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Chair: Mr. Chris Warkentin

Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

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• (1335)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Chris Warkentin (Grande Prairie—Mackenzie, CPC)): I'm going to call to order the 30th meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics.

We have Mr. Barrett on our speaking list.

I'll turn to you, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Chair, I would move that we resume debate on MP Fortin's motion from April 8.

The Chair: We have a speaking order here. We'll proceed now in that order. If anybody doesn't want to speak to the motion, please withdraw your hand.

We'll move to Ms. Shanahan.

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

Mr. Chair, I have to speak against this motion at this time. We were having a very productive committee business meeting just before this, where I think we all agreed that we have some important that we can get moving on. We know there are a number of outstanding issues regarding the pandemic spending motion, so this is not the time to be discussing this motion, which I think would preclude the work that we are doing and trying to complete as a committee.

I have to say again that when we look at the MindGeek study, we are very close to completing it. This is where we need to be spending our time right now, so that we can move forward on the additional witnesses we need to hear and we're able to move to the report-writing stage. We have limited time before us. I think this is where the committee needs to be spending its time.

Mr. Fortin's motion, which has come up before, is more appropriate at the report-writing stage of the pandemic study, and not at this time. I have to say that I cannot agree with this motion. I feel that it is unfortunate that we are precluding the work we're doing, not only on MindGeek, where, as we know, we had some 40 to 50 briefs from Canadians and advocates, from people who are active in this area and who are very interested in seeing the outcome of that study. This is something that we need to continue working forward on.

I do think that other motions for other studies, including the facial recognition study, which has been brought up by Mr. Angus—

and I know that we have members on our side who are very interested in that study as well—bear some particular attention to see how we can fit that into the timeline we have before us.

[Translation]

It's regrettable, and I understand that. We've already spent some time studying the issues in Mr. Fortin's motion, but given what has happened with the study and the witnesses called to appear, we can't now devote time to this motion.

I'd also like a copy of Mr. Barrett's motion. When motions are only made verbally, sometimes we don't have all the elements in front of us. I would appreciate it if the clerk could give us a copy of Mr. Barrett's motion.

Perhaps, then, we could suspend for a few minutes while we get the exact wording of the motion, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Next in the speaking order we have Mr. Fergus.

I would just remind members that the earlier part of the meeting was in camera. Referencing things that happened in the in camera portion of the meeting may violate the provisions of the in camera requirements. That's just as a reminder to members.

Again, this is focused on debate with regard to resuming debate on Monsieur Fortin's motion of April 8.

Mr. Fergus, we'll turn to you.

[Translation]

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

Mr. Chair, before I make my comments on the motion, could you clarify the answer to Ms. Shanahan's question? Will we receive a copy of Mr. Barrett's motion?

[English]

The Chair: We could circulate Monsieur Fortin's motion again. I'll ask the clerk to do that. It has been done several times.

Mr. Fergus.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Excuse me, Mr. Chair, that wasn't my question. I want to know if you're going to circulate Mr. Barrett's motion, which we are debating and which is different from Mr. Fortin's.

[English]

The Chair: I apologize for the confusion.

Mr. Barrett simply moved a motion to resume debate on Monsieur Fortin's motion of April 8. We are currently debating Monsieur Fortin's motion of April 8. Once somebody moves to debate a motion that has already been debated by this committee, moving back to that debate can indeed be done by that other member. That is what has happened.

Just so it is clear, we are debating Monsieur Fortin's motion of April 8, which has been circulated several times to committee members.

That's where we find ourselves now, Mr. Fergus.

• (1340)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, that indeed was my question. We have a motion on the floor, and it's my understanding that it's Mr. Barrett's motion. We can't have a hanger-on of a motion.

The Chair: No, we are not debating Mr. Barrett's motion. We are debating Monsieur Fortin's motion. Mr. Barrett was moving that we return to the debate on Monsieur Fortin's motion of April 8.

