



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 043

Tuesday, December 6, 2022

Chair: Mr. John Williamson



Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Tuesday, December 6, 2022

• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick South-west, CPC)): Good afternoon.

[Translation]

I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 43 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), the committee is meeting today for an information session with the Auditor General about her December 2022 reports, that is, Report 9, “COVID-19 Vaccines”, and Report 10, “Specific COVID-19 Benefits”, which were submitted to the committee on Tuesday, December 6.

[English]

I'd now like to welcome back our witnesses, Auditor General Karen Hogan and Mr. Andrew Hayes.

It's good to see you both.

I know it's been a long day for everyone. I want to say right off the top, thank you for your work. I know this report was largely the result of a vote in Parliament, and we appreciate your quick response to that motion. As well, I want to thank you for the work you did to have your officials present this morning for the lock-up and for your presentation as well. I think it was very helpful for members both to have time to review the document and, of course, to ask you questions this morning prior to its release.

Without further ado, I understand that you have a brief opening comment.

Members, we're going to have the first round as we normally do. Then we're going to have more informal questions to the Auditor General, and we have her here for an hour.

It's over to you, Ms. Hogan and Mr. Hayes.

Ms. Karen Hogan (Auditor General, Office of the Auditor General): Thank you very much, and we appreciate your feedback on the lock-up. We'll always strive to improve that every time we release reports.

I saw the interest in maximizing question time, since we have only an hour. I was asked to give a really quick roll-up, so I will try to do that from scribbled-together notes. Hopefully, it will be a good summary of the opening statement I delivered earlier today.

[Translation]

I will start with our audit on COVID-19 vaccines.

We found that the Public Health Agency of Canada and Health Canada, supported by Public Services and Procurement Canada, worked together to respond to the urgent and evolving nature of the pandemic.

Health Canada adjusted its usual authorization process to speed up the regulatory approval of COVID-19 vaccines. Public Services and Procurement Canada secured enough vaccine doses for the provinces and territories to vaccinate everyone who wanted it in Canada.

However, we observed that the Public Health Agency of Canada's efforts to minimize wastage were unsuccessful. Long-standing issues remain with respect to sharing of data, and delays in implementing functionalities of VaccineConnect affected the government's response.

[English]

I'll turn next to the audit that we did on specific COVID-19 benefits. In that audit we found that the support programs were effectively delivered by Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada. The early decision in 2020 to align with international best practices to limit prepayment controls and rely on attestations allowed the government to get support to Canadians and employers quickly while meeting its goal of preventing an increase in poverty and income inequalities and helping the economy bounce back.

The government also knew that in making these decisions there was an increased risk that money would be paid to ineligible recipients. Our audit found that overpayments of \$4.6 billion were paid to ineligible individuals. We also estimated that at least \$27.4 billion in payments to individuals and employers should be investigated further.

Where it's confirmed that benefits were paid in error, notifications should be sent and amounts recovered. Under the current system, that's what the government is required to do. If it wants to choose a different approach, for example by forgiving some amounts owing, then it needs to be clear and transparent with Canadians.

[Translation]

We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee members may have.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Hogan.

Ms. Hogan, I want to inform you—you're probably aware of this, but I would not want for you not to be aware—that this is a public meeting. I want to double confirm that you and all members are aware of that.

Is there a point of order?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): [*Inaudible—Editor*] Are these informal questions, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: They are, except for the first round. The first round we're going backwards, so I'll come to you right after, but Mr. McCauley has the floor for six—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I'm sorry. I misheard. Fair enough.

The Chair: It's just that the first round is kind of typical. Then I'm going to try to balance it based on the members who are here, with proper representation, but if any members or parties want to defer, they can do that as well, depending on the questions, but we will continue this until the questions are exhausted.

Mr. McCauley, you're up first for six minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair and Auditor General Hogan.

It's nice to see you back again, Mr. Hayes.

We just came from question period, and we had a rather shocking attack on the integrity and independence of the Auditor General's office by the Minister of National Revenue.

I want to quote her. She said, in regard to the AG's calculation of ineligible recipients of the wage subsidies, that the AG's figures were “exaggerated” and that it's not her fault because, “We all know that she was pressured by the opposition”. She doubled down later and said it was also because of a lack of time.

I wonder if you could confirm the integrity of your numbers, whether the report was done under pressure from the opposition parties, and how your office feels about such a partisan attack on the integrity and independence of your office?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Obviously I stand by the findings in my audit report. Our audit work is very vigorous. We are confident in the findings and the numbers we have put forward. In fact, that's why we put it as at least \$27.4 billion. We took an approach that was favourable to individuals and businesses when we did our audit work.

We based our work on the limited information that was available at the Canada Revenue Agency. Because very little was collected on application, we could look only at what information was available, and we believe we looked at the best information available and came to the best conclusions.

I know we also highlighted in our report some of the post-payment work the Canada Revenue Agency is doing, more specifically

on post-payment work on businesses. I would point you to the annex at the back, showing a phase 1 round of preliminary audits in which the error rate was approximately 40% to 42%, and then phase 2, where the Canada Revenue Agency has informed us that it improved its sampling strategy, and the error rate in phase 2 is about 60% of the businesses received amounts that were ineligible.

While the total dollar values might be small, that indicates to me that a much more rigorous approach to post-payment verification work is needed.

• (1540)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Have you ever changed results or your report based on pressure by an opposition party, as claimed in question period today?

Ms. Karen Hogan: The requirement to do the audit on the specific COVID benefits was included in an act. The act has a long name, so I had to write it down. It's an act to provide further support in response to COVID-19. That act outlined the programs we should look at and some of the scope of our audit, and gave us a deadline to provide it to the clerk by December 17 of this year. We staffed accordingly and had sufficient time and great co-operation from the department, and we stand by our findings.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thank you.

The \$27 billion, that is, as you said, the best-case scenario for taxpayers, basically. That's the bare minimum. Is that correct? However, could it be substantially higher?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We say “at least” because there is missing information in order to verify. It is likely that some of the payments to individuals or businesses that we identified as potentially ineligible are ineligible, but there are others that we haven't identified, and we included some of that in parts A through F of our report, in part 2, and that's why we believe the government just needs to do more work to identify ineligible payments and then make a decision about recovery.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: In 10.35 of your report you comment that it is difficult to assess the program impact of the wage subsidy because of the limited information required by employers on the application. Is this limited information requested by the taxpayers or the government from businesses for the wage subsidy—the fact that we required so little information—going to factor into higher losses for taxpayers or a higher number of ineligible payments?

Ms. Karen Hogan: In that paragraph we were talking about whether or not the emergency wage subsidy had met its intended objective, and some of those objectives were to maintain the employer-employee relationship, to rehire employees and to allow businesses to bounce back when the economy reopened. It was hard to assess whether or not the employer-employee relationship was maintained, because there was no information gathered, such as the social insurance numbers of employees, in order to be able to know if that relationship was maintained. What this could mean is that there were individuals who were receiving individual support payments, but then the employer was also claiming a wage subsidy, which may mean that it was ineligible on one side or the other. However, we've identified all of those, we believe, in our testing, and have made that information available to the Canada Revenue Agency.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: The final bill for the wage subsidy was almost \$100 billion. How concerned are you that so much money in support went out the door with so little information backing it?

As you mentioned, we were not tracking social insurance numbers. Someone could have been collecting CERB and working part time at the same time their wage was being subsidized.

Ms. Karen Hogan: As I mentioned, in the first audits we did in 2021 on the wage subsidy program and on the emergency response program, the approach to limit prepayment controls was one that is seen as an international best practice in the time of an emergency, but that comes hand in hand with needing to do rigorous post-payment verification to confirm eligibility and take the necessary steps afterwards.

I'm concerned that there isn't a more rigorous and more comprehensive approach planned on that post-payment work.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I had promised the floor to one member, but I have a note from another one.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have the floor for six minutes, but, Mrs. Shanahan, we will certainly get to you.

• (1545)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): We will. There is time.

Thank you, Auditor General, for your work and that of your office.

I listened to Mr. McCauley. I think there's a disagreement in terms of how the minister's statement in question period today should be interpreted. Looking at the statement, I didn't hear an accusation of a lack of independence. I don't want to get into this, because I know that the Conservatives in the past—as recently as 2021—went after the Auditor General's office in a way that left a lot to be desired. I think we should focus on the substance of today's report. Again, I deeply respect your independence and the work that you do.

I looked at the report closely. There are a number of things that stand out and a number of things that remind me about the peak of the pandemic and where people were, including in my own com-

munity. I think members of Parliament around the table will certainly attest to my experience, which was a deep concern about where the country was going economically and levels of poverty that people would have faced if the government had not moved very quickly to introduce the benefit that it did.

Your report gives specific figures about where things could have gone if the government had not introduced benefits as quickly as possible. Can you delve into that a bit more?

Ms. Karen Hogan: One thing we looked at in the specific COVID benefits program was whether these programs helped meet some of the objectives—one of which was to get money out to individuals and businesses quickly—whether efforts were made to mitigate poverty and income inequalities, and whether the economy was able to rebound.

What we found was that the people most impacted by the pandemic received support, whether they were individuals or businesses. We looked at information from Statistics Canada around poverty levels. Statistics Canada indicated that poverty would have increased by five points over the 6.4% that it was at in 2020 if these income supports had not been there.

