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• (1630)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC)):
Good afternoon, everyone. I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 53 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

Pursuant to the motion adopted by the committee on Wednesday, January 18, 2022, the committee is meeting on the study of the federal government consulting contracts awarded to McKinsey & Company.

I'm informing the committee that all witnesses appearing by video conference have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

Quickly, at the very end, before we start the subcommittee, there are a couple of items I have to go over that I need feedback on from the committee. I just need a couple of minutes then, please, and then we'll go on to the subcommittee.

We'll start by welcoming Minister Fraser.

Welcome to OGGO. I've been here seven years and we haven't seen you before, so welcome to your inaugural appearance with OGGO.

I understand you have an opening statement. Go ahead, for five minutes, please. The floor is yours, Minister.

Hon. Sean Fraser (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Perhaps in over seven years, the reason why you've not seen me is that I've only been in this position for a small fraction of that time. I'm happy to make my inaugural appearance.

[Translation]

Thank you, Chair and esteemed colleagues, for the invitation to join today's discussion about IRCC's work with McKinsey & Company.

[English]

Folks, I think everybody in this room is familiar with some of the challenges Canadian businesses are facing as they seek to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. We could pore over the labour force survey statistics to figure out the extent of the labour shortage in Canada if we wanted to, but my view is that you can figure out the reality by walking down the main street of almost any community

in Canada. You're going to find "help wanted" signs in the windows.

A lot of this is happening at a time when immigration already represents an extraordinary majority of our growth in the Canadian labour force. We need to continue to train our domestic workforce, there's no question, but it's not possible to meet the needs of the economy in the short or long term without embracing immigration as a key part of our strategy for growth. The fact of the matter is that we need more workers in just about every sector in every region of this country.

In November this past year, I announced that Canada is going to be increasing our annual immigration levels targets from 431,000 this past year to 465,000 this year and going to 500,000 by 2025.

[Translation]

These targets are supported by a plan that will capitalize on new tools to meet the needs of the Canadian economy while making it easier to settle newcomers in the communities with the greatest absorption capacity.

[English]

It's not unusual that a department might seek external advice on how to face certain challenges with its various departments or to achieve ambitious goals. However, to be clear, the advice we may have received over the course of a couple of contracts with McKinsey prior to my appointment to this position didn't touch on immigration policy, but rather efforts to digitize the process through which applications are processed at IRCC.

For what it's worth and for the sake of clarity, since being appointed as minister—or before, for that matter—I haven't had a relationship with representatives of McKinsey or Dominic Barton, if anybody was curious. The company did not advise me directly or influence the decision-making around our immigration levels plan. I know that has been the source of some commentary, but I would suggest it's without basis.

The decision made on immigration levels, the number of newcomers we welcome to Canada and how we envision the future of our country's population ultimately falls to me to determine in my capacity as the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. Although this is a decision I've arrived at independently, I take advice from a number of different groups, whether that's department officials or, I would argue most importantly, organizations, stakeholders, provincial and territorial governments, businesses and people across Canada who understand the needs of Canada over the course of the next generation and how immigration may play a key role in determining our country's future. It was on the basis of those conversations and my independent reflection that we landed on appropriate levels for immigration as published in the immigration levels plan.

McKinsey was engaged—as I mentioned, before I was appointed as minister—on two instances through an open bidding process that was run by the department under its authority to do so. Those particular contracts were designed to provide advice around the modernization of the immigration system and to enhance digital services, which are rolling out as we speak, although I would suggest there are greater benefits to be seen in the years ahead as we move to a fully digitized system.

• (1635)

[*Translation*]

Over the course of the past few years, even pre-dating the pandemic, an unprecedented number of people have been choosing to come to Canada.

On the one hand, that's great for our country, but on the other hand, there's no doubt that IRCC's aging systems and processes simply couldn't keep up with the increased demand.

[*English*]

Like all departments and agencies, IRCC relies on different partnerships to improve the way we serve clients. Sometimes we have to rely on third parties to provide specialized expertise for specific and typically time-limited purposes.

That's why, in 2018, the department determined it needed specific expertise to review how it serves clients and to recommend improvements. This resulted in two contracts between 2018 and 2020 being awarded to McKinsey. It represented in those particular years, for what it's worth, less than 1% of the department's operating expenditures.

The first contract provided an assessment and a set of recommendations to improve digital and other services and to begin the digital transformation process, which is ongoing today.

While the department moved ahead to implement some of those recommendations, it established the second contract, again, on a competitive basis. This was to grow its internal capacity, help IRCC employees gain specialized expertise themselves and accelerate the department's ability to carry on with the work to transform the digital system that we're moving towards, with a focus on improving client service.

[*Translation*]

The work carried out as part of these contracts identified gaps and opportunities to improve service delivery. It also led to the development of a transformation strategy, complete with a step-by-step plan, and two new operating models: one to deliver more efficient processes and another to deliver digital solutions for IRCC's clients.

[*English*]

Folks, I expect I'm getting close to the end of my five minutes, so perhaps I'll end my comments there.

The Chair: You're past it, if you could finish up.

Hon. Sean Fraser: That's fine, Mr. Chair.

I think you have a flavour for my commentary today. I'm happy to move to the questions that committee members may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Kusie, you have six minutes, please.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

Minister, in an article published by the CBC on January 4, 2023, two public servants in your department came forward about the role McKinsey had been playing in policy decisions of the department. One source told the media that “McKinsey was an idea from the government. The policy was decided for civil servants. It causes a lot of operational instability”.

Why is your government and why are you, as minister, allowing a firm such as McKinsey to make policy decisions instead of public servants?

Hon. Sean Fraser: For the sake of clarity, I would certainly dispute that McKinsey is making policy decisions on behalf of the government. That is not a fact.

For what it's worth, you framed your question as “why would I, as minister”. We're dealing with two contracts that were awarded internally by the department, before my appointment to this position.

In any event, this is an ordinary exercise where the department was seeking to grow its capacity to offer digital services. We're in the midst of a major digital transformation within IRCC that I do believe will end up with a better product for IRCC's clients, who are people seeking to be reunited with families or coming to seek opportunities.

I do believe the movement to a digital transformation within our system is the right one.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Minister, that's not what I asked. I was asking you specifically about McKinsey's implication in determining policy for your department.

Why is your government allowing McKinsey to make policy decisions instead of public servants?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mrs. Kusie, that is not happening.

If there's a specific policy you would like to ask the origins of, I would be happy to give my perspective, but the decisions that I have made have not been made on the basis of McKinsey's direction. I can reassure you of that.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: That's not what your civil servants said and that's not what the CBC reported.

The same CBC article, Minister, also said:

The IRCC sources are also critical of McKinsey's possible influence over Canada's immigration targets.

Ottawa announced a plan this fall to welcome 500,000 new permanent residents each year by 2025, with an emphasis on fostering economic growth.

The target and its stated justification follow similar conclusions in the 2016 report of the Advisory Council on Economic Growth, chaired by McKinsey's then-global head Dominic Barton.

The advisory council recommended a gradual increase in permanent immigration to 450,000 people per year to respond to labour market dynamics. At the time, Canada was accepting about 320,000 permanent residents.

John McCallum, the immigration minister at the time, expressed his reservations about the "huge figure" presented in the report.

But one of the sources at IRCC said the department was quickly told that the advisory council's report was a foundational plan.

Again, why doesn't the department have the capacity or the expertise to set policy around immigration targets rather than needing them to be recommended by McKinsey?

Minister, it was stated in reporting by the CBC that it is not the Department of Immigration that was setting this policy; it was McKinsey.

• (1640)

Hon. Sean Fraser: With great respect to Mrs. Kusie, as the person who sets these policies, I can tell you that I wasn't informed by McKinsey's work and didn't meet with them in my development of this past year's immigration levels plan. As I mentioned during my opening remarks, this is driven by the need for businesses to find workers, to identify the skills that will be necessary to grow the Canadian economy for the next generation and to make sure we're doing what we can to continue to be a leader on humanitarian issues and reuniting families.

The allegation that McKinsey is making decisions around immigration levels policy is false. The truth is that there were two contracts between 2018 and 2020 that were geared towards improvements to the digital processing of cases and movement towards a fully digitized system at IRCC, but it is not a true allegation that McKinsey has somehow been able to set the federal government's immigration policy.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Then, Minister, you're going against the words of your public servants. You're going against what they are saying to the media. You're going against what the media is reporting. Frankly, after seeing the way your government just voted in the House on Bill C-290, it's not very surprising. It's not surprising, and I see the member who passed the PMB is agreeing with that. This is not surprising. Considering the response that we saw from that poor gentleman from Afghanistan in the chamber last week, it's not surprising to me that you're disregarding the words of your public servants.

You are also contradicting the words of not only your predecessor, Minister McCallum. You're also contradicting the words of the former finance minister Bill Morneau, who also said in his book, "We developed a number of good ideas and concepts. They included setting immigration targets and expanding the number of scientists available to work on new developments that could either support existing economic activities or inspire new ones."

You're saying one thing, Minister. Your public servants, the media and your predecessors are saying something else.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't believe there was a question in that intervention, Mr. Chair.

