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• (1545)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC)):
Good afternoon, everyone.

My apologies to our witnesses for the delay, but we had votes today in the House of Commons.

I will call the meeting to order.

[Translation]

Welcome to meeting number 130 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, February 13, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of the effects of disinformation and misinformation on the work of parliamentarians.

[English]

I'd like to welcome our witnesses for the first hour today.

As an individual, we're pleased to welcome Mr. Benjamin Fung, a professor and Canada research chair at McGill University.

From the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Mr. Jon Bateman has joined us by video conference. He's a senior fellow and co-director of technology and international affairs.

I'll start with you, Mr. Bateman. If you want to address the committee for up to five minutes, you're welcome to do so.

Please go ahead, sir.

Mr. Jon Bateman (Senior Fellow and Co-Director, Technology and International Affairs Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace): Thank you, Chair and committee members.

It's an honour to appear at this important hearing.

My name is Jon Bateman. I'm a senior fellow and co-director of the technology and international affairs program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Carnegie is an independent, non-profit think tank with headquarters in Washington, D.C. and global centres in Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

In recent years, democracies worldwide have grown increasingly concerned about threats to the integrity of their information environments, including misinformation, disinformation and foreign influence. My Carnegie colleagues and I have drawn on empirical evidence to clarify the nature and extent of these threats, and to assess

the promise and pitfalls of potential countermeasures. Today I will share some overarching lessons from this research.

To be clear, I'm not an expert on the Canadian situation specifically, so I may not be able to give detailed answers about particular incidents or unique dynamics in your country. Instead, I will highlight key themes that are applicable across democracies.

Let me start with some important foundations.

As you have already heard, misinformation can refer to any false claim, whereas disinformation implies an intentional effort to deceive. Foreign influence can be harder to define, because it requires legal or normative judgments about the boundaries of acceptable foreign participation in domestic discourse, which are sometimes unclear.

Foreign actors often use mis- and disinformation, but they also use other tools, such as co-optation, coercion, overt propaganda and even violence. These activities can pose serious threats to a country's information integrity.

Still, it is domestic actors—ordinary citizens, politicians, activists and corporations—that are the major sources of mis- and disinformation in most democracies. This should not be surprising. Domestic actors are generally more numerous, well resourced, politically sophisticated, deeply embedded within society and invested in domestic political outcomes.

Defining and differentiating these threats is hard enough. Applying and acting on the definitions is much harder.

Calling something mis- or disinformation requires invoking some authoritative source of truth, yet people in democracies can and should disagree about what is true. Such disagreements are inevitable and essential for driving scientific progress and social change. Overzealous efforts to police the information environment can transgress democratic norms or deepen societal distrust.

However, not all factual disputes are legitimate or productive. We must acknowledge that certain falsehoods are undermining democratic stability and governance around the world. A paradigmatic example is the claim that the 2020 U.S. presidential election was stolen. This is provably false. It was put forward with demonstrated bad faith and it has deeply destabilized the country.

Mis- and disinformation are highly imperfect concepts, but they do capture something very real and dangerous that demands concerted action.

What should be done? In our recent report, Dean Jackson and I surveyed a wide range of countermeasures, from fact-checking to foreign sanctions to adjustments of social media algorithms. Drawing on hundreds of scientific studies and other real-world data, we asked three fundamental questions: How much is known about each measure? How effective does it seem, given what we know? How scalable is it?

Unfortunately, we found no silver bullet. None of the interventions were well studied, very effective and easy to scale all at the same time.

Some may find this unsurprising. After all, disinformation is an ancient, chronic phenomenon driven by stubborn forces of supply and demand. On the supply side, social structures combine with modern technology to create powerful political and commercial incentives to deceive. On the demand side, false narratives can satisfy real psychological needs. These forces are far from unstoppable, yet policy-makers have limited resources, knowledge, political will, legal authority and civic trust.

Thankfully, our research does suggest that many popular countermeasures are both credible and useful. The key is what we call a “portfolio approach”. This means pursuing a diversified mixture of multiple policies with varying levels of risk and reward. A healthy portfolio would include tactical actions, such as fact-checking and labelling social media content, that seem fairly well researched and effective. It would also involve costlier, longer-term bets on promising structural reforms, such as financial support for local journalism and media literacy.

● (1550)

Let me close by observing that most democracies do not yet have a balanced portfolio. They are underinvesting in the most ambitious reforms with higher costs and longer lead times.

If societies can somehow manage to meet the big challenges, like reviving local journalism and bolstering media literacy for the digital age, the payoff could be enormous.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bateman.

I really appreciate the insight in your opening statement.

Mr. Fung, you have up to five minutes to address the committee.

Please start.

Mr. Benjamin Fung (Professor and Canada Research Chair, McGill University, As an Individual): Thank you.

Good afternoon, Chair and committee members.

I'm a professor and Canada research chair at McGill University, and I am a computer scientist. My research interests include AI, cybersecurity and disinformation analysis. I am particularly interested in analyzing disinformation spreading in the Chinese Canadian communities. I am not going to repeat the disinformation examples, as I believe you have already heard many of those examples from different channels in the last few years. Instead, I would like to focus on recommendations that may help in fighting disinformation from the Chinese government.

Let's take a closer look at what other countries have been doing to fight disinformation.

The U.S. government has set up an agency called the Global Engagement Center, which is responsible to counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at influencing the policies and security of the United States. The Global Engagement Center has the authority to pre-empt disinformation from social media. Furthermore, it has a technology engagement division, which plays an important role to transform technologies from concepts to applications at scale and pushes innovations to both public and private sectors.

Another country that is at the front line of fighting disinformation from the Chinese government is Taiwan. My collaborator, Sze-Fung Lee, has done an excellent study. Here, I will highlight a few key points from her research.

Unlike the U.S. model, Taiwan takes a decentralized approach. It has multiple fact-checking centres that are run by the civil societies. This set-up successfully gains the trust of the general public because citizens understand that these fact-checking centres are not controlled by the government and they know they can participate in the process too. Most importantly, they have an effective social network to spread the correct information back to the society.

Taiwan has a few think tanks that analyze the origins, tactics and implications of disinformation. They regularly organize conferences to bring disinformation experts together to facilitate collaboration. There's no conflict between the U.S. model and the Taiwan model. In Canada, we can do both.

My third recommendation is to look into the social media platforms. Social media platforms like WeChat and TikTok play a crucial role in spreading disinformation, despite heavy Chinese government censorship. WeChat, the most popular app, circulates Chinese government-approved propaganda, while accurate Canadian information struggles to reach users. Without the co-operation of social media platforms, any solutions are meaningless. Interventions should include banning bot accounts, restricting posts or adding warning messages. Platforms that do not comply with this new regulation should be subject to evaluations and penalties.

Finally, I would like to share my latest observation. There are two types of social media bots—human bots and AI bots. Human bots are easier to detect as they use specific vocabularies, or sometimes they just follow China's time zone. Their posts typically spread within two to three layers of sharing, mostly staying within the Chinese Canadian community. However, the emerging trend is the AI bots. AI bots can spread disinformation beyond five layers of sharing, even reaching local communities. Therefore, I would like to emphasize that this disinformation issue is not limited to the Chinese Canadian community. With the advancement of AI technologies, all Canadians are affected.

Thank you very much.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fung.

We're going to start with our questioning now. Each member is going to have six minutes for questioning. For our witnesses, it's a very limited amount of time to ask these questions. Oftentimes, members will reclaim their time to try to ask as many questions as they can within those six minutes. Please don't take it personally if you get cut off. We're going to try to get through this as best we can.

I'm going to start with Mr. Caputo for six minutes.

Mr. Frank Caputo (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Bateman.

Thank you, Professor Fung, for being here.

Mr. Bateman, you intimated at the outset of your remarks that you may not be overly familiar with the situation here. I want to elaborate on a few of the principles you spoke about.

You spoke about supply and demand when it comes to foreign interference or disinformation, and also about the fact that it is politicians who are most often the sources of misinformation and disinformation.

Would you agree, as well, that politicians are critical not only when it comes to what they put out but also in their function when they are in a security capacity of ensuring disinformation doesn't get out? In other words, politicians and government play a protective role.

Would you agree with that?

Mr. Jon Bateman: Yes, I would.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Part of that protective role is this: When government sees things going awry or sideways, and sees misinformation and disinformation occurring, it has an obligation to act.

I take it you'd agree with that, as well.

Mr. Jon Bateman: It depends on the nature of the action being contemplated, because some actions can be helpful and others can be counterproductive.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Okay.

What I'm saying is that, when misinformation and disinformation are occurring, the government could conceivably do nothing. However, to do nothing is to allow this to occur even more.

Isn't that right?

Mr. Jon Bateman: Yes, to some extent.

Typically, a lot of information is transmitted through society without the government taking any particular action. In the case of foreign influence activities, there's a lot more the government can do. Whether or not to publicly disclose such activity, or take technical or diplomatic measures against the country at issue, is often a complicated calculation.

• (1600)

Mr. Frank Caputo: It certainly is a complicated calculation, but I think you'd agree that shining a light on foreign interference, in some way, is always the best antidote to address it.

Is it not?

Mr. Jon Bateman: It often is.

The exception to that principle is that, sometimes, the foreign actor may anticipate—even desire and benefit from—the public disclosure of their operation. For example, if Russia is conducting an influence operation that is publicly exposed, and that public exposure actually creates a lot more societal anxiety, fear and distrust than the initial influence operation itself, it could be considered a win for Russia.

That's one of the complications government needs to consider.

Mr. Frank Caputo: I see what you're saying. They're sowing chaos and getting their desired results.

When it comes to elected officials, generally, I think it's in everybody's best interest to know whether the people they're putting an X beside in elections have been willingly or semi-willingly participating in foreign interference.

