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• (1540)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome, everyone, to meeting number 43 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security.

We will start by acknowledging that we are meeting on the traditional, unceded territory of the Algonquin people.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022. I'd like to advise everyone that we have a hard stop at 5:30.

Pursuant to the Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, June 23, 2022, the committee is resuming its study of allegations of political interference in the 2020 Nova Scotia mass murder investigation.

With us today on the panel, we have the Honourable Bill Blair, president of the King's Privy Council and Minister of Emergency Preparedness and Mr. Shawn Tupper, deputy minister, Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

Welcome, gentlemen. You have up to five minutes for opening remarks.

Please, go ahead.

Hon. Bill Blair (President of the King's Privy Council for Canada and Minister of Emergency Preparedness): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the committee for their invitation to once again appear before this committee on this matter.

Let me begin by once again acknowledging the profound tragedy at the heart of this discussion. The events of April 18 and 19, 2020, were the worst mass shooting in Canada's recent history. Twenty-two people lost their lives, and their families and loved ones continue to mourn them. This senseless act of violence continues to reverberate throughout Nova Scotia and across Canada. We cannot begin to fathom the grief and the loss caused by this event.

On the matter before this committee today, I will begin by repeating part of my opening remarks from when I last appeared on this issue in July. At no point, Mr. Chair, did I direct the RCMP in any operational matter, including on public communications. I did not ask them to release any specific information, nor did I receive a promise from them to do so. As you will find in all of my public

statements from that time, I confirmed that identifying the weapons used was a decision wholly within the purview of the RCMP.

My testimony on this point from July 25 continues to stand. The independence of police operations is a principle that I have not only respected but also vigorously defended over my nearly four decades in law enforcement and throughout my subsequent career as a federal member of Parliament and minister.

I would not and I have not ever directed police to release information pertaining to an investigation, nor did I do so in this case. I do understand the recording of a call between the commissioner and her subordinates has been identified by the RCMP and subsequently released by the Mass Casualty Commission. Neither I nor my office were participants on this call. My conversations with the RCMP during that period, and generally throughout my time as Minister of Public Safety, were with the commissioner directly.

I understand that Commissioner Lucki will be appearing in the second hour of today's meeting and she will be far better placed to speak to specific details of what occurred between her and her subordinates.

The order in council that was announced in May 2020 had been the result of many, many months of work. I was in fact leading consultations across Canada alongside my former colleague, Minister Goodale, on the question of assault-style firearms and handguns as early as October 2018. As a government, we first signalled our commitment to get assault-style weapons off our streets in the 2015 Speech from the Throne. Work on the OIC began almost immediately after I became the Minister of Public Safety, as it was one of the priorities given to me in my mandate letter from the Prime Minister.

To put these regulations together, we needed to invest the time to get it right, and so this work was undertaken throughout the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2020. Through this OIC, Mr. Chair, we banned 1,500 plus of some of the most dangerous weapons that were at that time still legal in Canada. These are weapons that were designed to kill people and to do so efficiently. Weapons that were captured in the OIC were used in the *polytechnique* massacre, in the Fredericton shooting of two police officers, in Moncton, in Mayerthorpe and at the Quebec City mosque. The AR-15 alone has been used in some of the most deadly mass casualty events in the United States within the last decade, including most profoundly and concerningly the horrific murders of little kids at Sandy Hook.

Mr. Chair, gun violence is a complex problem and combatting it requires complex solutions. The order in council was a significant and positive step forward for the safety of Canadians, but that work, as you know, is not done. Just over a week ago, the Prime Minister announced a freeze on the sale, purchase and transfer of handguns. I also understand that your committee is currently examining legislation from my colleague, Mr. Mendicino, on this very issue in Bill C-21.

Mr. Chair, we continue with this work as a government because we know that effective gun control regulations can save lives. Our first priority has been and will always be to ensure the safety of all Canadians.

I thank the committee for their attention. I look forward to your questions.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will start our rounds of questions right now with Ms. Dancho.

Please go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

I think you know what I'm going to ask you, Minister, so let's just get right to it, shall we?

In the audio recording, the commissioner said that she “flew it up the flagpole” because it was a request from the minister's office: “I shared with the minister that in fact it was going to be in the news release”.

Now, you directly refuted this in committee. How do you explain that?

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much, Ms. Dancho.

I explain it with fact—just the truth. The reality is that in all of my conversations with the commissioner, at no time did I direct her, ask her or even suggest that she release that information. At no time did the commissioner promise me that she was going to do it.

I think you're referring to a conversation that the commissioner had with her subordinates, of which I was not a party. I can't and won't speculate on what was going on in that conversation.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: So you feel that the commissioner—

Hon. Bill Blair: I can simply advise you that the fact is—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: —was not telling the truth.

Hon. Bill Blair: —that I never directed her in that way.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay.

She also said further along that, yet again, “the minister on the simplest of requests”.... She's saying this word “request” several times. She also said that she got confirmation, that she confirmed to your office. You're saying that did not occur. She did not confirm to

you or anyone in your office that this weapons info would be released. Is that correct?

Hon. Bill Blair: That information was never shared with me. I can say that with absolute certainty, because I recall very vividly that....

I would remind you, Ms. Dancho, that on April 25 and again on May 1—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you—

Hon. Bill Blair: —when asked about the guns that were used in that offence, I made it very clear, very publicly in my response to the media—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Minister.

She said at committee as well—

Hon. Bill Blair: —that it was the sole responsibility of the RCMP to determine when and if that info should be released.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I asked her specifically if “the Minister of Public Safety at the time, Bill Blair, specifically asked you if weapons used during the attack would be mentioned in the press conference of April 28”. She said yes.

I asked her, “So you confirmed to Minister Blair, when he asked you if the weapons information would be released in that press conference, that, yes, it would be. Correct?” She said yes to that question.

Is Commissioner Lucki not telling the truth, Minister?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think Commissioner Lucki has told the truth. In fact, I would remind you that when she came before this committee, she was explicit and clear that at no time did she receive any direction from me, nor was there any interference with government with the RCMP's decision to release that information—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'm not asking about direction, Minister. I'm asking specifically about what Commissioner Lucki said.

At the Mass Casualty Commission, she also said, “I got asked if the media event would include the details of the guns”, to which Rachel Young, the Crown prosecutor, asked, “Who were you asked by?” She said she was asked by “the Chief of Staff of the Minister”.

Were you aware that the chief of staff made this request of Commissioner Lucki?

Hon. Bill Blair: I was not aware of that. Frankly, it was not something that I was at all concerned with. I believed then as I believe now that it was entirely the purview of the RCMP to determine if and when that information could be released.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Are you saying, Minister, that your chief of staff acted solely on her own in making this request?

Hon. Bill Blair: My understanding subsequently was that the commissioner had indicated to both my chief of staff and the deputy minister that she had made a decision to release that information, and that apparently it wasn't subsequently released.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: So you were not familiar...that your chief of staff made this request to the commissioner. Just to be clear, you were not aware that your chief of staff made the request to the commissioner to release the gun information at the press conference.

Hon. Bill Blair: Ms. Dancho, I believe that's not correct. I do not believe that my chief of staff asked the commissioner to release that information. In fact, that contradicts your assertion...contradicts the statement by the commissioner, who's made it very clear that no one in government—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Minister, it's not my assertion—

Hon. Bill Blair—neither me nor anyone in government, asked her to do that.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: It is not my assertion, Minister. It's the words of the commissioner, Commissioner Lucki.

The Chair: Ms. Damoff, you have a point of order.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): On a point of order, Chair, out of respect for the interpreters, it's difficult for them to do their job when two people are talking at once.

The Chair: Thank you for your intervention.

Can I ask everyone to take turns?

Please go ahead.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you.

So you're saying, Minister, that the commissioner was not telling the truth when she told her deputies that your office made this request. She was not telling the truth.

• (1550)

Hon. Bill Blair: The conversation between the commissioner and her subordinates was not something I was a party to—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Minister, she also said it at committee—

Hon. Bill Blair:—and I'm not going to speculate on her reasons for saying what she did.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: She also said it at committee. Was she not telling the committee members here the truth?

Hon. Bill Blair: She has testified under oath, Ms. Dancho, that she was not directed or asked by any member of government, including me, to release that information—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Minister, I'm not asking about direction.

Hon. Bill Blair:—and that there was no interference.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'm asking very specifically about the request made from your chief of staff. She said it here at committee that that happened. She said it at the Mass Casualty Commission. Are you saying that never happened, that the commissioner was not telling the truth?

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, my understanding from the commissioner was that she had advised both the deputy minister and my chief

that she had made a decision to release that information and then subsequently was concerned that it had not been released.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Minister, you're directly contradicting what the commissioner said in testimony here and at the Mass Casualty Commission. Are you not concerned that the commissioner is not telling the truth and that you're here as a result?

Hon. Bill Blair: Ms. Dancho, all I can do is come before this committee and testify honestly about what I know and what happened, and that's what I'm doing.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: How do you explain the commissioner's words to the committee members here and at the Mass Casualty Commission? She made it very clear that the request came from your chief of staff.

Just to be clear, before you answer, everyone here is well aware of how the chief of staff and ministerial relationship works. I doubt very much that your chief of staff went rogue and made this request without your knowledge, let alone without telling you following that request being made.

Are you expecting us to believe that, Minister, that your chief of staff went rogue?

Hon. Bill Blair: There are two things.

Whenever anybody begins a question with "everybody knows", it's usually a good reminder that some people simply don't know how things were.

Let me clarify what the commissioner said, which should be clarified by the commissioner. She's going to be appearing here in the next hour. I certainly invite you to put any questions to the commissioner about what she may have said.

I'm here to tell you about what I did and said. I've done that.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'm asking you about the commissioner's words. She directly refuted you on the record. She did that over the summer at committee. She did that at the Mass Casualty Commission.

Are you not concerned that her words directly refute yours? Is that not of concern to you, sir?

Hon. Bill Blair: I don't believe that's true. Frankly, I've heard a great deal of conjecture—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Oh, okay, she's not telling the truth.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

Hon. Bill Blair:—and innuendo from you, Ms. Dancho [*Inaudible—Editor*]. Frankly, I don't believe what you are saying is true.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: It's on the record.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

We go now to Mr. Noormohamed for six minutes.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed (Vancouver Granville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing, although I am certain you have better things to do than to be engaged in this political theatre.

