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Chair: Mr. Kelly McCauley

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

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• (1640)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC)):
Good afternoon, everyone.

I call the meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 55 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, a.k.a. the mighty OGGO.

For today's meeting we are doing the hybrid format, as usual.

Pursuant to the order of reference adopted by the House of Commons on February 15, 2023, the committee is meeting for its study of the supplementary estimates (C), 2022-23: vote 1c under Department of Public Works and Government Services, vote 1c under Privy Council Office, vote 1c under Public Service Commission, and votes 1c, 10c and 30c under Treasury Board Secretariat.

As everyone is aware, we are missing a minister. I understand she is in the House for a bit, so I am proposing, with everyone's agreement, that we switch the order and start with the officials from the department. We will have no opening statement until the minister shows up.

We will go right to Ms. Kusie for six minutes.

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

[Translation]

Thank you to my colleagues for being here today.

Let me begin with the motion I presented in a notice last week. That does not mean that we have to vote on the motion now, but I think it would be a good idea for me to read it out.

[English]

The motion is:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), the committee:

1. Send for all receipts and invoices in the possession of the Office of the Prime Minister, the Privy Council Office, and any other implicated government departments associated with the September 2022 trip to the United Kingdom by the Prime Minister of Canada, including for all individuals accompanying the Prime Minister;

a. That these documents be submitted in both redacted and unredacted form to the clerk of the committee in both official languages no later than Monday, March 20, 2023, at 12:00 p.m. and that the clerk be instructed to forward the unredacted version to members of the committee;

b. That these documents be published on the committee's website immediately following the redaction of all personal information in the aforementioned documents by the Office of Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel;

2. Send for an unredacted copy of the completed access to information request A-2022-02366 from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development;

a. That this document be submitted to the clerk of the committee in both official languages within 24 hours of the adoption of this motion and be distributed to members of the committee, and;

b. That this document be published on the committee's website immediately following its distribution to committee members.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kusie.

This is one that was put on notice a couple of days ago, so it is in order. It was a continuation of the one we were discussing last week.

Is there debate on that?

Ms. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much.

Many times in this committee as well as in the House we have asked for documents in an unredacted form. They have not arrived or appeared as such in many cases. Canadians have a right to have this information regarding this trip which the Prime Minister and his colleagues took in September 2022.

As such, I submitted a motion previously, but I am resubmitting it upon the advisement of the clerk with more specific direction and instruction to receive the information, which I and I believe all members of this committee and Canadians would like, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kusie.

Mr. Johns and then Mr. Jowhari.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): First, I actually really like the motion because it gets us a look at what amounts are being spent on travel, on trips such as this. Certainly it was a grave circumstance that brought the Prime Minister to the U.K.

I'm an MP from British Columbia and as someone who had the lowest travel expenses for both me and my family out of all B.C. MPs in the last reporting period from 2015 to 2019, this is a big issue for me. In fact, I work really hard to keep my costs low, and I replaced two Conservative MPs who were always in the top five for British Columbia and Canada.

I think it's interesting to hear Conservatives bring forward motions like this.

I do want to talk about prime ministers' trips. Prime Minister Harper spent a million dollars on his Middle East trip, back when he was the prime minister, and \$65,000 for a Keystone XL advertising trip to New York.

It says here it included coffee service of \$6,600 and \$3.4 million for an Arctic trip. Between him and Governor General David Johnston, they spent \$4 million travelling on jets over three years. When he went to the World Economic Forum he spent \$636,585—pretty close to Prime Minister Trudeau's \$678,000.

He defended Senator Wallin's budget of \$350,000 for travel. That's a lot, when mine was \$25,000 in a year to travel all the way from Vancouver Island to here 20 times.

We know that the former justice minister took a helicopter ride that cost the taxpayers a lot of money.

I think that if we're going to look at this, I want some comparables. I think it's good for us, in support of this motion, to add a trip by the previous prime minister so we get a good look.

Prime Minister Harper went to South Africa to pay tribute to Nelson Mandela, who was a hero to many of us. I'm glad he went to represent Canada, but I would like to have the same analysis done of Prime Minister Harper's trip to South Africa to get an idea of what this out-of-control travel spending looks like between prime ministers. I think it's important that we don't just look at the trip by current prime minister to the Queen's funeral, but we also look at other really important trips that we have sent our prime minister on.

I think we should also look at another trip where Prime Minister Harper took CEOs to China on the taxpayers' dime.

I won't move my amendment yet. I think I want to hear from other members of the committee, but I do want to highlight the out-of-control travel expenses that have been taking place in our country. I'd like to hear from other committee members before I move my amendment, to ensure that we get a full perspective of not just the Prime Minister's recent trip on the Queen's death. I can only identify one other trip that Prime Minister Harper went on, which was for Nelson Mandela, but I think we should apply the same principles and examine both trips equally so that we can see what different prime ministers are doing in terms of spending. I think that would be a fair and reasonable thing to ask. If we're going to support this motion, I can't see why Conservatives or Liberals would be afraid to look at that trip fully as well.

I'll let other members speak before I move that, Mr. Chair.

• (1645)

The Chair: Mr. Jowhari.

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

First of all, our government and our team fully support any type of study that brings clarity and transparency to any type of expenditure by any official. I would say that right off the bat. We welcome

consideration of a broader scope when we do this study, number one.

Number two, the premise on which we started this meeting was to hear from our witnesses. We have witnesses here today and supplementary estimates (C) that we need to review. The premise that we agreed on to start the meeting, reversing the order of the committee business and starting with the officials here, was to be able to get to some questions.

I'd like to move a dilatory motion that we move this part of the debate—which I welcome very much—into the later part of the committee business. If we must have a discussion to make sure that part of the committee business is in camera or in public, I wouldn't have any problem with that. My request is that could we please move this part of the debate to the committee business?

Also, I am missing two colleagues who, based on the whip's instructions, were staying back to acknowledge one of our colleagues who has served Canada for over 14 years.

If the committee members would like to consider this dilatory motion to move the debate on this motion—which is in order by the way—to the committee business part of the meeting, then we could have a dialogue going back and forth on whether it should be held in public or in camera.

Thank you.

The Chair: Our clerk does not believe it's a dilatory motion, because it has a condition attached to it. But I'm sure we could, as we've done in the past, just seek the permission of the committee.

I'll go to Mrs. Kusie first, and then we can get back to that.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Originally, I was going to ask for the Liberals' opinion on this. I feel we should just hash it out now. I really don't feel it's going to have any significant impact, similar to the Canadian elections, on the outcome of the vote that a couple of people are not here. I think we should just move forward. I think we should just get it done.

If we can move to voting on the amendment and then voting on the motion, Chair, that would be my preferred method of using the time. I know that we also have a lot of items to get through in the committee business portion. As well, when the minister comes, I think everyone agrees that we would like the full hour here.

I feel that further debate really isn't significant to determining the outcome of the debate, so I would really just suggest that we continue.

• (1650)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns: Mr. Chair, I'm happy to move my amendment, then, and we can go into discussion on the amendment.

Ms. Joanne Thompson (St. John's East, Lib.): Sorry, Mr. Chair. I was hoping to speak.

Mr. Gord Johns: I move that we expand the motion to include basically all of the language in here, but after the words “with the September 2022 trip to the United Kingdom by the Prime Minister of Canada, including for all individuals accompanying the Prime Minister”, I would add that we also include all expenses of Prime Minister Harper's trip to South Africa to honour the late Nelson Mandela in December 2013 and Prime Minister Harper's trip to Beijing in 2009.

That's all I would add. It would make it easy for this motion to include those other two trips. I hope that all of my colleagues would be wanting to see that comparison with those two trips. We don't have any understanding of what those costs were—

The Chair: Mr. Johns, can I interrupt for a second? Can I get you to just read that back again for our clerk to follow along?

Mr. Gord Johns: Yes. It reads as follows: “1. Send for all receipts and invoices in the possession of the Office of the Prime Minister, the Privy Council Office, and any other implicated government departments associated with the September 2022 trip to the United Kingdom by the Prime Minister of Canada, including for all individuals accompanying the Prime Minister; and for Prime Minister Harper's trip in December 2013 to honour the late Nelson Mandela and Prime Minister Harper's 2009 trip to China that included CEOs.”

That would be it. Both (a) and (b) are fine, and paragraph 2 is fine. I don't have any changes to make to that at all.

The Chair: Just bear with me. The clerk has asked me to suspend for about 30 seconds so that she can catch up on something....

We're back, folks.

Ms. Thompson, go ahead.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

I certainly feel that oversight and transparency are incredibly important. I don't question that at all. What I am concerned about is really the number of studies that we have before us.

The McKinsey study was one that was noted to be incredibly important. We're in the middle of this process. We had another layer to the study, which I absolutely agree with, that includes other consulting groups and really allows for that comparison and expands the scope of the original McKinsey study. Plus, we have an outsourcing study, with the work that we were already carrying on shipbuilding, which, as you've certainly mentioned many times, is of significant financial interest for Canadians. We also have the GG study.

The amount of documentation that's required for us to do this work is significant. My concern with adding another study that requires in-depth documentation is that it would be adding—

• (1655)

The Chair: I'm sorry. I'm going to interrupt quickly.

It's not a study; it's just a request for documents. It will not be studied in committee.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: That's fair enough, but it's still documentation.

