advise us. Since ministers are the ones who make the decisions, they are accountable to Parliament, to committees and to the public at large. This is a fundamental principle, and I'm glad we're revisiting it.

If you don't mind, Mrs. Shanahan, I'd like to quote someone on this matter.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Please.

[*English*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I'll do this in English. It says:

Mr. Chair, ministers are ultimately accountable and answerable to Parliament. Therefore, ministerial staff members will not appear when called before parliamentary committees. Instead, ministers will appear before a committee when required to account for staff members' actions. Virtually all departmental activity is carried out in the name of the minister, and ultimately that accountability lies with cabinet ministers.

That was from Mr. Poilievre in your committee a couple of years ago. It is the same person, same committee.

• (1625)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Excellent. Thank you for that.

I believe that you weren't given the opportunity to respond to Mr. Poilievre's previous question, so in the spirit of co-operation and collaboration, could you respond to it regarding the critical path?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes. I think it's very important, because Mr. Poilievre has been taking one document from here and one from there out of 5,000 pages. I don't even know what he's showing there. We have to be professional here and ask questions in a professional way.

He should have said that the critical path, in the document he was referring to, is something that happened after cabinet adoption. I understand from the question that he's trying to imply that those things happened before, but that's absolutely not the case. There was a critical path to get things out the door, but only after it was adopted by cabinet. This was done to make sure there was enough due diligence. The term "due diligence" here was the whole key of the document that Mr. Poilievre was referring to.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you very much.

Mr. Rodriguez, in your experience, is it common for unsolicited program ideas or proposals to be sent to the government? I imagine it does happen.

Is it inappropriate for the government to consider and act on such proposals?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That is definitely not inappropriate, nor is it uncommon, especially during a pandemic.

In a pandemic, we have to think about and reflect on things differently, act much quicker than usual and create programs from nothing. On top of that, we have to be there for our seniors, for our workers, for our families, for our businesses and for those who have lost their jobs.

That is what the government has done. In our many interactions, organizations, associations, unions, businesses and members of Parliament have suggested many ideas. The important thing is that everything is done in accordance with official standards.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to turn now to Mr. Gourde for the next five minutes.

Mr. Gourde, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I want to thank Minister Rodriguez for being here.

Minister, I would like to know one thing about this whole saga. From the beginning, on other words from when the contracts were first awarded, until the end, were you involved in the process surrounding the WE Charity file?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Never.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: When the program was being set up, did you speak with cabinet ministers about whether or not it was a good idea?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I cannot speak to what is discussed in cabinet.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Without going into any details, you can tell me whether or not it was ever discussed. You probably talked about it when you were discussing the programs you were going to put in place....

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I did raise some issues outside of cabinet. Out of respect for cabinet, I will never refer to what is discussed there.

The question I asked was about WE Charity's ability to provide services in French. I felt it was essential that they be able to provide services in both official languages, and the organization replied that it could.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Last year in the House, we asked for greater investments in the Canada summer jobs program rather than this program. We were told that the government would look into it. In the end, that didn't happen.

It would have been a good idea to hire students. Canadian businesses wanted to hire employees, but we had to turn them down because there wasn't enough money in the program. If we had invested a few tens of millions of dollars more, all the employers who wanted to hire students could have done so. That also would have been a good idea.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: We can always look back and say we should have done this or that. I understand your point of view, Mr. Gourde.

The government was acting in good faith and did everything it could to help Canadians, including students. The program we're talking about today was part of a series of measures that included doubling student grants and creating the Canada emergency student benefit, for example.

You know as well as I do that students are among those who have suffered the most. What do they do between sessions? They work in bars and restaurants, at festivals....

Mr. Jacques Gourde: We get that, Mr. Minister.

Earlier, you said you listened to everyone's recommendations. The Conservatives asked the government to put more money into Canada summer jobs. You had plenty of time to do that two months before the end of the program. Canada summer jobs was doling out money in August even. We asked about it in the House in May and June.

Was it a bad idea because it was the Conservatives' idea? If the Liberals had suggested it, would it have been a good idea?

• (1630)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Gourde, you know we respect everyone's ideas.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Come on, Mr. Minister. We begged the government to invest the money in the right place to give students a chance to work instead of stay home. Last summer, 100,000 more students could have worked. Businesses in my riding were ready to hire 15 students if Canada summer jobs had given them the opportunity. Lack of funds meant they could hire only two or three students.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: You can always look back and say it would have been better to do this or that. Maybe that's the case, Mr. Gourde.

