



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 073

Tuesday, May 16, 2023

Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 73 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The committee is meeting today to study the main estimates for 2023-24.

I've just been asked by the clerk to share that sometimes when we're speaking, we have our earpiece in our hand and it's moving around the microphone. That causes a feedback loop for the interpreters. Yesterday we had some interpreters who will not be able to provide the service anymore because of the damage that was done. Once again, I'm going to continue reiterating my point that one person speaks at a time and that we be mindful that we are a country with two official languages. We can always strive to do better.

We have with us today the Honourable Anthony Rota, Speaker of the House of Commons; Mr. Eric Janse, Acting Clerk of the House of Commons; Michel Patrice, deputy clerk of administration; and Paul St George, chief financial officer. From the Parliamentary Protective Service we have Larry Brookson, director; Éric Savard, chief financial officer; and Robyn Daigle, chief human resources officer.

Mr. Speaker, you have up to 10 minutes for an opening statement, after which we will proceed to questions from the committee members. I welcome you to give me any extra time that you do not want to use.

The floor is yours, Mr. Speaker. Welcome.

The Honourable Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee. It's my pleasure to be here today.

As Speaker of the House of Commons, I will be presenting the main estimates for fiscal year 2023-24 for the House of Commons and the Parliamentary Protective Service. These funds are required to allow both institutions to support the important work of members in their various roles as parliamentarians.

I am joined by officials from both organizations.

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: With me here today is Eric Janse, acting clerk of the House of Commons; Michel Patrice, deputy clerk, Administration; and Paul St George, chief financial officer.

Also with me are Larry Brookson, Éric Savard and Robyn Daigle, whose roles have already been mentioned. All these people will be available to answer questions from committee members.

[English]

I will begin by outlining key elements of the 2023-24 main estimates for the House of Commons that were tabled in the chamber on February 15, 2023.

The main estimates total \$597.1 million. This represents a net increase of \$34.1 million compared with the 2022-23 main estimates. I want to highlight that the main estimates were reviewed and approved by the Board of Internal Economy at its meeting of December 7, 2022.

I will present the main estimates for the House of Commons according to three major categories, in line with the handout that you received. The financial impact associated with these categories represents the year-over-year changes from the 2022-23 main estimates. The three categories are board-approved initiatives, cost of living and inflationary increases, and miscellaneous other items.

I will begin with the funding of \$4.2 million for the board-approved initiatives. On December 1, 2022, the board approved \$1.9 million for the professional development of employees of members, House officers and national caucus research offices as a permanent and centrally funded initiative. Other board-approved initiatives include \$1.3 million in funding for members' security support enhancements.

[Translation]

The board also approved \$0.7 million in funding for the establishment of an Accessibility Secretariat to oversee the implementation of the House of Commons Accessibility Plan 2023–2025. Additionally, this category includes net funding of \$0.4 million for conferences and assemblies. This includes an amount of \$1.2 million in temporary funding for the hosting of the 31st annual session of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly, offset by approximately \$1 million as a result of sunseting of the funds included in the 2022–2023 main estimates.

[English]

I will now turn to cost of living and inflationary increases. This category represents an overall adjustment of \$27.1 million.

An annual adjustment to the members' and House officers' office budgets and travel status expense account is based on the adjusted consumer price index—or as we know it, the CPI. In December 2022, the board approved an increase based on the 6% CPI in September of the previous year. The main estimates reflect a corresponding adjustment of \$11.7 million.

There are \$12.8 million in adjustments for the constituency office lease allocation. In June 2022, the board authorized members to charge to the central budget their constituency office leasing costs of up to \$3,000 per month. The board also approved an annual increase to this allocation, based on the adjusted CPI.

[Translation]

Furthermore, members' sessional allowance and additional salaries are statutory in nature and are adjusted every year in accordance with the Parliament of Canada Act. On April 1, 2022, members' sessional allowance and additional salaries were increased by 2%, which translates into an increase of \$1.3 million in the estimates.

Economic increases are also essential to recruitment efforts for the House Administration, including the page program. Funding for this is accounted for in the estimates in the amount of \$1.1 million.

• (1110)

[English]

Let us now turn to the third and final category for the House of Commons, which is other items.

This represents an increase of \$2.7 million and includes the following funding: \$2.1 million for employee benefit plans; \$0.4 million for contributions to members' pension plans, as determined by the Treasury Board; and \$0.2 million for the elector supplement adjustment due to the change in the number of members representing densely populated constituencies following the general election of September 2021.

[Translation]

I will now present the 2023–2024 main estimates for the Parliamentary Protective Service.

[English]

For the 2023–24 fiscal year, the service requests an increase of 2.9% over the 2022–23 estimates budget, for a total increase of \$4 million. The expenditures making up the increase can be grouped under the following four categories: personnel, training facility, inflationary costs, and diversity, inclusion and belonging.

[Translation]

Before I go into the details of each category, it is worth noting that the service strives to meet the needs and expectations of the parliamentary community and effectively fulfill its mandate to protect in a context where threats are ever-changing by focusing on the health, safety and well-being of employees and staying true to its commitment to inclusion, diversity and belonging.

[English]

The first of the four categories is personnel, which represents \$1.9 million in total. The majority of this amount, \$1.4 million, is associated with salary rate increases following the signing of a collective agreement with the protection group of approximately 500 members, and the subsequent extension of these rates to the unrepresented employees of the service, who represent approximately 200 members.

[Translation]

The second category is that of training and represents \$1.3 million. Most of these costs are linked to the service's need for a suitable interior training facility.

[English]

Inflation-related expenses totalling approximately \$0.5 million make up the third category. This amount represents various cost increases passed down to the service by other interdependent parties with whom the service engages through, for example, legal level agreements.

The fourth and final category is that of diversity, inclusion and belonging. Knowledge, awareness and the application of equity, diversity and inclusion are essential to the service's daily work. The sum of \$150,000 was earmarked to support the service's efforts in developing tools and initiatives that not only build the service's culture but also serve the parliamentary community, while ensuring pivotal learning and development opportunities along the way.

[Translation]

In closing, the service has delivered conservative estimates that demonstrate a commitment to stabilization and to financial stewardship.

[English]

Do you want me to finish off the last three paragraphs, or do you want me to stop there? I thought that beep meant I had to stop.

I got the look.

Boy, I'm going to have to learn that one.

The Chair: It's not the look, but you're asking me a question you know the answer to.

What do you want me to say, Mr. Speaker? You know how we function in this place and you know resources are very limited. Your table does a really good job of trying to get us extra resources, but we know they are strained right now.

With that, I'm going to go into six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Nater, followed by Mr. Turnbull and Madam Gaudreau, and ending with Ms. Blaney.

Go ahead, Mr. Nater.

• (1115)

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Through you, thank you to our witnesses for joining us today.

I want to begin, Mr. Speaker.... We know from past presentations that there are robust sharing agreements in place between corporate security offices and certain law enforcement offices. I'm curious whether similar sharing exists with security intelligence, specifically CSIS. Is there any sharing of information between House security and CSIS?

Mr. Eric Janse (Acting Clerk of the House of Commons, House of Commons): There is, but perhaps we could ask the Sergeant-at-Arms to come to the table and give a bit more detail. I don't know to what degree that's possible, given the sensitivity of the question.

Mr. John Nater: I joked earlier that Mr. McDonnell wasn't with us at the table, so now he's joining us.

Mr. Patrick McDonnell (Sergeant-at-Arms and Corporate Security Officer, House of Commons): Good morning, and thank you for the question.

Through you, Madam Chair, yes, there is an agreement in place with CSIS.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you.

Was the now famous Chong memo from July 2021 ever shared with the House of Commons?

Mr. Patrick McDonnell: It was recently, yes.

Mr. John Nater: It was recently, but not in July 2021.

Mr. Patrick McDonnell: No.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you for that.

Would more information sharing improve your job, if you were to receive more regular information sharing from intelligence agencies?

Mr. Patrick McDonnell: We have recently signed a memorandum of understanding with CSIS and ITAC. Yes, it's improving daily.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you for that, Mr. McDonnell.

I want to move on. This summer, Parliament will be hosting the annual session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, of which both Russia and Belarus are members.