Let's work with what we have on the table. Let's move through at least a significant number of the items before us and then add to our work list. I think we have layers of documents that we need to review. Realistically, adding more documents at this time is not going to move our agenda forward. I think it's adding an unnecessary burden at this moment on the staff.

While I think it's incredibly important to look at this, I think that we can put this on the list of things we need to look at as we go forward. Let's go back and focus on the work that we've said is a priority and ensure that we spend the time reviewing the documents. There's quite a number of them. Let's do a good job on that before we take anything else on.

Certainly, transparency and accountability for all Canadians are incredibly important, and I would never suggest that we don't look into them, but I think we need to pay attention to the items that we have before us.

The Chair: I have Mr. Johns and then Mrs. Vignola.

Mr. Gord Johns: I was going to say that this isn't a study, as you highlighted, Mr. Chair. I think it's fine.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Vignola. No.

Seeing no speakers, we can vote on it.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. The minister is here. We can proceed with hearing witnesses.

I'll reiterate that if I have to, I'll properly move this time a dilatory motion to adjourn the debate on this. I don't want to do that. We agreed that we can have that discussion during the in camera session, but if not, I'll move the dilatory motion to adjourn debate.

The Chair: We have a motion to adjourn.

We'll start a vote.

I'm sorry. I don't think we can recognize someone who's not wearing the proper headset.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Can I vote with a thumbs up?

The Chair: No, we don't.... I don't believe—

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.): Mr. Chair, that's been recognized in the House of Commons.

The Chair: We just went through this in a committee of chairs today, about not recognizing people to speak without.... I'm sorry. We've been through this for two years. We know it's affecting....

I will double check with our clerk, though.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Mr. Chair, if you don't mind—

The Chair: I will double check with the clerk. Give me just a second.

• (1700)

Yes, this is right from our friend, Speaker Rota, that without a headset you cannot participate, so I strongly urge you to go find a headset. It's been two years now. I'm sorry, but this is ridiculous.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Okay. Excuse me.

The Chair: Mr. Jowhari is right that we do have the vote.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: It is adjourned. But, please, I urge everyone to get a headset.

Okay, everyone.

An hon member: The game is on.

The Chair: Yes, the game is on. We're reverting to the original order of business.

Minister Fortier, thank you for joining us.

Hon. Mona Fortier (President of the Treasury Board): Hello, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: If you'd been on time, none of this would have happened. No, I'm teasing you.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Well, our colleague left today and I wanted to recognize—

The Chair: I'm teasing you, Minister.

We'll start with five minutes. We're running short. Please, could you keep your opening statement at five minutes, and then we'll get right to questions.

Thanks, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss the Supplementary Estimates (C), 2022-23. First, I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on traditional Algonquin Anishinabe land.

Today is international women's day, and I would like to join my colleagues in celebrating the achievements of women and girls who have helped shape our world today.

I am joined by senior officials from Treasury Board Secretariat, including four accomplished women. Allow me to introduce Ms. Annie Boudreau, Ms. Karen Cahill, Ms. Samantha Tattersall, Ms. Diane Peressini, Mr. Stephen Burt and Mr. Jean-François Fleury.

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, each year the supplementary estimates present information on incremental spending requirements that either were not sufficiently developed in time for inclusion in the main estimates or have subsequently been refined to account for recent developments.

Now, these estimates' family of documents, including the supplementary estimates (C), provide insight into how the government plans to use public resources to carry out its mandate for Canadians.

Mr. Chair, with these supplementary estimates, the government is seeking Parliament's approval of \$4.7 billion in voted spending across 58 organizations to address matters of importance to Canadians.

The three largest items in new voted spending are \$500 million for military aid to Ukraine; \$370 million to help developing countries address climate change; and \$271 million to help reimburse first nations and emergency management service providers such as the Canadian Red Cross for response and recovery activities related to emergencies across the country. I would note, Mr. Chair, that this includes the 2022 flooding in Manitoba and Alberta.

These estimates include funds to implement key government priorities like the interim Canada dental benefit plan, making housing more affordable, and service delivery for the CRA and old age security. In my own department—as you know, the Treasury Board Secretariat—we're making investments towards strengthening protections for whistle-blowers, improving mental health support for Black public servants, and developing a new inclusive language training framework for the public service.

I will also note that statutory authorities that receive Parliament's approval through separate legislation are included in these supplementary estimates to provide a more complete picture of the department's total estimated expenditures.

• (1705)

[*Translation*]

These Supplementary Estimates (C) include statutory budget expenditures of \$5.6 billion, which represents a 2.6% increase over previous estimates. The statutory estimates include a one-time rental housing benefit of \$500 for 1.8 million low-income families and individuals.

Mr. Chair, Canadians and the parliamentarians who represent them have the right to know how public funds are spent. That is why, in addition to budget documents, we continue to use report production tools such as the Government of Canada InfoBase and the open government portal.

These tools are readily accessible and provide Canadians with information that is easy to understand about the spending approved by Parliament.

Mr. Chair, in conclusion, I would say that these estimates show how the government invests in Canada and internationally in order to follow through on its commitments and values. Among other things, this budget will enable us to support our international allies, to fight climate change, and to invest in First Nations communities.

All of these efforts are crucially important. Thank you to the committee for inviting me to discuss the supplementary estimates.

As you know, my senior officials and I are here to answer your questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will start with Mrs. Kusie for six minutes.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

I see you have asked for \$486,378 for this five-week fiscal period for review of the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act and yet you and your government didn't vote in favour of Bill C-290.

Your government is clearly at this time, especially given everything that we're seeing on the foreign interference file—which we saw today actually dates back to 2019—really just a series of cover-ups. Frankly, I was really shocked that your Prime Minister didn't suggest an inquiry, because I felt as though this is what happened with Bill C-290, in that this private member's bill was put forward and so in a panicked response you put together this advisory board on the whistle-blowers.

My point is that your government at this point—and, in fact, we have seen in this meeting as well the closure of debate on our request for the documents around the U.K. trip—has a terrible track record of transparency with Canadians, and Canadians are waking up to that.

We saw that in question period today, where your Prime Minister, sadly, had to try to use so many tactics that we have seen before time and time again and to deflect by talking about, perhaps, errors my colleagues have made, or International Women's Day, which we have seen before.

Why didn't you just support Bill C-290 and will you commit to more transparency, Minister?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for the question.

We all know that those who disclose serious wrongdoing must be protected. That is why we are currently asking an expert external task force to study how the federal disclosure process can better protect and empower employees to come forward. I really look forward to their advice.

Also, I think all parties agree on better protecting whistle-blowers, and that's why Bill C-290 would make some constructive changes but also would create some structural challenges.

I have had very good conversations with MP Garon about bringing forward Bill C-290, and we hope to find common ground to

better protect our world-class public servants by taking some of the information in Bill C-290 and making sure that we also reduce those structural changes to make sure we have a law that provides a secure and confidential process for disclosing serious wrongdoing in the workplace and also protection from acts of reprisal.

• (1710)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Minister.

I appreciate more of that information.

Really I don't think that it is the protection of whistle-blowers by this government. I actually think it's desperation by public servants who felt compelled to protect their nation and to provide information that is pertinent and imperative to the democracy of this country that drove these individuals from CSIS to come forward with this information.

I think your government has been significantly behind on this issue for some time, and, as I said, this task force just looks like another attempt to try to cover up transparency when you were given the opportunity with Bill C-290 to move forward with that.

In addition, you mentioned maintaining public service morale. We also see here in the estimates that you have put aside \$817 million for professional services. You know very well that we have been undertaking a study of McKinsey here. Previous to that we were looking at other procurement issues. There has been a call to study other agencies outside of McKinsey. Why then do you continue to undermine public servants, who are sitting with you here today even, and provide another \$817 million for consulting firms?

I believe your government is failing on transparency and you're also failing in terms of public service morale and, frankly, it's showing in the numbers we have seen recently. Both private union support and public union support are at the lowest place historically that I can remember, Minister Fortier.

What do you have to say to that regarding the amounts put aside for professional consulting services?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for that question.

We know we have a very ambitious agenda. We have been supporting Canadians on many matters. We need to do that with the public servants, and they are doing a great job.

We also need to complement their work to make sure we deliver on that ambitious agenda. That is why, for example, we need to complement that work with IT. That is where much of the outsourcing will be to help us make sure we deliver for Canadians.

As you know, over the past decade the percentage of government expenditures for professional services has remained relatively consistent with the growth of the public service. Therefore, it's important to show that we are continuing to make sure that is still consistent with the outsourcing we're doing.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Minister, again.

What I'm seeing consistently across not only the Treasury Board but also the entire government, starting from the top, is a consistent lack of transparency, a consistent effort to put your trust in the public service and not on the protection of the whistle-blowers as well.

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you. That is your time.

Before we go to Mr. Jowhari, Minister, are you with us for a full hour from the start time?

Hon. Mona Fortier: That was the expectation, if I'm not mistaken, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Wonderful.

We just—

Hon. Mona Fortier: If you want to cut it, I'm really open to that.

The Chair: So, you're staying for two hours. That's wonderful.

Hon. Mona Fortier: No. Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jowhari, you have six minutes, please.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, minister and officials, once again to our committee.