We also looked at whether those in the lowest-income quintiles across the country received support to replace their income. We found that they did. In fact, some individuals received more than the income they would have earned in the prior year. We did, however, notice that the government tried to make adjustments to deal with that disincentive to return to work.

We also looked at the rebound of the economy and whether or not economic activity had returned to where it had been pre-pandemic. We found it had done that by November 2021.

All indications point to the fact that these supports met those objectives. However, the early decision resulted in some inefficiencies, and now it's time to do the hard work to identify payments made to ineligible individuals and businesses.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I understand, certainly, and work is ongoing on the part of CRA, as we see.

It started with poverty, but you have pivoted in the way I wanted to, which was to look at the economy and GDP. Without these benefits and various supports, what would have happened to our economy? I know that's a theoretical question.

Let me phrase it another way. To what extent did these benefits help to stave off a deep economic decline?

Your report talks about GDP, for example, and the way it dropped. You just mentioned November 2021, when we were returning to pre-COVID levels in terms of economic activity and employment.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Again, the report has a table that highlights measures that Statistics Canada gathered. We noted that there was a 17% decline in economic activity in early 2020. That's based on GDP and economic activity. It was back to preCOVID levels by November 2021.

We also looked at hours worked and noticed that there was a sharp decline, almost 28%, in the early part of the pandemic, which was in line with the severe health restrictions that were in place, but then again, by May 2021 that had bounced back to prepandemic levels.

All indications show that the support payments helped Canadians stay home, and the economy bounced back as expected.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Reading your report, one can't help but be struck by the fact that unprecedented times require unprecedented responses.

I'd like to know your thoughts on the attestation-based approach and the speed that allowed for. That speed, it sounds like, was essential to some of the very good outcomes we've seen both in terms of keeping poverty low, or as low as possible, and also in helping the economic recovery.

Do you have any further comments, Auditor General, on the speed and how attestation helped with that?

• (1550)

Ms. Karen Hogan: I would agree that adopting the approach of limited prepayment controls, which then relied on personal attestation, increased the speed and helped the government meet the objective of getting support to individuals and businesses in a quick fashion. That is an approach that is unusual and one that should be done in unusual times, but it does come hand in hand with the need to do very rigorous work afterwards to verify eligibility.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Yes, and I look forward to officials from the CRA coming and explaining to the committee the work they are carrying out right now in regard to what you just mentioned.

Finally, because time is limited, at the outset you talked about international best practices. Can you expand on that a bit?

Ms. Karen Hogan: That was something we looked at in the two audits we did in 2021, when we looked at the design and rollout of the Canada emergency response benefit and the Canada emergency wage subsidy. At that time, the government and I looked at the international best practices in times of an emergency that support the limitation of prepayment controls, which you would normally see in a support program, in order to get money out quickly. That's what's done in emergency times.

Those international best practices also cite the need for comprehensive and rigorous post-payment work.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Absolutely—

The Chair: Thank you. I'm afraid that is your time, Mr. Fragiskatos, but we will certainly come back to you, if you like.

With the committee's indulgence, I'm going to turn to Mr. Desjarlais next, to give our friends from the Bloc a few more minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you will get your turn right after Mr. Desjarlais.

[*English*]

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

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the Auditor General for her report, which I think is very timely when Canadians are feeling the pinch of this affordability crisis and many folks are feeling very little hope. We also had a very similar experience during COVID, when a lot of folks were losing hope. They were losing their will, in some ways, to understand how the pandemic interrupted their lives and how it's continuing to interrupt their lives.

None of us here were fans of the pandemic. That is a fact. The reaction of our national Parliament in making sure we ended poverty or at least reduced poverty with strong measures was something the New Democrats fought for.

Something we didn't fight for was in relation to the Canadian emergency wage subsidy. There are some loopholes within that subsidy, which we called for the closing of early on, that resulted in disproportionate effects on workers. We've seen the use of the Canadian emergency wage subsidy to break unions and lock out workers in my province of Alberta. This is very real.

We don't have to look very far in Edmonton, my city. There's a large corporation called CESSCO, which, as early as June 28, 2020, decided to lock out its workers and apply for the Canada emergency wage subsidy. The Canada emergency wage subsidy then went to subsidize the wages of scab labour, replacement labour, while the union was forced to be locked out.

It took the power of the union out from under it and forced replacement labour into the group. That replacement labour is still there today. Boilermakers in my city of Edmonton are locked out again, still. This is a critical issue that we need to address in a real and responsible way.

When I look at these numbers, they're quite damning: \$4.6 billion in ineligible employer expenses. Was that the number you mentioned, Ms. Hogan? Can you confirm the total amount of ineligible funds paid to employers under the Canada emergency wage subsidy?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We estimated that \$15.5 billion paid to employers require further follow-up. That amount is included in the \$27.4 billion that require additional follow-up by the government.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you for that.

Of the \$15.5 billion, I know you won't be able to comment now in terms of the fact that CESSCO, for example, is ineligible.

Could you enlighten us, the committee members—maybe Mr. Hayes as the principal might know better—in terms of the qualifications that make those companies ineligible?

• (1555)

Ms. Karen Hogan: Your comments actually point to one of the concerns we raised and a member raised in a question earlier. We were unable to determine the effectiveness of the program, whether or not one of the objectives—that of maintaining the employer-employee relationship—was met, because there was very little information gathered.

I could not comment further on the situation you've described. It points to the reason post-payment work needs to be done in order to ensure that the wage subsidy was used as intended, and that the businesses that applied for it actually had a decline in revenue that made them eligible.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: There were instances in which a company did not give a subsidy to its employees but used the Canada emergency wage subsidy to offset the cost of their labour and to offset the ability of unions to negotiate proper and fair contracts, because companies were incentivized not to make those arrangements if they qualified for the Canada emergency wage subsidy.

There's an incentive there that I think the Auditor General is pointing to that has to be addressed when we're talking about how we investigate these companies moving forward and how we get them to pay this amount back that they were never entitled to.

How can we do that in a way that is responsible without looking at the issues that we're seeing in terms of very poor Canadians? My fear is that we go so far as to empower a claw-back—let's call it that—so great that it disproportionately harms those who are right on that margin of poverty who accepted it.

There's a balance that has to be struck here between what you just mentioned, between the requirement to ensure that Canadians get that return from companies and other folks who made ineligible applications and received funding, and the reality that companies and Canadians are facing a tough time still. Some of them weren't able to recover.

What would you say in terms of advice on being able to distinguish between those two groups? How did you distinguish between them in the audit?

Ms. Karen Hogan: A different approach is likely needed for businesses and individuals. That is one the Canada Revenue Agency will have to decide on. There's different information needed, and a post-payment verification audit for a business will be much more lengthy. We even pointed that out in the audit. Some of them took almost a year to complete. There's a lot more work and time needed to follow up with businesses than to follow up with individuals.

My recommendations are based on the current legislative framework. If the government wants to take a different approach, that is one it can do and one it should be clear about. I would say that it needs to take the first step of identifying whether there are payments to ineligible organizations and businesses, and then making the decision about collection. If collection wants to be one with an individual focus, one of empathy or one where amounts are forgiven, then the government should just be clear and transparent with everyone about its intentions and processes.

The Chair: That is the time, Mr. Desjarlais. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone. I apologize, I arrived a bit late.

I'm pleased to see you again, Ms. Hogan.

I don't know if you were made aware of what happened earlier during Question Period in the House. What's your reaction to the comments that were made?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Earlier, a member shared the comments that were made during Question Period. I had not watched it.

My response to those comments is that we are confident in our audit and our findings. We always use a very thorough approach when conducting our audits. We relied on the information available from the Canada Avenue Agency. There was very little information, but we did the best we could with the data that was available. No one individual influences our work. We decide what we do. We would never issue a report if we were not completely sure of our findings.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I have absolutely no doubt about that, Madam Auditor General. I just wanted to get your opinion. The minister's are still significant because they call into question the integrity of the Office of the Auditor General, an institution for everyone. We're having trouble understanding the minister's comments.

The work was not sloppy at all. You had the same timelines as you would normally have and everything was done in a compliant manner.

• (1600)

Ms. Karen Hogan: The audit on specific COVID-19 benefits was included in Bill C-2. In accordance with the bill, we had one year to complete the work. We have ensured that we have the resources to complete the work. We are filing a report today, a few weeks before the deadline in the bill.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Rest assured that the Bloc Québécois will continue to pursue this matter. Obviously, attacking an institution like that is neither respectable nor acceptable in a democracy like ours.

Your report states that \$27 billion was overpaid. The answer may have been given earlier, but I'd like to know if the government can recover that money.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'd like to make some clarifications. We made two findings regarding the money paid out.

First, \$4.6 billion in total were overpaid to ineligible recipients.

Second, we estimated that payments totalling at least \$27.4 billion made to individuals and employers should be further examined. It's in this regard that we made recommendations to the Canada Revenue Agency to help it make its plan more comprehensive and move its work forward, given the timeframe for notifying individuals and businesses that are required to remit money to the government.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Do you believe that the government has the structures needed in place so that some of this money can be recovered?