Mr. Fergus, on Mr. Fortin's—

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, my understanding of the vote that just took place was that the vote to move from committee business to a public session, as opposed to Mr.—

The Chair: Mr. Dong, I couldn't speak, nor should any of us speak, to something that happened in camera.

Mr. Fergus, we'll return to you on the debate on Monsieur Fortin's motion of April 8.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Excuse me, Mr. Chair, I'm not playing partisan games. I just want to get a better understanding. Perhaps I haven't had the opportunity to see this kind of situation before. Can you quote the Standing Order that gives us the freedom not to debate Mr. Barrett's motion, which he clearly said was a motion to resume debate, in relation to Mr. Fortin's motion? I wasn't aware that it was automatic, because I thought it was a motion that was made. If that's not the case, is it possible to explain the situation to me before I make my comments, since I really thought it was Mr. Barrett's motion?

[English]

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I think it was fairly straightforward, first, to move into public so we could continue debating Mr. Fortin's motion. Our colleague reminded us when we came back that this was what we were going to do.

I would say to Mr. Fergus that if he has a problem with that, he can challenge the chair, but I think you read the situation correctly.

We should either challenge the chair or carry on with the work.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, I don't want to—

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Angus, that isn't a point of order, but I do appreciate the support.

We are proceeding with the motion of Mr. Fortin of April 8. As it is the right of members to challenge the chair, members are free to do that.

Mr. Fergus, we are continuing on the debate of Mr. Fortin's motion of April 8.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, it's important not to put the cart before the horse.

We haven't yet completed the work that's before us. We haven't yet decided how we'll modify the report or what instructions we'll send to the analysts who will be responsible for writing the report. Nor have we read many of the documents, because we haven't yet received them. There are hundreds of pages that we haven't yet received in both official languages. It's strange that we're skipping all these stages to debate Mr. Fortin's motion. We can deal with Mr. Fortin's motion once we have all the documents and are ready to begin that debate.

I find this a little unusual. Before we begin debating a motion such as the one moved by Mr. Fortin, it's important that we've received all the documents, that we've studied them and that we've given instructions to the analysts.

Once all of this is done, we can draw a conclusion. However, by skipping these steps, we could make mistakes. Some of the information in the missing documents may give us an opportunity to reconsider Mr. Fortin's motion.

• (1345)

[English]

Mr. Michael Barrett: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, regarding the question of relevance, the motion we are debating is Mr. Fortin's, which refers to the matter of witnesses failing to appear before the committee. It is not to report to the House on the study of conflict of interest and pandemic spending.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

We do give some latitude, but I would remind members we are debating the motion of Mr. Fortin of April 8. Mr. Barrett is correct that is in reference to the appearance of witnesses at our committee as prescribed by the House of Commons to this committee.

If it's helpful, the clerk is circulating the text of that motion as a reminder again to members as well.

Mr. Fergus.

[Translation]

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

If I understand you correctly, you're saying that I'm once again questioning the merits of this motion. Before our committee makes a recommendation to the House, whatever it may be, it's important that we have all the information we need to discuss, debate and reflect on it.

Once we have taken into account all the information available to us, we can debate Mr. Fortin's motion. Drawing premature conclusions doesn't help.

Madam Clerk, can you give us—

Mr. Rhéal Fortin (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): A point of order, Mr. Chair. My apologies to my colleague.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Fortin, do you have a point of order?

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Yes. I'm told that only the audio is working on ParlVU. There's no video.

Is it possible to report the problem to the person responsible, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fortin.

We will suspend for five minutes, so that we can make sure the technical feed is in fact working. Once we're able to verify that, it will allow members to refresh their memory of the motion.

• (1350)

(Pause)

• (1355)

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

I do apologize for that technical break.

Mr. Fergus, we'll go back to you.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. There's no problem. We know very well that our technical teams are working very hard for us. They've done an outstanding job during this pandemic, and we're all very grateful to them.

