



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

---

# Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 057**

Friday, February 10, 2023

---

Chair: Mr. John Brassard





## Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

Friday, February 10, 2023

• (0845)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC)):** I call the meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 57 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022. Therefore, members can attend in person in the room and remotely by using the Zoom application.

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise me. Please note that in that case, we may need to suspend for a few minutes, as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

[Translation]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, January 31, 2023, the committee is resuming its study of the subject matter of the report of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner entitled “The Ng Report”.

[English]

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I am informing you that our witnesses appearing virtually have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

[Translation]

I would now like to welcome our witness for the first hour today, the Honourable Mary Ng, Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development.

[English]

Minister, you have five minutes to address the committee. Please start.

**Hon. Mary Ng (Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development):** Good morning. Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for inviting me to appear here today.

I want to start by providing just a few words of context on this matter and my own personal perspective on all that has transpired. Before I get to any of that, let me be clear in saying once again that I made a mistake.

My office contracted services from someone close to me. It was a friend. It was someone capable, an expert in her field and quali-

fied. However, because of our friendship, I should have recused myself from any and all dealings.

[Translation]

For that, I have apologized to my colleagues, the House and the public.

I want to start this appearance by apologizing here again directly to the members of this committee.

[English]

In February 2019, my office arranged with the department for media and presentation training for me and my staff. The services were provided by Pomp & Circumstance, one of the country's leading communications firms. It was co-founded by Amanda Alvaro, a well-known communications professional. The value of the contract was below the threshold set in part 7.1.1 of Treasury Board guidelines, and I believed we were in full compliance with all relevant rules.

A year later, in March 2020, we turned to Pomp & Circumstance again for support. It was a time of enormous urgency, at the beginning of the pandemic, and demand for information about new emergency programs was intense, especially for Canada's small businesses. Departmental resources were clearly going to have to be supplemented. We relied on Pomp & Circumstance to help us communicate details about these supports, to help with media appearances, to support communications planning and in particular to provide social media strategy, design and execution.

Again, the contract amounts were below the threshold established by Treasury Board guidelines, and I believed we were acting in full compliance. That was my mistake.

In fact, in both instances, the Ethics Commissioner determined that it was my failure to recuse that resulted in his findings. It was not the contract amounts or the use of a qualified professional firm, and not the work itself, all of which was completed well and under severe timelines. The Ethics Commissioner's determination was that it was my failure to recuse because of my personal friendship with Ms. Alvaro. That was the issue, and I accept his ruling.

All contract awards were publicly disclosed. I co-operated fully with the commissioner's examination. I have accepted the findings. I've implemented new protocols in my office and within the department. I have apologized.

• (0850)

[*Translation*]

I recognize that my mistake means I will have to work even harder. All I can say is that I am committed to doing that hard work.

I hope that people will see and recognize that my efforts are sincere.

[*English*]

Now I would be pleased to take any questions from the committee.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

For the purposes of the committee, we have a few substitutes this morning. Ms. Lantsman is here. Mr. Dalton will be here. Ms. Koutrakis is here. We have some members on Zoom as well.

We'll begin with the first round of questioning for six minutes. I'm going to turn it over to Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Barrett, you have six minutes.

**Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC):** Thanks, Chair.

Thanks, Minister, for joining us in person this morning.

As you know, we have some pretty tight timelines for our questions, so I'll try to move through this quickly.

How often did you and Ms. Alvaro discuss communications and media?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** She and I started working together in the Ontario government in the education minister's office at the time. She was the communications director. I was the policy director. Over the course of time that I have known her, she and I have talked about communications, about politics and about a whole range of issues.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** In your time as a minister, would you say it was quite often?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** No, I wouldn't say that at all. From time to time, she and I would have a general conversation, but we're friends, so we would have a general conversation about a lot of things.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** When your deputy minister appeared, we were told that your department has about 100 communications public servants. Is that correct?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** If that's what the deputy shared, that would be correct.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** How many political exempt or political communications staff do you have who report to your chief?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** There are four.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Are they all pretty good at their jobs?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I would say that everyone is professional and capable, and they carry out their duties well.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** At about 9:45 last night, members of this committee received the documents we requested, so at about 10:30

last night our staff would have been looking them over in anticipation of your appearance this morning.

Did you know that they were going to be tabled last night?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I did not. I understood that we would be in compliance with the request of this committee.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Indeed you were. The time of day, an 8:45 committee appearance, I would characterize as unfortunate.

Do you understand that disclosure to be complete—that it includes, as the document production order listed, 100% of the work product in your two contracts with Pomp & Circumstance and Ms. Alvaro?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** What I know is that we are in compliance with the motion of this committee with respect to document production.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Of the work that Ms. Alvaro did for you, what could you characterize as work that the four political staff or the 100 public servants could not do for you or did not have the expertise to do? Perhaps you could answer in 30 seconds or less.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I wouldn't characterize it as expertise, because I think the political staff have expertise. I think the department has expertise.

I would situate you in March 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic. I think it was all hands on deck with every resource available to help Canadians and to get supports out to Canadians. Part of that was helping Canadian businesses, particularly small businesses, understand the range of supports and help that was available. It was all hands on deck and then some.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** In anticipation of and in preparation for your visit today and your interactions with the media, did you chat with your friend Ms. Alvaro?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** It's been established that Amanda and I are friends. However, we decided at the very beginning, when this matter started, that she and I would not speak about this matter and that we would allow the work of the commissioner and all the necessary process to take place, and we would respect that, and we have.

• (0855)

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** It's really important that Canadians be able to have confidence in their public institutions and their public officials. Incidents in which members of the public service or designated public office holders are found to have broken procurement rules damage Canadians' confidence in the institution they work for, the department they work for. They undermine, I think, the Canada brand.

Do you think that when federal ethics or procurement rules are violated, there should be restitution made, that taxpayers should be made whole for the wrongdoing?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I can speak to my circumstance as it relates to this particular matter that the commissioner examined. As I said in my opening remarks, I believed that I and we did comply with the rules, because the requirements for Treasury Board guidelines were fulfilled.

The commissioner indeed ruled that it was my recusal that was the error, which I accept. That I accept, and I've put measures in place to ensure that this does not happen again.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Minister, I have 30 seconds left and I have two questions.

Furthering the interest of your friend is not in compliance with the rules. With respect to maintaining public confidence, do you think that taxpayers should be reimbursed? Do you think that to ensure Canadians' confidence and to uphold ministerial accountability, you should remain in cabinet? Do you think your resignation is warranted in this case?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I think that in this case I've already said that I have made an error and that I have a lot of work to do. I have taken active steps to ensure that something like this will not happen again.

I hope that Canadians will see my efforts in serving them. I do believe that the position I occupy is a privilege. My work—my continued hard work for Canadians—I commit to do, and I hope that Canadians will see my sincerity in that work.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to Ms. Hepfner. You have six minutes.

**Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank the minister for being here today without hesitation to answer our questions. I think it takes a lot of courage to immediately admit that you made a mistake and to commit to ensuring that the same mistake won't happen again.

I will tell you that during the pandemic, when all of this was rolling out and these contracts were happening, I was on the other side. I was a journalist. I was mostly tasked with covering those daily news conferences. I have to say that from my perspective, the information was clear. There was a lot of information. These were really complicated programs that the government was rolling out. I want to thank you for making it easy for journalists to absorb all that information.

As a former broadcaster, I know that this sort of thing doesn't come naturally or easily to most people. I'm wondering if you can tell me what you were going through during that time when the government was rolling out these programs to help Canadians and you were faced with this task of communicating that.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** Thank you very much for the question.

The only thing that was going through my mind was the work that was needed to help businesses keep their employees on payroll and to help businesses get through the enormous difficulty when their doors shut and they had no revenue coming in.

I grew up in a small business. I know what it means if your door is shut and you have no more customers but you have staff on the payroll and you need to pay them.

I know that many businesses were talking to us. We had an 11 o'clock call in my department. There were thousands upon thousands of businesses. All the members here were faced with calls and requests for information from their constituents and from their businesses about what the government was going to do. Many people will remember the Prime Minister speaking day to day to the

press and then many ministers, including me, having the small business file, being among those—

• (0900)

**Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP):** I have a point of order.

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Minister.

Mr. Green, I believe I know what your point is going to be. Minister, I understand that you have the carpiece in your hand.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I'm sorry.

**The Chair:** It's causing a problem for not just the interpreters but I suspect Mr. Green as well.

Go ahead, Mr. Green.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** It was mostly for interpretation. It was noted that it was creating a lot of feedback and distraction.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I stopped the time, Ms. Hepfner.

Minister, go ahead, please.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I apologize for that, MP Green, and I apologize to the interpreter.

As I was saying, the only thing on my mind was how to make sure that we got the information out about the programs. They were changing as well, because they were responding to the needs of businesses at the time. When I look back on the kinds of programs that were lending support, it was the small business loan. It was the deferral of the GST and HST for small business owners and for entrepreneurs, those sole proprietors. There were wage subsidies to make sure that employers could keep their employees on staff. It was deferring income taxes and it was relief for commercial rent. There were supports for young entrepreneurs, high-growth companies that had a different threshold that they needed to meet, and it was making sure that there were regional supports, because the needs across the country were different.

