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Chair: Mr. Robert Kitchen



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• (1640)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Kitchen (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 31 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

The committee is meeting today at 4:42 p.m. Ottawa time to hear from the President of the Treasury Board and officials on the main estimates and departmental plans for 2021-22.

I'd like to take this opportunity to remind all participants in this meeting that taking screenshots or photos of your screen is not permitted.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

Interpretation in this video conference will work very much as it does in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of choosing “floor”, “English” or “French”.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, you may click on your microphone icon to activate your mike. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

To raise a point of order during the meeting, committee members should ensure their microphone is unmuted and say “point of order” to get the chair's attention.

The clerk and the analysts are participating in the meeting virtually today. If you need to speak with them during the meeting, please email them through the committee email address. The clerk may also be reached by using his cellphone number.

For those people who are participating in the committee room, please note that masks are required unless you are seated and when physical distancing is not possible.

With that said, I will now invite the President of the Treasury Board to make his opening statement.

Mr. Duclos, please go ahead.

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (President of the Treasury Board): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would first like to thank the committee for inviting me to discuss the Main Estimates 2021-2022 and the Treasury Board Secretariat's Departmental Plan 2021-2022.

I am accompanied today by some senior officials in my department, whom I will briefly introduce. They are: Glenn Purves, Assistant Secretary, Expenditure Management Sector, Roger Ermuth, Assistant Comptroller General, Financial Management Sector, Office of the Comptroller General, Karen Cahill, Assistant Secretary and Chief Financial Officer, Sonya Read, Acting Assistant Secretary, Digital and Services Policy, and Tolga Yalkin, Assistant Deputy Minister, Workplace Policies and Services.

[English]

The 2021-22 main estimates seek funding for the continuation of previously approved programs and services, as well as investments to support Canadians through the COVID-19 pandemic and to establish essential conditions for a successful economic recovery. These investments include economic support to Canadian citizens and businesses, vaccine funding, expanded support for pandemic-related mental health tools, virtual care and many others.

The main estimates provide information on \$342.2 billion in proposed spending for 123 organizations. This can be further broken down into \$141.9 billion in voted expenditures and \$200.3 billion in statutory expenditures already authorized through existing legislation. Some \$22.7 billion is related to the COVID-19 pandemic response. This includes just over \$10 billion for the Canada recovery benefit, the Canada recovery sickness benefit and the Canada recovery caregiving benefit.

I would like to point out some significant changes in statutory spending from last year's main estimates. These include payments to individuals under the Canada Recovery Benefits Act, which I just mentioned. Other changes of those are updates to major transfer payments, notably benefits for the elderly and the Canada health transfer, and increased climate action incentive payments published in the 2020 fall economic statement.

The main estimates exclude certain items listed in the 2020 fall economic statement which do not require annual parliamentary approval, such as the Canada emergency wage subsidy and employment insurance.

• (1645)

[*Translation*]

For my own department, the Treasury Board Secretariat, the expenditures listed in the Main Estimates 2021-2022 include \$3.7 billion for items such as government contingencies, government-wide initiatives, payroll requirements, the operating budget carry forward, the capital budget carry forward, and expenditures related to compensation.

The remainder of the Treasury Board Secretariat's expenditures are to continue to enhance the clarity and consistency of financial and performance reporting and to support the government's response to the pandemic.

The budget also contains a little more than \$3 billion for our responsibilities as an employer. These are payments with respect to public service pensions, benefits and insurance, including the employer's contributions to health insurance, salary insurance and life insurance premiums.

The department's expenditures will also be used to prepare the public service for the future, in matters such as diversity, inclusion and accessibility, and to ensure compliance with the official languages legislation.

The funds are also used for negotiations with public sector unions, and to lead the implementation of the Pay Equity Act. These activities are described in more detail in the Treasury Board Secretariat's departmental plan 2021-2022, which, as I understand it, has piqued the committee's interest.

[*English*]

Departmental plans play a fundamental role in the expenditure cycle by outlining and describing organizational priorities linked to the funding sought through the main estimates. The departmental plans set out the objectives and expected results for departments and how they will achieve these results throughout the year.

In the case of the Treasury Board Secretariat, I would like to highlight a few of these commitments. For 2021-22, the secretariat will support the government's COVID-19 pandemic response by providing additional guidance to departments for implementing policies, programs and initiatives related to the response.

In collaboration with Finance Canada, the secretariat will also track the impact of the government's fiscal response to inform and support decision-making and investments going forward.

Other important objectives include reducing greenhouse gas emissions from federal operations and recruiting people to the public service from communities across Canada.

[*Translation*]

In addition, the secretariat actively works to support the creation of healthy, safe and inclusive workplaces, and to speed up government efforts to achieve a public service that is representative of the Canadian population it serves.

My department is also committed to efforts to reform regulations in order to help Canadian companies be more competitive, to im-

prove transparency, to reduce the administrative burden, and to harmonize regulations.

These reforms will be undertaken with the assurance that we will be protecting the environment and the health and safety of Canadians.

• (1650)

[*English*]

In conclusion, the priorities set out in the secretariat's departmental plan and the investments requested in the main estimates reflect the priorities of our government and of Canadians.

We continue to prioritize the way these estimates are presented, with extensive explanatory documentation which is readily accessible to parliamentarians and Canadians alike online.

Thank you again for your kind invitation to speak with you today. My officials and I would be delighted to answer any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate your comments.

We'll now go into our first round of questioning. We will start with Mr. Paul-Hus for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Good afternoon, Mr. Minister.

My regards also to the officials with you today.

Mr. Duclos, you are the President of the Treasury Board, as well as an economist. In the document that I am about to show you, you will see figure 1, dealing with the composition of expenditures in the Main Estimates 2021-2022. You will see a green circle, indicating the cost of servicing the debt.

This year's budget shows \$21 billion for servicing the debt.

Does that concern you?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Mr. Paul-Hus, and all my colleagues on the committee.

I am indeed an economist by training and I am also President of the Treasury Board. As such, my responsibility is to ensure that the Government of Canada's funds and efforts are directed to where the pandemic makes it important.

As an economist, I also understand, as do many others, that, if we had not invested quickly and massively to support Canadians and their companies, the result would have been terrible. We would have found ourselves not only in an extraordinary economic crisis, but also in a social crisis...

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Mr. Duclos, you know that I do not have a lot of time.

I want to know whether it concerns you. I especially want to know whether you have assessed the impact that a 1% increase in the interest rate could have on Canada's finances.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: We know two things about that.

First, the interest to GDP ratio in Canada is the lowest it has been for almost a century.

Second, our financial and budgetary conditions are among the most enviable in the developed countries. It is important...

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: So your answer is that you are not concerned about the medium-term impact of a possible rise in interest rates for Canada and its taxpayers.

As the parliamentary budget officer has indicated, an increase of only 1% would have impacts on society as a whole and on all taxpayers.

Does that concern you?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The concern we absolutely must have at the moment is to get out of this crisis as strongly as we can. That is exactly what will allow us to avoid accumulating deficits, which would become greater and last longer. Those deficits would lead us into a fiscal and economic slump that we absolutely want to avoid.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: That is why it is important to be careful of unnecessary expenditures as we come out of the crisis. We could agree on that.

According to the monthly data that the committee has requested, the department estimates that it needs an additional \$1.8 billion to hire additional employees or to pay for overtime.

From those amounts requested to hire additional employees or to pay for overtime, why are you not providing danger pay for the employees of the Correctional Service of Canada? Those who work in our penitentiaries are required to be there around the clock and they receive no danger pay. Can you explain that?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Let me make two points.

First, I would invite you to be more specific in pointing out which aspect of the main estimates you are referring to.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: An additional \$1.8 billion has been requested to hire additional employees or to pay for overtime.

The unions have met with you and have asked why Correctional Service of Canada officers are not entitled to danger pay, because they are being asked to work during a pandemic.

Canadian Forces members who were assigned to long-term care facilities were entitled to danger pay, the same pay they are entitled to when they are deployed in a theatre of operations.

Why are our Correctional Service of Canada officers not entitled to that possibility?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Once again, let me make two points.

First, if you would like to have more information on the \$1.8 billion and on the management of human resources during the pandemic, that is perfectly legitimate. However, I invite you to put the question to Tolga Yalkin, one of our senior officials, who can provide—

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: My question was specifically about Correctional Service of Canada officers. Could they receive that danger pay?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Very good. Thank you for making the distinction between a question about the \$1.8 billion and a question about the Correctional Service of Canada officers.

Minister Blair and I have actually met with them. We are in close contact, because, as you know, the work those officers do is not only extremely important but also very difficult during the pandemic.

• (1655)

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Can anything be done for them, Mr. Minister, yes or no?

We do not have much time. Is it possible to help them?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Certainly.

Minister Blair has had more direct discussions than I have with the representatives of Correctional Service of Canada officers. He would be extremely pleased to appear before the committee to talk to you about it more.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Thank you.

My next question is about advance payments.

The Guide to Advance Payments states the following: "When the government pays in advance, it takes on greater risk and has fewer recourse options if the agreement is not respected."

Have you warned departments about the risks of advance payments made during the pandemic?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Certainly.