Again, I must admit that I'm surprised that we moved directly to this discussion without voting on Mr. Barrett's motion at the beginning of the public portion of our meeting.

I'm a little confused by this, given what is written in Chapter 12 of our green book, that is, the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, about such motions. I'll say it in English, because I only have the English version in front of me, and I'm having computer problems.

[English]

We talk about a dilatory motion. It is a motion designed to dispose of the original question before the committee, either for the time being or—

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, for clarity, are you challenging the chair?

Mr. Greg Fergus: No, I'm just explaining my surprise.

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, we are debating Mr. Fortin's motion that's before the committee. If you'd like to go back to the relevant discussion with regard to that, or if you'd like to challenge the chair, you're welcome to do one or the other, but you can't do neither of those.

Mr. Fergus, we'll return to you for the debate with regard to Mr. Fortin's motion, or you're welcome to challenge the chair.

I would like to proceed with either one of those.

Mr. Greg Fergus: For sure, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

Let me to explain my thinking.

I hope I'm not causing you any problems, and I didn't mean to challenge you. I'll explain why I feel it's important and why I'm surprised.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, we're not engaging in a debate with regard to whether or not I am correct. We have moved on. We are debating Mr. Fortin's motion of April 8. If you'd like to continue with the debate on that motion, you're welcome. You're not welcome to debate the chair.

Mr. Fergus, if you do not want to return to the debate with regard to the motion, or if you're not challenging the chair, then I'm going to either move on to the next speaker, if you won't move back to relevant discussion with regard to the motion.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, this is the second time you've come back to this point.

The substance of this motion forces us to jump to a conclusion right away, instead of looking at all the information we have. Not only do I have a problem with that, and not only am I against Mr. Fortin's motion, but I was also stunned by the way we came back to this debate.

Mr. Fortin is certainly free to present his conclusions before we've even considered all the information available to the committee and to use that kind of logic. With all due respect, I want to tell my colleague that we came to a conclusion before we had considered all the information available. That's not a desirable method for this committee to adopt, and I can't support it.

I really think we should wait until we consider the drafting—

● (1400)

[*English*]

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): On a point of order with regard to relevancy, Mr. Chair, what Mr. Fergus is talking about has nothing to do with the motion in front of us.

The Chair: I have encouraged Mr. Fergus several times to return to the motion at hand. I am hopeful that he will.

Mr. Fergus, please move to the motion, otherwise we will move to Mr. Angus. We have a speaking order that is getting longer by the minute.

Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

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

The reason I oppose Mr. Fortin's motion is very simple.

At the start, Mr. Fortin said that the House of Commons had held a debate on the motion on March 25. The motion said that the committee would meet to hear from Mr. Theis on Monday, March 29, Mr. Singh on March 31, and Mr. Chin on April 8.

The second point of Mr. Fortin's motion states that the committee noted the absence of these witnesses, who had been called to appear before the committee.

If I remember correctly, a number of people, including a few members of this committee, were part of the previous government, which faced a similar situation in 2011. The government at the time had argued that it wasn't up to political assistants, who are in positions independent of their political masters, figuratively speaking, to come before the committee. For this reason, it was important, given ministerial responsibility, that the ministers be the ones called to testify before this committee.

If we look at Mr. Fortin's motion, he concluded that these witnesses hadn't appeared and that they had discharged their obligation to appear before the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics.

Mr. Chair, I think that's a misinterpretation of what happened. In fact, a committee of the House of Commons is trying to intimidate the wrong people, or question them rather, I'm sorry. In fact, these people have no power independent of their political bosses. For reasons of ministerial responsibility, it was important to conduct an investigation and ask questions, not only of these political assistants,

but of their bosses. That's why we had the Honourable Pablo Rodriguez and the Honourable Mona Fortier appear, to tell what happened on this matter.