These were developed over the course of days and weeks, and my absolute priority, the government's absolute priority, was to be sure that we were able to effectively share this information with business owners and entrepreneurs so that they could access the supports.

Today I would say that some 5.3 million jobs were saved because of the wage subsidy. To give you a sense of the take-up on the loans, within a week of our launching that small business loan program, there were just under 200,000 businesses that were approved within a week, just to give you a scale. Through that period, there were just under a million businesses, about 960,000 businesses, that got access to the loan. On the deferral of GST, HST and customs duties, 3.2 million businesses were helped because of just those three things, in addition to the list of other programs and supports that we'd put forward.

To answer your question, that was the top priority. That was the top priority for days, for weeks and for months, and we kept doing this work. I would say that everyone did this work, including all members here, because we all represent business owners, we all represent Canadians and we all represent those constituents who were looking to us.

**Ms. Lisa Hefpner:** Do you think there would have been as much uptake of those programs? Do you think as many Canadians and as many businesses would have benefited if you hadn't been able to communicate those programs effectively?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** Even through all of our communications channels, through the media who were asking us questions, through social media channels, through communicating through members of Parliament's offices, through business associations like chambers of commerce and the various business associations, we were communicating and sharing. Even with that, there was still incredible demand, because businesses, particularly the small businesses that are 99% of this country, have a range of skills and resources, so our doing everything we possibly could to get the information out with clarity and to be able to assist them at the time of an absolute crisis in this country was the focus. Yes, I do believe that the level and number of communications helped Canadians understand what was there so that they could appropriately get the support to get them through what was a very difficult time in this country.

**Ms. Lisa Hefpner:** Did your training through Pomp & Circumstance make your communications easier or better? Did it help?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** It did help, because as the small business minister, I saw that before the pandemic the media requests were not at that level of volume. I can tell you that immediately when the pandemic hit, because so many small businesses across the country were directly affected and wanted information from the government, the requests increased exponentially, not only from the media but also from stakeholders and from Canadians all across the country.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Hefpner.

Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Villemure, you have the floor for six minutes.

• (0905)

**Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, thank you very much for agreeing to appear before the committee.

Before we begin, I'd like to provide a bit of context.

You admitted the error right off the bat, but we're not interested this morning in the positive consequences of the violation. So I will focus on the fact itself.

In our view, under the current circumstances, considering that public trust in the political class is sometimes a bit fraught with cynicism, is an apology enough?

[*English*]

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I want to draw the committee to the conclusion of the commissioner. The determination here was that I had failed to recuse myself. It wasn't the contract amount, because that met the rules. It wasn't the work itself, which was done and performed under severe timelines; and it was not the fact that a qualified firm was indeed retained. I have apologized. I recognize that mistake and that error.

I also recognize that I have to work even harder to demonstrate to the Canadian public that I have work to do to make sure they understand that I take this seriously, which I do, along with the proactive work that has to be done, that is being done. I've initiated a screen with the Ethics Commissioner between Pomp & Circumstance, Ms. Alvaro, and myself and my office. I've arranged for training, which will take place within a month, delivered by the commissioner to my own staff as well. As well, I continue to work with the commissioner.

I would also say that a lesson I have learned here is that the commissioner is there as a resource, and should there ever be any questions that need advice, we could certainly be reaching out more, and I also intend to do that. Those are the various steps. I think for me, as a responsible public office holder, that is my work, and I need to keep doing that hard work for Canadians.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. René Villemure:** Thank you.

Public trust is at the root of the commissioner's duties. With respect to public office holders, that's kind of what we're concerned about.

Who in your office decided to award this contract?

[*English*]

**Hon. Mary Ng:** When you are minister, you have a delegation of authority, so those who are delegated with the authority to act on your behalf for a range of matters do so. Those delegations work with respect to not only my own political staff but also the civil service and the deputy as well. In this particular case, it was my office that initiated and negotiated the contract.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. René Villemure:** Thank you.

Ethically speaking, the rules set forth by the commissioner are the minimum required to ensure that the public trust is not undermined.

Should we improve either the rules or the measures to maintain that trust at an optimal level?

These rules represent a threshold, a minimum. In your opinion, based on your experience, what more could we do?

[English]

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I think ensuring that the public always has trust in Canadian institutions and in those who serve it, such as the office-holders in the ethics commission or any of the office-holders who do the job of ensuring that our public institutions operate, is enormously important. In fact, we as Canadians should be proud of that, because I think we have among the strongest institutions in the world.

I think, as I said earlier, the lesson learned here for me is to continue to do the work of making sure that staff, new staff, understand their obligations. You don't do training once; you do it with some regularity. You do a refresher so that those who come in to do their jobs have the tools they need. Part of having the tools to do their jobs is understanding the rules that they fall within. As someone who has spent her career in learning institutions or in the area of learning, I think continuous learning and making sure institutions and organizations work fully is what Canadians expect of us; this is what I mean about needing to work hard and continuing to work hard.

• (0910)

[Translation]

**Mr. René Villemure:** Pardon me for interrupting, but I don't have much time left.

In your opinion, would it be helpful for people to have a clear understanding of the concepts of interest and conflict of interest? We always say that we should avoid conflict of interest. It's easy to say that, but is it well understood?

[English]

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I think it's always good to have more understanding. Ensuring that there is better understanding of all obligations and of the role of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner is something that we should all understand—public office holders, ministers like myself and indeed all of us.

There are mechanisms in place. We all fill out a declaration every year. I think that process is a good one, because it is up to date and holds us accountable, and that is good.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Minister.

I gave a little more time to each speaker.

[English]

You're next, Mr. Green. You may get a little more than six minutes because I have given it to some of the other as well. Thank you.

Mr. Green, you have six minutes or more.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Ng, I'm going to ask a series of questions in a rather rapid way. I'm going to ask that you keep your remarks as brief as possible. If there are opportunities for you to apply yes or no, that would suffice.

We really want to get to the heart of the matter and hopefully be able to move beyond this situation in our committee and get to the good work of the ethics committee.

I'm going to begin with your relationship with Ms. Alvaro. You mentioned that you've been friends for quite some time. Did Ms. Alvaro ever work in any capacity for any of your political campaigns, and if so, in what role was it?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** Ms. Alvaro volunteered on my campaign. In 2017, when I was a first-time candidate, she volunteered.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** In which role was that?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** She did communications and spokesperson work.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** In subsequent campaigns, did you ever pay her for communications work, support work or campaign work?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I've never paid Ms. Alvaro for her volunteer work.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Okay.

In your role as a minister, you noted that your office made a mistake. In fact, we see quite clearly that Mr. Jason Easton's signature is on the procurement contract, yet when your deputy minister was here, he noted that this was not a regular practice.

How often does your chief of staff directly procure contracts on your behalf?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** In my delegation of authority, there is a limit threshold for the delegation of—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** That wasn't my question, Ms. Ng.

How often does your chief of staff procure on your behalf, given that your deputy minister and the person responsible for the procurement noted that this is not a typical practice coming out of the minister's office? How often do you do that?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** It would be in the course of his work in carrying out of the function of running a minister's office.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** How many contracts are you personally procuring on behalf of your ministry?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I don't personally procure any contracts.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** How many does Mr. Easton procure on your behalf? It was noted as being out of the ordinary.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** A delegation of authority to a chief of staff is not out of the ordinary. A delegation—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** That's not what I asked. It's the procurement of contracts in a way that is out of the ordinary. That was the testimony of the procurement department here.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** The delegation of authority allows for a chief of staff to—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Okay, Ms. Ng, if you don't want to answer the question, that's fine.

I will go on to the scope of work, because I want to get a clear sense of what the deliverables were.

We know that in the communications support plan submitted in the documents, there were key strategies and deliverables. The first was an overall social media campaign, including hashtags.

What was the outcome of the generated use of those hashtags? How many interactions...or how many times did you use it?

• (0915)

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I wouldn't be able to tell you specifically how many, but I would say that using a hashtag was simply a means of being able to share more widely under that particular subject to Canadians.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Sure. I'll note for the record, and maybe you can confirm, that you didn't use the first two, which are #standingupforsmallbiz and #standingforsmallbiz.

I will note that according to my search, you used #supportforsmallbiz twice. The other hashtags seem to have been adopted from a conference somewhere else in 2017.

In that use of hashtags, you also have, in the scope of work below the MP tool kit, "video questions and answers, including FaceBook, Instagram and Twitter Lives".

How many of those activities were actually delivered, given this strategic plan?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** Every week I delivered an "ask me anything" so that any small businesses across the country would be able to ask me anything.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Where? Where did you...?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** It was on Instagram.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Okay. What about Facebook Live? How many live videos did you do there? It said "facilitate and support", so I want to know how many Facebook Lives did Ms. Alvaro facilitate and support?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** There were Facebook Lives with a range of social media-type commentaries that I participated in. I couldn't give you a specific number. What I can say was it was very regular, because—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** How many Twitter Lives did you have?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** The one Twitter Live that comes to mind would be one with Amber Mac, as an example. She is someone who is a commentator for a range of technology-type businesses. That one comes to mind, but—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Okay. At the conclusion of this meeting, Ms. Ng, I would request you have your staff prepare a list of deliverables in terms of the outcomes and note where Ms. Alvaro "facilitated and supported". I've done a quick search. I'm not finding a lot of your stuff online here. I'm seeing this is supposed to be facilitated and delivered, but particularly on Twitter, I'm not really seeing a lot.