I'm curious whether any Canadian tax dollars will be used to roll out the red carpet, so to speak, for Russia and Belarus this summer?

Mr. Eric Janse: There is, obviously, funding that has been made available to host the conference in general. It's not earmarked for specific countries or specific delegations.

I guess the challenge for all delegates participating in any conference in Canada is whether they can receive those countries that have a requirement to receive a visa to enter Canada to participate in said conference.

Mr. John Nater: Provided that the current government provides visas to the representatives from Belarus and Russia, they will be attending.

Mr. Eric Janse: That would be my understanding. Yes.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you, Mr. Janse.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I believe we would have to have the Minister of Immigration in to answer that question.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you for that, Mr. Speaker.

I want to follow up. Currently, obviously, we are between permanent clerks. Currently, you have the wonderful services of our Acting Clerk, Mr. Janse.

One of the challenges we had with the appointment of the previous permanent clerk was the then-House leader failed to consult with the then-Speaker about that appointment, as well as with the opposition parties.

I'm curious, Mr. Speaker, from your current experience, whether the government has consulted you yet on the permanent process to replace the clerk.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I know there's been talk of putting the process in place, but no, there hasn't been anything that I'm aware of, or there has been no consultation as of yet on the actual replacement. Mr. Janse is doing an excellent job. My understanding, in speaking to the government House leader, is that they are putting thought into it and they want to come up with a process that is transparent and will function well. I'm looking forward to seeing more information on that.

Mr. John Nater: I would just follow up on that. Would you expect that opposition parties and you as Speaker will be consulted as part of that process?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I can tell you what I'd like, but I can't tell you.... Yes, I would like everyone to be consulted. Again, the more transparent it is, the more acceptable it becomes as a process.

Mr. John Nater: I appreciate that for sure.

Following up, then, we do not currently have a permanent law clerk. We haven't for almost a year. Given where we are right now with a minority Parliament and given the fact that we have had a significant question of privilege come before us, I'm curious, Mr. Speaker and Mr. Janse, as to what engagement both of you may have had thus far from the government on the appointment of a permanent law clerk.

• (1120)

Hon. Anthony Rota: From what I understand, the process is being looked at, but again, it hasn't been put into place. I would hope that we have a permanent position in place as soon as possible, hopefully, and we'll see where that goes as well.

Mr. Eric Janse: Maybe I can just add that I've had a couple of meetings with the PCO on the process to select a next law clerk, so it should be rolling out soon.

Mr. John Nater: I'm sorry. Could you just repeat that last 10 seconds?

Mr. Eric Janse: I said it should be rolling out soon—the process to select a permanent law clerk.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you for that.

A final question that I want to follow up on is the recently approved three-year strategic plan for House administration. When it was brought before the Board of Internal Economy, impartiality had been dropped from the expressed values of the House administration. I understand that's been added back in, given the challenges we faced with the former clerk and regrettable allegations. I'll leave that to be responded to in the second round.

The Chair: Mr. Turnbull is next.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thanks, Madam Chair.

Thanks to all the witnesses for being here today. I want to start by saying how much we appreciate your leadership and your ongoing commitment to serve our country. You're doing such a fine job in everything you do, and I really appreciate your time today and all of your efforts.

I have three different areas that I'd like to ask questions about and that have been topics we've discussed at this committee. I'll just name them. One is the security of our parliamentary precinct. Another is resources for hybrid proceedings, and another is cybersecurity. Those are the three topics that I hope to cover in my limited time.

This committee did I think a really important study on the parliamentary precinct and with regard to security for members of Parliament. We identified this through lots of witness testimony and a great report that recommended that Wellington Street remain closed. Witnesses came before this committee and were almost unanimous. There were a few people, but a very limited number, who didn't agree with this. The vast majority of witnesses said that Wellington Street runs right through the heart of the precinct and it creates some real vulnerabilities for PPS to be able to secure the precinct and provide optimum security.

I want to ask a question about this. Is PPS inhibited in fulfilling its role in ensuring our security by Wellington Street having been reopened?

Mr. Larry Brookson (Acting Director, Parliamentary Protective Service): Through you, Madam Chair, to Mr. Turnbull, it's not impeded. The service is extremely agile and functions in a way to ensure the safety and security of delivering our mandate based on the parameters we currently have in front of us.

I can tell you that, outside of the ownership aspect for Wellington Street, for the service there has been quite a bit of advancement on some of the other pieces specific to increasing the value of the partnership between the service and the POJ. That work is advancing. I also understand that on the governance piece of Wellington there is a meeting this Thursday, so I anticipate getting additional information as to where that might be with respect to the ownership piece.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Mr. Brookson, just as a follow-up to that, and thank you for that response, would it have made PPS's life and job easier if Wellington Street had remained closed?

Mr. Larry Brookson: Through you, Madam Chair, the position of the service in supporting both administrations has not shifted on how it recognizes the risk and the vulnerability of the current openness of Wellington Street.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I know that, in this committee before, you said the response time of the Ottawa Police Service is a lot slower than what PPS's would be. Is that still the case?

Mr. Larry Brookson: Through you, Madam Chair, it's just important to understand the two respective roles and responsibilities of both of those pieces.

The service will always have an immediate response within the precinct. I can tell you that there have been leaps and bounds of advancement, particularly with the new chief, Mr. Eric Stubbs, on the willingness and the work that's been done to strike out what the POJ's role is going to be in producing the service now. This speaks back to, even out of the Justice Rouleau report, when we talked about a layered approach. That layered approach exists. It doesn't exist if the service is not recognized as playing an integral role of that layered security.

• (1125)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you for that. I obviously am still hoping that Wellington Street will eventually close, that we will have a land transfer and that the Parliamentary Protective Service will have jurisdiction over Wellington Street, thereby increasing its ability to optimize security for members of Parliament. That's where I stand on it. I think I've been very clear on that. I will leave it at that.

In terms of resources, the resources for holding hybrid proceedings have obviously increased during the pandemic, and I think we've increased our capacity to be able to offer those hybrid proceedings, which is good. I think members of Parliament all want to have that flexibility, and this committee did some important work at multiple stages to ensure that we send a strong signal that we want to keep those hybrid proceedings. We still have meetings, caucus meetings, etc., other events on the Hill, and things where we can't always secure the adequate resources.

Are there additional resources within the main estimates that are going to allow for more proceedings to have hybrid capabilities?

Mr. Eric Janse: Through you, Madam Chair, it's a very good question.

Currently, the major capacity issues are with the translation bureau, which does not fall under the jurisdiction of the House. To assist, one thing the House has been doing in close collaboration with the translation bureau is developing remote simultaneous interpretation. That's in the testing phase right now. We're hoping that it could, in turn, lead to an increase in capacity for interpretation services to allow more parliamentary events to go forward.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: If I could ask just a follow-up to that, how much extra capacity would that unlock if that is in fact successful?

Mr. Eric Janse: That's a very difficult question to answer because there are so many variables that come into play. From the current 57, we're hoping to bring it up by eight.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

It's good to see you again. This is my first full year on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. I was not here before 2019, but my sense is that since 2019, there have been a lot of significant issues, and they're taking on enormous proportions. This required a thorough review of the situation to help us deal with it. I'm thinking in particular of everything that has to do with the safety and security of parliamentarians, the people who work on the Hill and their families, as well as the increase in cyberthreats.

You talked about staff development in your opening remarks, and I'd like to hear a little bit more about that. We know that there was already a challenge a year ago with respect to the workforce.

How can staff development improve safety and security?

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons): If I understand correctly, you're talking about cyber-security in connection with the training of our staff, Ms. Gaudreau.

Madam Chair, through you, I will ask Mr. Aubé to answer the question regarding the development activities of our staff.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I wanted to hear what you had to say, so I asked you a question indirectly.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, Digital Services and Real Property, House of Commons): Thank you very much.

In the context of cyber-security, we are constantly under pressure to maintain the information technology environment and not interfere with the operations of Parliament.

As a result, we continue to invest in our people to ensure that they are trained well and trained in technologies to ensure that our defence lines are in place and effective. We're also investing in our partnerships. We work with a number of agencies and departments. We also work internationally. We have relationships with other parliaments to share information quickly and anticipate threats.

