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Chair: Mr. Peter Fonseca



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• (1300)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.)): As we have quorum, I call the meeting to order.

Mr. Terry Beech (Burnaby North—Seymour, Lib.): That's very good. I'm just about to move a motion.

First of all, I'd like to say hi to my friend Peter. Thanks for being here. He's my neighbour in British Columbia.

I put a notice to the committee two days ago about an administrative motion. I'd like to move that motion now.

I move that the committee authorize the clerk to distribute all committee documents to Peter Fragiskatos, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue.

I will note that Peter took the time to be here today for the motion.

The Chair: There is a motion on the floor to distribute documents.

Welcome, PS Fragiskatos. I know that you were a long-time member of this committee.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): I was, so it's nice to see Mr. Julian again and to hear today from Ms. Dzerowicz.

I'm here today for the motion, but to colleagues on all sides, I will be sitting in as an associate member from time to time, and I really look forward to working with everyone and, of course, you, Mr. Chair, our esteemed chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Larouche.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: I know the committee has asked two ministers to appear in connection with its work. The Minister of Finance, Ms. Freeland, appeared before the committee yesterday. I spoke with my fellow Bloc Québécois members—

The Chair: Ms. Larouche, sorry to cut you off.

[*English*]

We are still in the motion that was put on the floor by Mr. Beech. We'll debate that, and then I will hear your point of order.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Very good.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm looking for discussion. Is there no discussion? Okay.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: It is passed, yes. You can distribute the documents.

Does everybody have a copy?

Mr. Terry Beech: I believe it has been distributed.

The Chair: Now we will distribute all the documents from Mr. Fragiskatos.

Thank you very much.

Now we have Madame Larouche.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

As I was saying, the committee asked two ministers to appear in connection with its work. The Minister of Finance, Ms. Freeland, appeared before the committee yesterday, and we thank her sincerely. The Minister of Canadian Heritage, however, has yet to appear before the committee.

Where do things stand with his invitation? Has the heritage minister definitely been invited?

[*English*]

The Chair: The minister has been invited for this Monday, and also we have Wednesday, Thursday and Friday of this week.

Members, welcome to meeting number 7 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance. Pursuant to the House of Commons order of reference adopted on December 2, 2021, the committee is meeting on Bill C-2, an act to provide further support in response to COVID-19.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. So you're aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

Today's meeting is also taking place in the webinar format. Webinars are for public committee meetings and are available only to members, their staff and witnesses. Members enter immediately as active participants. All functionalities for active participants remain the same. Staff will be non-active participants and can therefore only view the meeting in gallery view.

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

Given the ongoing pandemic situation and in light of the recommendations from the health authorities, as well as the directive from the Board of Internal Economy on October 19, 2021, to remain healthy and safe, all those attending the meeting in person are to maintain a two-metre physical distance and must wear a non-medical mask when circulating in the room. As well, it is highly recommended that the mask be worn at all times, including when you are seated. Proper hand hygiene must be maintained through the use of the provided hand sanitizer at the entrance to the room.

As the chair, I'll be enforcing these measures for the duration of the meeting. I thank members in advance for their co-operation.

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

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have a choice at the bottom of your screen of either "floor", "English" or "French". If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately, and we will ensure that interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings.

The "raise-hand" feature at the bottom of your screen can be used at any time if you wish to speak or alert the chair. For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in the committee room. Keep in mind the Board of Internal Economy's guidelines for mask use and health protocols.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your microphone will be controlled as it normally would be by the proceedings and verification officer. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you're not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

I remind everyone that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do our very best to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether they're participating virtually or in person.

To members and witnesses, when you have 30 seconds left in your questioning time, I will signal you with this paper just to keep on track.

Members, before we get started with our officials today, I will tell you that we'll be going through three rounds to give enough opportunity to ask questions on Bill C-2. I'm leaving the remainder of our meeting time for some committee business.

I would now like to welcome witnesses from the Canada Revenue Agency. We have with us Janique Caron, chief financial officer and assistant commissioner, finance and administration branch; Cathy Hawara, assistant commissioner, compliance programs branch; Marc Lemieux, assistant commissioner, collections and verification branch; and Frank Vermaeten, assistant commissioner, assessment, benefit and service branch.

Clerk, is one of the witnesses going to make an opening statement, or will...?

Okay, one of the witnesses will make an opening statement for five minutes before we move to members' questions. Who will be making the opening statement?

• (1305)

Mr. Frank Vermaeten (Assistant Commissioner, Assessment, Benefit and Service Branch, Canada Revenue Agency): Chair, I will.

The Chair: Okay. You have five minutes, Mr. Vermaeten.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Good afternoon, everyone, and good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

I'm having some technical difficulties, as are some people in the agency today, so hopefully you can hear me loud and clear.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for the invitation to appear before this committee today to provide you with additional information regarding the support of the Canada Revenue Agency, or CRA, in delivering the Government of Canada's COVID-19 emergency support benefits.

[*English*]

With me today are several of the assistant commissioners of the agency—namely, Cathy Hawara of the compliance branch, Marc Lemieux of the collections and verification branch and Janique Caron of the finance and administration branch.

Mr. Chair, over the past 20 months we have delivered support to both Canadians and businesses through several emergency support benefits, including the Canada emergency wage subsidy, the CEWS; the Canada emergency rent subsidy, the CERS; the Canada recovery sickness benefit, the CRSB; and more. I am proud to say that these benefits have been instrumental in Canada's economic recovery. In fact, the CEWS has helped more than 5.3 million Canadians keep their jobs, with over \$97 billion in support already paid out through the program to help employers rehire workers and avoid layoffs.

• (1310)

[Translation]

Additionally, the CERS has helped more than 215,000 organizations with over \$7 billion in support for rent, mortgage and other expenses.

[English]

The Canada recovery sickness benefit has delivered over \$829 million to 750,000 Canadians. This benefit has provided income support to employed and self-employed individuals who were unable to work because they were sick, needed to self-isolate due to COVID-19, or had an underlying health condition that put them at greater risk of getting COVID-19.

Mr. Chair, that is why the Canada Revenue Agency will be proud to continue to administer COVID-19 supports and benefits should Bill C-2 be approved. The proposed legislation would continue to provide targeted support where it is needed to those Canadians and Canadian businesses that are most affected by COVID. In fact, this proposed legislation would extend until May 7, 2022, the Canada recovery hiring program that was introduced in budget 2021, and would provide a subsidy of up to 50% to eligible employers with current revenue losses above 10%.

[Translation]

This extension would help businesses continue to hire back workers, increase hours and create the additional jobs Canada needs for a robust recovery. This bill would also deliver targeted support to businesses still facing significant pandemic-related challenges.

[English]

Additionally, this proposed legislation would support individuals who are affected by illness or family obligations through an extension of the Canada recovery caregiving benefit and the Canada recovery sickness benefit, as well as by establishing the Canada worker lockdown benefit to provide income support to eligible workers who are directly impacted by a COVID-related public health lockdown.

[Translation]

In closing, I would like to emphasize that the CRA's mandate is to administer tax, benefit and related programs, and to ensure compliance, thereby contributing to the ongoing economic and social well-being of Canadians.

[English]

For this reason, the agency remains committed to supporting Canadian businesses, as we have since the beginning of the pandemic, by putting Canadians at the centre of everything we do. CRA employees are very proud to have supported millions of Canadian workers and businesses, following our “people first” philosophy.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. We would be happy to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vermaeten. That was excellent timing.

We will move now to questions by our members. In the first round, each member has six minutes.

We will commence with the Conservatives. Mr. Stewart, you have six minutes.

Mr. Jake Stewart (Miramichi—Grand Lake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Of course, all questions will be through the chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here today. We had a motion, and as a committee we felt it was really important for the CRA to have representation here. Over the course of the past week, we've had a very difficult time getting answers to questions. We know that the finance department, and all of our witnesses previously, couldn't tell us where the money that will be used is coming from. FINTRAC was here and let us know that they were not consulted with the drafting of this new bill, even with respect to their warning CRA, yourselves, in the summer of 2020, of the potential that these benefits could be defrauded.

On behalf of my constituents today in Miramichi—Grand Lake, number one, I hope we can break the streak and get some answers today. What role did CRA play in drafting the last emergency response bill related to the pandemic, the one previous to Bill C-2?

The Chair: I'd ask the members to maybe direct their questions—

Mr. Jake Stewart: My question is to the Canada Revenue Agency.

The Chair: —to one of the witnesses we have before us.

• (1315)

Mr. Jake Stewart: It's for whoever wants to answer it.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Maybe I can start. Others are welcome to provide additional comments.

Certainly part of our job is to work with other agencies when we have to administer something and there's legislation there. We look at it. We provide comments and try to make suggestions on potential improvements.

In terms of responsibility for the legislation, in the case of the business benefits, it's the responsibility of the Department of Finance, and in the case of the individual benefits, it's primarily Employment and Social Development Canada. It's their legislation, but of course others will participate by providing comments to make sure that the legislation is administrable as well as by providing any other comments that we might have for improvement. Of course, our role is not a policy role, in that sense. Our focus is really on the administration

Mr. Jake Stewart: So you played no role whatsoever in the drafting of the bill. You're saying no. Is that...?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I'm saying that's not our primary responsibility. We can provide comments on it. Certainly the justice representatives from the various departments are all participating in these processes, but the responsibility for the legislation ultimately falls, in the case of the individual benefits, as I said, with ESDC, and with the Department of Finance for the changes with respect to the business benefits.

Mr. Jake Stewart: Clearly, I understand what your responsibility is, but my question is actually a yes-or-no answer. If it's no, just say no. It's okay. I mean, you're here; you might as well answer the question. Nobody else has.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I'm trying to answer the question as accurately as possible—that we participate; we provide commentary; so therefore, we certainly feel—

Mr. Jake Stewart: I have to interrupt you there. I asked a very specific question. If the answer is no, the answer is no, so I'm going to just take that as a no, because clearly you're not answering it.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have a point of order, Chair.

Mr. Jake Stewart: The next question I have—

Mrs. Sophie Chatel (Pontiac, Lib.): I'm just wondering why we have to put words into the mouths of the witnesses. I mean, they provide an answer. You cannot reframe the question—

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

It would help if we didn't have crosstalk. We'll allow Mr. Stewart to continue.

Mr. Jake Stewart: I asked a very simple question. If the Canada Revenue Agency is coming in here today and they're not willing to answer the question, they're not doing anything for my constituents and they're not doing anything for this committee.

Mr. Greg McLean (Calgary Centre, CPC): Well, I'll raise a point of order, Mr. Chair, if I may. The point of order I have to raise is that I'd like you to instruct the witnesses to answer the questions that are posed to them, please.

The Chair: That is not a point of order.

The witnesses are answering the questions. I have been listening.

We'll allow Mr. Vermaeten to answer the question. If he wants to repeat his answer to the question, we'll allow Mr. Vermaeten to repeat his answer.

Mr. Jake Stewart: I'll ask a new question. We'll move on from that. He doesn't want to answer that one. That's okay.

What role did the Canada Revenue Agency play in the drafting of the current bill? What did you do with the information FINTRAC provided you at the Standing Committee on Finance in July of 2020?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Perhaps I could turn to my colleague Monsieur Lemieux to discuss the FINTRAC feedback.

Mr. Marc Lemieux (Assistant Commissioner, Collections and Verification Branch, Canada Revenue Agency): On the question of how we manage the information we receive from partners and stakeholders in terms of potential fraudulent activities, we take that information and we adapt our controls accordingly. This is an ongoing function that we have in the agency. We've always had that con-

cern of potential fraudulent activities from criminals who are trying to defraud the agency. We are always in contact with authorities to make sure that we are aware of any potential schemes. We continue to evolve our programs and adapt the delivery of our programs to make sure we close those doors if ever we find them.