I'm going to go back to your relationship.

You're mentioning that you're doing the work, that you're training. Would that not have been part of the course of your ascension to minister? Are you suggesting you didn't know this was going to be a conflict going into this and that you need training on what is

the most basic pecuniary interest for your close friend? Is that something you didn't know?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** What I mean by the training is that we can always improve, and certainly after the finding of this report.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Were you aware of compliance or preventive measures available to you? I'm just a fourth-party backbench MP. I recall my orientation, and they were pretty clear about this stuff. I'm wondering at what point did you miss this. Did you not, as a minister, have an enhanced education on what would be considered a conflict of interest, yes or no?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I didn't recuse. That was a mistake. I understood that we were under compliance because the Treasury Board rules were met on the amount of the contract—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** That's not compliance. Not recusing makes you out of compliance. The fact you didn't recuse yourself tells me you either knew and did it anyway or you didn't know.

My question to you is, were you aware there were compliance preventive measures available to you? If so, why did you not recuse yourself? You've done this contract twice now.

**The Chair:** Give a short answer, Minister.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I failed to recuse both times. The commissioner found that. That was the error. I accept that error.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Green.

We're going now to our second round. I am going to stick to the timelines on this round. We'll start with Ms. Lantsman for five minutes.

I do acknowledge that Ms. Roberts is here as well, on behalf of Mr. Dalton.

Ms. Lantsman, you have five minutes, please.

**Ms. Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, CPC):** Thanks, Mr. Chair. Thanks, Minister, for being here.

The statement says you take full responsibility for your actions. We know you didn't recuse yourself. We know there was a failure to recuse. We know you furthered the interest of a friend to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars.

You said, "full responsibility". Do you think you should pay back the money? Do you think you should pay back the money to the taxpayer?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I think I answered this earlier, but I think it bears repeating.



It was my mistake not to recuse. That's what resulted in the commissioner's finding. It was not the work itself, which was completed. It was not that a qualified firm was hired. It was the failure to recuse. For this error, I have said to this committee and to the House and to the public that I apologize. In an effort to continue to work hard for Canadians and to make sure this will never happen again, I have initiated strengthened protocols.

• (0920)

**Ms. Melissa Lantsman:** Yes, we know what you've initiated and we know that you've apologized, but for “full responsibility”, I think most people would deem that to mean you would pay back the money. Not only did you not recuse yourself, but you furthered the interest of your best friend. I think we'll leave that there.

You had 104 staffers in communications: four from the exempt staff, which means they work in your office, and 100 from the department, from what the deputy minister said. Couldn't they write the talking points? You said the documents we got last night at 9:45 were fulsome documents. It didn't seem like a fulsome contract.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** Was that the question?

**Ms. Melissa Lantsman:** Yes—well, if you want a question., what was in those documents that the 104 people couldn't do during that time?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** With respect to the documents, I think I shared earlier with your colleague that we have, and are in compliance with, the motion.

In 2020, it really was all hands on deck. The team at global affairs does excellent work. They work with three different ministers. They also do work across the globe, and my team also does that communications work as well. The extraordinary effort that was required at the beginning of the pandemic was such that we really needed all hands on deck. The requirements for me to share with Canadians the range of supports that went from—

**Ms. Melissa Lantsman:** I think we heard a bit more of that. I'm going to go on to some questions.

There was a failure of recusal in order to further the interest of your friend to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars, in addition to the 104 communications staff—that is, 208 hands—to write the talking points, which we got at committee last night at 9:45, and which weren't fulsome.

I have a question.

You grew up in a small business. If somebody stole from the small business, you would expect an apology, you would expect a commitment not to do that again, and you would probably, in the case that it was possible, expect the person to return what they stole.

Don't you think it's the same here?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I reject that premise. No one stole.

What the commissioner found here was that I failed to recuse. He did not find that the contract amount was an issue. That was in compliance with the Treasury Board guidelines, and the work was done.

**Ms. Melissa Lantsman:** Just to be clear, you've given a sole-source contract to the benefit of your friend for tens of thousands of dollars and, just to put it on the record, you do not believe you should pay that money back, given that you broke the rules.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** What I've said to this committee, and through you to the public, is that I regret the error that was made. I know that I have work to do. I know that I will need to work very hard in the eyes of Canadians, and I'm going to do that. I hope they see this work and the work going forward as sincere on my part. I'm taking steps and measures with the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner to be sure that a screen is put in place for Pomp & Circumstance and for Ms. Alvaro.

**Ms. Melissa Lantsman:** So that's a no.

**The Chair:** Ms. Lantsman, that's all your time.

Next we'll go to Mr. Fergus for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I also thank you for being with us today, Madam Minister.

[*English*]

I know that English is your first language and the one that you feel the most comfortable in, so I will continue with that.

Minister, you and your office were asked by this committee to provide materials to this committee, and we gave you a deadline of Tuesday to do so, to provide it to us, so we would have it in time in both official languages. You provided this information to us yesterday, well in advance of Tuesday's deadline. I would like to just thank you for doing so, because it makes our jobs that much easier to be able to have materials in front of us to make this evaluation.

Minister, you spent a bit of time on your opening statement. You also spent some time answering the questions from my colleagues. I would like to ask you a more precise question.

When the deputy minister came before this committee, he suggested that there could be additional training for staff who are involved in the contracting process. What do you think of that recommendation? Can you please be specific as to how we can make sure that the verifications now, going forward, will happen without conflicts of interest coming up again?

• (0925)

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I absolutely agree with the deputy. I think there should be additional training. Staff changes over. I've arranged for training with the commissioner's office for my team. That will happen in March. I am also working with the commissioner's office to strengthen protocols to make sure that this doesn't happen again.

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** When the Ethics Commissioner issued his report, he noted that the material was delivered. It wasn't a matter of the amount being produced, but rather that you failed to recuse yourself.

What are your comments about the report itself? Do you think it was fair?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I appreciate the work the Ethics Commissioner did in this regard and I thank him for it.

What his finding was, in my failure to recuse, is something I accept. I am now working with him to make sure there are preventive measures in place to prevent this from happening again.

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** What type of training have you contracted with the Ethics Commissioner, and when will that be happening?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** That will happen in March. It will be for all of my staff and for me. It will review, again, the obligations we have as public office holders and our obligations in terms of conflict of interest and ethics.

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** Very briefly, Minister—because I don't have a lot of time left—with regard to the use of these services, I recall how it was pandemonium at the front end of the pandemic. There were a lot of things coming at us. In what ways do you feel this contract helped you connect with Canadians and provide information in a clear manner to them so that they could access those services during the pandemic?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** The frequency of requests grew exponentially at the time. A number of programs had different design elements to them that needed explaining to a range of different businesses. The ability to speak clearly and simply to members of the media, which is an important channel for speaking to Canadians and businesses, was helped by that training. It helped to meet Canadians where they are at—which is on social media—and put information out that way, and to have the tools, whether they were video tools or clear Qs and As we could send to business associations or chambers, etc.

The assistance provided to my office and the work done to help us clearly articulate to millions of Canadians and small businesses across the country how to access supports helped us do that work, in addition to the very good and strong work the civil service did.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Villemure, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Mr. René Villemure:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, again, the value and nature of the contract are not in question. That isn't what we're talking about this morning.

Just out of curiosity, did Ms. Alvaro help you prepare your presentation for this morning?

[*English*]

**Hon. Mary Ng:** No.

• (0930)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. René Villemure:** All right.

Earlier, there was some discussion of your commitment to the Ethics Commissioner to have your team undergo training.

In your experience, what kind of additional training should public office holders receive? When it comes to contracts, things move quickly. What would you say is missing?

[*English*]

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I think it's the frequency of it. In each of our offices and departments, people change. They may work in a job, and if they're new to the assignment or change offices even in the same assignment, it's important to have more regularity to it. This is something we all take seriously. We certainly do. In the course of day-to-day work, we should be refreshed at times.

I think the frequency of training would help.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. René Villemure:** Do you believe the commissioner's proposed conflict of interest screen should be applied in the case of Pomp & Circumstance or in all cases?

[*English*]

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I believe it is applied. I believe we fulfill the obligations. I think there is opportunity to seek the advice of the commissioner—I do that anyway, and I think offices do—and work on a method such that if you're unsure, you just take that pause and make that call.

I would say that in the case of 2020, with the urgency that was upon us with the pandemic crisis, we were also in that context.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. René Villemure:** Thank you very much.

In a few seconds, could you tell me if you feel your failure to recuse yourself was an honest mistake?

[*English*]

**Hon. Mary Ng:** It was a mistake.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. René Villemure:** Okay, thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** *Merci*, Monsieur Villemure.

Mr. Green, we'll go to you for two and half minutes.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Thank you.

Ms. Ng, how long has your chief of staff been working with you?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** It's been from the very beginning of my appointment, so it's since 2018.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Then there was no change of staff there.