● (1405)

Mr. Chair, that's why I can't support this motion. That's in addition to the fact that we're doing this at this stage, in this study, when we don't have the necessary information, information that could apply to this motion. In this case, we seem to want to have our cake and eat it too.

The fourth point of the motion reads as follows:

4. The Committee also noted the absence of the Prime Minister, who was given the option of appearing in place of these witnesses in the motion of March 25, 2021;

This was when this debate was taking place in the House of Commons. On the one hand, the motion recognizes the need to hear directly from these individuals and seems to insist on it, but on the other hand, it recognizes the primary ministerial responsibility when it mentions the presence of the Prime Minister. On the one hand, this fact is accepted, but on the other hand, it is denied. This is not at all consistent. That's another reason why I don't think we can support this motion.

The Prime Minister is indeed a minister like any other. He is first among equals. In the present situation, we want the Prime Minister to be present. The reason given is that he is the person responsible for his government. The government is made up of ministers. This is the parliamentary system we have here in Canada, and that also exists elsewhere in the world. The cabinet is the government. The Prime Minister is there simply because his government supports him. He has the confidence of his ministers. That could always change.

In this case, it's clear that Mr. Fortin considers it acceptable to have only one member of cabinet, in this case the Prime Minister, but not the other members of cabinet. This is inconsistent. These two situations can't co-exist.

If I may, I'd like to come back to Mr. Fortin's motion again.

● (1410)

If I may, I'll come back to Mr. Fortin's motion again. Now that we've explored in detail the inconsistency of the fourth point of the motion, here's the fifth:

5. The Committee noted that Minister Pablo Rodriguez appeared on March 29, 2021, instead of Rick Theis, after having ordered him not to appear before the Committee ...

Again, this is a member of cabinet, a member of the government.

Mr. Chair, we asked the minister directly during his appearance, and he replied that no one had ordered Mr. Theis not to appear before the committee. So, again, we're debating a motion that doesn't reflect the facts before us.

Mr. Rodriguez said that no one had given that order, and that it's a fundamental principle—a principle that the official opposition had invoked in a similar situation—that ministerial responsibility takes precedence over a committee's requests to call a political assistant to appear.

This is very important. Not only is this part of the motion not accurate, but again, it doesn't reflect previous decisions made by our Parliament and the previous government.

Mr. Chair, when we look at point 6 of the motion, we unfortunately see that the error continues. Mr. Fortin wrote:

6. The Committee noted that Minister Mona Fortier also ordered witnesses Amitpal Singh and Ben Chin not to appear before the Committee ...

In that case, Mr. Chair, I can't accuse my honourable colleague Mr. Fortin of inaccuracies. In fact, we never had the opportunity to hear the Honourable Mona Fortier, a member of the government, so that she could give her explanation, in case my honourable colleague intended to ask her the same question that he had asked the Honourable Pablo Rodriguez.

To be perfectly clear, he was asked whether he had ordered a political assistant not to appear before this committee.

● (1415)

I don't like to make assumptions, but all indications are that if she had been asked, Ms. Fortier would have said that the witnesses hadn't been ordered not to appear before the committee. In the cases of Mr. Singh and Mr. Chin, I imagine she would have certainly said that it was more a matter of ministerial responsibility.

This principle was implied in the motion presented to the House of Commons on March 25, 2021. Under this principle, the three political assistants have no decision-making power without the authorization of their minister. This has been recognized.

Mr. Chair, when I talk about my family, my children and my spouse, I often use the following expression.

[English]

It's "reflected glory".

[Translation]

This expression certainly applies to this situation. These political assistants can't do anything and have no authority without the authorization of their minister, a member of the government.

Mr. Fortin has said on several occasions that, if we didn't want these three political assistants to appear, the committee would ask a member of the government to appear, in this case the Prime Minister.

Mr. Chair, I hope you'll understand this it is precisely why the government, which is made up of ministers, has asked some of its representatives to testify before the committee. This same principle was invoked by the previous government.

