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Chair: Mr. Robert Kitchen



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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Kitchen (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 15 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

Today, we'll be hearing from the President of the Treasury Board and officials regarding the main estimates 2022-23 and the departmental plans.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Members are attending in person in the room, as well as remotely using the Zoom application.

Regarding the speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether participating virtually or in person. I'd like to take this opportunity to remind all participants to this meeting that screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted.

Given the ongoing pandemic situation, and in light of the recommendations from public health authorities as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy on October 19, 2021, to remain healthy and safe, the following is recommended for all those attending the meeting in person. Anyone with symptoms should participate by Zoom, and not attend the meeting in person. Everyone must maintain two-metre physical distancing, whether seated or standing.

Everyone must wear a non-medical mask when circulating in the room. It is recommended in the strongest possible terms that members wear their masks at all times, including when seated. Non-medical masks, which provide better clarity over cloth masks, are available in the room. Everyone present must maintain proper hand hygiene by using the hand sanitizer at the room entrance. Committee rooms are cleaned before and after each meeting. To maintain this, everyone is encouraged to clean surfaces, such as their desk, their chair and their microphone with the provided disinfectant wipes when vacating or taking a seat. As the chair, I will be enforcing these measures for the duration of the meeting, and I thank members in advance for their co-operation.

I'd like to welcome the President of the Treasury Board, Minister Fortier, and her colleagues.

I invite her to make her opening statement.

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

Thank you for having me again, this time to discuss the main estimates for the 2022-23 fiscal year, and the departmental plan for the Treasury Board Secretariat for the same period.

[Translation]

Today, I am accompanied in person and virtually by the following Treasury Board Secretariat officials: Annie Boudreau, assistant secretary, expenditure management sector; Karen Cahill, assistant secretary and chief financial officer; Marie-Chantal Girard, assistant deputy minister, employee relations and total compensation; Monia Lahaie, assistant comptroller general, financial management sector; Samantha Tattersall, assistant comptroller general, acquired services and assets sector; and Paul Wagner, assistant deputy minister, strategy and transformation.

Mr. Chair, I would like to start by recognizing the excellent work done by these officials. I'm most grateful for all their efforts.

• (1535)

[English]

The 2022-23 main estimates seek funding to address Canada's key priorities. They include infrastructure investments, benefits for seniors and students, transfers to the provinces and territories for health care and child care, and action to reduce emissions and green our economy.

The government is also seeking the necessary investments to continue protecting and supporting Canadians through the COVID-19 pandemic, and to foster economic recovery.

[Translation]

The main estimates contain information on planned budget expenditures totalling \$397.6 billion, which will allow 126 organizations to provide programs and services to Canadians. This amount will be allocated through voted expenditures of \$190.3 billion as well as \$207.3 billion worth of statutory spending, which is already authorized under current laws.

[English]

As always, details about each organization's work can be found in the departmental plans. The plans were tabled the day after the main estimates, supporting parliamentary scrutiny.

The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat is seeking \$7.8 billion in funding in these main estimates, and \$4.3 billion is broken down as follows: \$750 million for government contingencies, \$152 million for government-wide initiatives, \$2.1 billion for operating and \$750 million for capital budget carry-forward, and \$600 million for payroll expenditures.

These central votes support Treasury Board in its role as the expenditure manager, employer and general manager for the Government of Canada.

[*Translation*]

There are also funds totalling \$3.2 billion for payments to pension, benefit and insurance plans, which include employer contributions for employment insurance, wage loss insurance and life insurance. The remaining \$320 million will be used for the department's operations and activities.

[*English*]

Before closing, Mr. Chair, allow me to touch briefly on some of my department's objectives and priorities. In its spending oversight, TBS is beginning an ongoing strategic policy review to ensure that programs are effective on challenges like climate change, the pandemic and growing the economy. It will also adapt government to our postpandemic reality, such as digitization.

I want to be clear: The review is about smarter government, not smaller government.

TBS will also work with Environment and Climate Change Canada to ensure that climate considerations are integrated throughout the government's decision-making.

In its role as employer, TBS will continue to ensure that Canadians can receive services in both official languages. We'll work to bolster our role through Bill C-13, an act for the substantive equality of Canada's official languages, which will strengthen our monitoring, auditing and evaluation.

We'll also begin a review of how to best protect the courageous whistle-blowers who disclose serious wrongdoing within government.

[*Translation*]

As to the Treasury Board Secretariat's administrative leadership role within government, it will continue to improve Canadians' digital experience when they access government services. The secretariat will work with its governmental partners to help departments and agencies attain the required minimum of at least 5% of the value of federal contracts being awarded to indigenous communities.

Moreover, the secretariat will work with departments and agencies towards fulfilling the government's commitment to purchasing completely clean electricity wherever possible by the end of 2022, electrifying the federal fleet of light vehicles by 2030, and reducing waste production and water consumption.

• (1540)

[*English*]

In its people management role, TBS will bring forward a plan for the future of work in the public service. It will also support depart-

ments in removing barriers for public servants with disabilities, and in implementing plans outlined in their responses to the call to action on anti-racism, equity and inclusion in the public service.

Finally, in its regulatory oversight role, TBS will continue to lead efforts to ensure that regulations maintain high health and safety standards while improving the competitiveness of Canadian businesses. A key measure is Bill S-6, the second annual regulatory modernization bill. This legislation will reduce administrative burden for businesses, facilitate digital interactions with government and simplify regulatory processes. Bill S-6 will support our economic recovery by helping businesses do what they do best and by making it easier for Canadians to get things done.

Mr. Chair, these priorities set out in the Treasury Board Secretariat's departmental plan and the investments requested in the main estimates reflect our efforts to meet the evolving needs of Canadians.

[*Translation*]

With these documents, the government continues to provide information in an open, transparent and responsible matter so that parliamentarians and Canadians have a clear idea of the way the government intends to invest money for Canadians and for Canada.

[*English*]

Again, I would like to thank the committee for its work and the valuable role you play in the estimates and parliamentary supply process.

In closing, thank you again for the invitation. My officials and I would be pleased to answer your questions at this time.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, for your presentation, and thank you to the witnesses you brought with you. We greatly appreciate seeing you here again in person.

We'll now go to our first round of questioning.

Mr. McCauley, we will start with you for six minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair, Minister and colleagues. Welcome back.

I want to start with whistle-blowers. In 2017 this committee put in a unanimous report that was widely lauded, that was unanimously lauded, by the Canadian whistle-blower community. It's been five years. We've seen nothing. When will we actually see the recommendations from this committee brought into legislation?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you very much, Mr. McCauley.

Our government believes that those who disclose serious wrongdoing must be protected, and the law provides a secure and confidential process for—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: When can we see legislation to protect whistle-blowers?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I understand. I would like to set the stage by the fact that the government is working very hard. Budget 2022 funded a review of the act, which we will expect very soon, later this year.

Also, I just want to thank you for the work you've done, as you tabled a report with 15 recommendations. I would like to hear what you think we should be looking at going forward, as we will be reviewing this later this year.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: There are a couple of things, Minister. You mentioned the law. Canada has the weakest whistle-blower laws in the OECD. For five years the government has sat on its hands and done nothing.

Recently there was a situation where whistle-blowers were actually exposed. This sums up the Canadian whistle-blower experience. Two whistle-blowers with the CRA were actually outed by the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner. The very gentleman who is supposed to protect whistle-blowers outed whistle-blowers.

What is going to be done about that? Why has it been five years with no legislation?

You asked me what my recommendations are. This committee put through very specific items to put in. The government could bring them in in a week. Why has this not been done? Why is the very person charged with protecting whistle-blowers exposing whistle-blowers? What is the government going to do to protect those specific whistle-blowers?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you, again.

I'll start with the first mention about the CRA whistle-blowers at the Federal Court. We know that the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada is an independent agent of Parliament, and it's mandated to allow anyone to disclose wrongdoing in the federal public sector confidentially and safely.

I have been advised that this information—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: That man exposed—

Hon. Mona Fortier: —has been removed by the Federal Court.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: —whistle-blowers. The very person meant to protect whistle-blowers exposed them. They have no protection for five years.

I appreciate that you want to do a review. The review is going to spend \$2 million or \$3 million over five years, which will mean a 10-year gap between this committee's widely lauded recommendations and perhaps a chance to even start looking at legislation.

Why don't we just simply put in the legislation recommended by...unanimously, and at that time it was a Liberal majority committee?

• (1545)

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you, again, for that information.

As you know, I've been mandated to review the whistle-blower act, and we will be reviewing this later this year. As you saw in budget 2022, we have put forward some money to do this exercise.

Maybe Marie-Chantal wants to add where we are at this point.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: No offence, but I don't want to hear from Ms. Girard, because she does not have the ability to put forward the legislation.

Do you believe it's acceptable for a 10-year gap between this committee's recommendation and a start to even look at legislation? That will be two governments from now, two Parliaments from now. People are exposed.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Again, I know that the committee did hard work in 2017 and had 15 recommendations. We will take that into account and also start the work, as I just mentioned. We have an important investment in budget 2022 to raise this and review the act.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I will just state for the record that I appreciate your good intentions, but we know the path to a certain area is paved with good intentions. I don't believe it's good enough for whistle-blowers. I hope you will reconsider.