You keep referencing that in your need for training, there needs to be updated training because there's a change of staff, but you've just suggested that there's been no change of staffing in your office.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** There was not a change in my chief of staff, but there was a change of other staff.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Right. At the level of the.... The chief of staff signed off on the contract, correct?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** Yes.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Is your chief of staff here with you today?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** No.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Okay.

In your interview with the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, you stated that your chief of staff, who had the “delegated authority for negotiating and establishing contracts”, “was aware” of your friendship with Amanda Alvaro.

To your knowledge, was your staff familiar with the Conflict of Interest Act and its obligations?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** Yes. Everyone is familiar with their obligations.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Did your chief of staff or any other member of your staff approach you about their concerns regarding the contract in relationship to the act?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I think, as I said here earlier.... Actually, I didn't say it, but it is the public office holder who holds the accountability. That is ministerial accountability—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** It's a very specific question that I'm asking you to answer for the benefit of this committee. Did anybody in your office flag this as being a problem, yes or no? It's simple.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** It was not flagged.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Your chief of staff, who's been with you for five years in a high political position, who signed off on a contract and who sent an email to procurement that said to get on this ASAP, did not recognize that awarding a sole-source procurement contract to your best friend was a conflict of interest? Is that your testimony here today?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** No. What I said earlier, and I will repeat, was that we believed we were in compliance because we met the Treasury Board rules—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Minister Ng, did your chief of staff...?

You weren't in compliance. You breached it because of the conflict of interest. Did your chief of staff—

**Hon. Mary Ng:** The amount of the contract—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** That's not my question.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** —met the rules of the Treasury Board guidelines.

**The Chair:** Minister, I'm going to let Mr. Green ask the question, please. Then you can respond.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** That's not my question. Your refusal to answer this question is only going to result in more questions. I just need you to answer it.

**The Chair:** Please be quick.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Somebody's been on the Hill for five years in a senior political position. Is it your testimony that they didn't understand that awarding a contract to your best friend was a problem, yes or no?

• (0935)

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I said here that the recusal was something I should have done, but we believed we were in compliance because we met the Treasury Board guidelines.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** This is basic stuff.

**The Chair:** Mr. Green, I'm sorry. That's all the time you have.

Mr. Barrett, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Thank you.

Minister, on what dates did the training sessions occur?

While you look for the dates, I'll ask you my next question. At those sessions, were there training materials provided? Was there a slide show presentation? Were there any handouts? Were there any laminates displayed on an overhead projector? Was there anything like that?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** Let me answer your first question. There was a virtual meeting session on April 10 and a second one on May 3.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Were they both in 2020, ma'am?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** They were in 2020, yes.

What we reviewed, to my recollection, was preparation for a video. It was a video that would help me communicate the range of supports our government was providing to Canadians. There were a series of mock questions that would simulate questions that the media would ask.

Some of the things I covered in the video training are actually in the document that we shared with you. It would include things like, “What is the Canada emergency wage subsidy? How do I apply?”

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Thank you. We received those, but was there a slide deck or a digital presentation of any type?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** No.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** How long were each of the sessions in duration?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I don't recall specifically, but they would typically be approximately a few hours.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Were they maybe four hours between the two?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** It would probably be for each. It was a lot of work.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Who was in attendance?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** They were done virtually, because it was in the pandemic, so it was me and Ms. Alvaro.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** That was one on one.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** There may have been other people on the screen, but I was working with Ms. Alvaro.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Were your four exempt staff, communications staff, on the call?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** On the virtual training for me to do these visual presentations, considering I was the one who had to answer to the public, no.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Those sessions were about \$2,000 per hour, and your salary as a minister is about four times the average Canadian salary. For that salary, you used your position to further the interests of your personal friend, your best friend, to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars.

Do you not think that this scenario warrants that taxpayers should be reimbursed? Do you think that someone should pay the money back?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** Maybe what I'll do is draw your attention to some of the documents we provided that show the range of work products—

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Ma'am, with all due respect, do you think someone should pay the money back, you or the vendor? You could split it. What's—

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I want to be clear about what the issue is that the commissioner examined—

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** The issue is.... Let me be clear about the issue, and we've heard this from Canadians. The issue is that we have a minister of the Crown who used her position to further the interests of her friend while Canadians are lined up at food banks in record numbers and struggling to keep the heat on in their homes. While this was happening, while small businesses were closing, while businesses were struggling, there wasn't a competition for these contracts. Your friend got a jammy \$2,000-per-hour gig, and those cheques cleared, and Canadians are worried about paying their bills, keeping the heat on and being able to afford to feed their families. They want to know if they're going to be made whole. Are Canadians going to get their money back?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** To the point that you made about Canadians and the difficulty, I agree with you. It's exactly why our government has been implementing and putting forward a range of measures to help make life more affordable for Canadians today.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Is it yes or no, ma'am?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I think I've given you my answer.

• (0940)

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Well, it sounds like a no, and it's in the context that you're unwilling to recognize the hardship that Canadians are facing and the enormity of these sums of money to Canadians. It's tens of thousands of dollars at a rate of \$2,000 per hour. I think the average Canadian hourly wage works out to about \$38 an hour. That's why Canadians have asked if you saw fit to remain in office or if you should resign. That's why we've asked for that.

Will you?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I know that you're not going to accept the answers that I've provided, but I have provided my answers on this matter, and what I've said here is that what Canadians can expect of me is that I will work hard, and I will work hard on their behalf. Working hard on their behalf, including making life more affordable for Canadians, whether it is—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

I have Mr. Fergus next. You have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** Madam Minister, let's talk directly now about matters pertaining to the products and services you received.

[*English*]

What products and services did you receive from Pomp & Circumstance?

[*Translation*]

Can you describe for us the range of products and services you received from Ms. Alvaro?

How have these products helped you better communicate with Canadians?

[*English*]

**Hon. Mary Ng:** Thank you very much for that question.

There were two full media training sessions. There was a communications plan that was developed. There were a range of communications products, including graphics and videos, to help communicate the supports that were available to small businesses. These were used across a wide range of media, including social media platforms, to reach as many Canadians as possible.

In the material that I provided, you will see a video transcript that I used. It's written in plain language as a way to help, as clearly and as succinctly as possible, to provide information, I hoped, as simply as possible to Canadians at the time.

There were a lot of initiatives at the time. I think we all remember. I listed a range of them, whether they were the HST or GST and customs duty deferrals, which millions of businesses were able to use. How did they help? They helped them meet their cash flow shortage at the time. There were the small business loans. The eligibility requirements that were in that program needed to be clearly shared with Canadian businesses so that they could access it.

There was the 75% wage subsidy. Colleagues here may remember that the threshold changed and evolved in the early days of the pandemic in response to what businesses were telling us at the time. Again, to ensure that there was integrity and to ensure that businesses were able to apply and receive that support, we had to be able to provide information in a very clear way. The communications plan looked at how we might do that and whom we needed to reach.

In my office and my department, there were calls every day at eleven o'clock. In those eleven o'clock calls, businesses, chambers of commerce and business associations shared with us what was happening on the ground and the iterations that we might have to consider making. That was in addition to many in this room, members of Parliament, who shared with us their experiences.

The services and the products were prepared to help us get this very important and critical information to the very people who mattered the most: Canadians and Canadian small businesses.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** At those meetings, you prepared the communications plan and discussed products, graphics and video transcripts. I imagine all that took more than four hours of work, contrary to my colleague in opposition's claim. It certainly took several hours of work to prepare all of that.

Didn't it?

[*English*]

**Hon. Mary Ng:** That would be correct. It would be my direct time that they spent, which would be around two sessions and the hours spent on that. In addition to that, the range of work done and the products prepared, as I just described, were also work performed by Pomp & Circumstance.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** The Ethics Commissioner is criticizing your failure to recuse yourself from the awarding of this contract. There was no question of the amount charged, the products delivered and the competence of Pomp & Circumstance, a very reputable company.

Have I understood correctly?

• (0945)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Give a very quick response, Minister.

**Hon. Mary Ng:** That's correct. The value of the contract was below the threshold set out by the Treasury Board. I believed we were in compliance, because we fulfilled compliance with the Treasury Board guidelines.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Fergus.

[*English*]

Minister, I have a question or two. At the time that the contract was initiated, were you posting your own material on your own social media platforms, or was one of your staff doing that?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** I would say as practice, I do, but my staff largely would.

**The Chair:** Were any of the staff who were posting at that time with Ms. Alvaro actually part of the training session? You said earlier that it was you and Ms. Alvaro, one on one, for those series of hours. Were any of those staff on that training session with Ms. Alvaro? Who was the staff member?

**Hon. Mary Ng:** The staff members who were with me at the time of the pandemic are no longer in my office now.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you, Minister Ng, for your time today.

We have our next witness available. We are going to suspend for a couple of minutes and then we'll be right back.

Thank you.

• (0945)

(Pause)

• (0950)

**The Chair:** I want to welcome everyone back for the second hour.

I'd now like to welcome our guest for our second hour. We have Amanda Alvaro, who works in communications with the Pomp & Circumstance company.

Ms. Alvaro, you have five minutes before the committee. Please begin.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro (Communications Professional, As an Individual):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for inviting me here today.