My honest belief is that Canada needs more people. I make the argument at every instance I have in public, including at an event with the Construction Association of Nova Scotia this morning, that the reasons we need more people are largely driven by economics and demographics I am concerned about. With respect, there are many thousands of people who work in the department, the most senior officials—

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: They're driven by outside consultants, including McKinsey.

Thank you, Chair.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, it's hard to understand why when it's my turn to speak I'm being interrupted by the questioner.

The Chair: Minister, I'm afraid that is our time, but I'm sure your colleague will allow you the opportunity.

Mr. Jowhari you have six minutes, please.

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

Welcome to the minister and the officials.

Minister, thank you very much for all the work you're doing in helping us navigate through some challenging times.

Minister, I'm going to ask questions, many of which you've already addressed in your opening remarks, but consider this an opportunity to expand, to clarify and to solidify your responses for the record one more time.

Minister, why, in your opinion, was McKinsey hired prior to your assuming this role? What role was it playing for the department?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think it was straightforwardly explained in my introductory remarks, but for the sake of clarity, McKinsey was engaged in 2018 and 2020 for particular kinds of work, first to assess the processes internally on how we deal with cases that come through the department and to help develop a strategy that would allow us to move towards a digital system. Subsequent to the initial work that was performed, McKinsey was retained again to help build capacity within IRCC so that we could do the work ourselves going forward to implement a digital transformation that they helped develop the guidelines around the process for.

What's important is that we understand it's ordinary for federal departments and public servants at different levels to engage consulting firms, but it's really also important to understand that this is not a displacement of the work that the public service does. When you want to deal with a time-limited initiative without expanding the overall size of the public service, that could be one reason to think about using an external group.

The other reason, which I think is essential to understand, is that it's appropriate to do so when you could use additional skills that may not currently be present within the department. There are tremendously talented public servants who have digital skills, but the retention at McKinsey actually helped us grow that pool of talent to position us better as we migrate from a largely paper-based system towards a digital system. We're starting to see certain digital features roll out, and over the next few years, we'll have a fully digital system at IRCC.

• (1645)

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Minister.

I would like to get your input on another thought. As an MP who has a lot of immigration cases coming to his office—and I have been there for seven years—I have seen the challenges that we've had. The levels have increased. The complexity of the cases has increased, and the demand has increased.

Is it possible...? I'm trying to put the previous minister of immigration, although it goes way back, into perspective. Had we not done anything, had we not changed our processes, had we not moved on to the digital transformation that your department, your ministry, is embarking on, would we be in a position to be able to accept the number of immigrants that we are accepting in order to deal with the shortages we are having?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Look, we live in a very different world from when we first were elected in 2015, Mr. Jowhari. The reality is that, with the volume of work we're doing at IRCC, not just in our immigration levels plan, which processes permanent residents, but also with the significant expansion of the international student program and the increased reliance on people here with a temporary status to work—and, frankly, the fact that Canada has become a major destination for visitors around the world—there's no way we would be able to meet the demands of the system.

In particular, there's a major thing that has happened between then and now. The COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on the immigration system. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that when you close a border to protect public health against the spread of a virus, you can have an impact on the folks who were involved in bringing people across those borders.

What has happened is that, for a period of time, we had to stop hosting citizenship ceremonies, for example. Part of the work that was informed by McKinsey helped us to evolve the digitization of the citizenship program, and now we're producing record numbers of citizenship grants on a monthly basis.

It's just one example of the kinds of efficiencies we're starting to see now across different immigration streams. If we want to continue to grow our immigration ambition, which I believe is a good thing for Canada, we're going to need to embrace digital technologies as a government that wants to do business in the 21st century.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Minister.

With about a minute and 15 seconds left, I'm going to ask several other rapid questions you have already responded to. I just want to get them on the record.

Did you or any of your ministry staff at any time meet with McKinsey during the time it was providing its services?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I haven't, personally. I would have to get back to you to see if there were any other meetings. Perhaps in the next round I could point to our deputy as someone to ask about engagement with the department.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: You were very clear on this, and I'm going to ask again. Did at any time the output of the work that McKinsey was hired for influence any decision that you have made during your time serving as a minister currently—I would dare to say in the past—and in the future?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It has helped set the stage for policies towards movement from a legacy-based, paper-based system towards a digital system, but only on the processes for my part. The immigration policies around how many people should be welcomed or changes to specific programs have not been informed by the work that McKinsey was contracted to perform.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: My last question is—

• (1650)

The Chair: I'm afraid that was your last question—for now.

Mr. Garon, we'll go to you for six minutes, but before we do, I want to congratulate you on the passing of your private member's bill regarding the protection of whistle-blowers. I do have to say that, as someone who worked on the original study from OGGO, I was extremely disappointed that those who worked on it from the government side refused to vote for it. However, I'm very pleased that it passed. It will be fantastic for whistle-blowers. Thank you, sir.

Go ahead for six minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon (Mirabel, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's always a pleasure to work on strengthening public sector integrity.

Minister, McKinsey is synonymous with the Enron scandal; the commercial papers; corruption in South Africa; the tobacco industry in the United States and defending its interests; jailed dissidents in Saudi Arabia; the opioid crisis in the United States, during which McKinsey managed to drive up opioid sales; the illegal implications in a presidential campaign in France; working for the Chinese military while at the same time working for the American military in Taiwan.

You've confirmed that McKinsey was advising your department on ways to operationalize your policies. Are you okay with that?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Some of the examples you listed, obviously, touch on questionable facts—

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Minister, the question is clear: Are you okay with these people having access to information from your department, yes or no?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Look, with respect, I disagree. I realize you're trying to have some gotcha moments.

The reality is that, when you start to paint people with a brush that worked for a particular company in another jurisdiction, I think sometimes you give an excuse to the bad actors to get away with not being held responsible for their own activities. We have a—

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Mr. Chair—

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, I'm having a difficult time when we can't.... It seems I'm being spoken over.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Mr. Chair—

[English]

The Chair: I apologize, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Mr. Chair, I've already lost 20 seconds with the minister. I understand that the minister and I disagree on the facts. That's his position, and I accept it.

The public servants working in your department stated that they were uncomfortable with the new immigration targets and that they opposed them, but that certain people working for McKinsey inside the department had some influence.

Who's right? Is it you, with your official version of the facts, or the folks who work inside the machine?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: First, Mr. Chair, if it means I need to extend my appearance by 30 seconds so we can have a conversation in which we don't speak over one another.... It's difficult in a virtual environment. I mean no offence to my colleague.

On the substance, I can assure you, from my perspective as the person who holds the pen in designing the immigration levels plan, the influence that was exerted upon me was from the Canadian business community. It was from workers who were concerned that they wouldn't have a job if their employer closed and communities, like the one I come from, that were worried about seeing young people moving away. It was from provincial governments, territorial governments and other organizations. I don't believe there was internal pressure from McKinsey that influenced my immigration levels plan one bit.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

So the minister has confirmed that the whistle-blowing public servants may not have been telling the truth.

Minister, by not standing in your place when the vote occurred, you recently opposed an amendment that would have improved whistle-blower protections.

Doesn't that make you uncomfortable? Do you really believe it's good practice not to increase their protection in a more transparent public service?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm sorry, but I think the member is conflating multiple issues here. I make no allegations about officials who have not been named who have suggested that they were in disagreement with my immigration levels plan. If you're interested in the perspective of the department's officials, we have some sitting in the room with you.

To our deputy, if you'd like to interject to present the views of the department yourself—

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Mr. Chair, the minister misunderstood the question.

If he spoke better French, maybe things would be easier.

You recently opposed—

Mr. Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Lib.): Aren't you going to say something, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Chair: No, it is the member's time.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: It's the member's time, but we have to have some decorum. Come on.

The Chair: Please, Mr. Housefather, it is the member's time. I'll allow him to continue.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: The member for Mount Royal and French—

[English]

The Chair: I would suggest that we maintain decorum.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I'd like to raise another question with you now.

We met with the procurement ombudsman recently and asked him whether the special auditor function he was given would allow him to identify if the work that the minister or the department outsourced could've been accomplished by our skilled public service, instead.

The ombudsman's response was that his job was to verify whether the duplication of work was done in compliance with the rules, but that there wasn't anyone in the government that could currently verify whether, in your department, the work that was given to McKinsey could've been handled by our public servants.

Are you not bothered by the fact that, to this day, no comprehensive auditing role was attributed?

I'm not making any of this up. The ombudsman told us as much two days ago.

• (1655)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, first I want to say that I'm very happy to be learning French. It's a new language for me, but I've made some very real progress and I intend to keep working at it.

Parliamentary privilege allows members to speak in the language of their choice. When highly technical subjects are involved, it's essential for me to be able to explain myself in my first language.

[English]

All of this said, I will continue to work to improve my French. If the honourable member would like to engage me in that practice as some of his colleagues do, I would—

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: What's your answer to the question, then, Minister?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: To his question, I think it's important that we come to understand that the reason McKinsey was engaged was in large part to expand the capacity of the department when it comes to offering the transformation towards digital services. Should people disagree with me on that, they're free to do so, but I don't view the award that was granted back in 2020 to be one that reflected redundancies that existed within the department already.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: The practice at McKinsey & Company is to not put their logo on every document and to usurp the logos of the clients they're working with. They could, for instance, use the Government of Canada's logo or that of a government department on the documents they produce.