When a prime minister is called to appear, it's very important to recognize that the prime minister knows the fundamental principle of government unity. However, the motion seems to ignore this principle.

● (1420)

You cannot have a government where one minister's opinion is different from that of the other ministers. It doesn't work.

[English]

At the time, Benjamin Disraeli—and I know, Mr. Warkentin, that you are a student of history—effectively said to his ministers that it's not important what we think but that we all think the same thing when we go out into the public. Effectively, that's what he said. There were more dramatic words, but in the 19th century, it wasn't necessarily as gender diverse as it should have been, I think.

[Translation]

This is important. The Prime Minister is only one member of the government, and when all members of the government make a decision, they share the same position. It is very important to point that out. You cannot have a government where ministers are at war with each other. That does not work in our parliamentary system.

So, if the Prime Minister appears before a committee, it is exactly as if he were a minister testifying. It is very important to understand that, when ministers make a decision, it is a collective decision. So when the Honourable Pablo Rodriguez appeared before us, he was not speaking on his own behalf, but on behalf of the government, because he is accountable to Canadians and to parliamentarians. We know that no government can remain in office if it does not have the confidence of Parliament.

So it's very simple. The aides were asked to appear before the committee, which Mr. Fortin acknowledges, but at the same time, he says that, if they are not heard in accordance with the motion adopted in the House of Commons on March 25, because they have no authority without the minister's authorization, we will accept the presence of the Prime Minister. Well done.

The Prime Minister is a member of the government, and the members of the government are unanimous. Otherwise, they would not be in government very long. That is how our parliamentary system works, whether here in Ottawa, Quebec City, Toronto or any of the provincial or territorial capitals.

I would like to read from the motion.

● (1425)

The sixth point of the motion states that these individuals were ordered not to appear before the committee "as mentioned in [the] letters to the Chair dated March 30 and April 7, 2021."

Mr. Fortin's inconsistency leads him to a conclusion that does not reflect the facts:

That the Committee report these events to the House of Commons in order to express its dissatisfaction.

I do not understand how such a conclusion can be reached. The members of the government were applying cabinet solidarity. That is the right term I should have used earlier instead of cabinet unanimity. I wanted to point out that it was the wrong term. I meant cabinet solidarity. In applying cabinet solidarity, the government has done its job well and met the requirements of the motion passed by the House of Commons on March 25. When it comes to the Prime Minister, it is important to understand that, fundamentally, beyond the person himself, his role is the same as that of any other minister. According to the principle of cabinet solidarity, all ministers can make decisions and statements on behalf of the government.

Therefore, the appearance of the Honourable Pablo Rodriguez did in fact meet the requirements of the motion. The offer by the Honourable Mona Fortin to appear before the committee did indeed meet the requirements of the motion passed on March 25.

Now that I have clearly demonstrated the inconsistencies in the motion before us and explained the importance of the fundamental principles of our parliamentary system of cabinet solidarity and ministerial accountability, there is no reason why we should adopt this motion, especially at this point in our study.

I sincerely believe that we should close this debate. I hope the committee will vote unanimously against the motion, including Mr. Fortin. I hope I have even convinced him to withdraw his motion.

• (1430)

I imagine that Mr. Fortin feels that I am asking too much of him, but it is really important that we say no to this.

Perhaps the occasion lends itself too well to petty politics, and that's a shame. It's a real shame. We should really focus on what we should do in this case and why we should refuse to consider this motion. As I pointed out before, it really has inconsistencies. Ministers are expected to be accountable to the principle of cabinet solidarity, to defend it and, when it works well, to uphold all the decisions of cabinet, without exception.

We cannot afford to have one minister go it alone on these decisions. It is impossible. It cannot work. Consensus has developed around the cabinet table. When that no longer works, we no longer have a parliamentary system.