Honestly, we listen to all ideas. In fact, as the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, I know that a number of the programs we put in place were influenced by ideas from the Conservative Party, the NDP or the Bloc Québécois. For quite a while there, we decided to work across party lines and help Canadians. All Canadians benefited as a result.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I'm happy to hear that, Mr. Minister.

The Canada summer jobs program is still short of cash. We are looking at these files, and we can see that there's still a lot more money needed. There's still time before the budget is tabled.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes—

Mr. Jacques Gourde: That's an idea for you.

If you really want to help students, you can up funding for the Canada summer jobs program for students. That will help them acquire truly enriching work experience rather than languish at home.

We can't let students go a second summer without work. Give all Canadian employers who want to hire students the money to do it. Students will gain priceless experience.

Will you do that?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: You're right that we should always do more for students. They are our future.

Maybe you can tell your colleagues that Bill C-14 includes concrete measures to help students. If your colleagues could pass that bill quickly, that would help everyone.

I'd like to ask you to do that.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Minister, you can't tell us anything about the process, and you can't shed any light on everything we've been trying to understand since this whole saga began. With all due respect, why did you come testify before this committee for three hours?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: As I've said, I didn't work on drafting the bill, which makes sense because that's up to the minister responsible. We were all looped in afterward. The reason I'm here today is the principle of ministerial responsibility, a principle that the Conservatives quite rightly upheld, a principle that we also uphold and that I hope you will too.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: We uphold it, but we sent ministers who were able to answer questions. You seem to know absolutely nothing about this file.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I've been answering your questions for three hours, Mr. Gourde.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Well, it's actually been two or three minutes for my questions. I wish I could talk to you for three hours. That would be really interesting.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Let's chat when I'm in your riding visiting my in-laws.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Sure. Let's hope you can visit my riding by the end of next year.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gourde.

[Translation]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I'll definitely stop by to say hi.

[English]

The Chair: Your time is up.

We're going to turn to Ms. Lattanzio now for the next round of questions.

Ms. Lattanzio.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have some more questions for you, Mr. Minister.

I'd like to dig into the Clerk of the Privy Council's testimony. He said that, given the importance of this issue with respect to pandemic response and the size of the contribution, he didn't know how the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance couldn't have participated in developing the grant program and approval process policies.

Could you comment on that?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: As I said a little earlier, Ms. Lattanzio, the Clerk of the Privy Council said that, given the scope and size of the program and the dollars involved, of course those people would be informed. That's what the clerk told the committee.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Mr. Minister, my understanding from a question Mr. Sorbara asked earlier was that the 5,000 pages of documents contained letters and documents that had been sent to Mr. Theis. It was also my understanding that he didn't respond to that.

If that is indeed the case, it seems clear that there was no further communication between Mr. Theis and the people at WE Charity. Isn't that right?

• (1635)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That's right. Ms. Lattanzio.

I have here the record of that interaction. There was just the one conversation I've already mentioned. That conversation took place on May 5 and lasted 25 minutes. During the conversation, WE Charity described its services, and so on. Mr. Theis wasn't very familiar with the organization. WE Charity took the opportunity to tell him about what they do.

Mr. Theis asked a few questions and then directed the organization to Diversity and Inclusion and Youth. As you said, people from WE Charity sent Mr. Theis several emails. I believe he replied to just one of them out of courtesy. That's something we ourselves do regularly.

He didn't reply to all the emails though.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Mr. Minister, those documents were in fact provided and are among the 5,000 documents that were made available to all of our colleagues.

It seems clear to me that this individual received emails but didn't reply to them. I believe that puts an end to any debate about communications between the parties.

To be honest, I don't see why we're now rehashing issues about whether there was communication and, if so, by what means. My colleagues have had these documents since last summer, but they're still rehashing the same issues.

The issue of intimidating witnesses has been raised. That doesn't apply to you, Mr. Minister, but I think that's the protection you were alluding to earlier with respect to government employees.

I have one last question to ask you about this matter.

I have one last question to ask you about this matter.

Based on your experience and expertise, are unsolicited ideas and proposals relating to a program often sent to the government?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes, I did have a chance to talk about that earlier. That happens a lot. There are discussions with groups, with businesses or, as I said before, with opposition members who want to share ideas. That's especially true in a pandemic situation. At the start of the crisis, we were all trying to figure out how to react to the situation. All MPs were looking at ways to help their constituents and the government, how to get programs up and running.