Do you agree with that?

Mr. Jon Bateman: Yes.

Mr. Frank Caputo: In such cases, transparency is paramount. If the government is aware that elected officials are participating in foreign interference willingly, the best thing that can be done is to address those things publicly. Is it not?

Mr. Jon Bateman: That would require a framework of law and, again, careful consideration. For example, I'm a former U.S. intelligence analyst, so I'm familiar with the possibility that there could be unverified intelligence information about someone being co-opted or roped into foreign disinformation—

Mr. Frank Caputo: Right.

Mr. Jon Bateman: —but it might not be a legal certainty.

Mr. Frank Caputo: I'm sorry. I don't mean to cut you off.

I'm going to ask you to operate on the assumption that we have intelligence services in Canada that have verified things and come to conclusions. The conclusions are that 11 parliamentarians have, either wittingly or semi-wittingly, acted with foreign and hostile states. This intelligence has been verified. It went into a report. In this case, people in Canada are expected to vote for these people in the next 12 to 13 months, in all likelihood.

Does it not make sense for democracy—for the integrity of the system—for foreign interference to be stymied at its root? Expose it and shine a light on it. Does that not make a ton of sense?

Mr. Jon Bateman: Without commenting on the Canadian situation—because I don't know the details—I would say there are situations where an intelligence assessment might fall short of a prosecutable offence. That would then create a judgment call and a difficult decision.

However, I'm not familiar with the Canadian specifics.

Mr. Frank Caputo: You talked about the Russia example. Could there be any worse discord than people questioning whether who they're voting for has been compromised by a hostile state?

Mr. Jon Bateman: I do think one of the situations where public disclosure can be helpful is when the lack of disclosure creates an environment in which selective leaks and rumours are running rampant.

We saw this in previous U.S. elections, and that did seem to lead to a policy of greater disclosure, but not universal disclosure. Each disclosure needs to be taken on its own terms.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Bains, we'll go over to you for six minutes. Please, go ahead.

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

Thank you, Mr. Bateman and Mr. Fung, for joining us today.

I'm going to continue on the same line of questioning. You mentioned something about how selective pieces of information can lead to rampant rumours. You're talking about politicians, and the whole issue around international peace is a key part of your work.

Do you think there ought to be greater scrutiny of candidates running for office, particularly if they have, in the past, worked closely with what we know are hostile states?

Mr. Jon Bateman: The general trend in a number of democracies has been toward increasing transparency and tighter regulation of foreign influence, such as bolstering enforcement of foreign reg-

istration requirements and the like. Traditionally, it's the voters themselves who are asked to be the ultimate gatekeepers.

● (1605)

Mr. Parm Bains: Yes, but again, that leads to the general complexities around the recommendations that I know you've mentioned, and Mr. Fung has mentioned some other issues around fact-checking, which makes it very difficult for the general public to really know, because the misinformation and disinformation has become so very organized and sophisticated, in a sense.

There are other examples if you look at people who are working with foreign entities that are research groups or producing reports. We have an example here, from 2020, of a current member of Parliament who helped produce a controversial report in association with the Macdonald-Laurier Institute and a CBC reporter alleging that Pakistan secretly created a Sikh separatist movement. This was later amplified by officials overseas—Indian officials—and that led to more information and disinformation spreading.

Can you comment on that?

Mr. Jon Bateman: I'm not aware of the specifics. I would say that, as I mentioned during my opening remarks, the boundaries of acceptable foreign involvement and domestic discourse are often unclear.

For example, in democracies, it is traditionally acceptable for a foreigner to speak in a domestic context, and it could be a foreign corporation, a foreign resident or a foreign business. It could be called public diplomacy and the like. Equivalently, it could traditionally be acceptable for a citizen or a politician domestically to engage with foreigners.

Things often become more challenging where there is some kind of covertness to the relationship and a violation of domestic law. I'll say that the norms and the boundaries around this are really being rethought and reinvestigated for this new era.

Mr. Parm Bains: Yes. In this instance, there were funds raised by other special interest groups, oil giants and other observer research foundations from different countries.

What I wanted to look at is the need for recommendations when it comes to the work we're doing here. What do we need to look at with respect to relationships with previous governments? In this specific situation, we recently received media reports coming from India, for example, saying that hundreds of millions of dollars should be raised to make sure that the current Justin Trudeau government is defeated. That is widely available in international news.

Mr. Jon Bateman: I would offer two recommendations, sir. On the specific question of foreign involvement in elections, most democracies have a lot more they could do to build capacity, monitoring, surveillance and enforcement around these types of laws and to close loopholes and modernize. But it's crucial to not create a situation where the cure is worse than the disease—in other words, whether the fear of being tarred as a foreign agent or being tarred as someone influenced by foreigners actually chills more legitimate domestic discourse than it helps.

The other recommendation I would give is what I might call “upstream” of all this—namely, building the social infrastructure to help citizens make good decisions. That comes back to journalism, media literacy and the like.

Mr. Parm Bains: Thank you.

I'll continue this in another round.

The Chair: Then we'll give a little more time—15 seconds—to Mr. Villemure and Mr. Green.

Mr. Villemure will be next, and the line of questioning will be in French. I want to encourage Mr. Bateman and Mr. Fung to make sure they have on their French to English interpretation.

• (1610)

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Mr. Fung and Mr. Bateman.

Mr. Bateman, could you tell us about the distinctions to be made between Russian, Chinese and Indian disinformation, for example?

[*English*]

Mr. Jon Bateman: Each of those countries has different tools, organizations and strategies. For example, if we're talking about covert digital disinformation, Russia was the original innovator. It developed very sophisticated online personas that could masquerade as real. Originally, China was much more blunt in its operations. It had less convincing personas but simply a lot more activity.

That's shifting over time. China is becoming more like Russia in its sophistication, and Russia itself is debuting new techniques. Both countries also have a very significant overt propaganda capability, such as RT in the case of Russia.

I'm not that familiar with Indian activities.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Are there countries other than India, China and Russia that could be cited as examples of disinformation sources?

[*English*]

Mr. Jon Bateman: Many countries are involved in these activities. We know a lot about only a few of them. Iran is an emerging example. There was just an incident in the United States where a group of Iranian hackers hacked the Trump campaign and obtained and released sensitive information about the vice-presidential nomi-

nee. Iran has shifted to have information and influence activities, against the United States and others, to be a greater and greater portion of its digital operations.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Should we make a distinction between the concept of propaganda and disinformation?

[*English*]

Mr. Jon Bateman: Yes. Among experts, the definitions of all these terms are constantly debated. To be candid, there is no single satisfying term that captures all of the problems we're describing here that everyone agrees on.

Disinformation, in its modern term, has been popularized, or re-popularized, only recently, but had a Russian origin and emerged initially during the Cold War. Propaganda is an older term, and nowadays is used more broadly to encompass a variety of overt media activities.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much.

Given that political parties seem to be permanently campaigning and that we seem to be living in an era of confrontation amongst politicians, has disinformation become more relevant or more effective?

[*English*]

Mr. Jon Bateman: It's difficult to say whether the problem of disinformation overall is getting better or worse. Certainly in previous eras in the United States, Canada and other western democracies, we had our own challenges—a highly partisan news media, a lack of journalistic standards of objectivity that exists nowadays and on and on. But I think you're right that the willingness of political leaders to spread and become a source of disinformation and misinformation is probably the number one challenge facing any democracy today. If we can't police this problem, very little else that we do will be effective.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much, Mr. Bateman.

Mr. Fung, could you tell us about the effects of artificial intelligence on disinformation?

[*English*]

Mr. Benjamin Fung: The impact of AI is on both sides. Someone who tries to spread disinformation can create some AI bots to collaboratively spread the disinformation. They can use, for example, large language models to make the spread of disinformation more effective. As I mentioned before, with the use of local vocabularies in that country, let's say English or French, they can spread it to the local community. It's not just limited to the minority group.

On the defence side, we can also use AI to fight disinformation. For example, in Taiwan, they have chatbots. You can submit your question to the chatbot. They can respond as to whether this piece of information is likely to be true or false. Of course, it depends on whether their database is reliable or not.

• (1615)

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: I'm going to pick up on the issue you just raised. In terms of defence, if we were to say that here in Canada, on the eve of an election campaign, we want to protect and defend ourselves against disinformation, how could artificial intelligence help us in practical terms?

[English]

Mr. Benjamin Fung: For example, we can use AI to identify collaborative processes. When we talk about spreading disinformation, it's not by one or two accounts. It spread by multiple or thousands of accounts. We can use AI to detect these types of co-operative activities, and that requires the co-operation of the social media companies.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: I have very little time left, Mr. Fung. Could you send us some additional information, possibly in writing, on the concept of using artificial intelligence as a defence against disinformation?

[English]

Mr. Benjamin Fung: Of course, yes.

There are many articles in the computer science community that talk about how to identify accounts that co-operate together to boost posts or to boost products. These are the same techniques that can be used for identifying and boosting disinformation.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

[English]

Mr. Green, you have six minutes and 15 seconds. Go ahead.

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Fung, we've spent some time focusing on state actors. We've highlighted adversarial countries that we believe are acting in malicious ways against our democracy and to undermine our institutions; however, there's a recent example of what ended up being a plot by a pretty amateur person to boost the appearance of the Conservative leader in a northern event, which led to much discussion and cynicism around the future of our own democratic processes domestically.

Can you perhaps, for a minute, talk about the ways in which non-state actors, both sophisticated and corporate as well as unsophisticated people with access to technology, could potentially disrupt?

Mr. Benjamin Fung: Do you mean the non-state actors like companies?

Mr. Matthew Green: Correct, and not just companies but ideologically motivated people, whether they're attached formally to think tanks or whether they're lone actors, hackers or people I envi-

sion in a dark basement who are really trying to manufacture consent around something they care about.