I'd like to begin by providing some context. March 2020 was not a business-as-usual time. It was the onset of a global pandemic. It was, by any account, an extraordinary time. The deputy minister who spoke on this matter on Tuesday referred to the internal ministry operations at the time as "chaotic" and said that everyone who was involved was "inordinately busy". Those were his words.

Minister Mary Ng was one of a few ministers who were tasked with a major communications role at this time. Her mandate as the minister for small business meant that she had several serious announcements to make, and there was an intense urgency to get that information out as widely and expeditiously as possible. That was the catalyst for engaging our agency for professional communication support.

My friendship with Mary grew out of a professional relationship. We worked together, I in a communication role and she as a policy adviser. Because we knew each other first and primarily in these roles, she has from time to time sought my communications advice, and I have been happy to provide it. Giving counsel over the phone or over coffee in an ad hoc way is not the same as being asked for the requirements that the minister's office had in March 2020. The effort to undertake was ultimately to develop a communications plan that included media training, the production of social and digital media assets, a seven-minute video with cut-downs, media list development, media outreach, content calendar, coordination of media, podcasts and about six Instagram Lives.

To be very frank, when it became clear that Mary and her office needed more than just some advice, my partner and I initially did not want to take on the work, and, contrary to assertions that have been made, we didn't need it. To give you perspective, this work accounted for less than one half of one per cent of our annual revenue in 2020. It also came at a time when we were pressed internally with competing client needs and would be required to pull staff off of work to get the job done in a compressed timeline.

The reason we ultimately decided to do it was that, on reflection, we felt that it was the right thing to do. As small business owners ourselves, we knew how clearly frustrating it was to not be able to quickly find information and supports that businesses were desperate to access at that time.

The question will inevitably be raised as to why our office didn't call another firm to supplement the departmental work. I think, when you're faced with a crisis like none of us had ever seen, your natural instinct is to work with someone you know and respect, someone you trust and someone you believe will get the job done right the first time, which is what we did, on time and on budget.

In total, we produced 103 hours of work, including 56 products worked on by five people over 17 days. This represented extremely good value for dollar. It was excellent by any standard, and we are proud of the good work we delivered.

I think it's also important to note that we have complied with all of our obligations at every step of the way, as we always do. As you know, this matter has already been extensively reviewed by the Ethics Commissioner, who did not find fault with the work or the need for the work. The issue is centred exclusively on recusal.

The minister, in my opinion, made an unintended procedural mistake in failing to recuse herself, which she has acknowledged, and she has taken steps to ensure that it is not repeated.

Finally, I will take the liberty to say this. Mary is one of the most principled and hard-working public servants I have ever met or worked with. While her error was procedural in nature, I believe that it came with the highest of intentions: to do right by Canadian small business during an unprecedented time.

I'm happy to take your questions.

• (0955)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Alvaro.

We're going to start with our first round of questioning for six minutes and go directly to Mr. Barrett.

Go ahead, Mr. Barrett.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Thanks, Chair.

Ma'am, thanks for joining us today.

Were you listening to the first panel, the first hour with Minister Ng?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I was.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Were the dates that the minister reflected correct for the media training, the April 10 and May 3, 2020?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I believe that those are the correct dates.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Who were on those calls? The minister seemed unsure of who took part in those training sessions. Are you able to recall?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I took part in the training session. The minister took part in the training session. The video editor was part of those training sessions, and I believe a member of her communications staff was a part of those training sessions.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Do you recall how long the sessions were in their duration?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** They were hours long.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Were they less than five hours long?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I think they were less than five hours long.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Do you have any current contracts with the Government of Canada—any Crown corporations, departments or agencies?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I do not and have not since 2020.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** You made a point of mentioning the success of your business. Congratulations on your success.

In my questions to the minister, I spoke about the challenges that small businesses were facing and the perception that Canadians have about an occurrence like this. The judgment that the commissioner made was strictly with respect to the scope of his mandate, on the Conflict of Interest Act, and he deemed that the act was broken, that that law was broken.

Do you appreciate why some Canadians would be upset that a contract for tens of thousands of dollars was given to a close friend of a federal cabinet minister?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I think what I accept is that the Ethics Commissioner reviewed this matter thoroughly and did not find any faults with the work or with the need for the work. I think it was excellent work, I think it was necessary work, and I remain proud of the work.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** I'm happy to hear that you are proud of it.

Do you understand why Canadians would be frustrated that a company that's making \$5 million a year was given a contract for tens of thousands of dollars by a minister because they were friends?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** As a small business owner myself, I understand the frustration of a lot of small business owners who were unable to access information at the time. It's difficult to go onto ministry websites to find press releases buried with the information that you need.

I think it was really important to be able to communicate simply and to use all of the channels available to the minister and the minister's office, including digital and social media channels, including the media, to get those important supports out that businesses were desperate to get to at that time.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Canadians remain frustrated, having seen that the minister made this decision and that it seems to be a contravention of federal law without consequence.

As my colleague pointed out earlier, a small business that had tens of thousands of dollars taken from their business in ill-gotten gains by another individual would expect restitution. Do you think that it's reasonable for Canadians to expect restitution when it's deemed that federal laws were broken in the awarding of a federal contract?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** What I do know is that the Ethics Commissioner thoroughly reviewed this matter over a matter of months. The Ethics Commissioner did not find fault with the work, did not find fault with the need for the work, and did not find fault with the contract amount. This was an issue of recusal, which the minister has acknowledged and apologized for.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Madam, do you appreciate the frustration that Canadians have when they feel like there isn't accountability in government and they then lose confidence in their public institutions because they see a case of a federal law being broken and it looks like insider back-slapping and ministers helping their well-connected and well-heeled friends?

Can you appreciate why that would undermine Canadians' confidence in public institutions like Parliament and cabinet?

• (1000)

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** What I can speak to is that the time we were engaged to do the work as a supplier was a time when Canadian businesses were frustrated because they couldn't access the information that they required in finding emergency supports like the wage subsidy, loans, eligibility and how-to-apply rules. Those were things that should be simply accessed, without the need to dive through ministry press releases at a time that was absolutely unprecedented. I think that it was very reasonable for the minister's office to use outside professional services to help get that information to Canadians as widely and expeditiously as possible.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** But not services offered by her best friend—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

Ms. Alvaro, thank you.

Next we'll go to Ms. Saks for six minutes.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks (York Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms. Alvaro, for joining us today.

Ms. Alvaro, can you tell me how many members of your team from Pomp & Circumstance worked on the \$16,950 contract awarded in March 2020 at the height of the pandemic?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** There were five members of our team, ranging from graphic designer to video editor to social and digital media specialist to media trainer.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks:** Thank you for that.

You said in your opening remarks, or in your comments previously, that it was 103 hours of work and 56 products on a \$16,950 contract, which would come out to about \$164 per hour to reach 960,000 small and medium-sized businesses in this country, and 3.2 million Canadians.

While my colleague talks about frustration, I'm a little bit frustrated about the misrepresentation of facts, because I'd say that would be pretty good value for money. Would you agree?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** It is remarkably good value per dollar, in my opinion.

We produced 20 shareable graphics in English and French for business podcasts and Instagram Lives, which we also arranged, including six opportunities with the kit—the Bay Street Bull, Katie Zeppieri's “Together We Rise”, Amber Mac, “The Brand is Female”, and Women of Influence.

We produced 18 social media graphics in English and French in both story and static post-carousel format to simplify the supports that were available to small business.

We produced one seven-minute video with cut-downs to showcase those supports, with nine graphic video slates.

We conducted two media video training sessions and produced one graphic downloadable one-pager in English and French to highlight all supports available to small businesses, including eligibility and how-to-apply instructions for emergency wage subsidies and loans.

We developed four “ask me anything” graphics in social media in English and French to allow for real-time answers to any user-generated question about how to access supports.

We produced a social media content calendar with all captions pre-populated.

We developed an extensive media list for outreach to disseminate information about the supports and tools available. Those media impressions reached 5,146,800 Canadians through those impressions alone.

I think, by virtually any standard, that represented extremely good value per dollar.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks:** Thank you, Ms. Alvaro, for that very extensive list of work that was produced from a \$16,950 contract. One of my Conservative colleagues who is in attendance today does come from the field of PR communications, and I'm sure, during her own time, assisted on similar projects and would know the value for the dollar.

Ms. Alvaro, have you ever seen—as we saw in March 2020—the volume of demands to a client that you saw from the minister's office in terms of clarification and need for communication and clarity in media requests during that time period?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Never.

I've also never done as much media training in a single year as I did over the course of the pandemic. In the minister's office alone, their needs had increased somewhere in the neighbourhood of six-fold. The volume of media requests that were coming in to the minister's office—but virtually to all businesses—to have a public presence was extraordinary. It was an extraordinary time.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks:** That's right. As the deputy minister said, from time to time it wasn't unusual to outsource contracts for communications in what would have been considered normal times. These were obviously abnormal times.

Do you think the four members of the ministerial team could have handled that kind of volume without external support?

• (1005)

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** No. I think they are very capable, but I think that given the volume, the increase in workload, the fact that decisions were coming down daily, the fact that the information that businesses were looking to access was changing on a consistent basis, and also that the minister's office and the ministry, to my knowledge, did not do the digital work we do.... They don't set up Instagram Live. They aren't looking for that kind of access point to Canadians.