Ms. Karen Hogan: That is very difficult to determine. Because I don't know the situation with individuals and businesses, I'm unable to estimate the amount that could be recovered.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Of the 2 million people who received payments when they should not have, are we able to determine what proportion is from Canada and what proportion would be from abroad?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'm not sure what figures you're talking about.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Apparently, 2 million people received over-payments.

Ms. Karen Hogan: You want to talk about those who are outside the country.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Were they all outside the country?

Ms. Karen Hogan: No. We put this in the pool of amounts received that the government should be tracking.

We reviewed information that the Canada Revenue Agency had. When an individual files their tax return, they are required to provide their home address, as well as their preferred mailing address. In the cases we have identified here, both addresses were not in Canada. However, it's possible that the situation is different and that the information is incorrect. For this reason, we recommended that the government follow up to confirm whether these individuals were actually in Canada and eligible for these benefits.

Mr. Luc Desilets: In your opinion, does the Canada Revenue Agency have the capacity to do that research?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We didn't audit what resources the Canada Revenue Agency has. However, when it made the decision in early 2022 to limit pre-payment cheques, it knew that much more work would be required after payments were made.

Mr. Luc Desilets: With respect to vaccines, how do you explain that it took two years to properly manage the stockpiles? We lost 32 million doses of vaccine. The failure to manage vaccines lasted until the very end, just recently. How do you explain the fact that there was no mechanism over those two years to manage the inflow and outflow of vaccines, as well as orders and shipments to underdeveloped countries?

Ms. Karen Hogan: You're referring to a recommendation that my office made repeatedly following other health crises and that I reiterated most recently in 2021 when I audited preparedness for the 2019 pandemic.

We have often recommended that the federal government enter into a health information sharing agreement with the provinces and territories and develop the systems and technology needed to support such sharing.

What we found during our vaccine audit was that the government designed and implemented VaccineConnect software to better manage vaccines, but did not implement all of its functionalities. In our view, this reduced the government's ability to limit vaccine waste.

• (1605)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Desilets. Your time is up.

[*English*]

At this point, I'm going to stick with the rotation, but with a more rapid two to three minutes, if that's okay with everyone.

I'm going to go to Mr. Genuis and Ms. Shanahan. Mr. Dong, I have you down as well.

Mr. Genuis, you have the floor for up to three minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Auditor General, thank you for your work.

I want to drill down on a specific area of disagreement between you and the government. The government has said it is not interested in developing the kind of post-payment verification system you recommend. It's not interested in following up in every case. It has tried to give the impression that it's all very vulnerable, disadvantaged people who might be impacted if the government tried to recover the money that was given to those who were ineligible.

The reality is, from my reading of your report, that we don't know anything about the people who received money who are ineligible, in the sense that some of them could be very privileged, well-off people who in fact still cashed government cheques during the pandemic and didn't meet criteria.

What you're calling for is not necessarily that at a policy level we insist on recovering money from every single individual. What you're calling for is that the government do the post-payment work it promised to do, and then, once it has that information, that it then identify what the policy is going to be going forward.

Am I correct in understanding where the area of disagreement is here?

Ms. Karen Hogan: The Canada Revenue Agency disagreed with our recommendations to follow up on all individuals and businesses that had a high risk indicator of being ineligible for the payments, but you are correct in the approach. The first step is to identify who the individuals and businesses are that could be ineligible, and the next is then to make a decision about recovery.

As we indicated in our report, the Canada Revenue Agency said its approach when it comes to individuals is to be "people first" and compassionate, but you first have to identify who might have received amounts they are ineligible for, notify them, and then take the next step, which is recovery.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: It doesn't make sense to me at all that the government would say it's being compassionate by not bothering to find out who the people are who received money they were ineligible for.

You might argue it's compassionate if you do the follow-up work, identify that there are certain people who had understandable circumstances, and therefore decide, transparently, to make a decision around not requiring payback in that particular case, but in what world is it compassionate to say we're just not going to bother to do the work? That seems more like laziness on the part of the government than compassion.

Your recommendation, then, is not to direct the government on policy; it's to make a recommendation on process, which is that the government do the follow-up work and then be transparent about what it plans to do next.

Is that correct?

Ms. Karen Hogan: That's correct. It's not my job to comment on policy or legislation, but it's my job to hold the government to account to deliver its programs within the parameters that are there. My recommendations are in line with the existing legislation.

If the government chooses a different approach, which is entirely in its hands to decide, it should just be clear and transparent with Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Shanahan, you have the floor for approximately three minutes.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Very good. Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Hogan, for appearing before us today and at this morning's meeting as well. It was very helpful.

In understanding the principle that there are different approaches to attacking a problem—and, as you said, it was a very unusual situation and called for an unusual approach—there are still a variety of approaches that could have been taken. For example, instead of rolling out the benefit programs in the rapid fashion it did, with the attestation—the bare minimum of verification—another government or another set of ministers could have decided to do it differently. They could have decided to put in a lot of controls at the beginning.

What would that have meant for the effectiveness of what the government was trying to achieve?

• (1610)

Ms. Karen Hogan: That's a little difficult for me to estimate. I don't know if the objectives would have been the same. The objectives here were to get support to individuals and businesses quickly, to minimize the impact of COVID on those impacted by poverty and income inequality, and to support the economy as it rebounded. That quick rollout of support achieved that.

A different approach may have different objectives. All I can comment on is how these were designed and rolled out, and I found that it was effective. That unusual approach, to rely on attestations and quickly get money out, comes with the need to do more work than is typical on support programs, because there wasn't rigorous prepayment vetting.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: The good news is that the approach achieved the objectives up front. Now we're looking, basically, at the clean-up of doing the additional verification work.

There are different methods of doing that. Typically—and this is what's used in auditing—you don't audit every single transaction that a department does. You take a risk-based approach, if I'm correct, or a sampling approach, to look at where those problem areas could be, and then make a series of assumptions after that. We'll hear more, I'm sure, when we have a further study on this report from Revenue Canada. They have different methods, including this risk-based method.

Could you just talk about the difference between the two, and why you think that every single transaction should be examined?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I want to be clear. I didn't say that every single transaction to a Canadian or a business should be investigated. I believe those who have been identified as having high risk indicators of being ineligible for the payments they received should be investigated. There are many individuals and businesses that received support they were eligible for.

It is the bucket where we have these high risk indicators that requires more work.

With a risk-based approach, there are many ways to come at risk, but when you've done very little prepayment control, your approach should be different from your typical approach. What we're finding is the same level or so of post-payment work is planned. That's why we recommended that a much more rigorous approach to post-payment verification be adopted.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I agree. Certainly, Canadians believe in fairness. People want to see that anyone who deliberately defrauded the system is justly investigated. Others, as we all had in our offices, we know were very confused. It was a very difficult time, and it may be a different situation.

Thank you for clarifying.

The Chair: That is the time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have two to three minutes.

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

Madam Auditor General, I'd like to ask you a question since I didn't get a chance to ask it this morning.

You say that data sharing across Canada could have improved the situation, but I get the impression that that's especially true with respect to vaccines. I'd like to hear your thoughts on that. It must be said that, although the federal government is responsible for the supply of vaccines, health care systems are a provincial responsibility. There are 10 health care systems in Canada, not just one, as you know.

I just want to understand what you mean when you say data sharing. I especially want to make sure that people who are watching today understand that we're not asking for a universal health care system in Canada managed by the federal government, for example.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Yes, it's not that at all.

When I talk about data sharing between the provinces and territories and the federal government, data is shared in several ways. In the case of vaccines, it's data on the safety, efficacy and quality of vaccines. This data was shared at a very high level, not in a detailed, case-by-case way. This type of data should be shared between third parties, foreign parties and vaccine companies. However, the government was not able to share this data effectively because it sought permission from the provinces and territories, and that took a long time.

That's why I say that having an agreement between all levels of government would improve how we manage a future health crisis.

• (1615)

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: So it wouldn't be about the federal government asking for certain data in exchange for vaccines, for example. We're not talking about that kind of cooperation at all, or rather one level of government being superior to another.

Thank you for clarifying that, Ms. Hogan.

Ms. Karen Hogan: The concern we have is that the Public Health Agency of Canada receives the data, but can't pass it on to Health Canada and the vaccine companies without the provinces' permission. So, to improve crisis management, I would recommend that an agreement be reached to determine the type of data that can be shared and the timeframe in which can be shared. If we're going to produce our own vaccines in Canada, this data will need to be shared to improve the effectiveness and quality of Canadian vaccines in the future.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for about three minutes.

[English]

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to return to the emergency wage subsidy.

Here's a quote from one of the local members of the Boilermakers in relation to this. It's from late last year:

However, we feel very strongly that tax dollars should not be given to employers who have locked out their workers. In the case of Cessco, we have no doubt that the [Canada emergency wage subsidy] money is being used to subsidize the use of replacement workers; and it has likely been used to offset the costs of lawyers and security firms, who have been working hard to prolong the lockout and starve the workers out. This is contrary to the vision and the goals of [the Canada emergency wage subsidy]. This money is supposed to be used to help workers, but in this case, it's being used to hurt them.

That was directly from a union member, who was feeling the cost of this policy in the workplace, over the pandemic.

You can see here that the words of the Auditor General are quite clear, in the sense that we do, in fact, need to look at this program and find some accountability for the folks who suffered. Canadians did suffer. Many folks were able to benefit from this program, but

there were some folks who suffered. It's incumbent upon us to recognize those people, listen to them and make policy recommendations to ensure this doesn't happen again. That's why we're all here. I think that's an important goal we all share.