How widespread is this technology, and how usable is it in its current forms? Maybe you could talk about the ways that it's accessible.

Mr. Benjamin Fung: In the current way, some non-state actors work together to boost disinformation. For example, they will like some posts together. This is one of the ways we can detect this type of activity.

Let's say that there are thousands of posts. Let's talk about television, for example. If both of us like to talk about television, it is very unlikely that we will co-like or co-comment on the same set of posts. We can use this type of information to detect this type of technology.

Mr. Matthew Green: Mr. Bateman, again, I think about Elon Musk, his takeover of Twitter and the way in which he's shaping the discourse of this digital public forum. Can you talk about non-state actors and the potential threat of undermining our democracy?

Mr. Jon Bateman: Yes. I would that say that actors other than foreign states are the main sources of mis- and disinformation. If you think about the perspective of an individual voter going through an election cycle, what's all the political information that he or she encounters? Almost none of it would be from any foreign actor. It would be from friends, families, community leaders, national politicians, local politicians and the news media. That is really the information environment in sum and substance. If any of those actors are spreading mis- and disinformation, as is frequent, that would be the primary problem facing democracies.

Mr. Matthew Green: Mr. Bateman, in your work you've identified 10 policy interventions, but you've also stated that there's no silver bullet.

With some specificity, given the contemplation that we have in this committee for recommendations, what might you suggest as a series of policy interventions that might be helpful, notwithstanding the 10 that you've already provided? Maybe you want to highlight a couple from the 10.

• (1620)

Mr. Jon Bateman: I would highlight at least two on there and one that's not on there.

The two that I would highlight are supporting local journalism and supporting media literacy programs. I mention those not because they're better or worse than the others, but because they have a higher ceiling. They could accomplish more over time than many of the other more small-bore measures that we're already highly invested in, which are more tactical in nature.

The third recommendation that I would make is a meta-recommendation. It's that we need to get better at informing ourselves about these informational dynamics and threats. That would start with, for example, helping researchers get better access to information from tech platforms and creating grants and other pathways to ensure this research actually occurs.

Mr. Matthew Green: Would that include algorithmic transparency?

Mr. Jon Bateman: It could include algorithmic transparency. It could also include transparency about major accounts, interactions and platforms.

There's a whole host of data. A colleague of mine at Carnegie has compiled some of that. I'd be happy to pass that on.

Mr. Matthew Green: On that theme, it was noted that it's not being studied by independent researchers in meaningful ways—I'm talking again about algorithms—and market viability of such changes is uncertain since the core business model for all major platforms is based on optimizing engagement.

Is it not the case that our major platforms have an incentive for what they call “clickbait” or “rage clicking”, which is often fed by misinformation and disinformation?

Mr. Jon Bateman: Unfortunately, yes.

Every platform is based on the business model of maximizing people's time and interest on the platform. That means the content that does well algorithmically is content that intrigues, outrages, upsets or amuses. False content is often more inclined to be sensational, outrageous and clickbaity.

We do have a conflict of interest here with the platforms. They are designed, in many ways, to spread disinformation.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bateman, Mr. Fung and Mr. Green. That concludes our first round of questioning.

We're going to go to two five-minute rounds, followed by two-and-a-half-minute rounds for Mr. Villemure and Mr. Green.

Mr. Barrett, you have five minutes. Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Mr. Fung, given what we know about the disinformation campaigns targeting our elections, particularly the campaign perpetrated by the communist dictatorship in Beijing against former Conservative member of Parliament Kenny Chiu, the current Liberal government has failed to adequately address this. This is borne out by the fact that we have to have a commission to look into foreign interference and that the legislation that's been put forward has not come in the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth or seventh year of their mandate.

What should government be doing today to prevent hostile foreign state actors, like the communist dictatorship in Beijing, from putting their thumb on the scale of Canadian democracy?

Mr. Benjamin Fung: There are two different ways. One way is to set up government agencies like the U.S. model, like the Global Engagement Center, and give them the authority to monitor the social media posts that are related to the democratic process. They

have the technological capability and the legal authority to stop some of this disinformation.

Another approach is to create a not-for-profit organization and give that organization the authority to do a similar process, but it is more independent of the government.

Mr. Michael Barrett: For anyone who's not familiar, and for the purpose of our report, can you provide some examples of the types of actions the CCP, the communist dictatorship in Beijing, has used to try to influence our elections?

If you have another example of any countermeasure that could be applied to that, please add it.

• (1625)

Mr. Benjamin Fung: One example is that it is not just focusing on social media disinformation. When we talk about disinformation, we often talk about social media, but the CCP is not just working on social media. It also works with traditional media, which is the Chinese media running in Canada. There are newspapers. There are radio stations in Vancouver and Toronto. They are collaborating with the CCP and different Chinese organizations running in Canada.

One of the questions raised previously was about the difference between Russian disinformation and this Chinese disinformation here. It is the economic power, because China can use advertisements to directly control what radio stations and newspapers put out in their content and how they invite different commentators to the radio stations. It can use its local economic power to control that, which is not the same in the Russian case.

To fight against this type of collaboration, I think Bill C-70 will play a part of the role by trying to identify the foreign agents in this case.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you.

Mr. Bateman, you're someone who has experience assessing a foreign state's senior leadership and cybersecurity. Are you able to identify any systems or countermeasures that the current government could have put in place up to this point, or could quickly put in place now, to protect us from malicious state actors and protect our national security, our economy and our democracy?

Mr. Jon Bateman: I'm not familiar with gaps within the Canadian system specifically, but I can offer some best practices from other systems.

There are a variety of tools available to governments to fight foreign interference. There are naming and shaming sanctions and indictments. There are targeted, technical actions, such as cyber-operations that could be carried out to disrupt the foreign activity, especially during a sensitive, temporary period, such as before or after an election. There are others, as well, like Professor Fung mentioned, that are simply public disclosure and public information.

One path would be to build capacity in each of those areas, but another path would be to build connectivity across these areas and make sure that they're working together, which is something the U.S. government has done.

I will say that, in the end, it's not clear how effective any of these policies are. We've been naming and shaming, indicting, sanctioning and disrupting these adversaries for some time. It probably has some operational impact on them, but it doesn't stop the activity.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks very much for your response.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

Thank you, Mr. Bateman.

They seem to be even more emboldened now.

Mr. Fisher, we're going to go to you for five minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to our witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Bateman, I want to tag on to some of the things Mr. Green brought up. I notice you have your publication there, proudly to your right. I think it's great that you are proud of that document. We're hoping to have some of the social media platforms here for this study, which would be very interesting.

As you know, social media platforms do everything they can to hold and maximize your attention for as long as possible. I think you said to Mr. Green that they're "maximizing people's time". Of course, they use algorithms to place in the feed the content you are most likely to be interested in, focus on or interact with.

In your publication, you talk about the importance of—or maybe it's a recommendation—finding a way to change the way algorithms are used. I'm interested in your thoughts on how that's possible. Make us understand what that would look like, how it might help solve the problem and why it hasn't been studied by independent researchers yet.

Is it just beginning, or do you expect that to happen in the near term?

Mr. Jon Bateman: I'd be happy to.

As we've discussed, the major social media platforms today have recommendation algorithms and other design choices, such as the way their buttons and apps look, feel and interact, that are designed to maximize engagement, but you could maximize something else. You could maximize, for example, the civility of discourse so that, if there were a long series of posts going back and forth on a controversial issue, you could actually bring to the top the one that seems the most clear and helpful and is achieving some amount of support or balance from both sides.

Other people have explored using algorithms to deter or dissuade people from posting toxic content by trying to nudge them in a more positive direction.

There are many options here. In essence, we just have to maximize for something other than engagement or for a combination of engagement with something else.

Why hasn't this been done? It's because engagement is how you attract eyeballs, and eyeballs are how you attract advertisers or subscribers and, thereby, make money.

There are academics who are experimenting with what are sometimes called civically oriented platforms. It's a worthwhile effort, but it's unlikely that these would ever be commercially viable alternatives because people actually want the high-engagement platforms.

• (1630)

Mr. Darren Fisher: I'm going to stretch this a little bit. If they were to look for the positive and try to encourage the positive.... We used to use the line "if it bleeds, it leads" for news stories. It's easier to enrage. It's easier to get people to complain or to post something or to pay attention to something a little more toxic.

You touched on this because you said that might reduce the advertising funds these social media platforms would get if they decided to change the algorithms to go in a more positive direction. I'm interested in your thoughts on what that might look like monetarily. Is that something you've even looked at?

Is it potentially going to cut their profits in half? Is it that significant?

Mr. Jon Bateman: I don't have an estimate, but I think it would be extremely significant. I think the most important factor from a competitive point of view is whether this is something that a platform would be endeavouring to do by itself, thus falling behind in the competitive marketplace, or is this something that would happen collectively?

I'll give an example that has been playing out in real life. I believe the European Union now has a regulation that requires platforms to at least offer an option for a chronological feed instead of an algorithmically curated feed. It's not that big a deal to just offer that as an option—most users do choose the default—but that form of regulation then creates a level playing field so that all platforms would have that as an option.

Mr. Darren Fisher: I'm just spitballing here. Threads doesn't seem to be nearly as toxic as X. Is there an algorithm that's driving that lower level of toxicity in Threads?

Mr. Jon Bateman: It's difficult to say, because we know very little about the internal governance of these platforms, and that's an important research and governance problem in and of itself.

It is clear that at the high level of business strategy and corporate leadership, Mark Zuckerberg wants Threads to be relatively anodyne and devoid of political content and controversy—more of a feel-good place—whereas Elon Musk wants X to be a wild and free-spirited environment in which people can get their kicks.

The Chair: Okay. That's it.