Talking about the transparency and accountability at the highest level, which is quite evident in our government, let me start with the mandate the Prime Minister gave you and Minister Jaczek to review the McKinsey file, which this committee has been engulfed in for the last number of meetings. Can you quickly provide an update on where you and your department are in your findings? Is there any timing when you would be in a position to be able to provide us some feedback?

• (1715)

Hon. Mona Fortier: As for the update, yes, the Prime Minister has tasked me and the Minister of Public Services and Procurement to review the matter and to take a close look at the circumstances and numbers. This government, as you know, will continue to maintain the highest standards of openness, transparency and, of course, fiscal responsibility. Now the review is currently under way, and we will be delivering it to the committee upon its completion, which we are looking at as being the end of June.

At the same time, I want to inform the committee that our government continues to advance the priorities of Canadians, including, of course, good jobs for the middle class, safe communities, continuing to protect the environment, and building a country where workers and families have the best chance to succeed in these very uncertain times.

I know that the Treasury Board has already provided this committee with the McKinsey contract data, and later this month, the

department's internal audit team's reviews are due to the TBS, so that gives you a sense of where we are at in the work. Again, our final report should be due by the end of June—so, in the summer. We will continue to share information with the committee as you requested. Again, I want to invite the committee to feel that they can share with me and my team their thoughts on the work that we're doing.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Minister.

Another concern or question was raised about the significant portion of the funding for professional services, specifically outsourcing to the tune of \$870 million. For the Canadians who are watching this committee especially as it relates to the estimates that we are about to approve, can you talk about how important these contracts are vis-à-vis the strategic direction we need to take as a government to make sure not only that departments are equipped to do the work they need to do but also that Canadians receive the services they need?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I think it's important to say that we do have an ambitious agenda, and we want to deliver on it. Of course, the Government of Canada is providing high-quality services to Canadians while ensuring best value for taxpayers. As I said earlier and will repeat, the procurement of professional services is used to complement the work of Canada's professional public service by meeting unexpected fluctuations in workload, and also to acquire special expertise.

One of these special areas, as I was mentioning earlier, is IT services. As we modernize legacy systems and further digitize operations and services, increased investment in IT is essential. Therefore, where it makes sense, we use internal resources, and when we need to, we supplement those with external resources that have special expertise, as I said earlier, or allow us to address those fluctuations in workload.

The decision to use procurement to meet operational requirements rests with departments and falls under the responsibility of the deputy head. We will continue, as I said, to support and to deliver on our ambitious agenda.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Minister.

Now I'll go to the frozen allotments, which you or your official could probably shed some light on.

The (C) estimates indicate that about “\$7.7 billion in money already approved by Parliament is now administratively frozen by the Treasury Board.”

Can you provide some background on why these are frozen and what the drivers of that are?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Yes, of course.

Frozen allotments are not available for expenditures and must lapse unless otherwise directed by the Treasury Board.

We know that freezing allotments is a normal tool to ensure that resources are managed prudently. They can be used to enforce conditions that the Treasury Board assigns to funding or to re-profile funds to a future year.

Right now in the supplementary estimates (C), Crown-Indigenous Relations is frozen for a settlement, as the timing of the settlement payments is difficult to predict right now. The contaminated sites remediation is frozen right now because it's taking a bit more time to be able to deliver on this.

That's why we have that tool, which permits us to freeze allotments.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mrs. Vignola, you have six minutes, please.

[Translation]

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

Madam Minister, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being here with us this evening.

The Supplementary Estimates (C), 2022-23, set out additional budget authorities of \$10.3 billion. In his report, the Parliamentary Budget Officer notes that, since there are just five weeks left until the end of the current fiscal year, the funds would have to be spent by March 31. As we know, this report was written two weeks ago.

Does that mean that most of that 10 billion dollars has to be spent in the next 23 days?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for the question.

I will let Ms. Boudreau begin and then I will follow up.

Ms. Annie Boudreau (Assistant Secretary, Expenditure Management Sector, Treasury Board Secretariat): Thank you very much.

As you know, the Financial Administration Act stipulates that the government must have parliamentary authority to make any payments out of the consolidated revenue fund. I am referring to section 26. Starting with the main estimates, Parliament adopts an appropriation act to authorize the maximum amount that can be spent.

In Canada, we use accrual accounting. That means that if I order an item today and receive it on March 31, but the invoice arrives in April or May, I can use the funds authorized in Supplementary Estimates (C) to pay for it.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

In previous budgets, it has happened that amounts were not spent. We have talked about that before.

What amounts from previous budgets, including the Main Estimates, 2022-23, the supplementary estimates (A), (B) or others, have still not been spent even though they were earmarked?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: We will have a better idea of that when we close the books on March 31. As you know, the public accounts are tabled in the fall. I can tell you the amount from last year.

Last year, there was a substantial surplus. It was approximately \$35 billion. Once again, the departments requested that that funding be carried over to this year because they needed it to cover their expenses.

There are mechanisms in the main estimates that enable departments to carry over funds to the following year to make sure they have enough to cover their expenses. We can say therefore that departments do not make a lot of expenditures in March for fear of losing their money. We have internal mechanisms to ensure that the money is protected to prevent the infamous “March madness” we often hear about.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you very much.

Of the \$1.9 million in new funding requested, Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada is requesting \$486,378 under vote 1c. These funds are for the review of the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act.

That is a Budget 2022 initiative. As you know, on February 15, 2023, my esteemed colleague Mr. Garon, the member for Mirabel, introduced a very important bill for the protection of public servants who are involved in the disclosure of wrongdoing. On November 29, 2022, a government task force was created.

What stage is the task force at right now?

Hon. Mona Fortier: First of all, thank you for your question.

I am pleased to hear you say that Bill C-290 has some strong points.

There are also some challenges with it right now, however, because of certain changes to be made to its structure. We are in discussions right now to find ways to improve it. The task force will therefore continue its work for 12 to 18 months and then, once we have received its recommendations, we can make our proposals to strengthen Bill C-290.

• (1725)

Mrs. Julie Vignola: So the task force is active and the amount of \$486,378 is essentially to cover salaries and administrative costs.

Is that correct?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Yes, that's right.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Perfect, thank you.

In 2017, the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, also known as the powerful OGGO, as our chair says...

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Julie Vignola: He is not listening to me anymore.

Hon. Mona Fortier: He's smiling, that's a good sign.

[English]

The Chair: You have an extra five minutes now.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Taken from you, that's [*Inaudible—Editor*]

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Our committee tabled a report on public servants involved in the disclosure of wrongdoing.

Will the recommendations made in that report finally—dare I say—be implemented?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for the question.

As we said, we have to do things properly, without half measures. Amending the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act is not as simple as adopting the recommendations made in the report of the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

Some of those recommendations would overlap with other possible avenues of recourse, resulting in needless duplication and inconsistent decisions. Others can simply not be done. On the other hand, we will draw on some of the committee's work to strengthen Bill C-290.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: I'm afraid that is your time, though.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: My five minutes!

[English]

The Chair: I apologize.

We have Mr. Johns for six minutes, please.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you, Minister, for being here. Happy International Women's Day.

In the Department of Indigenous Services, they're requesting \$170.9 million for the continued implementation of Jordan's principle. This funding, they say, will be used to provide first na-

tions children with access to needed health, social, education products, services and supports.

Can you talk about how many first nations children and families will benefit from this funding? Given that the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal determined that victims and survivors of the federal first nations child and family services program could have been compensated any time since 2016, when will the Government of Canada begin compensating them?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for that question. It's a very important question, MP Johns.

I could get a more specific response to your question on the specific numbers. I know the amount will be used, of course, to advance.... Annie might have some specific numbers to share with you today.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Thank you, Minister.

Since July 2016, the Government of Canada has funded over 2.36 million requests for products, services and supports for first nations children under Jordan's principle.

Mr. Gord Johns: In terms of the compensation.... Actually, I'm going to another question.

Given that the government is still fighting the human rights tribunal's decision, it would be interesting to see what you're paying lawyers to fight the decision. How much is the government allocating to keep fighting cases that indigenous peoples have brought against the federal government?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I know how important this question is, MP Johns. I would have to go to the minister responsible to understand those specific requirements.

We are, of course, having an amount to support the children. Therefore, if you want me to ask the minister, I can do so.

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay, we'll look for that from you.

In terms of the agreement in principle in place right now that sets the framework for ending the federal government's discrimination in child and family services and Jordan's principle over five years, what is your government doing to ensure the discrimination doesn't recur in year six and beyond?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Again, as you know, we are working very hard, and with every parliamentarian also, to make sure that we don't have any more discrimination. We have a lot of work to do, of course, but specifically to your question, I would address it to the minister responsible to share the strategic plan that they're moving forward. I think we know that we are investing and we are bringing forward those—

• (1730)

Mr. Gord Johns: I hope I'm not going to get that in the next question, because you're the one who supplies money to these departments, and—

Hon. Mona Fortier: I understand, but the minister responsible is the one developing the strategy. I allocate the resources.

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay. Sure.

Your government also made a commitment of \$4.5 billion in terms of an annual permanent transfer for mental health and substance use. So far, there's \$875 million that still hasn't been spent on the promise to date. Meanwhile, we're in a crisis, as you know, when it comes to mental health.

