



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 143

Thursday, October 3, 2024

Chair: Mr. Kelly McCauley



Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

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• (1105)
[English]

The Chair (Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. Welcome to OGGO.

We're in meeting number 143 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, fondly known everywhere as "the mighty OGGO".

Before we start, colleagues, I need feedback from the committee.

Of course, we have Global Affairs here today. The motion stated it was only Ms. Nicholson. Global Affairs has asked to have Mr. Cousineau, the lead ADM responsible for the department, attend today. However, because the motion only called for her, I will leave it up to the committee to decide whether Mr. Cousineau should be allowed at the table or not.

I'd like a quick show of hands, please.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): I think I made the motion to have Ms. Nicholson appear. I don't see... We've already had Mr. Cousineau.

The Chair: It's yes or no for Mr. Cousineau to be—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: No. I'm okay with just Ms. Nicholson joining us.

The Chair: The ayes have it.

Mr. Cousineau, you're welcome to join us.

Mr. Majid Jowhari (Richmond Hill, Lib.): I have a very short comment.

First of all, thank you to all the colleagues who supported us in that.

Prior to the meeting, I informed you and the clerk that the minister will be appearing on November 7. That was my mistake. She will actually be appearing on November 5.

Mr. Clerk, you're 100% right. I made a mistake. The minister will be showing up on November 5.

That was a mistake on my part and I wanted to correct it.

The Chair: Wonderful. That's great news. I appreciate your following up on that. It's November 5, not November 7, then.

Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): My understanding is that this committee passed a motion that no witnesses can be added without the

committee having duly considered it in advance. There was quite a bit of consternation about that.

Mr. Cousineau has appeared before the committee as a witness before, so he's being recalled today without appearing on the meeting notice. We have Ms. Nicholson, who's been called specifically to answer questions. Mr. Cousineau has not been requested by the committee to be here.

Is it going to be the practice going forward that we can summon people out of the gallery to ask them questions? If so, are we going to do that today? Are we going to pull other people from the gallery? This is a very unusual practice. I don't think it's a good one, to be clear. It needs to be understood that, if it is sustained that Mr. Cousineau sit at the table, he's not permitted to speak unless questions are directly given to him. There are no questions he can answer unless they're put directly to him.

The committee didn't ask for him to be here.

The Chair: I appreciate that.

On this point of order, in the past nine years I've been on this committee, when we asked for a department or person, other people could attend with them or in their stead. I am fine ruling to allow Mr. Cousineau. We have that rule. There was no one else on the motion, but it was a request from Global Affairs, and the committee has approved it.

I'm good with that, so we'll continue.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Cousineau is not permitted to answer questions if they're not directed to him.

The Chair: You do not have to ask him questions. If anyone is directing the question to Ms. Nicholson, we would expect Ms. Nicholson to respond. If we ask questions of Mr. Cousineau, we expect Mr. Cousineau to respond and not Ms. Nicholson.

If we're fine, then, we have a five-minute opening statement from Ms. Nicholson.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Emily Nicholson (Director and Chief of Staff of the Associate Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, honourable members.

[Translation]

I am pleased to be here to support the committee's important work to ensure full accountability and transparency in government operations, including those of Global Affairs Canada.

I will first speak about my role as chief of staff to the associate deputy minister, followed by the background and content of two emails, dated June 17, 2024 and July 25, 2024.

[English]

Turning to my role as chief of staff in the associate's office, I sometimes liken my job to that of an air traffic controller. I serve a coordination function, providing oversight of the associate's schedule and overseeing the flow of information between the department's subject matter experts and the associate's office. My work supports senior officials, enabling them to do their jobs effectively.

On occasion, I also serve a liaison function between the department and the minister's office to provide an initial overview, or quick update, on a file. The minister's office may then ask for a full briefing by the experts who manage the file on a daily basis. Here, I summarize the best information available at the time, as provided by the file experts.

[Translation]

The June 17 and July 25 emails were written as part of this liaison.

I will now address the context and intent of this correspondence.

[English]

On June 14, 2024, the minister's office requested information on the department's decision to sell Canada's official residence for the consulate in New York. That request focused on the sale of the property, originally purchased in 1961, and sought confirmation that all due policies and procedures had been followed.

After gathering information from the subject experts, I provided an initial overview response on June 17. The intent of that email was to clarify and explain why the department was selling the official residence and communicate that all proper policies had been adhered to, including confirmation that the head of mission was aware of the process as per standard departmental practice. The email summarized the information provided by the subject leads at the time of the request.

• (1110)

[Translation]

In the one-page summary of the response, which focused on the sale of the official residence, one sentence did not clearly differentiate between the role of mission employees and that of the head of mission, that is, the consul general.

[English]

In that sentence, I intended to convey that the mission staff had been “instrumental” in supporting this headquarters-led process throughout the past 10 years and that the consul general was engaged and aware that a process was under way.

In that same sentence—again, drafted in the context of responding to the questions about the sale of the current residence—the word “greenlight” was intended to communicate that the consul general was aware of and prepared to accommodate the department's plan to proceed with identifying a replacement property.

The email did not state that the consul general was involved in the decision-making process, exercised influence or signed for any transactions related to the process. In hindsight, more precise language could have been used to avoid any misunderstanding. That clarification was provided on July 25.

As the detailed email on July 25 clearly shows, the consul was not part of the approval for this overall process, the selection of a replacement property or the property purchase. The consul was only shown the property selected to replace the official residence after the bid to purchase was already accepted.

In conclusion, the detailed study and examination of records related to this file demonstrated that all correct policies and procedures were followed throughout this process, with the end result being to relocate the residence to a smaller, more cost-effective property.

[Translation]

To ensure full transparency, I am prepared to answer any questions the committee may have regarding this correspondence.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll start our opening round with Mr. Barrett for six minutes, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Ms. Nicholson, you understand that in your testimony today it's expected that though you haven't sworn an oath, your answers will be fulsome and truthful.

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Yes, Mr. Chair, I do.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You sent an email to Minister Joly's chief of staff on June 17, and you said both “CNGNY” and “HOM”. Can you give those acronyms for us quickly?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Certainly. CNGNY is how we refer to the consulate, and HOM is the head of mission.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Right. Also, you say, “Both CNGNY HOM and staff have been instrumental throughout this process, with the HOM providing the greenlight for the selection of the new residence.”

Did you personally have knowledge of Mr. Clark's personal involvement, or was that relayed to you? If someone relayed it to you, who was it?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, as I stated in my opening remarks, my role is to summarize the information that is provided to me, the best available information at that time.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Who provided the information to you?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: In gathering the information to convey and respond to the minister's office, I engaged with the property branch.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Who in the property branch?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, my interaction was with Robin Dubeau, the assistant deputy minister for the property branch.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Was that the only person?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, I also engaged with members of his team, including the director general for policy and planning of the property branch.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Who is that?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: That person is Franck Hounzangbé.

Mr. Michael Barrett: On July 24, this committee passed a sweeping accountability motion on this \$9-million condo purchase for a Liberal insider during a cost of living crisis here in Canada. Then, the following day, you issued a bogus correction to your June 17 email. In that correction, you say, "Neither Head of Mission (PRMNY nor CNGNY) was part of the selection or approval process for the overall process or the property purchase."

Just so we're clear, you wrote this email that I'm referring to, from July 25, 2024, and you wrote the email that I previously referenced, from June 17, 2024. Did I accurately quote you in both?

• (1115)

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Yes, Mr. Chair, I drafted those emails.

Mr. Michael Barrett: In the first email, you say, "Both CNGNY HOM and staff have been instrumental throughout this process, with the HOM providing the greenlight for the selection of the new residence." That's not a typo. It's not a comma instead of a semi-colon. That's very deliberate language. It's the head of mission providing the green light.

Who instructed you to issue the correction that you issued on the 25th, which was the day after the motion was passed by the committee?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, no one instructed me to make a correction.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You'll have to elaborate, ma'am. The timeline is beyond curious.

On June 17, you explicitly say the head of mission greenlit the project. On July 24, the committee issues the invitation for Mr. Clark to appear, and the next day your mind is cast back more than a month to issue a correction to the email that you sent, just of your own volition.

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, as I said in my opening remarks, the term "greenlight".... First, I think it's important to remember the context in which the first email was drafted. The first email—

Mr. Michael Barrett: With all due respect, ma'am, the question was about the genesis of the so-called correction email that you sent.

Did you do this entirely of your own undertaking, without discussion, consultation or instruction from anyone?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, I work with the best available information provided at the time. After issuing the initial email on June 17, which was, as I mentioned, an initial overview, the office of the associate requested that the leads go through and pull together a more detailed chronology of events.

Once that information was available, I relayed that information to the minister's office. No one asked me to correct anything. I relayed the best available information that was presented to me at the time.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Who told you that Mr. Clark was not involved?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, the records from the property branch demonstrated that the consul general was aware of the process but not involved or in a decision-making role.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I have to tell you, that's quite the reversal. You effectively swallowed yourself whole in this correction that you issued within a day of this committee ordering Mr. Clark to appear.