I think bringing in outside resources not just to deal with the volume but also to innovate a bit, to use resources that were available to them to get that information to Canadians, was an important move.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks:** Would you say that in a time of crisis, this kind of clear communication was critical at that time to small and medium-sized businesses and Canadians across the country who were facing real financial challenges in the face of lockdowns and the pandemic?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Yes, and it wasn't unique to the minister's office; there were businesses in all categories that were looking to communicate both internally with their internal stakeholders as well as externally. We refer to that time as the “great pivot”. It was a time when businesses had to move from their normal operations and their normal communication operations in order to communicate everything, all of the supports that were available through their own channels, and in the case of the minister's office, we needed to get all those out.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks:** I have about 30 seconds and I have one quick question.

How critical do you feel this kind of communication is in terms of pushing back against misinformation and disinformation that could have been out at that time or in the times that we're in today?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I think it was absolutely critical.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks:** Chair, how much time do I have left?

**The Chair:** You have about 20 seconds, Ms. Saks.

**Ms. Ya'ara Saks:** Ms. Alvaro, during that time, do you feel that you were able to help Canadians get the help they needed?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I do. I think there were a number of supports available to small businesses. Information on the emergency wage subsidy eligibility requirements and how-to-apply rules, as well as information around loans, was changing. I think—

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** —it's very difficult to find that information buried on ministry web pages, and I think we used tools, digital tools, that were available to us, to get that information out expeditiously.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Alvaro and Ms. Saks.

[Translation]

Mr. Villemure, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Mr. René Villemure:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Ms. Alvaro. Thank you for your testimony.

Because Ms. Alvaro is not a public servant and isn't subject to the Conflict of Interest Act, I have no questions for her. I'd therefore like to give my time to my colleague from the NDP, if he wants it.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

[English]

Mr. Green, you have the floor, sir.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Thank you. I thank you for the opportunity.

Welcome to the committee, Ms. Alvaro. I appreciate that there's probably a lot of media and that the adage “all press is good press” probably doesn't necessarily hold true in this moment.

I want to get into the questions, and because I have a little bit more time, I won't rush as much as I have in previous sessions.

Were you aware your friendship with Ms. Ng would have placed her in a conflict of interest when she received services from your agency? As somebody who's been around politics as long as you have, did you raise that as a possible concern?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Thank you for asking that question.

No, it never occurred to me that the work I would be providing to this minister, which was similar in nature to work I had provided to other ministers, would be problematic simply because I knew her better.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Did the other ministers or their chiefs of staff contract with you directly, or was—

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Yes.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** —it part of an open-bid process?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** No, it was not an open-bid process.



**Mr. Matthew Green:** Was it sole-sourced?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** It was sole-sourced.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** What would be the global total of those types of contracts—sole-source procurement contracts—with the Liberal government?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I don't have that number in front of me.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** What would you guess it would be? You seemed very precise about this contract being half a per cent of your overall income.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I think it would be somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$30,000.

• (1010)

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Is that in total?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** That's in total.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Then Ms. Ng would have represented half of your contracted services?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** That's correct. I've done work for three ministers.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Which ones are those?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Minister Monsef at the time, Minister Bains and Minister Ng.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Okay.

Did you have previous relationships with the other two, based on your proximity to the Liberal government in your time here?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I did not.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Then Ms. Ng was your closest relationship?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** That is correct.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** When you're contracting out services to government officials, do you have any internal protocols to declare your own potential conflicts of interest?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** No, we don't have an obligation in that regard, so we don't have a screen in that regard.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** For instance, if you had clients on your list who would be eligible for some funding from Ms. Ng, you wouldn't have to screen for that for her or let the minister know that it might be a potential cause for concern?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I'm not sure I understand the question.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** For instance, do you have clients who have received funding from the ministry that Ms. Ng is responsible for?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I do not—not that I'm aware of.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** You do not, that you're aware of.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I do not, that I'm aware of, no.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Okay. If you were aware, would you flag that for Ms. Ng?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Yes.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Okay.

In your interview with the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, you stated that the 2019 contract was your agency's "smallest engagement that year in terms of contract value" and that you typically do not take such a small-scale engagement. Did you make an exception due to your friendship with Ms. Ng?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I think I did, because I think that when her office asked us to do that work, since I have provided her with communications advice through the years, I considered it to be something that our agency could take on, despite the fact that it was a very small project.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** You mentioned you had quite a lot of staff hours set aside for this in a time when you had a massive demand, so you took it on because it was your friend and you thought that you could help her out. You were communicating with the chief of staff, I presume.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I was communicating with a number of individuals in her office.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Who was the first person to reach out to you?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** The first person I spoke to about this was Minister Ng. The first person who reached out from her office was, I believe, her communications director, Eleanor, whose last name I can't recall at this moment.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** What was the nature of your initial conversation with Ms. Ng? Maybe you were getting together for drinks and she said, "Hey, I'm squeezed" and you said, "Well, we might have a service for that", or did she say, "Amanda, I need your help."?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Nobody was getting together for drinks. There was a global pandemic, so the conversation was over the phone. She shared with me that she had been tapped as one of a few ministers who were going to take on a major communications role, given her responsibility for small business.

Initially we talked about some of the media interviews that she might do. It was at that time that her office connected with my office. When we realized that the scope of the work was going to be bigger than just advice, initially my partner and I did not want to take on the work. We felt as though we were too busy to do it—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** But it was your friend.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** —but ultimately we did it because we thought it was the right thing to do because we were a small business as well. As a small business, we felt strongly that small businesses should be able to access information that was critically important at the time on things like the emergency wage subsidy.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** It was also something that you offered that a hundred staffers couldn't. I looked at some of the scope of work and I'm sure it is high quality—

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Thank you.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** —but literally this is answering questions on Twitter with some talking points that seem to be fairly germane to the everyday average type of communications that senior staffers would prepare for a ministry. Again, there were 100 communications people within the ministry.

What do you feel you offered that was above and beyond what the competencies of her team of 100 people and four staffers could offer?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I think that I listed all of them and I'm sure you don't want me to use my time to list them again. However, to my knowledge, the ministry staff in the minister's office—and I was once a political staffer, a ministry staffer, and I worked directly with a communications department—they were not creating shareable graphics in English and French for business podcasts. They were not setting up Instagram Lives. They were not arranging six live opportunities with the Bay Street Bull or Katie Zeppieri and Together We Rise.

• (1015)

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Did you have to pay any influencers?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** No, we did not pay the influencers.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** They did their work for free in terms of engaging on the topic?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Yes. I think that at that time, there was a feeling of togetherness, that it was “all hands on deck”. People felt strongly that they wanted to get the information out to Canadians—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** After that initial conversation with the minister, did her staff, her communications staff, then follow up with you?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Yes.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** At any point in time did anybody raise the potential for a conflict of interest with either you or any of your staff, given your close relationship with Ms. Ng?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Nobody raised it.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** In retrospect, do you think that might have been a bit of a problem?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** In retrospect or maybe on a go-forward basis, I think that preventive screens around conflict of interest would be a worthwhile outcome of this committee's undertaking, yes.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** That was something that was in place for the other ministers you dealt with. Is that correct? For instance, the other ministers you referenced didn't call you. It would have been their department that would have engaged you. Is that correct, or did those ministers directly contact you?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** No, those ministers' offices directly contacted me.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** The distinction is did the ministers directly contact you or did their office?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** The ministers' offices did.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Okay. In the other two cases, the ministers did not call you and did not have that relationship with you. There was a bit of a screen. Staff undertook it of their own accord.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I don't think there was a screen in those cases either. I've never been asked that question. I've never been asked a conflict-of-interest question. There's never been a screen in any of my—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** It's likely, though, that in your time as a panellist you would have commented extensively on conflicts of interest and scandals. You're somebody who's very learned in politics. I find it difficult, Ms. Alvaro, that you would know what you know and not see this as a potential conflict of interest.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** It, again, never occurred to me that I couldn't do this work for this minister, work of a nature similar to work that I had done for other ministers, simply because I knew her better. It did not occur to me.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Okay.

Do you have any recommendations regarding changes that should be made to the Conflict of Interest Act as a vendor who had a close relationship and pecuniary interest in the contract that has now brought you before the ethics committee?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I do think that one opportunity to remedy this would be to put preventive screens in place proactively, and maybe certification, so that any supplier... We heard from the procurement officer a few days ago, who talked about the 10,000 contracts of this nature that go through the ministry. There should be a screen in place—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** It would be an attestation by the minister that would say that everything is in accordance....

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Yes.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** I would put it to you that I don't think it is your responsibility, by the way. It is absolutely the minister's responsibility to take care of this, and my questioning pertained to the minister in that regard, but would you agree on perhaps having all ministers and their senior staff—as we do with our MP offices—have an attestation that says their procurement is in accordance with the Conflict of Interest Act? Do you think that would be useful?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Yes, or any kind of preventive screen, any kind of flag that would raise the question.

I know that this question was asked of the deputy minister in procurement on Tuesday. Somebody said, “In this ministry of hundreds of people, didn't anyone raise a flag?” The answer was no. Nobody raised a flag.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Yes, and I think that's the heart of the problem. Hopefully we can make those changes moving forward.