Will you commit publicly to those whistle-blowers outed by our own government that they will be protected from retribution from the CRA and from the government for exposing corruption and wrongdoing within the CRA?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Again, I would like—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: These brave whistle-blowers, as you mentioned, deserve our protection. Will you guarantee that they'll be protected from retribution?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Well, it is our government's intention, and we believe that those who disclose serious wrongdoing—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: These people's lives are on the line. Will they be protected?

Hon. Mona Fortier: —must be protected. As I said earlier, we are going to be reviewing this later this year, and we are investing in this review.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Minister, these are whistle-blowers. Will they be protected?

Our government, the Government of Canada outed them. Will they be protected? They deserve that.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We're continuing to make sure that those who disclose serious wrongdoing must be protected, so that is an objective. Also, our government has strengthened training, monitoring, reporting and policies in the workplace to make sure this is taken into consideration.

I know the officials might want to go into more details, maybe in the next hour. I know you have other questions.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm just going to go on the record that I don't believe that's good enough. I don't believe the action taken in the five years is anywhere near adequate. We are still, when you talk to the whistle-blower community, the weakest in the OECD. Corrupt dictatorships have stronger whistle-blower protection than Canada. I think we need to do better.

Hon. Mona Fortier: This is the government's priority. It's in my mandate letter and we will continue to work on this closely.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McCauley.

We'll now go to Mr. Housefather for six minutes.

Mr. Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair. Thank you so much, Minister Fortier, for being here.

I want to say that I have had the opportunity to read the report on whistle-blowers that Mr. McCauley referred to, which recommends strengthening protections for whistle-blowers and expanding the definition of the people who would be protected by the act to include people who inadvertently were suspected of being the whistle-blower when they were not, for example. I definitely support our including in the budget this review of the act.

I was wondering, since we didn't quite get to that, could you give us a wider explanation of, for budget 2022, the amounts that are given for this review and what is planned?

Minister, I'll let you refer to whoever you'd like.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Yes. I will ask Marie-Chantal to move forward but I think, again, it's important to state that our government really believes that we need to move forward with a review and she will give the details.

Thanks.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard (Acting Chief Human Resources Officer, Treasury Board Secretariat): Indeed, there are two strings of work that are being done concurrently on this issue. We're not waiting. In the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer, we are improving the whistle-blower protection. In addition to the training and the awareness that was mentioned by the president, we're also meeting with the managers' communities and all senior leaders are also being trained and informed. We are implementing, through the policy suite reset, an initiative to focus on greater protection and improving the reprisal protection and supports to public servants. To that specific aspect, we fully recognize that it's a very stressful approach and discussion to have and action to post, so through our centre of expertise on mental health we are also developing services that are targeted to supporting potential whistle-blowers and accompanying them in that difficult period.

For the review, \$2.4 million was identified in the budget and we will start at the end of the summer, early fall, the work for the consultation preparing review options, criteria, doing the research and meeting with stakeholders for the review of the act.

• (1550)

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Thank you so much.

In terms of the other point that was raised, my understanding—and forgive me if I'm incorrect—is that the existing act, no matter

how much it would need to be strengthened, would obviously continue to protect those who are whistle-blowers who might have been inadvertently disclosed in the Federal Court. Would that be correct?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: You are correct.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Finally, my understanding is as well that the documents have now been withdrawn from the court because they were inadvertently disclosed by attorneys in a huge batch of production that had been agreed to by the parties and eventually these were judged to be irrelevant to the case. Is that also correct?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: I'm afraid I cannot confirm. I don't have the confirmation but we can come back to you with the answer.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Fortier, as you know, we are both passionate about official languages.

Can you tell us how Bill C-13 will increase Treasury Board powers in order to guarantee the quality of French and English within the public service and to maintain the status of both official languages?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for the question.

We both care about this issue, as do Canadians and many people within our communities who have been calling for the modernization of the Official Languages Act for many years now. They would like to see clauses that guarantee that all dollars are invested and that all policies are applied. Moreover, they want policies to be reviewed in order to ensure that they are adapted to the various contexts that exist in our country.

Treasury Board powers will be increased, which will allow us to oversee compliance and better evaluate the measures and programs being proposed.

I hope that all parties will support Bill C-13 which seeks to modernize the 50-year-old Official Languages Act, so that we can strengthen it.

[*English*]

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Just to make sure that we don't think the passion for official languages comes only from the franco-phone minority in Canada, I'll now ask this in English.

This will give you, as I understand it, the power to go to certain federal agencies and departments that don't respect official language policies as well as others and push them to be better in what they do. Is it correct that you're now an overseeing mechanism across the government?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Well, exactly. We'll need not only to monitor, but also to audit and evaluate how these programs and measures are brought forward by the federal government and how they are working, and to work with the different departments to make sure that these are responding to the needs that we have in the 21st century.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I think that's probably my time, Mr. Chair.

I just want to thank you again. I look forward to working with you on the official languages side.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Housefather.

Ms. Vignola, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Fortier, thank you for being here today.

The Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer will receive a small increase of \$1,174,000 compared to 2020.

My question is straightforward: is this increase really enough given the needs expressed by the Parliamentary Budget Officer, or is there still some leeway in order to better respond to those needs?

Please be brief.

• (1555)

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for the question.

Let me start by saying that we are very grateful to the Parliamentary Budget Officer for the work he is doing.

I will ask Ms. Boudreau to reply to your question, but I believe it is important to say that the amount allows us to take a good look at what we are doing. Perhaps my colleague can provide you with more details now.

Ms. Annie Boudreau (Assistant Secretary, Expenditure Management Sector, Treasury Board Secretariat): Thank you for the question.

The budget is based on the number of employees required. The increase that we see in the main estimates is for the number of equivalent full-time positions.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: If we look at the National Capital Commission in Vote 1, we see a decrease of about \$7.6 million since 2020-21, and in Vote 5, there's an increase of about \$8 million.

I would firstly like to know if it is just a simple question of transferring funds from one vote to another.

Secondly, the National Capital Commission was asked to refund amounts owing to the municipality of Chelsea for assessments. Will those amounts be refunded and if so, when?

Thirdly, how many other municipalities are seeing their assessment role being put into question by the National Capital Commission?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Let me start by thanking you for your question.

I know that the National Capital Commission works tremendously hard in the region to respond to various requests and that it also works with the federal government.

I will ask Ms. Boudreau to answer your three questions more fully, but let me just state that over the past year, the situation in Chelsea has been reviewed and I think that the amount will be paid soon.

If we are not able to answer your question, I will send you more information, because I know this is a problem for the municipality.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Thank you.

The main estimates for 2022-23 do not contain any information on municipalities.

You referred to a possible transfer, but it is not a transfer, because those are normally indicated in the supplementary estimates. Amounts in Vote 5, however, can vary from year to year.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

The residents and taxpayers of Chelsea can therefore expect that the situation will be resolved within the next few months.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Again, I will forward a more detailed answer because over the past year, there have been certain developments between the NCC and the municipality of Chelsea. We will be able to provide you with a better answer once we have made the necessary checks. I don't have the required information at hand.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you very much.

Going to Vote 5 for the Treasury Board Secretariat, I see there's no money provided for compensation adjustments.

I was wondering if that meant that the Phoenix pay system is suddenly working properly without us being aware of it. Why are there no compensation adjustments? I'm trying to understand why no funds have been allocated.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Ms. Boudreau will be able to give you a more fulsome answer.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Thank you.

You are referring to Vote 5, but I believe you meant Vote 15.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Indeed, I might have made an error copying the number down.

I was talking about the vote for compensation adjustments.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: In that case, it is indeed Vote 15.

This vote is for authorized increases provided for by collective agreements. Once a new collective agreement is signed, there will be increases. Again, these increases are mainly seen in the supplementary estimates.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Does that mean that there are no negotiations expected currently?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Negotiations are presently underway between the various bargaining agents and the government.

However, this won't necessarily have an immediate effect, because we may agree to pursue negotiations over the next 12 to 18 months.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Okay.

Going now to the Public Service Commission, we see a decrease of \$1.5 million, which is not huge, but it's still a lesser amount.

There are also \$7.1 million less for the School of Public Service. If memory serves, we hired more people. I might be wrong, to err is human. I'm trying to understand how we hired more employees when there's less money for the School of Public Service. We have to train the employees. Normally, it takes quite a while to train Canada Revenue Agency and Canada Employment Insurance Commission employees, for instance.

• (1600)

Hon. Mona Fortier: Before I say anything else, I would like to thank you for doing your homework. Your questions are fantastic.

We know that because of COVID-19, the School of Public Service has been working flat out to try to pivot over the past two years.

Unless someone here can provide you with an exact answer, I would prefer to send you a written reply which explains the decrease that you can see in the report.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. If you could provide us with that answer in writing, that would be appreciated.

I will now go to Mr. Johns for six minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

Minister, today the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development tabled an important report regarding whether the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat led the greening government strategy in a way that supports the government's climate goals. The commissioner found that five years into the strategy, the secretariat's efforts were not as complete as they could be, citing a limited approach to risk management and missing information.

Because of this, it's not clear whether the government is on track to meet its 2050 net-zero target. How do you plan to accelerate efforts to green government operations and increase transparency to Canadians?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Well, first I have to say that I had a conversation with the commissioner of the environment last week, knowing the report was coming out. Of the five recommendations that were tabled, we agree with four of them and we will be working with those four recommendations.