I'm just going to quote you back to yourself. You wrote about the head of mission "providing the greenlight for the selection of the new residence." That was based on the best available information that was provided to you at the time, but the information that you received a month later—a day after this committee passed the motion—is a complete reversal of that.

Will you table for this committee all correspondence—written, electronic or otherwise—related to this issue and specifically to the July 25 subject matter that you write on?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, of course I'm happy to provide the material that would be useful.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Our committee has passed a motion where we require any requested documents within three calendar weeks, not business weeks.

We will now go to Mr. Jowhari for six minutes, please.

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

Thank you, Ms. Nicholson, for joining us and for clarifying.

I'd like to get an understanding of two things. One is the general role that you play, and the other is the process that you go through in providing an update with a lens as it relates to the residence. What I've jotted down is that there seems to have been some conversation on June 14, which led to the June 17 update. A motion was passed on July 24 for a study, and on July 25 you felt that you needed to make some clarification. That's the chronology that I have.

Let's start with the role that you play within the department. What role do you play?

• (1120)

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, I serve as the chief of staff to the associate deputy minister. My role is largely to ensure that she, in her role, has the information that she needs to carry about her key business.

Specifically with respect to this question today, my role was really that of a liaison, to move information between the experts, the property branch and the minister's office.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: How often do you meet with the assistant deputy minister?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Do you mean with the associate deputy minister? I work with the associate on a daily basis.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Okay. Do you have a weekly...? Do you talk about topics on an everyday basis?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: We spend a good deal of our time together. We have set meetings, and we touch base in the morning to go over key files for the week.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Okay. Was this one of the key files that you were providing an update for on June 14?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: No, Mr. Chair. On June 14, the question came to our office from the minister's office.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Okay. On June 14, a question came from the minister's office making an inquiry about this.

Was that a regular part of an inquiry from the minister's office coming to your department about many different things, and that happened to be one of them as well?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Yes, Mr. Chair. Really, the role of the deputy minister's office is not only to ensure, first and foremost, that the running of the department is being handled, but also to ensure that the minister's office has the most up-to-date information on whatever might be of direct relevance to its work.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: It looks like a complex structure, the way you depicted it. Can you talk about the organization that exists in GAC and how your department fits into it?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Certainly. The department is organized under four deputy ministers, including a deputy minister of foreign affairs, a deputy minister of international trade, and a deputy minister of international development. The associate deputy minister primarily supports the deputy minister of foreign affairs.

Under each of the four deputies, they each have clear branches of responsibility, which is how we refer to them, and those are components of the department that work on different aspects.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: This is under the foreign affairs ministry. Is that correct?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: The role that I serve, if it's helpful, is under the associate deputy minister of foreign affairs. That role largely looks at the corporate matters, and it is in that capacity that a question of property would come to our office.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Okay. A question of property came as part of a regular process, and you provided an update on June 17. Is that correct?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Yes.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: For that update, you said that you acted as a liaison. You brought the source of information, and you highlighted to whom you reached out to get the information. On July 25, a month or so after, you felt that there was a need for an update. In your response to my colleague MP Barrett, you talked about the office of the associate making a request and about you preparing it. What is the office of the associate?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: My apologies for any confusion there. The official title of the person whom I serve is the associate deputy minister of foreign affairs. When I say "the office of the associate", I am referring to our office.

Just to clarify, if it is helpful, while the timing may be such that an email was officially sent on July 25, the process of gathering that information had been in the works for some time. The associate, after June 17, had requested the leads to compile a full summary and a chronology of events with respect to this process. This multi-year process was quite complex because it took place over the span of 10 years, which was eight years prior to the current head of mission's arrival.

• (1125)

Mr. Majid Jowhari: It's more of a coincidence, as you're stating it, that on July 25 the email came up, but the work on that email started way back, which was June 17. Okay.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Mrs. Vignola, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Nicholson, I'll give you time to adjust your earpiece.

[*English*]

Ms. Emily Nicholson: I'm very sorry, but I don't think that my headpiece is working correctly.

[*Translation*]

To make sure I can understand all the questions in French, could someone please help me?

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Just a minute, the technicians will help you.

[*English*]

The Chair: I will just freeze the clock for 15 seconds.

[*Translation*]

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

My colleagues have already talked about this. I'm trying to understand the statement in the June 17 email versus the July 25 email.

In your email of June 17, 2024, you wrote, “The head of mission ... and mission staff played a key role throughout the process ...”

What do you think a “key role” means? What does it mean, in concrete terms, to play a “key role”?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: I will explain myself in English just to make sure I am clear.

[English]

I'm sorry, but this still wasn't working very well, so I really didn't hear most of the question. I apologize.

The Chair: We'll suspend for 30 seconds.

• (1125) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1125)

The Chair: We are back.

Please continue, Mrs. Vignola.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: So I'm going to ask my question again.

The June 17, 2024 email said, “The head of mission ... and mission staff played a key role throughout the process, and the head of mission approved the selection of the new residence.”

First, what do you think a “key role” means? What does that mean in terms of the concrete actions that were taken?

Secondly, you wrote, “the head of mission has approved the selection of the new residence.” Is it an actual approval, or is it simply an administrative requirement without the head of mission really making the final decision?

[English]

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to clarify.

With respect to “instrumental”, what was communicated to me was that the mission staff, for example, had been instrumental in assisting with engaging a broker or realtor on the ground, had accompanied the property team to the 21 different site visits, and had been involved in the process throughout the period of over 10 years.

In order to provide a more fulsome response to that question, I would need to refer you to my colleague, Stéphane Cousineau, who is more familiar with the processes, but what was communicated to me was that the mission staff had been involved in supporting the staff.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

I will get back to the mission staff, but the email also refers to the head of mission.

What concrete actions has the head of mission taken to show that he played a key role?

• (1130)

[English]

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Again, as I stated in my opening remarks, that email should have been drafted more clearly. It should have said, “The head of mission was aware of the process, and the staff were instrumental.” I apologize for the confusion. Again, this was a transitory email that was meant as a quick update, a placeholder to the chief of staff in an initial response to his question, which was focused primarily on understanding the rationale and the business case for the department's decision to sell.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

My second question was about the head of mission and the approval of the selection of the new residence.

Did he actually approve it, or was it just an administrative requirement? What would the consequences have been had he not approved it?

[English]

Ms. Emily Nicholson: As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the term “green light” was meant as a thumbs-up. It was just intended to communicate that the consul general was aware of and prepared to deal with the hassle of moving partway through his assignment and that he had not raised any concerns with the department's decision to move forward with the selection of the sale.

Again, it could have been crafted better. At the time, this email was focused primarily on addressing questions about the sale.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: If he had not approved that sale, what would the consequences have been?

[English]

Ms. Emily Nicholson: In order to answer that question, I would need to refer to my colleague, Stéphane Cousineau.

My limited understanding is that the head of mission is not in a decision-making capacity at any mission.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: As for your speaking notes, we usually ask that they be received in both official languages 48 hours before the meeting. Would it be possible for you to submit them to us as soon as possible so that we can have them in front of us?

[English]

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Certainly. My apologies, Mr. Chair. My understanding was that it had been done by the department. I believe I have remarks on hand that I'd be happy to share if that would be helpful.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thanks. We'll ensure the clerk sends them out.

Mr. Bachrach, please go ahead, sir.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Boy, this is a frustrating bit of testimony, and somewhat unbelievable.

To be honest, Ms. Nicholson, the things you're saying are tough to believe, because you strike me as someone who is very precise and very professional in your conduct, and what you're claiming is that you accidentally mis-characterized something that seems to be characterized in a very specific way.

Isn't the term "give the green light" synonymous with approving something? You've characterized it as "okay" and "willing to go along with the process", but if I say that someone gave me the green light, to me that means that someone approved something. Is that not the most common definition of that phrase?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, I'm unable to speak to common definitions. I can only speak to my intent and what I was intending to convey.

As I said in my opening remarks, that sentence, again, was drafted in the context focused on the sale of the current residence and was intended to communicate that the consul general was aware of and prepared to accommodate the department's plan to proceed with identifying a replacement property. It was in no way meant.... Again, as I stated in my opening remarks, I did not say that the consul general was involved in any of the decision-making process. I did not say that he exercised influence or signed for any transactions, and there have been no records found that indicate anything to the contrary.

Again, the email drafted on June 17 was an initial email, a quick update, a transaction based on the best available information that we had at the time. As I said, in hindsight, the language could have been drafted more precisely, but again, the context for that email.... It was specifically focused on responding to questions from the minister's office about the sale and why the department was making a decision to sell a property it had purchased in 1961. Our intent and our area of concern and focus were principally and totally focused on communicating the department's business case and rationale for the decision to sell.