What I would say to you, Ms. Lattanzio, is that the work I did with people such as Mr. Julian, Ms. Bergen, at the time, and Mr. Therrien, was one of the best experiences I've ever had as a minister. We put partisanship aside and came up with programs that helped everyone.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Mr. Minister, do you think it's inappropriate for the government to consider proposals and programs like that and even to follow up sometimes? I'm talking about a major program that would help Canadians.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: The important thing, Ms. Lattanzio, is obviously to follow up responsibly, professionally and by following the rules. That is what the government did.

To come back to your initial question, it is not uncommon to receive such proposals because Canadians are very creative and full of ideas. The government benefits when those ideas are submitted, but it has to be done appropriately.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Would there be—

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lattanzio. Your time is up.

I'm going to turn to Monsieur Fortin for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, to the question asked by Mr. Barrett, I believe, whether Rick Theis was aware that WE covered the expenses of the Prime Minister's wife when she travelled to London, you said no, not to your knowledge.

Again, I understand as in the previous examples that you are not inside Rick Theis' head. You cannot say what he knows and doesn't know. I understand that. I think that every member of the committee understands that. That is why we asked him to come explain himself, not to bully him as I heard him say earlier, but to testify, to tell us what is happening and what happened, to his knowledge.

If we cannot get his testimony by inviting him here, if we cannot get his testimony when the House orders him to come testify, in your opinion, Minister, how can we find out what Rick Theis knows or doesn't know?

• (1640)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: We can glean that information from the different testimonies by the ministers.

Mr. Fortin, you have been here from the beginning, you have—

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Minister, you just said that you didn't know, or that you needed the facts. You said that several times.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I was talking to Mr. Poilievre when I said I needed facts.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: It doesn't matter who you were responding to. I can't blame you, Minister, I would do the same thing if I were you. You can't know what Mr. Theis knows or doesn't know.

However, the committee needs to know what he knows. Witnesses have shared some disturbing things with us and we want to ensure that we have the correct version of the facts. We want to ask him for his version.

What do we do if he does not abide by the orders of the House? How do we get his testimony?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Fortin, I think I have answered all of your questions rather clearly. It is possible that you are not—

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I must be having a hard time understanding things, Minister.

What do we need to do to get Mr. Theis' version of the facts?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: You will get it by speaking to me, Mr. Fortin.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: You said that you didn't know, that you couldn't know.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: When I said I didn't know, it was in response to a question from Mr. Poilievre about a stack of 5,000 documents, about the contents of one of those documents.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: That's not it at all. When asked whether Rick Theis knew that the Prime Minister's wife's trip to London was paid for, you said you didn't know.

Who should we ask that question if Mr. Theis does not obey Parliament's orders and if you do not know?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I didn't say that I didn't know, I said—

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: You told me that you didn't know, not that you knew.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Not that I know of, exactly.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I want to know what Rick Theis knows. Who should I ask?

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Fortin. Your time is up.

I will allow the minister to answer.

[Translation]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Ask the humble servant before you, Mr. Fortin.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: The “humble servant” doesn't know the answer. That is a rather humble response.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Fortin.

We're going to turn to Mr. Angus now for the next round of questions.

Mr. Angus, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You seemed surprised when we mentioned 5,000 pages of documents. Well, we have to read them.

I would like to ask you how many times Mr. Theis was briefed on the Canada summer student service grant.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: How many times was he briefed?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Yes.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: How many times was he briefed?

Mr. Charlie Angus: I mean prior to this going to cabinet.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I can tell you I was around the first time it was supposed to go to cabinet. I wasn't involved before that.

Mr. Charlie Angus: You don't know. So maybe that was a phone conversation the first time he was briefed?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, because that was a general conversation with WE, and he was very clear—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Actually, it wasn't a general conversation. Mr. Rodriguez, I really think you're downplaying and diminishing Mr. Theis's importance. He's the director of cabinet affairs.

On April 30 he is briefed for an hour on the Canada summer student grant, so he knows all about this. It is a briefing to the director of cabinet because it is going to cabinet.

Then on May 5 he has a 25-minute meeting, and you say, “Well”—I think I heard Ms. Lattanzio say—“people have big ideas.” God, the government loves talking to people with big ideas. The director of cabinet doesn't talk with a bunch of people with big ideas. They're talking about a billion-dollar program that's about to be approved at cabinet. He is briefed by Craig and Marc Kielburger, and they write to him later about the streamlining of the contribution agreement.