Can you solemnly affirm to the committee that McKinsey & Company used their own logo on all of the documents related to the

contracts with your department and that they never used the Government of Canada's logo on any of the documents they produced?

[English]

The Chair: I'll have to ask for a very brief answer, perhaps in the next round.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, I have not tried to examine the logos on all the documents that exist within IRCC.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Ms. Kwan, welcome to OGGO. You have six minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the minister and officials for appearing before the committee.

I just want to establish the process with respect to policy decisions. I fully anticipate and expect that it's the minister who makes these decisions. However, before the minister does, often officials will provide briefing documents and recommendations for the minister's consideration.

Is that the case for the immigration levels numbers or any other policy within IRCC?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Ms. Kwan, I want to make sure I answer your question. If I need to extend this to make sure I don't dodge it on you here, I'd be happy to.

The policy process, of course, comes to me. At the end of the day, my signature goes on whatever policy decisions we take. Sometimes there are delegated authorities to departments, but it's common for us to receive advice from different groups that could lead to recommendations. That is not a unique practice.

In addition to whatever exercise the department may undertake, I will on many occasions engage with stakeholders or partners directly.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

My question is this. At any point in time, did McKinsey engage in discussions or meetings with officials where they might have discussed policy decisions, or did work that would have implications for policy decisions? To that end, could the minister provide a list of the officials who actually met with McKinsey and what topics they discussed?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think my deputy minister, who's in the room, would be better positioned to discuss engagement at the officials level with McKinsey.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Maybe the easiest thing would be that, if there is such a list, we could receive that list of where McKinsey had engaged in discussions with officials. Could you provide that list and what topics they discussed?

My next question is this. The minister said that there wasn't the capacity or they needed McKinsey to help build capacity within IRCC, yet IRCC staff within the department are on the public record as saying that they offered to work with the government with ideas and forwarded these ideas, and there was zero uptake. IRCC, by the way, is the one department within government that contracts out more work than any other department. That has been confirmed with a PIPSC report.

The other thing that has been noted is that IRCC does not make a reasonable effort to hire before contracting out. As well, IRCC has more grievances than any other department within government. This is on the public record, in a report that's there for everyone to see.

Given the comment that people tried to offer their ideas and suggestions, why were those not received well and taken up?

• (1700)

Hon. Sean Fraser: I have a different view, with great respect, Ms. Kwan, on your allegation about our being slow to hire and also on the interplay between McKinsey and officials within the department.

To be a little bit more specific, my view, of course coming in after some of the work was performed, is that the collaboration that took place between the consulting firm and the department actually did help grow the capacity. We're starting to see some of the work that has come about as a result of the groundwork that was done a few years ago result in new digital processes.

With respect to the allegation about being slow to hire, since the past summer we've hired more than—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry. I'm going to interrupt you here, Minister. I think you might have misheard me. It wasn't slow to hire. The issue is that the government and the department chose to contract out instead of hiring in-house.

In fact, there's a report here that I'll turn the minister's attention to, the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada's "Contracting Out Report", which actually outlines very clearly the contracting out of IRCC and how it's actually breaching the collective agreement, by the way, in the number of grievances that exist within the system. That's there and on the record.

It has also been reported by CBC that staff within IRCC had offered to work with the department on some of these issues, yet that offer was not taken up.

I think the point here is that there is a systemic problem, I would suggest, within IRCC, then, where the workers are not being valued and we're not utilizing the talent from within. There needs to be an explanation as to why there is this level of contracting out that IRCC has engaged in with McKinsey.

Hon. Sean Fraser: First, let me dispel any misconceptions that, somehow, there isn't respect for the public service. They are and have been doing extraordinary work under very difficult circumstances, particularly over the past few years. We ask an awful lot of them as we seek to grow our immigration ambition, and I'm grateful for the work that they do.

With respect to the specific contracts that we're talking about with McKinsey and IRCC, my view is that it was in an area that was both time-limited and that required incremental work that wasn't within the capacity...not to operate a new digital system in perpetuity but to help build the capacity to finish the design and implementation of it.

The contracts were entered into within the department, not at a ministerial level. If there's supplementary information that the deputy minister has on this, I would be happy to give her time to offer an explanation.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I will say this—

The Chair: I'm afraid that's our time.

We're now into our second round of five minutes with Mr. Paul-Hus.

[*Translation*]

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

Good day, Minister.

First off, I'd like to say that my colleagues in the opposition and myself were a bit insulted by your accusation that members were making unfounded accusations. That's what you said in your opening statement. I'll keep my questions simple, then.

Do you acknowledge that Dominic Barton was part of the Economic Council of Canada in 2016, yes or no?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: At the time, was Dominic Barton still global managing director at McKinsey?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I expect, the way you positioned the question, yes. I don't keep tabs on when he came and left the company. I don't have a relationship with him.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Minister, we don't make unfounded accusations since we have accurate information.

We know that, when Mr. Barton sat on the Economic Council of Canada while being global managing director, the number of contracts awarded to McKinsey & Company skyrocketed. We also know that your old colleague, John McCallum, former immigration minister, stated in 2016 that he wasn't entirely comfortable with some of the discussions around the work being done in immigration.

How do you expect us not to connect all those dots? What are you basing yourself on when you claim that the statements we've made—that McKinsey is involved in IRCC's work—are unfounded?

• (1705)

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think it's an extraordinary and unfounded analytical leap to suggest that, because someone worked for both McKinsey and provided some feedback to the government of an economic nature, it somehow means that a different person was in charge of the immigration levels plan than was, in fact, the case. I know this because I am personally involved. Through my own experience in helping design the immigration levels plan with my officials and my team, I know where the motivation for those immigration levels plans came from—

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: I have to interrupt you, Minister.

Can you confirm Radio-Canada International's information? No one can claim that Radio-Canada International are purveyors of fake news.

Can you confirm the reports that immigration department employees complained about the fact that McKinsey and the Advisory Council on Economic Growth were too closely involved in the development of policy related to Canada's immigration targets?

Are you saying those reports are false?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm saying that your suggestion that a department made up of thousands of individuals who have disparate opinions is a monolithic entity that somehow unanimously disagreed with the approach I was taking is absolutely false. It's entirely possible that there are individuals who may have privately expressed disagreement, but my view—and I feel very well-supported by departmental officials at every level—is that we are on the right track when it comes to our ambition and immigration, because it's a good thing for the economy.

[Translation]

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

My time is flying by and I'd like to talk about contracts.

Your department is that one that gave McKinsey & Company the most contracts over the last few years. Together, they total \$24.5 million.

You mentioned that some of those contracts were related to assessments of internal processes and digital transformation strategies.

I suppose those two contracts alone don't account for the entire \$24 million. What other contracts were awarded?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: My understanding is that there were two contracts. The first was in 2018-19 for \$2.9 million, which was to do the external assessment of the processes that we would later come to revamp, and to provide a strategy and operating model for the digital transformation.

The second contract, which is the much larger of the two, was, I believe \$24.8 million. That was mostly designed to help build capacity within IRCC to help focus on operational improvements,

with a step-to-step pathway toward digitization and making sure we could build the capacity to deliver on a new digital system on a go-forward basis permanently.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: The contract that involved the development of the immigration strategy you announced in November, how much did that one cost?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: There was no such contract.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: So you're confirming that McKinsey & Company weren't involved whatsoever in the development and strategic analysis of the federal government's immigration targets.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I am not aware of any involvement McKinsey may have had in informing the immigration levels plan. I have not reviewed anything they have produced as part of my exercise in developing the immigration levels plan.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: If we were to poke around in the desk drawers at IRCC, could we find a report you may not have seen yet?

[English]

The Chair: Please give a very brief answer.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I feel I've been fairly clear. If my deputy minister wants to take a kick at the can, I'd be happy for her to give a summary of whatever other work she may be aware of.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Fox (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Mr. Chair, I can confirm that we have no reports indicating that McKinsey worked in any capacity on the three-year immigration plan, which covers 2022, 2023 and 2024.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry. That was past our time.

Mr. Kusmierczyk may give you an opportunity to expand on your response.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Minister.

My Conservative colleague again referenced Mr. Dominic Barton, almost as if on cue.

I'd like to read, into the record, an op-ed piece that appeared in the Toronto Star this afternoon, which was penned by the Honourable John Reynolds. He is a former Conservative MP and a former Conservative leader. He is assessing the performance of my colleagues around the table, when it comes to this issue. He writes:

The attacks levied against [Mr. Barton] by the Conservative party I once led are baseless. Barton is not friends with Trudeau. He did not leverage a non-existent friendship for economic benefit to himself or McKinsey. In fact, in the roles noted above, he accepted far less remuneration than he might otherwise have to help our country and our government.

He continues on:

These repeated accusations are not only disingenuous but speak to a more worrisome attack—an attack on infusing more talent into our government and the public sector. If this is the treatment that high-profile business leaders can expect after lending their talents to the public sector, most will simply take a pass. And it's a shame.

I'll continue here, as well:

...the Conservative Party of Canada needs to ditch the cheap politics and bring forward its own ideas about how to improve our country. Until its MPs can take these steps, I question that they will be taken seriously enough by Canadians.... And if Canadians do give them a mandate to govern, who will want to help them?

Minister, you mentioned a very serious subject: the challenge of labour shortages in this country. Can you please speak to that challenge, the urgency of it and why it's an "all hands on deck" approach in terms of the necessity for Canadians to meet that challenge?