We're not isolated from what's happening in the world. Any private or public organization is subject to those attempts. We invest in and make sure we have the people and the tools to detect those attempts and add, when necessary, corrective actions.

We were made aware in the summer of 2020 of potential fraudulent activities. We've adapted our programs and our practices accordingly.

Now it's—

• (1320)

The Chair: That's the time that we have, Mr. Stewart. We're moving over to the Liberals and Mr. Baker for six minutes.

Mr. Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to start by thanking the witnesses, the civil servants from the Canada Revenue Agency, for being here today. I want to start by thanking you for the hard work that you've done in helping to deliver the programs that have rescued countless businesses and helped Canadians put food on the table in a desperate time during a global crisis. I think I speak for my colleagues when I express my gratitude to all of you for all of your hard work. We thank you for that.

Before I ask my question, I want to speak to what Mr. Stewart said.

I am disappointed, because questions that the Conservatives keep asking continue to be answered, yet the Conservatives pretend they haven't been answered. One of the questions that Mr. Stewart said wasn't answered was where the funding was coming from to pay for the measures in Bill C-2. The very day that was asked—and you can check the Hansard—I read into the record the section of Bill C-2 that specifies where the funding is coming from. It's section 29. I'll repeat it again; it's in the consolidated revenue fund. The minister was clear in answering that question when she presented to us here yesterday.

On the question of the role of the Canada Revenue Agency in drafting the bill, which Mr. Stewart asked repeatedly of the civil servants from the CRA and argued that it wasn't answered, I thought that the answer from the representative from the CRA was very clear. They indicated that their role was to provide comments and input. The question has been asked. The question has been answered. On the first question, it was asked and it was answered.

It's shameful that some Conservative members are pretending their questions aren't being answered. It's shameful that they're treating our civil servants in this way, particularly the civil servants who have been part of the team that delivered the programs that have been so important to millions of Canadians.

I want to put that on the record, Mr. Chair.

My question to our witnesses is this. My understanding is that the Canada Revenue Agency would be responsible for administering the new benefits that are part of Bill C-2. Could I ask you to describe in detail the cost and the impact of delaying implementation of the programs in Bill C-2? What would be the impact for Canadian businesses and what would be the impact for Canadian workers?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I'd be happy to begin answering that question.

As the committee is probably aware right now, without the legislation we're in a situation in which individuals, on the individual side, aren't able to access the sickness benefit anymore. The same thing is true for the caregiving benefit. Those supports are important for those individuals who find themselves in a situation, with the ongoing pandemic, of being sick, having a day care that's closed or having a child who's sick or potentially at risk for COVID. As a result, they're not going to be able to work. They need to stay home. This bill provides that financial support. That's not going to be available until the legislation is passed.

The new lockdown benefit would not be available, and then you've got the benefits on the business side. The new period is not available right now, so in terms of benefits going forward, this legislation is needed so that you can provide the support—the wage subsidy and the rent subsidy—in the new forms and in that particular sector of tourism. I'm not going to speak for the tourism and hospitality sector, but that's an area where there's a continued pressure. Not having these funds available is going to create challenges for the sector. We hear that. We are appreciative that we're not....

I think people recognize the challenges of delivering these benefits and that the legislation needs to be examined, but at the same time there's an impatience out there as far as delivering these benefits is concerned.

• (1325)

Mr. Yvan Baker: Could you speak to what that impatience is? What I hear you saying is that these programs would be delayed to businesses—

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Yes.

Mr. Yvan Baker: —and to Canadians.

What I'm trying to get to is.... I'm thinking about my constituents in Etobicoke Centre who might be watching. Help them understand the importance of this bill. What would be the impact on the ground of delaying these programs for several months?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: If it's several months, the viability of some businesses will be at stake here. They would have to lay off people they'd like to keep, as the pandemic continues. It's one of these things.... The pandemic has continued a lot longer than all of

us expected, so there are certainly businesses in jeopardy. There are people who will lose their jobs as a result.

Can I quantify that today? No, but you can imagine by the size of these programs that they are very important and that they are providing important support for individuals, and even macroeconomic support.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thank you very much.

I have 30 seconds left, so I'll be brief.

In the last Parliament, the opposition Conservatives voted in favour of a motion to eliminate audits on the wage subsidy. Could you elaborate on the impact of suspending these audits?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I'll pass that to my colleagues, Monsieur Lemieux and Cathy Hawara.

The Chair: Your time is up.

We're moving over to the Bloc. Will it be Madam Sinclair-Desgagné or Madam Larouche?

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: I'm going to give the floor to Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné. She will ask the first question, which relates to my point of order.

The Chair: Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you may go ahead.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is directed to you, Mr. Chair, and the clerk. I want to follow up on my fellow member's question. As I understand it, the Minister of Canadian Heritage was invited four times this week to appear before the committee. Have you received any answer from him?

[English]

The Chair: Are you questioning the witnesses?

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: My question is for the clerk, Mr. Chair. Did we hear back from Mr. Rodriguez further to the committee's invitations?

[English]

The Chair: This is the time for members to ask the witnesses questions. This is not a question for the witnesses. It would have to come as a point of order.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Very well.

I was very keen to bring this to the committee's attention. The clerk told us that the minister had indeed been invited and that we had not heard back from him yet.

Now, my fellow member Ms. Larouche will continue with questions for the witnesses.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Mr. Chair, please keep in mind that I gave Ms. Sinclair-Desgagn  some of my time simply so she could provide that additional information to committee members on the record. We wanted to be told on the record that the committee had still not received confirmation as to whether Mr. Rodriguez would be appearing, despite the repeated invitations that were sent to him. That is my understanding. I received the email about it earlier.

[English]

The Chair: Is this a point of order?

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: I was under the impression that I could give some of my time to Ms. Sinclair-Desgagn  so she could ask a follow-up question that wasn't for the witnesses, and that is what I did.

[English]

The Chair: You did that as a point of order.

Go ahead, Madam Sinclair-Desgagn .

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagn : No, that was part of the six minutes we have to question witnesses. Mr. Chair, with your permission, we can move right into our questions for the witnesses. We got the answers we were looking for.

[English]

The Chair: The time that you have in the rounds of questions is for the witnesses. As far as the point of order is concerned, it was answered by the clerk and by the chair.

Your time continues to run.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagn : Over to you, Ms. Larouche.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Very good.

I am quite glad to have the Canada Revenue Agency officials with us today.

I am here as the critic for seniors. I have a vitally important question for the CRA officials about the Canada emergency response benefit, or CERB. It concerns seniors who were victims of a guaranteed income supplement, or GIS, clawback because they received the CERB during the pandemic, even though they were entitled to the benefit after losing their job.

Keep in mind that the CERB was not flexible. There was no option to claim anything other than the allocated \$2,000. That was the case for everyone. Anyone who lost their job during the pandemic was eligible to receive that amount.

Right now, those seniors' GIS payments are being cut. This summer, the Bloc Qu b cois, with the support of my colleague Gabriel Ste-Marie, wrote to the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Seniors to inform them of the situation.

Before the election campaign, groups had reached out to us about these massive cuts. From the accounts I heard, people's payments were cut by an average of \$400. We got the figures this week: 183,000 seniors have lost an average of \$3,500 this year. On top of

that, 83,000 seniors saw their GIS payments virtually disappear. We are talking about a crucial source of income, money that goes only to the poorest of seniors.

The issue was brought to the attention of the minister responsible for the CRA as early as June 2020 by family economics groups, including Quebec's Association coop rative d' conomie familiale. They wrote to the minister about their concerns regarding the GIS and the post-pandemic impact. Seniors groups had already written to the minister responsible for the CRA about the potentially negative impacts these GIS cuts could have.

I'd like to hear what the CRA officials have to say about this. I was told that people had sent letters as early as June 2020 to raise the uncertainty around the fact that seniors might see their GIS payments reduced because they had received the CERB. In November 2021, my fellow member Mr. Ste-Marie and I each wrote to the minister responsible for our respective areas once again, in other words, the Minister of Finance, Ms. Freeland, and the new Minister of Seniors, Ms. Khara. We are still looking for solutions.

I'm looking for details on the GIS reductions for CERB recipients.

● (1330)

[English]

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Mr. Chair, I'd be happy to try to answer that question.

The Chair: Yes. Please go ahead, if you can answer the question.

Members, please point your questions to the witness you'd like to answer the question.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Thank you very much for the question.

In calculating social benefits, the way the system generally works is that you're looking at an individual's income for the prior year. Individuals submit their tax return; their income is calculated, and that income is used by both the CRA and other departments, as well as provinces and territories, in terms of some of the benefits they might pay. We generally use net income.

The departments, in this case ESDC, would then use the information feed that we provide to calculate the GIS, etc. They're the department responsible for that, based on the income that we provide, which is always going to be the same.

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: The Bloc Qu b cois actually put forward solutions to the GIS problem. Exceptional situations call for exceptional solutions. In light of the pandemic, the fact that the CERB was not flexible and the fact that seniors entitled to the GIS can work and earn income up to a certain threshold, we proposed that the CERB be treated as work income, not another benefit, so as not to completely penalize seniors.

What's more, it's important to make sure the amount is recalculated, regardless of where the claim was made. It should be based on actual income for the year.

Is that something that could be considered?

[English]

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: As I said, we provide the information to ESDC. ESDC is the department that does the calculation and, based on their legislation and regulations, they will determine how much an individual receives in GIS.

That said, I do understand that the Minister of Finance has made a statement with respect to this—that they are looking for a solution—but this is a complex issue when you're looking at individuals' incomes. In this case, because individuals got CERB in some cases—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vermaeten. We are now—

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: If the CERB is treated as work income, changes to the legislation would be necessary. Do I understand that correctly?

[English]

The Chair: That's the end of your time.

We'll now go to the NDP.

Welcome, Mr. Julian. I know you've been a long-time member of this committee, and we welcome you here today.

Go ahead for six minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm very happy to be back here.

Congratulations on your election as chair of the committee, taking over from Wayne Easter, chair of the committee in the last Parliament.

I would also like to thank the witnesses for their service to the country throughout the pandemic.

[English]

I have a number of questions. If you've got the answer, please give it. If not, I'll move on to the next question. I'm looking for responses in writing in all of these cases.

My first question is with regard to the Canada child benefit. How many recipients experienced a decrease in their CCB because they

received payments from a COVID-19 financial support program? What was the average monthly reduction in their CCB payment?

• (1335)

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I don't have that statistic available. I can tell you, looking at the latest numbers that I've seen, that it's not a particularly unusual year with respect to what happens every year. Some people will get more and some people will get less, because incomes fluctuate.

I didn't see any significant change in that, but we can provide additional statistics. I just don't have them off the top of my head.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much. If you could provide it to the committee in writing, that would be very helpful.

With regard to the Canada workers benefit recipients, how many have experienced a decrease in their CWB because they received payments from a COVID-19 financial support program? What was the average monthly reduction in their CWB payment?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: It's the same thing. I don't have the numbers available, but you are correct. If an income goes up, their CWB in some cases could go down, so you're going to see some of that. Likewise, when incomes go down, you'll see increases in the CWB. Because of the enrichment to the CWB, it does make things a little more complicated in terms of calculating, but we'd be happy to look for those numbers.

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, thank you very much. As I'm sure you're aware, this is very relevant to the study of Bill C-2.

Madam Larouche mentioned the GIS. That's an important reference. We know that over 80,000 people have been impacted by accessing the COVID-19 financial supports. Would you be able to tell the committee what the average monthly reduction was for seniors in GIS payments as a result of that clawback?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I would not.

I'll just say briefly that it can be somewhat complicated, because individuals receive employment insurance, and that migrated to the CRB that was provided by ESDC. Isolating those impacts can be conceptually difficult, but we certainly can look at what numbers are available, if that's what you're looking for.