Thank you, Mr. Fisher.

Thank you, Mr. Bateman.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Villemure, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Bateman, I would like to continue along the same lines as my predecessor, because I find this very interesting. You say that businesses could favour positive content. It's a matter of algorithms, and it would probably affect their bottom line.

Nowadays, it seems that common decency has gone the way of the dodo. We see a lot of toxic content, with seemingly no boundaries. So I'm going to ask you a very theoretical question: Do you believe that social media companies should be forced to apply rules of common decency?

[*English*]

Mr. Jon Bateman: I would have to know more about what that looks like. What I would say is that, as much as social media companies bear a partial culpability for the degradation of discourse in society, they are far from solely responsible. The solution of government direct regulation of social media algorithms and design comes with many of its own challenges, including freedom of expression and other liberties, so it's not an easy call.

• (1635)

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Certainly, when we talk about freedom of expression, it's quite difficult. However, freedom of expression, which is the ability to say things, does not give someone permission to say everything. Even if social media companies are the vehicle used, should there be a better initial framework for speech, given the limits of freedom of expression and the kind of privilege to offend others that people have given themselves?

[*English*]

Mr. Jon Bateman: I agreed that freedom of speech is not unlimited. Let me try to answer the question this way. In most democracies, we do not want to trust the government with a direct ability to police and control speech, yet we also have great suspicion of these technology platforms because of their profit incentive and demonstrated history of bad behaviour, so where does that leave us? We're between a rock and a hard place.

I think that, in the long term, we need to find some kind of third way, some blended or hybrid governance approach that avoids both of these problems—and I will give Facebook credit, at least for this oversight board that they created. I don't know what kind of effect it has had and no other platform has duplicated it, but it's at least an experiment in trying to develop a third way. I think that should be a greater discussion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure and Mr. Bateman.

[*English*]

Mr. Green, you have two and a half minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bateman, I recognize you're not an expert in the Canadian context, but certainly there's an application for all elected officials. When elected officials, or in our case parliamentarians, are targeted

by malicious actors, what strategy can we use to protect ourselves and remedy the harms to us and to Canada's political system?

Mr. Jon Bateman: It's difficult for me to give advice because I think a working elected politician is probably smarter than I am about how to handle the push and pull of aggressive politics, including even foreign actors, but there are a few options in the tool kit. One is that, if something is blatantly transgressing legal and normative boundaries, like involvement from a foreign actor, it can be disclosed—and you might even garner sympathy for that.

However, I think that, often, if there's a false narrative circulating, there's actually a difficult decision about whether to respond to it and, thus, give it credence and maybe even elevate the number of people who are thinking and hearing about it, or whether to just let it lie because, frankly, many influence campaigns and misinformation campaigns are not effective. This is the elephant in the room. We don't know how effective many of these things are. However, many of them are demonstrably ineffective, so that's an important strategic decision.

Mr. Matthew Green: Mr. Fung, do you have any input?

Mr. Benjamin Fung: Yes. I think transparency is key, so I suggest talking about the truth and...that's it.

Mr. Matthew Green: Are there any resources, perhaps, that we can rely on to ensure that we're not improperly influenced by misinformation, disinformation or malinformation?

Mr. Benjamin Fung: There are some disinformation debunking websites in Canada, but again the resources from the government are not enough to make it more effective in society.

Mr. Matthew Green: What type of scale do you think it would be—not a precise estimate but in terms of the scale of the problem—and what type of investment might meet the scope of the problem?

Mr. Benjamin Fung: For example, as I mentioned, in Taiwan they have very effective fact-checking centres being run by civil society. They have two, and they are basically by donation. Then there are some think tanks that are indirectly supported by the government.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

Thank you, Mr. Fung.

We now go to Mr. Cooper for five minutes, followed by Ms. Khalid for five minutes, and that will be the end of the panel.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Fung, one of the tools that this government set up, supposedly to counter foreign interference and disinformation during elections, was the directive on the critical election incident public protocol. Are you familiar with that protocol?

Mr. Benjamin Fung: I'm not familiar with that protocol.

• (1640)

Mr. Michael Cooper: You're not familiar with it. Needless to say, it provided that candidates who are the target of disinformation ought to be informed, barring national security considerations. Now, my former colleague, Kenny Chiu, was drowning in a sea of disinformation in Steveston—Richmond East, and he wasn't alone in that regard. Several other Conservative candidates were, including former member of Parliament Alice Wong. Mr. Chiu was kept in the dark in the face of disinformation, but Madam Justice Hogue concluded that there was a reasonable possibility that those narratives from the Beijing regime impacted the result in that riding.

You spoke about the PRC and the connections between the PRC and certain media within Canada. I would note in that regard that at page 17 of the NSICOP report, the NSICOP noted that “Most of these media outlets” in the greater Vancouver area “were linked to the PRC via partnership agreements with the China News Service, the Chinese Communist Party's primary media entity”. Here not only do you have foreign disinformation from Beijing amplified on social media platforms, including WeChat, but you also actually have Canadian-owned news outlets that are amplifying that disinformation.

Can you speak to that, to some of the methods that the Chinese regime is using and to how that can be countered? It certainly was something that may have impacted the result in more than one riding.

Mr. Benjamin Fung: Let's talk about Kenny Chiu's case. It was first started in WeChat and WhatsApp. A piece of this information appeared on social media, and then it was spread mainly on the Chinese social media platforms. Then, the next day, a Chinese propaganda newspaper, Today Commercial News, tried to basically copy and paste that message from WeChat and amplify it on the propaganda machines. After that, many other Chinese news articles were written on different Chinese websites, and they fed back to social media. On the radio stations and in the newspapers in the Vancouver area, they also tried to basically invite some commentators on the radio stations to amplify this again.

This is not just on the media because they are being directly controlled by the advertisements from the Chinese merchants in that area. When some of the organizations, let's say, try to organize an event, they will invite the Chinese consulate to attend those events, and they will put that Chinese consulate at a higher position, as a VVIP, than the MP in Canada. If you are an attendee of that meeting, you will know who is the real boss in there and who is the one who can make decisions; it's the Chinese consulate. This message is passed to the Chinese merchants in Richmond or in the Vancouver area, and then it will affect the media in that area.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

It has been noted, the role that Beijing-based consular officials played in directing disinformation and interfering in the 2021 election, as well as the 2019 election. Notwithstanding that evidence, it must be noted that this Liberal government has done absolutely nothing to hold those consular officials accountable who interfered in our elections and attacked our democracy to the benefit of the Liberal Party.

Now I want to ask you, Mr. Fung... You talked about the need for transparency. Indeed, that is consistent with what CSIS has recommended: that sunshine is the best disinfectant but that there are challenges with that, particularly in diaspora communities. Do you have any recommendations on how disinformation of the kind that was going on in the 2021 election in Chinese diaspora communities can be effectively countered? There are unique challenges in that regard in getting to people to make them aware of that disinformation.

The Chair: We're way over time. I'm going to ask Mr. Fung to respond to that question in writing.

I will have the clerk follow up with you, sir, with regard to exactly what Mr. Cooper is asking for. If you could follow that up in writing, I would appreciate that so that we can move on. Thank you.

I'm sorry, Mr. Cooper. We're over time.

Ms. Khalid, go ahead.

• (1645)

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses who have appeared today and shared their expert testimony.

I find it quite weird that the Conservatives make it a big point to make this issue a partisan issue. The reality of the matter is that it is not a partisan issue. As outlined, there have been challenges with how elections have been run and the vulnerabilities our democratic institutions have had.

We've also seen reports recently that the Conservative Party is at risk of foreign interference from Russia, from India, of money being put into artificial intelligence, into bots, into social media campaigns, etc., to sway public opinion in favour of a political party.

I don't think that there's anybody to blame here specifically, but there is accountability that needs to be put in place within all political parties to remove the partisanship from this very serious issue.

Mr. Fung, you had mentioned “fact-checking centres” in your opening remarks. Can you perhaps expand on that concept? What did you mean by that? How would it help in ensuring that our democratic institutions are well protected?

Mr. Benjamin Fung: For those fact-checking centres, there are two groups of people.

One is “information professionals and social scientists”. They try to analyze the tactics and the technological advancements used by those people who spread the disinformation. Then, by understanding that, we can prevent the next wave of disinformation.

Another group of people are grassroots citizens. They share the workload from the information professionals because of the large amount of information they receive. Also, they have the social networks to spread the information back to society, so that is also very important.

By doing these things, it also gains the trust of the general public because they know they can participate in this process.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bateman, would you like to comment on that as well?

Mr. Jon Bateman: Sure. Of all the ways that have been proposed for countering disinformation, fact-checking is probably the one that's been most studied. There are very many studies of fact-checking initiatives, and the general finding is that they do work to an extent. They particularly work on correcting factual beliefs. That corrective effect is not necessarily enduring over time, and it does not necessarily change the attitudes or the behaviours that then result from that belief. For example, you might learn that a certain policy is based on a factual error, but you might still continue to support that policy.

There are hundreds of fact-checking initiatives worldwide that are to be commended and supported. In many countries, fact-checking itself has become the source of partisan controversy. I think fact-checking is promising and should be continued. I also worry that its effectiveness could be degraded over time as it's the victim of partisan mudslinging.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

I appreciate that, Mr. Bateman, because that is one of the major concerns where people, like a lot of my constituents, have just stopped listening to news, stopped reading news, because they just can't distinguish what is true and what is not true anymore. It just, I think, hurts our democratic process when we see parliamentarians actively leveraging that disdain towards news.

I have one more question that I'll ask both of you. I'll start with Mr. Fung.

What role do you think social media companies have to play in distinguishing between what is foreign interference, what is influence and what is advocacy? There is a distinction and I think that people have a difficult time, especially Canadians, in trying to understand what the distinction is between the three.