That is an overview of the approach we are taking to ensure that we continue to be protected. We are always on the lookout for what is going on. However, we are under a lot of pressure to keep our environment safe.

• (1130)

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Does Canada have everything it needs to adapt very quickly to this kind of cyberthreat?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: We've always had the support of the Board of Internal Economy to meet our needs.

We're continually adapting. If we identify other needs or if things change, I know that we can make the necessary requests to adapt

quickly. We have the right people and the right partners to be agile. Things happen all the time, and we have never had a problem accessing the resources and people needed to protect Parliament.

I don't think this is a problem right now, but if a need arises in the next few years, we'll come back to make the necessary requests.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I invite you to do that, because if we can fill a legislative gap to speed up the process, it's very important that we do so. That's what we've been looking at for some time. People in our ridings are concerned about these threats.

My next question is about the working group that was set up in the wake of the crisis we had with the trucker convoy. We've talked about it here in committee.

What about the working group in terms of communications and preventative management of an activity or a potential threat? I'd like to have a follow-up on that, with regard to safety and security.

Mr. Michel Patrice: I'll start by saying that we do indeed work with our various partners at events such as the one we experienced in February 2022.

On the front line, we have the Office of the Sergeant-at-Arms and Corporate Security and the Parliamentary Protective Service, which provide a preventive service. The Office of the Sergeant-at-Arms has a team dedicated to monitoring vehicles or social media posts to assess potential threats or events that are in the process of being organized.

There is co-operation with the Parliamentary Protective Service, the Office of the Sergeant-at-Arms and other partners, such as the police forces in the target area.

I don't know if Mr. Brookson or Mr. McDonnell would like to add anything.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I would actually like some clarification on the issue of the vigilance that we discussed in committee.

We've heard a lot of about reporting from individuals. What's the situation now? As I understand it, everything that can happen in terms of a cyber-attack or an in-person attack is monitored. That said, what about the people who may be targeted by threats? Is there a new way of doing that in the employee development program?

Mr. Michel Patrice: Indeed, there are a number of sources of information to ensure the safety of MPs and parliamentary staff. The member's office or the member themselves can contact the Office of the Sergeant-at-Arms. In terms of monitoring social media or what is being said about any of you, the Office of the Sergeant-at-Arms is very vigilant. Our partners can also alert us to threats.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I lost some time earlier, so I'm just going to take a quick 20 seconds to thank you. I see the contribution you're making and the hard work you're doing, whether it's ensuring safety and security or maintaining vigilance. It's worth mentioning, and I thank you for that.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll give you two minutes in the next round.

Ms. Blaney, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair. I like your tone today. It's great to see.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today. I have a few questions. The first one is around security concerns for members of Parliament.

We know there has been a significant change since the pandemic. What I'm wondering is whether you have the capacity and resources to respond to that change. What changes are you noticing? One thing I've seen very clearly is a fairly clear protocol on how to support and protect members of Parliament and the people who work in the precinct. However, things have also changed in the constituencies. These are particular challenges.

I'm wondering whether you have the resources and if there are any growing concerns in this area.

• (1135)

Mr. Patrick McDonell: Through you, Madam Chair, I believe we have the resources. We have different programs for members of Parliament in their constituencies. We have a residential security program. We have a constituency office security program. We have an outreach program with 91 police forces of jurisdiction. We're in contact, when there is a threat against a member of Parliament, with the RCMP's protective operations centre. As the deputy clerk mentioned, we have the ability to monitor social media and identify threats or even the harassment of our members of Parliament.

Currently, yes, I believe we have the resources.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I also have some questions around cybersecurity.

That's an interesting one, and I know it's ever-changing. I'm curious. We had an issue in this committee not too long ago, when we had some witnesses from Alliance Canada Hong Kong. All of a sudden, we started having a lot of challenges. There were some assumptions made that perhaps it was foreign interference. I don't expect you to be able to tell me in detail what may have happened there, but I'm wondering whether we have the resources to respond to that.

What are the protocols around having international witnesses? That was part of the challenge, that we had somebody streaming in from Hong Kong.

How are members alerted if a concern has come forward?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Through you, Madam Chair, I'm aware of the issue that happened in this committee. I can inform the commit-

tee that it wasn't a security issue. It was actually an operational issue that caused the event to happen, impacting the committee and the witness. That's the first answer. I could go into detail. Basically, a configuration issue between two rooms led to microphones starting and stopping. It wasn't linked to a security issue. Our systems in-room are completely isolated from these types of events, so they don't happen through the Internet and at the possible risk of remote participants.

Now, you're asking whether members... Members are well protected when they travel. We provide the proper infrastructure and tools for them to participate and do their jobs abroad when travelling. Having said that, when there are witnesses... I can't secure their device or environment, but we certainly secure the connectivity back from that participant to the House of Commons, in order to ensure we are secured. The environment has been configured, planned and assessed by our people and national security partners to ensure these types of incidents don't happen.

I'm not saying we're not exposed, but we've certainly done what we needed to do to minimize threats and risk and to protect these environments.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: My next question is around interpretation.

Of course, one of the important things we've done in this place is expand the ability to have interpretation for some indigenous languages. I know this has been an interesting process for us to go through. However, we've also heard some concerns from some of our members who use indigenous languages to communicate: Information is being interpreted into English, and then it goes from English to French. That's definitely a challenging thing for time.

One of my questions is this: How are we working to make that more effective? A second question is this: Now that we're expanding interpretation to virtual interpretation, I'm wondering whether we will eventually look at indigenous languages. I would imagine that, if we could find interpreters from across the country, they may be able to do more of that work in this place.

Mr. Eric Janse: Maybe I'll start, and then hand it off to Stéphan. You're absolutely right. There are two components to this challenge. There's the technical component, which Stéphan can maybe address, and then there's the human resources component.

There is the ability for members to use indigenous languages in the House. There's a process that has been put in place to make a request for it, and then through the translation bureau, we see if we can find interpreters. In most cases, we can. There are some cases where it's just not possible, but we're hoping, yes, more technology might be a solution to expand the pool of indigenous language interpreters.

Just very quickly, I'll go to Stéphan on the technical side.

• (1140)

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: The technology in the rooms and in the chamber allows for this to happen. We can have multiple languages. The real discussion will be around the impacts to other products that we have, such as the Hansard and broadcasting. We just need to make sure it's planned with the appropriate time to make this happen.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go for five minutes to Mr. Cooper, followed by Mrs. Romanado.

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

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for being here as well as to all of the witnesses.

I'm going to direct my questions to whoever is in the best position to answer my questions, although I think it will likely be Mr. McDonell.

In answer to a question posed by Mr. Nater, Mr. McDonell, you stated that the July 20, 2021, intelligence assessment concerning member of Parliament Michael Chong being targeted by an accredited Beijing diplomat at the Toronto consulate was recently shared with the House of Commons.

Does any witness have any insight why that was only recently shared with the House of Commons and not shared back in July 2021?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: We didn't have an agreement in place with CSIS at that time for the sharing of intelligence, us with them or them with us. We're a non-government department, so it created somewhat of a challenge before that MOU was signed.

Mr. Michael Cooper: When did that agreement come into effect?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: It was on March 30 of this year.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

Has any information from CSIS or any other intelligence agency been provided to the House of Commons that would indicate that any other members of Parliament are being targeted by Beijing or any other hostile foreign state?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Can you elaborate on the number? Again, I'm not asking you to name the individual members, but can you provide a number?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: No.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Why is it that you cannot provide a number?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: It's because the information was given to us in confidence by CSIS. Under the terms and agreements of the MOU, I'm not at liberty to disclose the information at this time.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay.

Is there a protocol in place to inform members of Parliament when the House of Commons receives this information from CSIS?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: It is my understanding that CSIS will be providing that information to any MP who is targeted by any foreign government.

Mr. Michael Cooper: There is no protocol in place. Is that your answer?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: There's a protocol in place now, under the terms of the memorandum of understanding, to advise my office who is being targeted by a foreign government. However, CSIS is the lead agency.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

When CSIS advises your office pursuant to the protocol, what do you do with that information?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: That information is.... A file is generated, and then we will undertake the appropriate investigative measures and techniques to monitor the safety and security of the said member.