I agree with the Auditor General's call for a post-payment recovery strategy to deal with bad employers like Cessco. It's reasonable to suggest that these employers be held to account.

I noticed, in paragraph 10.101, that the ESDC and CRA response is only partial agreement. Can you explain what their response is, and how that response levels in accordance with your recommendation?

Ms. Karen Hogan: That's one of our recommendations to the government, to follow up with all individuals and businesses identified as having a risk of being ineligible for the payments they received. The partial agreement from the departments was because they do not intend to follow up with all individuals or businesses identified as potentially ineligible. They don't believe they have the resources to do all of that, and they intend to take a risk-based approach to post-payment verification.

As I stated earlier, their plans, so far, are not sufficient, in our view. Even if they don't want to follow up with all, we believe they should do more than they are currently planning to, because it is not rigorous enough to compensate for the lack of prepayment controls at the beginning.

The Chair: That is the time, Mr. Desjarlais.

We'll now turn to Mr. Kram. You have the floor for three minutes.

Mr. Dong will be next.

Mr. Michael Kram (Regina—Wascana, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to Ms. Hogan and Mr. Hayes for being here today. I'm sure it has been a long day, but we will keep on getting through it.

Page 6 of report 9 lists the seven advance purchase agreements signed by this government, and the dates for each agreement. It says the first advance purchase agreement was signed in July 2020, and the last was signed in January 2021.

I spent the afternoon on Google, looking up when the American government signed its advance purchase agreements. It started way sooner. The Americans signed their first agreement in March 2020—four months before we signed our first—and their final agreement in July 2020, six months before this government signed their final agreement. As a matter of fact, when this government was getting down to signing its first agreement, the Americans were finishing up on their last one.

Can the audit provide any insight into why this government was so much slower than the Americans when it came to signing these advance purchase agreements?

• (1620)

Ms. Karen Hogan: We looked at the timelines for when all of this happened. The government waited for the vaccine task force to make a recommendation about which vaccine companies were more likely to have viable vaccines. That recommendation was made by the vaccine task force in late June, and the first agreement was signed in late July. The delay was mostly in waiting for the right recommendations. That is how it was explained to us by the department.

Mr. Michael Kram: Global News had an article on August 27, 2020, with the headline, “China blamed for Canada’s multimillion-dollar coronavirus vaccine deal collapse”.

I would like to read a couple of quick quotes from the article. It says, “This week Canada’s National Research Council (NRC) announced it has abandoned its partnership with Chinese company CanSino Biologics, because China’s government continues to block shipments of vaccine materials to Canada.” It then goes on to say:

The NRC—which is part of the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry—has received about \$44 million since late March to upgrade its production capacity in Montreal in preparation for materials expected from CanSino.... “With the funding received from the Government of Canada on March 23 and April 23 [2020], much work is under way at NRC”.

Are you able to offer any insight as to why, in the spring of 2020, this government seemed to be so exclusively focused on CanSino, while the U.S. government was signing deals with Johnson & Johnson, AstraZeneca and all the rest of them?

The Chair: You have time for a brief answer.

Ms. Karen Hogan: We did not look at the deal with CanSino in our audit. We focused on the seven companies recommended by the vaccine task force as being the most likely to have viable vaccines. I can’t comment on that any further, as we did not audit it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dong, you have the floor for approximately three minutes.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hi, Auditor General. It’s good to see you.

I didn’t have time to read the report word for word, but I have a pretty good understanding of it. Thank you very much for it.

The section where you talk about this incentive takes me back to 2020. You know, I can’t remember another time in Canada when Canadians profoundly understood that taking care of each other meant taking care of one’s own family and neighbours. They would go the distance to deliver a mask, a free meal and even money to help one another. That was because people truly understood it was a matter of life and death. The government had to step up, and they themselves were stepping up to help one another.

Previous studies have shown that...international institutions said, had Canada not taken any measures against...or taken limited measures, like our allied countries did—the United States and so on—we would have seen a death rate at least triple what it is now. What

it is now is close to.... I checked the fifth update. It’s 48,000. That’s 100,000 more, had Canada not taken any measures.

Looking back...people have to ask whether, had we known the information we have now, we had a choice between 100,000 randomly chosen Canadians’ lives and billions of dollars. It’s a tough decision, but I think we all know the answer. That’s why the opposition and government members all came back, in an emergency meeting, and quickly passed legislation to allow the government to start spending some of the relief money. There was earlier testimony that it achieved its objective.

At a time when, as we knew, there were very limited tests for applicants for any relief packages, did you foresee how postpandemic or post-payment verification could be a problem, afterwards? Did you, at the time, think about how, if you give money so easily, it may create a problem later on?

• (1625)

Ms. Karen Hogan: I would even go back as early as my nomination hearings in May 2020. I was asked questions about the government’s approach. At that point in time—and I continue to hold this view—the government took the steps it needed to take to support Canadians and businesses. However, decisions to limit prepayment controls need to come with rigorous post-payment work. That’s just good, prudent use of public funds, in order to demonstrate that you vetted and made sure those who were eligible received the money.

Mr. Han Dong: Did you provide detailed how-to recommendations about what could be done ahead of time to ensure that post-payment verifications could be done—

Ms. Karen Hogan: I would point you to my first two audits in 2020, on the Canada emergency response benefit and the Canada emergency wage subsidy, in which we looked at the design and the rollout. We talked about the need for rigorous post-payment work because of how the programs had been designed and rolled out. Both of the departments at that time committed to completing their plans, and that they would be comprehensive. We’re just not seeing that happen now.

Mr. Han Dong: I also remember you pointing out at the time that these were necessary for the unusual times.

You said earlier that high risk indicators were identified. Were these indicators set by CRA or by your office? When was that done?

Ms. Karen Hogan: This was during the work on the COVID relief programs. We took the entire database of individuals who received the Canada emergency response benefit and compared it with two years' worth of tax returns. Then we went through the eligibility criteria. When we found indicators that individuals were not eligible, we flagged those.

Those are the amounts that are accumulated here in our report. This is the work we did around the individual and business payments.

Mr. Han Dong: You set those indicators, not the CRA.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I didn't set the indicators. I held the government to the eligibility criteria that it established in the programs.

The Chair: Very good. Thank you, Mr. Dong.

We're getting short on time. I'll try to get to a few more folks who have their hands up.

I'm going to jump to Madame Sinclair-Desgagné, who has been very patient, and then Mr. Genuis.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for just two minutes, because time is flying.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will try to be brief.

Ms. Hogan, during your audit, discuss the underlying reasons for the overpayments with the Canada Revenue Agency? Was the agency able to assess how many people were overpaid in good faith, versus the number of people who knowingly took advantage of a loophole?

Ms. Karen Hogan: It's hard for the government or our office to come to any conclusions on those issues without doing post-payment audits. It's really those audits that will determine whether the payments were made in good faith and whether the individuals and businesses were indeed eligible.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: In your opinion, at its current pace, will the government be able to do all the necessary follow-up?

Ms. Karen Hogan: That's a lot of work. As we mentioned in our report, for the Canada emergency wage subsidy, audits take time and resources. That's why I recommended that the plan be comprehensive, so as to better estimate and determine the resources needed.

There is also a prescribed timeframe for conducting the audits, as the deadline under the law to notify individuals and businesses must be met.

• (1630)

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: That's right, they have 36 months.

Do you think the government will at least have time to go out and get that information, to understand the situation and analyze its performance?

Ms. Karen Hogan: It's hard for me to say how hopeful I am that they will manage. For some payments, the deadline is approaching.

Now is the time for the government to step up the pace of what they're doing.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. Genuis, you have the floor for two minutes.

Mr. Han Dong: Chair, on a point of order, I would like to move the session in camera, because there are some detailed questions I need to ask.

The Chair: That will require a vote of the committee.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: On the same point of order, a member can't move a motion if they don't have the floor. You don't have the floor if you raise a point of order.

The Chair: That's a very good point. Yes. Thank you very much.

You can't move a motion on a point of order. We can consider that in a few minutes, but first let's hear from Mr. Genuis. We can come back to you.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In light of what my colleague on the Liberal side seems intent on doing, it seems appropriate that I use the opportunity I have, on the floor, to move a different motion: That the committee report to the House that it calls on the government to fully accept the recommendations of the Auditor General's report 10.

I have now moved the motion, and I can provide some explanation for moving that motion.

Thank you very much, Auditor General. I know you have until 4:30. We've appreciated this opportunity to pose questions to you.

This motion recognizes the work done by the Auditor General and the fact that the Auditor General is recommending the government do the post-payment work it said it would do, in order to find out where the money went. It doesn't compel the government to insist on recovery, in every case. However, the recommendation of the Auditor General is that the follow-up work be done.

It is generally standard for the government to accept the recommendations of the Auditor General. However, in this case the government has attacked the independence of the Auditor General and certainly not accepted her recommendations. Therefore, I think it's important for this committee, which relies on the work of the Auditor General, to speak in support of the Auditor General's independence and work. That's why I proposed this motion.

The Chair: I'll hear debate on this in a second.

First, I'd like to thank Ms. Hogan and Mr. Hayes.