Mr. Benjamin Fung: For the social media companies, they definitely have the responsibility and capability to differentiate these different activities because they own all the data. Even the government will not see that piece of information. By using AI and the more recent data-mining technologies, they have ways to differentiate them.

• (1650)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Mr. Bateman, would you like to comment as well.

Mr. Jon Bateman: I do agree that both government and platforms have a piece of the puzzle. Platforms have extraordinary insight into on-platform activity, including non-public activity. Governments can have extraordinary insight into some non-platform activity, such as if they can intercept communications or embed human agents in these foreign intelligence services.

For better or worse, platforms have been allowed to and been left to develop their own rules set around what is considered acceptable and unacceptable on their platforms, so each platform has taken a slightly different approach. They have a different language. Some of them are almost quasi-judicial processes. Others are much more freewheeling.

I don't know that there's an effort to standardize all of this, but I do think good communication between government and platforms is essential.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bateman. We did go over time there.

I want to thank both our guests for being here today.

I see you, Mr. Barrett.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Chair, I also have my hand raised.

The Chair: That's fine. I see Monsieur Villemure as well. We'll go to Mr. Barrett first, then Ms. Khalid and then we'll go to Monsieur Villemure.

I want to thank both our guests for being here today. I appreciate your input on this valuable study that the committee is doing. Thank you both for being here today.

We are now moving to committee business.

First of all, before I go to Mr. Barrett, what I want to do is just update the committee on some of my and Monsieur Villemure's actions.

Last Friday, we met with Věra Jourová of the European Union. We also met with Ambassador-designate Geneviève Tuts, and we had a very good meeting.

I thought, Monsieur Villemure, that we talked a lot about the current study that we're undertaking and what the European Union has done to mitigate some of the issues with respect to that. We got into some other subjects, but it was a very good meeting.

I want to update the committee on a couple of things as they relate to meetings that are upcoming. We are still trying to get witnesses for Thursday. If you recall, the committee asked for an extension of up to three meetings; we have two meetings left. I didn't count last week's meeting with the previous guests that we had technological problems with. I didn't count that as one of those extras because, if you recall, we had votes and we had technology issues. We invited them back, so I haven't included that. Effectively, we have two meetings left. We're still working on witnesses for Thursday, but we're getting down to a late hour to get witnesses here.

I will tell you that invitations have been sent out for October 8. We have confirmation on at least one of our witnesses. We're still waiting for several others. Again, to try to find that balance, we're trying to find one Liberal and one CPC witness.

We have sent out invitations to social media companies for October 10 and have asked them to come that day. Typically social media companies like going through government relations. They go through various executives before they commit to coming to committee, but I know that the clerk has been on them. We will continue to be on them to have not only social media but also mainstream media come before the committee on October 10.

I see the clerk has Ms. Shanahan and then Mr. Cooper, so we have a long list here.

I know, Monsieur Villemure, that you had a question on TikTok.
[*Translation*]

We invited representatives from TikTok to appear before the committee, and we suggested October 10 as a date.

[*English*]

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Is that for this study?

The Chair: It's for disinformation and misinformation, yes. The social media companies were on the list as well.

That's my update for committee business.

I'm going to go to Mr. Barrett, followed by Ms. Khalid.

Do you have a point of order, Mr. Fisher?

Mr. Darren Fisher: I was watching for hands, and Iqra's hand went up first.

The Chair: Yes, well, we've been through this before. I saw Mr. Barrett's hand first, and then I saw Ms. Khalid.

Mr. Darren Fisher: I just wanted to say it for the record.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Barrett, go ahead, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, I've given the clerk this motion:

Given that:

- a. the Prime Minister recently appointed Mark Carney as the Chair of the Liberal Party's Task Force on Economic Growth;
 - b. Mark Carney is the chair of Brookfield Corporation, a multinational investment management company that owns Sagen, the second largest mortgage insurer in Canada;
 - c. on the first day of Mark Carney's appointment, the Liberal government announced major changes to the regulation of mortgage insurance in Canada, allowing for bigger and longer loans; and
 - d. this tremendously benefited Brookfield, evidenced by their stock price hitting a six-month high;
- pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), the committee call upon Mark Carney to testify before the committee within 14 days of the adoption of this motion.

● (1655)

The Chair: It's a little bit different from the motion that was on notice, but we are under committee business, so I'm going to accept that.

The only thing I need clarification on, Mr. Barrett, is the 14 days. Is that 14 calendar days or 14 business days? It's 14 calendar days, to be clear. We're going to debate it based on that.

Go ahead, Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Mr. Chair, if you don't mind, can we please suspend for five minutes so we can review the amended text of the motion?

The Chair: The text has been sent.

I'm going to continue with Mr. Barrett. If there's a need to suspend.... I'm sure he has something to say on this.

Mr. Darren Fisher: We just want to see the changes.

The Chair: We'll let Mr. Barrett go, and then, if I need to suspend after that, I will, just to give you an opportunity to reflect on the changes, but I'm going to go to Mr. Barrett.

Go ahead, Mrs. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): On a point of order, I want to make sure that I'm on the list for this round.

I wanted to say something previously about welcoming Mr. Williamson, who is my former chair.

The Chair: That's fine. Let's get through this. I love the fact that we are welcoming each other.

Mr. Barrett, you have the floor.

I'm going to go to you and then I have a list that has Mrs. Shanahan to start. I see Mr. Cooper, as well.

Go ahead, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, this matter is one of great seriousness and great importance.

The Prime Minister made an announcement to have Mr. Carney take over in a role that's the de facto finance minister role—effectively holding pre-budget consultations across the country. This came on the heels, of course, of expressions from the Prime Minister's Office that they didn't have confidence in the deputy prime minister.

We have Mark Carney, who's earned the nickname “carbon tax Carney” for his affection for Justin Trudeau's price on everything. This relationship seems to have earned him the opportunity to have this job.

What's Mr. Carney getting for this job? We're told he's not being paid and that he's not being employed by the House of Commons. He's being hired by the Liberal Party. That distinction's really important because although he's advising Justin Trudeau and his government members, he doesn't fall under the conflict of interest regime by virtue of how he's been appointed.

We have Mr. Carney, who we expect will be able to see non-public information and his investment firm will stand to benefit greatly from that. If you look at the first couple of days after the announcement by the Trudeau government that they would have carbon tax Carney as the de facto finance minister, Brookfield Asset Management had a great couple of days. That's reflected in their stock price.

The first is changes to mortgage rules with Brookfield owning Sagen, which is the largest private mortgage insurer in Canada. With longer amortization periods, we're now going to see more profits for mortgage insurers and big banks like Sagen.

As an aside to that, in the face of a supply crisis, the government's response is to create more demand. That must also have been advice they got from Mr. Carney.

What's more is that within the first couple of days.... A person identified as a personal friend—a buddy—of Mark Carney's is the head of a company called Telesat. Telesat was given \$2.4 billion to do something that the private sector is already able to do. The government has since made all kinds of claims that this is about national security, but the Prime Minister's remarks on the day of the event speak for themselves. I think he said it's about space and satellites and cool stuff, but it's really about connecting rural Canadians. Well, that's something we know can be done by the private sector for much less. If the idea they put forward was such a good one, we know that banks and private business would have gotten involved. Again, it's to the benefit of that elite cabal.

We then have Brookfield, in the days after this announcement, signalling that it's in talks to get 10 billion dollars' worth of Canadians' pension funds. This is terrifying. It should terrify Canadians that Justin Trudeau is trading influence and favours with his friends in exchange for the management of Canadians' pension dollars.

All of this should have been put through the lens of the Conflict of Interest Act and reviewed by Canada's Ethics Commissioner, but they've bobbed and weaved through a loophole and have appointed carbon tax Carney as an adviser to the Liberal Party for zero dollars, though we know that, as the paid head of Brookfield, he's going to benefit quite well.

• (1700)

Mr. Darren Fisher: On a point of order, Chair, I just received this from the clerk. It looks to be exactly the same as what Mr. Barrett sent on September 20, but it's not what he read today.

I'd reinforce the fact that we'd like a paper copy.

The Chair: I was going to let Mr. Barrett finish and then clarify that there was a minor change to the motion.

Mr. Michael Barrett: The motion should be quite different.

The Chair: There is one change that needs to be addressed, which was the timeline. We're going to get you a clean copy of that.

It was sent out in error. I apologize for that, Mr. Fisher. We're going to make sure you have it.

Continue, Mr. Barrett, please. You have the floor.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I was just about done, but I think that with all of this in the public domain, and though the moniker of carbon tax Carney fits very well, he very much appears to be conflict of interest Carney.

That's why this committee needs to take a look at the avoidance of the Conflict of Interest Act and disclosure rules that, of course, are the purview of this committee. It's very important, especially in the context of all that our country is facing today.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

I want to make sure that every member has a clean copy of what we're discussing here, so I'm going to suspend for a couple of minutes. We'll be back.

• (1700)

(Pause)

• (1710)

The Chair: Thanks, everyone, for your patience on that. I really wanted to make sure we had a clean copy in front of everyone, which I think we do now, somewhat.

When we left, Mr. Barrett had concluded his comments, and we're going to go to Mrs. Shanahan now.

Go ahead, Mrs. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you very much, Chair, although people may not be thanking me.

Chair, what is there to say about this motion? There are so many things going on here that I just really wonder, if it wasn't for the fact that the member brought it back a second time—I take it he's reread it at least once—it seems like it was written on the back of a napkin, maybe a napkin from a Quebec convention centre or something.

There are a few things about the motion that I question, but I'd like to get to the business of clearing the decks on the standing order front. I'd like to hear from the clerk on Standing Order 108(1) (a), because my reading of that standing order is that it has to do with business that's referred to a committee from the House. In fact, let me just see, as I think I might have it handy. Standing Order 108(1)(a) has to do with "Powers of standing committees", which is what is referred to here in this motion.