Mr. Peter Julian: Absolutely. You would have those numbers, so I don't think what we're asking for is over the moon. You will have the numbers, and they are, again, very relevant for our study.

Would you be able to give us a sense of what the anticipated revenue is that the government is looking to recover from CERB and CRB recipients under the LIM, the low income measure?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I apologize.

I'll turn this over to my colleague Marc Lemieux regarding the impacts—that is, if you're looking at how much money we are going to recover in terms of overpayments. Is that what you're looking for?

Mr. Peter Julian: It is, but for low-income Canadians. Clawing it back from low-income recipients, as you know, has been a controversial subject.

Is there an anticipated revenue that you're expecting to see as a clawback?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: If the question is whether we have a precise number right now, I'll turn to my colleague. I'm sure the answer is "no" at this point, as it is an ongoing process to determine who is ineligible and whether a recovery is possible.

Mr. Marc Lemieux: As Frank was saying, we don't have the numbers at this time. We haven't started to send requests for the reimbursement, so it's difficult at this time to give you a number. The approach that the agency takes in everything we do is to put people first. When we do collections and recovery, we will take into account the situation of each individual and consider their capacity to repay.

In cases of low-income recipients, we have measures in place to offer flexibility and take their financial situation into account.

• (1340)

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you for that.

You would also have the figures internally. We've questioned Canada Revenue before, and you do have the figures in your database. That's certainly what I and our finance critic, Daniel Blaikie, are looking for. It would also be useful for the committee as a whole.

I'll move on to any analysis the government did around anticipated impacts on low-income workers or self-employed workers from cancelling the CRB. I'm thinking of independent contractors, workers on online platforms, workers in contracted businesses, on-call workers and temporary workers.

Are you aware of any studies that were done or conducted of the impact prior to or after cancelling the CRB program?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Julian. That question may have to wait for another round. We are now moving to the Conservatives and Mr. Chambers.

You have five minutes.

Mr. Adam Chambers (Simcoe North, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Peter Julian: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, you're very distinguished in following in the footsteps of Wayne Easter. Wayne Easter always allowed the questions to be answered.

The Chair: Mr. Julian, we had already reached the six-minute mark. For a question to be answered, we would go well into seven minutes.

Mr. Peter Julian: All they have to do is say yes or no—

The Chair: Mr. Julian—

Mr. Peter Julian: —and if they'll share that with the committee. That's a very brief answer.

The Chair: Mr. Julian, it didn't sound like the answer was going to be so brief, so, Mr. Julian,—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): You don't know until you try.

The Chair: It's all about fairness here and about being fair with our time for everybody, so we're moving to Mr. Chambers for five minutes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On a point of order, I think Mr. Julian's request is entirely reasonable. Mr. Easter would normally allow just a few seconds to try to get an answer at the end.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, the meetings are being conducted in a fair way. I've been tracking time as efficiently as possible and ensuring that all members—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It's—

The Chair: —get their fair amount of time.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On a point of order—

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, when it came to Mr. Julian's—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Julian is not looking for more time.

The Chair: We have already moved past the six-minute mark. We're moving to Mr. Chambers now for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Julian: On a point of order, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Go ahead on a point of order.

Mr. Peter Julian: It's a very simple request with a very simple answer. We've already taken more time on points of order than it would have taken simply to ask the officials whether there are studies and whether they can share those. That's the essence of my question, and I would like to have a response, please.

The Chair: I don't know if our witnesses have a yes-or-no answer for you—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Give them a chance. If you'd let them speak—

The Chair: —Mr. Julian, and you'll have an opportunity to get that answer in the next round.

We are moving to Mr. Chambers for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, with respect, I have to challenge that decision.

The Chair: Mr. Julian, it is about fairness, and based on the answers that we have received from witnesses—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Chair, you have been challenged. Put it to a vote.

The Chair: Put it to a vote.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: That's how it works. It's not a debatable motion. You have been challenged.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Alexandre Roger): The question is, "Shall the decision of the chair be sustained?" If you are in agreement with the chair, you will vote yes. If you are against the chair's ruling, you will vote no.

Mr. Heath MacDonald (Malpeque, Lib.): What's the ruling?

The Chair: The ruling would be that we will not allow the witness to answer because we did go over time and we would be well over time.

Mr. Terry Beech: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, could we just get clarification from the clerk on whether or not time allocation is a challengeable ruling?

The Clerk: Every chair's ruling is challengeable, and I believe in this instance—

Mr. Terry Beech: I can't hear you.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Let's just vote on it.

The Clerk: Every ruling by the chair is challengeable ruling, and in this case the chair ruled on the conduct of the committee, so it would be appropriate to challenge.

We are ready to move to the—

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: For clarification, does it mean that we have more than the time allowed to speak? If that ruling is accepted, that means we have more than the time allowed to question witnesses.

• (1345)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On a point of order—

The Chair: It is up to the committee, but yes, we may find ourselves—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On a point of order, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: We might find ourselves—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On a point of order. On a point of order, Mr. Chair. I have a point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, I'm just trying to bring clarification and understanding—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On a point of order, Mr. Chair. I have a point of order.

The Chair: First I have Madame Chatel.

It would mean that we can go well over the six minutes or five minutes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: No. No. No. Stop misleading the committee.

On a point of order—

The Chair: No, that's—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Actually, I have a point of order.

The Chair: I have conferred with the clerk and—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'm sorry, but you have the obligation to recognize points of order rather than giving speeches.

On a point of order, your decision to prevent the witness from answering the question has been challenged. That is a non-debatable challenge. If the challenge succeeds and your decision is overturned, then the witness will be given a chance to answer the question. That's what we're voting on. Stop trying to manipulate the debate and get to the vote.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, the clarification on this is that the witnesses would be able to answer the question, and that may go on for as long as it will take for that answer to be given.

Is that correct? That is correct. If it goes on for a minute or two minutes or three minutes—

Mr. Peter Julian: I have a point of order.

The Chair: That's just so the members are aware.

Go ahead, Mr. Julian

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, I'm just asking for 10 or 15 seconds, not more. This is not an unreasonable request and there is no precedent set. It just means that normally you would permit the witnesses a few moments to answer. That's all.

The Chair: Mr. Julian, to be fair, if I thought it were going to be only 10 or 15 seconds—and the members are well aware from our meetings—I would have allowed it to go on for 10 or 15 seconds. I just did not want to cut off one of our witnesses from an answer that I thought would be much longer, and then there would be an opportunity in another—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, Mr. Julian was very clear. He was just looking for yes-and-no answers. It was a two-part question. He said he just needed a yes or no in each one of them. You know very well that kind of response could be given in under 10 seconds. To claim now that you thought that it would lead to many minutes of additional debate is nonsense. He just wanted to get a quick answer to his question, which has been the practice on this committee. I was on this committee for years. It happened without a problem.

By the way, your decision has been challenged. That is non-debatable. Let's get to a vote on it.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: I have a point of order, Chair.

Mr. Yvan Baker: On a point of order, Chair—

The Chair: I have Mr. Baker on a point of order.

Mr. Yvan Baker: —Mr. Poilievre just said this decision's non-debatable, and he's spent more time debating than anybody at this committee.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: That's not correct at all—

Mr. Yvan Baker: This is my point of order, Mr. Poilievre, not yours.

Mr. Chair, you were trying to answer—rightly so—and give a clarification that a member had asked for about the implication of the vote. It's a fair question to ask before one votes, to understand the implication of one's decision when they vote. That's what Ms. Chatel was asking. You were interrupted in the middle of that.

I thought that was completely fair. I think we're clear now on Ms. Chatel's question.

The Chair: Just for clarification, it may be a short or it may be a long answer, but this is what we are voting on.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: I have a point of order.

The Chair: I have Madame Chatel on a point of order.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: I want to know what the consequence is of allowing more time. I have a proposal to allow this person to answer, but not create a precedent. I'd like to stay on time. I don't want the six minutes allowed to us becoming 15 minutes, so it would be an exception for this witness, but not a rule. We should stay within our time.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Chatel, but there could be a challenge at any time in regard to the timing.

Go ahead, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Chair, on a point of order, could we just suspend for two minutes, to calm things a bit?

The Chair: Yes, let's suspend for two minutes.

• (1349) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1352)

• (1350)

The Chair: I call the committee back to order.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, I will withdraw my challenge if the witnesses are able to answer.

You'll recall that my question was whether there have been studies on the impacts of cancelling the CRB on low-income workers and self-employed workers, and whether they would be prepared to share those studies with the committee.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I'm happy to answer that.

I've not been aware of any formal published studies on this.

I will, if I may, supplement, that yes, the Department of Finance and Employment and Social Development have been looking at the need for these programs, and the strategy has been to evolve these programs to fit the economic situation. That's why the CERB, when it started, was giving benefits to about four million people in that first week. Over time, as we moved to the CRB and the CRCB, we were down to 800,000 people who were using it a little while ago.

I'm not sure whether there has been.... I don't think there's been a formal study that says at that point.... However, the responsible departments, ESDC and the Department of Finance, have been looking at the need for these programs and how they should evolve with the economic situation and the pandemic situation.

I hope that wasn't too much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vermaeten. Thank you, Mr. Julian.

Now we're off to—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I have a point of order.

• (1355)

The Chair: On a point of order, we have Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: First of all, I want to thank you for reversing your earlier decision. We could have saved a lot of time if you had done that at the outset.

In your short time as chair, this is not the first time that you've caused disruption in the committee. I would encourage you to look

back at how your predecessor, who was also a Liberal and a member of the government, tried to stay out of the debate, rather than trying to favour one side of the debate, as you did yesterday. Your role is to facilitate the debate.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You are a servant and not a master of the committee. I just wanted to put that on the record, and to thank you for reversing yourself. Thank you.

Mr. Yvan Baker: I have a point of order.

The Chair: On a point of order, we have Mr. Baker.

Mr. Yvan Baker: I have to respond to what Mr. Poilievre just said. Mr. Chair, you have tried to be fair to all members on all sides of this committee. If there's been any disruption, for the most part it's been caused by Mr. Poilievre and some of his antics at this committee. You've done the best you can to try to keep these meetings productive and to treat everybody fairly.

Mr. Greg McLean: Is this a point of order, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: We are moving forward. We're going to the second round.

We have Mr. Chambers.

I want to respect the witnesses. They are here to provide answers to our questions.

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

Mr. Adam Chambers: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I had quite some time to think about these questions, so I hope they're good.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Adam Chambers: Thank you, Mr. Vermaeten and all of the officials we see here and appearing before us today at the committee.

I want to also thank you for some very detailed information that you provided to this committee upon request. I understand that was done in very, very short order and it was very detailed, and I will focus a few of my questions on that information. We received this just as the committee started. I'm just looking for a little bit of clarification, so if you want to pull that document up, that would be helpful.

With respect to some of the audits and the numbers, I'm looking for clarification, and it looks as though there were about 700 audits completed in phase one with respect to CEWS. This is post-verification, as I understand, and about 2,500 are currently in progress. Is it safe to say that is about 3,200 audits out of approximately 4.7 million applications? Is that a fair characterization?

Ms. Cathy Hawara (Assistant Commissioner, Compliance Programs Branch, Canada Revenue Agency): I can take that question.

Just to clarify, phase one of the audit is actually still ongoing. It was more of a sort of preliminary research audit phase, if you will, as we were learning more about the risks and how best to deploy our audit resources going forward. You're correct that 700 is the number of audits, but they are not all completed. That work is still ongoing.

We were able to launch our second phase in November, just this year. Those are just getting under way.

That's just to say, then, that the results will inform our future audit activities in this space. We're not quite there yet. It's still ongoing.

[Translation]

Mr. Adam Chambers: Thank you.

[English]

I just noted on the CRB audits that it said “will be conducting in 2022”, so is it safe to say there have been no post-verification audits on the CRB so far, or did I read that incorrectly?