Of course, you're welcome to remain here, if you like, but you're under no obligation, of course. You indicated beforehand that you had to leave at 4:30. Thank you, again. We will, I think, see you on Friday. We're seeing someone on Friday.

Ms. Karen Hogan: You'll see someone on Friday.

The Chair: We'll see someone on Friday. That's good.

Thank you, again, for today.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Thank you.

The Chair: Can I look for discussion on Mr. Genuis's motion?

Mr. Dong, is your hand up?

Is that okay, Mr. Fragiskatos? I'm sorry. He just caught my eye first.

Mr. Dong, go ahead, and then I'll begin the speaking note here.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I respect the intent of my opposition colleague's motion, but I also want to point out to the committee that we are waiting to hear from the CRA. I think it's fair to give them a chance to tell their side of the story and why they agree or disagree with the report. I think it's good to hear from the CRA before we decide whether or not to pass, vote for or disagree with this motion.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: It's the same point, Mr. Chair.

We've seen the report. Important points have obviously been raised, but we've also seen that the CRA disagrees with some of the things put forward.

I have a very difficult time with this committee. I speak for myself, but I believe the general consensus is that as a committee, if we speak, we should speak after hearing all parties put their view on the record. We've heard only from the Auditor General. The CRA will be called in to give its perspective. I think we should certainly wait for that. That's a reasonable approach to take.

• (1635)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks. I appreciate the comments made.

I think, if that were the case, we wouldn't have heard such a virulent attack on the Office of the Auditor General by the minister. If it was an issue of, "We should wait and hear," then perhaps the minister shouldn't have already prejudged without hearing the full story, either.

I fully support this motion. I think it's important to gain firm support for the report and, frankly, to support the taxpayers as well.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mrs. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Mr. Chair, this motion is trying to do a couple of different things.

I, for one, would like to see the text of the motion in both languages, as is normal. I feel as if, on one hand, it's trying to compel the government to do something and, on the other hand, it's trying to say what I believe every member of this committee believes and knows to be true: The work of the Auditor General is, without question, professional. The integrity of the Office of the Auditor General is not coming into question, whatsoever.

I would like to see the motion in writing. Then, I ask for some time out, or indeed—as we are scheduled to do—to go into subcommittee now, if that's where we need to go, to discuss this issue.

The Chair: The clerk is going to send around the motion, which is translated.

We can't move into the subcommittee. We're dealing with a motion on the floor right now. The subcommittee wouldn't be appropriate for this motion anyway, because the subcommittee is just a truncated version of this committee and doesn't have the ability to decide such matters.

I'll turn to Ms. Yip first. In the meantime, the clerk is sending the motion around.

Go ahead, Ms. Yip.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Could we have just a brief recess?

The Chair: I would need unanimous consent for a recess. I'm happy to hear—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I don't know why we need a recess, and I don't know why we have members coming around the table to whisper to others. I mean, that's the purpose of debate, isn't it?

The Chair: The members are free to canvass one another. I'm not going to put a stop to that, of course. I would just ask that it be done in a way that does not interrupt the committee.

Mr. Genuis, would you like the floor?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes.

The arguments of the CRA are included, as are the arguments of the Auditor General. I think it's pretty clear-cut that we need clarity on showing support for the Auditor General's recommendations. Again, it's generally standard that we support the recommendations of the Auditor General. The government has not offered that support and has now questioned the independence of the Auditor General. I think the least we can do is simply say that we accept the Auditor General's recommendations.

The Chair: The clerk has sent that around.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have the floor, sir.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Can we take a two- or three-minute break, as I think Ms. Yip has suggested?

The Chair: I'm going to check on whether we need unanimous consent to take a pause.

Why would you like this meeting suspended?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I think there's further discussion to be had.

The Chair: I will suspend, then, for two minutes.

• (1635) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1640)

The Chair: We will resume the committee business, please.

I'm looking for a speaker, or I'm going to call the question.

I think the debate has collapsed, so I'm going to call the question—

Mr. Han Dong: Mr. Chair, I would like to speak. I didn't hear the announcement that the meeting had resumed.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead, Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: I heard what the opposition member, Mr. Genuis, talked about. First of all, I think this committee has shown that it's fairly non-partisan. We've always worked together. I have had conversations and discussions to express my view, not necessarily in camera and not necessarily on camera, with members from all parties.

On the first point, I still want to make sure we can talk to each other and just walk around and have private conversations in the back. This is a very important part of our job.

The second thing, to go back to the motion, is that I read the report. On all of these recommendations, the government has provided a response. Out of the list here, there are six sub-points. The government agreed with five of them and provided a reason, and there's one that's partially agreed to. That's all public. It's in the report. It talks about a couple of ministries here. I think it's fair to hear from these ministries to understand why they partially agreed and did not fully agree with this recommendation. That's very important for members of this committee to consider when it comes to supporting or not supporting this motion, or perhaps abstaining. There are three options.

I don't think it's fair for members on this side, who heard this motion just minutes ago, to make a very important decision without questioning government agencies as to why they partially agreed. We have to make a lot of guesses, and I don't think that's a very responsible way to do our job.

That's it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Yip.

Ms. Jean Yip: We just received these reports today. I think we need more time to study them and to have everybody come as witnesses, so that we can hear all the viewpoints before going through with the motion.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have a motion before us. I have no speakers.

Mr. Dong, go ahead.

Mr. Han Dong: Can I ask for a two-minute break? I think Mr. McCauley wants to challenge it.

No. Okay.

The Chair: I'm going to go to Ms. Bradford, who might be a little more ready.

Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I agree with Ms. Yip. These are fairly substantial reports that were tabled only earlier today. A lot of us have been in constant meetings all day, with House duty or whatever, and we haven't had a chance to review them. I really don't know why we need to rush through and pass a motion today, when we haven't had a chance to hear from the witnesses we would presumably want to hear from.

That would only be fair due process.

• (1645)

The Chair: Very good.

Go ahead, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Again, I go to fairness. As a matter of fairness, we should be able to hear from public servants and the CRA on their view of the report.

I take Mr. Genuis's point, but I can't agree with it, because they haven't had an ability to come before the committee in the same way that the Auditor General has. I very much respect the Auditor General, and I think the findings are important for this committee. Also, to be fair on that principle, we need to hear directly from the CRA. It does not suffice to have its perspective on the written record only.

I also know, and I suppose this goes to Mr. Desjarlais's point, that there are issues in the report that the NDP would challenge. He can speak for himself in this regard. I look at the report, and then I think about what the NDP has said on CERB verification. I know that in the finance committee, this issue has come up, around the CERB amnesty. The Auditor General is not calling for that. It's quite the contrary. I think there are views around the table that differ very much from what the Auditor General has suggested and put forward.

I raise that as another consideration for members to ponder.

I can't in good conscience see a situation in which this committee would put forward what has been suggested in the motion and not have the chance to hear from public servants who helped administer the program. It doesn't make sense. We can have another meeting when we can hear directly from CRA officials and then decide what to do at that point.

I don't understand the rush to a particular outcome here.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I, too, am a little disturbed by the way this is turning. I understand that members feel very strongly about the Auditor General's work, but we have had it before in this committee that different departments have taken issue with a recommendation that the Auditor General has made. Part of the work of this committee is to study those different approaches.

You heard my questions. I like to look at it and ask, if it wasn't this way, could it have been that way, and what would that have meant?

This is the "lessons learned" part of this whole exercise. We all want to do better, because we know there were previous reports—maybe not to the same extent as in this pandemic—in 1999, 2002 and 2008, and then the most recent report about pandemic preparedness. These are important lessons—I think we all get it now—that have to be learned. We need to hear from the officials who put this report together.

In the meantime, I would like to hear from my colleagues from the NDP and the Bloc on this question.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thanks, Chair.

Two principles go into my decision-making on this.

One is the utility, because I think there is utility in understanding the Auditor General's report. Investigating her recommendations is important for us to do, especially if there is an issue with the some of the acceptance of those recommendations. That's not something I think anyone here is disputing. I think everyone here wants to get to the bottom of why the recommendations have been made and why recommendations have been accepted or not accepted.

Based on that and on my conversations with other members, I think it's important for us to hear from the CRA and to hear from some of the witnesses, including from ESDC, which would describe...particularly on my last question, which was directly related to that paragraph. I think that it is a responsibility for the CRA and for ESDC to come to us and give us an explanation of what this portion is. I think that's a very reasonable position.

We should return to this motion. I don't think it's something we should vote on. It's something we should hold, if we can table it.

That's my request to the chair. If we can, let's find a way to table this and to have the vote the same day we have the scheduling of the hearing, if the mover is inclined to do that.

My second point is.... Actually, I'll keep my second point for now. Let's just stick with the first.

• (1650)

The Chair: I see Mr. Dong and then Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Han Dong: Can I move to adjourn the debate?

The Chair: No, you cannot. We are in a debate until there's a resolution.

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

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I have a point of order on that, Mr. Chair. Can I speak?

The Chair: Hold on a second. I will converse with the clerk.

Pardon me. We'll have a vote.

I'll ask the clerk for a roll call, please.

Is this to adjourn the debate or the meeting?

Mr. Han Dong: This is to adjourn debate. It's not to adjourn the meeting.

The Chair: Okay. Very good.

There is no debate on this. There is a motion to adjourn debate. I've asked the clerk to call the vote on it.