Standing committees shall be severally empowered to examine and enquire into all such matters as may be referred to them by the House—

I just don't know if we have heard from the House on this. It continues:

—to report from time to time, and except when the House otherwise orders, to send for persons, papers and records, to sit while the House is sitting, to sit during periods when the House stands adjourned, to sit jointly with other standing committees, to print from day to day such papers and evidence as may be ordered by them, and to delegate to subcommittees all or any of their powers except the power to report directly to the House.

I would like to hear from the clerk on this, because it seems to me that it's a mistake, a misprint or a typo, or maybe there's something that I'm not understanding here. I would love to be enlightened on that.

• (1715)

The Chair: Mrs. Shanahan, to your point, if I read that:

...shall be severally empowered to examine and enquire into all such matters as may be referred to them by the House, to report from time to time, and except when the House otherwise orders, to send for persons, papers....

I think it speaks more broadly to the mandate of the committee, so I think that may be where the confusion lies a little bit.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: You can see why I'm questioning that wording, because typically what I've seen in other resolutions, and goodness knows I've seen quite a few of these motions, it usually has to do with that kind of residual power where the committee can just decide to study whatever it wants to study. I'm looking for that in the excellent briefing note that we had, which is later on, on additional powers of standing committees.

The Chair: You may be referring to 108(3)(h), then.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Yes, that sounds familiar.

The Chair: It speaks to the general powers of the committee.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I would really like to know from the proposer of this motion which one he's referring to, because I think that clarity of terms and definitions will tell us what we are really about here. Otherwise, it feels like someone just pulled this together with a whole bunch of copy-and-paste or something. It's possible.

The Chair: Maybe I can clarify it, then. The standing order that's referred to in the motion, 108(1)(a), speaks to the general powers of the committee. Standing Order 108(3)(h) speaks to the specific powers of the committee. Overall, I think that 108(1)(a)—and 108(3)(h)—as it's referenced in the motion that was presented by Mr. Barrett, actually encompasses all of the powers, general and specific, of what the committee is able to do.

The specifics of 108(1)(a) speak to the general powers of the committee, which we're dealing with, and that is very much.... Well, it's what you read. Isn't that right? It's that:

Standing committees shall be severally empowered to examine and enquire into all such matters as may be referred to them by the House—

In this case it's not. It's being proposed by a member.

—to report from time to time, and except when the House otherwise orders, to send for persons, papers and records, to sit while the House is sitting....

You can cut it both ways, but in overall terms the general powers of the committee are reflected in this particular motion. I don't know whether that clarifies it for you, but from my standpoint, I think that referencing the general powers of the committee is sufficient, and then, the specific powers, as I said, are covered under Standing Order 108(3)(h).

• (1720)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Chair, far be it from me to stand on points of grammar, but there does seem to be something odd about that formulation, that the House may do something or the committee may pick up something that the House refers to it. It seems like there's a subject, an object and a qualifier there, and that does not seem to be the case. It does not seem to have anything to do with the motion that's in front of us. However, as I understand, the proposer is no longer with us, and I don't see that anyone on the Conservative side is jumping up, with their hands, to provide an explanation.

I can see that, maybe, it was just cobbled together. I accept your attempt to clarify that, so I will continue—

The Chair: Thank you.

Just to clarify even further, it's not unusual, Mrs. Shanahan, for these types of motions to come back with this specific number in it.

It speaks to the general mandate of the committee, so it's not that unusual.

In reference to Mr. Barrett no longer being here—and I'm sure he's busy somewhere else—Mr. Williamson is here in his place and is fully substituted in as a member of this committee.

I'm trying to clarify the difference as best as I can. From my standpoint, one is as good as the other in terms of the general mandate and the specific mandate. This motion is in order, and it does speak to the general mandate of the committee. That's what Standing Order 108(1)(a) speaks to.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Certainly, Chair, I think we're on the same team as far as trying to clarify what this motion is attempting to do.

I could have an issue with some of the other wording, which may be, again, more of.... How many of us wear different hats, Chair, in our roles? For example, I'm the member of Parliament for Châteauguay—Lacolle, soon to be Châteauguay—Les Jardins-de-Napierville. I'm also the chair of the national Liberal caucus. I'm also a member of this committee. We have different roles.

In the same way, the Prime Minister has different roles. His role, vis à vis the Liberal Party, is as leader of the Liberal Party. When the text refers to Mark Carney being recently appointed, he's appointed by the leader of the Liberal Party as an adviser and as a chair to the Liberal Party's task force on economic growth.

I salute the member for getting the name of the task force right because we know there are a number of different task forces, committees, forums and so on. Sometimes those names can be easily confused.

On that note, Mr. Barrett has the right name of the Liberal Party's task force on economic growth, but he does not have the right title. It is the leader of the Liberal Party. It's not the Prime Minister in his role as Prime Minister, but the leader of the Liberal Party.

If we get to the meat of the motion, what is Mr. Barrett trying to do here? I gather he's very concerned about conflicts of interest. He's very concerned about conflicts of interest amongst those people.

We are fortunate in Canada that we have many experienced people who provide their advice and who have extensive education, expertise and, most importantly, real-world experience in a number of different areas. They're not elected, necessarily. They are advisers. They are appointed to different forums or task forces. They can be a staff member.

If they're a staff member, then we can see where the rules, regulations and legislation concerning conflict of interest can come into play. If they are an elected member, we can see where our rules, regulations and legislation around conflict of interest and ethics come into play.

I think Mr. Barrett brings up a valid concern. What about people who are acting in a volunteer, ad hoc, periodic or regular advisory role to any leader of any party? Any leader of any party is lobbied and is under constant scrutiny and pressure, so it's reasonable to have questions about the background, the profile and the nature of the people surrounding a leader of... In this case we're talking about federal parties. We're not going to get into the provinces. That's another story altogether.

Is it the purview of this committee to be considering, to know more, to understand better and perhaps be in a position to make some recommendations that would better protect the integrity of our way of governing and of our democratic system, which are reliant primarily on democratically elected representatives of Canadians across the country?

It's good to know the people around leaders, who wield tremendous influence and have the ability to move matters. It would be good to know more about them and what, if anything, should be done by this committee or recommended by this committee.

In that regard, Chair, I would like to move an amendment. I think I have it here.

● (1725)

The Chair: Go ahead with your amendment, Mrs. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: You're lucky I didn't give you this copy, because it's all written up the sides of the previous page.

I move to add, following the line with “six-month high”, “and that Jenni Byrne, who is the well-known special adviser to Pierre Poilievre as well as a registered lobbyist for grocery multinational Loblaw's at a time that the Poilievre Conservatives are voting against every Liberal government measure to make grocery prices more affordable for Canadians; Jenni Byrne, who regularly attends caucus meetings and daily morning strategy calls, is not listed as an employee in Pierre Poilievre's office to shield her from public disclosure and conflict of interest laws; Jenni Byrne established a second lobbying firm working from the same office as Jenni Byrne + Associates to circumvent federal lobbying laws”.

It would then go to read, “That pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a)—I'm still not in agreement with it, but that's what it is—“the committee call upon Mark Carney and Jenni Byrne to testify for two hours each before the committee within 14 calendar days of the adoption of this motion.”

Chair, did you want to add the 14 calendar days, because you made that specification?

● (1730)

The Chair: Do you have the text for us, Mrs. Shanahan?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I do.

The Chair: You can send that to me. I'd like to have a look at it, if you don't mind.

Okay. I'm going to ask that you send that. In the meantime, I am going to suspend until I get a chance to have a look at it.

If you can send it to the clerk, that would be terrific. Thank you.

We're going to suspend for a minute.

● (1730)

(Pause)

● (1750)

The Chair: We're back, following a suspension.

All members now have the amendment as proposed by Mrs. Shanahan.

Madam Clerk, do you want to pull up the retyped motion that you just sent to everyone?

When you cut through it all, which I have, what we're dealing with is an amendment to Mr. Barrett's motion to have Mark Carney come before the committee. Madam Shanahan has moved an amendment to have Jenni Byrne testify before the committee, adding a time of two hours each—and we're all in agreement—based on the motion of 14 calendar days. Cutting through all of the preamble, all of it, that's what we're dealing with right now.

On the amendment to have Jenni Byrne appear before committee, Mrs. Shanahan, go ahead.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I thank the clerk for putting this together fairly quickly, but I think that, grammatically, it makes more sense where.... We say “and that Jenni Byrne”, that first bolded part of the amendment—“and that Jenni Byrne”, “and that Jenni Byrne”. Otherwise, I don't think it makes sense with just a semi-colon.

The Chair: Both proposals are very wordy, and obviously trying to capture everything. I think that if we were to capture this, the last line would capture it all, the preamble notwithstanding.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: In the French, you see that the “*que*” is there.

[*Translation*]

It reads: “That Jenni Byrne, who...attends...”

[*English*]

The “and that”.... It all flows from that original “Given that”.

The Chair: Good. We'll make the correction. We'll send it out.

The premise of the motion is that Mark Carney comes for two hours on the main motion. The amendment says that Jenni Byrne comes for two hours within 14 calendar days. That's the basis of what we're dealing with right now.

On the amendment, Mr. Fisher, go ahead, sir.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the clerk for her efforts in putting all of that together. It's never an easy thing to combine things on the fly. This looks very close to what I heard from the floor.

I'll support the amendment. It's interesting. I'm sure every party has advisers. Every party has advisers who have other things going on in their lives and other business prospects. Certainly this is something that's worth supporting. I would urge members to support the amendment and then see what these folks have to say.