Mr. Marc Lemieux: Mr. Chair, I can take this question.

We haven't yet begun the post-verification work on the CRB.

Mr. Adam Chambers: Okay. Thank you for providing that clarification.

We heard testimony yesterday from the Department of Finance—I can't recall if it was the minister or a witness—that a medical certificate would potentially be required in an audit, but I read in the document provided that there was a decision made to not seek medical certificates. I'm just trying to find out which one is correct. Will we ask for medical certificates for sickness benefit audits or not?

Mr. Marc Lemieux: Mr. Chair, on this, as we indicated in our written response, the decision was made not to request those certificates as a step towards eligibility for the program. The reason was to protect the health system from the pressure that doing that could have generated. That means that those certificates are most probably not available for post-verification work, which means that we will have to ask for information and the recipients would have to demonstrate whether or not they are eligible.

• (1400)

Mr. Adam Chambers: Thank you very much.

Mr. Marc Lemieux: Then we will—

Mr. Adam Chambers: Thanks for clarifying.

For my final question, we did hear some information from our friends and officials at FINTRAC, and they raised some questions and concerns. Have we contemplated or made changes to the post-verification or prepayment verification process based on some of the information and advice uncovered by FINTRAC?

The Chair: That's five minutes. I need a short answer, please.

Ms. Cathy Hawara: I can take that one.

Mr. Marc Lemieux: Go ahead, yes.

Ms. Cathy Hawara: We are constantly evolving our risk assessment processes and our pre-validation processes as we learn more and as, throughout the pandemic, we have learned more from both

our own experience and what our partners are telling us, so we do continue to evolve those risk approaches that we've been taking.

Mr. Adam Chambers: Thank you again for your responses.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're now moving to the Liberals.

Madame Chatel, you have five minutes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all the CRA officials for their extraordinary work. They had to deliver these programs at a time when all Canadians had to work from home, often in tough conditions. You have my utmost admiration.

I want to apologize for the tone of my Conservative colleague Mr. Stewart when he questioned you earlier. That isn't the way to behave in committee. That isn't how committee members should question witnesses who have been invited to appear. Please accept my apologies on behalf of my colleague.

Now, I want to talk about the Auditor General's 2020-21 report. There was considerable focus on the agency's verification efforts. I have here the English version of the report.

[English]

The main point of the audit was about whether the Canada Revenue Agency designed a mechanism so that the benefit would support eligible workers who suffered a loss of income for a reason related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including limiting abuse of the benefit.

I would like to know if the CRA could explain what exactly the finding of the Auditor General was in this very recent report.

Mr. Marc Lemieux: If I may, Mr. Chair, I will answer in French.

[Translation]

The Government of Canada swiftly provided emergency benefits and recovery benefits to millions of Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic. What we observed was verified by the Office of the Auditor General. The purpose was to determine whether we had taken a reasonable approach, in other words, using an attestation-based system to deliver the emergency response benefit and the recovery benefit to ensure that Canadians in need received the support quickly. This attestation-based approach is very similar to the one the CRA uses for income tax returns. It is based on the premise that people want to comply with the rules and will submit valid tax returns. We advanced this program on that basis.

As the Auditor General of Canada pointed out in her examination of the CERB, this approach has risks. Expediting payments to those in need is consistent with best practices promoted by the International Public Sector Fraud Forum and its principles of fraud control in emergency management. This approach is precedent-based and evolves over time.

The Auditor General also indicated that, once the program had been implemented, we made changes to the pre-payment control process. We added controls when we identified a risk of non-compliance. The agency's approach was really based on attestations and public education. People need the right information so that they can comply with the rules that we have to enforce.

We made a considerable amount of information available to Canadians to help them fully understand the eligibility criteria. In some cases, we even wrote to Canadians when the information we received showed that they were not eligible. The Auditor General also noted that.

• (1405)

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you, Mr. Lemieux.

Overall, the report reflects positively on how you responded in light of the circumstances and the tight time frame you had.

Mr. Marc Lemieux: If I recall correctly, the last time we appeared before the committee, when the report was tabled, it was viewed as good news.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you, Mr. Lemieux.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Chatel.

[English]

We will now move over to the Bloc and Madame Sinclair-Desgagné.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for whoever wishes to answer.

The finance minister, and your colleagues and counterparts at the Department of Finance told us that it was extremely complex to target a specific sector when delivering CRB payments.

Can you elaborate on that?

[English]

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I'd be happy to start. I'm sure my colleagues will supplement my answer.

Yes, it is a challenge to target payments to a sector, simply because there are borderlines. Whenever you create any sector, you're going to have a challenge about who's in and who's out, no matter how well the legislation is defined or, previously, the rules are established.

In terms of establishing borderlines, I think that under the circumstances, Bill C-2 has done an excellent job to try to articulate, as much as possible, borderlines of tourism, but you can imagine how there's always a borderline situation. If you are, for example, providing food and you are a chip truck, a poutine truck, are you a restaurant or are you simply selling chocolate bars and chips?

Those kinds of questions ultimately can never be fully specified in legislation, and therefore the CRA will need to do its job of looking at the facts and trying to distinguish whether you're in this sector or that sector. That's the challenge.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I understand.

You're telling me that a G7 country can't target different sectors when delivering benefit payments, thereby justifying the creation of an altogether new program. The excessively complex IT systems are to blame for delaying the process that would make desperately needed government support available to workers in the cultural sector, especially those who are self-employed.

Now I have a better understanding of the challenges.

[English]

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I'm sorry; I'm not sure I understand the question. Are you asking if it would be difficult to target the cultural sector?

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: It was a comment further to your answer. I was simply saying I understood that targeting a specific sector was too complex for the CRA's computer system, even though other systems manage to do it.

I think that's all the time I have.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: That's the time.

We have to move to the NDP and Mr. MacGregor. You have two and a half minutes.

• (1410)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

This is for all of the officials who are joining us today. I would like to know if there have been any impact studies or analyses regarding the Canada recovery benefit cancellation for self-employed workers and if you have any comments on that, or if you can share with the committee or table any documents to that effect.

If you need clarification on who I'm specifically referring to, this would be, for example, independent contractors, any workers who have online platforms, workers on contracted business, on-call workers and temporary workers.

Thank you.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Just to clarify, you're asking whether we have seen any studies on that. Is that the question, sir?

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Yes. Are you aware of any impact studies that have been conducted to assess the effect of the CRB cancellation on those classes of workers?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I am not. Again, I'll just reiterate that this policy is an ESDC policy. They and the Department of Finance are both responsible for the policies here. We're responsible for the administration.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Okay, I think Mr. Julian covered this question before with respect to the CRB. I'm looking specifically for an analysis on the decision to end the CRB, including the financial profile of CRB recipients as a group. Can you expand a little bit on the previous question he asked, but with respect to an analysis?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: As I said previously, I am not aware of any formal analysis with respect to published papers. Certainly ESDC has been looking at the issue of what kinds of benefits have been needed over time and how that's evolved. What I observed from CRA is a clear pattern of how demand for that product, for that financial support, has gone down significantly as the economy has strengthened.

Is there a black-and-white answer in a study that says it is needed or not needed? I don't believe there is. I think we're seeing programs evolving on both the individual and business sides, and I want to stress that on the business side, those benefits are also helping people to get jobs and retain jobs. They are those types of benefits. There are also, of course, a range of other benefits out there.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor. That's your time.

We're moving to the Conservatives. Mr. McLean, you have five minutes.

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

I want to thank the officials for coming today and for giving us the answers we need to make sure we're moving this bill forward, but I will comment, and I want the officials to know, that many of us on this committee have enough background in finance and economics to understand that the consolidated revenue fund is just a bank account. The money still has to come from somewhere, and I encourage my colleague Mr. Baker on the other side to understand where that money must come from to arrive in the consolidated revenue fund in the first place. It will add a lot of value in that respect.

Mr. Vermaeten, you commented earlier about the patience regarding the delivery of benefits that certain people are going to require once this bill is passed and with respect to getting this bill passed. This is definitely a rushed timetable that has been placed upon us here. This committee was composed literally this week to look at what this bill should be.

My first question is this: Is it historically unusual to jam a spending bill this quickly in front of the finance committee immediately after Parliament is recalled?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I'm not qualified to answer that. I will say that the last 18 months have been extraordinary in terms of my

career. I've been working for the government for nearly 32 years, and things are done much faster than they were before. The CERB, for example, was introduced in three weeks, including the legislation. I'll say these are still extraordinary times, but I have no expertise to say whether or not this was extremely quick following the opening of Parliament.

• (1415)

Mr. Greg McLean: Okay, thank you.

Would you say that having a delay of several months due to an election and then refusing to call Parliament back for two months would have caused this rush and this—

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

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Chair, Mr. McLean was elected in 2019, if I'm not mistaken, so he will know that putting explicitly political questions to public servants is not appropriate, and we're not just wavering into it; we're in that sphere already.

I would just caution my colleague that he's putting public servants in an impossible position.

Mr. Greg McLean: Thank you.

Would you suggest it's unusual for a government not to be sitting when they had to deal with these types of urgent financial matters, Mr. Vermaeten?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I have no comment on the matter. I do know that at the agency, we've continued our work throughout elections, throughout the winter, throughout COVID—

Mr. Greg McLean: Okay, and here we are, so let me ask one final question, if I can, because my time is probably running out soon.

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Mr. Greg McLean: Oh, good.

There's an investigation going on about CERB distribution of funds in Calgary, my city, in particular. Can you update us on that investigation, please?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Perhaps I could turn to one of my colleagues, if they are aware of the situation, and if they're in a position—

Mr. Greg McLean: Yes, and for a little more clarification, there are allegations of political interference and manipulating attempts to get more money from CERB by political candidates. I'm certain you are aware of it. I would just like to know where in the process that investigation is, please.

Mr. Marc Lemieux: I'm not aware of an investigation of that nature and I think it would be fair to mention that we're not investigating these things. It's for other authorities to do these investigations.

Mr. Greg McLean: Okay. As far as the fraud that's been perpetrated through CERB goes, I know that when you rush things out like this, you can't catch everything and some things will fall through the cracks, but has there been some learning from the mistakes that have occurred along the path so they don't happen with this program?

Ms. Janique Caron (Chief Financial Officer and Assistant Commissioner, Finance and Administration Branch, Canada Revenue Agency): Thank you for the question.

As you mentioned, with programs of this scale there will be some fraud. However, we have definitely learned and we have controls, tools and measures in place. We work with partners like the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and other government departments when we detect suspicious activities. It's been a learning experience. We take very seriously any cases that have been flagged to us or that we've uncovered ourselves, and we investigate them.

As scammers adapt their practices, so do we. We routinely monitor accounts for suspicious activity to detect, prevent and address the potential instances of fraud, including unauthorized use of stolen credentials and—

Mr. Greg McLean: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: We are moving over to the Liberals and Mr. MacDonald for five minutes.

Mr. Heath MacDonald: Thank you, Chair.

Listening to this conversation, I just want to say for those listening outside of these four walls that the vast majority of Canadians are honest. We all believe that.

I want to touch on Mr. Julian's comments too. I believe—and correct me if I'm wrong—that the minister was on the record as being committed to addressing the negative interactions between recovery benefits and the GIS. I just want to make sure that we actually mention that.

I would like to follow up on Mr. McLean's question and allow the answers, because that was actually one of the questions that I had and it was relevant to the checks and balances going forward, so if she could continue with her answer, it would certainly be appreciated.

Ms. Janique Caron: Mr. Chair, is the question with regard to learning from fraud?

• (1420)

Mr. Heath MacDonald: Yes.

Ms. Janique Caron: Okay. Great.