As this is in the beginning of our greening government strategy, we have time to develop and address different ways of making sure we concentrate on the priorities we have identified.

Mr. Gord Johns: Can you talk a little bit about what you're going to do to accelerate? I know Crown corporations have been left

out and they're a huge greenhouse gas contributor when it comes to buildings.

Hon. Mona Fortier: A goal in our greening strategy is to modernize the fleets with zero-emission, hybrid and alternate-fuel vehicles. We also have zero-carbon buildings and maximizing energy efficiency in existing ones. The third goal is to use nature-based solutions to protect assets from threats like flooding, and then to transition to a net-zero circular economy through green procurement.

We will be adjusting and working with these goals to make sure that we get to net zero by 2050.

Mr. Gord Johns: We're hoping that you'll expand into ensuring that all Crown corporations are included.

The strategic review of the public service is obviously a big issue right now, as you can imagine, especially for public service workers. The announcement that was made around the review and the potential cuts of up to \$6 billion has understandably prompted concern from many of the hard-working public servants and Canadians who rely on public services.

The last time a strategic review happened, the Harper government cut service delivery for veterans, people on EI and many others. In fact, because of those cuts from the Conservatives, we're still seeing the backlog right now, which your government has failed to fix for veterans who have been injured.

Obviously, there's the Phoenix pay system as well. Nineteen thousand public service jobs were lost as a result of that.

As you can imagine, the lack of detail about this review is deeply concerning. Can you reassure Canadians that this review will not impact service levels and that the public service unions will be consulted throughout this whole process?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for bringing this up. I'm actually really glad that we are moving forward with this strategic policy review. We promised it to Canadians, and we are keeping that promise.

As we know, this review will ensure that our programs are effective on challenges like climate change, the pandemic and growing our economy. It will also enable us to adapt our government to postpandemic realities, such as digitization.

This is a—

Mr. Gord Johns: The question, though, is whether it is going to impact—

Hon. Mona Fortier: I'm getting there.

Mr. Gord Johns: Great. Thanks, Minister.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We want to be a smarter government, not a smaller government. For that, it's really important to say that our government has been increasing the number of public servants in the last seven years. We are going to continue to work with public servants.

I did share in the last two weeks, following the announcement in the budget, that we want to bring higher values to taxpayers' dollars. That is focusing on priorities, and how we can do better. How can we transform those buildings that are empty into, maybe, community living? How can we get those investments, that we're making right now, into better and smarter ways of delivering services to Canadians?

That's the review that I'll be taking—

• (1605)

Mr. Gord Johns: I appreciate that, Minister. My concern is around service levels. That was the question, and ensuring Canadians that this review is not going to impact Canadian service levels.

We saw what happened with Veterans Affairs. We saw what happened with Phoenix, and the expensive outsourcing that's taking place around Phoenix, with expensive consultants trying to fix a broken deliverable.

In terms of whistle-blower protection, I'm going to follow Mr. McCauley. This government has committed in budget 2022 to take action to improve whistle-blower protections and supports for public servants, which is critical. The proposal is to provide \$2.4 million over five years to the Treasury Board Secretariat to launch a review of the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act. This committee, on which Mr. McCauley sat, did a review of this issue a few years back, and made some really good recommendations.

Why will it take five years to conduct this work?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I've been clear that we are starting the review later this year. We're making sure that we are going to do this review. We have \$2.4 million to start that exercise.

I want to come back to the report that was tabled in 2017, and the 15 recommendations. I believe you, and probably Mr. McCauley, would raise these recommendations as still being important in the review that we'll be undertaking. I will take into account the 2017 report as we do our review, and hopefully, we'll continue conversations with all parliamentarians as we do this.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johns.

We've now finished our first round. We'll now go to our second round.

We'll start with Mr. Paul-Hus, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Good day to you, minister. Good day to your colleagues as well.

My question is simple. It's timely. The Parliamentary Budget Officer noticed a piddling \$15-billion discrepancy in the Department of National Defence's budget. The Globe and Mail published an ar-

ticle on this yesterday. Can you please explain how such a thing can happen? We're not talking about \$15 million, but rather \$15 billion.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I am ready to answer the question, but please give me a few moments to organize my thoughts.

From what I understand, in the main estimates, we are investing a certain amount in National Defence.

[*English*]

We demonstrate that the difference is attributable to recently announced policy measures, including those in budget 2022, as well as funding that was previously approved, and capital projects that still require Treasury Board approval and inclusion in the estimates.

For specific details or projects, I would also invite you to speak with my colleague, the Minister of National Defence. That \$15 billion will have to go through a submission to Treasury Board.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: If I understand correctly, these are amounts that have yet to be approved, but they appear in the budget.

Hon. Mona Fortier: In this case, the amounts are indicated in the main estimates. Treasury Board must approve them.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: It seems \$77 billion will be allocated over two years.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We will receive other budgetary requests in the near future.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: This year's budget allocates \$77 billion. However, we also see an extra \$33 billion. As was stated earlier, this might include the \$8 billion for increased expenditures this year, but it does not explain the \$15 billion that appear in the same budget. The Minister of Finance's budgetary measures are creating a problem, because this has been authorized. Did you yourself see the authorization?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Yes. I have seen the authorization at Treasury Board. There are also the main estimates and the budget for 2022. Unless I'm mistaken, once we receive the request from the Department of National Defence explaining the need for \$15 billion and authorizing the expense, we will present the figures in supplementary estimates (A), (B), or (C). This will happen once the Minister of National Defence has made the request.

• (1610)

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: I will press on because time is fleeting, as you know.

You saw that the Bank of Canada raised its key interest rates and that we are expecting another hike. What will be the impact of the rate increases on debt servicing?

Hon. Mona Fortier: That is an excellent question.

Can you repeat it, please?

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: The Bank of Canada's key interest rate went up by half a percentage point. From what we learned yesterday, it will go up by another half a percentage point in June.

What will be the direct impact on Canada's public finances? What leeway will you have in terms of authorizing expenditures?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for that additional information.

I will ask Ms. Boudreau to give you more...

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Haven't you already received information on this?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: No, we don't have that information.

It's really a question that should be directed to the Department of Finance. As you know, the Department of Finance publishes two economic updates on debt servicing costs. It has already done so for the 2022 budget and will publish another update this fall in the fiscal monitor review.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: You mentioned federal buildings earlier.

Has the contract with BGIS for managing all of Canada's infrastructure been renewed? That contract is worth billions of dollars.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for the question.

I believe that the Minister of Public Services and Procurement, Ms. Tassi, spoke before your committee on Friday. She would probably be the best person to answer your question about contract renewals.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Hasn't Treasury Board already received a request for expenditure authorization in order to renew the contract with BGIS?

Hon. Mona Fortier: No.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Perfect.

Let's go now to the Department of National Defence. Is it true that the department returned \$1.2 billion of its \$28 billion envelope because of delays in procurement? Did you receive this information?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I don't have any such information.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Could you please indicate the fiscal year you are referring to?

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: It was last year in the 2021 budget. The Department of National Defence did not spend \$1.2 billion and returned that amount to Treasury Board.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: The Department of National Defence and other departments are constantly dealing with construction delays. When these delays occur, funds are indeed carried forward to the following fiscal year. The departments are allowed to carry forward to the following fiscal year amounts of up to 20% of capital expenditures. It is possible that the amount you are referring to is being carried forward.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

If you feel you need to add more to that, you can submit that information in writing to the clerk, who will distribute it among the committee.

We'll now go to Ms. Thompson for five minutes.

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

Minister and your staff, welcome to the committee.

Minister, would you mind speaking briefly about the funding for Indigenous Services Canada and the CIRNAC? Their funding has significantly increased. How does this contribute to the government's journey toward reconciliation?

Hon. Mona Fortier: As we know, it is part of our journey toward reconciliation, and the Government of Canada is committed to making the necessary investments to settle claims and support the infrastructure and services that are vital to indigenous communities. This includes their physical, mental, social and economic health and well-being.

The \$39.6 billion in funding for the department of Indigenous Services Canada includes, as you probably saw, the increase in funding for out-of-court settlements and for infrastructure in indigenous communities, as well as improvements to access to safe, clean drinking water in first nations communities. It is a major priority for our government and also Canadians to undertake these investments.

This shows our ongoing journey to reconciliation.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

I realize this is multi-faceted, but what spending in the main estimates would help with the continuing fight against COVID-19?

Hon. Mona Fortier: That's a very important question. As you know, in the past two years the Government of Canada has been committed to fighting COVID-19 and to our response to support Canadians' health but also the workers, the businesses and even non-profit organizations that have been helping with the response. While projected spending is down significantly from last year, there is still a significant effort needed to keep Canadians safe and to weather the broader impacts of the pandemic.

Of the \$397.6 billion in proposed spending in these estimates, approximately \$9.7 billion is related to the COVID-19 pandemic response. This is a decrease of \$12.4 billion compared to last year's main estimates. This funding would be used to procure vaccines, therapeutics and other supplies, for border measures, as well as for support for hard-hit businesses such as in the tourism, arts, culture and heritage sectors.

I want to add that the overall reduction of \$12.4 billion is largely due to the winding down of the benefit payments to individuals under the Canada Recovery Benefits Act. Of course, Canada's COVID measures will continue to be guided by science as it will evolve and as needed.