I believe that's probably all of my 10-minute intervention. Is that correct, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** You're very close, Mr. Green.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** I just want to take my final seconds to say *merci* to my colleague Mr. Villemure for allowing me to expand on that and not feel rushed. It's less combative when I can work through it without having to beat the clock.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Green.

That concludes our first round of questioning.

We are now going to our five-minute rounds. We will go to Ms. Ferreri.

**Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, everyone, for letting me sit in on the ethics committee today.

Hello, Ms. Alvaro. Thanks for joining us.

To start out, I want to read into the record that last night the committee did receive documents of the scope of your work, Ms. Alvaro, the work that you provided. Based on your testimony today, we're clearly missing a lot of documents. I just want to read that to start off.

The next thing I would ask, Ms. Alvaro, is, how many other companies offer the work that you do?

• (1020)

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Well, I think that there are probably a handful, maybe less, of companies that offer both communications support and also have a political lens or have a knowledge of government work, given my background, but I think that there are many firms that offer communications support.

**Ms. Michelle Ferreri:** Thank you.

Would you say dozens? Are there quite a few in terms of choice?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** There are dozens, yes.

**Ms. Michelle Ferreri:** Do you do crisis intervention, crisis communications?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Yes.

**Ms. Michelle Ferreri:** In your professional opinion, what would be your recommendation of media communication to the minister on this unethical breach that she has done?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I don't think I understand your question.

**Ms. Michelle Ferreri:** If you were providing crisis communication training to the minister and she's been found in an unethical violation and breach—a conflict of interest in hiring a friend—what would be your professional opinion of how she should handle that?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** My opinion would be that she should comply with the Ethics Commissioner fully, which she did, and that she should acknowledge the findings of the Ethics Commissioner, because the Ethics Commissioner took a thoughtful time over a matter of months to look into this situation.

The Ethics Commissioner found that there wasn't any fault with the work and there wasn't any fault with the need for the work or the contract itself, but that it was a matter of recusal. I think that my advice would be to the minister to acknowledge that, to acknowledge that there is an issue here.

The member I just spoke with spoke about remedies that could be put in place. I think that's a valuable outcome of a meeting like this, so I would encourage both additional training for staff and also to be an advocate for some of those remedies that could be put in

place to make sure that something like this, from a recusal standpoint, doesn't happen again.

**Ms. Michelle Ferreri:** Thanks, Ms. Alvaro.

You've said there are many other companies that offer this service. You are her friend. Would you not have suggested perhaps that she use someone else?

There are other companies that offer this service. You've mentioned multiple times how important it was to get the work out despite there being 104 public servants who offer communications services and who are already paid by the government. You said that you didn't need the money and you said that you're a \$5-million business, so wouldn't it have been better advice to say, "Maybe you could use one of the many other companies that provide this work that is so important"?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I think two things.

One, everyone who was involved believed that they were fulfilling and complying with obligations, and we did comply with all of our obligations. That's one.

Two—and I said this in my opening remarks and I feel pretty strongly about it—when you're faced with a crisis of this magnitude that nobody has ever faced before, a crisis that is totally unprecedented, I think it's absolutely natural that you would reach out to someone you know, someone you respect, someone you trust and someone you believe unequivocally will get the job done right.

That being said, if I had known—and I didn't—that there was an issue from a recusal standpoint, I would certainly have suggested that she work with another firm, as she has in the past. She's worked with other firms, which the Ethics Commissioner looked at, from a media training standpoint. I think that I absolutely would have done that, but I understand why she reached out to someone she trusted and respected to give her good advice and good work during this time.

**The Chair:** That's all the time you have, Ms. Ferreri.

Ms. Hepfner, you have five minutes.

**Ms. Lisa Hepfner:** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Alvaro, for being with us here today.

In the last hour, I have been speaking with the minister about how difficult it is to be natural and forthcoming and also to convey really detailed, important information to the public on camera. I'm a former broadcaster, and I wasn't good at it for a lot of years. For most people, it's not natural.

Can you kind of take us through how you train someone to deal with those situations?

• (1025)

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Yes.

There was a lot of media training of C-level executives during that time in the pandemic, because I think for many it was the first time they would be forced to deliver information of such a significant nature to the media.

Since the minister was one of just a few ministers who were tapped to deliver really important supports to Canadian businesses, I know her intention was to make sure she did that clearly and that she used every tool available to her, whether people were receiving information through Instagram Live or traditional media, so a number of products were created, which we detailed. There was also training around how to provide information to media and also how to deliver information in video format and through Instagram Live.

One of the things we produced was a seven-minute video with cut-downs. We took what we thought would be the most popular questions, the most urgent questions that Canadian businesses might have. We asked her to answer those questions, and we did a lot of training through that: Answer those questions simply and succinctly. Give Canadian businesses the information they need without all of the governmental jargon. Tell them how they can apply. Tell them what the eligibility is. Tell them what supports are available from the emergency wage subsidy to the loans. In seven minutes, she was able to do that. There was a full-scale video, but there were also cut-downs that she could use, and by that I mean small formats that she could use over social media to disseminate that information really quickly and clearly. I think that work was important work.

We also did some graphic downloadable one-pagers, which were available so that people could easily get the top 10 or the top seven things you need to know in order to access these supports. In some cases, since I am a small business owner who was interested in these supports, I knew the questions I wanted answered. I was working with other small businesses and I knew the questions they wanted answered, and I didn't want them to have to go to ministry web pages to try to decipher contents of press releases.

I think government is really good at a lot of things, but those things don't necessarily include using the digital channels and social channels that are available to them and delivering simple communications. I think there is a time and a place to use outside professional support, and, in my professional opinion, the middle of a global pandemic, an unprecedented crisis of this nature, was one of those times.

**Ms. Lisa Hepfner:** Would you say that the pandemic changed the way public figures had to communicate to the public? Did it change communications in the way that the government speaks to people?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I think that it opened up for some ministers. I don't think all ministers took the opportunity to use the digital tools that are available to them, but I think we're seeing more and more government departments and ministers use those tools.

I think that fundamentally businesses changed how they communicated because they recognized that traditional media are just one output and that people are having conversations and dialogue on digital and social channels. That's a way to really quickly reach people, but it's also a shorter format, so you have to be able to succinctly deliver that message in a way that's compelling and persuasive and allows people to digest the information in an easy-to-understand way.

I do think that in some ways it really did change the way people communicate, and I think in some ways for the better. It allowed

people to access the types of tools that maybe they hadn't accessed before.

**Ms. Lisa Hepfner:** I think that's my time. Thank you.

**The Chair:** That is. Thank you, Ms. Hepfner.

[Translation]

Mr. Villemure, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Mr. René Villemure:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to give my time to my colleague Matthew Green again.

**The Chair:** Thank you once again, Mr. Villemure.

[English]

Mr. Green, I recall that Canadian iconic show, *The Red Green Show*. Well, today, it's the Matt Green show.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Oh, no—

**The Chair:** You have five minutes, sir.

• (1030)

**Mr. Matthew Green:** I will take it, and let the record show that in the opposition—the Bloc and the NDP—we can work closely for the benefit of Canadians.

Ms. Alvaro, I want to get back to some of the metrics you brought forward. A company as sophisticated as yours would keep expressively detailed reporting mechanisms to show value for money, yet that wasn't released in any of the documents we received.

Would you have shared those outcomes with Ms. Ng's office?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I believe we certainly would have shared the earned media impressions, the number for which I have in front of me now, which was \$5,146,800—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** That's okay.

Would you be willing to submit those, or actually all of the documents?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Yes.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** That would be helpful for us, because as somebody who struggles to gain market scope in social media, I know it's difficult, but when I did a preliminary search for some of the hashtags and for some of the Twitter livestreams, I didn't find much. It could be a problem with Twitter's search engine optimization, but I think I found maybe two posts. Hopefully you can point us in the direction of where those things are and where they landed, maybe with links to some of the interactions that were there so that we can get a better understanding of the scope in terms of the value for money.

In your comments in your testimony, you reflected frequently that the Ethics Commissioner did not find fault in the work. Would you not agree that wasn't within the scope of the mandate, that the mandate of the Ethics Commissioner was particular to the conflict of interest, to the recusal?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** No. I think that the Ethics Commissioner... I participated in that investigation over a period of time, and there were many, many questions related to the work. He found no fault in the work or the need for the work, or the contract amount. I think that if it wasn't in the scope, he wouldn't have asked the questions.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Okay, but yet, as an ethics committee... I used to serve on OGGO, which is government operations, where questions of procurement would have been essential to our investigations and study there, whereas here at the ethics committee, the recusal is the problem.

As somebody from the outside looking in, somebody who presumably has dealt with politicians in crisis communication situations and scenarios, you'll note that our Conflict of Interest Act does have administrative penalties. They're nominal. Quite frankly, you'll recall... I'm sure you're very familiar with the WE scandal and Morneau, and I think it's around \$500 or something like that.