We have an issue here. The Prime Minister's director of cabinet affairs, who's about to bring this to cabinet, has a one-hour briefing on the grant and then has a meeting with Craig and Marc Kielburger. What was it that they were trying to streamline? We saw a lot of problems with this program. Why did he tell them that they could streamline this?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I'm sorry, Mr. Angus, but there's one thing I have to correct here. It is his job to meet with people and stakeholders, and he does that all the time.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Oh, I know. I know. I bet every charity phones and gets a call with Rick Theis for 25 minutes just before it goes to cabinet, because I know he's such a great human being.

But I'm asking about a billion-dollar deal. Don't you think it would have been reasonable that the director of cabinet got a full briefing? Yes, I think so. Don't you think it was smart for the director of cabinet to have a 25-minute conversation to talk about what they needed to do and how they needed to get it out the door? And then, lo and behold, the money starts flowing the day he has a conversation. Don't you think he was just...? Why don't you just say that he was doing his job, because a billion dollars was on the table and it was about to go to cabinet? Rick Theis's job was to defend the Prime Minister.

• (1645)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: But Mr. Angus, that's—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Wouldn't that be a better framing, so that we at least think this wasn't just an incompetent signing off for a bunch of friends of the Prime Minister?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: This wasn't the case, Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: No?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: He did his job. He met with—

Mr. Charlie Angus: It was just a group that was about to get a billion dollars, before that was about to go to cabinet.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: It was one of them.

Actually, they requested a meeting many times before he could find the time to meet with them, because he was meeting with everybody else.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Yes, that was just before it went to cabinet, for a billion dollars—\$900 million.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Again, Mr. Angus, the cabinet makes the decision. Some is—

Mr. Charlie Angus: I know, but don't you think the director of cabinet is going to have to do some...? What kind of operation are you running there, Pablo? He was just being a nice guy, talking to all kinds of people? He wasn't talking to the YMCA. He wasn't talking to Imagine Canada. He was talking to the Kielburger brothers, who were about to get \$900 million—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus.

We'll give the minister an opportunity to answer the question. Then we'll go to Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Rodriguez.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

He is talking to a lot of people, Charlie, with all due respect. I know that. It is a fact. And the PMO has to be open.

The other thing, if I may say so, Mr. Chair, is that everything has to be done super quickly. Right? We're in the middle of a pandemic, so we have to put programs in place, and this and that. If you think

that in normal times.... Well, maybe in normal times, but these are not normal times, Charlie.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Well, a billion dollars is—

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: But we do our best. We try to do our best.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus. Your time is up.

We're going to turn to Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Rodriguez, Mr. Angus just asked you a question about meetings. He asked about a specific meeting, but I believe you said they tried to get a bunch of meetings before that and they didn't get them. Maybe after this meeting you could give us those dates that they tried to get in touch with Mr. Theis.

In response to Mr. Gourde, you said you were never involved in the WE process. Yet you're the minister who Mr. Trudeau sent to committee today. I'm sure you prepared extensively for today, but you may notice there's some frustration in our voices, because there are so many contradictions in what the government's put out on this. Our job is to get to the truth for Canadians. I just want to lay out the narrative that has been given by your government.

Mr. Rodriguez, on April 18 officials from the former finance minister, Bill Morneau, and other government officials suggested WE as a potential third party for a student service grant program. On April 20 Michelle Kovacevic, deputy assistant minister of finance, said in an email to officials from the Privy Council Office that the PMO was already weighing in on the WE proposal. Yet according to the PMO's released timeline of events, there's no mention of the PMO until Sofia Marquez, the director of government relations at WE, emailed a staffer at the PMO and referred her to Rick Theis, the Prime Minister's policy adviser. On May 1 Mr. Theis contacted Ms. Marquez indicating interest in a meeting by phone, a call that takes place on May 5 with both Marc and Craig Kielburger as well as Ms. Marquez.

Before finance committee last year, the Prime Minister's chief of staff testified that the 25-minute call was merely for general discussion before Mr. Theis referred the Kielburgers and Ms. Marquez to the ESDC, yet the PMO summary says the only topic of the call had to do with Rick Theis's concern regarding diversity of placement for programs, which is an issue that takes no more than five minutes to resolve, leaving approximately 20 minutes unaccounted for. Like, what exactly was in that conversation? What are we hiding here? What's the government hiding?