• (1615)

Ms. Joanne Thompson: On the same thread, how are the protections for the federal public servants changing as COVID-19 continues to evolve?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I would say that we continue to focus on making sure that public servants' health and safety are our priority. As we know, currently we have a vaccine mandate that is still applied. We are reviewing this vaccine mandate, as we had said we would review it after six months. Therefore, since April 6, we've been working on that review and we should be coming out with the determination of how this policy will be moving forward in the near future.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

I probably have time for one more quick question. I'll throw it out there.

Under the department's priorities, I'm really interested to look at the focus on inclusivity within government and the work that's being done to ensure that we're not just diverse but we do that action piece, which is the inclusivity.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Yes, we are committed to including a lot of our work on more inclusivity and protecting, of course, public servants in the same.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll now go to Mrs. Vignola for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you very much.

In previous years' budgets, Vote 1, i.e., payments made to the Canada Post Corporation for special purposes, has been very stable. This vote went from \$22 million in 2019 to \$22,210,000 in 2020-21, and has been renewed from one fiscal year to the next.

I know that the Canada Post Corporation is an independent Crown corporation that makes its own investments, amongst other things, but it has to compete with the Amazons, UPS's and FedExes of this world in terms of price, access, speed of access, infrastructure, and so on.

How is it possible that we are only investing \$22,210,000 for special purposes in our postal corporation, when the federal government has concluded contracts with Amazon Web Services to the tune of \$24.6 million last year and \$15.7 million between 2011 and 2020? The Canada Border Services Agency alone has signed contracts worth \$12 million with this company.

How is it that we are investing less money in our own Crown corporation to bring it up to speed than we are in an American company?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for the question.

I am pleased to say that we are investing on many fronts to improve services at Canada Post. My colleague who is in charge of this file will probably be better able to talk to you about the measures taken to improve services.

I will therefore ask Ms. Boudreau to give you some details. However, we should state that Canada Post has accomplished some very important work and we will continue to offer our support over the next years.

• (1620)

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Thank you.

As you mentioned, it's a Crown corporation, so it can also raise its own revenues. You made a comparison with the Canada Border Services Agency. However, Parliament provides the agency with all of its funds, whereas the Crown corporation can generate its own revenues. It's also important to consider the entire source of revenue. More details on this are in its management plan.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Yes, but our Crown corporation, although it is making huge investments and efforts, needs, by its own admission, an extra boost. In many areas, we are investing in a multi-billion dollar American giant instead of helping a Canadian company.

It is worth asking yourself about this. My comment is meant to be constructive.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier: I would be happy to speak to my colleague in order to continue this discussion.

[English]

The Chair: That was a great question by Ms. Vignola. I'm certain that we're going to get a great answer, but unfortunately that's time. If you would like to provide that to the committee in writing, we would appreciate that.

We'll now go to Mr. Johns for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns: Minister, the toxic drug supply crisis continues to result in the loss of thousands of lives in our country, in your riding and right across this nation, a trend that only has worsened since the onset of the pandemic. Since 2016, can you tell me if any emergency funding has been sought by any departments under vote 5 to deal with this public health emergency?

Hon. Mona Fortier: First of all, we all know that we are all together in this and that we need to continue to invest, to fight and to make sure people are supported. The fact that you're asking about it since 2016 would probably be a response that we would have to send in writing. I don't have the numbers especially, but I can tell you that there is an important effort. Just in the last budget of 2022 there are investments to help.

Mr. Gord Johns: The \$100 million in this budget over three years is \$33 million a year over 10 provinces and three territories. That isn't even close to adequate for dealing with a health emergency of this magnitude. I'm hoping that your leadership.... You write the cheques. You're the purse of the government here in terms of doling out the money. This isn't even close to adequate, as everybody in every province who has lost a loved one will tell you.

I'm going to ask you about the Treasury Board. Does it actually have a workplace policy regarding substance use? If so, when was it last updated? Would you support funding under vote 10 for the creation of a review of such a policy as a strategic initiative to ensure that the government, as an employer, is following the most current evidence-based practices with respect to substance use?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for that very important question. I know that we have many policies in place.

I don't know if Marie-Chantal would like to specify if that idea of policy substance use is in what we have and if we are reviewing this shortly.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: Indeed, when we look at it, we look at it in terms of health and safety as the employer in the workplace. For example, when cannabis was introduced in Canada, we looked at it to see how it would be managed. It is part of that obligation we have to provide a safe and healthy workplace for our employees.

I can get back to you on if this particular item is under review in the short term, but not that I'm aware of in the short term.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johns.

We'll now go to Mr. Lobb for five minutes.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to all the guests here.

The first question I have is for Minister Fortier in regard to digital ID.

I'm sure that all members of Parliament are getting questions from their constituents about digital ID. I just wanted to hear from you your opinion on digital ID and what it means to you, and what it will mean to Canadians.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I am very humbled by the Prime Minister giving me the mandate to work on a digital strategy for government and also making sure that we work with different sectors, the provinces and territories, to focus on digital ID. As you know, the government and private sector services are becoming increasingly digital. It's more critical than ever to be able to know that the partner at the other end of the transaction is genuine.

Currently, for your information, 33 federal departments manage over 270 government online programs and services. The digital identity program—

• (1625)

Mr. Ben Lobb: Yes. I'm trying to be respectful here. I just want to know what it will actually mean for a Canadian. Is a digital ID something that they will have? Will it be like a passport? How will it be used? They're happy that everything is going great as far as you're concerned, but they want to know the details.

I'm just asking, respectfully, if I can get some details on what this is, how it's going to work and when it will come into play.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I appreciate the fact that digital identity is a priority for our government, and also working with provinces, territories and municipalities.

I might turn to Paul Wagner for perhaps more precision on where we are at this time.

Mr. Paul Wagner (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategy and Transformation, Treasury Board Secretariat): What I would offer is that working closely with the provinces...that's where the digital ID starts for Canadians. You'll note that British Columbia, Alberta and other provinces have started to roll out digital ID. The Government of Canada and industry will be able to leverage those digital IDs. It's very much a federated system. It needs to be based on standards and it needs to be based on nationwide infrastructure, but that requires close collaboration with provinces where digital IDs are allocated to individuals and then leveraged by the Government of Canada and industry.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Okay. So you're—

Hon. Mona Fortier: The other thing I'd like to add, if I may, is that it's important that it be designed, for cybersecurity and privacy reasons, to make sure that we protect Canadians when and as we develop this digital ID.

Perhaps I can also offer you a tech briefing to go more into the digital ID dimension and the work we're doing. I would gladly do that with you, Mr. Lobb.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Thank you.

I appreciate the answer from Mr. Wagner and Minister Fortier. I will say, though, that I can see how, if anybody is watching this and has concerns about the potential for a digital ID....

I don't know that we got a great answer other than the federal government is going to leverage what the provinces are already gleaning. I think there will be some concerns about how that information will be shared. Will my personal health card information or my personal medical records be shared? I hope that all members are maybe looking to do a study on this, potentially, to get some of these questions answered. A briefing would be great.

Another topic has to do with digital transformation and cloud computing. In 2018 there was a white paper, but there really hasn't been much information since 2020. What percentage of government is actually hosted in the cloud today? I think in the U.S. it's over 50%. What percentage is hosted in the cloud for the Canadian government?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Before I ask Paul to maybe give the right data about what is in the cloud, I have to tell you that the new chief information officer and I have been working on making sure that we bring forward a digital government that is good for Canadians and on making sure that we deliver better services to Canadians through digitization.

I will let Paul focus on the cloud question.

Mr. Paul Wagner: I would say that between 5% and 10% of our services are currently in the cloud. We're actually evolving our cloud strategy. In terms of the strategy you spoke to, you spoke about "cloud first". We're now evolving that into "cloud smart", looking at where it is appropriate for us to move services into the cloud in a very safe and secure manner, as the minister mentioned, in terms of making sure that privacy is of the utmost importance and ensuring that it's a balance between improving service delivery for Canadians and reducing our overall technical debt.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wagner.

We'll now go to Mr. Jowhari for five minutes.

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

Welcome to you, Minister and officials.

I'm going to stay on the theme of digital government. Unfortunately, you didn't get the chance to expand on some of the work our government is doing, especially with the new mandate from the Prime Minister, around digital resources. Naturally, we all know that during COVID, the gap that already existed also highlighted certain opportunities that we could capitalize on. Can you expand on what TBS is working on to ensure that the advancement in digital services is supplemented with a focus on access across government services?

• (1630)

Hon. Mona Fortier: I have to say this is really the focus on making sure we deliver better services to Canadians. We did have, through COVID-19, the opportunity, I have to say, to go faster because we didn't have a choice. We needed to make sure that our digital opportunity was there to support Canadians. Those efforts to deliver "secure" was one of the very important aspects. Secure, seamless services and information were our focus in four key areas.

The first one is modernizing the way we replace, build and manage our IT systems. The second is providing services to people when and where they need them. The third one is to take a coordinated approach to digital operations. Lastly is to tackle long-standing institutional barriers to change and innovate.