Mr. Michael Cooper: As far as informing the said member, for clarification, pursuant to the protocol it would not be your office or the Speaker's office that would undertake that. Am I understanding that correctly?

• (1145)

Mr. Patrick McDonell: Through you, Madam Chair, that is correct.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Would it be left to the discretion of CSIS, based upon their determination of whoever would be appropriate?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: I can't answer that for CSIS. That would be speculation on my part.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

I will reserve the balance of my time for Mr. Berthold.

The Chair: You have 27 seconds.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay. There is very little—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): I'd like to take this opportunity to ask for clarification.

Can you give us an update on the progress of work on Centre Block? Do you have a specific timeline?

Could you provide that to the committee?

Mr. Michel Patrice: Yes, we'll get back to you on the timeline we have. At the moment, I can tell you that the work is progressing very well.

Thank you.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you.

The Chair: That's very good.

Ms. Romanado, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Through you, I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I'm going to focus on three areas, and again, whichever witness is most appropriate to respond, I will leave to you to decide.

We talked a little bit about MP security, and since I was elected in 2015, we have seen a lot of advancement in terms of our physical safety, whether it be the panic buttons we have been provided or our residence and constituency office security systems.

I have been talking a little bit about this, and I haven't received any updates and/or movement on it. The House is in session, and right now it's what we call the "silly season" and we're sitting until midnight often. What happens is that the House will adjourn at midnight, and you have a group of MPs walking in downtown Ottawa at 12:30 at night.

I asked, I remember, in a previous meeting to see if it was possible for the shuttle bus to do a loop to some of the local hotels. We work it out among ourselves to walk home together so that we're not walking alone. It's great that I have my panic button, but it's basically just going to record somebody attacking me.

Is there a possibility of looking into the shuttle service? I know that with the Senate building being a little farther away, we do pass in front of hotels. Is this something that could be put in place for those who feel they need it?

Hon. Anthony Rota: It's a very good suggestion, and it's something that would be very feasible. Can we look into it? We'll get back to you or get back to the committee with some form of recommendation on that.

As you say, the late nights are of concern, and the last thing we want is someone being alone out on the streets when a bus could easily solve that. They are making a loop anyway. Expanding it by an extra few minutes is not going to break the bank.

Very good, thank you. We'll get back to you on that.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you.

I do want to follow up on another issue, and, again, it might sound bizarre. When you were last here in April 2022, I brought this up, and I'm glad we have Mr. Brookson, the Sergeant-at-Arms and the Speaker here in front of me. I'm sure you know where I'm going to go with this.

When we were in Centre Block, the two entrances for the Senate and for the House of Commons had an overhang so that the Parliamentary Protective Service who were outside waiting for the MPs and the Senators to come in were covered from the elements. Right now the West Block entrance that comes off Wellington has no cover over it, so our PPS officers are exposed to the elements. They are standing out in freezing cold, and I've witnessed a chunk of ice fall from West Block and almost hit an agent.

Had it been one of us, I'm sure something would get put in there, but I would be remiss to not ask. I understand there might be a line of sight issue. Is there not a way that we can have some sort of overhang, canopy or protective structure put in place temporarily while we're in West Block to protect the agents who are here to protect us?

I would be most remiss if I did not ask again about putting something in place.

Mr. Larry Brookson: Through you, Madam Chair, I very much appreciate the concern and the question. The service does everything that it can.

Currently what we're looking at is a posture review for the service across the board. It's more than just adequate coverage from the elements. Our human assets are our number one priority, particularly with the role they play. More often it's a conversation as to where we place those assets rather than where they currently reside, particularly since we've fused completely together from the east, the west and the exterior operation, where some of these positions or exterior lines of sight can be covered by the exterior operation most often.

I'm committed to coming back to both administrations on that review, hopefully in early fall.

• (1150)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you.

If I have time, quickly, to the Speaker, with redistribution they'll be adding five new members of Parliament next time around. Have we started looking at the space that is going to be required for those additional MPs?

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's something we constantly monitor in looking at different options. It is very important that everyone have adequate space to do their jobs. I have no concerns that we'll be short. We'll be fine as far as the five new members go.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now have a two-minute round.

[*Translation*]

We'll start with Ms. Gaudreau, followed by Ms. Blaney, Mr. Cooper and then Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Gaudreau, the floor is yours.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Since I don't have much time, I want to say that the opening remarks were very detailed, so I don't have any specific questions.

However, I would like each of you to share with us the biggest lessons you've learned from the 2022-23 fiscal year. It would also help reassure people about the good work done by the House of Commons and the Parliamentary Protective Service.

You're doing a good job.

Who wants to go first to give us their biggest lesson this year?

Hon. Anthony Rota: I'll start.

Since I started working at the House of Commons in 2019, I've been very impressed by the people who work there, whether in information technology or security services. All employees are prepared to do what it takes to ensure that the House runs smoothly and that MPs are able to serve their constituents.

Every day, I'm surprised to see these people at work, ready to give their all and more. The human resources that serve the House of Commons are fantastic. The staff impress me every day.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: From a security perspective, what are the key lessons learned?

Mr. Patrick McDonnell: Madam Chair, I think we can always do better than what we are doing today. We always have to find ways to improve things in terms of safety and security.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you. Keep up the good work.

The bells are going to ring soon, so I'll stop there.

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

[English]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

As always, everything goes through the chair.

We are a couple of years now into a hybrid Parliament, and the system has been very beneficial to MPs who need to be in their ridings during sitting weeks for various reasons.

I have two questions.

The first one is whether there have been any reflections on the change, because now we see a lot more MPs actually physically back in Parliament. Now that we have the majority of MPs here, is there any change to the hybrid system?

The second is that I know that several of the MPs of this place live in rural, remote and northern regions where Internet connectivity can be a fairly significant challenge. Has the House administration considered any effort to help them improve that connectivity, and are there any particular regions in Canada where the concern around connectivity is something we should be thinking about during this time?

Mr. Eric Janse: Through you, Madam Chair, maybe I'll take the first question, and the second one will be for Stéphan.

In terms of changes, you're absolutely right. Both in the chamber and in committees, the vast majority of members are now here in person, where a couple of years ago it was the dead opposite. In terms of the resources required, it's about the same, whether one or two individuals are participating remotely or whether the vast majority are. It takes about the same amount of resources in terms of the House administration and our partners.

Perhaps I'll turn it over to Stéphan in terms of the connectivity challenge, especially for those in rural areas.

• (1155)

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Thank you.

Through you, Madam Chair, yes, we are constantly looking at opportunities to help the members who are suffering from, I would say, having a lesser quality of connectivity to actually interact with Parliament.

If you're asking where the areas are, it's certainly the northern regions of Canada. We're still seeing risk as far as providing them

with the availability of connectivity and making sure that they can participate as other members can.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cooper, the floor is yours.

[English]

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to direct my questions to Mr. McDonnell.

Mr. McDonnell, you indicated that the memorandum of understanding between the House of Commons and CSIS was signed on March 30 of this year.

Has the memorandum of understanding and any protocol, pursuant to that memorandum of understanding, been updated since May 1?

Mr. Patrick McDonnell: Through you, Madam Chair, no.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

Mr. Patrice, you were cut off or had very little time to answer a big question that Mr. Berthold posed to you. I'll give you the remaining time to elaborate on progress at Centre Block.

I guess the big overriding question is this: When are we going to be back at Centre Block?

Mr. Michel Patrice: I wish I had that answer.

Mr. Luc Berthold: You could answer it in French.

Mr. Michel Patrice: As I said, the project is doing well right now. In terms of the excavation and in terms of the parliamentary welcome centre, that is really progressing well. In terms of the schematic design, it's also completed. We're now moving on to design development.

I'm going to say that, in terms of progress, the involvement of the working group established by the board is very helpful to receive feedback on decisions from the point of view of members and their needs. As we've often said, this is your workplace. We want to do a modern Parliament that will serve your needs. That engagement is key to the success of this project.

In terms of decisions that have been made or recommendations that have been made by the working group and recommended to the board, an example is the infill of the Hall of Honour, where there will be three additional floors for the benefit of members.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Monsieur Fergus.

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank all the people who are with us today.

Since I only have two minutes, I'll be brief.