Clerk, please call the vote.

Mr. Dong, there's no debate on this. You moved a motion—

Mr. Han Dong: I heard. Can I get some advice?

The Chair: If this is a question to me, you can.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

I think you could clarify the rules. If an adjournment motion is rejected, there's nothing to preclude a subsequent adjournment motion with a condition associated to it being moved.

The Chair: That is correct.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Theoretically, members could vote against this adjournment motion and then vote in favour of a subsequent adjournment motion with a specific condition attached to it.

The Chair: That's correct.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: This motion has no condition attached to it.

The Chair: Keep talking it out. That is correct.

Are we clear?

Call the vote, please, Clerk.

We have five nays and five yeas. I vote nay, as well.

(Motion negated: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: I'm now going to recognize Mr. Genuis, who is on the speaking order.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Chair. I hope we have a reasonable compromise.

I move that debate on this motion be adjourned until after we have a hearing with the CRA and ESDC on this report, at which time debate will resume and continue, and we'll conclude on the motion in the same meeting.

The Chair: That's a motion.

Give me one second.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: It's debatable. Hopefully, we don't need to prolong it.

The Chair: That is debatable.

That was my question. Would you like to debate that, or would you like to vote on Mr. Genuis's—

Mr. Han Dong: That's understood.

The Chair: Let me finish, Mr. Dong, so you know the options. You can debate it or you can vote on it, based on what Mr. Genuis just proposed, which is, basically, to push this off.

Mr. Han Dong: I have a point of clarification, perhaps, through the clerk: Is this a dilatory motion—which means no debate—or a motion?

The Chair: It's a motion. Debate can collapse. We have a vote, but it is debatable.

Mr. Han Dong: It says to end a debate with a condition. That's why I have this question.

The Chair: I'll let the clerk respond.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Cédric Taquet): We just voted to not adjourn the debate on that motion. We'll continue the debate on that motion, so the motion first brought by Mr. Genuis is the motion before the floor. Now Mr. Genuis seems to have found a compromise among the members of the committee to have that debate adjourned to another time or meeting. That is my comprehension of what Mr. Genuis wants to do.

Thank you.

• (1655)

The Chair: It is debatable. Members can choose to vote on it and push it off, or debate it.

I have Mr. Fragiskatos first, Mrs. Shanahan, but if it's—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: On a point of order, are we not still debating the first motion? There was no vote taken on that motion.

The Chair: It's been effectively amended.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Has it been amended?

The Chair: I'm using the wrong choice of words. Hold on.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: A member cannot amend his own motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk.

Mr. Genuis was attempting to find a compromise. The clerk corrected me. In fact, his original motion is still on the floor, but the statement he just made seeks to find a compromise, so I'm turning it back to the committee members to see whether they want to accept this compromise or continue to debate Mr. Genuis's original motion.

I'm going to stick with Mrs. Shanahan for a second, then I'll come to you, Mr. Desjarlais.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Mr. Chair, I call a vote on the first motion. We can't have this kind of back-and-forth. We're in public here, so let's not embarrass ourselves.

The Chair: Members can't call the vote. We will have a vote when there are no more speakers.

I see Mr. Fragiskatos has his hand up, as well as Mr. Desjarlais, but it sounds like we're moving away from Mr. Genuis's compromise.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry. I have a point of order.

I moved a motion. It's a motion for adjournment of debate, subject to a condition. I can cite various examples of this being done at other committees, where there is a motion to adjourn, subject to a condition. That motion provides a framework for saying a debate would be adjourned. It's a debatable motion. We've had this at the foreign affairs, immigration and status of women committees. It's a fairly standard case, where a motion is moved and, because it seeks to shape the way in which the existing motion will be dealt with, it's in order.

The committee should either debate or vote on my motion.

The Chair: Let me then suspend for one minute. I'm going to consult with the clerk for clarification on that point. Excuse me for one minute.

• (1655) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1700)

The Chair: Colleagues, I will recognize first Mr. Genuis and then Mr. Fragiskatos.

I think we have an agreement to come back to this, but Mr. Genuis, why don't you put your proposal out there, and we'll see if we can get UC on it?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes.

Generally, regardless of the previous matter, I think committees can proceed by consensus if there's agreement. I think there is an emerging consensus that the committee would adjourn debate on this, with an understanding as well that the chair would schedule an opportunity for us to resume consideration of this motion after we have heard from CRA and ESDC.

If that's the agreement of the committee, then we're good to proceed on that basis.

The Chair: I'll look to Mr. Fragiskatos on that.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have no problem with that [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] colleagues are okay with that.

The Chair: I'm sensing consensus on this.

Are you clear on what we're doing, Clerk, or do you want Mr. Genuis to repeat it?

The Clerk: I may have to go back to the evidence. Mr. Genuis might like to read it again, or I can go back to the evidence and draft the motion.

The Chair: You can take 30 seconds, Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: The proposed adjournment motion is withdrawn. The original motion is adjourned. The committee agrees to resume consideration of this motion at a time to be scheduled by the chair, following hearings with CRA and ESDC on the matter of the 10th report.

Is that clear? Okay.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Chair, let's not preclude what the hearings will be and so on. There's a lot packed into that. Let's just say that it's following the study that the committee conducts, in the usual manner.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry. My understanding of the compromise we had agreed to was exactly what I just said. If it's not, then we have to recalibrate.

We're going to have hearings with CRA and ESDC, aren't we? Is that what people want? Okay. Good.

Thanks.

(Motion allowed to stand)

The Chair: I'll come back to you, Mrs. Shanahan.

Mr. Desjarlais, do you have a comment?

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Sure. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think it's very reasonable. From what I've heard from my Liberal colleagues, what I've heard from my Conservative colleague and what I've heard from the Bloc Québécois, it's important that we hear from the witnesses. What gets us to that point is this consensus motion. It's reasonable that we should move forward with this consensus. We'll adjourn debate on this and return to this motion following the hearings with ESDC and CRA. I think that's as reasonable as it's going to get, and I think it's worth all members' consideration.

• (1705)

The Chair: Very good. We have a consensus. I'm going to move on to....

Just one second. I have a few hands in the air.

Mr. Dong, you had a point you wanted to make earlier. I think it was about going into camera with the AG, but I wasn't sure—

Mr. Han Dong: No. I had a couple of questions, but she's gone. That's fine.

The Chair: All right.

I have a few business points here for the whole committee. I want to turn to Mr. McCauley first, and then hopefully get all this done.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

In light of everything happening today, I'd like to move a motion, please. I'll read it into the record: That the public accounts committee rejects statements made by the Minister of National Revenue in the House of Commons on December 6 undermining Canada's Auditor General, and that the committee affirm its support for the Auditor General and the independence and integrity of the office.

The Chair: I'm checking to see if the clerk has that and could send it out. All right. It's coming.

Go ahead, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Chair, it's very unfortunate that we've reached that point. I said at the outset of the meeting that I did not

hear an accusation about independence on the part of the minister today. I also pointed to comments—I could have made an issue but did not—that members in the Conservative opposition made in 2021 about the Auditor General and her office's independence. I don't want to get into this back-and-forth where one side blames the other. I don't know how that advances the interests of the committee or of Canadians, more importantly.

All of us recognize the independence of the Auditor General. That's been affirmed. I don't see the benefit of engaging in this endless discussion. The independence of the Auditor General is something the government recognizes and all MPs on this side recognize.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mrs. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Chair.

I, too, am disturbed that these kinds of discussions are creeping into this committee, which has always prided itself on being non-partisan and studying the Auditor General's reports in a fulsome way. For members on either side, and I can think of examples where it was in....

When we're sitting on this side, or when the opposition was sitting on this side, there are very careful considerations made of what the Auditor General has to say and a very deliberate manner of bringing those points forward to the government of the day. This is because we all have the same objective in mind, which is that we want to have a better functioning public service and delivery on government policy for Canadians.

Therefore, a statement—and I think we do this on a regular basis—in which we uphold the integrity of the Auditor General's work is one that I am very comfortable making at any time. I have been very uncomfortable in past meetings, when there were accusations or insinuations that the Auditor General was somehow working on the government's side, or however it was put.

It was very unfortunate, because, as members have pointed out, the Auditor General is named by the government of the day, but there are nomination hearings. Again, it's the integrity of that office that is most important, even over and above the person themselves. The integrity of that office.... We are known internationally for the quality of the public accounts work that we do, and I know our ministers appreciate the reports that are produced by the Auditor General.

I always go to how the Auditor General works. They go into different government departments. They speak with public servants in their workplace. They look at the day-to-day operations. They are there to provide the kind of.... It's better than the best-paid management consultant you could hire, having the Auditor General in your offices.

I know our ministers, including our Minister of National Revenue, deeply appreciate the work that was done. Of course she does, and of course we do, because the Auditor General has brought forward some very important points that need to be looked at. We need to look at different ways of doing things, and we are very happy to do so.

I am distressed any time—and I've discussed this in other forums here—this committee wants to compel the Auditor General to do certain audits, because we know the Auditor General looks at the functioning of government and her office will choose to study independently those areas that she deems are the most important to Canadians. However, as she said today, these audits were produced by an act of Parliament, and she's followed them. I have every confidence that the work was done to the highest degree of excellence that we've come to expect.