That is why we're continuing to put this effort into building upon a strong policy framework and a set of digital principles characterized by accessibility, information and data, cybersecurity, and above all user needs.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Can you briefly comment on the number of departments that are moving in that direction and have implemented some of the digital resources needed to help Canadians access their information?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I can say that a whole-of-government approach is being brought forward. I don't know if Paul wants to add

some specific answers on where departments are at this time. I can tell you that we are pushing for a whole-of-government approach in the digitalization of the services.

Maybe Paul can add a couple of data points.

Mr. Paul Wagner: I think, if you look at Canada, we have a policy on service and digital. We're one of the only countries that has actually integrated service and digital from a policy perspective, so as organizations modernize their services...and even during the pandemic, we created a service officials council that brought together the service leads from departments to begin to have conversations, or in many cases continue those conversations—they started without the council—to look at how we can actually continue to integrate service delivery and digital.

I was speaking recently with colleagues from the United States who were looking at our policy and how we've developed this. They're looking at that as an implementation possibility within their framework as well.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you. It's great that we're aligning our policies and our services together.

One of the indicators is always a measure that adequately talks about the success of Canadians being able to access our services. I see there's a new indicator for this in the departmental results, namely the degree to which Canadians are successful in completing tasks on Government of Canada websites. Can you speak to this and how it will be measured? How will it help inform us about some of the future digital efforts we have to make?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you again for a very thorough question on how we're delivering services to Canadians and making sure that the quality of those services is up to par.

I will ask Karen to go into details.

Before she does, I just want to mention to all members around the table that as much as our government is putting a lot of effort into making sure that we digitalize our services, we are working with provinces, territories, municipalities and the private sector to get the best practices because we all have to work together.

One difficult situation that we have all across Canada is we need more capacity in IT knowledge and human resources. I know that by working together we'll be able to tackle the fact that we need to go faster. But we have to do that in a good, quality manner.

Maybe Karen can add how we're doing that.

[Translation]

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

• (1635)

[English]

This is a very good question.

We are going to have more surveys of Canadians about their satisfaction with accessing our website. I will also point out that the Canadian Digital Service is working very hard to ensure that our websites are fully accessible to Canadians with respect to the services we provide to them. Those are measures that we will put forward.

In our departmental plan, you are seeing that we have a target of 70%, and by surveying Canadians about how easy it is to access our services digitally, we will be able to provide measures in future plans.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We've now come to the end of our first hour of the meeting.

Minister, I want to thank you for being here. I'm assuming that you are still staying with the schedule. The questions were so jovial and your answers were so great that you might want to stay for the next hour, perhaps.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I would love to but, unfortunately, I have another engagement.

I do want to thank all members for your thorough questions. Everybody did their homework, so thank you very much, and we'll get back to you with those answers in writing.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and I want to thank you for the hour. You're always welcome back, and please do come when we get the chance to invite you.

We don't have to suspend at this time, so we will continue on with the questioning with the officials, as they are staying, and we have one new official here.

Mr. McCauley, go ahead.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I have a couple of quick questions.

When are we going to have the updated mandate for federal public servants released? My understanding was that it was supposed to be a few weeks ago.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: Are you referring to the vaccine mandates?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Yes.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: The vaccine mandates are currently under review. The policy on vaccination—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I realize that. The simple question is when will we have the updated...?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: We are currently gathering the data and doing the analysis, and it should be coming shortly.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It's past the six months. When will we have the update, please? There are a lot of people—

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: At the six-month point—

Mr. Kelly McCauley:—who deserve an answer.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: Very shortly. At the six-month point, the review started.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: So you won't tell us when we'll have an update.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: It's a governmental decision, so—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: A political decision or...?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: The Treasury Board Secretariat—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: So, it's a political decision.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard:—is working with Health Canada and providing the information to support the decision.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: When will the 699 leave end?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: First of all, it will never end, because it existed before the pandemic. Code 699 is one of several provisions that are in collective agreements, and there are a number of leaves that are available. Code 699 is when an employee is not in control of going into the workplace because of things like flooding, ice storms and then the pandemic.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You're referring to pandemic-related sick time.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: I am happy to report that we have now reduced the use of 699 by 99%, so we're back to normal.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: So pandemic-related 699 will not—

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: It's marginal.

Mr. Kelly McCauley:—ever leave?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: It is part of the collective agreements.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I want to talk about vote 10. Historically, vote 10 has always been \$5 or \$6 million, a very low number. A few years ago under this government, it was inflated to several hundred million. I think it was two years ago during the first minority government that this committee had a very frank discussion about it that, if the government tried to balloon it again, this committee would reduce it back to historical numbers. Now we see it's back up to \$150 million.

Why? Again, in relation to past historical numbers being much lower....

Ms. Annie Boudreau: I can give you the details of the \$152 million and transfer you to my colleagues.

The biggest amount there is \$107 million for the COVID-19 vaccination policy implementation.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Why would that not be done through individual departments on a horizontal basis, as it is done for other cross-departmental initiatives?

• (1640)

Ms. Annie Boudreau: This is done at the government level because it is more efficient, and we want to also have some controls in place. If there is a department in need of money for the COVID-19 vaccination policy—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Why not use vote 5 if it's a contingency then?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: We prefer to go through vote 10. For this one, you need the approval of the Treasury Board. You need to provide a Treasury Board submission.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Do you understand our concern, though, as members of Parliament? We went through this whole discussion with vote 10 before about pre-approving money in a roundabout way and taking away oversight from parliamentarians.

It appears we're again back to this process of pushing in money when it should be perhaps done separately in departments.

If you already have a plan specifically for \$107 million, you therefore know what departments that money is going into. Why is it not in those departments' estimates and done horizontally, as has been done in the past?

What is the other \$40 million for?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: There is \$24 million to respond to claims arising from the Phoenix system.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay. Why is that in a vote 10 and not in individual departments, again, done as a horizontal?

Ms. Karen Cahill: Mr. Chair, maybe I can take some of this question.

The money that we have under vote 10 is actually for horizontal disbursement. For example, the \$24 million that my colleague Ms. Boudreau spoke to with respect to damages represents money that, once the department has paid out the claims, the damages from the those, they will do a claim to TBS for reimbursement of those claims.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: This has not been done traditionally in the past. Again, up until four or five years ago, vote 10 was always \$3 million, \$4 million or \$5 million, traditionally.

Why the change?

Ms. Karen Cahill: I would offer that we have more horizontal initiatives.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Why aren't all horizontal initiatives put in vote 10, then?

Ms. Karen Cahill: In those cases the money that we will disburse from vote 10 is not known at the time we go to the board. Therefore we set aside some money.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You want Parliament to pre-approve, but you just said you don't know what the money is for. You just ask Parliament to pre-approve it.

Ms. Karen Cahill: No, we do know what the money is for.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Do you not understand our concern?

Ms. Karen Cahill: We do not know the amounts that will be required by the departments.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: But you're asking us to pre-approve it. You just said that you don't know how much, but you're asking us to pre-approve it. That's my concern with using the vote 10, when historically it has been done before. It should be in the departments as a horizontal.

I'm afraid I'm out of time. You said you don't know how much would be needed but you're asking us to pre-approve the total.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McCauley. Once again, it's another great question.

I'm sure that if you can provide an answer to the committee in writing to the clerk, we would distribute that.

We will now go for five minutes to Mr. Bains.

Mr. Parm Bains (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all of our witnesses here today.

I'm going to talk a little bit about a question around barriers on innovation and economic growth. Since the minister last appeared in front of this committee, the government introduced Bill S-6. The bill repeals or amends regulations that have over time become barriers to innovation and economic growth.

Can any member of the team maybe comment on how that bill will do this?

Ms. Karen Cahill: As stated by the minister in the first hour, Bill S-6 will offer more, make it easier for businesses to do business across borders. It will provide a more digital environment for Canadians to deal with our Canadian business. This bill will also ensure that we are able to make it less burdensome for businesses to do what they have to do. Therefore this will help them with the restart of the economy postpandemic.

• (1645)

Mr. Parm Bains: I'll go into a different area here. In its 2022-23 departmental plan, TBS notes that it will continue "to implement the Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada, including by ensuring progress toward hiring 5,000 new public servants with disabilities by 2025".

How many new public servants with disabilities have been hired since the launch of the strategy in 2019? Again, that's to anybody who has the answer.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: Thank you very much. I can answer that, Mr. Chair.

Indeed as a federal public service, we are very committed to taking concrete action to increase the number of persons with disabilities in the workplace, but also making it more accessible and supporting the fact that they remain in the public service.

The goal is 5,000 by 2025. In 2021, there were 1,363 new persons with disabilities hired across the public service. Having said that, I must report, though, that some at the same time have also left the public service, so the net new hires are 183 public servants.

It's clear that more work needs to be done, and we need to put some emphasis on retaining, maintaining, in the public service those persons with disabilities who join our workforce.

Thank you.

Mr. Parm Bains: Is there anything being done to focus on raising more awareness of these roles that are available?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: Absolutely. We are implementing the Accessible Canada Act and the strategy, "Nothing Without Us". This strategy was developed with persons with disabilities. They developed a road map to increase their recruitment, but also their retention. They're working on several initiatives, such as creating a welcoming and adaptive workplace and making sure that the accommodations provided allow them to remain in the workplace.

There is the GC accessibility passport that has been put in place. It is a tool that streamlines the accommodation process and brings in a new culture. It also allows people to move from one department to another and have that passport follow them, instead of starting over every time they get a new job.