• (1710)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you, Mr. Kusmierczyk.

The best immigration policy will be informed by the economic context in which we're currently living. In the jobs report that came out recently, 150,000 jobs were added to the Canadian economy in January. We're now dealing with 126% of the jobs that were lost during the pandemic. These have now been recovered. GDP is well in advance of prepandemic levels. The rate of unemployment is near the all-time low in Canada's recorded history.

At the same time, there are more than 800,000 jobs vacant in the Canadian economy. We need to be investing in training to have the domestic workforce grow. We can't meet the short-term needs of the labour force or the long-term skills gap without recruiting workers from other parts of the world.

We are also dealing with a demographic situation that should alarm all of us. Fifty years ago, there were seven workers for every retiree. There are closer to three today. In my part of the country, it's closer to two. If we don't welcome working-age families into our communities, the conversation we're going to have, a generation from now, won't be about labour shortages. It will be about whether we can afford schools and hospitals. This is a reality I'm dealing with in my own community, as a result of depopulation a few years ago. Thankfully, that trend has reversed and restored some vitality to the community I call home.

We need to continue to increase immigration levels and expand our temporary programs if we're going to meet the needs of the economy and serve the interests of Canadians.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you, Minister.

You've made it clear that the contracts are about service delivery. They're not about policy development.

Can you speak to how companies like McKinsey, Deloitte or other external consultants bring value in terms of the transformation

we're trying to undergo to bring more workers to this country? How do they help?

Hon. Sean Fraser: This is really important. There is the potential for governments to outsource the work of the public service where they don't need to. That's not what this is, in my view. The contracts that have been issued in this specific instance were designed to help us implement a new digital approach to processing applications to expand the capacity of the department, but also to help the department grow its capacity so it could implement the system in the long term on the back end of its design.

We're starting to see new features already roll out, like the digital application process for citizenship and now permanent residency. Case trackers are coming where people can get an update on the status of their case for certain immigration streams on their phones rather than having to call IRCC. We've digitized so many records during the pandemic as a result of the centre we've opened in Cape Breton to help bring paper-based applications into the system. This will eventually allow us, in an office that is having a slow day, to pick up the slack and process files that are somewhere else in the global network.

This is common-sense stuff.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Sean Fraser: This is the path forward.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Garon you have two and half minutes please.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Mr. Chair, I'd first like to rise on a point of order.

The interpreters were unable to hear the answer to my previous question, so we didn't get the answer.

Before starting my turn to speak, would you allow me to ask my question again and to hear the minister's answer, in full respect of official languages?

[English]

The Chair: I'm sure everyone is in agreement with that.

Go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: I'll be quick.

At McKinsey, it's common practice not to use their own logo on the documents they produce for their clients. The firm uses their clients' logos instead.

In this particular case, there would probably be documents produced by McKinsey bearing the Government of Canada's logo or that of a government department, whether it's a PowerPoint presentation or any other type of document.

Did McKinsey & Company at any moment use the Government of Canada's or your own department's logo on the documents they produced for internal use?

• (1715)

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm not personally aware of them. Perhaps I can ask the deputy minister to offer commentary.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'll offer the same response.

I have no knowledge of a document produced by McKinsey bearing the Government of Canada's logo, but we can certainly go through all the files to confirm that that's the case.

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: My time's starting now, Mr. Chair.

Deputy minister, I imagine you'd be able to table a sampling of PowerPoint presentations McKinsey produced for your department, bearing their own logo, all identified, so that committee members may peruse them.

Ms. Christiane Fox: We can absolutely supply the committee with any and all documents produced by McKinsey & Company. I think it's already in the works. We're working on the template.

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Mr. Chair, please consider that the request was made and then accepted by the department.

Minister, when he appeared before the committee, Dominic Barton very clearly stated that the issue of immigrants' integration and linguistic integration into Quebec society was never part of his considerations on the various committees tasked with setting immigration targets.

Unsurprisingly, in a stunning coincidence, your targets happen to be the same as Dominic Barton's. I, for one, don't believe in coincidence, but you certainly seem to.

We'd asked, through a question on the Order Paper, whether you'd commissioned any studies into the effects of your new targets on the French language in Quebec.

You refused to produce any study into the effects of your immigration targets on the French language. Why is that?

Hon. Sean Fraser: That's not true.

The situation with the province of Quebec is quite different. We have the Canada-Québec Accord relating to Immigration and Temporary Admission of Aliens. This accord sets out the terms and grants Quebec the power to select its economic immigrants.

In my opinion, if my goal is to continue to increase immigration levels across the country and protect the demographic weight of francophones outside Quebec, it is essential—

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: I really like your answer, Minister, but I want to be clear nonetheless that we obtained information in response to Question No. 979 on the Order Paper. It showed that your department didn't produce any studies on the impact of those targets.

You seem like a reasonable and very thoughtful person. Why didn't you try to think about that?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's because Quebec has the power to set its immigration cap for the province of Quebec.

Under the Canada-Quebec accord, Quebec has the power to set its immigration cap based on its demographic weight in Canada, plus 5%.

The Quebec government can increase that cap. I can't increase that cap for Quebec.

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: I've been told to keep it brief, Minister.

You know as well as I that there isn't just economic immigration, and that Quebec does not set the number of immigrants in all streams.

So I'll repeat myself.

When you increased the targets in the streams of interest to you, why didn't you feel it necessary to consider the impact those targets would have on French in Quebec?

[English]

The Chair: Minister, I'm sorry. I'm going to interrupt. Perhaps we're going to have to get to your answer when Mr. Garon has his last round. I'm afraid you're past time.

Ms. Kwan, you have two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: IRCC has 327 IT employees. That's fewer than half of what Correctional Service Canada has and about half as many as CBSA. Between January 2018 and September 2022, IRCC used 270 IT contracts but only hired 23 permanent positions. If IRCC needs IT for this transformation that the minister's talking about, why isn't IRCC hiring public servants to do this work instead of contracting it out?

How many staff, permanent positions, could the department get with \$24.8 million?

Hon. Sean Fraser: For clarification—and I may have to point to my deputy to confirm the numbers—I believe we've added about 160 new IT staff. This would include designers and IT specialists. The bigger point to me is not just the design of the system and people who have IT skills but developing a system where our staff who process ordinary cases will have the ability to use the digital system on the back end.

To my deputy, if there's further clarity you'd like to offer on the numbers, I'd be happy to yield the floor.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Maybe the minister can have staff table those numbers dating back over the last five years in terms of what the trend is and the dollars spent on contracting out that have gone out correspondingly to date. I think that would be useful.

The other thing, of course, with IT staff is that it includes programmers as well. With my information, programmers were almost 60 times as many contracted out, but there were only two advertisements during this period for regular employees. Again, why isn't the government hiring in-house instead of contracting out? You're talking about \$24.8 million for this transformation.

I also want to point that, at the CIMM committee, immigration consultants and lawyers have come up to talk about what disasters the transformation and digital process are in certain areas. They're saying that they can't upload documents, and when they do spend hours doing it, the system crashes.

The minister, I'm sure, is aware of all of this. Is this what we bought with \$24.8 million?

• (1720)

Hon. Sean Fraser: I would suggest that we're in the middle of a major transition, and the system we're working with now is predominantly the legacy system GCMS that the department uses rather than a fully modernized system, which will be available and fine-tuned after a few years. I think it's important that we continue to work with those stakeholders to understand where there are gaps to be improved and then work to improve them.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: That's our time.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I appreciate that it's a new system, but the reality is that it's not working very well. If McKinsey was spearheading this with \$24.8 million in tax dollars, it's not a very good job. I have to say that.

Can the minister advise if McKinsey—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Kwan. I'm afraid that is your time. You will have one more two and a half minute round after this.

We now go over to Mrs. Block, please, for five minutes.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today.

Minister Fraser, you indicated that you have been serving as the minister of IRCC since 2021. You've also indicated that you are aware of the McKinsey contracts. It seems that you would have even been briefed on them.

Last Monday, we heard from the procurement ombudsman that there was a contract awarded to McKinsey that had irregularities. I will quote what he stated: "Mandatory criteria were inadequately defined, and were not limited to the essential qualifications."

When a department purposefully defines criteria in such a way that only one company can fulfill them, do you think that circumvents the open and fair contracting practice that your department is supposed to adhere to?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I disagree with the characterization that the process was designed to result in a single eligible bidder. There were many bidders who were invited to apply for—

Mrs. Kelly Block: Are you disagreeing with the procurement ombudsman's findings?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I would have to review with detail the finding to make sure I understand what I specifically agree or disagree with, but I can tell you that, in this specific instance, it is not my view that the process was rigged somehow to select a particular outcome before it got under way. This was conducted in the ordinary course, in my view, that IRCC would go through and by the department, not the ministry.

Mrs. Kelly Block: You're saying it was conducted in the ordinary way of contracts, yet you also said you would have to look into the contract because you had no knowledge of the specific contract I was talking about. Which one is it?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm not sure I understand the question. Could you reframe?

Mrs. Kelly Block: You said that you feel assured that this contract went through the regular process assessment it needed to, yet when I asked you about the contract, you said you had no knowledge and would not comment on a contract until you were able to look into it.