Chair, I can only say that, again, this committee normally operates by consensus. Normally, we would be in the subcommittee or in camera right now, discussing the Auditor General reports and operating by consensus. However, members have brought up motions and want to have things done in public and to have votes when it suits them, and then go back to consensus when it suits them as well.

• (1710)

I am very disturbed, and it does not bode well for the future of the work of this committee, but again, I stand by my belief that the Office of the Auditor General.... I remember when it was Michael Ferguson who had the office and the tremendous work he did. I know we had ministers who were very appreciative of the comments he brought forward and the themes he was attacking and addressing before his untimely death, and he was named by a Conservative government.

Where are we going with this? This is just nonsense, and it's not worthy of this committee.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have a growing list here. I'm just going to run through it. I want to be sure to recognize everyone.

I have Mr. McCauley next.

[*Translation*]

After that, it will be Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné's turn.

[*English*]

After that, I have Mr. Dong, Ms. Yip and Ms. Bradford.

Mr. McCauley, you're up.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I find it quite amusing that the government side uses consensus a lot. Consensus seems to matter, apparently, only when it's a Liberal idea, and any disagreement with the government all of a sudden seems to be an attack on the opposition for not being in consensus with the government's view.

I'm going to quote from the minister. She stated this in the House twice today. She doubled down. She twice stated that it was not the

Auditor General's fault. She then said that the Auditor General had been under a lot of pressure from the opposition and that political games should not be tolerated. She stated that the CRA disagreed with her results, and it was not her fault because she was under pressure from the opposition. Previous to that, she also said, "That is not the Auditor General's fault. We all know that she was pressured by the opposition to produce this report."

It's very clear that the minister is stating that the AG violated the integrity of her office to produce a report that dared disagree with the CRA.

It's not, "We disagree and would love to chat it out," or "Hey, we disagree, but, you know, let's go to Public Accounts, and we'll have CRA come to discuss and defend its point of view," as the government side stated. Apparently the Minister of National Revenue believes the Auditor General doctored a report under pressure from the Conservatives. These statements are shameful.

It's also shameful that the government side is constantly trying to shut down any disagreement by claiming, "We used to be non-partisan, until you disagreed with us." Debate is wholesome. Disagreement is wholesome, and it's good for us. Disagreeing with the government is not being partisan; it's standing up for taxpayers. Disagreeing with the government does not mean we don't believe in consensus; it's because we disagree, and we disagree on behalf of taxpayers.

We heard it today from Mr. Desilets, and in a previous one, especially on the disgraceful report on the conduct of Indigenous Services. Mr. Desilets brought up some excellent points. That wasn't an attack on consensus or partisanship. It was a request to try to find truth and accountability. This is no different.

If you support the AG, then you support this motion. If you don't support the motion, it's very clear you support the minister's blatant attack on the integrity of the AG.

Thank you, Chair.

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor.

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

I think all my colleagues here know that I'm a reasonable person who's willing to compromise. That's why I would ask my esteemed Liberal colleagues to stick together with us this time and go along with the committee. We can prove to the public today that we're a non-partisan committee.

Ministers are elected officials, and they aren't infallible. They make mistakes sometimes. The minister made one today in Question Period when she insinuated in an answer that the Auditor General is not neutral. That's more than asking her to complete a study, Ms. Shanahan. I don't agree with what you said. The minister really went too far. It is this committee's role to show that we stick together and that we all support the Auditor General's neutrality and independence.

I urge you to support this motion. We must stand together to preserve the Auditor General's independence. It's very important, and we can prove it today to everyone watching and those who will be watching.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

I'll turn now to Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I kind of regret not continuing with my motion to move this meeting in camera, because had that happened...without an audience, this motion we're debating probably would never have been moved.

I have one thing on my mind, but before I say it, I want to respond to the point made by my colleague, Mr. McCauley.

“Non-partisan” doesn't mean “consensus”. I joined this committee after the last election. The members of this committee see this committee.... The subjects we debate and study are supposed to be non-partisan. I try to craft my questions very carefully—more on the substance, numbers and details, as opposed to, “Would this be good or bad for the government?” because there is no defence and offence in this committee. Everybody is on the offensive to make sure the government is accountable in carrying out its programs.

Not having consensus happens in this committee, but that doesn't mean the government side is partisan in its intentions. At the end of the day, we are a minority government. We don't control the outcome of votes in this committee. I think, from time to time, the public and opposition will have to recognize that, or need to be reminded that we are a minority government. We need to work with at least one of the opposition parties to get stuff done in the House. I think that's a very important fact.

I really hate the fact that we're wasting this committee's time by acting as an extension of question period—although question period is exciting. Some would consider it the most exciting part of our day. We hear the back-and-forth in the House, and there's attendance in the public gallery. It is very exciting, but nothing gets done. The work is getting done in committees like this, where we study things like recommendations, check the compliance with those recommendations and make sure the government follows through, so we have a better system. That's the whole point of this committee.

I don't know why we are debating something that happened in question period. We have another hour of question period tomorrow in which to sort this out. If the Conservative Party member has questions about the intent or wording of that question, he should ask the Prime Minister tomorrow. Tomorrow is Wednesday. I think

that's fair. Let's not waste any more time on this committee, trying to sort out something that isn't meant for this committee.

Those are my initial thoughts on this motion. Thank you.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Yip.

Ms. Jean Yip: I agree with my colleagues, Mr. Dong and Mrs. Shanahan. I'm very disappointed that this is happening in this supposedly non-partisan committee. It's the tradition to be non-partisan and work together.

In the past, there was unanimous consent on many reports. I would like to return to that—where we, here, don't always have to agree, but we respect what viewpoints there are. We should definitely respect the fact that the AG and her team work hard to produce reports that are very thorough, with recommendations. For the most part, the government recognizes the recommendations and is willing to put in action plans and work in order to provide some sort of solution.

I feel that right now we're wasting time. We're wasting taxpayers' time, as well, when we could be doing something else. We could have had our subcommittee meeting to discuss looking at more reports and moving things forward.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Ms. Bradford.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to say that the public accounts committee is a very important committee. It's an honour to serve on it. It's where we review the work of the government. It's really important.

I feel that the appropriate place to debate what was said in the House is in the House of Commons. That's what question period is for. That's not the work of this committee. This committee is intended to review, right now, the work of the Auditor General and the reports she presented today.

We had reached consensus on how we were going to proceed forward with that and then, all of a sudden, we get this unexpected motion put forward that is not at all related to what the focus of our meeting was today.

I feel it's inappropriate. I feel that the motion involves a discussion that happened earlier today in the House of Commons. As my colleagues have indicated, no doubt it will be continued tomorrow when question period happens again. It happens every day at the same hour, five days a week. That's the forum for that debate.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I was present in question period today, and I was just reviewing the blues from today's comments by the minister. It is quite clear that she does impugn some motive to opposition parties.

It does bring some credibility challenges to the reports of the Auditor General, and I think that's very reasonable. I also think the government and many of my Liberal colleagues who are present here today also understand that it's important we uphold the independence and integrity of the Office of the Auditor General. It's important that we continue to maintain that support for its independence.

Today, whether it was a government member or an opposition member—I'm certain that all members of this place would agree that whoever it came from—something that would disparage the independence of an Auditor General should be met with a verification by all parties present. It's all members, but I feel that we, in particular, as members of the public accounts committee, are most equipped, when dealing directly with the work of the Auditor General, to move this motion. I think it is important that Canadians actually see that, because what they saw today was something that I think demonstrates a harm to the Office of the Auditor General's independence.

I agree with the motion and with my colleagues from the Bloc Québécois and from the Conservative benches that we can find room here to enhance our position that the Auditor General's office is in fact independent and can serve its role to ensure that our processes and our programs are done correctly.

I disagree that opposition parties have in any way, shape or form motivated the Auditor General to say the things she did. I disagree with the statement made today in the House of Commons on that. I think it's important that our committee recognize the fact that we work with the Auditor General almost every single day in this committee. It's important for us to recognize that she does have a role and her independence is part of that. Verifying that independence is something I believe all of us agree with.

That's what we're doing here: We're verifying the independence.

That's my contribution. Thanks.

• (1725)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: We all agree with the independence of the Auditor General. The minister agrees with it. The government agrees with it. I'm worried that we are going to get into, as I said before, an endless back-and-forth that further politicizes a committee that should be, at its core—and that was, up until very recently—non-partisan. This is the audit committee of the Parliament of Canada, or the House of Commons side. We have a responsibility to uphold that in every way possible, but if members on the opposite side wish to engage in pure partisanship, that's how things will go.

I could point to comments made by the Conservative leader in an article from last year. The article is titled “Federal AG's office skewed contract, leaked reports to lobbyist”. That's the title. It's not the finding, but Conservative MPs were pointing to comments that are entirely partisan and hoping for that finding, it would seem. At the finance committee, the member who is now Conservative leader said, “it is not common for independent, non-partisan officers of Parliament to give untendered contracts to partisan lobbyists”.

The substance of the issue doesn't really matter, but where this is going, and I don't want it to go there.... This side could put forward a motion asking for the committee to condemn those comments. Is this where my Conservative colleagues want to go? I don't think so, but as a matter of principle.... Perhaps I see my colleague across the way nodding his head. Perhaps he would agree that two motions could be engaged on tonight. We could put a motion forward asking for this committee to condemn.... I see my friend in the NDP agreeing.