During the pandemic, we had to be quick and effective at the same time, as you suggest. The need for speed sometimes required us to proceed more nimbly than in normal times. For example, it might have taken us months, even years, to pay the Canada emergency response benefit to workers who no longer had any support—

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: In terms of advance payments to companies, we know that hundreds of millions of dollars have been paid out. Last week, we found out that a company had received \$81 million for equipment from China, or somewhere. That is not acceptable.

Now that we are talking about control measures for advance payments, what happened that allowed companies with no expertise in the medical field to receive so much money but not be able to prove that the goods bought by the Government of Canada were acceptable?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That is actually an excellent comment. In a situation where things have to be done quickly, we must also put mechanisms in place to make sure that the payments are made appropriately.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: So what happened last year? Is it because the controls and the mechanisms were not effective?

[English]

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

We'll now go to Mr. Drouin for six minutes.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I believe I will be filling in for Mr. Drouin.

The Chair: Okay, we'll go to Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Wonderful. Thank you very much.

Minister Duclos, I think I speak on behalf of the entire committee when I say we're delighted to see you back at OGGO and we're delighted to see you back in full strength as well. It's wonderful to see you again.

The TBS 2021-22 departmental plan states:

Access to reliable disaggregated data is essential for understanding the experiences of employees in designated employment equity groups and of those in other employment equity-seeking groups, and for identifying gaps in representation.

We know that diversity is incredibly important in our workforce and in the federal government and this ministry.

Could you provide an update on how TBS is generating and publishing disaggregated data?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you very much, Irek, for your kind remarks on my unfortunate inability a couple of times in the last few months to be fully in touch with you and to be fully supportive of your important work.

Thank you also for your very relevant question on diversity and inclusion. In Canada we're very proud of diversity in many different dimensions, but for that diversity to be meaningful, it has to come with inclusion. The Treasury Board Secretariat has a key role to play when it comes to making our public service fully inclusive. That comes, as you said, with the ability to generate and share disaggregated data.

To date, there have been seven sets of disaggregated data released to the public and to the public service, which in fact provide the first-ever view into the composition of 21 different employment equity subgroups. I repeat, it's the first-ever view on the disaggregated picture of our public service.

These numbers are based on those who have chosen to self-identify. We have a lot more work to do, because self-identification is sometimes an issue when it comes to sharing one's diversity and one's personality, one's person and one's identity. We have work to do.

Tolga might want to briefly add something on that. He's working very well with negotiating agents and various representatives and leaders of our diversity in the public service. We are looking forward to more work and to having more outcomes produced.

Tolga, you might want to briefly share further news on that.

• (1700)

Mr. Tolga Yalkin (Assistant Deputy Minister, Workplace Policies and Services, Treasury Board Secretariat): Yes, Minister. Thank you.

You mentioned the importance of self-identification. Our data is really only as good as the degree to which individuals feel safe and comfortable self-identifying with one of the equity-seeking groups.

We are currently working within Treasury Board Secretariat to develop an approach that will be more inclusive in the way in which it seeks that data from public servants, allowing them to, in effect, more completely and more accurately express their identity and demystifying and sharing with them information on the reasons for which that data is disclosed and how it can benefit them.

We're really looking forward to the richness that will add to the data we're actually able to collect.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: That's terrific.

I really appreciate just seeing the tremendous progress that's being made and the careful attention that's being brought to disaggregated data, so I really do appreciate both those responses.

We know that data is just one piece of the puzzle. Obviously you need data to be able to take action on it, but you also need to take action in order to increase diversification in the ranks. We know there are still gaps in the diversity of the executives in the public service, as highlighted in the TBS departmental plan.

What action has TBS taken, Minister, to increase the diversity of senior leadership in our public service?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you again, Irek, for being sensitive, interested and focused so much on that.

Yes, as you said, disaggregated data matters. We also have fixed targets when it comes to enhancing the diversity of our public service. As you may have noted, in the budget implementation act, 2021, we have introduced changes to the Public Service Employment Act, which will reduce not only barriers to entry but, certainly, barriers to the fulfillment of one's abilities in the public service, such as, promotion, feelings of well-being and fulfillment.

As you know, we are also going to invest, and we have invested significantly, in education and awareness opportunities and learning events. We are going to update the training with the Canada School of Public Service. We are going to set up a new federal speakers bureau on diversity and inclusion.

On senior leadership, we are going to review the appointment mechanisms. We're going to work on what may sometimes be useful external recruitment strategies. We're setting up mentorship activities to promote and support those who want to go further in their careers, and also implement the leadership development program.

It's all a work in progress. There is always more to do, but as you said, Irek, we can all, obviously, celebrate the progress we've made until now.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you, Minister. That's a fantastic response.

Mr. Chair, do I have any more time?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I will yield those 15 seconds and simply say, "Go Leafs, go."

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Ms. Vignola for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for joining us today, Mr. Duclos. In two or three simple, short sentences, can you explain where we are in the process of compensating the employees who were victims of the failed Phoenix pay system?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you very much for the question, Mrs. Vignola.

Let me make three quick points.

First, as we have often said—though it always bears repeating—it is totally unacceptable for public service employees not to be paid correctly and on time for the services they have rendered. That is true not only for the public service, but also for all Canadians.

Second, that fact has been recognized and, with due respect and considerable speed, we have worked very hard with bargaining agents to reach a series of agreements, some in 2019 and others in 2020.

Third, those agreements are now in place and will result in the appropriate compensation being paid to public service employees who have suffered unacceptable harm, either financially or psychologically.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

I will be a little more specific, Mr. Duclos.

For several weeks, I have been receiving hundreds of emails—as you probably have too—about the fact that the Treasury Board Secretariat, the TBS, is refusing to provide the guidelines that the Canada Revenue Agency needs in order not to tax the employees' compensation. We have already discussed this.

At our meeting on Monday, Mr. Aylward, the National President of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, stated that his union and the TBS had come to an agreement on a statement of facts to be

sent to the Canada Revenue Agency, but that TBS had not signed off on that statement.

What is holding the TBS back from signing the statement of facts that describes the compensation as not part of a salary and therefore not taxable?

• (1705)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you.

Your question actually lets me be a little more specific. Not only have the agreements I quickly mentioned been signed, but they are in the process of being implemented.

In the agreement to which you refer, clause 18 specifically states that the amounts in compensation payments are subject to the usual deductions. The Canada Revenue Agency, which is responsible for establishing the way in which those deductions are applied, has determined that some of those allowances should be taxable. That decision was made by Canada Revenue Agency officials, and, as I'm sure you are aware, I have no influence in that regard.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: The Canada Revenue Agency says that it is waiting for the statement and the guidelines from the TBS, and you are saying that you cannot, because it's their responsibility. So we really have to talk to you. As you have said, what the people are going through and continue to go through is unacceptable. It is high time for this to be settled. In addition, I've never seen allowances that are taxable. That opens up Pandora's box.

Some victims of Phoenix have retired and others are still having problems. This is another important matter. Some have still not received any compensation.

When will they get it?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That is an excellent question.

Obviously, the sooner the better. In some cases, it may take a little longer because we want to make sure that the compensation is what it is supposed to be. We certainly want to make sure that it is no lower than the people have a right to receive.

For more specifics on the timelines, I'm going to ask Ms. Cahill to answer, because she certainly knows more about the matter than I do.

Ms. Cahill, can you give us some more specifics?

Ms. Karen Cahill (Assistant Secretary and Chief Financial Officer, Treasury Board Secretariat): Former public service employees who came under the 2019 agreement have already begun to receive their compensation. In the case of former employees or retirees who came under the 2020 agreement, the timeframe for paying the compensation is by the fall of 2021. However, they can already submit a request to be compensated for the expenses they incurred as a result of the problems with the Phoenix pay system. That is in effect at the moment and always has been.

I just want to point out that they will receive more communications in the weeks and months to come.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you very much.

You are asking for \$3 billion under vote 20, on public service insurance. That is an increase of more than 40% over the 2020-2021 budget.

Could you explain that increase for me?

In the supplementary estimates, will there also be requests for public service insurance?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That is an excellent question.

As the topic is a little too complicated for me to explain myself, I'll turn to Ms. Cahill once more, if she agrees to answer that question.

Ms. Karen Cahill: Of course.

The increase is indeed 40.4%, and it is explained by two factors. First, there is an increase of \$795 million for public service insurance plans. That request was first in the Supplementary Estimates (B), 2020-2021. So this is ongoing.

There is also an increase of \$78 million for the public service long-term disability insurance plan. That was in the Supplementary Estimates (A), 2020-2021. It is now included in our budgets as an expenditure. At the moment, although I can make no promises, we are not planning on any amounts in the supplementary estimates to come.

• (1710)

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cahill.

We'll now go to Mr. Green for six minutes.

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you.

I would also like to welcome back my good friend, Minister Duclos. I'm happy to see you here, looking well and healthy and, hopefully, ready to take on the work ahead.

In your opening remarks, you mentioned efforts related to pay equity and implementation of the Pay Equity Act. According to your 2021-22 departmental plans, you were talking about working with departments and agencies to ensure compliance with official languages legislation and leading implementation of the Pay Equity Act in the core public administration in the RCMP.