Are you in fact aware of the contract the procurement ombudsman's review is speaking about?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I now understand what you're saying. On my desire to review something in greater detail, I was referring to the ombudsman's report rather than a specific contract. If the allegation is that the contract was designed to achieve a specific particular outcome with one successful bidder, I do not believe that was the case. Many bidders were invited to apply on both the first and second contract. In particular on the second contract, it was important to design it in a way that had a well-established supplier of services who we would be able to trust to get the job done because this is a very important initiative within IRCC.

For further details on the selection process, I would invite our officials who have joined today to offer comment, if you would wish, Ms. Block.

• (1725)

Mrs. Kelly Block: Sure.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you very much.

We definitely did pay attention to what the ombudperson's report said specifically around the restrictive nature of the bid. We took a look at it. It was in fact true that the department did ask, as one of the selection criteria, that the bidder have experience with client service and digital transformation, so we were quite specific about that.

That said, the department did take a look at the August 21 report from the procurement office. We looked at where the ombudsman indicated the department had done good work in terms of detailing the requirements, but also at the three main recommendations that we've taken into account, agree with and are building into departmental practice.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you.

You would confirm that IRCC received numerous comments from interested suppliers regarding the restrictive nature of the criteria that were put forward, that the criteria were not changed and that the solicitation process resulted in only one compliant bid, with the bidder receiving a perfect score in the technical evaluation.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'm not aware of multiple complaints from bidders on the procurement in either contract one or contract two. What we are aware of is that, in the aftermath, when the ombudsperson looked at our practices, he indicated that there was a robust suite of documents provided and that the evaluation process for bidders was well documented and well applied. There was some very positive feedback. As the three main recommendations were about good communication and, perhaps more detailed reporting, we've taken those into account and are applying them today.

Mrs. Kelly Block: So if in fact—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Block, but that is our time.

Mr. Housefather, go ahead for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, someone commented earlier on the quality of your French. Personally, I congratulate you on your French. The first time we met, you couldn't speak French at all, but now you can respond to questions in French. I congratulate all anglophones in Canada who are making an effort to learn French.

I also congratulate you on your success in meeting the francophone immigration target outside Quebec.

Tell me how Quebec is different. What role does the province play in selecting who gets to settle within its borders?

Hon. Sean Fraser: First, Mr. Housefather, I must thank you for your comment on the quality of my French. Support from my colleagues in the House of Commons is important to me.

On the specific issue of immigration levels, the situation in Quebec is very different from the situation outside of Quebec. We have an accord with the province of Quebec, which grants Quebec the power to select all its economic immigrants, in addition to allowing it to determine its overall immigration levels.

The situation outside Quebec is very different. The federal government sets immigration levels in its annual plan and proposes strategies to protect the demographic weight of francophones.

Last year was the first time in 20 years that a government reached the 4.4% target. I think that we can go even higher. It's essential to promote the French language and culture and protect the demographic weight of francophones.

Perhaps I need to improve the quality of my French, but I understand the importance of protecting the demographic weight of francophones, be it in Quebec or outside Quebec.

However, according to the accord with the Quebec government, it's Quebec's decision to make.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Thank you very much.

I congratulate you once again on your French. I'm really amazed.

[*English*]

Let me now ask you some other questions.

This is about McKinsey. Clearly there's an attempt to show here that somehow there was an unacceptable relationship between the Government of Canada and McKinsey that facilitated their getting contracts.

Minister Fraser, have you ever been involved in determining whether or not we outsource a contract, since you've been Minister of Immigration?

Hon. Sean Fraser: No, it's dealt with at the departmental level.

If you'll allow me, we actually publish a list of all the stakeholders the department engages with for setting our immigration policy. It's on our website. If people want to check it out, feel free.

• (1730)

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I'll ask the deputy minister this: Can you please confirm that ever, since you've been in the department, you've not have any political interference with determining whether we outsource or not and who we contract with?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I can confirm that we have not had any discussions with the minister around who we contract with.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Perfect.

Minister Fraser, let's come back to Dominic Barton.

Dominic Barton had been brought up. We were trying to hear before that somehow Dominic Barton's friendship with somebody... Even though he came here and said the Prime Minister wasn't among his 50 best friends, he didn't have the Prime Minister's phone number, he never went out to dinner with the Prime Minister and he never socialized with the Prime Minister, somehow this friendship led to these contracts.

You didn't know the year that Dominic Barton left McKinsey. He left McKinsey in early 2018. Both of the contracts with your department happened after that date. Dominic Barton had also disclosed that, when he left McKinsey, he no longer had any financial interest in McKinsey because he had to sell back his partnership interest.

Would you—just as a logical person—consider that it would make sense, if this friendship was so great, that the number of contracts with McKinsey increased drastically after Dominic Barton left McKinsey but didn't really increase very much between 2015 and 2018?

Hon. Sean Fraser: From my own perspective, there have been two contracts issued on a competitive basis since his departure.

I understand that the previous government actually had some dealings with McKinsey as well. I don't sense a pattern about his presence within a particular role at McKinsey or otherwise having an impact on this one way or the other.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Right.

Coming back, the professional public service is the one who makes these decisions, not you and not ministers.

Hon. Sean Fraser: It is extremely important to have that continue to be the case.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Now let me come back to—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Housefather.

Mrs. Kusie, you have five minutes, please.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much, Chair.

Respectfully, Minister, things just aren't adding up here. We have a public service that is saying that McKinsey is implicated. We have the media saying that McKinsey is implicated in deciding the policy. We have two former ministers, one of them your predecessor, saying that McKinsey was implicated in deciding policy—poor policy at that—for your department.

You're writing it off. You're saying you don't know anything about this. Did no one brief you? Someone must have told you where these numbers came from originally. Guess what: The media and your public service and your predecessor are saying they came from McKinsey.

Whether or not you're aware, or whether or not you're willing to admit it, this is what everyone else is saying. For you to even deny what happened previous to your arrival into this position... I get it. You've only been there since December 2021. It's easy to say that you don't know. It's the same with your deputy minister, who's only been there since September 2022. It's really easy to say that you take no responsibility for anything that happened before you.

This is the picture you're painting today. It sounds as though you are going against—and it's either ignorance or denial—what the public service, the media and your predecessors are saying. That's not a good enough answer for me. That's not a good enough answer for the official opposition. That's not a good enough answer for, I believe, all of the opposition parties on this side of the table. It's not a good enough answer for Canadians, Minister, that you would say, "I don't know. Everyone is saying this, but I have no idea about it."

Now, your colleague on the other side of the table is trying to save your bacon, saying, "Forget McKinsey. We're just here to talk about service delivery." Guess what: You're failing on that as well, with 2.1 million in the backlog. Even if you did create these targets, which everyone in the public service, the media and in the former cabinet is saying, then no matter who created these numbers, you're failing. You're failing not only in the historical background or the corporate knowledge not having been passed on...or trying to deny it, which everyone on this side of the table and those in the public service and the media believe you're doing.

In addition to that, you're also failing in the service delivery. There's no way you can deny that, regardless of the he-said-she-said, or John Reynolds said this, or someone else said that. You can't deny that.

I mean, what do you have to say to Canadians when you are admitting that you have no knowledge about the corporate background of the numbers and how you came to arrive at these numbers? You just show up here and say, "Oh, I don't know," and then

your colleague tries to say, "Oh, well, we're here about service delivery." But you're failing on that too.

What do you say to Canadians regarding both of those things, Minister?

• (1735)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have to answer this question? I would like to address it with ample time to dispel the many myths and, frankly, nonsense that I was just made to sit through,

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: That sounds like mansplaining, Chair.

The Chair: I will repeat what I said earlier about decorum, Minister. You have a minute and five, please.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you.

I do have respect for my colleague, whom I've sat on committee with. What I find—

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I think you speak French very well. It's just as good as mine. It's not entirely bilingual, but, you know, it's a solid level C.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I appreciate it. I'm working on it.

First, the allegation from your intervention, Ms. Kusie, that I can discern is that unnamed sources in either the public service or the media disagree with my immigration policy writ large. I don't know the nature of the allegation you're making. If the allegation is that they disagree with my immigration levels plan, I have not seen a confirmed source. I don't doubt there are some people who have spoken out because they think differently than I do. If you and I disagree on whether doubling the level of immigration compared to 2015 is a good idea, we should have that debate on the floor of the House of Commons.

With respect to my institutional knowledge of what took place during my time as an MP before I held this particular chair, I agree intensely with our government's immigration strategy. It has benefited my hometown. I am very familiar with the policies that have been implemented from 2015 up until now and continue to support them.

The particular issue that we're digging in on here is about two specific contracts in 2018 and 2020 that were focused on moving toward—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Minister.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: It was a policy designed by McKinsey and executed terribly, Chair.

Thank you.

The Chair: I'm afraid that is our time.

However, I see that next up is a member from the Liberal Party. Perhaps, you can continue with her time.

Ms. Thompson, please go ahead for five minutes.

Ms. Joanne Thompson (St. John's East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Minister.

The chair can read my mind.

Would you like to continue that thought before I move to my questions, Minister?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure.