I don't want it to get to that point. I hope that Conservative colleagues agree, and that we can move on. With that in mind, I wonder if Mr. McCauley would withdraw his motion.

If he doesn't, we'll keep discussing it, because I've had the pleasure and honour of working with the Minister of National Revenue as her parliamentary secretary for almost a year now, and I find her to be someone who's not just a compassionate person. She proved that again today in her comments at the press conference. She has proven that throughout her career as a social worker and as Canada's second-longest-serving minister of national revenue. To try to disparage the reputation of someone like that, I don't think is appropriate at all.

Again, we can end up going back and forth in a committee that should be entirely non-partisan, with a competing motion. We can do that. I don't think that would be appropriate, though. We can end it here.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Chair, I have a point of order. I'm sorry. Is debate collapsing, or are we going to vote—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: No, it's not. We can end my comments on this point—

The Chair: No, it's not.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Chair, it is a point of order.

I wanted to ask if we can request additional resources, or if additional resources are available to continue this at some point, maybe tomorrow or maybe subsequently.

The Chair: We can request them. I'm going to suspend this meeting.

[The meeting was suspended at 5:30 p.m., Tuesday, December 6]

[The meeting resumed at 1:02 p.m., Friday, December 9]

• (8500)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.)): Good afternoon. We will now resume meeting number 43, which was suspended on Tuesday, December 6, 2022, at 5:30 p.m. The committee was meeting to study the 2022 reports of the Auditor General of Canada to the Parliament of Canada. Reports 9 and 10 were referred to the committee on Tuesday, December 6, 2022.

At the moment the committee was suspended, the committee was debating the motion moved by Mr. McCauley.

Clerk, would you care to clarify the motion?

• (8505)

The Clerk: Yes. I apologize.

I just want to inform members that with regard to the motion I sent you on Tuesday, there are slight differences from the motion that was read into the record. I would like to know if you want me to send you the motion as read by Mr. McCauley, with the French translation.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Do we have a copy of the motion?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I think that's going to happen [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] Do we need to?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): I suggest that we move forward and we resume debate. There were no speakers on the list.

Go ahead, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I would like to amend the motion put forward by Mr. McCauley, as follows. After the word “office”, I would add, “and that the committee shall also report to the House that attacks made by the leader of the official opposition against the Auditor General in the context of the government's COVID-19 benefit programs are also unacceptable.” Also, after the word “unacceptable”, I would add, “The committee also requests a government response pursuant to Standing Order 109.”

Just so we're all on the same page, if amended, the wording of the motion after the amendment would read as follows: That the committee report to the House that it rejects statements made by the Minister of National Revenue in the House of Commons on December 6 regarding the independence of the Auditor General; and that the committee affirms its support for the Auditor General and the independence of the office; and that the committee shall also report to the House that attacks made by the leader of the official opposition against the Auditor General in the context of the government's COVID-19 benefit programs are also unacceptable. The committee also requests a government response pursuant to Standing Order 109.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

In recognition, I believe, of the conversation we had last week and the motion that was tabled by the Conservatives in relation to

naming the minister in the House of Commons, I believe it's incumbent upon us as members of this committee to look at our role here and to ensure that we can continue to have in mind the best practices of this committee and the best outcome for Canadians.

Hearing our discussion last week, and now hearing the amendment read by our Liberal colleague, this is my request to find a consensus on this. I think all of us do in fact believe in the independence of the Auditor General's office, so I believe that's something we can get to.

Recognizing that we have this existing amendment on the table, I would invite my Conservative colleagues to maybe look at amending the first portion of the motion, read more clearly in the relation to the last point our friend Mr. Fragiskatos made, the very last portion of his amendment, and let just that portion stand. I think that was part B, he said, if the Conservatives would be willing to amend their original motion.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Mr. Fragiskatos, perhaps you could send a copy of your amendment.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Can we get the motion in French, please?

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Okay.

Please forward a copy of your amendment in both English and French.

Mr. Desjarlais, were you suggesting—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I would just like to get the motion in French.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): You want the whole thing.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'll read it for our colleague. I'll read it in French, and then I have something to say about what Mr. Desjarlais has put forward.

[*Translation*]

Here are my proposed amendments for the motion.

First of all, after the word “office”, I want to add “and that attacks made by the Leader of the Official Opposition against the Auditor General in the context of the government's COVID-19 benefit programs are also unacceptable.”

Next, after the word “unacceptable”, I'd like to add the following: “The committee also requests a government response pursuant to Standing Order 109.”

Here is the wording of the motion, including the amendment:

That the Committee report to the House that it rejects statements made by the Minister of National Revenue in the House of Commons on December 6th regarding the independence of the Auditor General and that the committee affirms its support for the Auditor General and the independence and integrity of the office and that attacks made by the Leader of the Official Opposition against the Auditor General in the context of the government's COVID-19 benefit programs are also unacceptable. The committee also requests a government response pursuant to Standing Order 109.

• (8510)

[English]

Madam Chair, I'll also add that if I understood our colleague from the NDP correctly, he mentioned the word "consensus". I think we need consensus as well. I think what he is getting at is if we put forward something here that doesn't include the Minister of National Revenue and the Leader of the Opposition, and we emerge with a motion that has us, as a committee, understanding and recognizing the importance and independence of the Office of the Auditor General, that would be consensus.

I see him nodding his head, so maybe we can proceed to the next step. If we want the motion amended so that it reads that way, we can maybe vote.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Can we also mention the Liberal leader?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Mr. McCauley, that's very clever. That wouldn't be consensus, Kelly.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Resuming debate, we have Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I have a couple of comments.

Substantively, the allegation in the amendment moved by Mr. Fragiskatos is obviously ridiculous. I don't think that's the point of what he's doing. The committee, in its original motion, was responding to a comment that had been made by a minister of the Crown the same day that explicitly suggested that the Auditor General was making decisions in response to some kind of political pressure by the opposition. It was an outrageous claim by Minister Lebouthillier, which merited a response, and it merits a response from this committee.

That's very different from the particulars of the case that he referred to of a couple of years ago. At no point were the integrity or the independence of the Auditor General challenged by the Leader of the Opposition, who was not the Leader of the Opposition at the time when the events took place. It would have been more sincere if Mr. Fragiskatos had felt that the public accounts committee needed to engage in that discussion at the time. This is clearly a bit rich.

That said, if Mr. Desjarlais wants a compromise proposal, I'm as capable of doing math as anybody else, so I would certainly welcome Mr. Desjarlais's proposal. Procedurally, we'd have to agree by unanimous consent to withdraw this amendment and proceed with Mr. Desjarlais's amendment.

Mr. Desjarlais probably just needs to put his specific compromise language on the floor as something to talk about, because it's probably easier to discuss actual prospective language than to deal with what the possible language could be.

Those are my suggestions.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Desjarlais, do you have the wording in French and English?

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: It will take me about three minutes, unless someone has it in front of them.

• (8515)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Madam Chair, on a point of order, could I suggest we suspend for a few minutes?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): We will suspend for a few minutes.

• (8515)

(Pause)

• (8515)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Do we have unanimous consent to amend the original motion of Mr. McCauley?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry. Maybe it's a disadvantage to those of us on Zoom, but I haven't heard the new language from Mr. Desjarlais yet.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Please read the new wording.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you so much, Mr. Genuis.

First of all, I want to clarify something. Last week at one point, it was advised by the clerk to do things by unanimous consent if we can. At that time, two motions were presented to us. We used unanimous consent at that time to amend the original.

I was going to use the same procedure of unanimous consent to amend the original motion to remove the minister's name and have the amendment read the exact same way.

It would be, "That the committee report to the House"—then reject the portion after "reject" and everything after that to the word "the" and then keep "the independence of the Auditor General and that the committee affirms its support for the Auditor General and the independence of the office."

We would be removing the noun, "the minister". It would be any reference to the minister.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Could the text of the amended motion be reread?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Scratch out the portion about the minister.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I don't have the original with me. I just have the one that Peter has.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Let's suspend the meeting for a few minutes.

• (8515)

(Pause)

• (1330)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): We will resume the meeting.

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I move to amend by unanimous consent the original motion moved by Mr. McCauley to read:

That the committee report to the House that the committee affirms its support for the Auditor General and the independence and integrity of the office, and that the committee also request a government response pursuant to Standing Order 109.

• (8535)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you.

Do you have it in French?

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Oh, now I have to do that in French. I think you should do it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Here is the motion in French:

Que le Comité fasse rapport à la Chambre qu'il affirme son soutien à la vérificatrice générale et à l'indépendance et l'intégrité de son bureau et que le Comité demande également une réponse du gouvernement conformément à l'article 109 du Règlement.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Do we have unanimous consent for Mr. Desjarlais to move his motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): I see that we have unanimous consent. That's excellent.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry, Madam Chair, I have one quick point of order.

I think we have unanimous consent to amend the motion. Now I think we need to confirm that we have unanimous consent to adopt the motion, so we don't have that hanging thread.

Maybe I just missed something. I want to make sure that we have formally adopted the motion, and then we adjourn.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Go ahead, Mr. Desjarlais.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I move to adopt the motion.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Do we have unanimous consent?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you very much.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Seeing no dissent, the meeting is adjourned.

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

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

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

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

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

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

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