Now, the recent health care bilateral agreements with the provinces and territories provide temporary funding of \$2.5 billion annually to be divided into four priority groups, one of which includes mental health. It's far from what you promised in the transfer, and now, with multiple coinciding crises and facing emergency department closures and health human resource shortages, why has your government significantly decreased its funding commitment? We have a toxic drug crisis. We have a mental health crisis that's happening in our country.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for that question.

I have to say that we are investing in mental health, and we know that a very important agreement is happening right now with provinces and territories to make sure that we deliver on mental health care across the country—

Mr. Gord Johns: I think we need some more transparency, because we don't know what's in those agreements. We need to know. People need to know. We're far below our peers. We look at France and Britain, which are spending 12% on mental health. In Ontario, it's 3%. In my home province, it's going to be closer to 9% with the recent billion-dollar commitment by the Eby government. We need the federal government to step in and ensure parity with regard to physical and mental health.

I had a parent just write me—

Hon. Mona Fortier: Well, I was in my riding this week—

Mr. Gord Johns: I just had a parent write me. His son is addicted to fentanyl. He said he's going to have to sell his house because his son is in treatment. Now, if his son broke his neck, he'd get covered. This parent shouldn't have to sell his home to save his son's life. That shouldn't be happening in a country like Canada, and I hope you'll fulfill your commitment.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We are investing important amounts in mental health, and I know that in my riding—

Mr. Gord Johns: Minister—

Hon. Mona Fortier: If I may...? In my riding this week, I was at Recovery Care. Important amounts for safe supply have also been invested in communities—

Mr. Gord Johns: Minister, you're spending \$33 million a year on your substance use assistance program. That's peanuts for how many lives are being lost.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We are investing—

Mr. Gord Johns: People are dying. You're not acting like it's the epidemic that it is. You've never invested so little on such a health crisis: on SARS—you can name every health crisis—the HIV epidemic, COVID.... This is a drop in the bucket for how many lives are being lost.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I think we should also recognize that the federal government, the current federal government, has invested incredible amounts during not only the COVID pandemic but also for safe supply—

Mr. Gord Johns: If you spent 1% of what you spent on COVID—

The Chair: I'm sorry. That is our time. You'll get another moment, Mr. Johns.

We're entering the second round and our five-minute rounds.

You have five minutes, Mrs. Block.

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

Thank you to you, Minister, and to your departmental officials for being with us.

I just want to make a suggestion before I go into my questioning. While you're discussing Bill C-290 and perhaps the things you like about it and the things you don't, I would recommend that you take a look at a perfectly good OGGO study that made recommendations to address the issues within the system. It's my understanding that the report has basically been collecting dust for over four or five years now, and it actually could be implemented for free. You've had parliamentarians undertake a study on this, so please do take a look at that study.

Twice, Minister, you've mentioned “ambitious” agendas and have said that you have “an ambitious agenda”. I think an ongoing issue with the departmental plans has been the departments setting departmental results to be achieved with the money provided to them, but with dates and actual targets set with “to be advised” status. This has been brought up each time for years. You wouldn't get a bank loan for a lemonade stand by setting targets “to be advised”. A full 25%—one in four—had no stated goal for results to be achieved in a year. Why do you expect Parliament to approve money when there are no goals or targets attached to that?

• (1735)

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for your different comments.

I do want to mention that, of course, Bill C-290 is going to be part of our study to continue to reinforce the law about whistleblowing. Also, the OGGO committee tabled the report. There is good in there that we will be using. I did, of course, mention earlier that much of it will be part of strengthening the act.

When we talk about transparency and responsible financial management, our government is committed to that. We bring monthly financial reports that are posted and reported in "The Fiscal Monitor". Our departments provide quarterly financial reporting. You also know that annual audited financial statements are published in the public accounts. We also table, as you know, departmental plans and departmental results reports.

For your information, we will be tabling the departmental plans tomorrow. Outside of the pilot project that we did in 2018-19, which I'm sure someone might raise, our government has tabled the departmental plans—

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you, Minister.

You have not answered my question. I will move to another question.

In his report on the supplementary estimates, the PBO states in reference to a quote from you, Minister, when explaining the supplementary estimates, that "This effectively means the Government requires more time to figure out how their spending announcements can be implemented".

Again, this seems like a trend when it comes to how the government is making announcements with great fanfare but without their being followed up with any great plan. There are goals set with no targets but simply "to be advised", with Canadians being left in limbo not knowing exactly what their money is being spent on and when it's going to happen.

Now you've just told us—I was going to ask—when the departmental plans were going to be tabled, and that's happening tomorrow, as you've said. We'll be looking for that.

Can you confirm that every single goal in those departmental plans has a target set?

Hon. Mona Fortier: As I mentioned, and I will repeat it, our government has ambitious targets to improve the quality of life of Canadians, and we are delivering. Some results do not yet have data—

Mrs. Kelly Block: I've asked a question. I would really like you to answer my question—

Hon. Mona Fortier: I am answering.

Mrs. Kelly Block: —because this is my time.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I understand.

Mrs. Kelly Block: I've just asked if you can confirm if every single goal in the departmental plans has a target set. I'm sure you've seen them. If they're being tabled, you must have looked at them.

The Chair: Give a quick answer, please.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: In some cases, departments may not be able to have any target, and I will give you a couple of examples. Some indicators are new, and expected data were not available at the time of the reporting. That's one example. Another example is that departments may have stopped collecting data because of COVID-19. They have more pressing issues to take care of. Another example could be that they need the census to be able to get the data.

Year after year, there will be, for sure, missing targets that are not available, but there are very good reasons for that, which will be included in the documents.

Mrs. Kelly Block: So then "no" is the answer. "No" is the answer.

The Chair: That is our time. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Kusmierczyk, please, you have five minutes.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Madam President, for being here at the OGGO committee. It seems like you're appearing here on a regular basis—probably at least once a month—so I want to say thank you for always taking great time and care to answer our questions.

Yesterday was an historic moment in the House of Commons. The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, addressed the House of Commons. It was an historic moment for many reasons.

She dedicated the start of her speech to the situation in Ukraine and the valour of the Ukrainian people in fighting back against brutal Russian aggression. She highlighted the decisive efforts of Canada early on in training and preparing over 30,000 Ukrainian soldiers to be ready to thwart Vladimir Putin's egregious aggression and war. She also went on to say that Canada has demonstrated tremendous and decisive global leadership in supporting Ukraine, both in terms of humanitarian and military assistance.

Of course, Canadians and Canada continue to be supportive of Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression. Can you explain what funding Canada is providing to Ukraine in these estimates?

● (1740)

Hon. Mona Fortier: First, thank you.

Yes, Canada and Ukraine have a long history together. A year after Russia's illegal and unjustifiable "full-scale...invasion" of Ukraine—as the EU President, an inspirational leader who has been central to galvanizing support for Ukraine and its people, put it yesterday in her historic address—Canada continues to be....

As you know, since February 2022, Canada has committed over a billion dollars in military assistance to Ukraine. The supplementary estimates we're presenting today include funding to continue providing Ukraine with valuable military training and equipment to defend its freedom. It includes \$500 million for that.

As part of the Government of Canada's response, special programs have also been introduced to help thousands of Ukrainians. If my memory serves me well, over 170,000 Ukrainians have since come to Canada. This supplementary estimate includes \$170 million to provide transitional financial assistance to help those families take care of their basic needs while they settle in Canada.

Therefore, I think the answer to your question is that we are working to make sure we're supporting Ukraine in this fight.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you, Madam President.

Certainly, you've just described a country—and Canadians—stepping up in this incredibly pivotal moment to defend democracy and freedom. I should clarify that we are supporting Ukraine in its defence of not just its own borders, territory and people but also democracy and freedom around the world.

You mentioned the fact that Canada and Ukraine have a long-held relationship. You stated the support being provided to Ukrainian refugees. I think you mentioned about 170,000 have arrived. I'm wondering whether you have numbers on how many have been approved for the emergency visa. I'm curious about whether you have that information off the cuff. The last number I heard was around half a million approved for an emergency visa.

I'm just wondering whether you might have that information.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thanks to my supporting official, I have the answer to that question.

Through the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel—the CUAET, as some call it—Ukrainian nationals and their family members can apply, as you know, for a temporary resident visa to travel to, and stay in, Canada temporarily. There were 514,000 temporary resident applications approved between March 17, 2022 of last year and January 24, 2023 of this year—probably more, by now.

That would answer your question.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Vignola, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Madam Minister, this year we will set a record in terms of planned expenditures for professional and special services. They will total \$10 billion—this was mentioned earlier. In addition, the number of public servants has now risen to 320,000, another record, if I am not mistaken.

The government has used outside consultants repeatedly. In some cases, it is initially for a new project, but then the contracts are renewed so the consultants can continue their work for the same department or another department.

Instead of setting aside funds to hire outside consultants repeatedly, wouldn't it make more sense, once it is clear that the expertise does not exist within the public service, to create dedicated teams for certain tasks and to develop that expertise ourselves?

Ten billion dollars is a lot of money. For next year, we are looking at \$19.5 billion. That is incredible. In my opinion, having our own expertise would be more cost-effective.

What are your thoughts on this?

• (1745)

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for the question.

When senior departmental officials plan to hire consultants, it is often to train public servants for a new service. It is a way of developing the expertise internally.

In many cases, we use outside resources on a short-term basis if we need help meeting tight deadlines, for instance.