There are also other initiatives, such as the neurodiversity recruitment pilot in FINTRAC that is being put in place with Shared Services Canada and the Public Service Commission. There is a lending library service pilot with Shared Services Canada that also works on digital access.

A lot is being done.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bains.

We will now go to Mrs. Vignola for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

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

I always enjoy, although not everyone does, dissecting the budget. I really enjoy it, because I have 15,000 questions. Maybe I have an oppositional disorder, I don't know.

I'm going to set the budget aside a little bit, as much as I like to dissect it, and I'm going to focus on one of the Treasury Board responsibilities for federal buildings. There comes a time when a building has to be disposed of, and a bill of sale is then made to an agent. I'm thinking of one building in particular. You may not be able to give me details on this specific case, but I'm wondering about the process. It has surely been done very well, and that's not the problem, but this building is being sold at one-tenth of its value. It's a heritage building, and there's no provision to oblige a future buyer to keep it in place.

Is it usual for heritage buildings to be sold at a tenth of their value and without consideration for the heritage?

• (1650)

[English]

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: Mr. Chair, I will turn to my colleague, Samantha Tattersall, to take that question.

Ms. Samantha Tattersall (Assistant Comptroller General, Acquired Services and Assets Sector, Treasury Board Secretariat): In terms of the specific building, we wouldn't have the details because, as you said, it is not a building that the Treasury Board owns.

In terms of the disposal process, there are two stages. In the first stage, there are legal requirements before you dispose of a property. There are environmental requirements and indigenous engagement and consultation requirements. In the second part, you move into policy requirements with the disposal.

When you're looking at policy, the first thing you look at is priority circulation. Can the building serve a public purpose? There is a priority circulation to federal departments, provinces and municipalities. After that process, if there is not—

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I'm studying the process. I'm a bit of an odd duck, very curious.

I can understand disposing of a heritage building, but I don't understand why there is no provision at any time for the preservation of that building and that it should be left to be completely destroyed.

Is that normal?

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Vignola.

[English]

Unfortunately, two and a half minutes go by very quickly.

Ms. Tattersall, if you could respond in writing, it would be greatly appreciated.

We'll now go to Mr. Johns for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you.

With 98.5% of federal public servants having been vaccinated against COVID-19, I think that's an amazing accomplishment. I strongly support vaccinations continuing, and I urge people to come forward for all of the doses they are eligible for.

With the majority of the public servants now vaccinated and a small portion of public servants who remain unvaccinated, they're eager to return to work from unpaid leave. They're looking for clarity on when the review of the public service vaccine mandates will be complete.

Can you please advise us of the status of the review to date and when you think it will be complete?

I'm even having constituents.... It's about travel, obviously. It's really important. This woman, Kristen, can't get home to the U.K. to see her family. One man, David, just wants to go on a trip and get back on the road to see friends and family.

Maybe you can give us some idea when this is going to be complete.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: All mandates are being examined. In the examples that you just gave, you gave examples for travellers and for employees, so those are under separate vaccination mandates. The work that Treasury Board Secretariat is currently doing is with Health Canada providing all of the data, looking at the most recent epidemiologic information, and looking at various considerations such as consulting and speaking with bargaining agents, seeking views. We're bringing that to the government, which is taking the decision and can make—

Mr. Gord Johns: I appreciate it. I just know in my own province people are back to work in the public service. The time is running long here. People need answers, they need an explanation.

In terms of outsourcing, it's become a huge concern under the government with millions being spent on expensive consultants—you hear me talk about this—like McKinsey & Company, which paid out a substantial settlement for advice it gave that played a huge role in the tragic overdose and opioid crisis. Does the strategic review include looking at outsourcing and why this work isn't being done by federal public servants?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: For the strategic review, my colleague, Madame Boudreau, can answer. Perhaps Madame Tattersall can also speak about outsourcing.

I'll let you determine who goes first.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: I can start with the strategic review. The strategic review was announced in budget 2022. We are at the planning stage of it. You have seen in the document they're talking about real property, they're talking about travel being more efficient, and—as indicated—we're going to provide an update in budget 2023.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Unfortunately, Ms. Tattersall, you've again drawn the card right when the time is up. If you do have anything to add to that, please provide that in writing. It's greatly appreciated.

We'll now go to Mr. Paul-Hus for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Boudreau, I'd like to come back to the question I asked the minister about the famous \$15 billion for National Defence. The minister did give me an answer, but the Parliamentary Budget Officer, who is much more familiar with the government's budget cycle than I am, says that there's a problem, but that the problem isn't explained.

Could this simply be an error in handling the numbers that just went unnoticed?

The Parliamentary Budget Officer finds this inexplicable, so imagine what it is for us.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: I will continue by rounding out the answer of the Treasury Board President.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer mentioned that there was a \$23 billion gap. Of that \$23 billion gap, the 2022 budget has set aside an additional \$8 billion for National Defence. That leaves \$15 billion. The \$15 billion is what you see in the federal budget compared to the estimates and the departmental plan for National Defence.

In fact, that \$15 billion hasn't yet been approved by the Treasury Board. Once these amounts are approved by the Treasury Board, they will be included in supplementary estimates (A), (B) or (C). That is why there is a gap. There is a gap because the Treasury Board hasn't yet given its approval.

Until the expenditures are approved, we cannot present them to you for review.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Why, then, would someone like the Parliamentary Budget Officer flag such an issue? He must be familiar with the procedure. He must know how things are done.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: I can't speak for the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Let's talk about human resources. Earlier, you mentioned the return to work of vaccinated and unvaccinated public servants. The last time we met, before the holidays, if I'm not mistaken, I asked about the return to work of public servants. In other words, where did things stand when it came to employees going back to work?

I know you said that each director would be managing the return to work of their employees as they saw fit, but have things changed since then?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: You have a good memory.

Yes, things have changed. Some employees are back at work. The last time we spoke, we planned on taking a cautious approach. When we put out our communications, which I and my counterpart the deputy health minister co-signed, we made it clear that the return to work would be gradual. That proved to be a smart decision since there was another wave. Being cautious was the right thing to do so as not to send employees back to work when it wasn't appropriate. That's the approach we took.

The government's guidance has since been updated. Every department has a toolkit with directives and policies that continue to change as needed. At this stage, we are looking to do some experimenting, because we know we aren't the only employer in this boat.

Various options are available, and we will be trying out different models leading up to the summer. The idea is to figure out which models work best for which types of organizations and workflows, depending on the specific mandates and functions of each department. That will help us identify best practices and build the momentum to move forward.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: The risks associated with COVID-19 aside, work productivity and efficiency has been an issue. Over the past two years, we have seen tremendous problems on that front. Take the processing of immigration and passport applications, for example. Are those issues a direct result of employees working from home, or are they due to the fact that the process for handling those types of applications is lengthier and more complicated?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: I wouldn't attribute the problems to that. Pandemic aside, I'm sure you would agree that some exceptional circumstances have arisen, and they have created challenges for the public service, the likes of which we haven't seen in a very long time. Productivity is a key consideration when we evaluate the different models, and a leading principle. It comes down to whether Canadians are being well served and organizations are able to fulfill their mandates.

Yes, health and safety are still important considerations, but, I assure you, so is productivity.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: All right.

Before the holidays, cybersecurity was an issue. In light of the current conflict, are we seeing even more attacks from Russia?

• (1700)

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: I'm going to ask my colleague Mr. Wagner to speak to cybersecurity.

Mr. Paul Wagner: Good afternoon, Mr. Paul-Hus. I remember your question quite well.

We remain on the alert and continue to enhance system security. We work very closely with the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security and Shared Services Canada. All of the senior leadership is on high alert. Like me, you've seen the statistics. I can tell you that we continue to ensure the security and integrity of the Government of Canada's infrastructure.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wagner.

Now we'll go to Mr. Kusmierczyk for five minutes.

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

My colleague from Courtenay—Alberni raised some really great questions about the strategic policy review. I wanted to pick up the thread of that conversation.

Now as I understand it, the review has two different streams. I'm just wondering if you can talk about the two different streams and what the focus is of each of them. Maybe give us an example of some of the things that we're going to be looking at and assessing under both streams.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Thank you.

Effectively we have two streams under budget 2022. The first stream was in fact included in Minister Fortier's mandate letter. It was about a comprehensive review of policy programs of the government. The first stream will be looking at big programs and their impact in terms of net-zero reduction, quality of life and things like that. It will be continuous program reviews. It's not going to be

done only one time. We want to do it year after year. That's stream number one, which was included in budget 2022.

Stream number two is about being smaller. It is about being more efficient and more effective. This is where we see looking at property, travel and how we do business. With stream number two there is a commitment to come back in budget 2023 with more information.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: The first stream is reviewing the programs to see how they align with the government's priorities and whether they're meeting those objectives and those targets.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: That is correct.

We will use a quality of life framework to assess that. It's also part of our minister's mandate letter. We'll use that framework to assess programs and make sure that we are delivering on priorities for Canadians.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Departments do reviews all the time, as individual departments, ministries and whatnot. How does this strategic policy differ from what usually takes place at the different department levels?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: We want to take a horizontal view.