Just on the actual effectiveness of the immigration policies that we've implemented to deal with some very serious challenges facing our immigration system, I'm not going to pretend everything has been perfect, because the shock to our system that came from COVID-19, an outsized response to Ukraine and Afghanistan, and the fact that Canada became the most popular place in the world to come to in order to seek economic opportunities have put real strain on our system. We've advanced policies to put more resources in the system by hiring more than 1,250 people, to relax administrative barriers in a number of different ways and to embrace the adoption of digital technology that will speed the processes up.

The figure that Ms. Kusie raised of 2.1 million cases in the system has actually been dramatically reduced. Since this summer we've been able to reduce the number of cases in our inventory by more than half a million. We are back to the service standard we enjoyed pre-pandemic for family reunification cases and for federal express-entry cases. We are very close on study permits and work permits for new applications that are being made. We have some work left to do on visitor visas, which we're working very hard to advance as quickly as possible, but there is real and tangible progress that people are feeling in communities.

Does it need to go faster? Yes. Will it go faster in the future? Yes.

We're doing the hard work now and have been doing the hard work over the past year, including by adopting digital processes. There will be bumps along the way, but we're doing everything we can to get families back together more quickly, to get workers into the businesses and to allow more people to visit Canada for important life events.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

I do have to say that the staff in your office have been phenomenal. In my time as an MP, I've seen such growth in terms of how we've been able to move files through and just in terms of the co-operation from your office. Thank you for that.

Has the work that McKinsey completed on the transformation process impacted how you've been able to move through that backlog and bring additional staff on?

You mentioned staff numbers. Are you starting to see that having an effect on the ground? What does that look like?

• (1740)

Hon. Sean Fraser: In my view, it has started to have an impact but the full scale of its impact will not be fully revealed until we actually have a fully functioning fully digitized system operating for a few years. It will take some time to really know the extent to which the digital improvements we're making, which were tied to McKinsey's work, will actually bear fruit. The early signs that I'm observing indicate that they are having a positive impact. Whether it's from an accessibility point of view, allowing people to apply online more quickly, giving them information about their cases on their phones or having a process that allows us to leverage the glob-

al network of offices to maximize productivity, there are many ways in which movement towards the digital system is going to have a positive impact.

Some of this work could have been done internally within IRCC, but it would have taken longer, probably years longer. Given the significant uptick in volume that's been put on the department and the ministry, particularly over the course of the pandemic and since, I don't think the system could have handled such an increase in volume if we didn't continue to quickly move towards a more digital system.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

What is your timeline to really bring this digital system to a place where the processes will follow the timelines you've set out? How long do you think that's going to take?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It depends on which stream of immigration you're referring to. We're already back to the pre-pandemic service standards for family reunification and federal express-entry cases. We're very close for new applications for work permits and study permits. We expect visitor visas to get back this year as well.

Despite the fact that we might get back to the pre-pandemic service standards, we can still improve the quality of service that clients get in particular in terms of getting information about their own cases and ease of access to the system. Ms. Kwan actually pointed out a very good issue that we need to continue to work with representatives on to allow them to have access to their client systems and to make simple edits as things come up.

I expect that over the next several years we're going to have a start-to-finish digital process both in terms of how we process things internally and in terms of how users interface with the system. It won't be as though we have to wait the entire time to get a moment where we flip the switch. We're continuously adding digital functionality to the system as new features are ready to deploy.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you. Certainly, coming from a province that has great ambition for immigration numbers, I really appreciate that.

From that space, if we could go back to the COVID pandemic, the realities of what was happening in the country during COVID and then geopolitical realities, how did that time affect the second contract, the recommendations and the need to go back and accelerate the work?

The Chair: I'm afraid that is our time. I'm in the habit of interrupting the minister today.

Perhaps you'll get to that in the last round.

We're now in the last four interventions.

Mr. Garon, you have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You know, it can be very frustrating sometimes to not get answers from the minister and, obviously, I made an inappropriate comment about his mastery of the French language.

I want to tell the minister that he speaks French very well. I apologize and ask him to accept my most sincere apologies.

That said, with regard to the motion initiating this study, I'd like to ask whether we've received any responses or refusals from the ministers whom we've invited.

Where are we at with that?

[English]

The Chair: Be a bit more specific please. Is this for the documents we've asked for or for the witness—

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: I'm talking about ministers who would appear, based on what's indicated in the motion. I'd like to know whether there's any news about ministers who've agreed or refused to come testify.

[English]

The Chair: They've all accepted, except for the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and the Minister of National Defence.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If the Minister of Immigration could exert pressure on the Minister of National Defence to get her to change her mind, it would be appreciated. I'm making an official request here.

Now, I'd like to ask him a brief question.

Minister, I'm not necessarily saying that this happened in Canada, but I'd like to tell you about one of McKinsey's practices. It was mentioned in a report by the French Senate. It's the foot-in-the-door technique. McKinsey did unpaid work for the government, in order to then have easier access to contracts.

I'm not saying that this happened in your department, but, generally, do you believe it's an acceptable practice, be it here or abroad?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think it's essential that we have rules in place to deal with how contracts are awarded and that those rules are followed. I'm only aware of instances in a Canadian context when those rules were followed.

I don't know if my deputy can supplement that response, but I'm only aware of circumstances that follow the official process at the department level.

• (1745)

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: I'm satisfied with the answer, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to quickly address one last thing.

McKinsey has a strong presence in your department. Contracts were granted and advice was provided. However, the firm isn't listed on the lobbyist registry.

Does that make you uncomfortable? Do you think that this could be the result of an error and that it should be changed?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't believe it's an error. I think it's essential that lobbying rules are respected. For the sake of clarity, the reason I don't think it's an error is that they weren't even on our internal consultation list, let alone lobbying list, when it came to the development of our immigration levels plan. There would be more than 500 organizations represented on that list.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Garon.

Thank you, Minister.

Ms. Kwan, it's your final two and a half minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The minister said that he was not engaged in any of the McKinsey contracts' awarding and the deputy did not speak with him about it. Of course, that is the case. Why? Because the minister was not appointed until 2021, and the contracts took place in 2018 for the first round of the contract and 2019 for the second contract. Therefore, it predated the minister's seat at this table and it predated the deputy's seat at this table. Of course, they had nothing to do with it.

That said, there is a real question. The minister raises the issue around the lack of capacity within IRCC, hence the requirement for contracting out.

My question to the minister is how much funding was allocated within the department for training and skills development, specifically for this. Also, on recruitment and retention, did IRCC implement any of the PIPSC recommendations from the collective bargaining process? If not, why not?

Hon. Sean Fraser: You'll forgive me for not having the information front of mind, Ms. Kwan. If I could defer to my deputy to provide whatever information she may have, I would be grateful.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I can say that, absolutely, we invest in our workforce, both in training and in learning. I would say that part of the benefits of the McKinsey contracts was the digital talent lab, which produced 160 IT professionals who now work for the department. They have built on the lessons that they learned in the early days and are now implementing some significant changes, like digital applications for citizenship—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I have limited time, so maybe the officials can table the documents on the funding that was provided for training and skill development, as well as the issue around the recommendations that were adopted from PIPSC.

I want to ask this question: Was McKinsey involved in the AI development for IRCC? Were they involved in the Chinook development?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll again defer to my deputy. I'm not familiar with any role they may have had specifically with those tools.

Deputy, if you're able to provide any response, that would be great.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, definitely as part of the work they did in the second contract, they were looking at road maps and efficiencies in the system. Part of that was Chinook, which is a bulk processing tool. That was part of the digital transformation.

I think we can speak to some very specific—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I wonder if the deputy can table to the committee specifically the work that McKinsey did related to AI development, as well as Chinook.

We were told at CIMM that Chinook was done in-house. This is clearly not the case then, if McKinsey was involved.

Ms. Christiane Fox: It was in-house.

The Chair: I'm sorry. Can I interrupt, Ms. Kwan?

I'm not going to put words in your mouth, but are you seeking the will of the committee to ask that these documents be tabled?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, I am.

The Chair: If so, do I have my colleagues' approval?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If I may, for all of the documents that I've requested throughout the entire proceedings, could I have the committee's support in requesting and receiving those documents for the committee's review?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Can I just clarify that definitely Chinook was developed in-house? Bulk processing, AI and looking at efficiencies were part of the McKinsey work.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I think the deputy would also recognize that there were a lot of issues of discrimination related to AI and Chinook.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, I'm afraid we're out of time.

To get back to your last point.... Colleagues, are we fine with that? I see thumbs up.

The clerk will clarify.

I apologize. Ms. Kwan, you can't move a motion. We seem to have approval from the deputy minister that she will provide that.

I'm going to make the assumption that Mr. Johns will just take over your last 20 seconds and move that same thing. It's just to make it official, Mr. Johns.

• (1750)

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): I move that the government table the documents that Ms. Kwan has requested throughout this meeting.

The Chair: I appreciate that. I think we all understand the intent.

The clerk will follow up with you, Ms. Fox.

I'm afraid that is your time.

Minister, we have just 10 more minutes. I appreciate your staying a bit longer.

We have Mr. Barrett and then Mr. Bains for five minutes each.

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

Thanks Minister and officials for joining us today.

Ms. Fox, it's nice to see you at committee again.

Minister, did you have the opportunity to review any of the issues that were raised when your cabinet colleague Minister Jaczek was before this committee with respect to some of the practices that McKinsey has engaged in? They are specifically with respect to the opioid crisis in the United States, their corporate conduct with respect to the location of their retreat in China near a concentration camp and the scandals that they've been involved with in South Africa and France.