• (1135)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Ms. Nicholson, there are two possible explanations for what happened. One is the explanation you've provided, which is that you accidentally mis-characterized what occurred and used language that you shouldn't have used because it didn't accurately describe what happened. The other explanation is that Mr. Clark was actually involved in the process, did give the green light, tried his best to avoid having any documentation of that, and yet, despite trying to avoid documentation, ended up with this email on June 17, which was then corrected.

For a member of the public who's watching this testimony and trying to decide which of those explanations is the most likely, you'll have to forgive people who think the most likely explanation is the simplest one, which is that the language used in the June 17 email about giving the green light and having been "instrumental" was an accurate reflection of his role in the process.

How do you explain that to reasonable people who are watching this testimony and thinking that it seems like, maybe, something occurred that shouldn't have occurred?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, a mistake was made. The department proactively provided that clarification to the committee, anticipating that there could be concern, fully cognizant of how language, taken out of context, could be misinterpreted. That's why I'm here today, to convey and to clarify the context within which that first email was drafted and to clearly state that there was no request by anyone to ask me to make a correction.

The information that was provided on July 25 was pulled together through a process of the property team going through and clearly putting a more detailed explanation together, and that explanation was provided to the minister's office on July 25.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I asked Mr. Clark at his previous appearance how he was notified that the process was occurring and whether he could provide documentation of that notification. He said that there was no documentation. It was all done verbally. Is that convenient? Is that appropriate, given the context and the need to document notification of significant officials like Mr. Clark? It seems unusual that something like notifying the consul general that a process was taking place wouldn't be documented in some way through an email, a memo or something like that. It seems to kind of play into this pattern that we're seeing, which is that he actually had a more involved role than he said he had, but none of it was supposed to be documented because if he were that involved, it wouldn't be following the department's procedures.

Why wasn't it documented when he was notified of the process?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, unfortunately I'm unable to speak to whatever transactions or communications would have taken place on the ground for that. I would need to refer the committee to my colleagues at work, at our mission in New York.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Chair, do I have more time?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I'm not sure how much further we can take this testimony, other than just to express my total incredulity at the fact that the language used in these professional communications is so specific. It seems obvious to many members of the committee that the language was meant to convey Mr. Clark's role and then was retracted.

If, hypothetically, as articulated in your June 17 email, Mr. Clark had been involved and had given the green light, which constitutes approval of the process, would that have been inappropriate?

The Chair: I'm afraid there's not enough time for a response, but perhaps you can get a response in your next round or in writing.

We'll now go to our second round. We'll start with Mrs. Kusie, please.

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

Ms. Nicholson, the Treasury Board recently increased the approval threshold from \$4 million to \$10 million, as I'm sure you're aware, in 2022. How many real estate purchases did the Minister of Foreign Affairs approve on an annual basis, both before and after this significant change, please?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, with apologies, that would be outside of my scope and area of expertise.

I would be happy to refer the question to my colleague, Stéphane Cousineau.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: That's not necessary at this time. Perhaps if Monsieur Cousineau could provide this information to the committee and table it, that would be truly appreciated. Thank you.

Minister Joly was appointed as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in late 2021, and it seems that shortly after this, the threshold was increased by \$6 million. Suddenly, the minister was not required to approve these costly real estate purchases. The following year, Tom Clark was appointed as consul general of New York. Immediately after this, work got under way to provide him with a new luxury apartment on Billionaires' Row.

Does this timing not seem a little suspect to you, to the point where things perfectly lined up to allow Mr. Clark to have this new luxury apartment?

• (1140)

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, I can really only speak today to my role in this process, which is limited to these two emails that have been presented to the committee.

What I can say, from my understanding, is that this process, I believe, spanned over 10 years and was initiated in 2014, which was eight years prior to the current head of mission's arrival in New York.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: According to an ATIP received by the National Post, you emailed an executive in the department that the branch in charge of the purchase failed to mention that the apartment was on Billionaires' Row. I believe this is Monsieur Cousineau's branch. Why did you personally think that it was important for the minister to know that this was located on Billionaires' Row? Why did that stand out to you to mention to her?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, my summary in that email to the deputy minister, who was acting for the associate over that weekend, was very much to convey the background and all information—to ensure that he had the most detailed information to make decisions on the file. What I intended in drafting that email was simply a summary of events that had taken place to that date.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: In your introduction, Ms. Nicholson, you indicated that you prioritize issues for the minister. You provide a summary of issues to the minister. What is the title and name of your counterpart with the minister, please?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: If I understand correctly, Mr. Chair, is the honourable member asking for the name of the chief of staff in the minister's office?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: That's correct. With whom do you have these daily conversations, please?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: With apologies, I was speaking to the role of the associate deputy minister. My daily conversations are with the associate deputy minister, who is my boss.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay, pardon me, but who is your counterpart with whom you bring up points of interest to the minister? Whom do these occur with?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: If I understand the question correctly, in conveying information to the minister's office, that largely goes from our floor to our liaison unit.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay.

I'm going to go to the process, then, Ms. Nicholson.

What criteria do you personally use to bring something forward to the minister? You said you prioritize issues and you provide summaries. What flags you personally that something has to be brought to the attention of the minister?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: The majority of the work I do in summarizing or prioritizing is in areas the leads within the department and the branches bring forward to my associate and identify as priorities within the department or that might be of interest or of need to update in the minister's office. I have never personally identified a priority for the minister.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay.

How does the minister, then, flag decisions that are of importance to her?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Again, my direct involvement with this is quite limited, but my understanding of the process is that the minister conveys to her staff what her priorities are, and those come down to our department via what we call a liaison unit, which works between the minister's office and the deputy's office.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Did the minister's office ask you to send the July 25 correction?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: The minister's office did not ask me to send any correction ever.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thanks.

Mr. Bains, please go ahead.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today.

Ms. Nicholson, as you work closely with experts involved in the sale of residences, can you share your perspective on how the department adhered to policies and ensured there was transparency throughout the process? Did you review the records that your office requested? Did they show any interference in this purchase by Mr. Clark?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: The review of any documentation and the processes and procedures is done by my colleagues, the experts on this matter, who have years of expertise in the property branch. I don't personally have the expertise to review their documentation.

• (1145)

Mr. Parm Bains: Have they completed their review?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: I would need to defer to my colleagues on that. I wouldn't want to misspeak. That's outside of my area and scope.

Mr. Parm Bains: Is there a review happening right now?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: As I stated earlier and am happy to clarify, the office of the associate deputy minister requested that, following the initial summary that was provided to the minister's office, a thorough review be conducted of all processes and procedures, including the chronology. That was what was presented to our office, and that is what I presented on July 25 as an update to the minister's office.

Mr. Parm Bains: Has that been activated now? Is that in action?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Again, to give you a more fulsome—

Mr. Parm Bains: That was just to confirm, with a yes or no, if that's in action.

Ms. Emily Nicholson: I honestly don't know if it has been completed or not. It was asked, and the information was presented to me on July 25, and that's the extent of my knowledge.

Mr. Parm Bains: Maybe it has not been concluded, but has it been activated? Do you know if it has started?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Certainly, the outcome of the information was conveyed in the email that I sent and provided to the minister's office on July 25 of this year.

Mr. Parm Bains: Okay.

What mechanisms are in place to avoid political interference in the purchase of any real property by Global Affairs Canada?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: I certainly know there are processes and policies in place, but unfortunately that's outside of my scope.

I would be happy to refer you to my colleague Mr. Cousineau, who could better answer that question for you.

Mr. Parm Bains: Sure.

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, People and International Platform, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): It's going to be a pleasure for me to clarify this point in response to the question I had, which is, how do we ensure that the decision-making is internally managed by real property expertise with no influence? We have very clear governance that involves all the real property experts at the table and the different stakeholders. There's ongoing interaction with the mission, which is understandable, because we need to make sure that the requirements are very clear.

As part of that process, absolutely, we always make the mission aware, but there's no involvement in the selection or any purchase. They're only there to ensure that, as we apply the process and the plan, the limitation is there for any impact on their operation, which is why we always check with the mission to make sure that we can proceed with our plan, because they need to continue their operation.

Once again, this process complied with all policies, all processes and chapter 5 of our real property framework that we have in place.

It was well executed, and we still believe that it's a great investment for the Canadian taxpayer.

Thank you.

Mr. Parm Bains: At what price threshold, if any, do real property purchases require the authority of the Minister of Foreign Affairs?

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: Mr. Chair, I can take that question.

Mr. Parm Bains: Sure, whoever has the information, please answer.

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: Mr. Chair, I'll be pleased to take that question on authority.

The minister adheres to the delegation of authority that we obtain from Treasury Board. In this case, the authority to purchase an official residence was \$10 million, and we followed that delegation authority that was provided to the minister and the departmental authority.

Mr. Parm Bains: Mr. Cousineau, on the earlier questions that Ms. Nicholson didn't have the information for, do you know if a review has been activated on this?