I'll give you an example. If we look at a student program, we know we can have a student program under ESDC, under Indigenous Services Canada and other programs. We're going to look at the line of business basically, do a horizontal review and we'll be able to provide feedback on governance, on programs, on areas to improve and things like that.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: That's actually a really good point because when you look at, for example, the programs out there to support young people, you're talking about 10 different ministries that have responsibility for supporting our young people. This strategic policy review is going to sort of tie those different ministries together.

Okay, that's terrific to hear.

Is there an amount of funding that's expected to be saved because of this policy review? Is that number driving this review process or is that just an estimation that's separate from what the real goal is?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Under stream one, as indicated in budget 2022, it's really to look at the programs to make sure we are efficient. There is no money attached, as we have read and we have seen in budget 2022.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: There is no financial goal that's attached.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Not that I'm aware of.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Not that you're aware of—okay. That's terrific.

You touched very briefly upon remote work or virtual work and how that might fit into a strategic policy review to see how we can find efficiencies and make government more effective. Can you maybe talk about how remote work or a hybrid model fits into a strategic policy review? Again, knowing that the review is just beginning, how could that conversation fit into a strategic policy review?

• (1705)

Ms. Annie Boudreau: As an example, we'll look at the real estate. We will look at the footprint. Obviously what we have seen since COVID-19 is, as you said, hybrid, or people working from home. It's time to look at the real estate we lease and the real estate we own, and to look at what is the best that we need in order to capture the new world that we are in. That will be part of the review that we are undertaking.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] considering we're coming out of a pandemic, where a lot of trends that we maybe saw emerging were accelerated and accentuated during the COVID pandemic, I think the timing of this strategic policy review is excellent.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will go to our fourth round, and we'll start with Mr. Lobb for five minutes.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Thanks again, Mr. Chair. Again, I appreciate everybody being here.

I'd like to go back to Mr. Wagner again for his input on digital ID. I'm pretty sure the Province of Ontario is spending \$20 billion on digital ID. I look at some of the stuff... I'm not going to be critical of them, either, but to read some of the stuff...there's a check mark, so that when you go to a liquor store you just show a check mark. I know that I'm simplifying that quite a bit. I know we're not spending \$20 billion for a check mark.

How do you see the federal government working with the provinces and territories on digital ID? Is this something you envision? Is your passport linked to your driver's licence and this kind of thing? Give us the 101 here on what you see.

Mr. Paul Wagner: There are a couple of different examples.

One is around a digital ID for government services. If you think about having a digital ID—and we'll talk about what that looks like from a citizen's perspective—the citizen owns that digital ID. They own that code. There's no master database where all the digital IDs are stored and it becomes a target.

What happens when you use your digital ID is that you actually validate that the ID you have is in fact you. There's another layer of protection in there called “multifactor authentication”. It basically is another factor to ensure that if I just pick up somebody's cell-phone or I get access to somebody's digital ID, I also need to have another factor to ensure that assurance.

I want to go back a bit on that first question you had around that idea of “are we are exchanging lots of information among the provinces?” The goal is to actually have a very minimalistic approach in terms of how that works. From a citizen's perspective, one thing we're going to be doing is a consultation with Canadian citizens around how a pan-Canadian infrastructure could work and how digital ID is seen as being beneficial to citizens and to businesses.

As individual provinces start to build out their digital ID infrastructure, like you said, you can envisage a world where a citizen has a digital ID. They go in to get a licence for their car: “Can you show me your driver's licence?” Well, that can be pulled up in a

digital wallet. You could have a credential that's your driver's licence. You could also have a credential that's your proof of vaccination. That would be attached to your digital ID.

If you think of one of the gaps today in a lot of provinces, you showed your vaccine credentials, probably on your phone, and then you had to produce a physical piece of identification to confirm that you were in fact Paul Wagner. Digital ID actually brings those two things together, binds them and creates that seamless transaction.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Right, but it's got to be a little more than that. That seems pretty analog to me that we're just linking your licence to your vaccine passport. I know that you're just giving me a 101 there, but if you log in to check your tax status or you file your HST, I don't see any glaring problem with that right now such that we would need another factor of authentication or identification.

If you log in through your bank card for your banking, that sign-in seems fairly safe and fairly secure. Are we scrapping that and building on something else? I'm just trying to get it so that I can explain back to my constituents what this actually is. I'm still not getting it, I guess.

• (1710)

Mr. Paul Wagner: We're planning a technical briefing, and will be happy to go into a little more detail where we can show this more effectively.

The short of it is, we're not displacing the other forms of identification that are out there. The examples you gave where you're logging into individual systems...If you think about the ability to have a digital ID, though...I'll go back to the Government of Canada. If you have a service platform where you log in as Ben Lobb, and you're able to then access a multitude of government services having been identified, those are the kinds of benefits we can see downstream.

We're not architected for that now, but it does allow for that.

Mr. Ben Lobb: I can already do that.

Are you proposing that my passport would be a digital ID, as well? Will I have a digital passport in this plan?

Mr. Paul Wagner: There will always be physical opportunities for this. There's no Canadian left behind.

I won't say digital passports are part of the initial plan. We need to get the infrastructure in place to start to use that. I wouldn't say digital passports would be the first place we would start that.

Mr. Ben Lobb: It would seem reasonable that this would be something that you're proposing. I'm glad to hear nobody will be left behind, because many of us represent seniors, Amish and Mennonites, so okay, we'll see. To be determined; to be continued.

Mr. Paul Wagner: Happy to continue the conversation.

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Housefather, for five minutes.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you again to all the officials for being here today.

I'm going to go back to Mr. Wagner for one second on the digital ID project. Could you tell me how many different accounts the Government of Canada manages today?

Mr. Paul Wagner: We have 33 departments and 270 different services. I don't have the exact number of accounts.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Would it be in the couple of hundreds? More than 200?

Mr. Paul Wagner: In terms of accounts?

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Yes, in terms of accounts.

Mr. Paul Wagner: There are 270 different services you can log in electronically.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: So, at least 270?

Mr. Paul Wagner: Correct.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: How could we do better in terms of managing that?

Mr. Paul Wagner: You're dealing in terms of a log-in. Back to Mr. Lobb's question, if you think of a digital ID as being a bit of a cornerstone for service delivery, right now we have a situation where you have to log in to Parks Canada to get your campsite, and then you have to log in to ESDC on a separate platform to apply for CPP.

If you leverage digital ID, and have the ability to actually identify individuals, get them into a platform where you can start to then present a multitude of government services, that's where you want to go from a digital government perspective. We're all doing it in our daily lives on other platforms, but it does begin with that verified identity, so that we know the individual we're dealing with at the other end of the device.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: It highly simplifies the process for those of us who are technologically literate, but as I guess Mr. Lobb said, it doesn't resolve the problem for those who don't have access to technology, or those who don't know how to use it at all. The end result is that is what it would be. It would be making life a lot easier for those of us who are technologically adept.

Mr. Paul Wagner: That's absolutely one path. The other path would be...As we start to look at service modernization, thinking about how we actually can align services to deliver in a digital world, that will also yield gains in terms of an analog world as we start to morph services together.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Thank you.

I want to go back to the real property question, because I know homework was given, Mr. Chair, for somebody to respond in writing to various questions. I'd like to give her the opportunity to respond now, quickly and orally, so she doesn't have to spend hours writing out the answer.

Ms. Samantha Tattersall: Thank you for the opportunity.

The answer is, it depends. In our policy, we set out that when you're disposing, you look at conserving the heritage value of the properties. There are procedures that you follow that are set out, I believe by Heritage Canada, so there are mandatory procedures for heritage assessment and conservation that departments need to follow when they dispose of properties.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Essentially, are you saying that under this policy, experts will make a determination if the heritage character of the property is important enough to require the preservation in the event of a contractual disposal?

Ms. Samantha Tattersall: You've done a good summary. You could do my job, I think.

Yes, essentially, when you're disposing, you need to undertake an assessment. You work with Parks Canada, and then as you dispose, you take those factors into consideration.

● (1715)

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

Do I have any more time, or am I done?

The Chair: You still have a minute and a half.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I'm going to continue on that path.

As I understand it, again, there's a policy in place that says that we're consulting with other Canadian government agencies, departments, provincial governments, municipalities and indigenous communities. All of these different organizations will get to see if there is a community or public use that can be made of the property before the government would then seek to look to potentially dispose of it to a private buyer. Would I be correct in that?

Ms. Samantha Tattersall: Yes, that's correct.

As I was saying before, there are first legal requirements that you have to follow. There's a legal duty to consult with indigenous people. The second step when you start the policy process is what we call priority circulation. We circulate those to federal departments and municipalities, which inform official language minority communities about whether there is a public purpose use for it. If there is, then you would proceed with that disposal. If not, only if you've gone through that step, would you then move to a position where you would be selling it on the market.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: That makes total sense.

I assume again that we look at, when we do put something on the market, price offers and if it makes business sense, and we have standard model contracts that have a variety of different clauses that could be used depending on the type of disposal we're doing, correct?

Ms. Samantha Tattersall: There would be an appraisal process. You would have a sense of the fair market value before you go to tender.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Perfect. I think that's it. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: In that case, I allowed Ms. Tattersall a chance to answer instead of having to send us in a written answer.