Do you have any insight or any thoughts around ways in which we can create a deeper level of accountability by having clearer consequences in place for when people contravene the Conflict of Interest Act?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I could be wrong, but I think it was in the Ethics Commissioner's purview to determine whether or not he would apply that consequence in this matter—the \$500—which he did not, but again, I think—and we spoke about this earlier—that there are screens that could be put in place—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** I want to go to deterrence, though, because the problem we have in this committee is that the Liberal government keeps getting caught with its hand in the cookie jar, as it were, in multiple scandals and investigations. I would like to get to a place where our legislation is clear, the definitions are crystal clear, the trainings are in place and the consequences are there. At the end of the day, I would tend to agree with my Conservative friends that when you look at the Bev Oda \$18 orange juice, there was a time within the House of Commons when these types of transgressions came with real consequences. We seem to be beyond that now.

Would you not agree that if somebody were to be caught in a situation like this—not for an \$18 orange juice but for a \$16,000 contract without a screen—there should be greater consequences?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I would definitely defer to the Ethics Commissioner on that question, and his determination—

**Mr. Matthew Green:** The Ethics Commissioner can only provide findings on the legislation that we provide to them. We're legislators.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** But there's also the fine that you mentioned. Is that correct?

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Yes, but—let's be honest—that's nominal.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** But he didn't apply it. Isn't that correct?

**Mr. Matthew Green:** He did not in this instance, no. I would put to you that it's not good enough to keep having to come back to this committee with these scandals when there aren't really clear consequences in place, because obviously when the minister is left to her

own devices, an apology and a commitment to working harder do not resonate with Canadians who are struggling to get by.

Do you have any reflections at all—and I'm not even talking about your friend Mary—moving forward, about how providing clear consequences, having clearer definitions within the act and having greater checks and balances in place may prevent somebody like you from having to spend their time in front of a committee like this?

• (1035)

**The Chair:** Be quick, please.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I think members of the committee and members in the House of Commons would have a much greater understanding of what that should be than I, in my communications capacity, would have.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Thank you for your time here.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Green and Ms. Alvaro.

We are going to go to Mr. Barrett, but I do have something I need to inform the committee about. We've had a request come in from the media for the documents that we received last evening. There's nothing in the motion that deems the documents confidential, so I've advised the clerk to be mindful of any personal information but to supply the media with the documents that we receive. I just want to make that clear to the committee.

The other thing I would say on the documents is that those we received last night were in advance of the Tuesday noon deadline to receive all documents, so we may not have received all of the documents at this point. I just want to let the committee know that.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** I have a point of order.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Green.

**Mr. Matthew Green:** On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I just want to make sure that in our considerations we're including that Ms. Alvaro has agreed to provide the outcomes and metrics and materials that would have been subject to her consultations with Ms. Ng.

**The Chair:** Thank you for that, Mr. Green.

I think there's a clear understanding by Ms. Alvaro with respect to supplying that to the committee. I would also remind the committee that the motion doesn't allow us...or there's nothing in the committee that would propose a report to Parliament, so any of the documents that we are going to receive will be for the benefit of committee members in looking further into the circumstances of the contracts and the work that was done.

I just want to make that clear, Mr. Green. Okay?

**Mr. Matthew Green:** Yes, so that means no concurrence motions. That's correct.

**The Chair:** There's nothing at this point that would cause that to happen. Thank you.

Mr. Barrett, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Thanks, Chair.

Ms. Alvaro, in your opening statement you referred to preparing communications plans. Were you being read in on cabinet proposals or other market-moving information and economic supports before they were announced publicly?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** No.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** The information was announced publicly and then you assisted the minister in communicating on it after it had been publicly communicated.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** That's correct.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Who would have prepared her communications and the communications plans for them once they had been announced?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I'm sorry, but I don't understand your question.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** I guess the question is, what was your function in preparing communications plans on information that had already been communicated?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** As I mentioned in my opening statement, the information that was provided was provided in a press release that was on the ministry's website. The press release was provided to us, and then we turned the information that was in the press release into all of the extensive work products that I have shared with you today.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Okay.

In your work as a political commentator, have you ever commented on findings and other reports by the Ethics Commissioner or other work of this committee with respect to violations of the Conflict of Interest Act for designated public office holders?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I can't recall if I commented specifically on those matters. I can't recall.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Okay.

There is Trudeau report number one, with respect to the trip to "billionaire island". I imagine that would have come up on CBC. There are the Trudeau II Report, the Trudeau III Report, the Morneau reports numbers one and II, and the LeBlanc Report. Did you never have occasion to comment on those in your role as a commentator?

• (1040)

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Well, I'm an infrequent commentator. I am not commenting daily. I comment sometimes weekly and sometimes not.

No, I don't know offhand if I have commented on any of those matters.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Were you aware that they occurred?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Yes.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Okay.

The reason I ask is that one of the members asked about your awareness of or understanding that there were obligations for designated public office holders—not for you, but for them.

Your friend being a minister and you being a former political staffer, it's surprising that there wasn't, between you and the minis-

ter, an awareness that this would likely run afoul of conflict of interest rules. You would maintain that it was not something that occurred to you.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** It was not.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** We have these contracts worth tens of thousands of dollars. Canadians don't understand how.... If Canadians break the law, they're expected to face consequences. Oftentimes, there's an expectation of restitution.

Canadians expect restitution in this case. Do you believe that the individual responsible for breaking this federal law should be required to make restitution to Canadians? If not, why not?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I think it's really, really important to note that we, as an agency, complied with all of our obligations at every step of the way. I think it's very important to note that. I think that we have to not demonize the private sector for helping when help is needed.

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Ma'am—

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I think that's really important. I think that—

**Mr. Michael Barrett:** Ma'am, I was very specific in my question that the person who was found to have broken the Conflict of Interest Act is a minister of the Crown. She's a designated public office holder.

My question is specifically with respect to the law having been broken, the perceived need for consequences by Canadians and the effect that this has on their confidence in public institutions. My question was specifically that if you don't believe the minister should make restitution to Canadians, why do you not believe that?

It is the conduct of the minister that I'm speaking to. I appreciate the context that you're providing as the vendor, but my question is very specifically about the need for the minister to provide restitution and, frankly, because of its negative effect on Canadians' confidence in ministers of the Crown, this has precipitated our call for her resignation. That was the nature of my question.

**The Chair:** I'll give you a quick opportunity to answer that, Ms. Alvaro.

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Well, I think I would defer to the Ethics Commissioner, who deliberated over this and didn't find a need for restitution, as he had previously. I would defer to him on this matter, and I think it's important that we all do.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Hepfner, you have five minutes.

**Ms. Lisa Hepfner:** Thank you, Chair.

There's been some outrage across the table about the actual cost of Bev Oda's orange juice, so I want to go back to some of the numbers we've heard here today.

You said in your opening statement that your firm provided 103 hours of work and 56 products over 17 days. We've heard that some of the things that were taken from that training are used in the long term; it wasn't just for the 17 days. It's a bit of a stretch, then, to say that you were making \$2,000 an hour. Would you agree?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** Yes, and it was 103 hours of work for a \$15,000 engagement, pre-tax, which accounts for less than \$130 an hour. We delivered everything we were asked to deliver—everything—on time and on budget. It was excellent work by any standard, and it was extremely good value for the dollar.

Many of the products that were produced were products that were used for a long time, because they provided the supports that Canadian businesses were seeking over the course of the pandemic. You could refer back to them at any time.

The media list that we developed on how to connect with media and the training for both media and video is training that the minister can and will continue to use. Having worked in communications in a professional capacity for the better part of 20 years, I don't just believe that it was very good value for the dollar; I know it.

• (1045)

**Ms. Lisa Hefner:** Thank you.

It was a \$15,000 contract. I think it ended up costing just under \$17,000, so would you say it's a bit of a stretch to say this was tens of thousands of dollars?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** I would.

**Ms. Lisa Hefner:** Thank you.

Do you think as many Canadians would have been able to benefit from all of the government programs during the pandemic if they hadn't understood as well as they did what these programs were and whether they would be able to benefit from them?

**Ms. Amanda Alvaro:** No. I think it's easy for us to look back in retrospect and make assertions about certain things, but at the time, people were desperate for information, and they wanted to know

how they could access the emergency wage subsidy. They wanted to know what loans were available to them. As not-for-profits or charities or entrepreneurs, they wanted to know whether there were different rules that would apply. How could they apply? What was the eligibility? Those were real concerns. Those were real needs of small businesses in every corner of the country.

I think being able to access that information simply and clearly was not a “nice to have”; it was essential. It was critical, and I think the minister made the right call to use every support available to her to provide that information to Canadians as broadly and as expeditiously as she did. I think she had the best of intentions to do right by Canadians.

As well, it's very important to know that all of the work that was contracted was supplied to the highest quality and was excellent value for the dollar. I believe it really helped Canadian businesses understand what they were entitled to and what they could access.

**Ms. Lisa Hefner:** Thank you very much. I don't have any other questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Hefner.

Thank you to Ms. Alvaro for being with us this morning.

Committee members, that concludes our work for today. I want to wish everybody a great weekend and safe travels on your way home.

Thank you to our analysts and our clerk for the work they are doing.

Have a great weekend, everyone. That concludes the meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

---







Published under the authority of the Speaker of  
the House of Commons

---

### SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

---

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

---

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité  
du Président de la Chambre des communes

---

### PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

---

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

---

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :  
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>