The Chair: We only have time for a yes or a no.

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: I will say yes, and the information has been provided already.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Bains.

Mrs. Vignola, please go ahead for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

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

Ms. Nicholson, I'm listening to you, and having experienced it in another life, I feel like I'm talking to somebody who's covering for another person, covering someone else's mistake or decision, because that's what has to be done.

In all sincerity, I hope that is not the case. If it is, I honestly think it is a shame. Having said that, I have to ask you, are you covering for someone?

• (1150)

[English]

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, I appreciate the honourable member's concern. This really is a simple matter of a different choice of wording. If we could go back in time, we would write the email differently to make it more clear, but the information that I've provided to you and all of the testimony that I've given to you are accurate.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Okay.

In 2019, the transaction limit for the purchase of an official residence was significantly increased to \$10 million, if memory serves. In the past, some homes were built for \$16 million. That was the case of a chancellery in Peru more than a decade ago. Only an authorization was required at the time.

Did Global Affairs Canada ask Treasury Board to increase the transaction limit so that it would no longer have to apply for an increase?

[English]

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, I have a very cursory knowledge of our authorities and would need to refer that question to our chief financial officer, perhaps. I'm not sure that Stéphane knows that answer either, so we would need to come back to you to give you a fulsome response.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bachrach, go ahead, please.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Ms. Nicholson, have you ever met Mr. Clark?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, I have never met Mr. Clark.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: How did you know that “green light” was a mis-characterization of Mr. Clark's role?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, as I stated in my opening remarks, after providing the initial summary, which was intended as a very initial overview, to the minister's office on June 17, we asked our colleagues in the property branch to provide a more fulsome explanation or chronology of events. In that chronology of events, it was very clear that the head of mission was very much aware that a process was going on and under way, which predated his arrival, and was in no way influential.

When I saw that information and realized how things could be interpreted from my initial email, I took the liberty of ensuring that both the department and the minister's office had the best available information at the time.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: What prompted the request for a more fulsome explanation of events?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, as evidenced by the article in the National Post, our office was not aware of this transaction. While we had the initial conversations with the property branch to gather the initial information provided on June 17, there was certainly an acknowledgement that this transaction would.... There was interest within the associate's office of having a more fulsome understanding of that transaction. As such, the request came from our office to pull together a detailed chronology.

Mr. Chair, it's also quite complex. It was spanning over 10 years. It involved numerous decision points. So, for our office to have a clear understanding of what exactly had happened from start to finish, we requested to have that information put forward to us. Once we had it ready, we relayed that to the minister's office. It just happened to be on July 25.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I looked up the definition of the term “green light”. The most common North American definition is “give permission to go ahead with”. Now, if Mr. Clark had given permission to go ahead with the purchase, would that have been inappropriate?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, I would need to relay that question to.... I would be giving you my notional understanding, which would be probably inaccurate, so I would refer the question to my colleague, Stéphane Cousineau, if that would be acceptable.

The Chair: There's only time for a very brief answer, please.

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: Mr. Chair, I want to clarify the reality of what the consul was approving, which was essentially ensuring that his operation was not impacted. We wanted to make sure that the plan was fine for his operation, that there was no impact. He was actually approving the process of proceeding, not the purchase of the actual new residence. Mr. Clark was not—

• (1155)

The Chair: I'm afraid that's all we have time for.

Mrs. Block, go ahead, please.

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

Ms. Nicholson, I join my colleagues in expressing a deep skepticism with regard to the explanation that you have provided to this committee today. I want to go back to a response you gave with regard to a question that was asked today. In response to the question about who asked for the update email sent on July 25, you stated that it was the office of the associate that requested it. Is that correct?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Yes, to the best of my knowledge, that is correct.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Okay. Are you the chief of staff in the office of the associate? Is that the office you are referring to?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Yes.

Mrs. Kelly Block: So, you're telling us that your own office asked you for the update. Is that correct?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: No, Mr. Chair. I apologize for any confusion. It was our office requesting that the leads, my colleagues in the property branch, provide the chronology.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Okay. Thank you for that. There's a lot of confusion being created here today.

In fact, I want to go back to the email you sent on July 25. In that email, you state that the reason for this update email was a conversation between Minister Joly's chief of staff, Peter Wilkinson, and the chief of staff of the deputy minister, Karolina Guay.

I'll quote what you wrote at the top of your email:

Peter,

Following your conversation with Karolina and further to my email of June 17 below, I am writing to provide additional information on the purchase of a new Official Residence for the Consulate in New York....

I think we may have found the subject expert that you referenced in your testimony earlier in this meeting in regard to who advised you on what should be in the updated email. That would appear to be Mr. Wilkinson, in conversation with Karolina Guay.

I guess I'll give you one more opportunity to tell this committee: Did anyone in the minister's office—anyone at any level in the minister's office—directly or indirectly ask you to provide an update and to include this information in it?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned in my opening statement, the email I provided on June 17 was an initial email to the minister's office—

Mrs. Kelly Block: That's not what I asked. I asked you this: Did anyone in the minister's office ask you, directly or indirectly, to provide the information that you included in this summary?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, the answer is unequivocally no. There was no instruction on what to include. We were providing information to the minister's office. The minister's office had asked for the rationale and the business case for the sale of the original property, purchased in 1961, and asked if the head of mission was aware—

Mrs. Kelly Block: Okay. I do have the email in front of me.

When did the conversation between Peter Wilkinson and Karolina Guay take place?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, with apologies, I don't have that information top of mind. I would need to go back and consult with the individuals in question, as I wasn't in that conversation.

Mrs. Kelly Block: It certainly would have happened sometime between June 17 and the email that you sent. I'm going to assume that it probably took place much closer to July 25 than to June 17.

I want to ask you, Ms. Nicholson, if you will table all communications, emails, written documents or phone calls between you and any member of the real property branch of Global Affairs Canada, Peter Wilkinson, Karolina Guay and anyone working at the consulate in New York City from June 1, 2024, to October 3, 2024.

• (1200)

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, if it's within the purview of the committee, I'm more than happy to provide whatever the committee needs in order to do its work.

Mrs. Kelly Block: I can assure you that it absolutely is within the purview of a standing committee to ask a witness to do that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Sousa, go ahead, please.

Mr. Charles Sousa (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.): Thank you for appearing before us, and thank you for your composure. I know that this is not always an easy task. You're doing a phenomenal job.

Ms. Nicholson, you know that you are under oath.

Did you make the decision to buy this property?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, I did not make the decision to buy this property.

Mr. Charles Sousa: In the correspondence that you wrote, did that indicate that someone had agreed to purchase the property, or did that...? Is that a correction, or are you trying to clarify what has taken place?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, I'm not totally sure I understand the question.

Mr. Charles Sousa: In your subsequent email, you were.... I've heard the term "correcting the record", that you've been correcting the record. Are you correcting the record or are you clarifying what took place?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, that is in fact a better use of words. The July 25 email was, as evidenced by the length of the email, far more thorough, far more comprehensive in its coverage and based on the information available at the time.

As I said earlier in my opening remarks, in my role I provide the best available information provided to me at the time of the request.

Mr. Charles Sousa: Is it appropriate for anyone from government who's proceeding to make a major transaction of this nature on behalf of Canadians—saving Canadians money, no less, in this transaction to the tune of \$7 million—to then advise or consult with the head of that particular residence, who's going to be impacted by the change?

Did you advise for the purpose of acknowledging a sale, or was it acknowledging the process by which that person or department would be impacted?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, my colleague would be better placed to fully answer that question.

I can speak to what I intended to convey as a non-expert on this matter in the email I drafted. As I stated in my earlier remarks, my intent in utilizing the term "green light" was simply to demonstrate to the minister's office that the head of mission was aware a process was under way that would require him to move partway through his assignment and, therefore, would impact him.

In order to give a more fulsome answer to your question, I would refer you to my colleague Mr. Cousineau.

Mr. Charles Sousa: Mr. Cousineau, I think you've already responded to that effect, but, by all means, reaffirm it, if you can.

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: Absolutely. The reason we make the consul and head of mission aware is not only that it will impact him personally when we move, but it will impact the whole operation of the mission. This makes it even more important to be aware of the process we're putting in place.

Once again, I'm going to reiterate that there is no involvement by the head of mission in the selection or purchase of any residence.

Mr. Charles Sousa: Does the purchase create a net benefit to the taxpayer?

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: Absolutely. I could provide you with the breakdown. The business case is very clear.

In the overall picture, we're selling the current OR for \$13 million. We're purchasing one for \$9 million. We're also adding what we're going to be getting in cost savings from a renovation perspective. We're saving an annual, ongoing cost of \$115,000, which leads to that net present value of roughly up to \$7.4 million.

Mr. Charles Sousa: Can you give us a one-pager on that?

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: We could.

Mr. Charles Sousa: My next question is with regard to the consul general himself.