I want to begin where Ms. Dancho left off, because I am actually quite disturbed by how we are now mired in what appears to be misinformation by omission. I want to be clear that, in my view, what Ms. Dancho just portrayed is not what I believe to be the case.

I want to give you the opportunity, because I want to get this on the record once and for all—having recognized that you have done this several times. In every appearance you have made before this committee and Parliament, have you been telling the truth when you've been asked a question?

Hon. Bill Blair: The answer is yes, sir. In every answer I have given to this committee, in my previous appearances and today... In every answer I have given in the House, I have spoken the truth.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Minister, do you believe the commissioner has been telling the truth in the answers she has given?

Hon. Bill Blair: That's a question best put to the commissioner. In fairness to her and out of respect for the position she holds, I think she should be allowed to speak for herself and explain, for example, the conversation she had with her subordinates.

All I can say is that, in all the interactions I had directly with her...what I myself have done. I've done my very best to convey that honestly and forthrightly to this committee and Parliament.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Minister, a lot of attention is being focused on the view that your office asked whether something would or would not be included in a press conference.

How often, during the course of the operation of your office, is the question asked, "Is this going to be included in something?" or, "Is this going to be done?"

Hon. Bill Blair: It happens throughout an event like a mass casualty event. It was, as I've said, one of the worst shooting events. Many Canadians lost their lives. A community and country have been traumatized by this terrible event. There were, quite understandably, briefings taking place directly with the RCMP commissioner and other officials, in terms of what had transpired. For example, information about this event was coming somewhat slowly to us. I think the commissioner was working diligently throughout, in order to provide briefings to the government.

I have to tell you, my friend, that there's a very clear line on how we speak to the commissioner about this information. It's a line I'm quite familiar with. I was, as you know, for many years, a police leader myself. I had to speak to those to whom I was accountable and provide briefings to them. That line is crystal clear in my mind: Do not give direction to the RCMP. It's a principle I have always respected.

• (1555)

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Minister, to be clear, what I'm trying to get at is this: Is it reasonable... When your office is asking a question, are they just asking a question because they would like an answer versus giving a direction in the asking of that question? That is to say, "Is X or Y going to be included?" because they are curious about whether X or Y is going to be included, versus that, somehow, being intuited into a direction?

Hon. Bill Blair: That's one of the reasons why—on April 20, when I was speaking at a press conference beside the commissioner, and again on April 25 and subsequently on May 1—I always prefaced my remarks by saying that information about the investigation, or the release of information or any aspect of the investigation, was solely the responsibility of the RCMP. I was trying to be very clear not only to Canadians but also to my government—to all of us—about the importance of respecting the principle of police independence.

This was a very difficult investigation for the RCMP. There were a lot of questions about what had transpired. People had a desperate need for information, and we respected that. It is ultimately the RCMP's responsibility to provide that information.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Thank you, Minister.

In the last moments I have, I want to clarify two things. Let's do it one more time.

Did you ever instruct the commissioner of the RCMP to release any information at your direction?

Hon. Bill Blair: No, and if I may be very clear, I did not direct her. I did not instruct her, I didn't ask her to do it, I didn't even suggest it should be done. It is, in my opinion, her decision.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: So if any information was chosen to be released, we can sit here confidently knowing that it would have been the decision of the commissioner of the RCMP alone and not you, not the Prime Minister, not political staff, no one.

Hon. Bill Blair: It is the job of the RCMP commissioner as the head of that organization.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Thank you, Minister.

I think that's all I have, Mr. Chair. I think I may be out of time.

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: In that case, I do have one more question for you, Minister, if I might.

Minister, as we all know, this was one of the most horrific tragedies in the history of this country. Communities have been traumatized and, regrettably, we are now having to understand much of what happened. The Mass Casualty Commission is doing its work. This committee is going through this process right now.

What is your message to those who may see this in some way, shape or form as undermining the credibility of the RCMP and of our public safety institutions in this country? What would you say to Canadians who are watching this to reassure them that we can have confidence in our police forces?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think one of the greatest principles of trusting the police is that they are an institution that is accountable to the people they're sworn to serve and protect. In these circumstances, it's one of the reasons that our government brought forward a commission of inquiry to answer certain questions with respect to, for example, RCMP communications, the actions that were taken in response to the shootings, including the critical incident response, and the services that were provided for victims.

Transparency and accountability to the public is foundational and a principle of trust in our policing institutions, and I think it is incumbent.... I've been through this previously in another role that I've held. It's incumbent upon the police to explain their actions and to be accountable to the people they're sworn to serve and protect.

The families of the people who lost loved ones in this terrible tragedy need answers, and they need our compassion and our respect, and that's why, as well, the report of the Mass Casualty Commission will be so important to them.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Noormohamed.

[Translation]

Ms. Michaud, you have six minutes.

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being with us, Minister. We are pleased that you are appearing on this topic again.

Last time you appeared before the Committee, on July 25, you stated in your opening remarks:

I want to make it very clear: At no point did I direct the RCMP in any operational matter, including on public communications. I did not ask them to release any specific information, nor did I receive a promise for them to do so.

You were referring to Commissioner Lucki.

However, according to the transcript of the meeting on April 28, 2020, Commissioner Lucki stated:

[English]

“...it was a request that I got from the Minister's office, and I shared with the Minister that, in fact, it was going to be in the news release, and it wasn't.”

[Translation]

You stated numerous times that you did not make Ms. Lucki promise anything. However, her statements really seem to confirm that that is what she was talking about.

You said that you were not part of that conversation and I know that we can't speculate, but, in your opinion, what would she have been talking about, if it was not about revealing which weapons had been used?

• (1600)

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, I don't want to speculate. I can tell you that I had no direct conversation with the commissioner. My interactions with the RCMP were almost, in every case, directly with

the commissioner. The commissioner never advised me, personally, that it was her intention and her decision to release that information.

I understand subsequently from her testimony that she had passed that information on to someone in my office, but we never had the conversation because, quite frankly, I'd never asked her to do that. I never thought she was going to and, frankly, I didn't really think it was particularly necessary. It was a decision that I believe the commissioner had come to on her own, and she shared her decision with my office, but it wasn't something that I had requested or required of her.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: You said that she didn't speak to you about it directly. She may have told someone at your office without you knowing about it.

When the transcript for that meeting was made public, did you and your team, when you were Minister of Public Safety, check whether this request was made by your office without you being aware of it?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: I am absolutely certain that it was not direction from my office, and the commissioner has, in fact, confirmed in her own testimony both here and before the Mass Casualty Commission that at no time was she directed and, in her words, she was “not influenced by government officials”, which would have included everyone in my office.

I will also say, because it was not something I had ever asked or required of her, that the fact that she had made a decision to do it and then it didn't happen was not terribly relevant to me and not something that I felt I needed to follow up on with the commissioner, because it was not something that, quite frankly, I had sought or required or directed her to do.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: You talked about following up.

In that same transcript of the meeting on April 28, 2020, Commissioner Lucki stated that the minister wanted to speak to her after the press conference. I am referring to you, of course. She said she knew exactly what it was about. Listening to you, it's clear that you don't seem to agree. She seemed to say that you wanted to talk about disclosing the type of weapons during the press conference.

Did that discussion between the two of you take place, after that press conference? If so, what was it about?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: I have no recollection of having that conversation, but it most certainly did not involve the release of information with respect to the weapons used. Frankly, I was not even aware that the commissioner had made the decision to release that information.

I had said, sitting next to her at press conferences on the 20th and the 25th, and then again on May 1, that it was up to the RCMP to make a determination on if and when any information related to the investigation should be revealed.

I don't have any recollection of requiring a call with the commissioner. I was receiving briefings from her, but it was not something I reached out to her about or was waiting to speak to her about. I think the commissioner herself will have to explain her comments.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: If this request didn't come directly from you or your office, do you think it could have come from the Prime Minister's Office?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: I absolutely believe that is not true.

Under subsection 5(1) of the RCMP Act, there is only one person in the government of Canada who has any authority to provide direction to the RCMP. That's the Minister of Public Safety, which is a role that I held at the time. In that role, I did not at any time give direction.

That's confirmed, in my opinion, by Commissioner Lucki's testimony, both before this committee and before the Mass Casualty Commission, in which she was very explicit and under oath. She said she received no direction from any member of the government, including myself.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: What makes this testimony a bit strange is that this is not the only thing that leads us to think these discussions may have taken place.

The director of strategic communications for the Halifax RCMP, Lia Scanlan, said roughly the same thing, that government officials and the Prime Minister wanted to sort of control the message at that point. That means directives would have been issued by your office and the Prime Minister's Office.

What is your response to that?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: I've never met Ms. Scanlan. I have no insight into her comments or her speculation. I have no idea how she came to those conclusions.

I think that's a question better put to her.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you.

• (1605)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Michaud.

[English]

Mr. MacGregor, please go ahead for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister Blair, for appearing before our committee again.

Again, I think the big reason why this committee is meeting today is the appearance of that word “request” twice in the transcript of the recording.

First, the commissioner referred to “a request that [she] got from the minister's office.” Secondly, she complained of “not being able to come through for the minister on the simplest of requests”.

This recording and its transcript has been public for a little while. We're really trying to drill down to the meaning of that word “request”.

Sir, I don't doubt for a second that your office has been talking about this transcript and what it means. Have you come to any conclusion through conversations with your office—your staff or your chief of staff—as to what on earth the commissioner is referring to when she states this twice during a recorded phone call to her subordinates?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. MacGregor, if I may be really clear, I was not a party to this conversation—

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I understand that, but surely your staff could have said, “Maybe she thought it was this.”

We're just trying to understand why the commissioner would refer to this word twice in a recorded phone call to her subordinates so closely after being in conversation with your office.

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. MacGregor, you're asking me to engage in speculation and conjecture. I don't believe that's appropriate.

The commissioner herself will be here before this committee in less than an hour's time. This is a question you may want to put to her.

You're asking me about a conversation I was not a party to. You're asking me about things that someone else said and asking me to explain why she might have said it. You have an opportunity to ask the person who actually spoke those words what she meant and why she said it. I'm sure that you'll take that opportunity.

I am not going to engage in speculation or conjecture about what she said or what she might have meant.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Granted, Minister, and I understand. You come up with no theories as to why she may have used those words and you don't want to engage in that—fine.