As I said, we've definitely continued to learn throughout the process. We increased the capacity in the teams. We created a new team to coordinate all of the efforts so that we could share information as well and make the linkages between all of the behaviours we're seeing. Of course, we won't disclose all of the controls we have or the threats we are facing, but we are definitely learning.

One of the key tools we are using is data analytics and business intelligence gathered from many sources. We've had many partners. Law enforcement agencies and financial institutions have been key partners as well. We also get leads. Thankfully, as well, budget 2021 announced \$330 million over five years that will, once approved, allow us to continue to invest even more in making sure that we protect ourselves, that we detect, that we control.

No taxpayers who have been confirmed as subjects of fraud incidents are liable for the amounts that were paid. We have them. We've also dedicated phone lines to help them and have increased

the capacity in our call centres, because we do appreciate that this created a lot of calls to our organization.

Mr. Heath MacDonald: Thank you. That's a great answer.

Sometimes around this table, with the rhetoric, I think we forget how chaotic the beginning of this pandemic was. I've been in public life for quite some time and I don't think I've seen bureaucracy or bureaucrats react so quickly, so kudos to you and your team at CRA.

With regard to the co-operation and communication among the different organizations relevant to fraud, what can you tell us about those lines of communication or those checks and balances? We had FINTRAC in here this week as well. We didn't have the RCMP here, but I know they've been mentioned several times. Can someone elaborate on the verification, the checks and balances pre and post that go into ensuring that everything you do is done adequately for the taxpayers of Canada?

Ms. Janique Caron: We definitely collaborate. Perhaps Ms. Hawara will be able to complement the answer as well.

When we see, for example, something that meets the criteria to warrant our criminal investigation team looking into a situation, then we involve those experts on the file. They're the ones who interact very closely with the authorities and with the RCMP. That's definitely one of the partnerships we have.

As I said, we have partnerships with financial institutions as well. Those are critical. They have shared leads with us, for example, so we are very much working closely together.

I don't know whether Ms. Hawara would have additional information.

Ms. Cathy Hawara: You covered it very well.

I would emphasize that there are very strong relationships between the Canada Revenue Agency and law enforcement, in particular the RCMP, and FINTRAC and others in terms of supporting our mandate to investigate criminal offences such as tax evasion and benefit fraud. Those partnerships are strong and are working well, and we are engaged at the moment with them. That's what I would say.

The Chair: That's your time, Mr. MacDonald.

We are moving into our third round, members. We have the Conservatives up for five minutes.

I have Mr. Chambers.

Oh, I'm sorry. It's Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you.

I have here the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada report on the CERB. It indicates the following:

...criminal organizations, using stolen IDs and individuals recruited via social media, are operating 'CERB scams' in certain cities; prepaid cards are loaded with CERB benefits and other laundered funds.

Since CRA received this report, how many dollars has CRA recovered from pursuing the perpetrators of these scams?

Ms. Cathy Hawara: I would say our work is ongoing. These are complex cases, and I'm not in a position to provide an answer to that specific question yet, but—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you.

Ms. Cathy Hawara: —transparency is important, and when we're ready, we will.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you very much.

The report further indicates that clients who do not meet the CERB eligibility requirements and who are fully employed still apply for and receive CERB benefits, often while engaging in suspicious financial activity.

Since CRA received this report, how many dollars has CRA recovered from the people who fraudulently received the CERB even though they were engaged in suspicious activities and were already employed?

• (1425)

Ms. Cathy Hawara: It would be the same answer as I previously provided—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: So we don't know.

Ms. Cathy Hawara: The work is—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: No, no. I know. The work is ongoing, but how many dollars have been recovered?

Ms. Cathy Hawara: I don't have that figure to give you, unfortunately.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Have any been recovered?

Ms. Cathy Hawara: I don't have that figure to give you. In our work—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Who would know?

Ms. Cathy Hawara: In our work, the broader work in relation to our audits of CERB recipients, will start in 2022.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Then no dollars have been recovered?

That's a question.

Ms. Cathy Hawara: I don't know if Monsieur Lemieux might have an answer to that particular question, but on the criminal investigation side, our work is still ongoing and—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay.

Ms. Cathy Hawara: —my understanding is that the audit work for CERB on the civil side is only going to begin in 2022.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: All right. The CERB began being paid out at the beginning of 2020, and you're not even going to begin the audit work until two years later.

I'll try elsewhere.

This investigation by FINTRAC showed that clients have applied for and received CERB despite not living in Canada and appearing to be residing in a jurisdiction of concern.

How many people not living in Canada got the CERB—the number of people?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemieux: Once again, we don't have the answer to that question, unfortunately.

What I can say is that, once we receive the information, we examine the measures that can be put in place.

[*English*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right. You don't have the response.

All right. When did your agency get this report from FINTRAC that I'm quoting from?

Anybody...?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemieux: Unfortunately, I can't provide a specific answer as far as that report is concerned.

[*English*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemieux: I can tell you that, as Ms. Caron explained earlier, we are in contact—

[*English*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'm sorry. You did answer or you said you don't know the answer. Is there anyone there who can tell me when your agency got this report from FINTRAC showing all of this fraud and abuse?

No one? Okay. Wow.

The report goes on. It's stamped here with a date of June 2020. I'm not sure if that's the accurate reporting date. Are you aware of this? This has actually been reported on in the media.

Is anyone from CRA aware of this report from FINTRAC?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemieux: As I said earlier, the agency is in contact with those organizations and receives information on the nature of—

[*English*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Sorry, but I asked just a simple question. Are you aware of this document? Are you aware? This was reported in the media. It says that people got money who were not entitled to it, that people who were not even living in Canada got the CERB.

I'm asking a simple question. Is CRA aware of this report by this federal government agency that is responsible for money laundering and financial crime, yes or no?

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre's time is up.

Could you just answer the question very briefly? After that, we'll move to the Liberals.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemieux: Mr. Chair, we are familiar with the report.

[English]

The Chair: We're moving to the Liberals now. Mr. Fragiskatos has five minutes.

[Translation]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much, Chair. It's great to be back at the finance committee meeting.

One of the recurring patterns I've noticed today, Chair—and I think colleagues around the table have seen it—is that Conservative colleagues are very preoccupied with questions relating specifically to audits but also more generally questions around due diligence. I find it interesting and a bit contradictory, with all due respect, because just a few months ago, a former Conservative member of the finance committee, Mr. Kelly, penned a letter to the Minister of National Revenue in November 2020 calling for audits to be suspended entirely. The letter was referenced earlier by Mr. Baker. These are audits on the use of the wage subsidy by small businesses, so I struggle to understand the Conservative position, but for the benefit of colleagues, specifically Conservative colleagues, I'll table that letter with the committee chair. I think it will help inform the work that's been happening here over the past few days.

To officials, first of all, thank you very much for your work throughout the pandemic and ongoing. It is truly appreciated by us but specifically by constituents in London, where I'm from—

• (1430)

Mr. Greg McLean: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, we'll give the member extra time if he wants to read that letter directly into the record at this point in time, please.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Chair, I'll table it, which is something I can also do.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, continue.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The number of CERB recipients is what I'm looking for, but I was just saying how appreciated CERB has been and it's appreciated because public servants put it forward. I believe the number is eight million. Is that correct?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: That is correct. It's the right range.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

Furthermore, I just want to ask about something that was touched on earlier, I think in a question Mr. Julian raised.

Standard prepayment controls are used by the CRA for programs administered by the agency. That's not just very common; it's part of the mandate of the organization to put those controls in place. What are some of those controls outside of the pandemic? I'm talking about in normal times.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: There are a range of controls that we use, both for the pandemic measures and for others. We check things. If it's for a business, we'll check the business number. We'll check how long it's been in business. We may check the size of its payroll. We may check past compliance records. There are range of things that we look at, depending on the type of benefit and the amount.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Mr. Vermaeten, I'm sorry. I don't mean to interrupt you, but for individuals as well, you check their hours worked and things like that, right?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Certainly you're looking at things, depending on the program. It's not easy, for example, to look at hours worked, but for employment insurance, employees have the ability to look at their employment record, to get the record of employment from the employer and verify that information.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Yes, okay.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Of course, it's different in the situation of the self-employed.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Yes, and that's in normal times, but in the context of a pandemic, it's very difficult to do, and that's why the attestation approach was used, which is something mentioned in the sixth report of the Auditor General, which Madame Chatel referenced earlier.

For the benefit of the committee—this is not even a partisan comment—I would suggest that members read that report. It's highly instructive. It gives very good insight on CERB specifically, on some of the program design but also some of the thinking that went into that program design.

One of the key findings—and again, this is all in the context of analysis of an emergency program—is as follows. I quote directly from that report, Mr. Chair, and since Mr. McLean was so eager for me to read something into the record, I'll indulge him here.

It is paragraph 6.53. The Auditor General found, it says, the following:

We found that, by using attestations and limiting the number of pre-payment controls to validate eligibility, Employment and Social Development Canada and the Canada Revenue Agency were aware that some payments would be issued to applicants who were not entitled to the benefit. This included potential cases of intentional misrepresentation.

The key thing, though, is this:

Accepting risks in order to expedite payments to those in need is consistent with best practices promoted by the International Public Sector Fraud Forum and its Principles of Fraud Control in Emergency Management.

What we are left with is a really important insight, and again, to my colleagues across the way who have pressed this issue of due diligence, there were attestations. If there is time, I'll ask about those, but in the context of the pandemic, public servants put forward an approach that, yes, did involve some risk, but that always made sure to focus on Canadians, the now close to, as I heard Mr. Blaikie whisper a few minutes ago, nine million or eight million, or whatever the number is.

I'll go with public servants on that number, with all due respect to Mr. Blaikie. They get the support they need.

The Chair: That's the time, Mr. Fragiskatos.

We are now moving to the Bloc.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Ms. Larouche will be speaking.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you.

Briefly, I would like to revisit the matter of the GIS clawback as a result of CERB payments.

My first question is for whichever official would like to respond.

Would the solution proposed by the Bloc Qu b cois—that is, treating the CERB like work income—require legislative changes? Does it have to be done through regulations? Could the CRA do it, itself, through a directive? Please keep your answer brief.

• (1435)

[English]

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: This program is run by ESDC. I believe it would require a legislative change, but I can't be 100% certain.

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: I see.

What I gather is that, with Christmas two weeks away, seniors aren't going to get an answer as to whether they'll be able to make ends meet. They will remain in a financially vulnerable position.

My last question is about something Ms. Freeland said yesterday. According to her, on a technical level, the issue is a bit complicated to address as far as the system's capacity goes.

Can you elaborate on those technological challenges? In 2021, is there no way to find a solution for seniors whose benefits were clawed back? Is it not possible to consider treating the CERB as work income? Would the technology allow for that, so that all the affected seniors could qualify for a review based on their actual income?

[English]

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Chair, I can give you a flavour of why there are technological challenges. The GIS determination was made after we received individuals' tax returns for 2020. That was done, we'll say, in June 2021. Individuals had started receiving their benefits. Entitlements had been determined.

Now, as far as a solution goes, if this is the policy intent, you'd need to isolate the impact of CERB and determine how that impacted the GIS and then figure out when you're going to give those

amounts. Are you going to give them all at once to the extent that you're going to provide an offset? Who will that be given to, and what happens to individuals, for example, who may have received CERB and then paid back CERB a little bit later? We did have a lot of people who did pay back the CERB afterward.

There are all kinds of complex data issues, and you want to try to alleviate the situation rather than make it worse. Therefore, I would say that in moving forward, you need to be very careful to get it right.

The Chair: That is the time, Madam Larouche.

We are now moving to the NDP for two and a half minutes. Go ahead, Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Thank you very much.