How long has this process been in play? How long have we been looking at relocating the residence?

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: Mr. Chair, I can give that response as well.

As we explained, historically, we were looking into this file for probably the last 10 years. There was a report that came out on the 17th on the situation of the OR. I would say it started in 2017, when there were considerations for either renovating or replacing the residence.

With COVID and the increase in the price of the real property market in Manhattan, there was a very detailed analysis through the governance and tools process that we have that indicated very clearly that it was best to replace it with a new—

• (1205)

Mr. Charles Sousa: Who made the decision to buy the property?

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: Mr. Chair, the decision was made, according to the departmental authority, by our DG expert of real property.

Mr. Charles Sousa: Did the Minister of Foreign Affairs make the decision to buy the property?

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: Mr. Chair, there was no political influence, and no, the minister was not involved.

Mr. Charles Sousa: Did the consul general make the decision to buy the property?

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: Mr. Chair, no, the consul general was not involved in the selection and purchase of the OR.

Mr. Charles Sousa: The process was followed and clarification was provided to ensure that the impacted people would be aware of and acknowledge the existence of this transaction. The transaction ultimately benefits Canadians to the tune of \$7 million because the net value appreciation of that is in favour of the taxpayers, and the location is in keeping with other consuls general. In fact, it's one of the less affluent residences—

The Chair: I need you to finish up, Mr. Sousa.

Mr. Charles Sousa: Is that correct, Mr. Cousineau?

The Chair: A yes-or-no answer is all we have time for.

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: Mr. Chair, that is absolutely correct.

The Chair: Thanks.

Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Ms. Nicholson, you said you received information from subject matter experts. Is that correct?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Yes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You insert the information from the subject matter experts, but you are not the subject matter expert. Is that correct?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: That is correct.

Mr. Michael Barrett: That means, respectfully, that on the \$9-million condo, you are not the expert.

Ms. Emily Nicholson: That would be accurate, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You received information from the experts before you sent this email on June 17. Is that correct?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, in compiling the information for the June 17 email, I—

Mr. Michael Barrett: It came from the experts.

Ms. Emily Nicholson: It came from our property branch, yes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You just testified that you issued a correction to your email. The story that you've told today doesn't add up, just like the two emails that you've sent don't add up. You're saying two contradictory things: that you only report the info that you receive but, on July 25, you arrived at a conclusion on your own, absent the other information.

If the subject matter experts told you in June that the head of mission, to use your words, was “providing the greenlight for the selection of the new residence”, if that's what the experts told you and if you're just air traffic control and you just landed the information in the document, well, where did the new information come from? This is what doesn't make sense.

Which subject matter expert told you on July 25, the day after a standing committee of the House of Commons launched an investigation into this \$9-million condo, that Mr. Clark didn't have anything to do with it? What is the name?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the experts have already been stated. It was Mr. Robin Dubeau, assistant deputy minister for property, and his team.

To clarify, the request for the chronology and the information that was provided in that quite fulsome email had been made—

Mr. Michael Barrett: When? On what date was the request made for the chronology from the minister's office?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: As I mentioned in my opening remarks, following the initial information that was provided to the minister's office on June 17, the office of the associate engaged with my colleagues in the property branch and asked them to pull together a more fulsome explanation.

Mr. Michael Barrett: On what date did you get the request?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: I would have to go back. I don't have a date off the top of my head.

Mr. Michael Barrett: We're going to need you to table it, because it just seems.... Do you agree to table that with the committee?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Of course.

Mr. Michael Barrett: It seems incredible. What a coincidence that you get the information from the experts, you circulate that in the department, and a correction is issued only after a happenstance conversation with the minister's office. Suddenly, the head of mission is no longer giving the green light. That simply does not add up. It's absolutely not believable.

In the absence of proof of what you're saying, it appears you're misleading us today. We have your own words, making the assertion that the green light was given by the head of mission, Tom Clark, to buy a \$9-million condo after the Treasury Board changed the rules to allow for purchases of less than \$10 million without cabinet approval. It's like this perfect puzzle was put together. The only interruption was that a standing committee started an investigation, and, suddenly, a correction needed to be made.

Does that sound believable to you? Does this presentation of facts sound believable to you? What you said on June 17 is one thing. Of your own volition—without any new information—at the end of July, you say the complete opposite. You assert the complete opposite without any evidence that what you're asserting is true.

• (1210)

Ms. Emily Nicholson: It would be inaccurate to say that there was no new information presented. As I have said from the outset, the email provided on June 17 was very much an initial overview and not an attempt to capture everything. It focused specifically on the sale—

Mr. Michael Barrett: From an overview perspective—

The Chair: That is our time.

Mr. Michael Barrett: —you said Tom Clark gave the green light, and you only changed your story after an investigation was launched. That's the bottom line.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mrs. Atwin, please.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for being with us, Ms. Nicholson.

If you'd like to clarify, was the second response the opposite of what you had said, or was it a clarification?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: As said, the information provided on July 25 was very much a more fulsome business case and a more fulsome explanation that was put together by the leads to provide a detailed chronology. I appreciate being here to clarify the words that I drafted because, of course, taken out of context, any snapshot moment in time can be misconstrued and viewed as something else. I am here today to correct, as the author of the statement, what was intended.

What I intended in drafting that statement was simply to convey that the head of mission was aware and had not raised any concerns or objections to the department's plan to proceed with the purchase. There was certainly additional information—in response to the previous member's question—that was brought to our office and was

gathered by the property leads between June 17 and July 25. That's why they were asked to gather additional information.

It would be inaccurate to say that the information provided on July 25 came out of nowhere. That would be inaccurate and is not the truth.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you very much.

The green light referred to the department's plan and the process and not the purchase of the property.

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Certainly. The information conveyed to me was that the head of mission was giving the green light for the plan and of the plan. He was not green-lighting the plan.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you.

Recent media reports indicate that senior officials were not informed of this purchase. Is this a gap? Is there a way to address this? Should they have been informed?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Certainly it's always in the department's best interest to have as much key information conveyed to the deputy's office as possible. With the scope of the department and the areas and issues that we navigate, it's not always possible.

As stated in that article, the department has certainly taken steps, including the request from the associate's office to the property branch to ensure that key real estate transactions are brought to the associate's attention.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you very much.

Mr. Cousineau, while you're here with us, the media often calls the new location for the official residence “Billionaires' Row”. Why didn't you bring this nickname to your management's attention?

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: I know that the branding that was actually done by that market raised some questions. I want to reiterate that when the purchase was done, we investigated 21 properties. When that one came out, it was actually in the district of Midtown, in a very old heritage building that was built in the 1950s. I think the branding was done because of some surrounding skyscrapers that are very nearby. It's in the same area, but it's not within the same building. I suspect that is why not a lot of attention was paid to it until that was raised.

Could we have paid a bit more attention to that branding? Maybe we could have, but frankly, I think the investment that we have with the purchase in this old heritage building was the right one to make, and it's going to be benefiting the taxpayer moving forward.

• (1215)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you.

On that, you mentioned at your last appearance the ongoing savings from this transaction, including how leaving the co-op model in New York could lead to tax savings under the Vienna Convention. Can you explain that a bit further?

Mr. Stéphane Cousineau: Absolutely. I've been talking about the annual, ongoing savings that we're going to be having. First of all, this is related to the fact that the residence we're moving to is a little bit smaller. The costs of operation are a little bit smaller as well.

Also, to your point, according to the convention that you mentioned, the tax is not excluded in a co-op environment, which we are in right now, but in a condo environment, we are exempt. That's going to be a big saving for the Canadian taxpayer moving forward.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: I have about 15 seconds left. That's not much time for a question.

Again, I think this is a very high-pressure environment. I really appreciate your testimony and the clarifications. It's very important that we understand exactly what happened here.

I very much appreciate your being here. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Atwin.

Mrs. Vignola, you have the floor, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to move the motion I tabled with the committee on Tuesday, October 1, 2024, to be precise. The motion concerns the Governor General and reads as follows:

[...] the committee :

(a) is concerned that the Governor General cannot adequately address Quebec francophones and francophones from francophone communities in other provinces in their mother tongue;

(b) expresses its deep disappointment that after three years since her appointment, the Governor General of Canada is unable to sustain a basic level of conversation in French in the exercise of her title as representative of the Sovereign in Canada, and that she has spoken only in English when French is the only official language in the province of Quebec; and

(c) requests the chair to report to the House as soon as possible.

It is simply a request to report the situation to the House, a report that shows our disappointment. I hope it is shared and that I am not the only one who is extremely disappointed by this situation. She is the representative of the King of England and, consequently, of Canada's head of state, according to the documents, and that head of state speaks French, in particular.

Yes, his representative is bilingual, but you can be bilingual in many ways. It could have been Spanish, Mandarin. It could have been Portuguese. It could have been Danish, Swedish, but the fact remains that Canada's two official languages are French and English, and not any of the 3,000 or so languages and several thousand dialects that exist all over the world.