Those quotes were wrapped around a series of complaints to her subordinates based on how the RCMP was communicating with the public. There was a second quote in the middle of those two words where she states:

...does anybody realize what's happening in the world of handguns and guns?

The fact that they're in the middle of trying to get legislation going, the fact that legislation is supposed to actually help police, and the fact that very little information I asked to be put in the speaking notes...could not be accommodated.

We have the reference to a “request” from the minister's office. We have the complaint about what this is tied to.

Minister, do you not see how this committee could not infer from these comments that the “request” from your office, as she's referring to, is not tied to the creating of a public narrative coming up with the OIC that was announced on May 1, 2020. How can we not infer that?

Hon. Bill Blair: Quite frankly, you're free to engage in any speculation, conjecture or innuendo. That's one of the privileges of a member of Parliament, to come to their own conclusions.

I can only tell you what the facts were. The fact is that I or any member of government never, at any time, directed the commissioner to release this information. She has confirmed the truth of that. The reason she said those things to her subordinates is a question you may wish to put to the commissioner. I can tell you that certainly it was no secret that our government had made a commitment. It was in the throne speech of 2015—you'll probably remember it.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I do.

Hon. Bill Blair: It was also something we campaigned on rather vigorously in 2019.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I understand that.

Hon. Bill Blair: It was in all of the newspapers, I'm sure you'll recall.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Yes.

Hon. Bill Blair: It was in my mandate letter, and I know as a member of the committee you probably read that.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: You even stated that on the record, sir.

I understand the timeline with the OIC. I understand that it was very much in the works. Let's forget for a moment about the questions on requests from your office.

Subsection 5(1) it provides for the appointment of the commissioner, “who, under the direction of the Minister, has the control and management of the Force”. Do you think it was appropriate for the commissioner to be using briefings in Nova Scotia to push your government's legislation, as it seems she is clearly doing in the recording? Do you feel that's appropriate, in your role as the minister for public safety, for the commissioner to be doing that? Shouldn't the policy and the politics part of it be coming from your office and not from the commissioner?

Hon. Bill Blair: I can speak to the politics of it from my role as a minister of the government and the minister for public safety.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I asked for the appropriate answer, though, on the commissioner in that recording.

Hon. Bill Blair: You're asking me to pass judgment on a conversation that the commissioner had with her subordinates.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I'm asking you to pass judgment as her direct superior. You had a role to play as the minister for public safety.

• (1610)

Hon. Bill Blair: Keep in mind that in many respects that is an operational matter. The commissioner was having a conversation with her subordinates about an operational issue, which always in-

cludes the release of public information. How the commissioner chose to do that, and how she chooses to explain herself, I leave that quite appropriately to her.

Let me just share this with you. I will tell you there was only one incident in the time that I was the minister for public safety that I issued any directive to the RCMP. I did it by ministerial directive. It was done in writing. It was made public. It was a ministerial directive that prescribed time limits for the RCMP response to ATIP requests. It was the only time I exercised that authority under subsection 5(1) of the RCMP act to issue a directive to the RCMP.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: In my final 20 seconds, Minister, I want to make one request. Will you table with our committee all emails and communications between your office and Commissioner Lucki that happened between April 18 and 28 relating to the mass shooting and its aftermath? Will you table those with our committee, sir?

Hon. Bill Blair: Let me be clear that I have always responded to requests from this committee.

I might suggest, Mr. Chair, that if this committee makes a decision to request certain documentation, subject to issues of privilege and classified information, I will co-operate. I always have co-operated with this committee in providing the documentation that I'm able to provide it.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

That ends the first round of questions. We'll start the second round with Ms. Dancho. We will probably have to abbreviate this round at some point.

Go ahead, please, Ms. Dancho, for five minutes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you.

Did you communicate with the commissioner, or did anyone from your staff communicate with the commissioner or her staff using any apps, or was it just emails, phone calls and text messages?

Hon. Bill Blair: My communications primarily with the commissioner were direct, face to face, or sometimes—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: How about your chief of staff? How does she communicate?

Hon. Bill Blair: I don't know. I will tell you that the only app I use is my parliamentary email account, and I also use the phones together with text messaging when it's available.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you very much.

Did you do any prep work with the PMO in the lead-up to this meeting?

Hon. Bill Blair: No.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Did you do any prep work with Commissioner Lucki or her staff? Did you talk to her in the lead-up to this?

Hon. Bill Blair: At my last conversation with the commissioner, I think you were present. We were at the musical ride at the college. I spoke briefly to the commissioner, and you were standing beside me at the time.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Minister, I'm going to ask you this very specifically.

This is what Commissioner Lucki said in testimony at the MCC, under oath, as you said. I'm going to quote her. This is verbatim.

I was told. I asked. I was asked questions from the chief of staff: "Will this be included? Are the details of firearms going to be included in this media event?" I tell the chief of staff, "Yes, you know what, it's going to be part of this big event."

What's your response to that? Do you believe that she was lying about your chief of staff saying that?

Hon. Bill Blair: No. Let me be very clear, though. The questions you—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: You have not been clear, sir.

Hon. Bill Blair: Perhaps not to you, Ms. Dancho, but if I may, what you just read to us was not my chief of staff giving any direction to the commissioner of the RCMP, but asking what the RCMP had decided to do.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Pardon me, Minister, but you're not denying that your chief of staff asked her this. That's new.

Hon. Bill Blair: Frankly, I don't know. You're talking about a conversation—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay. I'm glad that we established that finally.

Hon. Bill Blair: —to which I was not party. But what you just read to me is not in any way giving direction to the RCMP; it's information about a briefing.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: We're not asking about direction, Minister, and you're well aware of that. We're asking if pressure was put on the commissioner, even subtly, from your office.

If the chief of staff to the Minister of Public Safety, to whom the commissioner is responsible, is speaking, it's on your behalf. If she's asking the commissioner, as you just confirmed, you have not denied this, "Are those weapons going to be released?"; that is pressure.

Do you not see that, Minister?

That's why we are here today. That's why this saga has gone on for five months. A ministerial directive does not preclude political interference, Minister.

I will go on to ask a few more questions—

Hon. Bill Blair: If you don't want a response to that, I'll...

I have one.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: She also made it very clear, and my colleague alluded to this, that she had to apologize to you. This is what it says in the audio recording. She said, "not being able to come through for the Minister, um...on the simplest of requests".

Further on, she said, "I already have a request sitting in my phone that the Minister wants to speak with me, and I know exactly what it's going to be about."

She looks like she's very responsible to you for this information not being released in the press conference, and yet you're denying that this ever happened. You denied on the record in committee that you didn't even know she was going after this information. Yet, she's telling her staff quite indignantly, in an audio recording, that she's going to have to apologize to you for failing to deliver that information publicly.

You're denying that ever happened. You are expecting us to believe that, Minister.

Hon. Bill Blair: It's the truth, Ms. Dancho, and let me be—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: So Commissioner Lucki is lying, then.

The Chair: Ms. Dancho, could you let the minister answer, please?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: If he would answer it, Chair.

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to respond to that.

To be very clear, I never spoke to the commissioner of the RCMP about this, and she never apologized to me. What she said to her subordinates is something you can ask her about, as to why she said it.

I can confirm for this committee that I did not ask the commissioner to do this. She never promised me she would—

• (1615)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Yes, you said that, Minister.

Hon. Bill Blair: There was no call outstanding with me. In fact, at no time has the commissioner—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: So that call never happened.

Hon. Bill Blair: —ever offered any kind of an apology, because, quite frankly, none was required.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: To confirm, then, she was not telling the truth. She was not telling the truth on the audio recording. You never called her after.... You never spoke to her on April 28. You never spoke to her on that day.

Hon. Bill Blair: I have no recollection at all of ever having a conversation with her on that date or about that issue.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Did she ever make any apologies to you at any time during this saga in April 2020?

Hon. Bill Blair: No.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: She never made a single apology to you.

In the audio recording, she said that would have been her fourth apology to you.

Hon. Bill Blair: She did not apologize.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: She's never apologized to you. So the commissioner really was telling a long tale in this audio recording.

Are you not concerned that the head of our RCMP is saying that many mistruths about you and your chief of staff, on MCC testimony, in this committee, and to her subordinates as she's.... You have no concern that she was making that all up.

Hon. Bill Blair: I can only come before this committee and tell the facts, which is the truth. She was not directed by me. The commissioner has not apologized to me. It wasn't necessary for her to apologize to me. She did not do or fail to do anything that I asked her, because I hadn't asked her to do that.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I will just conclude, Mr. Chair, with my final 10 seconds.

Again, Minister, we're not asking about direction; we're asking you about political interference. Any request from your office would have been pressure. That would have been political interference into the worst mass-killing criminal investigation in Canadian history.

On the record, you've denied all of the words that she said to be true, and yet you have not fired her. I find that shocking.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Bill Blair: Learn to live with the shock, Ms. Dancho. The reality is that the commissioner was not directed. She's been forthright and truthful in her testimony that there was no interference and that she received no direction from me or any member of this government.

That's, in fact, the truth.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

Thank you, Minister.

We will go now to Mr. Sorbara.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara (Vaughan—Woodbridge, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today. It's always great to be in your company, Minister.

I just wanted to put something on record with regard to July 25 and whether inquiries or asking for information is interference. I believe Commissioner Lucki stated—and I just want to make sure I have this correct from my notes—that, quote:

Keeping the government informed through timely and accurate information sharing is not interference. It's standard procedure, and these situational updates are provided without compromising the operational integrity of an investigation.

Those are the commissioner's words and—

Hon. Bill Blair: The commissioner is absolutely correct. In fact, we receive very regular briefings on matters of law enforcement, of national security intelligence. We are frequently briefed and provided with information on their responsibilities.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: That would be standard practice of whichever government is in power.

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, and in fact, I've been involved in similar briefings, sitting on the other side of the table with previous governments.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Absolutely, and that would be also at the provincial level, say, or any other level of jurisdiction.

Hon. Bill Blair: That's correct, sir.

• (1620)

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Minister.

Moving on from that, I think it's very important to put that on the record, because we want to be able to separate fact from fiction.

Minister, given your long and extensive professional background, can you speak more, further, about police operational independence and why it's so important?

Hon. Bill Blair: As I've said many times in the House, Mr. Sorbara, I think it's the principle that underpins the rule of law. In our Canadian criminal justice system, we have always respected the independence of the police. They can never be subject to political interference.