One of the current initiatives that warrants the use of outside resources is all aspects of digital government. I can assure you that a lot of work is being done, and that we are also training public servants at the same time to do the work internally.

One of my team members might wish to add something in this regard.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: If we are talking about analyzing a strategic plan, suggesting innovative ideas or getting people to think outside the box, why not create roving teams within the public service that can move from one department to another to address these kinds of needs?

In my humble opinion, that would cost a lot less than constantly using consultants.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I will ask Mr. Stephen Burt...

[*English*]

The Chair: Just make it a very brief answer, please.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mona Fortier: I will ask Mr. Burt to answer that question, specifically in regards to digital government.

Mr. Stephen Burt (Chief Data Officer of Canada, Treasury Board Secretariat): Thank you, Ms. Fortier.

We are actually in the process of establishing departmental guidelines regarding digital matters. We expect to ask departments to submit their action plan for hiring new employees or contract workers.

This will help us clarify matters. We want to find the best way to manage the digital shift. Do we want to invest in the public service in order to have the right staff internally or do we need to continue using contract workers?

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

It's to Mr. Johns for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns: Minister, as President of the Treasury Board, you have a mandated commitment to establish a mental health fund for Black public servants. It arose from the Thompson class action suit, which you're well aware of, the Nicholas Marcus Thompson et al v. Her Majesty the Queen case, where on July 9, 2021, the plaintiffs filed a motion seeking an order for the establishment of a fund to provide mental health services and counselling for Black public servants who have suffered mental health and physical symptoms associated with experiences of racial trauma and systemic discrimination within the public service of Canada.

It's been a year since budget 2022 and your commitment of \$3.7 million for a Black-led engagement, design and implementation of a mental health fund for Black federal public servants. Can you tell me about the current status of the program, what work has been done in the first year and how much of the \$3.7 million has been spent?

Hon. Mona Fortier: It is an incredible, I will say, commitment that we have made to have a Black public service mental health fund in place. We have been working in the last year, making sure we prepare the strategy and that we have an ask to develop a whole—

Mr. Gord Johns: I'm just trying to get an idea. It was because of the court—

Hon. Mona Fortier: Because of the...?

Mr. Gord Johns: —the court decision.

I'm wondering what the status is, what work's been done, how much of the money's been spent, what it's been spent on. Is the work being done, in terms of being Black-led? How many Black executives—I'm asking Treasury Board—are leading the program? What is their classification? I want to know that this is being undertaken by them.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We have been working very hard to develop the Black public service mental health fund. I don't have the specific numbers out of the \$3.7 million that has been spent at this time. I will provide this to you.

We will be—

• (1750)

Mr. Gord Johns: Is the work actually ongoing right now with Black employee networks? Is this actually happening?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Yes, we have been co-developing the, let's say, exercise of having the Black public service fund.

Mr. Gord Johns: Have you been consulting the Black class action secretariat, which prompted the need for this mental health?

Hon. Mona Fortier: We are....

[*Translation*]

Would you like to answer that question, Mr. Fleury?

[*English*]

Mr. Jean-François Fleury (Assistant Deputy Minister, Research, Planning and Renewal, Treasury Board Secretariat): We have been working with the communities and networks of Black executives, as well as Black public servants within the public service, to really co-develop the options—

Mr. Gord Johns: What about the Black class action secretariat?

Mr. Jean-François Fleury: I'm not....

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

Hon. Mona Fortier: The Black class action secretariat is not working on the Black public service mental health fund at this time.

Mr. Gord Johns: There's been no consultation with it.

The Chair: Mr. Johns, Minister—

Hon. Mona Fortier: It's another file completely.

The Chair: —that is our time.

I understand you might have some information you could share with the committee in a follow-up to Mr. Johns's question.

Hon. Mona Fortier: The \$3.7 million, I could provide more insight on that.

The Chair: Sure, and on any of the other questions that Mr. Johns has outstanding.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I can also discuss the hard work that is being done and what we're trying to accomplish and the next phase of having a Black public service mental health fund for the public service.

The Chair: Thank you.

It's to Ms. Kusie for the final five minutes.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, I am consistently shocked by the headlines that I read with your picture. The one I saw most recently—which I guess is what we'll study next—is on the estimates, which are \$432.9 billion, which I understand is an 8.9% increase compared with what was proposed a year ago.

Since we're here today discussing the supplementary estimates, I see that you're asking for \$10.3 billion in the supplementary estimates. I'm shocked that you require this amount of funding at a time where Canadians are seeing a 40% increase in food prices and at a time where young Canadians are being priced out of potentially ever owning a home.

How can you possibly justify \$10.3 billion more when Canadians are in a difficult cost-of-living situation as well as facing 40-year-high inflation?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you.

Actually, I'm seeking approval for \$4.7 billion for priorities in these supplementary estimates to provide ongoing military support to Ukraine and financial assistance to Ukrainians who have come to Canada to escape the conflict.

I'm also asking for reimbursements to indigenous communities for costs incurred on reserves due to emergencies such as natural disasters. It's also for providing first nations children with health, social and educational services and support.

It's also for helping developing countries transition to low-carbon economies as part of the global fight against climate change. This is what I'm seeking approval for today.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you for that.

What I can't understand as well is that, given these incredible amounts of billions and a 9% increase foreseen in the estimates compared with a year ago.... I mean, that's a lot of money. I don't know how many Rolexes or BMWs that would purchase.

In addition to this large sum of money, many services for Canadians are not being delivered. Last year, we saw Canadians having a lot of difficulty obtaining passports. We've seen 2.1 million immigration cases in our backlog. We've seen a ballooning public service as well as incredible costs to bring in consultants in effort to try to deliver these services.

It seems very evident to me that you're failing on both fronts. This government supposedly committed to a pay-as-you-go model, yet we're being asked for more funding now. What I'm seeing is significantly more spending and lack of delivery of services for Canadians.

How can you justify that, please?

● (1755)

Hon. Mona Fortier: First of all, I believe we've all been through COVID in the last two years. We did deliver in supporting Canadians, workers, families and businesses be able to bridge through the pandemic. Many investments, like the wage subsidy, helped to support those businesses that are still open today and were able to keep their workers.

Recently, we also committed to supporting vulnerable Canadians who feel the cost of living. As we all know, the cost of living going up is a global effect of the pandemic, so we have doubled the GST credit and are sending cheques to 11 million Canadian households that need it the most. We're also providing a \$500 top-up to Canadians struggling to pay their rent. We've brought forward the dental care for Canadian children who are 12 years and under to help families cope with making sure they have that support. I can also share the fact that we've permanently eliminated the federal interest on Canada student and apprentice loans.

Therefore, we are continuing to support Canadians in these difficult times. Our investments are targeted. They are intended to make sure that we can continue to grow the economy and that Canadians can continue to be in a good situation while we are, of course, looking at this global difficulty that we're living with.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll go to Mrs. Thompson for the final five minutes.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Minister. It's good to see your team with you again.

We know bargaining with unions takes tremendous effort and good will, but it can obviously bring about successful agreements, such as the one you mentioned during your last appearance at committee, regarding ACFO.

Could you please update the committee on how that went, and then the renewal of public service health care plan and why that matters for the current round of collective bargaining?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you.

We are continually making sure that we, as a government, are committed to working together in providing a good conversation with the unions. Of course, we want, in good faith with bargaining agents, to achieve results that are fair for employees, but also reasonable for taxpayers.

I have to compliment the fact that one success of working all together is that the improved public service health care plan shows we achieve something very important when we work together.

To give you a bit more information on this modernized plan, it will provide and improve support for mental health by increasing coverage for psychological services and reducing barriers to access. It also provides greater access to hearing aids and mobility devices, like wheelchairs, which was requested during the negotiations. It also improves coverage during parental and caregiving leaves, which are a reality that many Canadians and public servants live with today. Also, for the first time, it provides coverage for gender affirmation.

All of these improvements come at no additional cost to the taxpayer. I thought you'd like to hear that.

I'm very grateful to bargaining agents and federal retirees for their collaboration to make these improvements happen. As we know, when there's a shared commitment to work together, we can deliver positive results. This is what we will continue to work with as a guiding principle for the current negotiations we're having right now.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you, and well done on that.

I'm going to switch to climate emergencies. We know that they're becoming more dire each year, certainly in Atlantic Canada, which is my province. We saw that a very short number of months ago.

Indigenous communities are often some of the hardest hit. Could you please tell the committee what work is being done by the government to ensure that indigenous communities are being supported through tough times?

● (1800)

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for that.

As we know, we've been providing supports to indigenous communities, especially with the difficulties that we have been having with the climate change, by supporting them with resources, and we will continue to do so in the future.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

As you well know, there has been some misinformation surrounding the relationship between executive performance bonuses and departmental result targets. Can you share with the committee how they actually work?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Can you repeat that? I'm having a hard time hearing.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: I'm sorry. No problem.

There's been misinformation surrounding the relationship between executive performance bonuses and departmental result targets. Could you speak to the committee about how they actually work?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you.

We know that executive performance pay and departmental results, which you're asking about, are something that we have to make sure we differentiate. Bonuses hold executives accountable for individual results. They are different from organizational goals, which are dependent on policy decisions.

Therefore, it's like apples and oranges to try to compare those bonuses with the departmental results.

The Chair: That is our time, I'm afraid.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Oh. Thank you.