As you can see, the bells are ringing. They are 30-minute bells and we basically have a two-minute walk. We have 15 minutes left of questioning, but I would ask that we have unanimous consent to finish this and then adjourn at that point in time. Do I have unanimous consent?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to Ms. Vignola for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

I want to follow up on vote 30 under Treasury Board Secretariat, in the main estimates. It's for payroll requirements. In the 2021-22 main estimates, \$600 million was requested, but that increased to nearly \$800 million in 2022-23.

What accounts for the \$200-million increase?

This year, \$600 million is being requested. Should we expect another increase in any of the supplementary estimates?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Thank you for your question.

Last year, we did indeed see an increase of \$200 million.

In this case, it has to do with departments' requirements related to parental and maternity allowances. It's hard to know at the beginning of the year how much the parental leave taken by employees is going to cost the government. We follow up with departments on a regular basis to make sure we have enough money because the Treasury Board reimburses each department for those costs. Once the money is reimbursed, all the information is available on our website for each department.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Does the vote cover parental leave only, or is that just one of the things it covers?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: It's an example of an item that is covered.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I see.

Under vote 25, a total of \$2.1 billion is being requested for operating budget carry forward. Vote 35 also concerns a budget carry forward.

What does that mean? Are those budgets being carried forward because they lapsed?

If so, why did they lapse?

Ms. Annie Boudreau: I'll tell you a bit about how the process works.

Every year, departments receive their budget, and at the end of the year, delays can arise in terms of spending that needs to be paid out. Each department is permitted to bring forward to the next fiscal year up to 5% of its operating budget and up to 20% of its capital budget.

When departments do that, the money comes out of Treasury Board's coffers, and there again, the information appears in the annex for each department or organization.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I see. Basically, it reflects your planning of funding that will be carried forward.

Ms. Annie Boudreau: Yes, exactly.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Johns for two and a half minutes.

• (1720)

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here today and for your hard work.

Your own report states that hiring people with disabilities is worse than any equity-seeking group in the federal public service. With the federal accessibility legislation now in place and employment for persons with disabilities identified as the key priority, recognizing the explicit interface between disability, poverty and employment, what are the federal government's key strategies in accommodating employees who acquire a mental or physical health impairment and are unable to carry out their current duties?

I think about the strategies accommodating those with long COVID, for example, as well. It's estimated that 10% to 25% of individuals who acquired COVID are unable to carry out their current duties. I'd like to hear what your plan is.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: With long COVID, we're looking at a condition that is relatively new, but which requires, of course, medical certification. Employees have a sick leave bank they can use, but once the diagnosis of long COVID is established, those employees are eligible to use long-term disability insurance. It's part of their benefits package, which is a bit different from the accessibility and persons with disability issue—

Mr. Gord Johns: I'm also thinking about disability management. What are you going to do to ensure that your managers are trained in disability management, so that you're accommodating people?

If you're not back to work within 12 months, the chances are 99% that you're never going to return to work, so this needs to be a top priority of the public service.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: Thank you.

Absolutely. You're right. The longer an employee is out of the public service or the workplace writ large, the more difficult it is.

Here, we are working with several departments, but also doing more with the insurer along the lines of case management and training managers to maintain positive contact with employees while they are on disability to ensure that when we work with a medical practitioner and they return, we have a good understanding of what is needed to provide a successful return to work.

Mr. Gord Johns: The track record is not good. I outlined the failure. It's in your own report.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: I agree. We can do better.

The Chair: We now go to Mr. McCauley for five minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

After discussions around the table, I just want to put forward a matter-at-hand motion that we call the PBO to appear for one hour on the estimates sometime before the end of May, if the schedule works out. We'll leave it up to the clerk to squeeze in one hour.

The Chair: Okay. On that matter-at-hand motion, I'm seeing around the room that it looks like there is consensus that this be approved.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I was looking at the schedule that came out and noticed that there's no PBO.

The Chair: Thank you. We will take that under advisement and try to schedule an hour for the PBO.

Mr. McCauley, you still have four and a half minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks.

I just want to go to our issues with access to information, realizing of course that COVID negatively affected the ability to do it. I realize there's a review going on.

When will we see it getting back to normal? I hate to use that word. When we will be getting back to a proper ATIP process where we're actually recognizing and respecting the legislation of 30 days?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: I'll turn to Paul Wagner for that question.

Mr. Paul Wagner: Looking over the past five years, we've seen at least a doubling of the overall number of access to information requests and then couple that with the time during COVID, as you mentioned.

I think the work we're doing under the access to information review will yield.... I think the minister will be tabling that report in Parliament by the end of this calendar year. We've already started to work on activities to help departments to get to those targets, Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Let me just ask you something quickly. I appreciate what you're saying, but this actually does precede COVID. I still have ATIPs from the 42nd Parliament that are outstanding, going on five and a half years.

In your departmental plan, there was legislation. It's not a suggestion to maybe do it if you can. The 30 days' response to ATIPs is legislation. Your own departmental plan is to only achieve 90% of 90%. Basically, 81% of ATIPs will be handled properly under the required legislation.

Do you think it's acceptable to actually put in writing that your goal is to violate the legislation 19% of the time? Should we not go for 100% and recognize...? Last year, 49% was achieved. Should we not be recognizing that this is legislation and saying that we will follow the law?

• (1725)

Mr. Paul Wagner: I think you're absolutely correct. The way that departments—our department included—set and meet those targets is germane to the review that's under way.

We're looking at putting in place a software system to help departments actually expedite the ATIP request processing within the departments, so that each department does not have to go out and do that on their own. We're working on—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: That's a great idea. When will it be coming in?

Mr. Paul Wagner: The RFP is in its final stages, so we can expect a contract award within the coming months. That will be there and available for departments to be able to avail themselves of it.

We've talked a lot about recruitment. We're working with departments on recruitment of ATIP professionals. It's a domain that has absolutely very specific requirements around the kind of work that needs to be done. Again, we're helping departments so they don't have to each do it in a bespoke manner.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: We're nearing the postpandemic stage. I realize it's still going on, but are the ATIP people being allowed back in the buildings to do their work?

We had an OPQ come back. I think we lost 17,000 days on 699 claims because of COVID. Is this still ongoing? Are they being allowed back in the buildings to do their work? Not everything can be digital. There are papers, notes, etc., that have to be found.

Mr. Paul Wagner: Absolutely, that's a great question.

I think Marie-Chantal spoke to the variety of return-to-work activities. Departments are looking at what the critical services are within each of the departments and making sure that those are staffed up accordingly. As you mentioned, a lot of this work does require paper, and some of it does require work on classified systems, which, again, requires work on site.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: When will they all be back or allowed back on site to do that required work?

I think I'm abrupt in this committee, but the Information Commissioner's comments are far worse than mine and far more critical than mine about the government's performance on ATIP.

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: If I may, honourable—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: When will we see them allowed back in to do the work?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: If I may, honourable member, employees are allowed, but, of course, health and safety come first. If they were part of a tracing or if there is COVID, no, but they are allowed to do the work based on what the deputy minister's organization and direction is.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: If they're allowed—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: —then why the delays?

The Chair: Thank you.

We have a vote we have to get to, so we're going to Ms. Thompson for the last five minutes.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

I'm going to reference the 2022-23 departmental plan.

TBS notes that, in collaboration with Indigenous Services Canada and Public Service and Procurement Canada, it will issue mandatory requirements and guidance to support departments in meeting the phased implementation of the government-wide minimum targets of 5% of the value of federal contracts awarded to indigenous businesses. When do you expect that target to be mandatory?

Ms. Marie-Chantal Girard: We'll turn to Madam Tattersall.

Ms. Samantha Tattersall: As the government announced in August of the past year, we'll be phasing in the target over three years. I am pleased to say that up on our website is a mandatory procedure now for all departments on how they can meet that 5% target. That is a floor, not a ceiling. That mandatory procedure that Treasury Board has now launched is effective April 1 of this year.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

Following on with this, what will be the consequences on departments that do not meet the minimum target of 5% of the value of the federal contracts?

Ms. Samantha Tattersall: What we have set up is accountability through reporting. There are two ways in which we're doing that. We've been working with departments and with indigenous partners as well in setting up that accountability.

First, we've updated our requirements around proactive disclosure, so it will be much easier to see when you go there which contracts are being awarded to indigenous businesses. The second thing we are looking at is every department having to report on how

they're achieving their target on an annual basis. We are actively looking at updating the departmental planning process so that can be transparent to the public, our indigenous partners and parliamentarians.

• (1730)

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

Will this apply to Crown corporations?

Ms. Samantha Tattersall: Right now, because it is a Treasury Board policy, our policies apply to organizations in schedule I, I.1 and II of the FAA. Crown corporations don't form part of that, but what we are looking at is where they don't, how do they follow the spirit and intent of what we want to achieve through this policy? That's how we're approaching it at this time.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

I know; I hear the bells. I'm not going to go on to the final question.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Yes, we still have about 15 minutes, I think, on the bells, but I do appreciate the committee's questions.

On behalf of the committee, I want to thank the witnesses. It's so nice, as you were the first to come back to us in January, and I want to thank you for being here again today, as well as those of you who are with us virtually. Thank you very much for everything you did.

Ms. Tattersall, I'm sorry you always ended up getting the question when the time was running out.

I want to thank everybody, including the interpreters and the technicians for all the work they've been doing for us, as well as our analysts and our clerk.

With that said, so you don't have to run to the House, I declare the meeting adjourned.

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