I'll just give you an example that I cited today in the House. Two years ago, a member from the Conservative caucus rose in the House and demanded to know why the government hadn't released information on search warrants and production orders and even a closed warrant. I had to explain to him at that time that it is never the responsibility or the authority of the government to make decisions with respect to the release of that information. It is solely the purview of the police.

Throughout my career as a police officer, I've dealt with a number of sensitive national security matters and serious criminal matters as well, and briefing government is a very different thing, if I may, from receiving direction from the government. There have been a number of occasions in the past where perhaps a politician, not understanding that principle very clearly, made an attempt to recommend a certain course of action, but I think it is a principle always vigorously defended, and now well understood, that there are no circumstances in which there should be a political interference in operational or investigative decisions of the RCMP. It's an allegation made in the past, one we've learned from.

If I may, I would also cite Justice Linden's public inquiry into Ipperwash. I think there was a very clear articulation of where that line is and how it must never be crossed.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Of course, and if I can follow up in my remaining time with the deputy minister, could you further elaborate on how Public Safety Canada works in conjunction or collaboration with the RCMP as an independent agency, especially for folks out there who may not be versed in terms of how agencies cooperate and how government works with an agency such as the RCMP?

Mr. Shawn Tupper (Deputy Minister, Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): Ten days on the job.... I'll try to measure that out. But 38 years of public service....

Within a portfolio like the one that I now lead, I will work closely with all the heads of those agencies in the development of advice for the government. That would be a key part of my responsibilities: to engage with, in the instance of the RCMP, the commissioner, to make sure that as we are engaged in the development of advice that it would include the expertise that can be offered by any of the portfolio agencies in the formulation of that advice.

It would be a regular thing. Indeed, I have plans to meet regularly with all the heads of the agencies to ensure that we're pulling together the best advice for the government.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sorbara.

Mr. Chiang, can you get in a question for one minute?

Mr. Paul Chiang (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and my apologies for not chiming in earlier.

Minister Blair, you have made it clear that you firmly believe in the operational independence of law enforcement in Canada. As a police officer for 39 years and chief of police for those last 10 years, could you elaborate on your perspective surrounding operational independence again? Why is it so important that elected officials can never influence the action of independent non-partisan public servants?

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much, Mr. Chiang.

I think it really comes down to an issue of public trust. If the public are going to trust that the police will follow the rule of law, that the police will act in the public interest, there can never be a suggestion that the police are acting out of a political interest. Someone once said to me it's a grey line, and it's not. It's a bright line. It's a bright line that stands and needs to be defended and acknowledged and recognized, between any political interference, or even the appearance of political interference, with operational decisions, including whom to investigate, how that investigation will follow a certain course, and including the release of certain information pertaining to that investigation.

I think there may be, and I think there are always, suggestions and allegations by people who perhaps don't understand where that bright line is, that for political reasons some of that information should be released. But I believe most vigorously that's never the case.

Mr. Chiang, not only in my previous career as the chief of the Toronto Police Service, but also in my advocacy as the president of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, there were a number of times with previous governments when I have stood for that principle, as I stand for it now. It's a principle not only that I respect and vigorously defend, but also a principle that was honoured and respected throughout this very tragic event that occurred in Nova Scotia.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Chiang.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I will now give the floor to Ms. Michaud for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, according to the report on the mass shooting and the account by Superintendent Darren Campbell, the RCMP Commissioner, Commissioner Lucki, stated during the meeting of April 28, 2020, that she had promised you and the Prime Minister that she would publicly release information on the weapons used during the mass shooting, even if it could compromise the investigation, because she knew that a regulation would be issued two days later and that revealing the type of weapons used would help the government.

Do you agree that releasing certain information, such as the weapons used in the mass shooting, could have compromised the investigation?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: Ms. Michaud, the fact that the RCMP investigators believed it could compromise that investigation is good enough for me. But, as well, just to be very clear, I didn't ask the commissioner to release that information. I've always said it is solely the responsibility of the RCMP, who are responsible for those operational investigative decisions to decide when and if that information is released. I said that publicly, by the way, on April 20; I repeated it publicly at a press conference on the 25th, and I said it once again on May 1 at a press conference, that it's only the RCMP who can make that decision.

Frankly, if the RCMP said the release of that information had the possibility of compromising that investigation, that's not something, quite frankly, I would question. It's not something that I would disagree with. It's their decision, and I respect that.

• (1625)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: It's rather strange that you announced the May 1, 2020, regulation banning certain assault weapons, two days after Commissioner Lucki pressured, or allegedly pressured, Superintendent Campbell to disclose the weapons used. The weapons used in the Portapique shooting were covered by this regulation.

It's rather strange that you announced this immediately afterwards. I know that you had been working on it for a long time. You said that you had been working since 2018 on this regulation, which was to ban certain assault weapons.

However, we get the impression that you acted in response to this unfortunate event, in order perhaps to gain public support or approval. It seems to me that this is also what happened with Bill C-21. This was announced just days after the shooting in Texas, which was appalling.

Can you confirm that the fact that this regulation was announced only a few days after the shooting isn't a coincidence?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: If I may, I wouldn't characterize it as a coincidence. The prohibition of assault-style rifles, for me, has been a very important goal since the mass shooting in Sandy Hook, where 22 little kids got killed. There have been numerous mass shootings involving these weapons since. In Canada, I've been to the funerals of the police officers who were killed in Moncton and in Fredericton and in Mayerthorpe. I've also attended a number of vigils for the worshippers who were killed at the mosque in Quebec City and at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. Every year I've attended vigils for the women who were killed at *École polytechnique*.

When there was a mass shooting in Nova Scotia, we had been working for several months, years in fact, in compiling the list of the weapons to be prohibited. We were working with the Canadian firearms program and others in developing that list. I had gun consultations across the country. When that mass murder took place in Nova Scotia, for me it was the last straw. It deepened my resolve. We had to act, and we acted. It wasn't a coincidence, but neither was it exploiting that terrible tragedy. It was responding to that terrible tragedy and saying "never again".

The Chair: Thank, Minister, I'm going to have to cut you off there.

Mr. MacGregor, please go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, we've referenced subsection 5(1) of the RCMP Act a few times here. It provides for the appointment of a commissioner "who, under the direction of the Minister, has the control and management of the Force".

I appreciate, and you stated, that you understand the line between your former role as minister of public safety and the commissioner of the RCMP, but I think the wording of this act is sufficiently vague to allow it to be open to interpretation. We know that previous federal governments have gotten in trouble with direction of the RCMP. There are examples, like the previous Chrétien and Diefenbaker governments.

We have examples in Canada, like Ontario's Police Services Act and the Manitoba Police Services Act, where they do specify that the board shall not give the chief of police any kind of operational decisions. They took the time to put in the specificity of that language.

We have jurisdictions abroad, like the South Australia Victoria Police Act, which goes on to specify all of the matters where the minister may not give the police directions, including "enforcement of the law" and "investigation or prosecution of offences".

There are examples, legislatively, around the world where jurisdictions have taken the time to add more specificity to the law.

My question to you, sir, is, would you support an effort to add that kind of specificity to subsection 5(1), so ministers of public safety in the future understand clearly where the difference lies between their role and the commissioner of the RCMP's role? Would you support efforts to add specificity, as we do have examples, not only here in Canada, but abroad?

Hon. Bill Blair: Obviously, I'm quite familiar, by the way, with the Ontario Police Services Act. It's something I worked under for a very long time. I would also point out to you how important—

• (1630)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: But on the question—

Hon. Bill Blair: I promise I will get to your question.

I'd invite you to come have a look at the mandate letter that was provided to Commissioner Lucki upon her appointment. It was provided by the then-minister of public safety. It is a very clear and explicit articulation that the government will not and must never interfere with the operations—

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: With respect, a mandate letter does not have the same force as a statute of Canada.

Hon. Bill Blair: No, and I understand that. I wanted to share that with you because I think it's clear that our government declared that principle right up front and made it public.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: To my question, sir...

Hon. Bill Blair: To your question, there are a number of legislative remedies that I think might be worthy of the consideration of perhaps this committee or Parliament.

If you bring forward such recommendations, I would certainly look at them with a very open mind because I think it is incumbent upon us to make sure that the law is clear and that important principles, like the independence of the police, are clearly recognized in law. It's a principle that I certainly recommend and recognize.

If you were to bring that forward, it's certainly something that I would look at with an open mind.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

Thank you, Minister.

We're really short on time, but we're going to try to shoehorn in a couple of quick slots, with three minutes for the Liberals and three minutes for the Conservatives.

Mr. Lloyd, please go ahead.

Mr. Dane Lloyd (Sturgeon River—Parkland, CPC): Minister, would it upset you if you found out that your political staff went behind your back and sought to ask the commissioner to release information?

Hon. Bill Blair: Are you asking me to speculate on something that there's no evidence of?

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Would you be upset if that hypothetical situation happened? I'm not asking you to speculate on if it happened. I'm asking you, if it hypothetically happened, would you be upset about that?

Hon. Bill Blair: With great respect, Mr. Lloyd, I'm not going to speculate on a hypothetical. I think that would be silly and a disservice to this committee.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Okay, so you're refusing to say whether you would be upset if your staff went behind your back to politically interfere in an investigation.

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, you're mischaracterizing what I just said to you. I said I'm not going to speculate on your hypotheticals. I think it would be a disservice to this committee.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: On April 23, Zita Astravas, your chief of staff, as well as the deputy minister at the time, Rob Stewart, received information about the types of firearms that were recovered from the Nova Scotia crime scene.

Your office reached out to the RCMP commissioner to ask about what guns were used in the crime scene. Would you agree that it is completely appropriate of your staff to ask that kind of question?

Hon. Bill Blair: That's part of a briefing.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Okay, that's part of the briefing.

Rob Stewart then immediately emailed this list to his director general for policy, Randall Koops, asking him, "Are any of these on the to-be-banned list?"

This was just days before the May 1 OIC announcements on the firearms being banned. Your deputy minister was already linking what happened in Nova Scotia to the soon-to-be May 1 announcement on firearms.

Given that evidence, do you agree that your office was in communication with the RCMP about the firearms used in the Nova Scotia mass shooting so that this information could be used at the May 1 announcement?

Hon. Bill Blair: To be really clear, first of all, the deputy minister is in the public service and doesn't—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: And your chief of staff.