Which departments and agencies are struggling most to comply with the official languages legislation?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Matthew. I'm not only glad to see you again, but I'm also glad to hear you ask questions on official languages. As you might expect, it's a key issue and a key interest for me at the Treasury Board. We're working every day to make sure that everyone in the public service is able to work in whichever official language they want to use, and is able to prosper, giving his or her full potential.

The secretariat has key roles to play, one of which is to make sure that the directive on the use of official languages is well understood by departments. If you would like to ask specific departments specific questions, that's—

Mr. Matthew Green: Actually, I do have a specific question, through you, Mr. Chair. It relates to the ongoing operations of Parliament. I'm wondering what the Treasury Board has done, understanding that there have been frequent interruptions in our ability to have adequate standards and translation for our committees.

It's often the case that our democratic processes are capped at committee because we don't have the right kind of hybrid technology or the staffing in place to allow for the fullness of debates, discussions and, sometimes, government or opposition filibusters.

Notwithstanding the fact that we're going to be looking at this kind of hybrid model perhaps for the foreseeable future, what steps has the Treasury Board taken to ensure we have adequate support to comply with the Official Languages Act as it relates to our own operations as parliamentarians?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Matthew, as parliamentarians, we have not only a right but a duty to ask, as you've said, for the ability to operate in either of the official languages. If you and any other colleagues on the committee see areas in which things have to be improved, then you need to speak up and let those things go to the relevant people, either within the committee.... There are good and great people who I see on the screen. The clerk is certainly one of them. There are many others outside of this particular committee that should be there to support this obviously important—

Mr. Matthew Green: Mr. Chair, I have a deep amount of respect for my friend Minister Duclos, but I also have limited time, and he has an ability to really stretch, so I'm just going to bring it back to my line of questioning, if I could.

I want to shift gears a bit about the expectation for the full implementation of the Pay Equity Act. As the President of Treasury Board will know, there is a significant Black class action lawsuit that identifies as a particular point of interest and negotiation the ability for self-declaration and a call for the federal government to amend the self-declaration of "visible minority" to create a separate category for Black employees. In his remarks, my good friend Mr. Kusmierczyk talked about disaggregated data.

For the interest of a good-faith conversation around the issue, understanding that this request is coming from the Black class action, has the Treasury Board looked at this and at preliminary steps towards the ability for desegregated categories as that relates to not just Black employees but all employees, to be able to ensure that there is an accurate reflection of perhaps some of the barriers or challenges that are faced by the public sector workforce?

• (1715)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Matthew, you're asking about three different things.

On the first one about the Pay Equity Act, which was passed in the earlier mandate—unfortunately, you were not here yet—you're obviously aware that this law was given royal assent in December 2018, and we looked forward to implementing this in the fall of 2020. Just a few months ago, a set of proposed regulations was published so that up to 1.3 million Canadians could at some point, when these regulations are approved, benefit from proactive wage equity opportunities.

The second thing is about the Employment Equity Act. I am supporting my colleague Minister Tassi in reviewing that act for the purposes that you have highlighted.

The third thing is about the class action and the importance of recognizing that there have been barriers over the past in people fulfilling their full potential. I'll turn quickly to Tolga Yalkin so that he can perhaps outline where we are at this particular stage.

Mr. Tolga Yalkin: Yes, thank you, Minister. Very briefly, I have some elaborations on your remarks.

When it comes to the Employment Equity Act review, certainly we are supporting our colleagues at Labour Canada, but we're also, in a sense, not waiting for any changes to the Employment Equity Act, both to, as we've already discussed, release disaggregated data, but also to offer opportunities for public servants to self-identify at the subgroup level.

When it comes to the work that is ongoing in the context of Thompson and Diallo in the class action, certainly, as the minister has identified, we are aware and conscious that there are issues and opportunities and challenges when it comes to racism and discrimination in all organizations, including ours. We're approaching the exploratory discussions with the plaintiffs' counsel in that spirit. It's very early days yet, but we look forward to continuing this discussion with them.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Yalkin.

We'll now go to Mr. McCauley for five minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Minister, welcome back. It's nice to see you well.

Did the Canada emergency wage subsidy go through the standard Treasury Board approval process?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you for your kind words. Yes, I was looking forward to being back and in particular to exchanges with you, Kelly.

On the Canada emergency wage subsidy, as you will remember, that was voted on in Parliament, so—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: No, I recognize that. Did it go through the standard Treasury Board approval process?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Maybe I should turn at some point to Glenn Purves, who will be happy to distinguish between voted and statutory expenditures. That might be useful to the members of the committee.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Right. As a new spending program under the Financial Administration Act, my understanding is that the wage subsidy program would have had to go through the standard Treasury Board approval process.

The reason I'm asking is that we've all seen the reports. It's the largest of the COVID spending at \$100 billion. We've seen the reports recently, obviously, of wealthy hedge funds receiving the money and profitable companies receiving taxpayers' money.

Did it go through the usual Treasury Board approval process?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: You're right in saying this is an extremely important part of our pandemic response to the economic crisis. It helped, if I remember well, over five million workers to keep their jobs—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Sir, I'm aware of the program. Please, could you answer the question? Did it go through the regular, proper Treasury Board approval process? It's \$100 billion. Did it go through the process? Did you approve it?

What do you think of the news that money is going to wealthy hedge funds and profitable companies? It seems that taxpayers' money has just been going out the door without proper oversight.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That's very good. There are two parts to your question. The first one is the impact of that program. I would be happy, as you might have noted, to speak about the incredibly important and positive impact—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It's a very simple question. Did this \$100-billion program go through the standard Treasury Board approval process? Were any exemptions granted from policy for this \$100 billion?

● (1720)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That was the first part of my answer. If you are interested, I would be certainly very interested in talking about it—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Again, I'd be interested in the answer.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The second part of the question is about the distinction between voted and statutory expenditures. These are called statutory expenditures. I would turn to Glenn Purves to make sure that every member of the committee understands the difference between the two.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Did it go through the process? Were any exemptions granted on this?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Glenn, I don't see you on the screen, but I think you are there.

Mr. Glenn Purves (Assistant Secretary, Expenditure Management Sector, Treasury Board Secretariat): I am here.

I don't have the answer to that question.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay, let me just stop you both right here.

It's a \$100 billion of taxpayers' money. Billions have gone to hedge funds. Billions have gone to profitable companies. For one of them, their market cap has gone up \$9 billion since COVID started. You're saying that neither of you have an answer as to whether this \$100 billion went through the standard Treasury Board approval process and whether any of this was granted exemptions going through the process.

Do you understand my concern?

Mr. Glenn Purves: Minister Duclos is correct in the sense there are appropriations that go for spending authority and then there are statutory authorities that have various authorities built into the legislation.

If there was any step that involved the Treasury Board, certainly the authorities would have been secured before any money flowed. I'm just saying that it's a different path.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It's \$100 billion. Who is reviewing this money if TBS is not doing it?

I'm going to quote TBS's reason for being. It "provides oversight of government financial management, spending". The FAA, subsection 7.1(1), lays out administration of policy and oversight of expenditures. We have \$100 billion going out and we can't get a simple answer of whether this went through the Treasury Board approval process and if any exemptions were granted.

Were exemptions granted for any of the other COVID spending from the standard Treasury Board approval process?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Purves is explaining to us and to you the distinction between expenditures voted and legislated in the House of Commons. We're all members of Parliament, so through our role as members of Parliament, we had not only the opportunity, but the responsibility to express our views on whether these expenditures were warranted—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Do you think it's appropriate that taxpayers' money went to wealthy hedge funds?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McCauley.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: If I remember well, we all voted in favour of that legislation in the spring of 2020.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

If the minister and Mr. Purves can provide further answers to the committee, it would be appreciated if they could be provided to the clerk. Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. MacKinnon for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Steven MacKinnon (Gatineau, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I welcome the President of the Treasury Board. Mr. Duclos, it's a great pleasure to have you here again.

Before I move to another topic, I would like to quickly go back to a point that Mrs. Vignola raised, about the compensation for the Phoenix pay system.

I would like to clarify one point. The Treasury Board took no position either for or against compensation for the Phoenix pay system and has no role in the decision on whether or not to pay it. Is that correct?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. MacKinnon, thank you for your kindness and your gracious words.

The responsibilities are threefold: two of them are up to the Treasury Board and the third is up to the Canada Revenue Agency.

First, the Treasury Board Secretariat was responsible for negotiating an agreement with the bargaining agents.

Second, it had to make the content of that agreement public. Just now, I referred to clause 18 in the agreement. That was made public a number of weeks ago.

The Canada Revenue Agency was responsible for establishing whether or not deductions would apply. It was then supposed to inform the appropriate people about the nature of the deductions that would be applied to the compensation paid pursuant to the agreement that the Treasury Board Secretariat and the bargaining agents had negotiated.

• (1725)

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Those decisions are made independently of the secretariat, of course.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Exactly. The secretariat negotiated and published the agreement. The Canada Revenue Agency then went through the agreement to establish, in the most transparent and professional way possible, the nature of the deductions that had to be applied to the compensation paid.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you for those clarifications.

As you know, I am a member of Parliament for the National Capital Region, just like my colleague Mr. Drouin, who sits on this committee. Public servants are often asking us about their return to work. People are curious and want to know how they can organize their lives. They are wondering what the future holds for them after the pandemic.