How ready to go is the system to pay the Canada worker lockdown benefit if a region were to suddenly qualify? My understanding is that so far there are no regions that qualify, but if one were to qualify, how ready is that system to go and how will it start paying out individuals?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: The system is ready to go. Once the legislation is in place and royal assent is received, we probably could activate the system within approximately 24 hours.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: There's an attestation, I guess, in that system as well. People will make certain attestations about their income and their job situation.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: That's correct. There's an attestation and, of course, there are also checks. For example, the areas of lockdown would be identified—

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Sure.

I'm wondering. In that application, would they identify what kind of job they have, what their work is and who their employer is? Would they include that information anywhere in the application?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Not that I believe.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Okay.

Would it be possible for them to do that? Let's say they had a multiple-choice list that just asked, "Do you work in this industry or in that industry?" Is this something that could be added?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Technologically, it would be possible. The information I guess could be used for statistical purposes. I—

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: For instance, if the multiple-choice list corresponded to all of the industries listed in part 1 of the bill—tourism, hospitality, arts and culture.... I forget how many letter items there are; I think they're "A" through "M" or "A" through "O". They then could attest that they work in one of those affected industries and receive the Canada worker lockdown benefit even if there weren't a lockdown order, say, if the legislation were amended so they could do such a thing. That would be technologically possible if it were incorporated into the attestation. I think that's consistent with your previous answer. Am I wrong?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I have to confess that I don't.... Could you just explain to me the goal you're trying to achieve? I'd be happy to try to give you an answer—

• (1440)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Sure. The bill recognizes that there are a number of industries that are in distress, notwithstanding whether there's a lockdown order in effect in a particular area that people would be working in, a geographical area. Right?

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: Yes.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: They're listed in part 1. Now, if those industries are in distress, then self-employed workers, for instance, might need income assistance, whether there's a lockdown order or not. In fact, the government says they will. That's why they're making the wage subsidy available for workers in those industries.

I'm just wondering. If people were to attest that they work in one of those industries and derive their employment income from one of those industries, the Canada worker lockdown benefit could then be flowed to them regardless of the fact that there's a lockdown order.

Now, I respect that the legislation is not currently worded that way—

The Chair: Could we have a very short answer?

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: —but if it were, would it be technologically possible to implement?

The Chair: Give a very short answer, please.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: It would be technologically possible to ask for the information—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: —take it on an attestation basis and provide amounts. Yes, that would be a—

The Chair: Thank you. That's the time.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: [*Inaudible—Editor*] possible.

The Chair: We're moving to the Conservatives and Mr. Stewart for five minutes.

Mr. Jake Stewart: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is directed to the CFO of CRA, Janique. It's in response to my colleague Mr. McLean's question. Have the Calgary police, the RCMP or any investigative agency reached out to CRA with respect to the potential CERB fraud and the involvement of certain politicians in that area?

Ms. Janique Caron: Thank you for the question.

I am not aware that we were approached with that information.

Mr. Jake Stewart: Okay. As CFO, you'd probably be aware.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: On a point of order, Chair—

The Chair: We have a point of order—

Ms. Janique Caron: Just a precision, as the CFO, I'm not necessarily involved in some of the criminal investigations.

The Chair: We have a point of order from Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: This question continues to be asked. It was answered.

Again, they're not politicians. I know that Mr. Stewart is new to the committee. We're talking to public servants today. Once public servants answer a question, continuing to ask them a line of questioning that seems to be explicitly political is highly inappropriate.

The Chair: The officials are not politicians—

Mr. Greg McLean: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, in response to that point, this is not a political question. It's very much an administrative fraud question.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Stewart.

Mr. Jake Stewart: Obviously, I see it as a very important question, Mr. Chair. Through the chair, again my question to the CFO of CRA is this: How much of the \$7.4 billion is it going to cost Canadians to administer the program, or is there an amount above that?

Ms. Janique Caron: Thank you for the question.

I believe that this was included in the information we shared in writing earlier with the committee. For the measures that are included in Bill C-2, at this point the preliminary estimate of the whole cost to administer these programs is \$184 million over five years. They are preliminary estimates, in the sense that we still have some analysis to do. We need to consult some of the other government departments that are partnered with us. These costs include only the CRA costs, but it's the best information we have available at this time.

Mr. Jake Stewart: Okay. Thank you.

What type of increase has there been in the number of employees hired at CRA to administer the program? Do you have numbers on—

Ms. Janique Caron: Again, in the same exercise, in terms of the measures that are proposed in Bill C-2, we think that at peak times—we increase and level off—we would need 650 full-time equivalents to administer these programs.

Mr. Jake Stewart: Thank you.

If you were to take a look at the information provided by FINTRAC in July 2020 and the reporting it has done since, what do you think the total scope of fraud in the prior program would be? How many millions of dollars would it involve? What's the ceiling on the potential defrauded amounts?

Ms. Janique Caron: I do not have that information, but perhaps my colleague Mr. Lemieux can.... We've already indicated, I think, that the programs and our verification processes are in progress. In some instances they have not started, so we don't have the full picture.

● (1445)

Mr. Jake Stewart: Is Mr. Lemieux going to answer the question?

Mr. Marc Lemieux: Again, we haven't started the post-verification work on these programs. We don't have an estimate of the fraud in those programs. As we begin that work, we will assess the risks and we will determine how many resources we have to put towards it. We are going to be, as we provided in the written answer, doing that work over the coming years.

Mr. Jake Stewart: Today, obviously, we have money laundered. We have fraud, which happened to Canadian taxpayers. My constituents in Miramichi—Grand Lake certainly don't want to pay for any of that. Nobody's constituents here would want to pay for that. Anyone in their right mind who is paying taxes doesn't want criminals to get their money. No one wants to pay for it.

This has been going on since March 2020, and nobody has investigated anything. How does CRA feel about that? Do you think it's a good plan to wait two years to even think about going after the fraudsters? And now we're making another program with another \$7 billion to \$8 billion.

My question is, how's that benefiting the Canadian taxpayers?

Ms. Cathy Hawara: Perhaps I can answer the question, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Hawara.

Ms. Cathy Hawara: From a criminal investigations perspective, I can assure the committee that we are working closely with our partners. We are aware of the risks and the possibilities of fraud. As soon as we are able to share information, we will, but these are investigations that we cannot discuss. We are actively working on this.

The Chair: Thank you. That's your time, Mr. Stewart.

We are moving to the Liberals. Mr. Baker, you have five minutes.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I'm going to cede my time, if I may, to Mr. Beech.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Baker. We'll go to Mr. Beech.

Mr. Terry Beech: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today.

Thank you to the committee for all the good work we've been doing over this week.

I do want to take an opportunity to move a motion. Hopefully, we can get through it quickly and have more time with our witnesses before our time runs out.

It has become obvious, as we all know, that we lost part e) and part f) of the motion previously, but given the testimony we've had to this point, the urgency that is required to get these supports in

place has been made very clear, not just for our tourism businesses and other organizations that are hard hit but for people in communities right across Canada, especially during the break after the House rises.

I do appreciate the points that have been raised by colleagues, especially around the cultural sector and around impacts of benefits, especially income-tested benefits, and it is with that in mind that I would like to move the following motion.

I move (a) that pursuant to the motion adopted on Monday, December 6, the Standing Committee on Finance reinvide the Minister of Canadian Heritage and officials to appear before the committee for one hour at 11 a.m. on Monday, December 13; (b) that all amendments to the bill be submitted to the clerk of the committee by 4 p.m. on Saturday, December 11; (c) that the committee proceed to clause-by-clause consideration of Bill C-2 at 6 p.m. on Monday, December 13; (d) that at 10 p.m. on Monday, December 13, every question necessary for the disposal of the said stage of the bill shall be put forthwith and successively without further debate or amendment; and (e) that the chair be ordered to table the bill in the House on Tuesday, December 14.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beech.

Is there discussion?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We have Mr. Poilievre on a point of order.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes. Normally we leave motions to the end of the meeting.

The Chair: There is a motion on the floor, Mr. Poilievre

Is there discussion?

We have Mr. Blaikie and then Madame Larouche.

● (1450)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

Given that the motion does touch on witnesses that the committee would be hearing from before the end of its study, one of the voices we haven't heard around the table yet is the voice of Canadian labour. I understand that the Canadian Labour Congress is interested in appearing—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Mr. Chair, the interpreter is having trouble making out what Mr. Blaikie is saying. Can he bring his mike closer to his mouth?

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I can also speak a little louder.

Considering that the motion does treat the question of witnesses and it may well be that this motion passes, I think we would be remiss if we didn't hear the voices of labour at the table. This is a bill and a pandemic program that has a lot of consequences for workers across the country.

I believe the Canadian Labour Congress is quite interested in weighing in on this, so I would move to amend the motion. I think the motion says that the Minister of Heritage would be invited to appear at 11 o'clock. I would move that we invite the Canadian Labour Congress to appear at noon for an hour.

Mr. Terry Beech: I'd be happy to take that as a friendly amendment.

The Chair: We have a friendly amendment to the main motion.

We have Madame Larouche and then Mr. McLean, Mr. Poilievre and Mr. Stewart on our list.

Go ahead, Madam Larouche.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A motion was adopted by the committee on Monday, and we expect the Minister of Canadian Heritage to be here this coming Monday. That is a condition of the Bloc Qu b cois in order to continue with clause-by-clause consideration.

As for the NDP's motion, we'll see what the committee decides in relation to that part come noon.

[*English*]

The Chair: We have Mr. McLean.

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

I appreciate the motion.

I'm looking at the number of witnesses we've asked to be part of this committee so that we can get full disclosure on the effects of what are clearly undefined parts of this bill and what the financial implications are going forward, as well as the people who are affected. There's some important input that still has to come, and I really want to make sure we get that input.

When I look at the names we've put on the list, I look at FINTRAC, which we've heard from. We do need to talk to the Canadian Taxpayers Federation and the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, but it is really important to hear from the Auditor General of Canada. They need to have some input on this legislation as well.

We have other economists here who need to describe to us, from a finance committee point of view, exactly what the effects are of unlimited spending. As we've heard, that \$7.4 billion has no modelling associated with it. It has no end date. It's been extended by two years, when the program was only supposed to be extended by seven months. It is deep in the weeds. The Fraser Institute would give us some explanation on this. There's the RSM tax department and, finally, the C.D. Howe Institute. These are all reputable institutions that could give us some guidance on how to make this bill better.

The fact that we're not even interested in trying to make this bill better at this point in time and the rushed timetable within which Parliament's been called upon to deal with this very quickly, because the money's needed.... We know the money's needed. Money's always needed.

There's a retrospective portion of this bill, as you will recall, Mr. Chair. That's very clear about how people are going to be dealt with once this is over. The spelling out of those details is not yet clear.

I would like that clarity. If anybody could provide it, some type of explanation would be appropriate for this committee.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McLean.

Go ahead, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I have an amendment.

Before I get to that, I just find it interesting that the Liberals are learning, according to one of the government's own agencies—the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada—that people defrauded the CERB, that people took the money even though they don't live in Canada, that some people got multiple cheques in the same week, even though we all know that it is a—

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, are you speaking to the motion or to the amendment?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, I am. Actually, I am. I do have the floor, so thank you very little.

To go back to my point, the Liberals are learning that basically the taxpayer's being defrauded of money, that people are taking multiple CERB cheques in a week—even though it's a once-a-week benefit—that people who are organized criminals are defrauding the system and that people who don't even live in Canada are getting the money. What do they do? How do they respond to that news? They say, “Well, let's hurry up and pass some more government cheques” rather than “Boy, now that we've learned about all of this misappropriation, we'd better look into how that happened.” I think it's incredible how little interest they have in scrutinizing how the money is spent instead of just trying to shovel more and more of it out the door.

I would move an amendment to this proposed motion by adding the following paragraph—sorry; before I add the paragraph, I will say to delete all of the deadlines that Mr. Fragiskatos listed in his original motion for submissions of amendments and for reporting back to the House.