Imagine if we adopted this motion. It would be like saying that the foundations of our parliamentary system are not very important, that we should drop it all and make an exception this time. Of course, when you, the members of the opposition, are in power some day, you will want to return to our parliamentary traditions. It doesn't work that way. We must assume our responsibilities.

The principle of cabinet solidarity applies to all the ministers who form the government. I am a member of the governing party, but I am not a member of the government, since I am not a minister. This is specified in all the constitutional texts and we are well aware that this is the definition. In fact, if I am not mistaken, the Constitution Act, 1867 makes no mention of the Prime Minister. It does refer to the government. The role of the Prime Minister has become one of *primus inter pares*. My Latin is coming back to me.

The word "*pares*" means "peers" in English. So we are talking about peers, equals.

• (1435)

If we reject all these principles by passing this motion, what other tradition will we throw away?

I know that's not the intention of my colleague Mr. Fortin, nor is it the intention of Mr. Barrett, Mr. Carrie, Mr. Angus or you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I would point out that it's not my motion and I haven't made up my mind yet. Mr. Fergus must be finding lots of reasons to fill time, but he probably does not need to refer to me on this motion. I'm still waiting to hear some evidence that would compel me to support him, but if he were more concise, it might help.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus.

It's not a point of order, but Mr. Fergus, I would ask you to limit your conversation to the matter at hand, the actual motion and the merits of it, or your perspective on it.

Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

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

I apologize to Mr. Angus. Perhaps my French let me down a little. I didn't mean to say it was Mr. Angus' motion. I was saying that I am counting on everyone's good faith. Since we are all parliamentarians, we support these parliamentary principles, and it is important to do so.

Mr. Fortin has proposed a motion that, on the one hand, upholds fundamental parliamentary principles, and I applaud him for that. However, at the very end, his conclusion includes items that are misleading. We have seen this in points 4, 5 and 6. If you look at it one point at a time, you may think that it is not very serious and that it is not fatal. However, when we come to the end and have to express our dissatisfaction because of the small errors that we found in the previous points, we realize that we are moving away from the foundations and principles of Parliament.

These principles are extremely important. We have all these privileges granted to us as members of Parliament. We are men and women who have the right to sit in the House of Commons with all the responsibilities that we have. As long as we have a constitutional parliamentary system in Canada and in all the provinces and territories, it is important that we respect these traditions, which are very clear.

The federal government has a Parliament of elected officials and an upper house. In the provincial legislatures, there were upper houses, which disappeared in the decades following the founding of Canada. As elected officials and parliamentarians, we must respect the constitutional traditions of our parliamentary system until the Constitution is changed by a vote.

To do this, we have the Prime Minister who, as I said, is a member of cabinet like all the others. This Council of Ministers represents the government, which recognizes the fundamental principle of cabinet solidarity. When a member of the Council of Ministers makes a statement on policies that are the responsibility of the government—

• (1440)

[English]

Mr. Charlie Angus: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I know that Mr. Fergus is having to go over his notes again, but we've already learned about his point of view on ministerial solidarity. I think we've already gone through that. Maybe there's something else he hasn't talked about that's relevant, but that one we've definitely well covered off.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus. That's a good reminder.

Mr. Fergus, we'd ask that you don't review the subject material that has already been covered. It must be a new debate.

Mr. Fergus.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Thank you for that reminder, Mr. Chair. I just wanted to make sure everyone understood.

Having said that, I understand you, Mr. Chair. We need to bring new arguments to this debate. It's part of our parliamentary tradition, and I intend to respect that. I will continue to offer you a fresh perspective on this issue.

Mr. Chair, apart from the matter of the fundamental principles of our parliamentary system, a funny thing happened. Actually, it wasn't funny, it was interesting. There is a grain of truth in every joke.

Ms. May, the leader of the Green Party, attended our meeting on Monday, March 29. Her party does not have a representative on the committee, as it is not recognized in the House of Commons. So she had the floor at the very end of the meeting and said something that contradicts my view. I think she said that, of the people asking the Minister questions, she was probably the only one who voted in favour of the motion put forward by the official opposition on March 25 [*technical difficulties*] with the provisions. Even so, she could not understand why a two-hour session was held to debate this issue, which could have been resolved with a simple letter.