The Chair: Minister, thank you for joining us. I appreciate your sticking around. We'll let you go.

We're going right back to our regular round.

Colleagues, we are short of time, so we will just do one round of five minutes, and five minutes, and then two interventions of two and a half minutes. Then we have to vote on the supplementary estimates and then go in camera on a couple of items.

Ms. Block, you're up for five minutes. Oh, I'm sorry.

Mrs. Kelly Block: I have a different question, and it's just while the minister is taking her leave. You can let me know if this is out of order or not. It's a follow-up to a commitment to get information back to a member when they ask for it, or to the committee when it asks. I do know that PACP has adopted this motion. I want to suggest it here. I don't know if it will be in order.

They passed a motion. It reads:

That, when undertakings are given by witnesses at committee meetings to provide further answers to questions or follow up information, the witnesses be given three weeks to provide the committee with a written response, if a response is not received within the specified time, that the committee invite the appropriate accounting officer to appear before the committee to explain why the information has not been provided in the time requested.

I want to leave that with you. Let me know if it's something that we can deal with here and now or if we would deal with it later.

The Chair: We can deal with it here and now. This is something that public accounts and several other committees I've sat on actually do, where they pass a formal motion. We constantly ask for documents or answers back. They have a three-week time period. We can do it as an official motion, or we can just agree that it will be the will of the committee going forward.

Funnily enough, I think it was passed by a former Liberal member of the public accounts committee.

Go ahead, Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Mr. Chair, it's an interesting motion, an interesting suggestion. I was just wondering if my colleague would allow us to consider it and then take this up at the next meeting.

The Chair: Of course. Thanks very much.

We have Ms. Kusie, please.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Chair.

To what extent do voted authorities requested for public service insurance reflect negotiated collective agreements this fiscal year?

Ms. Karen Cahill (Assistant Secretary and Chief Financial Officer, Treasury Board Secretariat): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

These are all voted authorities, so \$160,000 reflects collective agreements entirely. This is covered from previous collective agreements. We're bringing the funds in through supplementary estimates (C).

• (1805)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you.

Of the \$1.9 million in new funding that Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat is requesting under vote 1(c), program expenditures, \$486,378 would be for a review of the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act. This is a budget 2022 initiative. On February 15, 2023, a private member's bill, Bill C-290, an act to amend the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act, was referred to the committee.

In your opinion, would the requested funds support the nine task force members' compensation? For what else would these funds be used, please?

Mr. Jean-François Fleury: This money will be spent to cover salary costs as well as research activities and secretariat support for the task force. Members of this task force are volunteers.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay. Thank you for that.

Will the government implement all recommendations of the committee's 2017 report on the whistle-blower's protection act as part of this review?

Mr. Jean-François Fleury: It will be consulting lots of specialists in the whistle-blowing regime, as well as looking at the recommendations made in the report by OGGO and the comments expressed during discussions on Bill C-290, and will do a report in 12 to 18 months from now.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay.

How will Bill C-290 affect the legislative review process?

Mr. Jean-François Fleury: I don't have that answer. I'd have to come back to the committee with an answer.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay.

The Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer notes that over \$800 million in new cash is intended to pay for professionals and special services, which includes spending on external consultants. Since the 2017-2018 fiscal year, spending on professional and special services has increased by over one-third.

As the employer of the public service, what options has the Treasury Board explored to increase reliance on existing capacity or hire new public servants rather than spending on consultants, please?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: I think I would like to demystify the professional services. Inside the amount, we have 14 categories. Consulting represents only one of them. In those categories, we have nurses who have to go up north to provide help to indigenous communities. I would not consider that as being business consulting. We also have legal services, protection services, training and educational services. I think we should look at all of those 14 different categories because management consulting represents 5% of the total. As you said, it was also indicated in the PBO report.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you for that.

Given that information, do you think the government is prepared to contain costs related to professional services? If so, what are some ideas being discussed in an effort to do that, please?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: The mix between personnel and professional services is, at the end of the day, a decision from the accounting officer. All deputy ministers in each organization will look at the priorities and at the skill shortages, and they will decide what's the best way for them to split the money in order to be able to deliver their own mandates.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I think I'll stop there, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Kusie.

Mr. Bains, you have five minutes, please.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for coming in today.

The Canada Revenue Agency is requesting \$213.8 million “to address the post-pandemic sustainability of contact centres”. Moreover, the supplementary estimates note that “The Agency anticipates 5 million calls from individuals and 1.6 million calls from businesses in 2022-23. This funding will be used for call agents, support functions and related internal services, and will help the agency preserve current capacity and service levels.”

How has the Government of Canada's digital transformation efforts affected the efficiency of these contact centres?

• (1810)

Mr. Stephen Burt: I can address that.

The Canada Revenue Agency is a fairly sophisticated user of digital services. It has been one of the leaders among agencies in terms of the services being offered to Canadians. I won't get into the details of call centres specifically, but I can say that it has been

driving its program in a way to make sure that it stays modern and accessible to Canadians across the board.

It's something that it hasn't come to us to ask for our help on. I have a high degree of confidence that it is taking the digital considerations into account as it builds that program.

Mr. Parm Bains: It hasn't raised any issues with the Treasury Board concerning its hiring and training efforts for call centres. Has that happened?

Mr. Stephen Burt: On the hiring and training efforts for call centres, no, it has not raised that.

Mr. Parm Bains: Just shifting gears here.... The Department of National Defence is requesting \$167.8 million “for Canada's military contribution to the Global Coalition to counter Daesh (Operation IMPACT); North Atlantic Treaty Organization assurance and deterrence measures in Central and Eastern Europe (Operation REASSURANCE); and the United Nations Peace support operations in Africa (Operation PRESENCE)”. Furthermore, the supplementary estimates note that “This funding will support overseas missions, including military training and capacity building for international partners, counter-terrorism operations, the deployment of task forces, and contributions to the [UN] peacekeeping missions. The missions promote peace and security in the Middle East, Eastern and Central Europe, and Africa.”

What is the proportion of requested funding allocated to each of these operations?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: The \$167.8 million is divided this way. Operation Impact has \$106.7 million. Operation Reassurance has \$56.6 million. Operation Presence has \$4.5 million.

Mr. Parm Bains: How do you foresee Operation Reassurance funding changing based on Canada's support to Ukraine since February 2022?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Funding for Operation Reassurance is not expected to be affected by Canada's support to Ukraine. Canada remains committed to both our partners in Ukraine and our allies in NATO.

Mr. Parm Bains: On the Department of Employment and Social Development, they're requesting \$227.5 million to write off unrecoverable debts owed to the Crown for Canada student loans and Canada apprentice loans.

Canada student loans provide financial assistance to students for their post-secondary education. What proportion of the student loans does this figure represent?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: The amount that we find in supplementary estimates (C) represents roughly 1% of the portfolio. This is also consistent with the amount that you saw last year in supplementary estimates (C). It's always about 1% of the portfolio.

Mr. Parm Bains: How does it concern liabilities on Canada's balance sheets? How does the practice of writing off student loans differ from forgiving them?

Ms. Diane Peressini (Executive Director, Government Accounting Policy and Reporting, Financial Management Sector, Treasury Board Secretariat): The writeoffs of student loans actually remove the debt from the accounts of Canada, but that doesn't legally discharge that debt. In the future, the Crown does retain the right to be able to go back and collect or recover the debt. The debt can be reinstated on our books at any time, subject to limitation periods or exceptions that may exist.

Conversely, with forgiveness of a loan, it's actually legally extinguished. It waives the right of the Crown to reinstate that debt in the future and allows both the Crown and the debtor to permanently remove the amount from their books and discharges the liability.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bains.

Witnesses, thank you for being with us. You're all done for today. It was a pleasure to see you. I think we'll see you back in a few weeks for the main estimates.

Good heavens. I sincerely apologize. I should just pack up and go. I messed up from the beginning of the meeting. I apologize. We have two and a half minutes for the Bloc and two and a half for the NDP. I do sincerely apologize, witnesses, and Mrs. Vignola and Mr. Johns. Sorry.

Go ahead.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: One of Treasury Board's roles pertains specifically to parts IV, V and VI of the Official Languages Act.

A contracting document has come to my attention that stipulated that deliverables had to be provided in English only and that in-person presentations had to be made in English, or French if necessary.

To your knowledge, is that standard practice? If so, is that acceptable in a country that calls itself bilingual?

• (1815)

Ms. Samantha Tattersall (Assistant Comptroller General, Acquired Services and Assets Sector, Treasury Board Secretariat): Thank you for the question.

I would like to point out that we have published a new guide on the official languages in contracting. Each contract has its own conditions. Ultimately, the government must live up to its obligations.

If we require documents in English, it might be because we want to translate them if they are technical documents and we have more experience in that field.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Okay.

I do not think that is acceptable. It is unfair. I do not really see why it is that way, but I expect we can talk about this again another day.

If Canada is a bilingual country, it is completely bilingual from the outset, and the two languages have the same rights. Employees who receive documents have the right to receive them in their first language. By chance, the employees who were responsible for the contract in question were francophones.

I understand all of this, but francophones always bear the brunt because, every time, bilingualism is fine as long as it is the francophones who have to be bilingual. Unfortunately, anglophones are often, but not always, the ones who are treated better in their first language.