To make matters worse, Mr. Rodriguez, in response to Craig's follow-up email, Mr. Theis said that they should be in touch soon. There'd be no plausible reason for why Mr. Theis would think to be in contact with a stakeholder that hasn't even been approved for a relevant government contract—that is, of course, unless your government had something to hide. Yet Craig Kielburger sent a follow-up email suggesting that Mr. Theis and the PMO should help WE streamline the contribution agreement. That was three days before the Prime Minister was even made aware of WE's approval, according to the PMO's summary, and 17 days before cabinet approved WE as the third party administrating the Canada student service grant program.

There's no reason why talk of a contribution agreement should come up unless the call was more than a general discussion, Mr. Rodriguez. It's also critical to note that May 5 was the exact date that the contribution agreement, which was approved on June 23, applied retroactively, meaning that WE was able to receive reimbursement expenses from the federal government before the Prime Minister even knew of WE's approval.

With your government's narrative laid out, the math just doesn't add up. We have a finance official saying the PMO is weighing in on WE's proposal 10 days before the PMO's summary indicates any substantive discussion between WE and PMO officials; a 25-minute phone call that was supposedly very general but suspiciously took 20 minutes longer than needed; Craig Kielburger suggesting that the PMO should help WE streamline the contribution agreement despite the PMO not even being aware of WE's proposal until three days later; and Mr. Theis suggesting to Craig Kielburger that they should speak again soon despite your government's claim that it's the ESDC alone who handled the Canada student service grant program's crafting. To top it all off, the contribution agreement signed between WE and the government applied retroactively to May 5, long before WE was supposedly given the go-ahead to implement the program.

Mr. Rodriguez, I can't even count how many holes are in this plot, and here today you have given no testimony that lays any rest to the unanswered questions evident in your government's narrative. There are only four people who can do that—Rick Theis, Ben Chin, Amitpal Singh and the Prime Minister. My question is very simple. You are not one of those people. Which ones will be coming to testify before us on Wednesday? Could you please let us know? We need to find answers.

• (1650)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you, Mr. Carrie. It's nice to see you. It's been a while.

Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left to give an answer?

The Chair: Mr. Carrie is almost out of time, but you should take the remainder of it. I will give you, as the chair's prerogative, a bit of additional time to answer the questions that were asked.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you. It is much appreciated.

As I mentioned, Mr. Carrie, there was no discussion during that phone conversation about agreements, contract money or anything like that. If I may, I would like to remind you that it's the public servants who recommended WE. They said that WE was the only one

that could administer the program. That is why, when it went to cabinet for the first time on May 8, it was pulled back. We wanted more due diligence, as the Prime Minister had many questions on a lot of things, and then we moved ahead. It was definitely as it should be. I mean, the public servants were involved since the beginning and they made that recommendation. That's how it was. There are no new facts here.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll turn to Ms. May now, for five minutes.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Thank you. I'm deeply grateful to have a five-minute round.

I'll start by saying that I think I'm the only member, of those asking questions of the minister, who voted in favour of the motion that compels staffers to be present and who thinks that it's appropriate for a minister to step forward and replace a staffer. I also want to put on record that the position taken by Mr. Poilievre in 2010 was incorrect. The position he takes today is correct. I think political staffers may in fact have essential information that committees need, but given principles of ministerial responsibility and accountability, it's appropriate for a minister to replace them.

We've been very informal here. We've all been acknowledging friendships, so I'll say Pablo, we are old friends. Is it your full understanding, as I see it now, that Mr. Rick Theis had one interaction with WE Charity, Marc and Craig Kielburger and Sofia Marquez, and that the entirety of his direct communication with them was a 25-minute phone call on May 5? Is that correct?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you very much, Elizabeth. It's great to see you. It's been a while. I miss seeing you guys. It's difficult to be in our homes all the time.

Yes, indeed, that was the only phone conversation. I made sure to ask Mr. Theis all of those questions. I asked, "Was that the only conversation?" He said, "Absolutely." I asked for the content of the conversation and it was exactly what I explained to you. There was no conversation before that. There was no conversation after that. There was only, I think, an exchange of one email and he said something like, "We'll be in touch again." When I asked about that, he said that it was out of courtesy and something they usually do, which is true.

• (1655)

Ms. Elizabeth May: For me, a lot of the questions.... I went back over my notes from when a number of key players testified to a different committee, to the finance committee. That was some months ago, but I was able to participate in those meetings as well.