In words that the people listening to us are very likely to understand, can you explain which factors the Treasury Board Secretariat, the employer, will consider in its deliberations over the return to work protocol?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you very much for the question, Mr. MacKinnon.

You are fortunate, as I am, to be able to represent a constituency with a lot of public servants. You represent Ottawa and I represent Quebec City.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Actually, I am the member for Gatineau.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: My apologies. I should know that because I live in Gatineau myself. We both are fortunate to represent and associate with people who spend a good part of their energy and their time in the service of our country.

The three key words are health, flexibility and collaboration.

The main objective is to ensure the health and safety of public service employees. Employers actually have a legal obligation to do so. It must be done with flexibility. In other words, working conditions and responsibilities must be considered, and they vary from employee to employee, depending on the workplace. The pandemic had a number of repercussions on levels of risk to the health of the employees. It is extremely important to be flexible and to be able to adapt.

The third key word is collaboration. As President of the Treasury Board and a member of Parliament, I can say that MPs have the responsibility of working closely with public servants and their representatives. We have been doing that since the pandemic began.

If you wish, the officials could tell you in more detail about the mechanisms that have been established since the beginning to make sure that everything is done to ensure the best work-life conditions of public servants in the Ottawa-Gatineau and Quebec City regions.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: We have already heard that you will be delegating authority to agency and department deputy ministers to decide what steps to take regarding return-to-work in the respective agencies and departments.

Why are you delegating this task?

Why did you choose this decentralized approach?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That's a very good question. We can only guess the answer, and the public servants understand that quite easily. It obviously depends on the working and living conditions of these public servants. Canada is a very large country. People are serving the country in every province and territory. Pandemic conditions have varied and return-to-work conditions must also vary.

There is also the fact that the pandemic has been an extremely difficult and traumatic event in many ways. However, we have learned a number of lessons—we talked about this not too long ago—that will allow us to do even better after the pandemic. There are technological lessons learned—

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to Ms. Vignola for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Duclos, I'll come back to what Mr. Green was talking about earlier. Your departmental plan indicates that you are going to work with all the ministers and organizations to ensure compliance with the Official Languages Act. I'd like to know when that will begin.

Yesterday, I received an invitation from a minister to attend an information session given only in English, without interpretation. This is in addition to the other invitations I've received, including one from the Minister of Finance to discuss the budget, another information session given only in English, without interpretation.

Not only are Canadians entitled to have access to information in both official languages, but so are MPs.

When will this great battle—I'm not sure what to call it—begin to ensure that French is taken into account, even by ministers?

• (1730)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Mrs. Vignola, for the question.

There is so much to say about this, but I know our time is too short. I could tell you about all the things we've been doing since 2015 to increase bilingualism in the public service and across the country. I'm thinking of Ontario's French-language university, the appointment of bilingual Supreme Court judges, the \$2.7 billion for the action plan for official languages 2018-23, the largest official languages plan in the country's history, the enumeration of rights holders on the short-form census—I hope you all filled it out—the reinstatement of the Court Challenges Program, which was abolished twice by the Conservatives, and many other things.

However, since I know that the time is short, I'll limit myself to what the public service and the Treasury Board Secretariat are doing and will continue to do in the coming weeks, which is strengthening appointment and assessment criteria for public service positions.

I know you're a little impatient, because you also want me to talk about how you and we, as francophones, must always take our place. If you or I feel that there are things, including in this committee, that do not meet the expectations that we as parliamentarians must have in a bilingual context and in the public service, we must speak up and insist that corrections be made.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: This is done with—

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Vignola.

Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to Mr. Green for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Minister of Finance presented her budget on April 19. When will the supplementary estimates (A) for 2021-22 be tabled?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: They will be tabled very soon, Matthew.

Mr. Matthew Green: What date would be very soon? Do we have a month? Do we know? Are we talking a few weeks?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: As you might expect, I won't give you a precise date, but I can tell you it will be as soon as possible. If you'd like to have further details, I can turn to Mr. Purves.

Mr. Matthew Green: No, that's fine. You're quite capable.

What portion of the budget measures announced by the Minister of Finance on April 19 will be included in these estimates? Specifically, have they included child care?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: As you know, I have great esteem and even affection for you, Matthew. Unfortunately, I cannot provide these details at this time, but I'd be happy to come back as quickly as I can, either me or officials, to provide further guidance on that important question.

Mr. Matthew Green: Forgive me, but what's stopping you exactly from giving us a basic estimate on when we might be looking to see that? I mean, we waited two years for the budget.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Are you thinking about the date or the content of the estimates?

Mr. Matthew Green: Let's go back to the timing. When can Canadians expect to get a clear picture on where we're headed based on the budget that was presented on April 19?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: We already have quite a lot of information. You would have read the 820 page budget and would have probably kept in mind most of it. You also have heard debates in the House, and you would have read the budget implementation act. All of this is very substantial and very full—

Mr. Matthew Green: On that point, through you, Mr. Chair, I noticed within the budget there wasn't a lot about the settlement for land claims. Do you have any idea about how much the government is setting aside to settle existing land claims?

I'll bring to your attention the ongoing reclamation that is happening at 1492 Land Back.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: This is a very good question.

As you will know, it's reconciliation, affirmation and respect for indigenous peoples that has been at the centre of our actions and attitudes since 2015. It's ongoing work. I'm sure you will want to invite my colleagues, Minister Bennett and Minister Miller, to listen to and talk to them. They would be, I think, not only happy to talk to you but also to hear from you on how we can make that important work advance even further.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and Mr. Green.

We'll now go to Ms. Harder for five minutes.

• (1735)

Ms. Rachael Harder (Lethbridge, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being with us today.

You talked about reinforcing your priorities in your opening remarks. I'm just wondering, are you familiar with your departmental plan?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Yes, of course I'm familiar with the department plan.

I know that you will have read it completely and most likely not only understood, but appreciated most of it.

Ms. Rachael Harder: Sure.

One of the things that was talked about earlier between you and one of the Liberal members at the table was the importance of di-

versity. The statement was made by you that diversity is incredibly important. I can appreciate that.

What's interesting to me, when I look at the departmental plan, are the goals that are set out in terms of the number of people within the executive, so executive employees, who are also a member of a visible minority. The goal is actually not to increase the number of those individuals but actually to decrease the number of those individuals. I find that interesting and actually quite concerning given the state of our country and where I think most people would like to go and also given the statement that you made earlier with regard to placing incredible importance on diversity.

Right now, the percentage of those individuals who are members of a visible minority is 11.5%, but the target that you've set out is 10.6%. That's actually a 0.8% drop. Your goal is actually to reduce the number of visible minorities within your executive. Why?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Ms. Harder. I'm glad to be speaking about this. Let me say two things briefly.

First about the data, as you would have seen, we are proud and pleased to be able to provide further disaggregated data. I spoke earlier, as you might have heard, about the—

Ms. Rachael Harder: I'm not asking about disaggregated data. I'm asking why your goal is actually to decrease the number of individuals who are members of visible minorities.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: First is the numbers, and second is the targets and the achievements.

The numbers, as you also said, matter because if we want to make further progress, we need to know what the current situation is. These numbers, the seven sets of disaggregated data that I mentioned earlier—

Ms. Rachael Harder: Why are you wanting to decrease the percentage of individuals who are within your executive who are also a member of a visible minority?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: As I'm trying to say, the numbers matter very much—

Ms. Rachael Harder: I don't actually need to be mansplained to. I understand the data. I have the chart in front of me.

I actually just need you to answer the question.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Second are the targets, and we're very pleased that—

Ms. Rachael Harder: You continue to mansplain. Why?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: —you and I can see that sometimes we even exceed those targets. Exceeding targets is, in most cases, a good thing and we're all going to continue so we can exceed those targets.

Ms. Rachael Harder: I totally agree with that. I think exceeding the targets is a good thing, which is why I'm confused, and actually baffled, as to why this is something that your department has done year over year.

This isn't just a one-off. It's in this departmental plan and it was actually in the last departmental plan as well, where your goal was actually to decrease the percentage of people who are members of visible minorities and who are a part of your executive team. This isn't just a one-off. This isn't just a glitch.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I think you're right, Rachael.

Ms. Rachael Harder: Don't you want to get better? If you're committed to diversity, shouldn't you be setting your targets above where you're at rather than setting your targets below where you're currently at?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The key word here is "right"; I think you're right to ask for clarity. I would, therefore, turn probably to Tolga to explain, perhaps in some more detail, what exactly the departmental plan says.

Ms. Rachael Harder: Sure, and Minister, if I may, maybe he can explain both of these things at the same time.

In your departmental plan, you've actually outlined the same type of priority for women. The current rate is 51.1%, but your target for this coming year is 48%, so you're actually aiming for a 6% drop in the number of women who are employed within your department. That doesn't speak of diversity, if you're looking to get rid of those who are part of a visible minority group and women.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Are you hoping for clarity and less confusion? If so, I can turn to Tolga. Tolga will be pleased to clarify and make these things less confusing for you.

• (1740)

Ms. Rachael Harder: I'm just wondering, Minister, why you're not setting your targets higher rather than lower than where they are currently.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Would you like an answer?