Instead, I would replace that with the following amendment: “That the Standing Committee on Finance continue to hear witness testimony on Bill C-2 the week of December 13, 2021; that the clerk reinstate witnesses who were unable to appear on Bill C-2 due to scheduling conflicts; that the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance appear before this committee on the economic and fiscal update 2021 for three hours prior to the House of Commons' rising on December 17, 2021; and that each answer that the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance provides does not exceed the time taken to ask the question.”

For some context—

• (1455)

The Chair: You have a point of order, Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Mr. Poilievre said that he was moving an amendment to Mr. Fragiskatos's motion. I just wonder if the amendment is in order, because the motion on the floor, of course, is Mr. Beech's motion.

I wonder if that was just confusion—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, it was.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: —or if we have an amendment that's out of order. Perhaps Mr. Poilievre or the chair can clarify.

Thank you.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you for that. In my old age, my sight has gotten so bad that I just....

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre's amendment is in order.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you. There were two handsome gentlemen over there, and I just mixed up which was which. I apologize for misattributing the original mover of the motion.

To her credit, the minister was here, but she specifically said that she couldn't answer certain questions because she didn't yet have a fall economic update. She specifically couldn't tell us how much debt we have in Canada or how much a one percentage point increase in interest payments would cost taxpayers. She said that once the fall economic update was introduced, she'd be able to answer these questions, so out of respect for her, I think the least we could do is call and ask her to testify on her update.

Now, this is conventional; when a finance minister introduces a fall update or a budget, typically they testify on it. We're scheduled to close shop for Christmas, unfortunately, as early as it is, so we would miss out on the opportunity to have the minister here to testify on her update. I know that she will be anxious to testify, so I am putting forward this amendment out of respect for her request to have a chance to speak to some of my questions after that update is introduced.

I'm furthermore open-minded to working with colleagues on all sides to make sure that the final amended motion that comes out of this place is one that everyone feels comfortable supporting.

Thank you.

• (1500)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chambers is next.

Mr. Adam Chambers: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You'll have to forgive me, because this is my first time on the committee, and I have a hard time with.... Perhaps Mr. Beech, who originally proposed the motion, has it is available in hard copy, or else could email it to the rest of us. It's quite difficult to manage what we're actually voting on.

I would like to make the point that when we're talking about timelines and witnesses, we are right now cutting into the witness testimony that we already decided was important to hear before we

got to a vote or moved on to clause-by-clause consideration. I think it's important for this committee to feel comfortable that it's heard from all the witnesses. We know that some witnesses were unable to attend. We've heard that a few others have been invited, certainly from the labour organizations, and there were some others listed by my colleague. I think it would be imprudent to consider cutting off witness testimony or not allow relevant time for those witnesses to come and provide their feedback on this bill.

I do think we need to be careful to allow an opportunity for members of this committee, and in effect the general public, to hear from the witnesses we had anticipated to hear from before we agree to move any more forward.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have Mr. Stewart and then Mr. McLean.

Mr. Jake Stewart: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I support Mr. Poilievre's amendment. I think the main part of this committee was to bring in the witnesses. This is an astounding amount of taxpayer dollars, dollars that were never defined in terms of where they were even coming from. I think the minister would be anxious to come back in here and answer all of the questions she couldn't answer this week. She admitted herself that she'd like to have more time to give more answers. There's all of next week, and there's more time beyond that as well.

By bringing in as many witnesses as we could possibly bring in, the members of this committee would get to ask more questions. We'd get to delve into the \$7.4 billion. We know the track record of the government with taxing and spending. We know the track record of the previous legislation. That's why FINTRAC was called in here this week. We know that Canadian taxpayers have footed the bill for fraudsters, criminals and potentially even terrorist organizations. I don't think some of that's been proven, but it hasn't been unproven yet either. This is something the Canadian taxpayers deserve—the scrutiny of this committee.

I think Mr. Poilievre's amendment is sufficient. As members of this caucus, we want to be here to ask these important questions. I think it's important for all Canadians that safeguards are placed in the legislation. We know they weren't last time. I think it will be extremely important for the members of this committee to have the ability to ask those important questions on behalf of our constituents, on behalf of mine in Miramichi—Grand Lake and the rest.

Therefore, I support the amendment.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stewart.

Go ahead, Mr. McLean.

Mr. Greg McLean: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the amendment very much.

I recall being here earlier this week. It's our first week at the finance committee. We've had a week of meetings and we've barely scratched the surface.

The minister was quite clear when she was here earlier this week, along with a high-level finance official who couldn't answer any question put to him, about the economic situation facing Canada at this point in time. This led us very clearly to the answer she gave, which was that she will be dealing with the economic situation in her economic update. We have the right and, I think, the parliamentary privilege of asking those questions.

The amendment is clearly in order and would add value for Canadians. It would add value to the respect this House has in terms of our looking at where government is spending money, how government is spending money and what the accountability is for that money. At this point in time, many Canadians are looking at those accountability mechanisms as completely lacking.

We have a bill before us today that refuses to be tightened in terms of the applicability and the definitions around some of the applications. Think about that, because it is a very compromising amendment that allows us to move forward with the business of Parliament while we also move forward with the business of passing a bill.

That is what we're here for. Let's take our parliamentary jobs very seriously, be accountable to Canadians and move forward with more than one dot on the map at a time. Let's move forward with what we're supposed to be doing here in the finance committee, which is addressing the finances of the country.

• (1505)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McLean.

Go ahead, Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

I just want to take a moment to say that the bill came here so quickly out of the House, with a certain collaboration in the House, that it seems like there's a plan for how this is going to happen.

I'm glad to be able to get one more of our witnesses here. I wonder if the Conservatives, who mentioned a number of witnesses, want to suggest a priority witness on that list. Sometimes the art of Parliament is to know when the jig is up and to get as much done as one can in the circumstances. If there's a suggestion from the Conservative bench for a priority witness for them who might be invited to accompany the CLC at noon, that's something I would urge them to consider while there's still time. It sounds to me like the bill is heading to clause-by-clause consideration. It would be good to hear from more people in the time we have available.

I know free advice isn't always appreciated at these tables, so take it for what it's worth. We'll see if there's anything more to say.

The Chair: I see no further discussion—

Go ahead Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Can I get a report from the clerk on the witnesses whose names were put forward and who have not been able to appear?

The Chair: The clerk is pulling up that information.

The Clerk: In terms of the Conservative witnesses, we weren't able to have Franco Terrazzano, the federal director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. We didn't have Philip Cross from the Mac-

donald-Laurier Institute. We couldn't get the Auditor General. We couldn't get Jack Mintz from the University of Calgary. We could not get Michel Kelly-Gagnon from MEI. We couldn't get Jason Clemens from the Fraser Institute. That's it for the Conservative list.

Do you want me to continue with the other parties?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Can you just remind me if there were any Conservative witnesses who actually did come?

The Clerk: Yes, there were. There was FINTRAC at the first meeting, and yesterday there was Mr. Steve Saretsky.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, there was Mr. Saretsky. Thank you.

Is there anyone else on the speakers list right now?

The Chair: I heard Mr. Blaikie. Who was next?

Go ahead, Mr. McLean.

Mr. Greg McLean: Mr. Chair and Mr. Clerk, we spoke yesterday. I know you attempted one time for some of these witnesses, but we talked about how not being available for one specific day wasn't the same as not being available to respond to this bill. Since our discussion yesterday, I understood you were going to reach out to some of the potential witnesses who could come here, particularly the Auditor General of Canada, and appear before this committee prior to having this rushed through committee and then back to Parliament.

Has that been met with any success in the last day?

The Chair: I do know that the clerk has been working tirelessly to get witnesses in and has done a commendable job in short order in doing the work that he has done.

I believe we reached out to the Minister of Canadian Heritage for Monday.

Is there any further discussion?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Could we ask for a 90-second break to consider Mr. Blaikie's advice? He gave some free advice. We're considering whether to take it.

The Chair: You have 90 seconds, Mr. Poilievre.

Members, we're suspending at this time.

• (1505)

(Pause)

• (1510)

The Chair: We have Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: We would like to have the CRA officials back on Monday, with the Auditor General.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, is this an addition to your amendment?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, I think that right now we're into somewhat informal discussions. I'd like to get a response. We can go into the formality of a motion, but if we have agreement from the other committee members to bring back the CRA officials and bring the Auditor General, then we can very quickly and amicably amend the original Terry Beech motion accordingly. If there is no such consensus, then I guess we can proceed to debate.

We have a suggestion from Mr. Blaikie, which I think was intended to break the logjam, and what we've proposed is how we would go about taking his advice.

Mr. Terry Beech: Just for clarity, so we can maybe consider this a friendly amendment, would that visit take place at the same time as Mr. Blaikie's witness's visit, at noon on Monday?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: We are flexible. If Mr. Blaikie's witness wants an hour beforehand or if we move things around, we're not insisting that it happen at the same time.

The good news—

Mr. Terry Beech: It's acceptable as long as it's at the same time, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: It's peace in the family.

The Chair: Peace in the family—that's what I hear.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, just in time for Christmas.

All right. Do we have agreement, then, on those witnesses as a friendly amendment?

Mr. Terry Beech: It's a friendly amendment.

The Chair: Members, there is agreement.

• (1515)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: All right. What I will do, then, is withdraw my original amendment for now.

Mr. Chair, I'll let you confer.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What I would then do is withdraw my original amendment, and the original motion would then be amended to include the Auditor General and the CRA officials who were here today, who will appear.

Mr. Blaikie would have to accept the friendly amendment to the friendly amendment.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Very well. I think the question we want to pose to the committee, Mr. Chair, is whether we have unanimous consent to add the Canadian Labour Congress, the Auditor General and the CRA officials who appeared today to Mr. Beech's original motion as witnesses who would be invited, and that those three witnesses would be invited for 12 o'clock. I think there is some discretion for the chair as to whether they would come at 12 and for an hour or two hours. I'm certainly happy to leave that as an open question to you to exercise some discretion, given the fact that there are more witnesses now for that space than there were before.

The Chair: Yes, I understand. Thank you very much for that, Mr. Blaikie.

Witnesses like the Auditor General have been invited and have not been able to attend our meeting. What would be the case if they are not able to make it? Will that be built into the amendment?

Mr. Terry Beech: The motion as originally drafted and then amended was to invite. That is what we'll do. We'll do so in all good faith, given the committee's will.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Can I speak to that as well?

The Chair: One moment. We're just looking at the motion for clarity. Is it “without further debate or amendment” in part d)?

Yes, it's for clarity.

Mr. Philippe Méla (Legislative Clerk): Good afternoon. I'm the legislative clerk for Bill C-2.

My question regarding the motion is about paragraph d), where it reads “that at 10 p.m. on Monday, December 13, every question necessary for the disposal of the said stage of the bill shall be put forthwith and successively without further debate or amendment”. I would like to know if, in the part of the amendment we are talking about, the amendments that are in the package that we're—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Pardon me, Mr. Chair.

The interpreter is flagging that they can't hear the clerk. Can he bring his mike closer to his mouth or take off his mask?

[*English*]

Mr. Terry Beech: Yes. To clarify, we're talking about amendments necessary to clarify or to dispose.

Mr. Philippe Méla: Right. The question I have for you is, what do you understand by “amendment”? Are those the amendments that were in the package, the ones that were submitted beforehand, or are they new amendments that will be submitted during the course of the debate?

Mr. Terry Beech: It's any and all.

Mr. Philippe Méla: Okay. The amendments that were in the package will not be considered.

Mr. Terry Beech: Maybe I'm misunderstanding.

Mr. Greg McLean: Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. McLean.

Mr. Greg McLean: I'm a little confused by the motion, because we are talking about any amendments being received by tomorrow at 4 p.m., yet we are hearing from witnesses on Monday. That's the reading I have.

• (1520)

The Chair: Let's hear from Mr. Beech.