Mr. Speaker, you talked about the work being done on equity, diversity and inclusion.

[English]

I would like to know, sir, if the House collects disaggregated data in terms of its personnel, its employees and the services it offers. The reason I ask is that it's been a recent initiative of the Government of Canada to go further in collecting disaggregated data so that we can have an idea as to how the breakdown works.

No one's looking to blame anyone for where we are, but we're looking forward to making sure that the House is reflective of the rich diversity of our country.

Hon. Anthony Rota: The data is collected, yes. It is. I'm not sure how else to answer that. Our HR department is very active in that. Just recently we had a report. I don't think I'm speaking out of line, but if you tune in on Thursday for the Board of Internal Economy, we'll be getting a report on that exactly.

Yes, we are very conscious of that. Canada is a very diverse nation. I've always described it as being like a fabric. It has many different materials woven into it. Those materials are people. Each one comes from different parts of the country, and we bring it all together. Our fabric is very strong. We want to make sure that we know what's in it so that we can make sure that any bills we pass will be reflective of our people.

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: I wanted to ask some questions about Wellington Street, but a number of my colleagues have already done so.

I'd like to add my voice to those of all the stakeholders who have stressed the importance of the Government of Canada taking ownership of Wellington Street to ensure protection not only of members of Parliament, but also of visiting Canadians.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

On behalf of the PROC committee members, I'll echo our appreciation for the work you do. As the previous Clerk was mentioned, I will give him a shout-out for the good work he did, and the previous Clerks, including our current interim Clerk. We know how hard it is to do the work. Well, we don't. You do it, and we appreciate it.

Mr. Speaker and the entire team, thank you.

Mr. Aubé and Sergeant-at-Arms McDonell, I know you weren't slated to be here, but you did a great job. If there's anything else you would like to share, please do share it with the clerk. We'll have it translated and circulated around.

With that, we wish you a really good rest of the day.

We'll do a really quick switchover, because our second panel is here.

Thank you.

• (1200)

Hon. Anthony Rota: On behalf of my team and Mr. McDonell as well, I want to thank you all for your questions.

Thank you.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1200)

The Chair: We will call the meeting back to order.

[Translation]

We'll get started.

Thank you.

[English]

In our next panel we have the Honourable Dominic LeBlanc, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities. He is accompanied by Allen Sutherland, assistant secretary to the cabinet, machinery of government.

Minister, you will have up to five minutes for your opening comments.

Welcome to PROC.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities): Madam Chair, thank you for having me.

I'll try to be brief.

It's a bit intimidating. When AI and I show up here by ourselves, the entire room evacuates. Either the two of us count for those 40 people behind us or maybe this is sort of an ambush. We'll see how it goes.

Madam Chair, I have told you that I have a news conference with my colleagues Mendicino and Lametti at 1:15 on a bail reform bill, which I know will interest colleagues, so I do have a hard stop at one. That's why I'll be very brief.

[Translation]

Madam Chair, I am pleased to address the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs today to discuss the main estimates for the Leaders' Debates Commission. With me is Allen Sutherland, assistant secretary to the cabinet, Privy Council Office.

As you know, the Prime Minister has entrusted me with the important responsibility of supporting our democratic institutions. Canadians have many reasons to be proud of their democracy. However, as you know as well as I do, democracy is a work in progress that requires our ongoing attention.

• (1205)

[English]

I thank the members of this PROC committee particularly for the commitment that all of you invest every day in our democracy and our democratic institutions.

Madam Chair, the leaders debates play an essential role in federal elections and are a cornerstone of Canada's healthy, vibrant and diverse democracy.

Since its creation in 2018, the independent Leaders' Debates Commission, or LDC, has engaged Canadians during two federal elections—in 2019 and 2021—providing a platform for citizens to compare and learn more about prospective prime ministers and their ideas and vision for our country. While the Leaders' Debates Commission relies on limited administrative support from the Privy Council Office, it conducts its mandate with complete independence and in the public interest.

[*Translation*]

The commission's mandate includes organizing two leaders' debates for every federal election, one in each official language, under the leadership of an independent commissioner. The commissioner is supported by a seven-member advisory board. The commission carried out a sound review to identify lessons learned from the 2021 leaders' debates, and the committee has discussed those findings at previous meetings. I reported the commission's recommendations to the House of Commons on May 10, 2022.

As the minister, I was instructed by the Prime Minister to examine the recommendations aimed at improving the leaders' debates and to take the necessary measures to ensure that the debates continue to reflect the public interest. I have already spoken with the commission about how to implement the report recommendations within its current mandate.

[*English*]

As you know, colleagues, the Right Honourable David Johnston stepped down as the debates commissioner in March of this year to take up his appointment as the independent special rapporteur on foreign interference.

I want to express, on behalf of the government and on behalf of all Canadians, my gratitude for Mr. Johnston's leadership, knowledge and experience, which he brought to the commission. He continues to serve in ways that strengthen our democracy.

The government intends, of course, to appoint a new commissioner. I'll have more to say about the timing of that in the coming weeks. We would, obviously, welcome suggestions from members of this committee and from other parliamentarians as to who could serve in this important role. In the meantime, the commission continues its work to prepare for the next set of debates.

Very briefly, Madam Chair, the subject of the appearance is the main estimates for 2023-24 on the Leaders' Debates Commission. As you will note, there's an amount of \$3,453,736 for the commission. The commission will have access to \$596,814 in this fiscal year. This is to fund its ongoing operations, including salaries. There is one full-time employee, I believe, and three others who work part time. The remaining \$2,856,922 is a frozen allotment in the event that—of course, in a minority government—there should be an election.

Madam Chair, I know that was of huge interest to colleagues. I'll be happy to address precise questions on those financial numbers.

The Chair: We thank you, Minister.

We will go to six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Cooper, followed by Ms. Sahota, Madam Gaudreau and Ms. Blaney.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

Through you, Madam Chair, on May 3—days after *The Globe and Mail* broke the news that Michael Chong's family was being targeted by a Beijing diplomat—the Prime Minister told reporters he had directed Canada's intelligence agencies that they must immediately inform MPs of any threats against them, regardless of how serious or credible those threats are deemed to be.

Has any order in council or ministerial directive been issued to CSIS regarding these new instructions?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, through you to Mr. Cooper, thank you for the question.

Obviously, I have been in a number of meetings with the public safety minister, the Prime Minister and other officials. As the agencies put into effect this public directive the Prime Minister shared, I believe my colleague, the Minister of Public Safety—who obviously has legislative responsibility for CSIS—is in the process of finalizing what will be that ministerial directive.

Operationally, I can tell you, from the meetings I've been in, that CSIS is very much in a position to implement that—

• (1210)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: —and is contacting parliamentarians on an ongoing basis.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Minister, for that.

We know that a member of Parliament, Michael Chong, was kept in the dark about that. His family was being targeted by an accredited Beijing diplomat, and he learned about it for the first time upon taking a call from a reporter from *The Globe and Mail*, which is completely unacceptable.

How many other MPs being targeted by Beijing or other hostile foreign states have been left in the dark by your government?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I certainly share Mr. Cooper's sense that the circumstances around Mr. Chong were unacceptable. That's why we have made the appropriate changes to ensure a circumstance like that doesn't happen again. I know that CSIS, under the authority of the public safety minister, is reviewing all the information they have.

The public safety minister—or the director of CSIS—is in the best position to talk about those circumstances. Obviously, Madam Chair, I am not going to talk about individual cases in a public forum like this, but I can reassure committee members that all the necessary steps to ensure that what happened to Mr. Chong does not happen to others....

Our government is very much seized with this issue.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, earlier, I posed a question to the Sergeant-at-Arms. He indicated, in answer to my question, that he is aware of other members of Parliament who have been targeted or are being targeted by Beijing or other hostile foreign states.

Can you confirm whether those MPs have been briefed or are being briefed? Can you provide that assurance and an update in that regard?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I obviously can't speak for the Sergeant-at-Arms. He's somebody I've worked with for a long time. I think he's doing a terrific job. He very much has the safety and security of members of Parliament and our staff at heart. I have full confidence that he'll take what measures are appropriate, based on the advice he'll receive from intelligence and police agencies.