Certainly the public of Canada—anyone paying attention to this issue—knows that Rachel Wernick, as assistant deputy minister for the key department of employment services, ESDC, testified. The Prime Minister testified. His chief aide, Katie Telford, testified.

I don't know that Mr. Theis's phone call on May 5 adds anything. I say that, because part of me regrets voting for a motion to compel staffers to come forward if they didn't have anything important to contribute. In the case of Mr. Theis, now that I realize we're looking at one phone call of 25 minutes on May 5, I don't see how it can be germane. We know that decisions and conversations took place with Rachel Wernick; conversations took place to get the WE Charity lined up way before a conversation on May 5.

We know that the announcement was made April 22 that there would be such a program. The Prime Minister made the announcement before any agency was lined up to do the work. They then backtracked and said, "No, Prime Minister, you can't use the Canada Service Corps. It can't do the work." Then somehow WE Charity's name got into the mix. Then, we had a May 8 effort to key it off and it was rejected until June 25.

Not to waste too much of the committee's time—and I apologize—but it seems to me that it's only appropriate to ask staffers to be compelled to appear at a committee if they have information that's relevant. I don't see how Mr. Theis's 25-minute phone call on May 5 can add anything substantial to what we already know, since the WE Charity was already being keyed up to go to the key cabinet committee before that call. It was on the agenda for May 8. It got bounced back until June 25 for reasons that are already much in the public domain.

That includes, by the way—it's in the public domain, so I don't know why everyone's dancing around this.... I'm sorry to all colleagues, but just to point out, everybody knew that Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau had been in London with the WE Charity. The only question is whether her way was paid there. She got COVID from attending the WE Charity event in March. We all know this.

My only question remaining is, will the government continue to oppose having staffers come forward if they have relevant additional information?

Mr. Rodriguez, I think you've demonstrated that the one thing you can tell us is that there was a 25-minute phone conversation on May 5, and nothing more than that. If that's the sum total of it, I don't know that it was worth your time or the committee's time for you to bring that information forward.

Do you have any other comments on what you may or may not have been told by Mr. Theis as to any pertinent involvement that he had in this matter?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Elizabeth, it was extremely important for me to have that conversation with Mr. Theis. Today, when I had a little bit more information to ask, I did again...to make sure that I was able to provide that information to the committee. The total of the time he spoke to them is exactly what you said. It was about 25 minutes. It was mostly a general conversation, and that's what it was.

Now, everybody knew this. Honestly, I don't know why Mr. Theis's name was added to that motion. It's not up to me to decide, or judge or whatever. I'm just asking, the same way you are asking, because it was known that there was only a conversation of 25 minutes a long time ago. Why? Because we provided thousands of pages of documents.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Do you happen to know if—?

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

The Chair: I'm recognizing a point of order.

Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: It's just that we are about 30 seconds away from the three-hour mark and we need full committee support to continue. I can't continue after five o'clock.

I'm asking, because we have two motions before us, are those going to be picked up on Wednesday?

The Chair: We certainly have time on.... I suspect that we have time. I think if there's committee will to move forward on those motions, we certainly could do that.

I take your point that you're leaving, and I suspect that members would want to have all members present if the motions were to be debated.

An hon. member: Yes.

The Chair: I hear you.

Ms. May, your time is almost up, though I'll let you ask your final question and allow the minister to answer.

• (1700)

Ms. Elizabeth May: In deference to Charlie's time, I'll stop there.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Well, thank you so much, Elizabeth. I didn't want to interrupt. It was just that if I ran out at five o'clock, I'd have to know where we're going next.

The Chair: I know that schedules are tight and we have had a lengthy meeting here.

Minister, I don't know if there was a question that hadn't been answered there. I'll give you the opportunity to answer and then we will move to adjourn the meeting.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: As I said before, I agree with Ms. May's comments.

I just want to thank you, Mr. Chair, for chairing this meeting so professionally. It was much appreciated.

To all of you colleagues, from all parties, thank you for everything you're doing for our country. We may disagree on the way to get there, but we all agree that we want to improve the lives of Canadians. That's why we're all here.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Chair, I know I'm speaking out of turn, but you had a difficult meeting and you always do it with real professionalism and grace. Thank you.

The Chair: It's a privilege to chair, members.

Colleagues, we'll now move to adjourn. I look forward to seeing you again at the next meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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