This is a measure of respect for francophones in Quebec and the rest of Canada. Regardless of whether they believe in or support this monarchical symbol on Canadian soil, they nevertheless have the need and the right to have their mother tongue respected and considered important.

I am opening the debate so that my colleagues can express themselves and determine the issue around the vote to bring this report to the House of Commons.

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Majid Jowhari: May I suggest this? We have the NDP, CPC and the Liberals left. If we can proceed with those and then go back to debating the motion, it would be much appreciated. We can finish this round, dismiss our witnesses, and then move on. I understand the chair has already asked for extra time, so that shouldn't be an issue.

Thank you.

• (1220)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I have no problem with that, as long as we come back to it after the round of questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: If you wish to withdraw for now, we can get back to it. We have resources until about 1:30. I'm supposed to be in the House at 1:12 to finish a speech. I'm hoping that we don't delay this much, but we can continue with the rounds if you're fine with that and get back to it afterwards.

We have Mr. Bachrach, then a Conservative round and a Liberal round. Then we can resume. Are you fine with that, Mrs. Vignola? Okay.

If the committee is fine, we'll do that. I'll start a speaking list when we finish up with the Liberal round.

We've pretty much burned through your two and a half minutes, so we'll zip over to Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll go back to the topic of Mr. Clark and the process for approving the process. Mr. Clark asserted in his testimony that he was aware of the process but not part of that process. Mr. Cousineau just said Mr. Clark was approving the process for proceeding.

Maybe I'll pose this as a question to Ms. Nicholson. Does approving a process constitute being part of that process? If you're in charge of approving a process in your department, does that not make you a part of that process?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, I'm hesitant to speak to any hypothetical situations. I can speak to what I approve, and I can refer specifically to the question for which I am here today, which is specifically to speak to the two emails that I drafted. I drafted these emails, but other than that, in any reference to approval of a process related to property, I would need to refer you to my colleague Mr. Cousineau.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: To your understanding, did Mr. Clark approve the process, based on the information that you've seen?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Based on the information that I have seen, my understanding is that the head of mission was aware and did not raise any concerns with the department's moving forward to proceed with the sale and then the purchase. Again, to clarify—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Did he approve the process? It's a very simple question. It's a yes or a no. Did he approve the process?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: No. The head of mission was not in a place to approve the sale or purchase.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Why did Mr. Cousineau say that he approved the process?

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Mr. Chair, I would need to refer you to my honourable colleague here, who would be able to speak to his words.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: It seems, Mr. Chair, like there's so much prevarication around Mr. Clark's role that it strikes the committee—and I think I can speak for some of my colleagues at least—that there's an attempt to construct a story that has a semblance of credibility, when in actual fact Mr. Clark was fairly involved in the process. He wasn't just aware that a process was happening; he had some role in green-lighting the process and, in fact, may have been instrumental in the process.

You know, it's frustrating for me, because perhaps I differ a little bit from my Conservative colleagues in the question of whether the purchase of that property was in Canada's best interest and whether it was a good decision. Really, this study has evolved into a study about the process and whether people are telling the truth about Mr. Clark's role. That should be something that people are very concerned about if they're watching this, because we have a set of facts and assertions that are frankly unbelievable. It's unbelievable that a senior civil servant would write a memo and misuse phrases like giving a green light or being “instrumental”. We're in this strange situation where we have testimony that doesn't line up and where we're forced to make conclusions based on inconsistent testimony provided by Mr. Clark and by you today.

I don't have any more questions, other than to say that it's really disappointing that we haven't been able to get to the bottom of what happened. Instead, we're stuck making assumptions.

I'll hand it back to you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Bachrach.

We'll now go to Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Nicholson, it just seems very obvious that the trigger was pulled on buying the \$9-million condo immediately after the Prime Minister visited Mr. Clark in New York. It seems very obvious. As well, it seems that Mr. Clark, as well as the department, put a lot of stock in the listing price. It's just not reasonable. It's not good accounting practice at all, but unfortunately it is one that the government uses consistently, to count on something before it is sold. Accounting is not done this way. Reconciling a budget is not done this way, and the government should not be conducting its business in this way.

As well, it's incredibly concerning that it seems you've lied about changing this email and changing the terminology within the email. It seems very clear that you're not being truthful with the committee today. We just don't know who directed you to speak these mis-truths today to this committee and to Canadians.

There have been multiple scandals where the minister said she wasn't informed about things. There's the \$9-million purchase on Billionaires' Row, and there is the warship that docked in Havana alongside Russian ships; she said she didn't know about that. In each of these instances, including the purchase of a \$9-million condo on Billionaires' Row, she said she wasn't informed, yet, all of a sudden, when something goes wrong in the media or in this committee, she is informed. She's informed at this time.

What you're saying today doesn't add up. What the minister is saying doesn't add up. It shows incompetence or lying, one of those two things. Canadians expect their minister to know what is going on, and they expect their minister, their government and the government's officials, no matter what level, not to lie.

We require more information, Mr. Chair, and with this information that we are not uncovering today—I wish we could say we were uncovering it rather than not uncovering it—I would like to move that:

In regard to the committee's study of the purchase of the new official residence for the Consul General in New York, the committee invite to appear: Former Chief of Staff to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Peter Wilkinson; Former Chief of Staff of Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister, Karolina Guay; Property Branch Assistant Deputy Minister, Robin Dubeau; and Director General of Policy and Planning, Franck, as referred to by Emily Nicholson in her testimony today.

It's clear we're not getting the answers we require to, first of all, determine how the minister implicates herself into these significant decisions, and then, as well, there is the inconsistency we've seen with the wording within the email and the timing around the email here today, Mr. Chair.

As such, I am putting this motion forward to call these further witnesses.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

• (1225)

The Chair: We'll get the motion distributed. Are you sending it over to the clerk?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. Do you wish to speak on it, or should I start a speaking list on this motion?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Sure, you can start a speaking list. Thank you.

The Chair: Would anyone like to speak on it, or would you like to wait a couple of moments for it to come up?

We'll suspend for a couple of moments.

• (1225)

(Pause)

• (1230)

The Chair: Thanks very much. We are back on Mrs. Kusie's motion.

I'm starting a speaking list. I understand we have Mr. Sousa and then Mr. Brock.

Mr. Charles Sousa: I'm a little confused. I thought we had already agreed to deal with Mrs. Vignola's motion after we proceed. Is that the process?

The Chair: The agreement was that we would deal with Mrs. Vignola's motion after the two interventions from the Conservatives and the Liberals, so we will. Hopefully we can put this motion to bed. Then we're going to finish the interventions from you and the CPC, and then we'll get to Mrs. Vignola's motion.

Mr. Charles Sousa: I understand the minister is actually coming on November 5. Is that not correct?

The Chair: That's correct.

Are you putting yourself on the speaking list?

Mr. Charles Sousa: No.

The Chair: Does anyone want to speak on Mrs. Kusie's motion?

We'll go straight to a vote, then.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: I had my hand raised.

The Chair: You did not, Mrs. Atwin. I asked several times. There was no response, so we started the vote.

Mr. Larry Brock (Brantford—Brant, CPC): Actually, I had my hand up.

The Chair: Oh, I apologize. Mr. Brock is correct. I accept full responsibility. That's my mistake.

We had a speaking list for Mrs. Kusie's motion. I had recognized Mr. Sousa. He finished his time.

Mr. Brock, you are correct. You had your hand up. I apologize. We're not voting on it yet.

You're up on Mrs. Kusie's motion.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you, Chair.

I apologize that I arrived at literally the tail end of this particular important meeting, but I am familiar with the evidence from Ms. Nicholson. I thank her for her attendance.

I just want to reiterate the extreme importance regarding the content of the motion from my colleague Mrs. Kusie. This saga seems to create different layers of complexity, with finger-pointing, denials, mistruths and exaggerations of the truth. It's hard for this committee to determine who is telling the truth.

I understand, from the evidence that we've heard today from Ms. Nicholson, that she wants to assign herself full responsibility for attributing input directly from Mr. Clark in the acquisition of this \$9-million condominium on Billionaires' Row. I find that really hard to believe, given the explicit language used. This wasn't a typo scenario. It was very specific that Mr. Clark did have his hands all over the acquisition of this particular unit. The evidence we have heard so far in this particular committee seems to lend credence to his involvement.

I remark and recall just how ridiculous Mr. Clark's statement was, to the effect that when he was invited for the first time to tour this condominium with a real estate agent.... He had the audacity to challenge me and suggest to this committee that he walked in with the real estate agent, who listed it and sold it to the Government of Canada, and not a word was spoken. The two of them walked around aimlessly—not pointing out features, not communicating with each other, but simply observing. It is absolutely ridiculous in

the extreme for someone to tour a property and not be guided by an agent. It only lends credence to the fact that Mr. Clark had previous knowledge about this unit and had input with respect to the acquisition of this unit.