Everyone agreed that there was something new in the case of Ben Chin, even though this issue had been addressed by the Standing Committee on Finance in August 2020. Ben Chin had received a message on LinkedIn, which reads something like:

• (1445)

[English]

He just said, you know, it's a pleasure to see you. I'm glad we're working together on youth.

[Translation]

I am not able to provide an exact quote. Perhaps someone else could do that.

Mr. Chair, you are not giving me the opportunity to look at my documents to read the quote properly, and I have to say that I feel a little intimidated. So I'm giving you a rough quote and I hope the clerk or my colleagues will correct me.

Ms. May said that it didn't make sense to have a meeting just to ask a few questions. She asked if there had been any further communication with WE Charity or the Kielburger brothers.

The minister, who appeared as the government representative, stated that there had been no further communication.

She said she was satisfied with that answer.

However, I chuckled at the time, but we all know that sometimes the truth can be told in a few words. I know that I am taking a lot of time today to speak. Ms. May is an extraordinary woman whom I greatly admire. I would like to have her intelligence some day. We don't always see eye to eye on a number of issues, but she has a strong character, as do all my colleagues here.

• (1450)

[English]

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

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: I hope that Mr. Angus—

[English]

The Chair: I'm recognizing Mr. Angus on a point of order.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I'm just not sure if Monsieur Fortin had amended the motion to include Ms. May as a witness, because I don't know what we're talking about.

I have enormous respect for Ms. May, but again, I find that my colleague here is out to waste our time. He sees our committee as something that can just be just played with, using all kinds of talk off the top of his head. It's not germane to the point.

The Chair: I've asked several times, Mr. Fergus, that you maintain your debate on the relevant point before us. It is creating a little bit of disorder that you're not.

I'd ask again that you do remain on the debate of the motion itself.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: I have a question for you, Mr. Chair.

Actually, I was making the point that Ms. May, when she was at the committee, told us that she voted for the opposition motion in the House on March 25. I was using that to demonstrate that there was no reason for this committee to conclude that we should continue to debate Mr. Fortin's motion.

Is that relevant to this discussion, in your view, Mr. Chair?

I don't want to state things that are not relevant. So I'd like to know if you think it's relevant.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, I think the concern was that you were talking about the strength of the character of Ms. May. I think that probably strayed outside of the bounds of relevance.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Okay, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate the way you repeated what I said.

from the debate.

Mr. Chair, what I wanted to say is that I think Mr. Fortin's motion is not working. The conclusion it comes to is a hasty one.

I will end my comments there. I hope I managed to convince my colleagues of the validity of my objection to Mr. Fortin's motion.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Angus, we'll turn to you.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is Friday afternoon and we've covered off some ground, but not all of the ground.

I want to bring attention in my remarks to the continual letters we've been receiving from WE Charity's lawyers that, I believe, is turning into a form of harassment and intimidation of our committee. We've had a number of letters wherein they've questioned what we've asked. They've claimed we've made false statements.

The latest one—and I have to bring it forward now because I couldn't bring it forward earlier—was an April 12 letter about comments that certain members of this committee made while explaining the committee's work to ABC7 San Francisco News. It reported that a "non-profit involved with 1,400 schools [was] being investigated by Canadian parliamentary committee".

I was one of those people interviewed. I think my remarks were very straightforward. I was asked about their huge holdings. I asked why a charity needed all of this property. The problem with the group is that we don't see transparency by it. We're told it has to do with helping children, but tracking and figuring this out has pretty much stumped a parliamentary committee, and we haven't got a picture of who owns what and how money actually flows. Without that, how can you say you have trust?

That's a pretty straightforward thing to say, and it's also within the right of committee members to talk about committee work.