Hon. Bill Blair: Just let me finish, if I may.

He was doing his job, and it's his job to speak to his own officials about this. I recall being advised that we had been provided with that information and that the RCMP had indicated that it was not to be released because of the ongoing investigation. At all times subsequent to that, until the information was released several months later as a result of an ATIP request, we respected the position of the RCMP, and although we knew that information, we never released it because the RCMP said that it shouldn't be released and would compromise their investigation. We agreed and said that it was entirely up to the RCMP to make that decision, not us.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: You make that assertion, Minister. If that assertion is true that the RCMP said this would compromise an investigation, why then would it have been the RCMP commissioner's idea to release this information?

Hon. Bill Blair: That is a question you may wish to put to the RCMP commissioner.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Did it not strike you as odd that you knew that your staff had received an email saying this information was not to be released publicly, and then the RCMP commissioner went to your staff to say they were planning on releasing this information publicly?

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, that's a decision solely of the purview of the RCMP. The commissioner is the head of that organization. If she makes a decision with respect to her organization, that's her job and not something that we would ever interfere with, and didn't.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will go now to Mr. Chiang, for three minutes, please.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Minister Blair, in recent weeks we have heard renewed allegations from opposition parties of political interference between you and Commissioner Lucki. These renewed allegations are related to a partial meeting recording that was released between Commissioner Lucki and other RCMP officials.

Minister, were you a participant in that meeting that was recorded?

• (1635)

Hon. Bill Blair: No, Mr. Chiang, I was not. This was a conversation between the commissioner and her subordinates. Neither I nor anybody who works for me was present.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Thank you, Minister, for answering that question again and again.

If the recorded meeting was not between yourself and Commissioner Lucki, any allegation of political interference must rely on speculation rather than any actual evidence or first-hand witness testimony. Would that be correct?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think it's fair to say that there has been a great deal of speculation, conjecture, innuendo and even fabrication related to that. That's why I have worked so hard in the House and before this committee to simply provide the truth.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Thank you so much, Minister.

As both of us are former police officers, and given your professional background as a police chief, can you speak a bit more about the independence and why it is so important for independence of police operations.

Hon. Bill Blair: Thanks, Mr. Chiang.

As I said, it really comes down to the public trust. Frankly, without the consent and the trust of the people the police are sworn to serve and protect, the police cannot do their job, and they can't keep our communities safe. However, the public also needs to trust that the police are acting in the public interest, that they are guided only by the rule of law and not by any political consideration. That's why that's such a bright line.

The police are also accountable. We give the police extraordinary authorities, and we give them those authorities with the belief that they will be held accountable. That's one of the reasons we set up governance bodies such as police services boards, with which you and I are quite familiar, and we sometimes have ministers—the Solicitor General of Ontario, for example—who have some ministerial oversight.

The line between our boards and ministerial oversight is very different from being able to provide any kind of political direction, however. The public needs to be assured that the police will be operating in their best interest and following only the rule of law. That's why it's so important, and that's why, quite frankly, I am so concerned by the innuendo and speculation that's being applied by some in this case because I think it has the effect of undermining public trust. It's one of the reasons I have tried so vigorously to assure the public that in this case there was no interference.

I also acknowledge and am grateful for the commissioner's strong assertions that there was no government interference in this matter or any investigative matter pertaining to the mass shooting in Nova Scotia.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chiang. That brings our questioning to a close.

Thank you all for being here today. Deputy Minister Tupper and Minister Blair, thank you for your time and for helping us with our inquiries.

With that, we will suspend and bring in our next panel.

• (1635) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1640)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

On our second panel, we have, from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Commissioner Brenda Lucki.

Welcome, Commissioner.

We'll give up to five minutes for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions.

Please go ahead, Commissioner, for five minutes, if you will.

Commissioner Brenda Lucki (Commissioner, Royal Canadian Mounted Police): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon. I'm speaking to you from the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

This isn't the first time I've testified on the perception of political interference. The released audio recording of the April 28, 2020, meeting makes it abundantly clear: I did not, nor did I attempt to, interfere in the criminal investigation into the 2020 mass casualty event in Nova Scotia on behalf of Minister Blair or the Prime Minister.

There was no political interference. I was neither asked, directed nor pressured by government officials to release information specific to the firearms used by the perpetrator in these horrific attacks. I had the information on the firearms, and I had the authority to release it publicly—I did not. I respected the views of my employees that releasing it at the time could impact the investigation.

In all my interactions with government officials, I'm aware of my responsibilities as commissioner and the importance of ensuring foundational principles of police independence. This is so important for the RCMP, for all police services.

I would encourage this committee to consider the difference between law enforcement's sharing information versus the perception of political interference. As I outlined for this committee in July and at the Mass Casualty Commission, there were requests for information on all aspects of the attacks, including information related to the firearms. The requests for information were reasonable and did not raise any concerns of political interference or impact the operational independence of the RCMP.

As commissioner, it's my responsibility to provide accurate, relevant, and timely information to government counterparts, elected officials and their offices. These were the expectations that I was outlining in the April 28 meeting with my colleagues in Nova Scotia. I was not being briefed with the necessary information about the ongoing operation, and it was for this reason that the meeting was called. Those who have listened to the recordings heard that I was frustrated with the information flow from Nova Scotia RCMP, be it related to victims, sites and the supports provided to RCMP employees. This is in line with my previous testimony before the committee and the MCC. In the lead-up to the April 28 press conference, I provided government officials with an overview of the information that was being made public. The sharing of the information in briefings with the Minister of Public Safety are necessary, particularly during significant operations or incidents. It is common practice and does not impact the integrity of ongoing investigations or interfere with the independence of the RCMP.

It was at this time that I was asked if the information about weapons would be included. Following a briefing from my team at national headquarters, confirming the information was to be publicly released, I, in turn, advised government officials of the same. There was a miscommunication, and this is clear on the recording. Sharon Tessier notes that she likely told me that Darren Campbell was going to speak about the weapons in the upcoming press conference, and then acknowledged that she had, in fact, misinformed me.

During the call, you hear me reference pending gun legislation to help provide context on why it was important to be clear on what we would share. I was not suggesting that the weapons information was needed to inform or support the pending legislation. It was simply about providing context for my employees.

In addition to the legislation, there was considerable public interest in knowing about the firearms used in the attacks. This is something seen following other mass shootings, both here and in Canada and in other countries around the world. The desire to keep the public informed was part of the reason I wanted the information released. We were getting questions at press conferences, and I wanted to be sure that I was providing clear and accurate information about what we could and would say at different points in the days and weeks following the event.

As I have already stated, once I was informed by my team that the releasing of information would jeopardize the ongoing investigation, the matter was closed, and I passed this along to the minister's office.

I know how important today's discussions are, but I want to reiterate and be very clear for the record: I did not interfere with the investigation. I did not receive direction. I was not influenced by elected or government officials in relation to the direction of the investigation or the release of the information to the public.

I love the RCMP, and I am so honoured to be the commissioner. I'm so incredibly proud of the great work my employees do from coast to coast to coast each and every day, and I'm so thankful for them. I would never impact the operational independence of my organization. Maintaining integrity is absolutely paramount.

Following today's testimony, it's my hope that we can quickly move past this conversation in order to help the people of Nova Scotia continue to heal and to keep the focus on those impacted.

• (1645)

These discussions are important.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

We will start our questioning now.

We will start with Ms. Dancho.

Go ahead, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Commissioner, for being here today.

In the audio recording, you specifically mentioned a request you got from the minister's office. Can you confirm that you did, in fact, get a request from the minister's office?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Yes, there was a request.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Was it from the chief of staff, Zita Astravas? Did she make that request of you?

Commr Brenda Lucki: I believe so, yes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: The request, specifically, was to share the weapons information at the April 28 press conference. Is that correct?

Commr Brenda Lucki: That's incorrect. The information was not to share the information. It was simply a question about whether, in fact, the information in that press conference would include information about the weapons.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: She asked you whether it would be. Is that what you're saying?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Whether it would be...yes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: We asked the minister several times, in the hour before you appeared, whether that was the case. He flat out denied that was real. He denied that his chief of staff did that. He denied that his office asked, or even knew that you were going to be seeking this information being released.

How do you respond to his denying what you've said to us here today, over the summer, and also at your testimony at MCC? In essence, he's saying it's not true.

Commr Brenda Lucki: First and foremost, I didn't deal a lot with the minister directly. I did at the beginning of the event, but I

dealt more so with various people on his staff, as well as the deputy minister of Public Safety. There was a lot of back and forth.

This was, as I said, a crazy time. There were a lot of phone calls and different talks. I didn't have my staff with me, for the most part, because of COVID—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I understand.

I'm sorry to interrupt, Commissioner.

The minister is saying this did not happen—that his staff did not ask you to do this.

Commr Brenda Lucki: They didn't ask me to do anything. They just asked a simple question.

I provided one of the versions, because there were several versions of the media event that day. I provided one of the versions of the speaking notes of Superintendent Darren Campbell.

They asked whether, in fact, the information about the weapons would be part of that media release—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I need to interrupt you. Thank you very much.

You mentioned—it's even in your words, just now—that it was a simple ask: "Is this going to be included?" To me, it seems as if you're downplaying this a bit.

When you listen to the audio recording of that meeting, it's very clear this was very important to you. In fact, you said that you would have to apologize to the minister for not, in essence, delivering on that.

I'm getting a bit of tension here. You're saying, "It wasn't that big of a deal. She had this ask, and I said, 'Yes it would be.'" It was a big deal to you, wasn't it?

That's why you called that meeting. That entire audio recording was about this issue.

Commr Brenda Lucki: No, it wasn't about this issue.

Ninety per cent of that meeting was about issues regarding the flow of information from the start of this incident. There were several requests for several different kinds of information, which I wasn't receiving in a timely manner. Some of the information wasn't completely accurate.

As mentioned, I say, in the recording, that I planned to have this meeting at an earlier time. There were one or two times when I would have wanted to have the meeting. I was very conscious of it.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you.

Commissioner, you mentioned you had to apologize to the minister. Did you speak to him and make that apology?

Commr Brenda Lucki: No, I think it was more to his office. It was an apology for misinformation. It was simply about the fact that I—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Pardon me. To clarify, did you apologize to his chief of staff?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Yes, I'm saying it was somebody in his office. It was more than likely his chief of staff. I would have said, "You know what? I'm sorry. I didn't get that—"

• (1650)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: That's understood.