I don't really have much more to add to that. I'm just reading this over because it was spoken to. Again, I thank the clerk for this. It looks like what I heard from Mrs. Shanahan is articulated very well here.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fisher.

For the benefit of the committee, we're trying to calculate, with all the suspensions.... The clerk is in the process of doing that right now, of figuring out what time we have resources to. Right now it looks like that's 6:32.

Go ahead, Ms. Khalid.

• (1755)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much, Chair.

I'm happy to speak to the amendment as presented by Mrs. Shanahan and also to be here until 6:30. It's always a pleasure to spend lots of time with all of you guys.

I really appreciate your bringing it down to what the value of this motion is and what this motion, practically, is trying to do, including the amendment. It is to ensure that political parties and governments of the day—or what have you—have the ability to make sure that checks and balances are in place with respect to whoever advises the political party of the day or the political party of concern.

For me, the broader question is about what kinds of checks and balances are missing from this process. Whether it is the Liberal leader appointing Mark Carney to the Liberal Party of Canada as the chair of the Liberal Party's task force on economic growth or whether it is the leader of the Conservative Party appointing Jenni Byrne to advise on.... I really don't know what she advises on, to be honest, other than running campaigns. That's beside the point.

I think the point that we're trying to make here is that removing partisanship is really important for us to improve the potential of conflict of interest and the removal of the potential challenges that political parties could run into while also ensuring that, where expertise is available, expertise should be used. Where expertise is lacking within any organization, whether it's in the Conservative Party, the NDP, the Bloc or the Liberals, we should actively seek out where we can fill that void of expertise.

We need to do that in a responsible way. We need to do that in a way that respects the values of our democratic institutions, makes sure that there aren't any conflicts and makes sure that there are checks and balances in how we conduct ourselves, not just in the way that we operate as members of Parliament but also with our partisan hats as well. We need to make sure of what roles and responsibilities and checks and balances we should have in place within our political system.

I think that Mrs. Shanahan very rightly pointed out that it's about the perception of democratic institutions. It's about the perception

of holding what we are trying to do here in this place to account and making sure that those checks and balances are not just in existence but are also being fulfilled. It's also that the onus is not just on the government of the day. The onus is on each and every single political party that operates in this place in a partisan way.

I know that we spent the first hour talking about foreign interference. We have been going into this major study of misinformation and disinformation. I think understanding and appreciating how the perception of conflict of interest can play a role in the value of democratic institutions and how democratic institutions are perceived by the general public would be a good study for us.

As Mr. Villemure has said, we need to be more efficient with our time, and that's why I support the two hours piece to this amendment.

Now I will talk a little bit more, because I know that Mr. Barrett, while he was here, spoke at length about why he was bringing forward this motion. I will perhaps add as to why Ms. Byrne needs to be added to this motion. It's because of exactly what I was outlining, that perception.

• (1800)

Ms. Byrne is the current chief adviser, political strategist and confidant to the Leader of the Opposition, or the leader of the Conservative Party, while she is also an active lobbyist. Recent media coverage has confirmed that a lobbying firm run by Ms. Byrne has established a second company that's housed out of the same office, so there's a bit of a perception issue here.

Obviously, we take everything at face value and want to give everybody the benefit of the doubt, but we are talking about the perception of conflict of interest and, ultimately, how that leads to deteriorating trust within our democratic institutions.

It would appear that Ms. Byrne's firm is actively lobbying at the federal level, and that includes current Conservative members of Parliament, while she's taking steps to hide that activity. That is what has been reported in the media. All of my information is coming from open sources and from what has been reported in our news.

As I was saying, this raises some serious questions as to what extent Ms. Byrne is personally involved in that federal lobbying piece and whether or not she's in compliance with the laws that are related to ethics and with lobbying in this country.

As we're kind of drawing parallels here, we need to have a broader picture and a broader understanding of how we can amend our rules and regulations to ensure that this kind of perception of conflict does not occur. This amendment makes this motion very balanced, and it removes the partisanship from this motion to talk about a very serious issue.

I will park my comments there, Chair. I do want to support this motion, and I think that the more we can do to ensure the partisanship is taken out, the better a position we will be in to ensure our democratic values and ensure that the perception of conflict of interest does not exist, regardless of hyperpartisanship, whichever party it comes from.

Thank you, Chair. I'll leave my comments here for now, but I do reserve the right to get back on that list.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Khalid.

I'm going to go to Mr. Caputo next on the amendment, followed by Mrs. Shanahan and Mr. Fisher.

Go ahead, Mr. Caputo.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Thank you.

I really appreciated Ms. Khalid's soliloquy about partisanship and hyperpartisanship, because it is against that backdrop that I'm really happy to move an amendment, which I have sent to the clerk, that would clean up a lot of the language.

It would read, "That pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), the committee call upon Mark Carney, Gurratan Singh and Jenni Byrne to testify before the committee for two hours each within 14 calendar days of the adoption of this motion."

The Chair: Hang on, Mr. Caputo. You're proposing to strike the preamble of the motion and deal directly with the motion. Now you're adding, as a subamendment, Mr. Gurratan Singh, because we've already had an amendment moved to include Ms. Byrne.

The main motion was to—

Mr. Frank Caputo: This would be a subamendment, I guess, or an amendment to the subamendment.

• (1805)

The Chair: Mr. Caputo, we've dealt with this before at committee and the clerk just reminded me of this.

We're currently on an amendment that includes Ms. Byrne. What I'd like to do is dispose of that amendment and then—whatever happens with the amendment—rather than proposing a subamendment you come back with another amendment that would include Mr. Singh, which I heard you say.

Rather than accept that as a subamendment, I'm going to give you an opportunity, once this amendment is disposed of, to come back and deal with it as an amendment to the motion as amended, if that provides any clarity.

Mr. Williamson, I'll put you on the list.

Mr. Frank Caputo: I'll yield my time to Mr. Williamson.

The Chair: I have a list. I am going to come back to you, Mr. Caputo, when the time is right.

I have Mrs. Shanahan, Mr. Fisher and then Mr. Williamson.

Go ahead, Mrs. Shanahan.

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): I have a point of order.

I think some clarification is needed from Ms. Khalid, who said she reserves the right to be added to the list.

It's not quite clear that she'd like to be added to the list. I think you need to seek that because Ms. Khalid and I had a disagreement on another committee about her—

Ms. Iqra Khalid: It was very different circumstance.

Mr. John Williamson: It's not at all. You are a generic—

The Chair: I'm going to stop both of you right now.

I try, to the best of my ability, to see who's raising their hand and who wants to intervene and have some discussion on this. We're going to maintain that same standard.

I have Mrs. Shanahan, Mr. Fisher and then Mr. Williamson on the list.

Go ahead, Mrs. Shanahan, on the amendment, please.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Yes, it's on my amendment. Thank you.

I did want to add something just to clarify. We hear a lot of pejorative language being used when people's names are used in motions and amendments. That's not what I'm about.

I want to make it very clear. I do not know Ms. Byrne. I may have met her briefly at a Progressive Conservative leadership convention back in the 1970s when I moved in those circles. Yes, it could be. No, probably.... I think she's a little younger than I am.

I do not know her personally and I am not someone who would ever approve of or be party to the kind of denigration that I have seen other members partake of when they talk about members of the public, whether or not they are advisers or linked to any particular party or what have you.

That's the only comment that I wanted to make there, Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Wonderful.

Mr. Fisher, go ahead on the amendment, please.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you. I was grasping for the thought I had when I was speaking last time on the amendment. I just wanted to touch on my thoughts on that.

The Conservatives have voted against every effort to do whatever we could in the House of Commons to reduce grocery prices. The connection of Ms. Byrne to Loblaw's makes it a question that I certainly would love to ask of her.

Again, going back to my comments earlier, I would support the amendment. That's all.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead on the amendment, Mr. Williamson, please.

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you.

With your ruling recognized, I'd like to move an amendment to the amendment. This is largely to remove the description of both individuals, just so we really get down to the core of what we're debating here. I hope members would agree that this is what we're trying to get in this.

I move that we strike what is on offer and debate the following: "That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), the committee call upon Mark Carney and Jenni Byrne to testify before the committee for two hours each within 14 calendar days of the adoption of this motion."

I think you'll find that's in order. It just clarifies what in fact we are debating, without additional language or additional baggage, which I think both sides are struggling with.

We have a clean motion that really gets to the heart of what we're debating here. It does not take away from either the motion or the amendment to the motion, but wraps it up, shortens it and cleans it up.

• (1810)

The Chair: The challenge with that...

I get where you want to go with this, Mr. Williamson. I think I made my position on this clear. We're dealing, effectively, with the last line. Part of the amendment that we're dealing with is the addition to the preamble over and above what the main motion is.

Do you understand what I'm saying? The amendment that was proposed starts after "a six-month high". We're dealing with an amendment that has three paragraphs in it and then the addition of Ms. Byrne in the last part of that motion.

The challenge for you in proposing this is that it doesn't accurately reflect what you want to do. That's why my suggestion is that we dispose of the amendment. We can continue to have debate on this and then come back. If it's the will of the members to delete the preamble and just deal with the heart of what this motion is all about and what the amendment potentially is all about, then we can look to add to that amendment, which includes the deletion of the preamble.

You're only dealing with half the issue right now. That's the problem. You're not dealing with the top half, which was moved in the main motion. You're dealing with the second half, which was moved in the amendment. I appreciate where you're going with this.

I don't have any other speakers on the list, so I am going to move to the amendment.

Do we have consensus on the amendment? Do you want votes?

Mr. John Williamson: Yes, let's have a recorded vote.

The Chair: We're going to move to the clerk now to take the roll on the amendment, which everybody has clearly established, to add Ms. Byrne, notwithstanding all the preamble, as well as "two hours" and "14 calendar days".