To Mr. Cooper's questions specifically, I know officials of CSIS, who are the appropriate ones to provide this kind of information, are reviewing all the intelligence they have that would speak to the exact issue Mr. Cooper raised, and they are taking the appropriate steps to get in touch with parliamentarians who may be concerned.

That shouldn't come from a minister responsible for democratic institutions, and it shouldn't, obviously, happen in a public committee hearing. However, we recognize the importance of that happening.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Through you, Madam Chair, the buck stops with the Prime Minister and your government. CSIS informed this committee that, when elected officials are targeted, the information is conveyed to the government. Consistent with that, we know the intelligence assessment from CSIS of July 20, 2021, concerning Michael Chong was sent to the Prime Minister's department, the PCO and relevant departments, including Global Affairs Canada. It's not just a matter of passing the buck down to CSIS. It is the responsibility of your government to see that members of Parliament who are being targeted by hostile foreign states are briefed on a forthwith basis so this doesn't happen again.

I ask you again: What steps are being taken? How many MPs have been briefed? How many more need to be briefed, and when will all MPs whom your government is aware have been targeted have a briefing?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I accept Mr. Cooper's premise that the government is responsible for ensuring that officials of the security and intelligence apparatus are the ones best able to speak to individual circumstances, incidents and concerns. The Minister of Public Safety can probably speak in the detail that is appropriate for these national security incidents.

I am aware that steps are currently being taken and have been taken in recent days to get in touch with a number of parliamentari-

ans who have come to the attention of the security and intelligence community.

• (1215)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Just very briefly, why are they only being—

The Chair: You can take it up in the next round.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today. I appreciate your update on the Leaders' Debate Commission and look forward to hearing about the process on your next visit to our committee.

Is there something more, though, you could let us know as to the process of selecting another commissioner? Will the process remain the same? Are there some adjustments being made to the process? Is there anything that's being changed from having undergone the process for the very first time, last time?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Ms. Sahota asks a very important question, and one which we're obviously reflecting upon. The current structure of the commission is established by order in council. That was the structure we put in place in 2019 and renewed in 2021.

We obviously recognize that the debates commissioner has to be someone who has impartiality and experience in democracy, public affairs and perhaps journalism. Somebody has to bring to this role a credible, non-partisan body of work and experience. We think members of Parliament should be able to offer views as to who perhaps would be the ideal candidate to fill this position. In my own view, it should be somebody who is bilingual. It would be difficult in the case of one commissioner to have somebody who's not bilingual.

Ultimately, we expect it to be an order in council appointment. It's a recommendation I would make to cabinet for a Governor in Council appointment. Because of the very unique nature of this work, it has to be somebody who is beyond reproach. I'm working with the Privy Council Office on a potential list of nominees. We haven't even landed in any way on a short list. We're working from a large list of potential people. We would hope political parties, members of this committee, organizations representing democracy groups and perhaps journalists would offer views as to who might fill this role. We're very much interested in those suggestions.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: David Johnston made many contributions to the leaders debate last time, but there were also many challenges that were faced, having done so for the very first time.

Would you speak to some of the positive outcomes and the challenges that you think, from your perspective, the leaders' commission faced, and how we can resolve them in the future?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, those are again very germane questions.

I know that Mr. Johnston appeared before this committee in a session subsequent to one where I had appeared previously as well. I share Ms. Sahota's view in terms of his service to the country in many roles.

I think he acknowledged—and we've acknowledged—that the English-language debate in the 2021 election created some controversy, particularly around a particular opening question in the province of Quebec. That's understandable and regrettable. I can't speak to the structure or of those decisions, obviously. I didn't make them. The commissioner and his advisory group came to those conclusions.

Mr. Johnston has spoken about those challenges. There's the challenge around organizing the debates so that the commission would have the sole authority around the format versus the issue around accommodating the necessary elements of journalistic integrity. I'm not an expert in that space. I can't speak to that. I recognize the importance of hearing thoughtful voices and getting that right.

Ms. Sahota asked about the success of the commission. I think one metric might be that 10 million Canadians tuned in to watch the 44th general election English-language debate, and four million Canadians watched the French-language debate. The English-language and French-language debates were distributed on 36 television networks, four national radio networks and 150 digital streams. The debates were provided in 16 languages, including six indigenous languages. That's one of the principal reasons we think the commission has a role to play. It makes those debates accessible to the widest variety and the widest group of people possible.

We've seen in previous elections that television network X, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy or university Y will decide to organize a debate. That's great. Some leaders may go and some won't go. In terms of allowing networks and digital service providers the greatest access to a neutral, professional, thoughtful debate amongst people who seek to serve as Prime Minister of Canada, we think the commission has an important role to play.

● (1220)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I'm just going to leave you with a question. I don't think there will be time to answer it.

There's been a lot of talk about foreign interference; however, I do think for your portfolio that disinformation, misinformation and even domestic interference are a huge issue. We know that consultations are happening for a foreign agents registry from Public Safety.

At any point, could you give us some thoughts as to what other measures you may take in order to counteract all of the threats that we face internally, on social media and with the emergence of AI being used so readily as well?

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Madam Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to continue with the same line of questioning.

When the major television networks organize a debate, whether in the States, the U.K. or France, they bring in a journalist to ensure neutrality. Even Quebec uses a Radio-Canada journalist to moderate its debates.

That brings me to wonder why. I don't want to hear that it's in the interest of non-partisanship. It's actually about having experts, a structure and funding. What happened during the last election could have been avoided.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I think Ms. Gaudreau is absolutely right, Madam Chair. I and many of my colleagues paid careful attention to the entirely legitimate and understandable questions and concerns that were raised regarding the English-language debate during the last election.

As I said, I, personally, wasn't involved in organizing the debate. That's not to say that I'm washing my hands of any responsibility. I agree with you, Ms. Gaudreau, but I wasn't the one who chose the structure of the debate or the moderator. The right people need to have the independence to make those decisions.

I completely agree with the point you're making. The commission could find someone, a reputable seasoned journalist who is respected by their peers, maybe even from a different network. You mentioned Radio-Canada. No controversy came out of the other networks regarding the person who was chosen. Even our friends at TVA recognized that the person had experience and presence.

I hope the committee will invite the next commissioner to appear. When I speak with him or her, I'll be looking for the answer to that specific question. The unfortunate situation last time could have been avoided.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Since we are on the subject, I'd like to know whether you're aware of the commissioner apologizing to the leaders as well as Quebec's National Assembly regarding its policy choices?

Are you aware of the commissioner issuing an apology, as he should have?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I don't want to mislead anyone, but from what I heard publicly or from what my colleagues may have said, he understood just how unfortunate the situation was, further to his appearance before the committee. Honestly, Ms. Gaudreau, I'm not surprised, because I, too, was disappointed, and I said so publicly.

I never heard Mr. Johnston claim at the time that what happened was fine. I'm not familiar with the details, but it doesn't surprise me. He's a man of great humility. Based on my discussions with him, my sense was that he wanted to understand the criticism and rectify the situation. In fact, that tied in with the recommendations he made following the 2021 election. The new commissioner will likely take a close look at them, and I hope that person will have the support of the committee and members.

• (1225)

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I asked the question because I didn't have any information indicating that he had, and as far as I know, no apologies were made. If we want to achieve what we're trying to do here, a formal apology needs to be made publicly. I think it would go over very well.

Situations like that may be why members, especially in the Bloc Québécois, don't see how a special rapporteur is supposed to be impartial when we don't feel our concerns are understood.

What do you think?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: While we may not agree on the matter of Mr. Johnston being the independent special rapporteur, I do understand your concerns over the 2021 debates. I think we can find common ground.

The process to appoint the next commissioner will have to take into account the lessons learned. The person chosen will have to consider the challenges that arose and understand the legitimate concerns expressed by many, whether in the Bloc Québécois or other parties, or our Quebec friends in the National Assembly.

Mr. Johnston assumed that role on a volunteer basis. I can't imagine that the person who agrees to take on the responsibility would not want to examine the lessons learned to make sure what happened doesn't happen again.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: It's never too late to right a wrong and apologize formally.

That's all I have to say.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gaudreau.

Go ahead, Ms. Blaney.

[English]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

I thank you for your testimony here today.