Ms. Rachael Harder: I was hoping that you, as the minister, might be able to provide direction. I believe it's your department.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Would you like an answer?

Ms. Rachael Harder: I'm waiting.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Okay.

Tolga.

Mr. Tolga Yalkin: Yes, thank you, Minister. So—

Ms. Rachael Harder: So, the minister doesn't know.

Mr. Tolga Yalkin: Mr. Chair, the number that appears as the benchmark in the departmental plan is indeed that: a benchmark. It's a floor. It's not necessarily a ceiling, and it actually is prescribed by—

Ms. Rachael Harder: This is just it, though. Why would the floor be less than where you are right now?

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Can we keep a conversation going? It's extremely difficult for the interpreters.

Ms. Rachael Harder: That's exactly what this is. It's a conversation.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that said, if Mr. Yalkin has an answer, if he could provide that to the committee in writing, that would be greatly appreciated as we've come to the end of our time.

We'll now go to Mr. Jowhari for five minutes.

Mr. Majid Jowhari (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister. Indeed, it's good to have you back, and it's good to see you in full health. Thank you for the work that you're doing.

Minister, in the 2021 budget, the TBS received about \$227.9 million to implement a low-carbon fuel program. Can you explain the significance of this investment, as well as other additional investments in budget 2021 for greening government that you've reviewed? Can you explain the impact of those as well?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Majid, and thank you for your kind words as well—in fact, for everyone's kind words. I didn't expect that you would have noted my absence earlier, but you did, and it's very nice of you to welcome me back.

I'm going to be very pleased to answer that question, Majid, because this is obviously a demonstration of how the economy and the environment go together, hand in hand. I would say that one way to do that is to demonstrate leadership on the part of the Government of Canada. We're going to do this in several ways.

One way that was announced in budget 2021 is through this \$228 million to implement the low-carbon fuel program that is going to be necessary as we move toward our 2050 net-zero emissions goal. It's going to also be important because it's going to make it possible to achieve low-carbon fuel use in federal domestic air and marine fleets.

As we do this, we are also going to provide opportunities for businesses across Canada to partner in green supply procurement initiatives. That's going to be excellent news for everyone in Canada because both technologies and economic development opportunities will be there to support that combination of the economy and the environment. One objective that we're going to set is the procurement of exclusively clean electricity by 2025 for federal use.

Again, Majid, thank you very much, and I look forward to working with you and your constituents in making that happen.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Minister.

Also, in the TBS departmental plan, the TBS has committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by about 40% below the 2005 levels. In your opinion, with all the measures that are put in—and you oversee the expenditure—is Canada well on track to achieve this goal? Can you give us some concrete example of how the government will actually accomplish these ambitious targets?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The answer is yes, the government is on track to reach its emission reduction goals. By the way, we are all mindful that we are at the start of a green revolution, both a green environmental revolution and a green economic revolution. We are going to reach that. By now, we have already—when I say “we”, it’s the federal government—reduced our emissions by 35% since 2005. We are confident in reaching a 40% reduction by 2025 and to being net-zero carbon emitters by 2050. We’re going to do this by how we own and lease real property, and how we manage and purchase fleets for business and public servant travel. We’re going to also work on national safety and security operations to make those operations more green. Finally, as I said earlier, we’re going to leverage green procurement chains.

Just two weeks ago, I spoke to the president of the Council on Environmental Quality at the White House in Washington, D.C. As you know, we have great opportunities to work with the new American administration in integrating our green supply chains, not only making our environment greener and cleaner more quickly but also partnering with businesses across the two sides of the frontier to make that beneficial for businesses, looking forward.

• (1745)

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Minister, for highlighting the initiative, what we are doing as a government and what you are doing as minister overseeing the TBS. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jowhari.

Thank you, Minister. I appreciate you for coming back. Thank you for being with us.

As many of my colleagues have already done, I want to express on behalf of the committee our great pleasure to have you back here and to see you again. I’m glad to see that you’re well. We wish you the best. Along those lines, once again, thank you for attending the meeting today.

With that, we will go to questioning the officials for the second hour.

The department is going to add one new member. I see Mr. Greenough is now on. I appreciate that.

We will now continue with questioning.

We’ll go to Mr. Paul-Hus for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Ermuth, I’d like to come back to the issue of advance payments. I spoke to the minister about it, but his answer wasn’t clear.

The Guide to Advance Payments states the following, “When the government pays in advance, it takes on greater risk and has fewer recourse options if the agreement is not respected.”

Have you warned departments about the risks associated with advance payments during the pandemic?

[*English*]

Mr. Roger Ermuth (Assistant Comptroller General, Financial Management Sector, Office of the Comptroller General,

Treasury Board Secretariat): Our approach throughout the pandemic has been to work with departments, with their CFOs and also with deputy heads of communications, acknowledging that with the challenges of the pandemic, money would be going out and we would, at times, have to be more flexible. As a result, we have been having conversations with them about making sure the appropriate set of internal controls are there so that post-audit verification, etc., can be done in these programs.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Mr. Chair, there wasn’t any interpretation.

Could you give me one extra minute? I missed part of the response.

Could Mr. Ermuth repeat his answer?

[*English*]

The Chair: I’m not getting any French translation, either.

Can we check for the translation, Mr. Clerk?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Thank you.

Could the witness repeat his answer from the beginning? His remarks weren’t interpreted.

[*English*]

The Chair: I’m still not getting any translation on my end.

An hon. member: Nor am I.

The Chair: I have paused your time, Mr. Paul-Hus.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: We’re not getting it in the room either, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We do not appear to be getting any French translation.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Paul Cardegna): Mr. Chair, I was hearing translation on the French channel, but if you give me a moment, please, I will ask the technician to look into it. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

The Clerk: For the benefit of the technicians, I will continue speaking, so they can check the translation.

[*Translation*]

I want to make sure the interpretation is working properly.

[*English*]

The technicians are suggesting we try again, Mr. Chair.

If you could please try, I would appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk, and thank you, Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Ermuth, it appears that when you were answering, there was no translation. If you could repeat your answer, we would start from there.

• (1750)

Mr. Roger Ermuth: Absolutely. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have had conversations, both with the CFOs as well as deputy heads in terms of the fact that we would need to have additional flexibility. As a result of that, some of the funds and some of the controls that maybe weren't in there at the front would have to be looked post-audit, looking at it at the end.

In terms of a direct answer to the question, yes, we have had conversations with the departments around making sure that they are looking at and adjusting appropriately their systems of internal controls to maintain good stewardship of government funds.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Thank you.

We know that companies have received huge sums of money in connection with personal protective equipment contracts. Some people even started companies a week before they got the contract. They received tens of millions of dollars for the purchase of equipment. They supposedly had contacts in China or elsewhere in the world. They made deals and got some money.

How could the government ensure that the equipment was really available before sending so much money to companies that were more or less known, or not even in the industry?

[English]

Mr. Roger Ermuth: With regard to the specifics of each contract, or the specifics of each arrangement, I would have to direct you to the specific department and/or PSPC. They would look at what was written into the terms and conditions, and what the appropriate mechanisms were for any follow-up response in terms of recovery of funds or legal action as would be allowed under the contract.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: When Public Services and Procurement Canada enters into contractual agreements with various suppliers, Treasury Board rules must be followed.

The situation was urgent, but the Treasury Board had to follow the rules for awarding contracts, especially when tens of millions of dollars, or even more than \$200 million, are being distributed. That's not small change.

Was there strict control between the Treasury Board and the departments, including Public Services and Procurement Canada? Were they told that they had to follow certain rules or was it so urgent that follow-up was less important? Today, we have to recover \$80 million from a Montreal company and other companies. I'd like to know if the government is having trouble recovering certain amounts.

Public Services and Procurement Canada was entering into agreements, but the Treasury Board still had to follow up, since government spending is under its responsibility and that of the minister. Is that correct?

[English]

Mr. Roger Ermuth: Again, the specifics around individual contracts fall under the negotiations with PSPC. In terms of how it would have executed those contracts, as has been noted, it would have followed the procurement policies and whatnot. Acknowledging the fact, of course, that during the pandemic there was a global shortage of certain supplies, that would have necessitated changes and additional flexibilities that PSPC might have requested and/or exercised in purchasing that equipment.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: I can understand that some processes have been accelerated from what is normally done, but we're talking about advances of tens of millions of dollars.

Does the Minister of Public Services and Procurement Canada have the authority to authorize an advance, an advance payment, or does this require Treasury Board approval?

[English]

Mr. Roger Ermuth: Depending on the specifics of the contract, there would be times when it would have been delegated by the minister. There are other times when the minister would have potentially come in.

Again, it depends on the specifics around which specific contracts. I'm not as familiar with all of the work that PSPC has been doing.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Last week, we learned that Tango Communication Marketing was the subject of a lawsuit because it was unable to deliver the products.

Was the authorization to send \$81 million to this company granted by the Treasury Board or Public Services and Procurement Canada?

• (1755)

[English]

Mr. Roger Ermuth: I'm not familiar enough with that specific contract.

The specifics of the actual execution of contracts will always go through PSPC. PSPC would probably be best placed to provide you further details.

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

We'll now go to Mr. Weiler for six minutes.

Mr. Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank our departmental witnesses for joining our committee today.