When contracts request that oral presentations be given primarily in English and in French only if necessary, that sends a clear message that echoes other moments in Canadian history. I am not even referring to Manitoba or Ontario. You know your history, I hope. It does not make for pleasant reading.

[English]

The Chair: Thanks. I'm afraid we don't have time for a response, but if there's any answer, perhaps you could provide it in writing to the committee.

Mr. Johns, you'd better do your two and a half minutes before I cut you off.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you.

First, I want to thank you and all of your colleagues and all of the people who you work with for your service to Canada in the public service.

There's \$800 million more for external consultants here, which I believe is work that should be done by public servants like yourselves. Now it's going to be \$21.4 billion to be spent on external consultants. This has gone up fourfold under the Liberal government since 2015. It doubled under the Conservative government. It's risen tenfold from a decade ago. It's a runaway ship. We know consultants are in it to make sure they've got work for themselves, so I've got some questions.

Can you maybe tell the committee when staffing plans will be developed and released for departments? How many of them will or have been developed by outside consultants or with input from them?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: As the minister mentioned, tomorrow she will be tabling the DPs, the departmental plans, in which you will see the three-year commitment by departments in terms of the money that they have available, and also the FTEs they are going to be able to pay with the existing funding. Those will be tabled tomorrow.

Mr. Gord Johns: The minister talked about the special expertise of these consultants. Their special expertise is making sure they've got work for themselves for the future and growing their own companies. That's what they've proven. That's proved by the numbers.

I need to know how many of them helped develop those staffing plans, because they're developing work for themselves. That's what I believe.

Did any of the big six \$100 million-plus club, the highly paid consultant companies, have anything to do with the development of any staffing plans?

• (1820)

Ms. Annie Boudreau: I won't be able to answer your question.

Mr. Gord Johns: You can't answer if McKinsey or PricewaterhouseCoopers or Accenture or KPMG or Deloitte had anything to do with drafting staffing plans or plans to make sure they've got work to fill roles and jobs that could be done by public servants?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: I have no answer for you. The best person to respond would be the accounting officer, who would be the deputy ministers in each respective department and agency.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you, again, for your service.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johns.

Colleagues, thank you for bearing with us today the back and forth and everything.

Witnesses, now please, you are welcome to leave.

Colleagues, we have to vote on the supplementary estimates (C)s, and then we'll go in camera.

Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I want to return to my motion that I had presented. We had agreed to deal with this afterwards. Would you suggest we get the vote on the supplementary estimates done first and then return to the motion, or...?

The Chair: Yes, the vote will just take seconds.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay.

The Chair: So why don't we do that?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I have seconds. That's fine.

The Chair: Officially does the committee wish to vote on the supplementary estimates (C) now?

A voice: Okay.

The Chair: Yes, thank you.

In all, there are four votes in the supplementary estimates (C), 2022-23. Unless anyone objects, I will seek the unanimous consent of the committee to group the votes together for decision.

Is there unanimous consent to proceed this way, as we usually do?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Wonderful.

Shall votes referred to the committee in the supplementary estimates (C), 2022-23 carry?

Mrs. Kelly Block: On division.

The Chair: On division. Wonderful.

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Vote 1c—Operating expenditures.....\$ 13,334,589

(Vote 1c agreed to on division)

PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE

Vote 1c—Program expenditures.....\$2,773,222

(Vote 1c agreed to on division)

PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

Vote 1c—Program expenditures.....\$1,432,258

(Vote 1c agreed to on division)

TREASURY BOARD SECRETARIAT

Vote 1c—Program expenditures.....\$1,860,409

Vote 10c—Government-wide Initiatives.....\$9,265,000

Vote 30c—Paylist Requirements.....\$140,000,000

(Votes 1c, 10c and 30c agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the votes back to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Wonderful. Thank you very much.

I have Mrs. Kusie, and I think Mr. Kusmierczyk, you wanted to respond.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Sure. I guess Mr. Johns can.... Do I move it again, or do we just go back to his amendment or what?

The Chair: Colleagues, there was discussion about moving the motion for the production of the documents to the end of the meeting. I'll be honest and say I can't recall if it was Mr. Johns or perhaps from Mr. Jowhari.

I'll go to Mr. Kusmierczyk, then Mr. Johns.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Mr. Chair, I had a chance to actually speak with Mr. Jowhari before he left. He made it quite clear that his motion was to adjourn debate, so debate is adjourned on that motion today.

The understanding of our side was that the debate has been adjourned.

The Chair: Mr. Johns, go ahead on this.

Mr. Gord Johns: My only comment is that I thought we would go to my amendment, which was on the floor. That was the discussion.

That's all I was trying to clarify, but it sounds like that's moot at this point.

The Chair: I think our clerk is looking in the big green book, so give me two seconds, please.

We'll suspend for 30 seconds.

● (1820) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1825)

The Chair: Colleagues, I am advised by the clerk that someone can move to resume debate on it and that just becomes a majority vote.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I move to resume debate.

The Chair: I can have the clerk explain a bit more, if you wish to wait a second.

Mr. Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Lib.): I think that would be necessary.

Thank you.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Aimée Belmore): The idea of adjourning debate is to adjourn debate until the conclusion of the order of business.

We adjourned debate on the motion of Mrs. Kusie and moved to the next order of business on the agenda, which was the supplementary estimates.

The supplementary estimates have now been concluded and it is the committee's time to move to a further order of business. At this point, at an intervening proceeding, someone can move to resume debate on the amendment of Mrs. Kusie. It would be a majority vote in that case—whichever way the majority goes—and then the debate could either resume or be further concluded until the committee decides to resume debate on the motion of Mrs. Kusie.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I'm confused.

The Clerk: Have I confused you more? I'm so sorry.

We proceeded to the next thing that we were supposed to do. We have since concluded that—that being the supplementary estimates—and we were moving on to the next thing the committee was going to do. The next thing the committee was going to do was move into committee business.

If the committee chooses to do something else with its time, that is its purview. It's an intervening proceeding.

The Chair: My understanding is that a move to resume debate becomes a majority vote issue.

Mrs. Kusie wishes it. Am I correct there?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: That's correct.

The Chair: Okay.

We can do a voice vote on that or...?

Mrs. Kelly Block: Are we doing a recorded vote?

The Chair: I'll let the clerk do that.

The Clerk: Thank you, kindly.

The question is to resume debate on the motion of Mrs. Kusie.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: I guess Mr. Johns is first, then Mrs. Kusie.

I'm making a speaking list: Mr. Johns, Mrs. Kusie—

Mr. Gord Johns: To clarify, Mr. Chair, are we now discussing my amendment? Is my amendment on the floor?

The Chair: Yes.

Do you need the clerk to read the amendment back, or [*Inaudible—Editor*]?

Mr. Gord Johns: I think that would be good for the committee. I don't need to comment more than that. I was hoping she'd do that, then let the committee discuss the amendment.

I'm happy to comment after I hear thoughts from the committee.

The Clerk: To clarify, do you just want the paragraph where the amendment is located?

Okay, the first paragraph states:

Send for all receipts and invoices in the possession of the Office of the Prime Minister, the Privy Council Office, and any other implicated government departments associated with the September 2022 trip to the United Kingdom by the Prime Minister of Canada, including for all individuals accompanying the Prime Minister

This is the part where the amendment starts: “and for Prime Minister Harper's trip in 2013 to honour the late Nelson Mandela and Prime Minister Harper's trip to China in 2009.”

I would like some clarification on whether you want it to be Beijing, specifically, or China. It was said both ways.

• (1830)

Mr. Gord Johns: It's Beijing.

I also want to clarify that the latter two trips encompass the Prime Minister's Office, all staff, and anybody else who was on those trips, with the same clarity that's in the motion for the trip to the Queen's funeral. It should include the same parameters.

This is how we get some comparison. We ensure the same grouping is being asked about to get a good idea of what the different prime ministers are spending on these very important trips. I'm not going to diminish the importance of these trips or make them insignificant. It's for comparable analysis.

Of course, I want to ensure the amendment includes, “the Office of the Prime Minister, the Privy Council Office, and any other implicated government departments associated with” those latter two trips—all the individuals who accompanied the prime minister on the latter two trips we're adding, through this amendment. They need to be included, as well.

The Clerk: If that's the intent, I suggest adding the word “both”:

Send for all receipts and invoices in the possession of the Office of the Prime Minister, the Privy Council Office, and any other implicated government departments associated with both: i) the September 2022 trip to the United Kingdom by the Prime Minister of Canada, including for all individuals accompanying the Prime Minister and ii) for Prime Minister Harper's trip in 2013 to honour the late Nelson Mandela and Prime Minister Harper's trip to Beijing in 2009.

Does that sum up what you are looking to achieve, sir?

Mr. Gord Johns: I'm sorry, Madam Clerk, I can't hear.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I'm sorry, Madam Clerk.

The Clerk: I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I think the clerk is speaking too quickly for the interpreters.

The Clerk: I apologize, I will read a bit more slowly because it is much too difficult for the interpreters. It is my fault.

[*English*]

Thanks, everyone, for a little patience:

Send for all receipts and invoices in the possession of the Office of the Prime Minister, the Privy Council Office, and any other implicated government departments associated with both: i) the September 2022 trip to the United Kingdom by the Prime Minister of Canada, including for all individuals accompanying the Prime Minister and ii) for Prime Minister Harper's trip in 2013 to honour the late Nelson Mandela and Prime Minister Harper's trip to Beijing in 2009.