Mr. Terry Beech: We will finish off any amendments that may be debated, but we will not allow any new amendments.

I was a little slow to your question. I apologize.

Mr. Philippe Méla: I couldn't hear you. Could you repeat that? I'm sorry.

Mr. Terry Beech: We'll finish any amendments that need to be debated, but we will not accept any new amendments.

Mr. Philippe Méla: Thank you.

The Chair: Okay, we're good. Is there any further discussion?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes. You asked if the....

The problem with the amended motion is that Mr. Beech is now clarifying that this is just a friendly invitation. We want the witnesses here. That's what we're seeking in exchange for allowing the debate to terminate. We need the Auditor General here. This is a \$7-billion addition to an already nearly \$100-billion package. We need to hear from the Auditor General on where the previous expenditures have gone in order to vote on these new expenditures.

The Auditor General fortunately serves Parliament. The Auditor General does not just come here when he or she desires; the Auditor General comes to Parliament when Parliament requisitions him or her. We're seeking the Auditor General. We want the Auditor General here. For Conservatives to support going to a vote on the passage of this bill, we need the wording to be clear that the Auditor General will be here and testify before the bill is returned to the House of Commons. We are not prepared to support going to a vote until that is clearly worded in the motion.

We hope that arriving at that outcome is not overly time-consuming. We should all agree—this is actually a fairly easy thing to agree on—that if we're passing a piece of legislation of this magnitude, the Auditor General would come to comment. Mr. Fragiskatos has said that the Auditor General has produced reports on the predecessor programs and has cited the AG's work in order to bolster the case for the bill, so he should have no problem supporting that the AG will come, or someone very senior in the AG's office in the event that there is a health problem or that some incredible extenuating circumstance interrupts. We're not asking for something unreasonable here.

I see Mr. Beech; let's see if we can work this out.

Mr. Terry Beech: Could the clerk clarify for us the powers we have and the abilities we have? I don't think changes in language will help us here, with all due respect to my colleague across the way. I think this is a good-faith motion. I would encourage them to adopt it.

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, could you comment?

The Clerk: I'm unclear on what the question is. "Powers" with regard to what?

Mr. Terry Beech: Well, without any sort of clear amendment or change to the language as it's currently stated, I think the language, with all due respect, accomplishes what the Conservatives are trying to do. I would encourage them to support it. If there is some stronger language, I'm certainly open to hearing it, but I don't think anyone's trying to pull a fast one here. I think we're all trying to be collaborative. It is our intent that those three witnesses will be here on Monday.

I don't know what other solutions I can offer the member opposite.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beech. It is up to the committee.

Go ahead, Mr. McLean.

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

I'll beg your pardon on this side, because there are some things here that I don't think we can.... Remember, we talked about blocking out the space here about when we get this stuff done.

Mr. Beech, in here you talk about "4 p.m. on Saturday" to receive the amendments. That's before we're going to hear any witnesses on the Monday. I think the input from these witnesses will be important, so I'm hoping we can say "6 p.m. on Monday" as opposed to "4 p.m. on Saturday" with regard to when we can submit amendments based on the testimony we've heard here.

I'd also like to mention this part of the motion: "d) that at 10 p.m. on Monday, December 13, every question necessary for the disposal of the said stage of the bill shall be put forthwith and successively without further debate or amendment".

However, we're talking about amendments here, so is that a misprint, or an oversight, or...? I mean, we're talking about putting forth amendments here.

Then it's those two things—those two words...or "amendment", and the date, this Saturday, to submit those amendments prior to hearing the witnesses. Can we change those, get the Auditor General in here and make sure we have the input we require on Monday?

• (1525)

The Chair: I have Mr. Stewart and then Mr. Chambers.

Mr. Jake Stewart: My opinion, Mr. Chair, alongside that of my colleague Mr. McLean, is that I think the importance of having the Auditor General here is very clear. This is a very large amount of Canadian taxpayer dollars—more than \$7.4 billion—and I think the government has repeatedly proclaimed just how much they listen to the AG and how they take the opinion of the AG so seriously. I think it's prudent that we have the Auditor General here so that we can ask questions about this \$7.4 billion. Who better to have here than the Auditor General, alongside the CRA and other officials?

I want to state the importance of that. If the government is serious about their own assertions on the importance of the AG, they will absolutely support this, and this committee will ensure that the Auditor General is present here for these questions.

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

If we are going to continue for much longer, we would need to take a 10-minute break for the resources that we have available to us here in this room, so I'm looking to members....

Mr. Adam Chambers: I think we're ready to vote, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, no, we're not. We still want to have the wording clarified, because it's not clear that we're getting the Auditor General before the bill passes. If it is simply a matter of inviting the Auditor General, we've already done that. It hasn't worked so far.

The Auditor General serves Parliament. We are a creature of Parliament. The Auditor General must be here to testify on this bill before it goes back to the House of Commons. We want wording in the motion that would clarify that, or we will not go to a vote, because there are many more things that need to be said in this debate.

As you know, Mr. Chair, this is not a time-limited debate, nor can members be interrupted when they're speaking on a motion like this. I think it would be in the best interests of all committee members that we come to a conclusion that is amicable and reach consensus instead of just ramming it through.

The Chair: Again, for the House resources, we are going to take a 10-minute pause.

I will suspend for 10 minutes.

- (1525) _____ (Pause) _____
- (1555)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order. Welcome back, everyone.

I want to thank the clerk and many around the table, the staff and all others, for all of their hard work. We have got hold of the AG, and it looks like she will be available from 12 to one o'clock, so we do have confirmation of that.

A voice: Call the question.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: No. If I could, I just want to make sure the motion reflects that.... The operation of the motion is dependent on her appearance and on the appearance of the officials from CRA.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Beech.

Mr. Terry Beech: The point of calling the AG and confirming was to give everyone on the other side assurances. We can't support that as an amendment. I hope that the motion as it is, including the new witnesses, is sufficient.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: If it is the case that she is going to be here and the CRA officials are going to be here, let's just put it in writing.

Mr. Terry Beech: Unfortunately, while I believe they have all the best intentions and it's been confirmed by our clerk, things happen, don't they?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right. I agree. Let's talk about that, then.

I want to thank the chair for reaching out to the Auditor General. I have to say that there was some confusion about why the Auditor General did not appear when invited earlier on.

That said, this committee obviously can't approve billions more in spending without reviewing the Auditor General's inquiries into earlier and similar spending. If the government really has confi-

dence in the way the dollars were spent, it should have no concern about having the Auditor General appear here to testify on that spending.

The members across the way tell me that she is coming to this committee, but they are not prepared to put that in writing. This welcomes the question, "Why not?" Are we expecting a last-minute cancellation? If so, why wouldn't we just specify in the motion a little bit of flexibility so that rescheduling could occur?

We have already, as Conservatives, indicated that we would even welcome another senior official from the Auditor General's office. It's rather unusual to allow that, because the Auditor General is a servant of Parliament and normally parliamentary officers show up here in a heartbeat when they are invited by committees. I don't understand why, frankly, the AG hasn't already arrived and testified, having been invited. That is very peculiar. Actually, I've never seen it in my 17 years here, including several years on the public accounts committee, that being the committee to which the AG reports.

I also note that one of the conditions for Parliament granting the expeditious passage of the COVID emergency spending was that the Auditor General would audit all of that spending. We're now coming on two years since that condition applied. By the way, this committee was responsible for overseeing all of that, and we still haven't had the Auditor General come here to tell us her findings. Putting aside that this government is now asking us to pass another \$7 billion of spending, which in and of itself has been rushed, it would have been normal business for the AG to come to testify regardless.

We're saying that you don't even have to do that. Bring a senior representative in her place if she's not available but, for God's sake, surely this committee can't approve yet \$7 billion more without at least hearing from the auditor who is responsible for telling us how the previous \$100 billion was spent. It's a very small request, actually, and I'm confused as to why this is even controversial. I'm not expecting that the government is going to agree with my fiscal policy. Obviously we have very different points of view. If the—

- (1600)

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, I'm going to interject.

Not only have we received verbal confirmation from the Attorney General—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Great. Put it in writing. No problem. It's the Auditor General—

The Chair: —but the Attorney General has put it in writing, as just received by the clerk, that she will be appearing. It is in writing here.

I take the Attorney General at her word, both verbal and written, that she will be appearing.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, I welcome the Attorney General as well.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I'm sorry. It's the Auditor General. I apologize.

I don't know why I said "Attorney General". It's the Auditor General.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Chair, as one final request, could we invite Jody Wilson-Raybould to appear?

The Chair: Again, Mr. Poilievre, both verbally and in writing, the Auditor General has confirmed that she will be appearing on Monday.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay.

Can I just confer with my colleagues for 60 seconds?

The Chair: Yes, for 60 seconds.

We'll suspend.

• (1600) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1605)

The Chair: I have Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I would just ask Mr. Beech, as he seems assured that the AG is going to be here, why he wouldn't just put that in the motion and make it a matter of finality. We could be out of here and everyone could be on their flights.

Mr. Terry Beech: I would be extremely happy to be out of here and be on my flight back to my daughters and my wife back in British Columbia.

I think we've been pretty clear that this is an important bill. We want to make sure that it gets passed to support Canadians. There have been verbal and written assurances that the Auditor General—I'm almost saying "Attorney General" now—or some senior representative in their stead will be here between 12 o'clock and one o'clock on Monday. I am looking forward to their testimony.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beech.

Go ahead, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: If the Auditor General doesn't come, then we have assurances that the Attorney General will begin prosecuting Mr. Beech.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, we'll stick to "AG".

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. It's AG.

All right. Listen, we are somewhat perplexed as to why you guys won't put that in writing if the AG has put it in writing. I've never seen anything quite like this—being told that something is going to happen but being asked to do it on faith. We will accept it this time, but we're early in this Parliament, and if there is a breach of trust on something like this, I can assure the committee, as you all know, that it would cause this committee to devolve into unproductive chaos for the rest of this Parliament.

The only way things ever work on these committees is if there is some level of trust that when one party... While we fight tooth and nail, when we make deals, we shake hands, we make commitments and we keep them to each other. That's how parliamentary committees—and, frankly, this place—actually get things done.

We will assume, as I have every reason to believe that Mr. Beech is acting honourably here and that you, Mr. Chair, are likewise, that the Auditor General will be here. If that doesn't happen, then it would be a tremendous breach of trust towards the committee by the government.

Mr. Terry Beech: Mr. Chair, I'd just like to put on the record that I appreciate the goodwill of the member opposite in this case. I do also hope that we avoid extreme chaos at this committee and that we're able to complete some good work on behalf of Canadians.

With that, I hope we can call the question.

• (1610)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beech.

It is a friendly amendment, so we will—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Can you read the final motion that we're voting on? It's been a little bit of a journey since it was moved.

The Chair: Can we have the final motion read?

The Clerk: The motion is as follows: "That pursuant to the motion adopted on Monday, December 6, 2021, the Standing Committee on Finance reinvide the Minister of Canadian Heritage and officials to appear before the committee for one hour at 11 a.m. on Monday, December 13; that the committee invite the Auditor General, the Canada Revenue Agency and the Canadian Labour Congress on Monday, December 13, from noon to 1 p.m.; that all amendments to the bill be submitted to the clerk of the committee by 4 p.m., Saturday, December 11; that the committee proceed to clause-by-clause consideration of Bill C-2 at 6 p.m. on Monday, December 13; that at 10 p.m. on Monday, December 13, every question necessary for the disposal of the said stage of the bill shall be put forthwith and successively without further debate or amendment; and that the chair be ordered to table the bill in the House on Tuesday, December 14.

The Chair: Is that clear?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes.

The Chair: Shall we put the motion to a vote? Okay.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: I'm looking for adjournment. I think everybody's ready to go.

This meeting is adjourned.

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