To start off and show some respect to our witnesses, I want to give Mr. Yalkin the opportunity to finish answering the question he was asked earlier on government targets on diversity, before he was interrupted.

Mr. Tolga Yalkin: Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Chair.

Just to clarify, the figures that are provided in the departmental plan are the workforce availability figures. Those are calculated to basically determine the workforce that is available when it comes to the four employment equity groups that are named in the Employment Equity Act. The workforce availability, known as WFA, is calculated based on authorities that are outlined in the Employment Equity Act. Clearly, those benchmarks are intended to be a floor, not a ceiling. Departments are definitely encouraged to achieve them and also exceed them, as the case may be.

In any given case, one group may exceed what the workforce availability currently is for that group. That by no means reflects the fact that the government is indicating we should be reducing that representation. We should, I think, celebrate it and continue the important work of trying to increase representation where there are any gaps and, obviously, continue to support the diversity of the public service in that vein.

The departmental plan is very clear. It doesn't say just the pin-point target or the percentage. It says "at least" and then it provides a percentage, indicating that really that figure is a floor, not a ceiling.

Thank you.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thank you very much for that clarity.

What measures has TBS taken this year to be able to improve transparency in financial reporting?

Mr. Glenn Purves: Mr. Chair, it's a great question from the member.

We have been working very diligently over the past year to improve the transparency of financial reporting, starting through GC InfoBase. We've been working hard with respect to ensuring that we're building out what we produce for GC InfoBase. I would say that going forward that's really going to be our focus, to continue to add to that tool for the benefit of everyone involved. We'd always be willing to take input from members of this committee but also any other members of Parliament about how we can continue to improve that.

Part of that has to do with thinking through how we report on people, on results, on funding that's spent, but also we've added a few panes pertaining to COVID. Particularly, the authorities that have been secured through Parliament, by measure, are mapped back to the same items that were in the economic response plan outlined in the fall 2020 statement.

We've just added onto GC InfoBase as well the COVID expenditures, the estimated expenditures that we've been collecting on a monthly basis from the departments, and including information on open data, the latest report of which we submitted to the committee yesterday.

Beyond that, within the estimates themselves, I think there have been a lot of questions about the reconciliation between what's included in estimates and what's not included in estimates. Something such as the wage subsidy, which Mr. McCauley actually touched on earlier, is a tax expenditure. That along with EI and so forth are things that we do not track through estimates, because they're outside the appropriations of departments. It's through tax expenditure

reporting that that has been done and has enabling legislation linked to it as well.

Through the estimates, not just reconciling the latest estimates to the budget but if there's a fall economic statement that comes out with a projection, or any policy statement from the government with a projection, ensuring what the estimates are to date, any supplementary estimates, compared to what that latest policy document shows is something that we think is going to be very valuable and we'll continue to do that for the benefit of committees.

On the COVID side, we've tagged the items that are COVID related. If there are things we're not providing that would be useful for committee members, we're always open and interested in securing that. Thank you.

● (1800)

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Along those same lines, as part of budget 2021, there has been a commitment made to ensure that Crown corporations with less than \$1 billion in assets are going to be expected to start reporting on climate-related financial risks. I'm curious as to what role, if any, TBS has with respect to this matter.

Mr. Glenn Purves: Well, on—

The Chair: Mr. Purves, I apologize. We're at the end of the time. I don't mean to interrupt, but I do need to be respectful of that time, and not only the member's but all members' time commitments.

If you can provide us an answer in writing, it would be appreciated.

Mr. Glenn Purves: We're happy to.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move to Ms. Vignola for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julie Vignola: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Cahill, I talked about a statement of facts earlier. We had been told by Mr. Aylward from the Public Service Alliance of Canada, or PSAC, that this statement of facts was to be signed jointly by PSAC and TBS.

Did TBS sign this statement of facts?

Ms. Karen Cahill: Thank you for the question.

As Mr. Duclos mentioned, when we reached the agreement with PSAC in October 2020, the clauses were clearly laid out, and PSAC signed the agreement. It is the foundation of everything.

The Canada Revenue Agency has ruled on the terms of the agreement and the taxable nature of the payments.

Ms. Julie Vignola: When you talk about an agreement, are you talking about the statement of facts that was mentioned by Mr. Aylward last Monday, or is it something completely different?

Mr. Aylward told us that the statement also had to be signed by TBS, which has not been done. This delays the Canada Revenue Agency's decision on whether or not to impose compensation.

I'm not accusing anyone; I'm trying to understand.

Ms. Karen Cahill: Thank you. That's a very good question.

As I mentioned, we agreed on the terms and conditions. As for the statement of facts that Mr. Aylward mentioned, if there were to be new terms and conditions added, the agreement would have to be reviewed and accepted by both parties.

We agreed on an initial agreement. Prior to signing the agreement PSAC was aware of the different payment methods and the tax liability on some of the payment methods.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

I'm going to have to get more information, because everyone is passing the buck. At the end of the day, the public servants are the ones who are paying the price, and they've already paid a lot. I know a lady who is still waiting for \$40,000 in compensation.

Currently, the main estimates don't include EI benefits, the Canada child benefit or the Canada emergency wage subsidy.

Mr. Purves, can you explain this to us?

• (1805)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Purves, you're on mute.

Mr. Glenn Purves: I missed the translation on that. I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: The main estimates don't include EI benefits, the Canada child benefit or the Canada emergency wage subsidy.

Can you explain this to us?

[*English*]

Mr. Glenn Purves: The purpose of the estimates is to ensure that parliamentarians have a line of sight on what is being put before them for voting as it pertains to the appropriations for the various votes of the departments. There is funding that is approved through appropriation acts, through the estimates, and there is a spending authority that is approved separately through statutory legislation. EI and the Canada child benefit are items that are supported under separate statutory legislation and that receive their payment authority through separate statutory legislation that is not linked directly to a department.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Okay.

[*English*]

Mr. Glenn Purves: That's why we include information on voted spending in the estimates document that is for decision by parliamentarians. For information purposes, we include the statutory legislation that's directly linked to that appropriation-dependent organization. Beyond that, if there are tax expenditures or if there is statutory funding that is forecast beyond that, it's typically covered under separate reporting, including for EI, including the tax expenditure report.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Vignola, you have three seconds.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I'd like to wish the witnesses a good evening.

I thank them for being with us and having the patience to respond.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Green for six minutes.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you. Just picking up on the issue around the 1492 Land Back Lane and McKenzie Meadows claim, I'm wondering, just to get a sense, when you're under these types of court proceedings, whether Treasury Board sets aside potential settlement money, just to earmark it, in case there's a chance or a likelihood that a settlement will happen or a judgment will happen.

Through you, Mr. Chair, that's for Mr. Purves.

Mr. Glenn Purves: Mr. Chair, there are contingent liabilities that are identified by departments. Those contingent liabilities are recognized and are managed through the Department of Finance. At Treasury Board, if there's a circumstance where there's a payment that is required to exercise and to make a payment to a group, to a settlement, that would flow through an estimate. It may be that in a supplementary estimate, Mr. Green, you might see a line item about out-of-court settlements and so forth.

Mr. Matthew Green: Would you be aware of or privy to if there have been set-asides for indigenous land claims?

Mr. Glenn Purves: Ours is more about the execution of funding decisions taken through Finance. It would really be the department and the department's—

Mr. Matthew Green: I'm sorry, sir. I'm unclear on if you've actually answered my question.

Here's my question, specifically through you, Mr. Chair, to Mr. Purves: Would you know if there are set-asides through the Treasury Board on these settlements pursuant to the Department of Finance's policies or reporting mechanisms? It's a direct question through you, Mr. Chair, to Mr. Purves, a personal direct question as to if he would know that or not.

Is there a technical problem? Maybe he's on mute.

I do hope that my time is retained.

• (1810)

The Clerk: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I believe Mr. Purves may have dropped out of the meeting, unfortunately.

The Chair: Right. I just was looking and I did not see him there.

Mr. Matthew Green: Well, I'm going to ask my good friend... It's really unfortunate that it dropped out at that point.

Is my good friend Yves Duclos still here?

The Chair: No, the minister is gone as well.

Ms. Karen Cahill: Mr. Purves has indicated that his computer has gone black. I'm really sorry about that.

Mr. Matthew Green: That's okay. I won't attribute any malice.

Although I have seen some expert ducking and dodging of questions, I will not attribute his blacked-out screen to that kind of tactic, because I know him to not be that type of—

The Chair: Mr. Green, if you want to continue your questioning, I had paused you for a brief amount when this happened, so—

Mr. Matthew Green: Is there anybody else available to answer that question?

The Chair: I'm not seeing—

Ms. Karen Cahill: I can do this. Thank you for the question.

Actually, in the Treasury Board Secretariat contingent liability, there are no provisions for land claims, as indicated by Mr. Purves. The provision would be in the specific department's public accounts books.

Mr. Matthew Green: Are you privy to those numbers? Is this something that you would be briefed on?

Ms. Karen Cahill: I am not. As the CFO, I'm only privy to the numbers for TBS, but the specific department definitely could provide these numbers.

Mr. Matthew Green: Then would you be privy to how much has been paid out to indigenous, first nations and Métis claims that are already settled? I've asked this question before, and we didn't have clarity around that.