The two reports following the 2019 and 2021 debates recommended the creation of a permanent publicly funded entity to organize the leaders debates. These reports also recommended that the commission maintain its permanent capacity in a reduced form between elections.

If these recommendations were accepted, would you want to see some changes to the mandate of the commission?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You're right, and Al Sutherland will correct me if I have the technicalities wrong. We accepted the commission's suggestion after 2019 to establish it on an ongoing basis. In other words, it wasn't for one election. The order in council that recreated the commission was on an ongoing basis—it didn't sunset—and that allowed the commission, as I said in my opening remarks, to have some capacity between elections, which is more complicated in a minority Parliament, of course, to ensure that continuity.

With respect to the legislated independence, I've shared this with Mr. Johnston in my conversations with him previously, and I think I may have said it at the committee, as well. Ideally, we would have a legislated structure that would create this. We're in a minority Par-

liament, where House time is precious, where changes like this to the Canada Elections Act or other companion legislation are, obviously, extremely important and sensitive. We didn't want to have a gap around a potential ultimate legislative structure, but we think we can learn from the current structure, which exists by virtue of an order in council and exists on an ongoing basis. However, we're obviously looking at the recommendations coming out of the 2021 report and would want the new commissioner to quickly be seized of those as well.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Based on that, what would be the necessary budget to allocate to the commission during an election period? The other question is this: What would be the annual budget to allocate to the commission between election periods?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, it's a very good question.

The amount of money allocated in a non-election year to allow the commission to maintain its bare-bones staff—it's one full-time person, I believe, and three part-time employees—is about \$600,000 annually. There's this frozen allotment of \$2.8 million, which is the amount we believe would be necessary in the context of an election for the commission to retain the professional services necessary to actually organize the two debates.

The amount in an election year would include an additional \$2.8 million. We think \$600,000 allows them, on an annual basis, in a non-election year, to continue to do their work to prepare to listen to experts and to develop their plans. Obviously, the arrival of a new commissioner will be an important step in the realization of this work and making sure that work happens.

• (1230)

Al, did you want to add something on the financial numbers for Ms. Blaney?

Mr. Allen Sutherland (Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Machinery of Government, Privy Council Office): Yes, it's just to note that, in budget 2021, the debates commission was put on a four-year budget cycle. That too speaks to the commitment that the minister mentioned of an ongoing debates commission. They put it on a four-year cycle, and it properly reflects the fact that, particularly in a minority government context, an election can occur at any time. That's why there's a frozen allotment, so that the money when needed can be drawn on, but it can't be used otherwise.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: In its May 2022 report, the commission also recommended that it should select the moderators of debates on the basis of consultations with experts.

I'm wondering if you can elaborate on the criteria for selecting the experts who would be consulted if this recommendation is accepted. Can you address the considerations that might be used to guide the selection of moderators, if this recommendation is accepted?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, through you to Ms. Blaney, that is a critical question.

To be honest, I don't have the expertise. I've obviously read the debates commission's report. I've had conversations with the previous commissioner, Mr. Johnston. I think that gets to the crux of the issue.

That was the challenge: Under whose authority is the choice of the moderator and in whose hands does that rest? How is the public interest of a debate balanced against the journalistic...? I may not be using the exact, precise words. I don't pretend to be an expert myself in this space. However, as I remember those conversations, there's the obvious importance of respecting journalistic integrity and independence, and the commission's independent role in selecting a moderator who would act in the public interest.

Those two issues clearly overlap, certainly in my mind, in a number of areas, but there are probably important distinctions between the two. I wouldn't hazard before this committee to improve an answer.

However, I think in my recommendation to cabinet on a potential successor to Mr. Johnston as the debates commissioner, in terms of this person's ability to triage that very question and arrive at an answer that doesn't land in the unfortunate circumstance that we discussed with your colleague previously, Madam Gaudreau, I would want to be assured myself and be able to assure my colleagues that we have found an answer, not to the specifics of that question but to a process that will give the correct answer.

The Chair: We will now go to Mr. Berthold,

[*Translation*]

followed by Ms. Koutrakis, Ms. Gaudreau and Ms. Blaney.

Over to you, Mr. Berthold.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. LeBlanc, you can appreciate that the committee is in an unusual position. The reason we are dealing with multiple issues is that they are all intertwined, when it comes to the decisions of the Liberal government. Questions have been raised regarding the Trudeau Foundation's funding. David Johnston, the former commissioner, is now the independent special rapporteur on foreign interference.

Mr. LeBlanc, I want to ask you something very specific. I know you to be someone who answers questions candidly.

Had the Globe and Mail article not come out, do you think Michael Chong and the other members would have been informed that they were being targeted by the regime in Beijing?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I think so, yes.

For months, the department and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, CSIS, have been looking for ways to strengthen measures.

Mr. Luc Berthold: You just said that you've been looking into it for months. You are confirming, then, that you were aware for months that a Conservative member had been targeted.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: No.

Mr. Luc Berthold: That's what you just said.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That's not what I said, Madam Chair.

Mr. Luc Berthold: You said it's been months, Mr. LeBlanc. Let's turn the clock back momentarily. I asked you whether you thought the Globe and Mail article was the catalyst. You said that it wasn't and that you had been looking into the situation for months. Then one day, you decided to inform the members, and it had nothing to do with the article. That doesn't wash, Mr. LeBlanc.

• (1235)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You asked me a question, and I answered it candidly, as you asked.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Why, then, were the members not informed until recently, if you were aware for months that the regime in Beijing was pressuring them?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That's what I didn't say. I don't want to be a difficult lawyer with you, Mr. Berthold, but I didn't say that we were aware of the specific circumstances regarding the members of Parliament.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Had the Globe and Mail article not been published, would these MPs have been notified?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: We were and still are looking for more robust safeguards against foreign interference. We are in discussion with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, especially with my colleague Mr. Mendicino. I sometimes have discussions with him myself.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. LeBlanc, it's because the government got caught red-handed that Mr. Chong was finally notified, a week after a Globe and Mail article was published. In that article, it was revealed that he had been targeted by the Beijing regime. The same source said that the government had been informed of this several years earlier. Had they known for one, two, three or five years? We don't know. You mentioned several months.

Mr. LeBlanc, is this willful blindness?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: No, that's not what this is about. You can't put words in my mouth. I want to be very specific. I did not say that we had been aware for several months of the circumstances concerning the MPs and individuals, including Mr. Chong, obviously. The Prime Minister has been very clear on this. I talked about several months because of the evolving threat.

Mr. Mendicino, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and I are looking at how we can strengthen our measures internally, and we're having discussions with experts and officials at the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. I can't imagine you'd be against the idea that—

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. LeBlanc, that was my question: When did you learn about it and why was it made public? Why was Mr. Chong notified only a week after the Globe and Mail article appeared?

When I asked you if you thought the Globe and Mail article had been the trigger, the question was very clear. You replied that this was not the case and that you had been monitoring foreign interference in our elections for several months.

Mr. LeBlanc, the government was caught not wanting to act in the case of Michael Chong. Do you believe the foreign interference crisis is now over?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: No, I don't believe that at all. On the contrary, I think it's even more important that we listen to the experts and take whatever steps are necessary to strengthen our democratic institutions.

You asked several questions during your intervention, Mr. Berthold. You asked me why this information was made public. I can't answer that specific question. Obviously, I hope you're not claiming that it was I who gave this information to the Globe and Mail.

Next, you asked why it had taken so long to understand the precise circumstances in relation to Mr. Chong. That's an excellent question. It's one that the Prime Minister, Mr. Mendicino and I have asked of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, and we will continue to make sure that it doesn't happen again in the future.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Koutrakis, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Through you, welcome, Minister, and thank you for your testimony this afternoon.

I'd like to give you the opportunity, Minister, to tell this committee the steps our government has taken to address the issue of foreign interference. Can you also compare this with the actions that were taken by previous governments?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, thank you for that question. Madam Koutrakis's question is very important.

The simple answer to the question is that effectively no measures existed before our government won the 2015 election. The first general election in which there was a series of discrete and deliberate measures in place to detect, respond to, mitigate and ultimately, if necessary, inform Canadians around foreign interference was the 2019 election. Our colleague Karina Gould at the time was minister of democratic institutions. That's when many of these measures were stood up.