Zita Astravas, the chief of staff, asked you whether you were going to share this information. From our perspective, that would be political pressure. The minister's office and his chief of staff are "the minister". We know, if it's the minister's chief of staff, that it's the minister asking for it.

The minister's chief of staff was asking whether this information—which you yourself connected to the OIC gun control policy coming forward—was going to be included in the press conference. To us, that's political pressure from the minister's office. That's the concern here, ma'am.

Commr Brenda Lucki: I appreciate your perception, but your perception is incorrect.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: You understand there's a perception you were attempting to further the Liberal political agenda concerning gun control.

Commr Brenda Lucki: Absolutely not.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: You mentioned it specifically in the audio recording, ma'am. That's irrefutable.

Commr Brenda Lucki: Absolutely not.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Are you denying that you mention it in the audio recording?

Commr Brenda Lucki: I talked about gun legislation, because, if you recall, my very first media event was with Minister Blair. One-third of that was about Nova Scotia. The other two-thirds were actually about gun legislation. Obviously, that was in the news quite a bit. I was providing context for my staff.

You'll also recall that there were many requests. We had a rule when we provided information to the minister's office: Nothing could be released until it was released by our folks. That's why it was important—what would be and wouldn't be released at what time.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Again, you are kind of downplaying the urgency you had with wanting the weapons information released at that press conference, yet Sharon Tessier, who is the RCMP communications lady, emailed her counterpart in Nova Scotia quite insistently. She said, "Please tell me Darren is going to mention the guns. My phone is lighting up."

She is saying this to her during the press conference, clearly indicating there is serious urgency from her—and she answers to you, correct?—and asking why isn't this information being released.

If you're looking at this all together, Commissioner, it is very difficult for us to believe the narrative that this wasn't that big a deal, that you weren't trying to further the Liberal political agenda, because in the audio recording you make it evident—you make the connection. Your staff are really harassing the Nova Scotia staff, saying, why isn't this information being released?

You understand the perception, which is why you're here today.

I may say, the minister denied all of this. He denied that his chief of staff asked this of you. Don't you find that odd, that he is saying that what you've said in committee here and in testimony was incorrect?

Commr Brenda Lucki: No. There was a lot of information going back and forth.

What I will say is that it's important to note that there were a lot of requests of about when are we going to release the names of the victims, when are we going to release the locations of each and every deceased? There was lots of information, because they could not speak about it until we did.

It wasn't unusual to ask if in fact information was going to be included. The firearms was only one of several requests. We're making it all about the firearms here, but really it wasn't all about the firearms. My meeting was just one example of many others. There was a chronology I was looking for. There was a map I was looking for. There were some timelines I was looking for. These were all expectations I had, which had not been met and the firearms were but one of those.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner. I'll have to cut you off there.

Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

We go now to Ms. Damoff, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for being here again, Commissioner.

The recording that was released is a partial recording. It starts mid-conversation, so we don't know what transpired beforehand.

There have been accusations made here that you're not telling the truth, so Commissioner, did the minister or his staff direct you in any way prior to your conversation with the Nova Scotia RCMP?

Commr Brenda Lucki: There was no direction provided whatsoever.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Is it normal, Commissioner, for the minister's office to ask questions, particularly in this case, which was the worst mass shooting in Canadian history? Is it not normal that the minister or his staff would be asking you questions about what was transpiring?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Absolutely, each and every day, and despite this event, this happens weekly, this happens daily. Obviously in preparation for question period we get lots of questions as well, but in a major event like this, it's not unusual for us to provide information. We get questions for clarification back, and we clarify these if we can. That's part and parcel of my responsibilities.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Commissioner, I read the transcript of the call you had with the Nova Scotia RCMP and we've heard accusations that you were overly emotional during the call. What I read and what I heard was a commissioner who was echoing the frustration that all Canadians had about the lack of communication being provided by the Nova Scotia RCMP.

Were you being overly emotional, Commissioner, or were you in fact holding the Nova Scotia RCMP to account, as commissioner?

• (1655)

Commr Brenda Lucki: I appreciate that you say all of this because I was very careful of being calm. I knew they were feeling very traumatized by what was going on. There was a lot of pressure put on them each and every day during this event, with 22 crime scenes and a lot of information.

It's never pleasant to have a conversation when somebody is not meeting your expectations. That's why I thought about it. I didn't have it earlier on. I was very temperate in my approach. I was very calm; I didn't make it personal. It was more about the behaviour and how we could move forward to meet our expectations.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Earlier in questioning, you were accused of harassing the Nova Scotia RCMP.

People in your position, as commissioner, need to have hard conversations with people who work for them. Would you consider this a hard conversation, or were you harassing the Nova Scotia RCMP?

Commr Brenda Lucki: It was a difficult conversation because they didn't have the capacity. There was a lot of negative narrative coming out in the media, so it was very difficult. That was why it was so crucial that I have this conversation so we could be more proactive and more strategic about our communications.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Commissioner, I know you probably won't say it, but as a woman you've been labelled as being overly emotional, as harassing your staff. Your judgment has been called into question.

We see this repeatedly said about women in leadership positions, namely that when they're being assertive and doing their job, they're accused of being overly emotional. If it were a man in that position, I don't think the same questions would be asked.

I don't know if you would agree with that, or not, Commissioner. I know you probably...

Commr Brenda Lucki: These are difficult times for all leaders. I find it difficult, especially when my integrity is being questioned, because as a police officer I pride myself on my integrity—and, having over 37 years of policing, to have my integrity questioned by anybody I find a bit offensive.

Ms. Pam Damoff: You have repeatedly assured us that you were not provided with any direction from the minister's office. As I said, when I read the transcript, I saw someone doing their job in holding the RCMP to account. That's what we expect the commissioner to do in taking her job forward.

I'm not sure how much time I have left, Chair.

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Ms. Pam Damoff: On the order in council to prohibit the firearms, Commissioner, did the RCMP provide input in creating the order in council? How long would you have been working with the minister's office on that?

Commr Brenda Lucki: In any legislation, if it affects policing, we're always.... Not only us, but all of the policing community under the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police.... This would have been going on for a couple of years. It's no different from the cannabis legislation or online harms. For any legislation that's going to affect policing, especially in enforcement, we would absolutely be consulted along with our other colleagues.

Ms. Pam Damoff: So the fact that you brought up pending firearms legislation is not betraying any confidences. In fact, the Nova Scotia RCMP probably should have been aware as well that this was coming forward, but this had nothing to do with pending legislation but was rather just stating a fact that was well known by Canadians.

Commr Brenda Lucki: Absolutely. It wasn't going to change anything in future dealings, and it wouldn't affect the integrity of any investigation either.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

I noticed after the incident in Saskatchewan that the response from the RCMP seemed to have improved. Would you say that there were lessons learned after Nova Scotia in terms of communications with the public?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Absolutely. In fact, at the beginning of that event, on behalf of the RCMP I called in the person who was overseeing the Mass Casualty Commission just to make sure that no mistake was ever repeated during that.

With regard to the flow of information, for or an event like what happened in Nova Scotia, I should be briefed minimally twice a day. I had two briefings in six days. That shows you that the flow of information was not there.

I don't like to point fingers, because a small division like that would not have the capacity of a bigger division. In the recording, you hear Ms. Scanlan talk about there being four people and working 20 hours a day. It's a tough to try to get the information out to the Canadian public and Nova Scotians, and they deserve no less.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, you have six minutes.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Commissioner Lucki, thank you for being with us. We appreciate it.

At the April 28, 2020, meeting, which we received a transcript of, you said:

[English]

...it was a request that I got um, from the Minister's office. And I shared with the Minister that um, that it in fact was going to be in the uh, in the news release and it wasn't.

[Translation]

You mentioned a request. Can you give us more detail about that request? Can you tell us who it came from, whether it was the minister himself or a member of his team in particular?

[English]

Commr Brenda Lucki: It definitely wasn't from the minister. It would have been from his office and probably the chief of staff, Zita Astravas. It was just more of a confirmation. After getting the speaking notes, I would imagine they'd already gotten a copy of one of the versions of the speaking notes of Superintendent Darren Campbell, and it was more of a clarifying question if, in fact, the information on the weapons would be included in that media release.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: In your opinion, when the government sent a request through the minister's office or the Prime Minister's Office, did they just want that information or did they want to control the message that was going to be delivered at that press conference?

[English]

Commr Brenda Lucki: No, absolutely not. There was no question about the content or what type of information would be provided. It was simply about if it were going to be provided—and it wasn't just the minister's office requesting; it was the media. There were other government bureaucrats asking and people within our organization who were trying to get the information out in as timely a way as we could.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: In the same transcript, you say that you'd already received the request from the minister's office to follow up on what was said at the press conference. You say that you will have to apologize and have a conversation with him after the press conference.

Earlier, when I asked the minister this question, he said he had no recollection of a conversation he had with you following the press conference. Is that what you remember as well? Was there a conversation between you or representatives from your offices? If so, what was the topic of this discussion?

[English]

Commr Brenda Lucki: There was no specific conversation with the minister on this. I believe that it was more of a back-and-forth on email and it was basically: When I referred to an apology, you asked if the information was going to be included. I advised you that it was. Sorry, that was not the case, I was misinformed. I was given the wrong information and it was not in fact included.

It did, in fact, get included in a question-and-answer later on. In that particular meeting, that is when I was actually advised that no further information would be given, because it might affect the integrity of future investigations. That was relayed back to bureau-

crats and the minister's office, saying that we won't be speaking any further about the weapons at this point. That was the end of the conversation.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: In the transcript, you seemed to be upset because you hadn't received certain information. You even said so in some of the testimony.

Do you think that members of the minister's office and the Prime Minister's Office were also upset by the fact that they hadn't received certain information or that some information wasn't made public?

Do you think the ministers were upset, as you were, that certain information hadn't been disclosed?

[English]

Commr Brenda Lucki: I would first like to clarify that I was never upset. That's not in my nature. I was frustrated with the flow of communication. The fact that we were getting requests daily from the media asking us when such information would be released, when the information about the weapons was going to be released, when more background on the perpetrator was going to be released, the information about the incident at the fire hall, the replica police car... There was an insatiable appetite for information from the media, from Canadians, and from Nova Scotians, who had a right to know what was going on, and it was so important.