Ms. Karen Cahill: Again, sir, thanks for the question.

Mr. Chair, I am not privy to this information, but we can track the information for the member.

Mr. Matthew Green: Mr. Chair, I understood it to be the case that up until the point of settlement, it's the Department of Finance, but that after they were settled and to be paid out, the Treasury Board would have an understanding of these numbers.

Could Ms. Cahill help me understand why that's not the case?

Ms. Karen Cahill: I am really sorry, Mr. Chair. Again, I see what the TBS pays out. This amount would not be paid by the Treasury Board Secretariat—

Mr. Matthew Green: Would it be approved by the Treasury Board Secretariat?

Ms. Karen Cahill: I can't answer this question. I'm sorry. I don't have the answer.

Mr. Roger Ermuth: Mr. Chair, maybe to respond to Mr. Green's question, in the public accounts at the end of the year—I don't have the specific listing here—there is a summary of all of the claims that have been paid. Again, whenever there would be funding that would go out, there would have to be a source of funds of some sort, whether that was from internal departmental resources or specific to a specific claim or settlement, but for the specifics on each individual one, I don't have that information myself.

Mr. Matthew Green: If the public service sector was being sued for \$1 million by the Black class action lawsuit, would the Treasury Board know if there was a set-aside on that contingent liability?

Mr. Roger Ermuth: The Treasury Board would be aware of the fact that there would be a legal suit going on. Working with the Department of Justice—again, I'm not speaking to any specific suit—there would then be discussions around setting up contingent liabilities as per public sector accounting standards.

Mr. Matthew Green: What is the contingent liability for the Treasury Board on lawsuit settlements currently? Would it be in these main estimates?

Ms. Karen Cahill: No. You will find the contingent liability in our public accounts as per Mr. Ermuth. Each department will have worked on their contingent liability. It will also depend on the likelihood of the settlement.

• (1815)

Mr. Matthew Green: If the entire government—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: If I could, as a point of privilege, please give my best to Mr. Purves and let him know that he was dearly missed in my round of questioning.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

As the question was put to Mr. Purves before we lost him, perhaps, through Ms. Cahill or Mr. Ermuth, he might be able to provide a written answer to the committee. It would be appreciated if you could forward that to him.

We will now go to the second round and to Mr. McCauley for five minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

To the witnesses, I want to get to the departmental results. Before I do, I have some more questions on the Treasury Board process. Maybe I can just give them to you and you can get back to us. I suspect it would be lengthy answers.

I'd like to know what COVID measures the Treasury Board reviewed. What went through the process? I was asking about the wage subsidy. What COVID measures got exemptions from policy? How many exemptions from policies were granted in the last 12 months?

If you could get back to the committee on that, I'd appreciate it.

From the departmental results, I have a few things.

First, I'm looking at the departmental result indicator for the “percentage of access to information requests responded to within legislated timelines”. Often at this committee we have discussed the raging dump fire that is our ATIP system right now. It was 79% in 2019-20. The target for this current year is 85%.

Why would we not have it set at 100% when it's a legislative timeline? Again, these are not wishes to have ATIPs returned on a certain time. These are legislated timelines. Why would we not have 100% as a bare minimum and as the only possible goal?

Ms. Sonya Read (Acting Assistant Secretary, Digital and Services Policy, Treasury Board Secretariat): Thank you very much for that question, Mr. Chair.

We've set the targets based on reasonable expectations in terms of past performance.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Can I just interrupt right there?

How is not recognizing the law or obeying the law a reasonable expectation? It's a legislated guideline. It's not legislative wishes. It's not legislative get around to it whenever. These are legislated guidelines. I realize that it may not be achievable, but should we not be having our goals set to recognize legislated timelines?

Ms. Sonya Read: The performance standard we expect from departments is they are meeting the legislated timelines at least 90% of the time. That's our performance target.

Of course, we would always strive and we encourage departments to meet the legislated timelines 100% of the time to the best of their ability. A significant proportion of departments actually do respond to all of the ATI requests—approximately 84 departments, I think, in the last year met their timelines—90% of the time.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Would your department maybe submit to the committee what actions the TBS is taking about the laggards? If 84% are meeting the legislative timelines, what are we doing about the ones that aren't?

I want to move on. It's on the same page.

The percentage of departments that maintain and manage their assets over their life cycle was 73% last year, and for some reason, we're dropping to a goal of 60%. In the departmental plan, it states that, I think, 11 departments make up the majority of the assets that have to be maintained. I don't expect an answer right now. You can get back to us on this one. What is the value of those assets of which you've stated 11 departments make up the majority? What is the value of those assets? These are assets owned by the Canadian taxpayer. Why is it that the government is setting a goal of just 60% of these valuable assets to be maintained?

I would think that if it's billions of dollars' worth of assets—again, respecting our taxpayers and their rights—we would have goals set at, if not 100%, at least an increase over last year's results. Instead, our goal is at least 60%.

I'll be honest. I do not accept this argument that it's a floor. The Treasury Board framework lays out very clearly the purpose of departmental plans, and it states priorities and purposes. Departmental plans aren't where you put in minimal expectations. They're your priorities.

The government is prioritizing 40% of departments not to maintain or manage taxpayers' own assets. Why?

Okay, maybe get back to us.

I'm looking at the departmental plans and the Treasury Board departmental results. With regard to percentage of departmental results indicators of which targets are achieved, they've stated achieving 71% of their targets: 71% last year and 71% this year. When I go to the open.canada.ca website, it actually shows 38.7% achieved. Why is there the discrepancy between what's tabled in the

House of Commons, to Parliament, and actual numbers on the website? There were 75 indicators, and the website said that 38% were achieved. However, the departmental plan and the DRR both show 71%.

Again, maybe get back to us.

• (1820)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McCauley.

If we can get an answer back to the committee, it would be appreciated.

We'll now go to Mr. Drouin for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us today.

The white paper was published by the department responsible for official languages. For several years, the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, or FCFA, has been calling for a central agency to have greater responsibility for the Official Languages Act so that it is stronger.

I don't know who to direct my question to.

Could one of you explain how the Treasury Board can act as a central agency to strengthen the Official Languages Act?

Mr. Tolga Yalkin: Thank you for the question.

The public document submitted by Ms. Joly sets out the government's vision. It outlines changes the government is proposing as part of the modernization of the act. The document contains several proposals in this regard.

I'll focus on the proposal to increase the responsibilities of the Treasury Board to ensure compliance by federal institutions. The Treasury Board must review cases where permissive provisions have become mandatory.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you very much.

I want to come back to the issue of statutory items. I don't know if that's what my colleague was referring to earlier, but since the emergency wage subsidy is considered a statutory expenditure, there are no controls. That's also the case for EI, but audits are still done by the department.

Can you explain briefly how the statutory expenditure process differs from the supply process?

Ms. Karen Cahill: I think Mr. Greenough can answer the question.

• (1825)

[English]

Mr. Rod Greenough (Executive Director, Expenditure Strategies and Estimates, Treasury Board Secretariat): Yes, I'll start, and we can follow up in writing, if there are additional details that Glenn could have provided.

In terms of what's in the estimates and what's not in the estimates, as Glenn explained, voted authorities are within the appropriation act that the estimates support. That's the key piece. In addition, for information, statutory items that are tied directly to a department are also included in the estimates, on a for information basis, to provide a more complete picture.

In terms of tax measures, they're not tied to a specific department. They're under the Income Tax Act, and they're reported separately in the tax expenditures report. The majority of tax expenditures are revenue changes, for example, tax credits that lower revenue, but there are some that are reported in the public accounts as expenditures. These are also reported in the tax expenditures report, not through the estimates. That's the main dichotomy.

The EI and tax measures aren't tied to a particular department. They're reported elsewhere, but the statutory and voted spending tied to departments are reported through the estimates.

[Translation]

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you very much.

It's true that, in the case of the emergency wage subsidy, there was an application process. Just because a company or an organization applied and qualified doesn't mean the government will simply believe it. The Canada Revenue Agency has implemented measures. On its website, I see that this income is taxable. These businesses or organizations could be audited by the Canada Revenue Agency later, even if they've already received this subsidy.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Drouin.

We will now go to Ms. Vignola for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll ask another question out of curiosity. I'm not sure which one of you will be able to answer it.

I read in the estimates that \$104 million was set aside for administrative leadership. I, for one, come from education. In that field, administrative leadership is the duty of the school principal or department head, whose role, among other things, is to lead the team to excel, both pedagogically and administratively. This also includes the secretaries.

What does "administrative leadership" mean for the government? Why is \$104 million needed for this? How will this money be spent?

Ms. Karen Cahill: Thank you for the question.

First, let me clarify that administrative leadership encompasses many of our programs. We're not just talking about people in lead-

ership roles here. There are many applications, government-wide programs. For example, the Office of Public Service Accessibility falls under administrative leadership. We have a number of programs, such as the Canadian Digital Service, that fall under it as well.

To summarize, this is a cluster of programs that will provide services across government, so to all departments.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you for the clarification.

As you know, access to information is important, not only for MPs, but also for journalists and the general public. The Information Commissioner told us that, before the crisis, the access to information system was in a critical phase, on the verge of being ir-reparable.

What steps is the Treasury Board Secretariat taking to improve this system? When will these improvements be available to users?