Did you have the opportunity to watch those proceedings, or have you since become familiar with what was discussed?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I did not watch the proceedings myself. I learned of some of what was discussed and heard some other examples that were similar in kind to those you've listed during today's committee hearing.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Minister, do you support the immigration policies of the last or current U.S. administration?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm not focused on American immigration policies unless and in so far as they intersect with Canada's national interest. In that case, I'm not focused on whether I support their policies but on developing ours to respond in kind.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'd like to ask you about policy at the U.S.-Mexico border. We've seen images over the last couple of years of women, children and men detained in cages.

Would you say that is supportable or not supportable, in your estimation?

Hon. Sean Fraser: At the time, I had certain criticisms that I spoke publicly about with regard to the situation that took place at that particular moment.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

Have you seen reports, or are you familiar with reports, about the U.S. government cutting food and medical care to women, children and men who are detained at the border, or other controversial practices of the ICE service in the United States?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I've heard some different examples with regard to ICE in the United States, not the specific instances that you just raised with me now.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Is there—

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Excuse me, Mr. Chair. I have a point of order.

Is there relevance to questions regarding American immigration policies? I ask my honourable colleague to just state the relevance of that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I assume we're on stopped time to have this chat.

The Chair: We are, yes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Great.

Mr. Chair, our colleague across the way will, if he's patient for just a moment longer, see that—as I use my time to talk about immigration policy with the immigration minister on a study about consultants—there seems to be a connection between the folks who advised the United States on its immigration policies and this minister's department, so it's very important that there's an understanding that the architects of policies in the United States have been given tens of millions of dollars by this minister's department.

That company is McKinsey, so that's certainly germane to the study—

The Chair: Okay. I accept the relevance.

You have two and a half minutes left.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

I should have given a spoiler alert, Minister.

McKinsey was responsible for advising the U.S. government on those specific policies I referenced and some of which you've commented publicly on and, if you weren't before, are now familiar with.

How can we be sure that the folks who crafted those policies are not employed to work for IRCC in their role as consultants?

• (1755)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Look, this is an important question. We have standards that are put in place that allow companies to qualify as bidders on federal contracts. They are designed to protect against certain kinds of bad actors gaining favour from the federal government.

My understanding is that those processes were followed. I think it's important to not necessarily conflate certain different potential corporate entities or business organizations that operate in different jurisdictions because I really do feel strongly, for reasons that are tied deeply to my community, that we need to be attributing individual responsibility wherever possible for people who run afoul of the rules and also, to the extent that the law has provided a process to punish corporate actors, that we follow those rules.

My understanding is that the rules through the PSPC process were, in fact, followed. Does there need to be work on individual accountability where people run afoul of moral norms? In most instances, yes, but I hesitate, without having the full information of the present circumstances, to place judgment upon what you're asking me to.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Do you think that McKinsey is an ethical company?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I actually don't think we can ascribe ethics to companies.

If you'll indulge me for 30 seconds, Michael—

Mr. Michael Barrett: That would be the balance of my time, so in giving your—

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll give you the extra 30 seconds and stick around if I need to, if the chair is okay...?

The Chair: Now hold on just one moment, Minister. I appreciate that.

Are you fine with the Minister or...? I'm sure you can answer in Mr. Bains' time.

Go ahead. We won't penalize Mr. Bains, Minister, for your continuing.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure.

This is something that I've thought about since I was a kid, strangely—what seems like a kind of technical concept.

Ten minutes from where I'm sitting right now is the Westray mine, and 26 men were killed in my community when I was a kid. It was 30 years ago, and I see the families around the community all the time. There was nobody held accountable for what happened at Westray. There was a process that played out, and I think that putting this onto Westray rather than the people who were profiting on the backs of my deceased community members is something I take pretty seriously.

The Chair: Thanks, Minister.

I'm afraid you have no time, Mr. Bains. The minister used yours.

Actually, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Mr. Parm Bains (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for joining us today. I want to thank you for all the hard work you do. Through all the challenging times, definitely you've been able to pivot and make sure that you and your staff are getting the work done in IRCC. I can tell you that among the people in Richmond, British Columbia, there are a lot of working professionals, families and students who are very happy about that and thankful.

I want to just go back to maybe even draw upon what Mr. Barrett was saying. On February 1, Dominic Barton told the committee that “McKinsey never provides policy advice. They're executing what government wants to do.” Do you agree with this statement?

Hon. Sean Fraser: As far as I know, that was the nature of the work that was conducted in the present instances.

Mr. Parm Bains: Thank you.

Just on the contracts, does the department review contracts to assess vendor performance and outcomes?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes, on an ongoing basis. If you'd like more details, I'd be happy to yield the floor to the deputy to shine a light on what that process looks like.

Mr. Parm Bains: Yes, sure. Please.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Absolutely. We definitely look at our internal practices in terms of how we manage the contract from start to finish. I think that we're also always looking at best practices either through recommendations from the Auditor General or the procurement ombudsman. For instance, I know that for the McKinsey contract, as a result of a past AG report, the department ended up running, let's say, a price certification process prior to awarding a contract to ensure that we were getting the right price point based on the competitive and transparent bid that the department did. This is just one example of how we continuously try to improve from a procurement management side of things.

Mr. Parm Bains: Thank you for that.

How would you respond to criticism that IRCC has enough resources and shouldn't need to outsource?

• (1800)

Hon. Sean Fraser: In the present circumstances, Mr. Bains, we're hiring as many people as fast as we can to continue to grow our capacity. Since August, we've added more than 1,250, with a few hundred more whom we expect to add by the end of next month. We're doing what we can to continue to grow our capacity.

At times when we have a time-limited need to expand the functionality of the department in an area where we don't have a full complement of staff in-house or need to grow capacity, it can make sense to hire a consulting firm—not just at IRCC, by the way, but in any organization. This has been the practice of governments for many years. This particular example had to do with the time-limited need to help design a pathway toward the digital transformation within IRCC and then to build the capacity to make sure IRCC could implement the path forward in-house.

Mr. Parm Bains: You've indicated that the department has onboarded the necessary skills so it no longer needs to contract out for similar services in the future. How else is IRCC building in-house capacity?

Hon. Sean Fraser: There are a number of things that we're doing. The deputy mentioned some of the training opportunities we've had through the digital app, and we have now added more than 160 IT staff. We continue to add people at a pace that we've not seen in order to process more cases, but we're also constantly tinkering with our processes to reduce the burden on each case and then making sure that we provide opportunities for our staff to become familiar with the expectations we have as we make these different policy changes.

An organization is only as good as its people. We need to continue to set our people up for success by providing training opportunities and professional growth opportunities, so that people see a future for themselves within the organization. This comes through routine training types of opportunities, but it also comes from policy decisions at the government level to potentially give longer runways for the department to plan, which can give security to people who will know they have a job for more than a year or two so they can actually see that opportunity for professional advancement. There's no silver bullet when it comes to creating a corporate culture to maximize productivity, but investing in people and creating opportunities for short-term growth and a longer-sighted future with the department is part of the equation.

Mr. Parm Bains: Thank you.

Those are all the questions I have today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bains.

Minister, thank you for being with us. We appreciate your sticking around for a bit of extra time.

Before we go in camera and to committee business, I have a couple of things we need feedback on and the decision on, please.

Minister, you can hang around for this.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, I assume that feedback need not come from me.

The Chair: You're welcome to stay and watch the only committee that matters continue its business.

Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you so much, colleagues. I appreciate your time.

The Chair: Quickly, colleagues, we've received two letters, from Canada Post and Natural Resources, asking for an extension for submitting their McKinsey documents. Canada Post has asked for March 15. I don't recall, top of mind, the Natural Resources one.

I'm looking for feedback and direction on where we should go with this.

Go ahead, Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I feel as though the motion was very clear in terms of the deadline. I'm very concerned that, if we start to provide exemptions to certain agencies, other agencies and departments will ask for the same. I don't think it's a good precedent to set, so I suggest we encourage Canada Post to stick to the proposed deadline, as outlined in the motion, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Is there anyone else on this?

Go ahead, Mr. Housefather.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Obviously, I agree with encouraging everybody to stick to a deadline. Given the volume of documents they might need to get translated, I don't know whether every department will be able to deliver on time.

I think writing a letter back that encourages everyone to meet the deadline is absolutely appropriate. It can say, "If you cannot, please produce everything you have on a rolling basis, as quickly as possible." We can then assess whether anybody has not met their entire burden and come back a couple of weeks later and figure out what to do.

A polite letter saying, "We expect you to meet the deadline, and if you can't give us everything you have, keep producing them...rolling...as quickly as you can" is probably the fairest and most reasonable way.

• (1805)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I liked everything you said about, “We encourage you to meet the deadline.” I like that part.

I wasn't as excited about the second part. We don't have to be rude, but I think the letter should firmly state we encourage them to meet the deadline.

The Chair: If I can interject, I share this concern. If we do it for one, then it's for everyone else. I understand, from Canada Post, that it's not a lot of documents. If you look at the Order Paper, it's not mountains and mountains. I certainly—

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I appreciate that.