Go ahead, Madam Clerk.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 7; nays 3 [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: I'm going to go to Mr. Caputo now.

Mr. Caputo, you have the floor.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Thank you, Chair.

I would like to move an amendment, and that would read as follows: "That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), the committee call upon Mark Carney to testify before the committee for two hours, as well as Jenni Byrne and Gurratan Singh to testify before the committee for one hour each, within 14 calendar days of the adoption of this motion."

Mr. Matthew Green: If you guys can get two hours of questions out of Gurratan, all the power to you.

Mr. Frank Caputo: We said one.

Mr. Matthew Green: I'm not going to support this. Bring everybody for two.

The Chair: Mr. Caputo, just to be clear.... You did indicate before that you wanted to delete the preamble. I didn't hear you say that. You went to the—

• (1815)

Mr. Frank Caputo: I'm sorry. That would be the extent of the motion.

The Chair: Right. The extent of the amendment that you're proposing is to, effectively, have Mr. Carney for two hours, Ms. Byrne for one hour and then Mr. Singh for one hour. Is that correct? You're looking to delete the preamble.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. Is that even in order?

The Chair: Give me a second here. I'm going to discuss this with the clerk. Hang on a second, please.

I appreciate your question. I sought clarity from the clerk on this. It's my opinion that the amendment would be in order because he's adding another witness to the witness list, and he's dealing with the time.

In my view, the amendment as proposed by Mr. Caputo is in order.

We're on the amendment proposed by Mr. Caputo.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much, Chair.

To clarify, the amendment proposes that Mr. Carney appear for two hours. Ms. Byrne, who was in the amended motion, was slated to appear for two hours and will now appear for one hour. As for Mr. Singh, we don't really know where he fits within the context of this motion, but he should also appear for one hour.

I'm not really sure why there are different times assigned to the proposed witnesses. I also don't see any justification as to why Mr. Singh should appear. I don't think that any argument has been made as to how he fits within the narrative of Mr. Carney and Ms. Byrne. I think that this amendment is a little bit half-baked and a little bit suspicious, as Mr. Cooper would say, in that we don't know why there's a differentiation, and we don't know why this extra name is being added without any context for why it's being added.

Chair, I would really appreciate some clarity from the mover of the amendment.

If I can get back onto the floor once we've had clarity, that would be great.

The Chair: I do have a list. I'm going to go to Mr. Cooper and then Ms. Shanahan after that.

Mr. Cooper, do you have your hand up on the amendment?

Mr. Michael Cooper: On the amendment, I'd like to move a subamendment. I understand your previous ruling. It would be, very simply, to remove the provision for Gurratan Singh to appear. It would leave the balance of the amendment intact in that Mr. Carney would appear for two hours and Ms. Byrne for one hour.

The Chair: Again, I'm going to deal with this.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Mr. Chair, I'm listening to the interpreters, but if I don't have the text in front of me, it's quite difficult to follow.

The Chair: It's difficult for me as well, Mr. Simard.

Mr. Mario Simard: We talked about an amendment and we have just received a subamendment, but we have not yet seen the text of the amendment.

[English]

The Chair: I'm going to deal with the amendment.

[Translation]

We'll deal with the amendment first. If Mr. Cooper wants to propose another amendment afterwards, we will make a decision at that time.

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: We're on the amendment proposed by Mr. Caputo.

I'm going to come back to you after, Mr. Cooper.

I'm going to go to Mrs. Shanahan now on the amendment proposed by Mr. Caputo.

Mrs. Shanahan, go ahead.

• (1820)

[Translation]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I am pleased to have a better understanding of what is going on here.

First of all, this is not at all in keeping with my amendment, which sought to have Mr. Carney and Ms. Jenni Byrne appear before us for two hours each. I don't know if they would necessarily have to appear separately or together, but that's the kind of discussion the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure can have.

The reason we want to hear from these witnesses is to study an issue, not to get into the details of each person's life or background. We want to know their point of view, how they see their work and what measures they have taken or considered, or not, to manage not only their conflicts of interest, which is important and which any

professional is capable of doing, but also any appearance of conflict of interest.

This is a group of witnesses that could be quite interesting. We are asking that they appear for two hours each, but that could also be done in a two-hour meeting with the two witnesses. They are professionals, not adversaries or competitors, as far as I know. Both serve as financial advisers to federal party leaders here in Canada.

As for Mr. Singh, again, I have no idea what his background is. There was quite a preamble for the other two people, but there is nothing about this gentleman, unless it was in Mr. Caputo's amendment. For his part, Mr. Williamson wanted to eliminate all the preambles that talked about the background of each of the witnesses we want to invite, but there is nothing about Mr. Singh. So I'm having trouble understanding what's going on.

Furthermore, I share my colleague Mr. Simard's frustration at the fact that there seems to be no end to the amendments and subamendments presented.

Mr. Chair, you are able to give us some time and perhaps even suggest that the stakeholders agree to draft a motion that makes sense. I have already seen that at the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, and everyone was satisfied with the result.

That said, I will definitely not support this amendment, which proposes that we hear from one witness for two hours, but the other for only one hour, which is completely illogical.

Thank you very much.

• (1825)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Shanahan.

[English]

Next on the list, on the amendment, is Mr. Caputo.

Go ahead, Mr. Caputo.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Could I raise a point of order before you go to Mr. Caputo?

The Chair: Go ahead on your point of order.

Mr. Darren Fisher: At 6:21, we received a notice of motion, presumably as amended by either Mr. Williamson, Mr. Caputo or Mr. Cooper—I'm not sure which—but it strictly strikes everything out, and I don't remember Mr. Caputo saying that. I do remember Mr. Williamson saying that, but I don't remember Mr. Cooper saying that.

Are we suggesting now that all of the preamble is gone, based on the email we got at 6:21?

The Chair: We haven't disposed of Mr. Caputo's amendment yet. I think what was sent to you was a proposal that reflects accurately what Mr. Caputo's amendment was, and that is to delete the entirety of the preamble and, then, just deal with that last line that's there. That's what we're on right now. Effectively, what we're on right now is Carney for two hours, Byrne for one, Singh for one and 14 calendar days. That's the amendment we're on right now.

Mr. Darren Fisher: The preamble is all gone.

The Chair: He proposes to delete the preamble.

Mr. Darren Fisher: I didn't know that.

The Chair: I know Mr. Williamson brought it up, but I know Mr. Caputo did bring it up as well, Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Okay, so the motion that's on the floor right now is Mr. Caputo's and not Mr. Williamson's.

The Chair: The motion that's on the floor right now, or the amendment—

Mr. Darren Fisher: Yes, the amendment....

The Chair: —is to delete the entirety of the preamble. I'm going to say this. Frankly, preambles on these types of motions have no business being in motions, regardless of who's proposing them. If you want to deal with something, deal with it directly.

What we're dealing with, on the amendment, is “That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), the committee call upon Mark Carney for two hours, as well as Gurratan Singh and Jenni Byrne for one hour each, to testify before the committee within 14 calendar days of the adoption of this motion.”

That's the amendment we're dealing with right now. The preamble is proposed to be gone.

Does that clarify that for you, Mr. Fisher?

Mr. Darren Fisher: That's not what I understood, but I got the clarification I was seeking. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Simard, do you have a point of order?

Mr. Mario Simard: I just want to check something: when you read the motion, you did not add Mr. Singh. I didn't hear the interpreter name him.

The Chair: I think I mentioned him.

Mr. Mario Simard: Okay. If Mr. Singh is included, we're talking about the same motion.

The Chair: According to the amendment that was just proposed, Mr. Singh will appear before the committee for one hour.

[*English*]

Mr. Barrett, it's on a point of order, I assume, not debate. Is it a point of order?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Yes, and on that point of order, Chair, the text that Mr. Fisher references...what form did that take in its circulation? I'm rejoicing after being in the House, dealing with the Speaker's ruling on the last report you tabled from the committee.

The Chair: I haven't sent them out. I know the clerk has been on this, so I'm going to get the clerk to advise you on the question you asked.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'm happy to take that off-line, if that's easier.

The Chair: Okay. Let's do that off-line.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Nancy Vohl): It seems that everybody, including me, may be a little confused. I do a lot of things with tracked changes, so I'm hoping I sent you one of the many versions with tracked changes.

The amendment by Mrs. Shanahan was agreed to. It added some text regarding Jenni Byrne and that she also be invited, and it was for two hours each. Now we are back—

Mr. Michael Barrett: It's two hours for Ms. Byrne and for Mr. Carney.

The Clerk: Yes, that's two hours for each.

The Chair: Now what we're dealing with is Mr. Caputo's proposal to strike the entirety of the preamble and then to have Mr. Carney appear for two hours and Ms. Byrne and Mr. Singh for one hour within 14 calendar days of the motion being adopted. Am I correct?

• (1830)

The Clerk: It's to delete everything that is part of the preamble and leave, “That, pursuant to Standing 108(1)(a), the committee call upon Mark Carney for two hours” and then add “as well as Gurratan Singh”, which is part of the new amendment, “and Jenni Byrne”, which was already adopted. Then, instead of being for two hours each, it becomes two hours for Mark Carney. Then we add, “Gurratan Singh and Jenni Byrne for one hour each within 14 calendar days of the adoption of this motion.”

Mr. Michael Barrett: My last question—if I can, Chair—is for the clerk. I see the amendment about Ms. Byrne, and I understand the new change proposed by Mr. Caputo. My staff sent me these. Where did the insertion come with respect to Mr. Singh?

The Chair: Mr. Caputo.

Mr. Michael Barrett: It was an amendment to the amended motion?

The Chair: That's right.

Mr. Michael Barrett: That's understood. Thank you very much.

The Chair: That being said, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we are out of time and resources.

This meeting is adjourned.

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