[English]

Ms. Sonya Read: We value very much the Information Commissioner's input and her views in terms of the performance of the access to information system, and recognize the pressure that the system has been under over the past number of years. TBS has been working directly with institutions to identify strategies to improve their access to information performance both in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. This includes many of the areas that the commissioner has noted in her submission.

Included in this, we've been issuing guidance to support institutions. We've been working with them to ensure that they are aware of best practices and have the tools they need to be able to deliver access to information requests electronically during COVID.

In terms of other initiatives beyond the COVID-19 response, we have undertaken a procurement exercise for request processing software. That is nearing completion, hopefully this spring, over the course of the next couple of months. That will help improve departments' internal processing for their software. We continue to...

Oh, I'm sorry.

• (1830)

The Chair: Thank you. I hate to interrupt you, Ms. Read.

Ms. Sonya Read: No problem.

The Chair: If you have anything further to add, please do.

I see that Mr. Purves is back. Hopefully, he'll be able to communicate in some way, should that be a need.

We'll now go to Mr. Green for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you.

I tend to stay on topic, and now that we have Mr. Purves back, I have a question for him. His staff answered it in ways that I think were adequate for his staff, but I just can't let go of the fact that the Treasury Board is not consulted on contingent liabilities. I'll put the question one more time and allow Mr. Purves to go on the record and describe the process to those who might be tuned in.

Is he aware of, or is the Treasury Board...? Is he in his capacity and is the Treasury Board consulted on contingent liabilities as it relates to indigenous land claims and, I will throw in there, the Black class action lawsuit?

The Chair: Mr. Purves, I realize you're using an iPad and buds, but hopefully you can answer that question. If you would speak slowly and clearly, it would be greatly appreciated.

You're on mute, Mr. Purves.

The Clerk: Mr. Chair, I'm sorry to intervene. I believe Mr. Purves is still having some issues with his sound.

Perhaps it may be worthwhile to come back to him. Our technicians are still working with him. He was back, but I think his sound is still giving him some problems.

Mr. Matthew Green: Maybe what I will do—notwithstanding the fact that we will have Hansard and that his staff will pick up this question—is borrow a line from our good chair and ask, through you, if he could provide in writing his direct statement from the deputy minister on whether or not the Treasury Board is consulted on contingent liabilities.

Mr. Chair, by way of comment, I'll just share with you that it's disconcerting for me that significant potential outstanding liabilities don't seem to have a place that is front and centre in the minds of the Treasury Board. I thought, maybe wrongly so, but it was my understanding from this committee for public accounts, that the Treasury Board ultimately had at least some kind of cursory process obligation for approval. It would have some kind of high-level understanding of what's coming and going out of all the departments.

I'm hearing today that this might not be the case in a practical way, as it relates to the questions I'm asking, so maybe I'll get that in writing at a future date.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

We will now go to Ms. Harder for five minutes.

Ms. Rachael Harder: I'll come back to you, Mr. Yalkin.

Thank you for explaining the departmental plans. Of course, I understand the nature of them. They are to set priorities. They are to set strategic outcomes, to set programs and to set expected results covering the next three years. That's the description that accompanies them, anyway, so thank you. I'm aware.

When we talk about goal setting, we shouldn't be talking about setting a goal that puts us behind from the year in which we're setting them. Goals should be about making things better.

You talked about a goal being the floor and then trying to exceed that. I understand, which is why I'm confused. Your numbers, the numbers in the department for those who belong to minority groups and those who are women were actually decently high in 2019 and 2020. For minority groups it was 11.5%. For women it was 51.1%.

Then the targets that were set for the next year were actually lower than where they were at, and then lower yet. The benchmark continues to be dropped rather than heightened, rather than set higher. I'm confused by that.

• (1835)

Mr. Tolga Yalkin: Thank you for the question, Mr. Chair. It's a pleasure to speak a little bit about it, given the fact, also, that benchmarks are amongst the precedents of five priorities on diversity and inclusion, including revisiting them as part of that work. The benchmarks that exist are, as I mentioned before, workforce availability. Legislatively prescribed benchmarks are the minimum that departments should be aiming for, the floor they should be aiming for, ensuring that their workforce represents the available labour in the market.

As is indicated in the departmental plan, this is not a ceiling at all, by the denotation at least. As part of the process of reviewing these benchmarks we will be considering, for example, whether it would make sense to consider an alternative that perhaps results in higher benchmarks being set. It's something that we're currently working on and considering as part of our work on D and I.

Ms. Rachael Harder: I don't understand why there is the goal to have a lower percentage than where you are currently at.

Mr. Tolga Yalkin: Mr. Chair, the goal is not to have a lower percentage than where we're currently at. The goal is always, as is the case with many of the departmental results that one will find in the departmental plan, continuous improvement. Even in circumstances where—

Ms. Rachael Harder: Sorry. Excuse me. I'm just going to clarify here. The term “benchmark” was used. The words “continuous improvement” were used, but the goal that I'm reading here—I have the chart right in front of me—is not actually that the percentage would be increased but rather that it would be decreased from where it's currently at.

Mr. Tolga Yalkin: Mr. Chair, I don't have the report directly in front of me, but I can see the table in my mind's eye. I do recall that when it speaks to the target on the page itself, it says “at least”, and then the percentage. What that indicates is that the goal isn't to lower, for example, the representation to that rate. It's really to at least achieve that level of representation, and wherever possible, of course, exceed it.

Ms. Rachael Harder: Okay, but again, the number is coming down. It's moving in a downward direction, in other words, fewer numbers who are members of a minority group, and fewer numbers who are women. It's moving down.

If I write a math exam and I get 71%, my goal next time is not going to be, “Gee, I think I'll set the benchmark at 65%.” No, my benchmark is going to be 85%. In what world does it make sense for the department to set its benchmark lower than where it's currently at?

Mr. Tolga Yalkin: Mr. Chair, thank you again for the question—

Ms. Rachael Harder: —I don't actually need the document to describe it. I just want to understand the philosophy behind it.

Mr. Tolga Yalkin: Mr. Chair, the benchmark is actually calculated based on the data that is available on labour force availability. Essentially, they're technical adjustments that are made to calculate, not just determine willy-nilly, for example, what we think a good percentage is, but to calculate exactly, or as exactly as possible, what the available workforce is for the four EE groups that departments have at their disposal. It's not, in a sense, a goal that is set arbitrarily by Treasury Board Secretariat, or by the President of the Treasury Board, or by Treasury Board. It's a goal. It is a benchmark that is established under authorities in legislation, and it is calculated using a set formula.

• (1840)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Yalkin and Ms. Harder.

We'll now go to Mr. MacKinnon for five minutes.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

For everyone's information, I'm the last questioner, so I'll try to perhaps yield some time back. I know it's been a long day for everyone.

I am struck, and I've been listening intently to the back-and-forth today. I'm not sure that those who are watching the committee today will be particularly enlightened with respect to the government's commitment for diversity by the previous line of questioning about benchmarks, which are called benchmarks, but are, in fact, targets, and so on.

I want to applaud the officials before us, and, of course, the government that I'm a part of for its commitment to diversity in the public service. That's an ongoing commitment. I know it's one that all of you take very seriously.

I won't ask you to explain any further, Mr. Yalkin, but I do want to point out that this very sterile debate that we just had is not at all a reflection of the significant progress that has been made with respect to diversity in the public service. I want to thank you for that.

I do want to speak, though, about collective bargaining. I recall specifically that when this government took office in 2015, we were way behind on collective bargaining with public servants. We had to catch up very quickly. Then, in 2018, a second round was accomplished in rather speedy fashion, if I do say so myself.

Can one of you—I'm not sure who, perhaps it's you, Mr. Yalkin—outline for us the collective bargaining schedule that lies ahead, and how the government's looking and planning to that?

Mr. Tolga Yalkin: I apologize. I'm by no means an expert when it comes to collective bargaining. I'm really representing the expertise of my colleagues in the office of the chief human resources officer on this. I understand that notice has been given to collective bargain, that plans are well under way to begin that process this summer, and that my colleagues are very much looking forward to that opportunity.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: How much time, roughly? Again, we're not looking for the government's negotiating strategy, but what kind of timetable are we looking at? What are the priority groups and so on?

Mr. Tolga Yalkin: It's very hard to say in terms of a timeline. The nature of negotiations is that they don't lend themselves well to precise timelines. As I mentioned, what I do know and what I can say is that negotiations are planned to begin this summer. I have no doubt they will continue into the fall. I would also be happy to come back to the committee with further precisions, should those be available, to provide more details on that.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: That's very good. I appreciate it.

Mr. Chair, that's all I have for today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacKinnon. I appreciate that.

With that said, as he indicated, he was the last questioner.

I'd like to thank you, Mr. Ermuth, Ms. Cahill, Mr. Purves, Ms. Read, Mr. Yalkin and Mr. Greenough, for coming and continuing to come to committee and for presenting and answering our questions when you can.

As we've indicated before, where there were questions asked that you could provide further information in writing on, it would be greatly appreciated if you'd provide that to the clerk so that it can be distributed to the committee.

With that said, I want to thank everyone. It's been a long day. I wish you all a good evening.

I adjourn the meeting.

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