Does that accurately reflect the intent of the motion, sir?

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you so much. I'm very grateful for your wordsmithing.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to raise a matter of privilege.

I've been thinking about the course of events today. When we were deliberating on the original motion at the start of today's meeting, I was deeply concerned that MP Lattanzio was not permitted to vote on—

The Chair: Actually, I can address that. I can just cut you off and address that. I do have a clarification that I have received. I was going to address it at the very end, but I can do it right now if you wish.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: That would be great.

The Chair: The clerk and I were discussing.... There was some error communicated to us about it. It has been clarified that thumbs-up or thumbs-down can.... However, we still obviously require for committee involvement that, but yes, a thumbs-up or thumbs-down.

• (1835)

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: A thumbs-up or thumbs-down is sufficient. That's what I thought the rules were.

In fact, I also sent—

The Chair: We received a clarification afterwards.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I'm glad to hear that, because I did also after that transpired send a letter to Speaker Rota for clarification on that. I think especially on a day like today, International Women's Day, when you have an MP who basically today was not able to cast her vote on an issue, on a motion like today's, I think that is especially egregious.

I understand that it was done unintentionally, but the fact remains that we had before us a motion. We clearly had an indication from MP Lattanzio as to what her intent was and she was not permitted to vote. I think that as a committee we have to take that seriously. I would say that we have to revisit that decision, because the votes were clearly cast. The member had clearly communicated her vote and her intention. I believe that at that point we need to revisit the decision of that particular vote that was taken, because that would change completely the direction of this conversation that we're having at this point. I believe that it would be patently unfair if her vote were not recognized.

The Chair: It didn't actually change anything because it was still 5-4. It was still a 5-to-4 vote: five yeas, four nays. It didn't affect the result of the vote. It just would have changed it to six yeas and four nays, from the five yeas and four nays.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I still think it's important that it be recognized. As a matter of principle, I think it's important.

The Chair: It's a fair thing. As I mentioned, the clerk and I reviewed it. We received information that was incorrect. I have a note from the clerk to address it, but I was going to do it at the end, not in camera, but at the end of our discussion.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Right, but can I just ask the clerk?

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Thank you, Chair, for your latitude. If I could ask the clerk to clarify how that vote is going to be recorded...?

The Clerk: That depends if you've raised a question of privilege—

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I would love to have something like that at some point in my life.

The Chair: We'll let the clerk—

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

At a certain point at the start of the pandemic, there were some technical errors that led to a very unpleasant incident, and I bore the brunt right across Canada. Nobody acknowledged it. It was not in this committee, but nobody wanted to acknowledge that incident was the result of a technical problem over which I had no control. It was not my responsibility. It was a technical problem. Unfortunately, I bore the brunt of it.

Right now, I am willing to recognize the facts, because I have more respect than I received at that time.

Today, however, international women's day is being used. If Ms. Lattanzio were Mr. Lattanzio and did not have a headset on, I would have had exactly the same reaction as I had today. We asked for a rule out of respect for the interpreters. It is really important that we follow that rule.

Whether it is a thumbs up or a thumbs down, I will leave that to the clerk to decide, but I would have liked it if your side had shown the same consideration to someone who was not from your party. It is honourable, but especially if it is someone from another party.

[*English*]

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I agree with everything that was stated.

I would be just as concerned and I would be just as perturbed if it had been any other member of any other party who had been denied their ability to cast their vote and have their say, whether it's based on technical reasons or not. I think this is important.

I don't think this is something we can simply sweep under the rug. It's important. It needs to be addressed. I believe it had an impact on the course of the discussions here at committee.

Again, I understand as well.... I want to emphasize that it was unintentional. I understand that, but I think it's important. I want to emphasize that, again, whether it's one party or another, it's important for all of us to stand up and protect every MP's right to have their voice heard and have their vote count. That is the very foundation of this democracy and this process.

Like I said, during the entire meeting today, I had it in the back of my mind, because it didn't sit well with me. It didn't feel right, and it's something I felt we needed to address.

I certainly hope the Speaker clarifies it for other committees and other committee members, so that this doesn't happen again, because, again, who knows? In this instance, it was a six-to-four vote that became a five-to-four vote, but in other situations, the stakes may be much greater and much higher.

My colleague, Madame Vignola, raises some important concerns here. Again, there should never be a situation when we allow someone to have their voice cancelled and their vote disenfranchised.

From my perspective, it doesn't matter on which side of the aisle that person stands. We have to defend their right to be heard and their right for their vote to be counted. I think there needs to be some clarification on that, and it needs to be communicated by the Speaker to the House and to other committees, so that we don't have a repeat of this.

• (1840)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Johns, did you have your hand up?

Mr. Gord Johns: Mr. Chair, my concern here is that this is about protecting workers. This is about protecting the interpreters, who have been under immense pressure. They're short-staffed because of the injuries they've incurred at committee because of members of Parliament not using the proper, authorized House of Commons equipment.

We were clearly given instructions by the Speaker to use the House of Commons equipment or we couldn't participate. That's my understanding.

I don't like to talk about what we talk about in caucus as New Democrats, but I'll share this with you. If you don't have the proper head gear, you're not participating in our caucus, because we have an obligation to protect the employees who work here.

To show up to a committee meeting and not have the proper equipment, putting staff at risk, and then assuming that your privilege and right are going to supersede the health of workers.... I actually don't support that.

I'm open to getting clarification from the Speaker, but, as parliamentarians, we have an obligation to protect those workers.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johns.

I have received some clarification and some advice from up above on the procedure.

I can simply count the vote, and I choose to do so. I recognize, again, that miscommunication on how that should be done. However, someone can simply do a "yes" or "no", so I'll simply count the

vote. It does not change the process. It's six to four, as opposed to five to four.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 4)

The Chair: So it will now show on the record here that her vote has been counted, and that it's six to four.

Mr. Kusmierczyk is first, and then it's you, Mr. Housefather.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I'll yield to Mr. Housefather.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Thank you.

I am so sorry that happened to you, Ms. Vignola. I was not aware.

I think each committee manages its own affairs in certain respects. As Mr. Kusmierczyk said, I hope everyone will defend the rights of colleagues from other parties when there is a lack of respect like that.

[*English*]

What I wanted to say to what Gord said is I agree. With respect to speaking at a committee, you clearly need to have the headset and be appropriately ready. However, for voting, I think we've all been at committees where people have done this. Even in the House, people have done this. This is a perfectly acceptable vote to indicate how you want to vote. That's always been the rule. It would be completely unfair for this one committee to have a different rule from every other committee, where I've seen on multiple occasions people vote like this.

That, I think, is the issue. It's not about whether they speak; it's the vote.

The Chair: Bear with me for two seconds, colleagues.

Go ahead, Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I just want to reiterate what my colleague, Mr. Housefather, said.

I absolutely agree with Mr. Johns that in order to be able to speak at committee, you need to have the requisite headset. That's something that was decided upon and made clear with the ruling and the communication of the Speaker in the House. We need to make sure that we're all playing on a level playing field, that we are all abiding by the same rules.

As Mr. Johns pointed out, it's as much about an equal playing field as it is about protecting the health and safety of the interpreters and the workers of the House of Commons. Lord knows they put in incredible time doing this work. We often ask them to stay hours and hours after a meeting is scheduled to continue with debates. They have families they want to go home to. They have soccer practices and hockey practices they want to drive their kids to. There are dinners they want to prepare. There are also those times when they simply want to go home to recharge rather than stay for hours and hours after a meeting is supposed to be scheduled. The least we can do is to make sure that we abide by the rules and we incorporate practices that protect their health and safety and prioritize their health and safety first and foremost. So I completely agree with Mr. Johns' sentiments.

What we're talking about here is different. This isn't about the privilege of speaking at committee or speaking in the House of Commons. This is the sacrosanct privilege of voting. It is sacrosanct. This is the very foundation of what we do here. As Madam Vignola raised, when that sacrosanct privilege is violated, not only is it injurious to the democratic process, not only is it injurious to that member of Parliament, but it's also injurious to the tens of thousands of constituents that the member represents. It's not just the member's voice that is represented in that vote. It is the voice of tens of thousands of constituents who send us to these hallowed grounds to vote on their behalf. So when that happens, it's not something that we can take lightly. It's not something that we can simply sweep under the rug and move on. It's something that I think has to be addressed and acknowledged. Steps have to be taken to make sure that it never happens again.

Again, this is the very foundation, the very reason that we are here in Ottawa on Parliament Hill, to do the bidding of the people that we represent. I want to make it clear that we're not talking about the privilege to speak. We're talking about the privilege to represent the people who voted us here, who sent us to Ottawa, to cast votes on matters of importance to them. I think that's something that's worth protecting, and we have to raise that issue whenever that is violated.

In that case, Mr. Chair, what I would do is to move a motion to adjourn the debate.

• (1845)

The Chair: This is wonderful timing because we're running out of resources and we do have to get to the other issues.

Thank you, Mr. Kusmierczyk.

We have a motion to adjourn the debate. Do we need a vote?

An hon. member: No.

The Chair: I think we agree we will adjourn the debate.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Perhaps the sides can chat about this separately.

We will now suspend for a few seconds to go in camera, and we'll discuss very quickly the two items we have to do.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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