I felt that when we didn't give that information proactively... I know exactly what happens in those cases. The media looks to other sources of information, and those sources are not always the best source of information. The best source of information is the police. We need to be proactive and strategic in our communications, just as we were, as you saw, in the James Smith Cree Nation. There were regular media briefs for people, so there were no questions floating out amongst the media asking what about this and what about that...

Why did it not happen in Saskatchewan? Because there was regular information. We just didn't have that ability in Nova Scotia with the onset of the pandemic.

● (1705)

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: As I recall, when the minister was here in July, he said there wasn't necessarily a connection between the announcement of the regulation on May 1 and the events in Portapique a few days earlier. He said that the fact that it happened at virtually the same time was a coincidence and that he had been working on this regulation to ban certain weapons since 2018.

If I understood him correctly today, he confirmed that he had intended to have the weapons used during the shooting included in the announced regulation. Do you think that's a positive approach? Do you think the government should be more proactive and not wait until a specific weapon is used in a shooting to ban it?

Personally, I feel that we should be more proactive. I don't know what you think about that.

[English]

Commr Brenda Lucki: Well, I believe that any time that we can keep Canadians safe in getting guns off the street, whatever weapons those are, that's a positive for Canadians, keeping Canadians safe, especially weapons that are designed to kill....

The legislation that happened on May 5, I didn't even know that it was coming out. I had no idea. I didn't connect that to the conversation here. Mine was more of a general conversation to my staff to say, you know what, if you haven't heard on the news, every second media event besides the events in Nova Scotia is about the pending gun legislation, so let's keep this in context and let's have the big picture when we're talking about the media event.

I think, going back to your original question, it's always important to get guns that kill people off the streets.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Thank you, Madame Michaud.

Mr. MacGregor, you have six minutes, please.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Commissioner Lucki, for appearing.

Just for clarity here, on the word “request”, when it's referenced twice in the transcript, you're stating clearly that it wasn't a request from the minister's office to include stuff, but a request if things would be included.

Commr Brenda Lucki: Yes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Okay. There's a further quote in the transcript that has Lia Scanlan, followed by Dan Brien, the RCMP media relations director. They both made reference to the Deputy Commissioner Brennan.

Dan Brien in particular stated:

...we got the message from Lia's team member that the Deputy Commissioner wanted the handguns uh, included uh in terms of uh, number and type and we then changed the answer knowing that we were just literally minutes away from having the um, text of that loaded up for posting.

Just for some clarity, you were in on the call, because you did interrupt a little bit further down. With regard to the deputy commissioner's reference to wanting the number and the type included, who ultimately, during the course of this investigation, makes that call about the appropriateness of information being released?

Commr Brenda Lucki: First, there's a command triangle. The command triangle would go through any request if you were looking at, as in our case, wanting to be more proactive in getting the information out. If in fact it would compromise the integrity of an investigation, the command triangle would say, we can provide the number of weapons, and we can provide the general type. We can't get into makes and models and where they were found. But we can generally talk about this.

That's great, and that's exactly what happened. Nobody was asking for specific information. We were asking for the number of weapons because 22 people had been killed by weapons. So of course everybody wanted to know generally what type of weapons were being used, and that would go through the command triangle. I wouldn't make that information....

We also had a rule for anybody doing media that only the information released first by the RCMP would be talked about publicly.

That would be why for a request like, “Are you going to be talking about the victims or are you releasing names?”, they couldn't talk about the names until we released the names, even if they were out in the media. They couldn't talk about the weapons unless we talked about the weapons.

There was always a back and forth when we were talking about media, and I know the deputy and I were really trying to get the Nova Scotia comms team in a good position to be more proactive and more strategic.

• (1710)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

Further on—and you made reference to this in your statement—you're quoted as saying, “Does anybody realize what's going on in the world of handguns and guns right now?” and “The fact that they're in the middle of trying to get a legislation going.”

I was writing notes as you were speaking, and you said that it was important for the team to understand the context. Can you clarify what you meant there? Why did you feel it was important, in the midst of this conversation, that they understand that the government of the day had an OIC coming up fairly soon?

Commr Brenda Lucki: It wasn't really specifically about an OIC. It was about—

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: It was about legislation in general?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Yes. Legislation in general was looming. It was talked about every day in the media and in a media event I did with the minister. So obviously it was important. It was coming out.

It was more about providing context to people as to how this information possibly would or could be linked into legislation. Sometimes we talk about why we do things and why they're important.

In my mind—and I testified about this on previous occasions—we can't be naive about what's going on around us. Of course, people are interested in this. They might be interested in the legislation. They might be interested in the weapons that killed people in Nova Scotia. Everybody wanted information on that, and I always had to defer and say, “I'm sorry. I can't release that at this time.” There were lots of times.

But I don't understand—and the deputy and I were pushing—why we couldn't go with the numbers of weapons and the general types.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

We've already covered a little bit, too, about the statute that governs your organization, specifically subsection 5(1) that provides for your appointment under the direction of the minister to have control and management of the force. In the previous round, I mentioned that there are a couple of provincial police acts and ones abroad that have a lot more specificity in the division of powers, specifying how the minister may not give directions, like when it comes to enforcement of the law and ongoing investigations.

I think our act is quite vague compared with those other examples. Would you agree with that, and given the vagueness of subsection 5(1), how do you understand where that line is when other jurisdictions have taken the time to clearly put that dividing line down?

Commr Brenda Lucki: The line is so obvious. The line is not thin on this; the line is very thick. Asking for information is not providing direction. Requesting information or my providing information about the biggest mass casualty in Canadian history is not interference. It's part of my responsibility, as commissioner, to make sure there's no environment of surprise for either the minister or the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister and the minister should get information before the media does.

I get requests from across the country from members of Parliament. They get questions from their constituents. I get letters all the time asking for information. We reply to those and give the information when we can. That's part and parcel of the relationship between government officials. Our detachment commanders do it with the mayors. Our commanding officers do it with the premiers. This happens weekly, daily in some cases.

There is no line for me. But, obviously, the fact that I've had to testify on this three or four times means we need some clarity here. Having to respond to this again is not something I would wish on any other commissioner going forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

That ends round one of questions.

We will go to the second round. We will have to abbreviate this second round, with one slot for each party as per usual.

We'll start with Mr. Lloyd for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Thank you.

What we all want is clarity here.

In the minister's testimony just previous to your coming here, he said it was your idea to release the information about the guns, that it came from you. Is that the truth?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Well, that was part of it. In that particular example, as I explained, I got a request regarding whether the guns were going to be included. I had also asked about the guns in previous conversations with my communications team.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: But you independently decided that it would be helpful for the information about the guns to be released.

Commr Brenda Lucki: We talked about various chunks of information. We talked about when the victims' names were going to

be released, information on the different crime scenes, a chronology, information about the replica police car. We talked about being proactive. Every time we did a media release, our communications folks would do a scan of what was out there, and that would tell us what we should do next.

• (1715)

Mr. Dane Lloyd: The minister said you told deputy minister Robert Stewart and his chief of staff Zita Astravas that you wanted to release the information about the guns. Is that the truth? That's what the minister just said before this committee.

Commr Brenda Lucki: First, the question I got from the minister's office was whether the guns were to be released. The details of what was going to be released to the media in that media event were not discussed at all with Nova Scotia.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: So are you saying it was not your idea to release information about the guns?

Commr Brenda Lucki: No, it was actually the idea of the people on the ground.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: It was the Nova Scotia RCMP that decided the guns needed to be released?

Commr Brenda Lucki: What happened, as I explained before, was that there were multiple types of information. When we could release information, it would be released.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: On April 23, you were part of an email chain, in which SiRT said that the information was to be released only internally. You told the Prime Minister's Office and the minister's office that this was only for internal distribution. Just five days later, you were on a call with your staff and you asked why this information was not included in that available to the public media. During those five days, did you receive any emails or confirmations from SiRT that this information should now be released publicly?

Commr Brenda Lucki: No. There was no intention to release the details of that information we got. That was very detailed information. There was no intention to release it. All we were looking at, to be proactive, was the number of weapons and the general types of weapons. That's the information we were looking at, and that was the question I was getting asked by media. I personally was curious as to why that was not happening, but—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: The staff on the ground were worried that this could compromise an ongoing investigation. Why would just the number of weapons and the general type of weapons have any impact on the investigation?

Commr Brenda Lucki: It wouldn't,—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: So then why would your staff be concerned?

Commr Brenda Lucki: —and it was released.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Well, the specific details were not released until quite some time later.

Commr Brenda Lucki: No, they were released in the Q and A of that media event.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: That was very general information—

Commr Brenda Lucki: Yes, and that's all we were looking for.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: —about handguns and assault weapons.

Commr Brenda Lucki: That's all we were looking for.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: That's all you were looking for.

Commr Brenda Lucki: It was just the general information: the number of weapons and the general type of weapons. With respect to the details you saw in that email, there was no question that the information was not to be released, and there was even a caveat to that effect.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: In your transcript, you continually talk about the minister's office, but you also talk about the minister. You said you had a request from the minister to have a call. You knew what it was going to be about. What was the call with the minister about?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Well, there were a few requests that had not been completed, for things such as the chronology. I pride myself on giving the correct information. I pride myself on giving information in a timely manner. If I say to you, Mr. Lloyd, that I'm going to give you information tomorrow by four o'clock, I'm expecting to have the information tomorrow by four o'clock. If I don't get you the information by four o'clock, I'm going to phone you up and say, "You know what, I'm sorry, I didn't get you the information." That's—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: That's the same for when you commit that information is going to be shared publicly at a media release. That is the same thing.

Commr Brenda Lucki: When the minister's office asked if that information was going to be part of the media event, I had no idea. I'm not controlling the media event. I talk to my comms people. My comms people go to the comms people on the ground. They told me, yes, in fact the general details about the weapons would be included. I tell them it will be included.

In my mind, I'm thinking they're preparing for when they're in front of the media and that they will be able to talk about that once it's released, because until it was released by us, they could not talk about it.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: You were frustrated because you had to do this multiple times with the minister and his office. There were multiple times where information was incorrectly given. As you said, you pride yourself on giving people the correct information, and that was the reason you had to call the minister. You were upset about having to talk to the minister, saying that you had dropped the ball again.

Commr Brenda Lucki: I wasn't upset—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Not with your staff necessarily. You were upset with yourself you were saying.