We're getting letters from WE's lawyers almost daily. On April 12 they wrote to our committee about ABC7's news coverage and wanted the chair to instruct the committee on what we should be doing, saying they'd be grateful if the chair advised members of the committee that WE was in the process of preparing its information.

We don't need to be told by our committee chair through the lawyers for WE what WE is doing and what we should be saying in public. I think that is a form of harassment.

Mr. Chair, we see a pattern. For example, this morning we got another letter from WE lawyers attacking one of our witnesses, and

that letter sent to our committee was coordinated with Guy Giorno, the high-priced, very famous Conservative lawyer who's written an article attacking that witness and our committee.

I have been involved in Parliament for 17 years. We have taken on some big issues, some big players. I have never seen a committee continually harassed by these kinds of legal intimidations. I've been around, so I've got a pretty strong back, but I think that a new MP continually who was receiving legal threats telling us what we should and shouldn't be saying at committee.... This is the privilege, the right, of committee members to do our work, to get answers.

I'm speaking for myself, but I am sure for all of my colleagues, that after eight months, we don't know how WE spends its money. We don't know how they're structured. That's a fair comment. The question in the California investigation was that WE seemed unable to answer how many schools it actually built with money raised from California donors. If you're a children's charity, you should be able to answer that.

• (1455)

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm recognizing a point of order by Mr. Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: With all due respect to my colleague Mr. Angus, I think his speech is important and we need to hear it—it is not a filibuster in my opinion—but I don't think it's relevant to the motion we are considering right now.

Can we finish this motion and then deal with another motion or debate?

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus: I'm certainly willing, Mr. Fortin, to start a different debate by raising it as a question of privilege. I'm using my right. You are certainly going to be looking to get some support for your motion, so I think if you want to undermine the few minutes I've taken to speak to an issue on whether or not we're being intimidated by the legal letters from WE lawyers, I think it's very serious. The fact that WE has sent letters about one of our witnesses today while coordinating an article with Guy Giorno attacking our committee is not something that we as parliamentarians, regardless of the issues and our political stripes, should be saying is a precedent and that we support it.

I'm not going to bring it forward at this time as a question of privilege because I don't think we're done with this kind of harassment that we've seen from them. But I want to put my colleagues on notice that I think we have to be aware of this, because if this becomes the standard tactic, it will be used by others and it could intimidate other members of Parliament getting the work done.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus.

We have Mr. Dong, Mr. Sorbara, Monsieur Fortin, Madame Latanzio and Madame Shanahan on the list.

We'll go to Mr. —

Mr. Charlie Angus: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, it is three o'clock. Do we need a motion to continue? Some of us do have other work that we need to do as well.

The Chair: We don't need a motion to continue. If somebody moved to adjourn the committee, then that would be a non-debatable motion. We would move to a vote on that.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I move to adjourn.

The Chair: Mr. Angus moves to adjourn.

I'm getting a mixed signal of where committee members are at, so I will ask the clerk to assist me with a roll call on that vote.

I should just clarify, Mr. Angus, that I did recognize a point of order. I know that you'd been speaking most recently, but it wasn't a point of order. Of course, I should have remembered that you're not able to move a motion on a point of order. I do apologize. That isn't in the protocols. Mr. Fergus talked extensively about the traditions

of this place and the necessity of maintaining the rules, so I'll maintain the rules.

• (1500)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Fair enough.

The Chair: We'll turn to Mr. Dong on the speaking order.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Chair.

I do have a lot to say about this motion, but with respect to Mr. Angus's suggestion, I agree. I do have a full schedule this afternoon.

I move that the meeting now be adjourned.

The Chair: That's not a debatable motion, so we'll move to the vote. That was not raised on a point of order, so we will proceed.

Madam Clerk, please go through the roll call on the motion to adjourn.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 4)

The Chair: Colleagues, that passes. The meeting is adjourned.

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