We need to hear from further individuals to shed truth on what really transpired.

I understand that the minister is about to appear to answer these questions. I read recently in the press that her office is denying that they were even made aware that this condominium was located on Billionaires' Row. Again, I find that extremely hard to believe. The minister has a penchant for basically denying anything that seems to be controversial in her portfolio, which begs the question of who really is telling the truth.

For all those reasons, Mr. Chair, having more witnesses come to this committee to shed more light on the process and the acquisition of this most extravagant condominium on Billionaires' Row.... This is something that Canadians want a clear answer on at a time when we have millions of Canadians lining up at food banks, when we have millions of Canadians unable to make a down payment to purchase a home, when we have millions of Canadians defaulting on mortgages and when we have all kinds of people never even thinking about acquiring the Canadian dream of home ownership. We have Justin Trudeau awarding a buddy of his from the media, Tom Clark, a \$9-million condominium at a time when we have a number of major crises in this country. Canadians are fed up. They want this committee to get to the truth. That's exactly what we plan on doing.

I'll be supporting my colleague's motion.

Thank you.

● (1235)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we can go to Mrs. Atwin, and then we have Mr. Sousa.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you very much.

I first want to mention that with regard to process, I think it's taking advantage of Mrs. Vignola's goodwill for us to have stayed the conversation around her important motion as well. Nonetheless, we're here.

I also want to comment again on the treatment of our public servants when they come before us at this very important committee. It's been a disturbing trend. We've seen character assassinations and accusations that are, I think, deeply concerning and offensive to those who are the subject of those accusations. I'm very conscious of how previous public servants and their lives have been affected by such appearances at this committee. It's unacceptable and I think unbecoming of us as parliamentarians.

On the motion specifically, we do know that the minister is coming on November 5 to answer our questions. We know that the minister is absolutely accountable to their staff. We certainly want to hear from anyone who can shed light on this conversation.

• (1240)

We've already requested additional electronic communications that may perhaps shed even more light on the conversation we're having today, which is great. What we're all trying to achieve here is to get to the bottom of what happened.

I'll also take issue with Mr. Brock's characterization, saying that the consul general had "his hands all over the acquisition". We've heard repeatedly that this is actually not the case. We need to be really careful about the words we're using in this space. If we actually do want to get down to the truth about what happened, making those assumptions and generalizations is really unfair. I don't think it leads us to finding out what the truth is in this situation. We should all just be really careful and cautious.

Again, we want to hear from those who have information pertinent to this discussion, absolutely, but what is the proper channel? What we really need to discuss here is the proper process.

I have deep concerns about this, and I'd just like to register that.

The Chair: Thanks, Mrs. Atwin.

I'll now go to Mr. Sousa, please.

Mr. Charles Sousa: Thank you, Chair.

Further to Mrs. Atwin's comments, we want truth. We want transparency. We want to make sure we protect the interests of Canadians and taxpayers in all decisions being made by the government and its officials. Through the testimony we've had on this particular file, it has become evident that much has been done to try to ensure and enable us to have a net benefit. It's not happening just now, with this new consul general; it has been going on for some time.

In order to establish truth and transparency in the tremendous amount of work our civil servants do, the tone and the line of questioning also deserve to be respectful and truthful, rather than making assumptions of guilt and wrongdoing, or, frankly, accusing civil servants of lying and misrepresenting who they are and what they do. The line of questioning is also critical and important, and it needs to be justified, too. I think that, in itself, should be made with a degree of a semblance of truth and proper information. To jump to conclusions and act as some form of kangaroo court is inappropriate. It's not respectful of the citizens of this country. They deserve better from their representatives, as well, especially those who profess to be experts, professionals and experienced individuals of law. To act in this way and interfere with the investigations of other cases for political purposes, so they can put out a tweet or a post, is inappropriate and self-serving on their part, at the expense of others, including very strong, working and credible members of the civil service.

In regard to some of what has happened here, the discussions around the decisions, how it came to be that this purchase was made, who was involved and what engagements others may have had or not.... Ultimately, the decision rests with a process. The decision was not made by a minister of the Crown. The decision was not made by a head of mission who's only there temporarily. There's no net benefit to the individual in question, against whom accusations are being made. It's certainly appropriate for that per-

son to be involved in and aware of the process—to be aware of what's going to take place—because they're the head of the mission. They're engaged in that local community.

The notion of it being in some row and in some residence relative to the others in question.... There are other consuls general and diplomatic engagements within that region at a much higher price. This is inconsequential in comparison with the rest. I think that was brought out. If I'm not mistaken, Chair, there were 21 properties that were investigated, addressed and reviewed. Again, accusing and deliberating on guilt, and trying to ensure there was wrongdoing.... Twenty-one properties were reviewed, and an assessment was made that this was probably the most appropriate, because it provided greater savings to the taxpayers and Canadians. That, to me, seems appropriate.

It seems appropriate that we would take every avenue to bring forward and make the best decisions. Of course, it makes sense that we would use those that are there, in the specific community involved and in that area. It should be appropriate, because otherwise the members opposite would then accuse us, "What, you made decisions without information? Now you're making a decision without being informed." You can't speak out of both sides of your mouth. You have to get...and deliberate.

Now, in terms of whether there was a green light from someone, does it matter? Did it even matter that an email was sent, representing or possibly using an inappropriate means by which to suggest that, yes, the consul general was made aware that this was going forward, and that he approves, agrees, and green-lights it? It doesn't matter, because direction doesn't provide the decision. The fact that he is engaged doesn't mean he was the one making the decision. The fact that he may be walking the streets and going to other diplomatic residences doesn't mean he made the decision or has the ultimate right to make the decision on the purchase.

That has been clarified ad nauseam in these committees. It's been made clear that the consul general did not make the decision. It has been made clear that the minister did not make the decision. It has been made clear that proper processes took place. It has been made clear that this has been ongoing for over 10 years. This didn't happen just yesterday.

• (1245)

Therefore, the accusations made by the opposition, the way they behave and the way they're accusing members of the civil service, I believe, are totally inappropriate, and they should show more respect, Mr. Chair.

The minister is making her way here on November 5 to respond to the questions before us. I think that's appropriate in itself. I would leave it at that, and I would show more respect to the people who are witnesses before us.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks.

We're going to go to Mr. Kusmierczyk, and then to Mrs. Atwin.

Go ahead, sir.

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

I've been following the line of discussion that our Conservative colleagues are bringing forward, and it's obvious to everyone here that they're trying to distract from the point and the unassailable fact that with the purchase of this property in New York, Canadians are saving \$4 million. That's \$4 million that Canadians are saving with this transaction. In fact, with this new property, they will be saving a total of \$7 million over a 20-year life cycle. That's what's important here. It costs half as much to operate this new mission, and Canadians will be saving \$115,000 annually in operating costs. Again, over the course of a 20-year life cycle of this property, Canadians are saving \$7 million.

This new property has a smaller footprint. It is also more accessible than the old property, and it has many more functions as well. It's a better property in every single sense. It is a cheaper property to operate, and it will save Canadians \$7 million. All of the discussions here, led by the Conservatives, are to try to distract Canadians from the very fact that because of this real estate transaction, Canadians are saving \$7 million. When you're looking for efficiency from government officials and government, this demonstrates that.

I can't say it enough; this saves Canadians \$7 million in a 20-year life cycle.

What concerns me also about this motion is asking the chief of staff to appear at committee. This sets a dangerous precedent. We already have the minister appearing before this committee, and the minister speaks on behalf of the minister and speaks on behalf of the ministry. Therefore, asking staff to come here sets a very dangerous precedent.

As members of Parliament, as MPs, we all have staff, and I do believe that we would be quite concerned if any one of our staff were to be called in front of committee to speak on our behalf and to answer questions on our behalf. We are answerable. We are the ones who are responsible, just as the ministers are responsible to speak for themselves and for their ministries.

At the very least, I would put forward an amendment to strike from this motion the invitation for the former chief of staff to Minister Joly, Peter Wilkinson. That is the amendment that I would like to bring forward. Again, this is a dangerous precedent, and the minister—

• (1250)

The Chair: Can I interrupt for a second, Mr. Kusmierczyk?

I'm sorry. Just to confirm, is it just deleting the former chief of staff? Is that correct for your amendment?

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: That is correct, yes.

The Chair: Great.

Go ahead and continue, sir, and then we'll start a speaking list on the amendment.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: The third point I just wanted to bring up, as I was listening attentively to the comments by my Conservative colleague—

The Chair: I'm sorry, but I have to cut you off, sir. We're now actually debating your amendment, so I'll get you to address your amendment.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Oh, pardon me.

That's fine; I'm all set.

The Chair: Does someone wish to speak to Mr. Kusmierczyk's amendment, which, as I mentioned, would delete the former chief of staff from the motion?

Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: That is a ridiculous amendment, because in eliminating the former chief of staff, Mr. Wilkinson.... He's the one who was named in the email. The point of this motion is to determine who directed the poor witness who is still sitting in front of us here today, Ms. Nicholson, to use the terminology "greenlight" and to provide the correctional email. Where did that come from? This motion is moot without Mr. Wilkinson, so we cannot support this amendment.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Before I continue.... I apologize, Mr. Kusmierczyk. There are two former chiefs of staff. Which one? Is it Mr. Wilkinson?

Which one are you eliminating, Mr. Kusmierczyk?

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I apologize; I see one here. I'm reading only one here, and that's Peter Wilkinson.

The Chair: There are two, according to our clerk.

Mrs. Atwin.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Again, I'm just speaking to the precedent that we've said that we don't call chiefs of staff. Again, we know that the ministers are accountable for their staff. The minister is coming. She will answer the questions that we need answers to.

With regard to the other two people who are listed, I think it is important to hear from them. We've heard testimony today that speaks to their potential additional information that could inform the conversation that occurred that led to the second email, so we're very much amenable to that. However, again, I don't think the chief of staff to the minister is going to enrich...because the minister is going to be the one to speak on behalf of and to represent her team.

Based on that, I support the amendment, for sure, and I wouldn't be supportive without that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks.

Mr. Brock.

Mr. Larry Brock: I don't know what parliamentary precedent Mrs. Atwin is referring to, but chiefs of staff—current chiefs of staff, former chiefs of staff—are not immune from attending a committee.

As a case in point, we had Katie Telford, the Prime Minister's chief of staff, attend not too long ago for a two-hour meeting. It doesn't get much higher than Katie Telford. Again, I challenge Mrs. Atwin to provide some evidence of some parliamentary precedent that has been set that the Conservatives are no longer following.

The Chair: Mr. Sousa.

Mr. Charles Sousa: If I recall, chief of staff Katie Telford was an exception. She actually offered to come forward. It wasn't a norm by which to proceed, but she obviously wanted to provide some clarity.

However, in this case, we do have the minister who is attending before us to provide clarity, clarification and full understanding of what has taken place. The requirement here is to enable us to determine if proper processes were followed, if the procedures were done correctly, if there was any interference by any other party by which to proceed, which would have restrictions on the way we process the transaction and the decision-making of the acquisition. I think that's been clarified at some length today and throughout the previous testimony.

The question now becomes whether we want to continue to prolong this process, to continue to promote some notion that there was a benefit to any individual as a result of this transaction. That's the only incentive that would be made or be insinuated by the opposition. If that person or any of them were not involved in the process into the termination of the ultimate decision, then it would seem that this is not likely. But that's fine. There is the right, and it's appropriate that we, as members of this committee, have full disclosure as to how things proceeded.

Also, the minister is accountable for the actions of her staff and, ultimately, has those rights. Certainly, the opposition makes that clear almost every time when they make wild accusations about various ministers and prime ministers in terms of engagement on files that they have no decision-making authority on, ever, yet those allegations and those connections are continuously being made, as they are trying to do again today. That's appropriate because we have a right to determine how best to proceed and how best to clarify the process.

Given the fact that the minister is attending and there is going to be the opportunity to question her effectively on this thing, I would suggest that we proceed with the amendment to eliminate Mr. Wilkinson and others who are just going to eat up some time on our committee and prolong the matter when we want to get down to the conclusion of the issue, which is ultimately a huge savings to taxpayers in the decision that was ultimately made.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1255)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I think we've heard points on both sides about whether the chief of staff should be either invited or not invited. The best way to determine that would be to vote on it.

My only point was that in her testimony Ms. Nicholson did provide the last name for the individual whose first name is Franck,

and I would hope that the clerk or the chair could pull up that surname and add it to the motion. I think the committee would agree to have that done after the fact. I think we all understand who's being referred to, but it does seem funny to me to have only the first name there.

Has that already been dealt with? Maybe I missed that.

The Chair: We're working on that right now.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you very much.

I'll just restate my interest in voting on the amendment, voting on the motion as amended or not amended, and then moving on to Mrs. Vignola's motion, because I do agree with Mrs. Atwin that it's somewhat in poor faith to jump ahead of our initial decision to finish the rounds of questioning and then move on to her motion.

Let's do it.

The Chair: We're clear on the amendment, which is eliminating Mr. Peter Wilkinson from Mrs. Kusie's motion.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 6; nays 4 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: The amendment carries. We're back to the amended motion, which has deleted Peter Wilkinson.

We'll start a speaking list on that. Or are we ready to move ahead?

We're ready to move ahead to the amended motion.

(Motion as amended agreed to on division)

● (1300)

The Chair: The motion as put forward by Mrs. Kusie, and as amended by deleting Mr. Wilkinson, has passed.

We finished up with Mr. Sousa.

We're now back to our original final rounds with Mrs. Kusie for five minutes, and then Mr. Jowhari.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: No, Mrs. Kusie moved her motion. That leaves me as the last one.

The Chair: That's right. We have Mr. Jowhari for five minutes.

We have resources until 1:30. Hopefully, we'll be able to get to Mrs. Vignola's motion.

Go ahead, Mr. Jowhari.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Yes. I'll be very brief. I have the last five minutes.

Thank you very much.

Ms. Nicholson, your words and your explanation were interpreted and portrayed as lies. You were disrespected. I'm giving you the rest of the four and a half minutes, not to talk to us but to talk to Canadians, because it seems that when you talk to us, we have certain ways of interpreting. I'm going to give you this opportunity to talk to Canadians directly and once again explain whether by "green light" you meant that there's no impact on the work that the head of mission is doing, on his work and on his personal life, and that he did not have any involvement in the decision-making or the approval.

The floor is yours. You can take up to four minutes.

Ms. Emily Nicholson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will take the opportunity to clarify a couple of things to ensure that there is no further miscommunication from my end.

First of all, speaking to something that one of the honourable members mentioned about it being a memo, I'll just clarify that the email sent on June 17 was not a memo. It was simply a transitory email meant as an initial first step, summarizing the best available information that I had at my disposal in response to a question from the minister's office, which was focused specifically and primarily on the sale of that property. We were not looking at a purchase. We were looking solely at a sale. If my words as drafted are read within that context, they are more easily explained.

Again, the term "green light" was there simply to indicate that the head of mission was aware that a process was under way and ongoing, as is our usual departmental practice. There was nothing out of order there with our standard departmental practice. It is well within the realm of the normal that a head of mission would be informed that an ongoing real estate process was in play that predated their arrival and would likely impact them physically—they would be required to physically move.

The clarification was made. There should have been a distinction in that first sentence to differentiate or draw a clearer delineation between the role of the head of mission, which was being aware that a process was ongoing, and the work of the mission staff, which was instrumental throughout this multi-year process. Again, it was initiated in 2014, predating the current consul general's arrival by eight years.

I'll also state, for the clarification of timelines, that it's important to note that the head of mission was first taken to the selected property on April 26, 2024. The offer from the department to purchase was accepted on April 19, predating his even seeing that property. I reference that because those site visits were taking place in April. My emails were drafted in June 2024 and July 2024, long after the process and transaction had been initiated.

I'll clarify that the issue is actually far simpler than it might seem. There was an initial email that was drafted based on the in-

formation available at that time. In an effort to summarize a very complex and vast process that spanned over 10 years, there was one line of a full-page email drafted in a way that could be misconstrued when taken out of context and applied to a purchase as opposed to a sale.

I would like to state again for the record, and I'm happy to do so under oath, that no one asked me to change any information. I received further information pursuant to that original email drafted on June 17 and relayed it to the best of my ability to ensure that both my bosses and the office of the minister had the best available information.

Again, to clarify and reiterate everything, to the best of my knowledge and the best of my understanding, as it has been demonstrated and consistent through all testimony that has come before this committee, the head of mission was aware that a process was ongoing and was not in any way instrumental or in a position to take an actual decision on choosing a property.

Thank you.

• (1305)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jowhari.

Witnesses, thank you for being with us. Thanks for your patience as we worked through the earlier motions. You are dismissed.

We're now restarting Mrs. Vignola's motion. I'll start a speaking list.

I see Mr. Bachrach, and then Mr. Berthold and Mr. Sousa.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On this motion proposed by my colleague Mrs. Vignola, there are two points I'd like to make. The first is that we certainly have substantive comments on the substance of the motion and this attack on the Governor General based on her proficiency in French.

The main point I'd like to make is that this is better placed with the official languages committee. Looking at it, I don't see a very close tie-in to the mandate of this committee. Based on that, and with all due respect to my colleague, I move that we adjourn debate, and I encourage her to make this motion in the appropriate place.

The Chair: We will turn it over to our good friend the clerk and have a quick vote on the motion to adjourn the debate.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 4)

The Chair: With that, unless there is anything else, we are adjourned.

I thank everyone for their patience today. It is sincerely appreciated.

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