Commr Brenda Lucki: I was frustrated with the information that I wasn't getting as well. That was what the meeting was about.

In fact, there were times when the minister didn't get the information, but there were more times that I didn't get the information. The flow of information was not the usual speed and pace and flow.

We usually get a rhythm going, and there was no rhythm in the flow on information. That's why I called the meeting.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lloyd.

We go now to Mr. Noormohamed, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Commissioner, for joining us.

It's disappointing that so much has been made by some in this committee to try to undermine your credibility and there is such an obsession with trying to find a smoking gun where one doesn't exist.

Your reputation seems to be what people have chosen to put in the crossfire. I want to apologize for that.

I also want to take this time to try to clarify a few things, so that there can be no misapprehension about what actually happened.

In your testimony, you noted that you were asked if certain information would be included. When questions are asked of you as to whether something will be included, do you see that as a direction? Do you take that as a direction, or do you see that as a question for information?

• (1720)

Commr Brenda Lucki: No, not at all. Direction would be telling me what to do.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: Let's talk about direction.

Did Minister Blair ever direct you to do anything in respect of this investigation?

Commr Brenda Lucki: He has never directed me in this investigation or any other investigation during my time as commissioner.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: What about his chief of staff, Zita Astravas? Did Zita Astravas ever direct you to do anything in respect of this investigation?

Commr Brenda Lucki: No, never.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: What about the Prime Minister or the Prime Minister's Office? Did the Prime Minister's Office ever direct you to do anything?

Commr Brenda Lucki: No, they have not.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: What about the Prime Minister himself?

Commr Brenda Lucki: No, he has not.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: What about the Prime Minister's staff?

Commr Brenda Lucki: No, they have not.

I have received requests for information, but not direction.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: What about other staff in the Minister of Public Safety's office? Did they ever direct you to do anything?

Commr Brenda Lucki: No. I have had ministerial directives on specific administrative matters, but nothing in the operational realm.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: There has been nothing in the operational realm.

If the minister were to direct you to do something in the operational realm, what would your response be?

Commr Brenda Lucki: It would be, "Sorry, I cannot provide you the information. I cannot do that. You're crossing the line."

There are a number of things I could say. I've never had to do that, but—

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: You would say those things. Is that correct?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Absolutely. I have the courage of conviction to do that. That's why I'm commissioner.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: A lot has been made of what appears to be this desire to paint you as being angry or upset on this phone call.

I want to stop for a moment and ask, as you look back, how much of that perceived frustration, or whatever people will try to call it, was about the lack of information and lack of clarity that you were getting from your team in Nova Scotia, versus this idea that you were somehow disappointing the minister?

Commr Brenda Lucki: About 95% or more was about the lack of flow of information. That's where my frustration was stemming from.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: To be clear, what percentage came out of this perceived direction that some members claim you received?

Commr Brenda Lucki: I said this in previous testimony: This was kind of the straw that broke the camel's back. Getting the wrong information from my staff was yet another example of what was happening throughout those past seven to 10 days.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: To be clear, it was not in response to any direction, because as you said in this testimony, you received no such direction, correct?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Exactly.

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed: I'm going to ask you the same question that I asked the minister.

There is a very real problem, I think, when parliamentarians choose to act in a way that undermines the credibility of our police services at times of crisis.

What would you say to Canadians who are watching this and who have heard the minister unequivocally state that there was no political interference? They have now heard you unequivocally go through all of the people who could possibly have directed you to do something and you have said that none of them gave you direction.

That's greatly reassuring to me, but what would you say to Canadians to give them the confidence that their police services and the RCMP, in particular, are independent of political interference and have been in the case of what happened in Nova Scotia?

Commr Brenda Lucki: I would like to say to Canadians that they should have every confidence in, not only the RCMP, but the other 193 police agencies across Canada.

Each and every day, the police officers of the RCMP are out in the communities 24-7 trying to keep Canadians safe. They're doing everything they can to ensure the safety of Canadians by making thorough investigations and bringing people to justice. This is part and parcel what we do and we do it very well. We're a police agency of excellence and we do so many things so well.

I would like Canadians to have confidence not only in the RCMP, but in their police in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Noormohamed.

Thank you, Commissioner.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

According to the transcripts that were made public, the regional team seemed to think it was a bad idea to publicly disclose the type of weapons used because it could compromise the investigation. That is what we understand from Lee Bergerman's account. However, in response to a question, you said earlier that it was more the idea of the people on the ground to publicly disclose this information.

Can you clarify again where the intention to disclose that publicly came from? Did it really come from the people on the ground, or did it come from the government or your RCMP team?

• (1725)

[*English*]

Commr Brenda Lucki: Thanks for asking that clarifying question.

In fact, the question was asked if this information was to be included. I thought it was a really great question because I felt that at this point.... This was a huge media event. They had planned it for days and speaking notes were very fluid. It was something that was going on very quickly, so it was important that we include as much information as possible.

They did speak about a one- or two-liner in this transcription. They talked about doing a one- or two-liner that they did not want to put in the speaking notes. They were going to bring it out in the question and answer. That was their idea. I didn't get into any specifics on how it should be done or why it should be done. It was just, specifically, whether they were going to include it and they said yes.

I had no reason to ask what needed to be included because they told me it was going to be included.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you.

We learned from CBC this morning that the American who supplied some of the weapons used in the shooting said that he could not bring himself to testify before the Mass Casualty Commission. He told the investigators that he got rid of all his guns. The RCMP and the commission reportedly continued to investigate information from Maine, where some of the killer's weapons were purchased and later smuggled into Canada.

I think this information proves that it was important to proceed cautiously with the investigation and the disclosure of certain information sooner or later in the days following the shooting.

The Chair: Ask your question quickly, please.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Do you think this information could compromise the investigation?

[English]

The Chair: Please answer quickly.

Commr Brenda Lucki: Yes, that's why it's important to go back to the command triangle and ensure that we don't release information that could compromise an investigation.

Giving the number and the general type of firearms used would not have compromised that investigation. Darren Campbell, who was in charge of the command triangle, in fact released that in a Q and A. Why? It was because it would not compromise the integrity of the investigation.

I would never ask that information that would compromise an investigation be included in any media.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Mr. MacGregor, you have two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Commissioner, I'd like to ask you about Dan Brien. Of course, it's from his phone that we have the transcript.

Did he announce to all of the participants that he was recording the call?

Commr Brenda Lucki: No, he did not.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Is that something that he normally does, and is that justifiable? Usually you have to get the consent of people first.

Commr Brenda Lucki: Yes, the normal procedure is to get consent. If you notice, in a Microsoft Teams environment, you can see when the recording button is on, but nobody was aware that he was recording.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Nobody was aware.

Of course, the story of how it ended up on his phone and the different stories we've gotten about whether it existed, whether it was deleted, whether the phone was stolen.... They had his personal phone, I believe. A forensic unit managed to get three audio files adding up to nearly 24 minutes.

What do you have to say about the fact that he recorded this on a personal device? This was a very high profile briefing. This is you as the commissioner with your direct deputies in Nova Scotia.

Commr Brenda Lucki: This is part and parcel of a complete security review and an administrative review, so I would hold judgment until I get all of the information, because I have no idea what the intent was, if it was for nefarious reasons or not, and I don't have all of the information in front of me.

I do know that we did go through all of the RCMP devices in the first instances because we control those devices, and it wasn't until we were given the personal device of Mr. Brien that we were able to retrieve those, and that was within a day of receiving that device.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Of course, lawyers representing the families before the Mass Casualty Commission have remarked how helpful it would have been to have the recording during the time when they were doing the cross-examination.

I can see you nodding that you agree with that.

I understand that you want to wait for the investigation to run its course, but have you taken steps for future conference calls to make sure that operationally sensitive information is not being recorded on someone's personal phone?

• (1730)

Commr Brenda Lucki: That's part of our departmental security policies and procedures, so, if it is found that those policies and procedures were not followed, then, in fact, Mr. Brien will be held to account for that.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

That wraps up our questioning.

Thank you, Commissioner, for being with us today and assisting us in our inquiry.

I would like to advise the committee that it looks like we'll be able to finish witness testimony on Thursday for Bill C-21, so I'm asking everyone to get their amendments in by close of business on the following Thursday so that we can take up clause-by-clause the following week.

With that, thank you all—

Go ahead, Madame Michaud.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Can you clarify that, Mr. Chair?

We said that we agreed to hold an additional meeting so that this study wouldn't delay the study of Bill C-21. Since this meeting was held today, will we still have an extra meeting on Thursday on Bill C-21? So we'll have two meetings on Thursday. Is that what you mean?

[English]

The Chair: Yes, I am saying that.

The clerk and I were panhandling for meeting slots last week, trying to arrange this meeting. We managed to get the spot on Thursday—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Why, Mr. Chair? Why is that? We didn't skip any meetings for this, so why are we having an extra meeting on Thursday?

The Chair: We were able to get the slot because we thought we were going to have to have this meeting then.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: This is the extra slot. We did not agree—

The Chair: We didn't have this slot then. The whips have been advised; the whips are aware of this. I would encourage you to take it up with the whips, but currently the plan is to finish up Bill C-21 on Thursday so that we can go ahead with clause-by-clause after the constituency week.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I'm sorry, but we did not agree to that. We didn't even discuss that as a committee.

The motion in good faith put in a clause that, if this meeting that happened today were to overtake a Bill C-21 meeting, we would have an extra meeting, but because that did not happen, there was no conversation among all parties. There was nothing on the record, and we did not agree to that, so that is something you unilaterally did without our consent. Is that what I'm understanding?

The Chair: In good faith the clerk and I set up a meeting on Thursday for this meeting, because that's when we thought we would be able to have the commissioner and the minister here.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Right, and that's on the evening on Thursday. There are individuals who fly home Thursday night, so—

The Chair: I'm one of those. I can't go home either. It's a terrible time for a meeting—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: We should probably discuss this on Tuesday at the first meeting.

The Chair: Absolutely.

As it stands now, we're currently scheduled for that. If we go ahead with this, I'm hoping we would be able to get to clause-by-clause the week after. I just want to give you notice today so you have more time to prepare amendments. I'm sure you all have amendments in the queue ready to go.

With that, we're over time, and we're slowing down the other committees.

Thank you all for your time today.

With that, we are adjourned.

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