The Chair: —understand your concern. If we do it for one, we'll get a barrage of everyone asking the same.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: It was a \$9-million contract, so I'm quite surprised to hear this information. That just further encourages me to encourage them to stick to the deadline.

The Chair: Sensing the will of the committee, I'll ask our clerk to write back and ask them to respect the deadline.

That's great. Thanks, everyone.

The other one is this: I've sent an email out, but we haven't received anything yet. The Governor General's study is ongoing. We require the recommendations. I want to request, considering the public interest in the cost but also the recent issue that's come up with its being reported that political staff are not to answer questions about a different recent government trip, that we please take this seriously and get our recommendations in regarding the Governor General's travel by the 28th.

Go ahead, Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Yes, Mr. Chair. I have a motion that might address this. That motion is—

The Chair: Is this just a matter of a hand motion?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: This is a table-drop motion.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I move that the committee request, one, the production of all unredacted receipts and invoices associated with the September 2022 trip to the United Kingdom by the Prime Minister of Canada, including for all individuals accompanying the Prime Minister; two, that a report be included breaking down the receipts by individual and by item of expenditure, including in particular accommodation costs, travel costs, security costs and costs for food, alcohol and drinks; three, that the documents requested be submitted to the clerk no later than Monday, March 6, 2023, at 12 p.m., and that the clerk forward them to members of the committee as soon as they are available in both official languages; and, four, that all documents be published on the OGGO website.

Mr. Chair, that concludes the motion I'm presenting here, today.

The Chair: Thanks.

It appears to be in order. Is there debate on this?

Mr. Majid Jowhari: I have a comment. You have already ruled that the tabling of this motion is in order.

The Chair: It appears to be, yes.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Can we get clarification?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Housefather.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: May I ask a question, Mr. Chair?

I haven't seen this before. I don't think it came to us. The subject of this meeting was McKinsey. I don't believe that this is related to the subject of this meeting and, therefore, shouldn't 48 hours' notice go out? I would like a chance to review it and understand it better. I just got it right now.

The Chair: It's my understanding is that it's table-dropped or a matter-in-hand motion in relation to the discussion I was bringing up, not the Canada Post one but of the—

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Mr. Chair, it was not on the notice of meeting. The notice of meeting was McKinsey, and this has nothing to do with McKinsey. Therefore, there should be 48 hours' notice.

I'm not saying I'm against it, but I think we should be following that rule.

The Chair: Bear with me for two seconds while I consult the clerk.

That was a very intense discussion. It was intense for our clerk, not necessarily for me, because I think I have a higher threshold for stress than our clerk.

I am in disagreement with our clerk, but I will take her advice. She has informed me that it's not a matter-of-hand motion. We can put it on notice for our next meeting, which I guess we will do. Again, I will disagree with my clerk, but she does have a stronger—

• (1810)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: She is smarter than you.

The Chair: She is smarter than me, yes. I'm making her blush.

Go ahead, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I have a question on that, Chair.

The practice of discussing items that are not on the agenda... I haven't been on this committee for as long as you, but it seems to be the practice that we do this and we arrive at decisions at these meetings that are not on the agenda.

Will it be the practice of the committee that, on a go-forward basis, that's not what happens?

The Chair: I'm going to ask the clerk to explain the rules that she explained to me, all 1,800 in both official languages, please.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Aimée Belmore): Pages 1 to 100 are the history of the House of Commons, so you might want to leave those out of the discussion.

If you're referring to the Canada Post letter that was just discussed, that was related to the McKinsey draft anyway, so it is related to the matter under discussion, which is the study of McKinsey and the contracts. That is within the realm of the discussion that was at hand.

The Governor General's study, which is another study that the committee is undertaking, is a completely separate study. It is not related to the matter that was on the notice today that we are currently discussing, and we're not in committee business. If we were in committee business, it would be fine.

The Chair: I'm sorry. I'll interrupt. At the very beginning of the meeting, I did announce that we would have committee business before we entered in camera. How does that affect your interpretation? Again, I looked at it as a matter-of-hand motion.

Colleagues, I'm sorry. If you will recall, I did say at the very beginning of the meeting that we would have committee business before we entered in camera in committee business.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Honestly, we have the notice of meeting. That notice of the meeting set the agenda.

The Chair: I'm sorry. I'm putting you in a difficult spot, Clerk, but I'm looking for clarity.

The Clerk: The clarity I would offer is clerk wisdom in that I only offer advice and recommendations, but ultimately decisions on admissibility are the purview of the chair, so if the chair says that the motion is admissible, then it is admissible. His decisions can always be challenged by any member of the committee.

The Chair: You're throwing it back at me, then.

Just excuse me for two seconds. There is the issue that I did mention, at the very beginning of this meeting, that we would have committee business before going in camera and discussing more committee business. I think it might have a different bearing on it.

Let me confer with our clerk.

Colleagues, I do apologize for my lack of education on this issue and the back and forth. I have confirmed with the clerk, and she has confirmed that at the beginning I did state it would be committee business before committee business. Therefore, someone can table-drop a matter-in-hand motion. I do believe it is relevant. You are welcome to challenge this.

I will open it up to the committee to vote on the issue if you wish to challenge the ruling. Because we did state at the very beginning it would be committee business before we went into the subcommittee, that would be it and the challenge wouldn't go to a vote.

• (1815)

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Before we challenge and go to the vote, Mr. Chair.... Colleagues, we work very well together. I have yet to see a motion come forward that, had we been given enough time to be able to review it, we rejected it. You know that. If you look at

the history, this has never happened in this committee, at least from this group that has been together. That's number one.

Number two, we just don't want to set precedents in such a way that we feel we are trapped, because when we act like this our backs go up—and I'm being very transparent. I know we are in public. It's just—

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I didn't know John Reynolds had an article in the media today, so thank you for that.

The Chair: Mr. Jowhari has the floor.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Honestly, I don't recall any member in this committee who hasn't worked collaboratively. When we walk out of this room, we greet each other well, we work with each other and we ask each other's opinions. I understand when we are in camera we have to behave a certain way based on whatever our party alliance is, etc.

But let's talk about this thing.

Stephanie, you could stop me and say, "Hey, Majid", or any of our members could say, "Hey, look, I'm putting this.... What are your thoughts?"

At the end of the day, I guarantee you that we're going to support this. We may have some questions. There may be some amendments, but when we start standardizing a practice of dropping a motion like this, trying to get it in public and not having an opportunity for us to work together, it puts our backs up. We wonder if there is something in there that we have to be careful of. Are we exposing anyone?

Again, all I want to say is that we work well together. Let's work well together.

Chair, I believe you're going to say this is in order, and I'm going to challenge this, as a vice-chair, and we're going to go to a vote. Whatever the result is going to be, it will be.

My ask is this. Please—I'm here and my colleagues are here—work with us to make sure that the motion comes in.... Look at what we have. I don't think any committee has as many studies on the table as we have. I challenge any committee, any committee members of any other committee, to come and say that this group has not worked collaboratively together to make sure they're addressing the issues of the day.

We have five or six studies that we have not finalized, because we want to act collaboratively and we want to address the issues of the day.

I will rest on that. Thank you.

The Chair: Before I go to Mrs. Kusie, I'll say it has been practice over the years that we do matter-at-hand motions quite often.

We'll go to Mrs. Kusie and then Mr. Johns.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I won't say anything.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns: Clearly, I would support this motion when it is voted on.

I do want to point out that I tabled a motion on outsourcing. It was a matter-at-hand motion and it reflected exactly what we talked about. The Conservatives said no, and said that they needed more time. It was just around expanding the outsourcing to include the big six companies. We actually waited all the way until this Monday to vote on my motion, which was a motion that just reflected what we had talked about, which I had shared with everybody and had gotten everybody on board with.

I actually agree with Majid on the practice that we do. Matter at hand is a different story. Clearly, I think we need the documents, and I really appreciate the motion by Mrs. Kusie and her work on this because it's really important. I think, as a practice, what Mr. Jowhari's suggesting is the right thing to do.

Clearly, the government is going to get the idea this is coming. We could put a new date on it, maybe, and get it passed early in the next meeting and then just give them a very short window to get the documents.

This is coming. It looks like it's going to get support and the government's going to get wind of it. Hopefully, they can start getting these documents ready.

• (1820)

The Chair: We can go to Mr. Housefather, but I'm sensing that it's not going to happen today.

Go ahead, Mr. Housefather.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just wanted to introduce one element, Mr. Chair, to give you a chance to reconsider your ruling before we actually have to challenge it.

This wasn't on the agenda today; that is clear. This was a McKinsey meeting. Regardless of what the chair says at the beginning of the meeting, you did not ask the committee if it wished to change the agenda to add something. You may have announced it, but that's not changing the agenda in the correct way.

I think we're all going to agree on this motion. We can talk about it until the next meeting. Can we perhaps have the chair rule that it should come up at the next meeting.

The Chair: At this point, with Mr. Johns not supporting it, it's six of one and six of the other. I'm happy to have you challenge me and do a vote.

At this point, it really doesn't matter.

Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I'll change it to a notice of motion, then, Chair.

The Chair: I'm still open to have you challenge me, though.

If that's the case, we'll suspend very briefly. It's going to be, unfortunately, about 10 minutes for us to get the tech working properly.

We'll suspend briefly, and then we'll go in camera for the subcommittee meeting.

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