Parliament changed the legislation in 2018 to plug some loopholes around potential foreign financing in the Canadian electoral system. Those are measures that have existed for five or six years. At the G7 summit in Charlevoix, in the province of Quebec, the Prime Minister agreed with G7 leaders around establishing a rapid response mechanism, because this threat is not unique to Canada. Many of our allies around the world and other big democracies, like those in the G7, face similar threats.

We modernized the Elections Act in 2018. Those amendments to the Canada Elections Act brought in, for example, advertising and reporting regimes for fundraising events and for party leadership contestants. Those were new measures. In 2019, we unveiled the "protecting democracy" plan, which had four important pillars. One was enhancing citizen preparedness and citizen resilience. One of your colleagues spoke about the challenge of misinformation and

disinformation. It's increasingly a threat to free and fair elections. The best remedy is to inoculate Canadians against those threats. That has to be done by civil society and outside experts to the extent possible.

We improved organizational readiness within the Government of Canada. We provided, for example, briefings to all political parties, to designated representatives who were security-cleared to receive this information. We set up the security and intelligence threats to elections task force, a group of professionals that head our security and intelligence agencies, who would provide advice. Perhaps you took note that we again stood up that group in the context of these ongoing by-elections that were called for later next month. We also passed the "Canada Declaration on Electoral Integrity Online" provisions to hold social media platforms accountable for their appropriate role in dealing with disinformation and misinformation.

It's an ongoing effort. Federal budgets in 2019 added \$19.4 million over four years. We gave the Communications Security Establishment, an agency of National Defence, \$4.2 million over three years. We've continually invested in the apparatus necessary to ensure that our security and intelligence community has the tools needed to do the best we can, but we don't pretend that these are perfect answers.

In response to your colleague's questions, we don't think the job is ever done. If there are ways that we can further strengthen and improve these measures.... The threat continues to evolve. We can learn from other countries, so we're very much on the hunt for good ideas and better practices, and we're continually looking for ways to improve what we think is a considerable body of work that we've done to date.

● (1240)

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Quickly, what is the government doing to strengthen communities and populations most at risk from disinformation?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That's a very good question.

A lot of it speaks to diaspora communities in Canada. Many of these communities are targeted in languages other than English and French. We think preparing citizen resiliency is probably the best approach, including in those communities.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Madam Gaudreau, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I got a lot of answers to my questions, but I'm forced to note that humans are like that: They wait for the lid to pop before they get busy and really focus on what's important.

You also don't need 20 years of experience in politics to understand that when you're in power you want to stay there, and when you're not, you want to try to find your way there.

Every three months, when it comes to being non-partisan with regard to particular interests, I repeat that I'm not looking for power. I'm seeking it for Quebec, later.

However, given the polls that were done, I'm worried about the next election. One in five voters have clearly expressed that they no longer trust our electoral system, its integrity.

I did not expect the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to begin studying the issue of interference in November. Now, May 23 is approaching. We'll get results that may have already been heard and are expected.

What should we say to the population, in the meantime?

This is a good time; let's take a good minute to explain to people that they can trust us, because we know where we're going and what to propose to improve things.

• (1245)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, that's an excellent question.

It's true that Ms. Gaudreau has the virtue of saying that her political party is not seeking to form the Government of Canada. I don't want to disagree with a colleague I like, but let's not confuse the terms “non-partisan” and “non-governmental”.

I've been a member of the House of Commons for a long time. I've made friends with our Bloc Québécois colleagues, who are some of the best supporters of the parliamentary system I know. They are people who fundamentally respect democracy and the parliamentary system, it must be said.

It's true that the Bloc Québécois does not aspire, unlike the other parties, to form a government.

Your question is extremely important and must be heard by all political parties present in the House of Commons, as it concerns Canadians' confidence in their electoral, political and public institutions.

I recognize and share the concerns about the challenges. The best thing we can do is build on what we've already established and continue to draw on the advice of MPs like my colleagues here, as well as you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms. Blaney, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Before I ask questions of the minister, I want to read in a notice of motion. I will be emailing that to the clerk and we can send it around. I'll read it out, and then I'll get on to asking questions.

The motion is as follows:

That the committee recognize that (i) a 2014 resolution prioritized by the Liberal Party of Canada called for “an all-Party process be instituted, involving expert

assistance and citizen participation, to report to Parliament within 12 months with recommendations for electoral reforms including, without limitation, a preferential ballot and/or a form of proportional representation, to represent Canadians more fairly and serve Canada better”; (ii) the 2015 Liberal election campaign included a promise to end the first-past-the-post electoral system; (iii) The 2016 Report of the Standing Committee on Electoral Reform observed that a majority of the experts who testified recommended proportional representation. The government stated it would “undertake a period of comprehensive and effective citizen engagement before proposing specific changes to the current federal voting system”; (iv) A Leger poll conducted in September 2020 showed that 76% of respondents supported a move to proportional representation and 80% supported the idea of striking a non-partisan, independent citizens' assembly on electoral reform; (v) In 2021, the Procedure and House Affairs Committee passed a motion to undertake a study of a National Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform; and, that the committee (a) urge the Government of Canada to establish a non-partisan National Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform and (b) recommend to the House that it task the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs with developing guidelines for the establishment of such an assembly and report these to the House by December 15, 2023.

My first question to the minister—and obviously my last, with the limited time I have—is around misinformation and the fact that Finland is actually coming out as quite a strong leader.

Part of that is having extensive education in many of their programs, not only in elementary schools but all the way into college and university. It's not limited to just that classroom setting, but every classroom setting. I'm wondering if that's something you're working on with other levels of government.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I know that colleagues would be so interested in that answer.

Poor Al Sutherland was having flashbacks to that democratic reform period here. I want to make sure Al is okay after you read that motion.

The Chair: I'm going to—

• (1250)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: In answer to her question, yes, that was one of the countries that was identified for me in terms of best practices around civics and education, starting with school-aged children. The challenge, of course, is that in a federal system, that is entirely within provincial jurisdiction. I can imagine your colleague to your right having views if we were to offer curricula suggestions in schools, but we entirely support the idea of greater citizen awareness, starting with younger people.

The Chair: Thank you.

You have about four and a half minutes, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Sutherland, you are the assistant secretary to the cabinet at the PCO for the machinery of government. You're the lead PCO official on democratic files. When did you first become aware of the July 20, 2021, intelligence memo stating that Michael Chong was being targeted by an accredited Beijing diplomat?

Mr. Allen Sutherland: I believe I first heard about it when I read *The Globe and Mail*.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

Minister, you implicitly acknowledged that sitting members of Parliament, other than Michael Chong, have been left in the dark. We know that at least two other members of Parliament are in the process or have been recently briefed that they have been a target of the Beijing regime.

Why is it that only now, after it was reported in *The Globe and Mail* that Michael Chong had been kept in the dark, that steps are being undertaken to brief members of Parliament? Why has it taken this Prime Minister so long to realize that MPs should be briefed when they're the target of Beijing and other hostile foreign states? Isn't it because the Prime Minister did nothing, covered it up and is now in damage control mode?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I don't think it will surprise you, Madam Chair, that I don't share Mr. Cooper's pessimism. As for those highly inappropriate words at the end of his question, I don't associate myself with those at all. I would think the Prime Minister acts in the opposite sense of those words.

Madam Chair, my colleague, the Minister of Public Safety, of course, would have the lead responsibility for this, but he and I are working together in this space in a number of ways. We have said that the information sharing around these issues needs to be strengthened. That is what the Prime Minister has said publicly. That's exactly what the public safety minister is implementing now.

If these other colleagues are being contacted and asked to be available for briefings by the appropriate officials of CSIS, it's precisely because we want to strengthen their resiliency, and Mr. Cooper certainly wouldn't say that because we perhaps waited some time, we shouldn't do it now.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister—through you, Madam Chair—what is inappropriate is that we have a sitting member of Parliament who was kept in the dark for three years and learned about it in *The Globe and Mail*. That's what's inappropriate. What's also inappropriate is that under this Prime Minister's watch, only now are members of Parliament being informed. That's inappropriate. It's unacceptable, and what's further inappropriate, Minister—through you, Madam Chair—is that on May 3, when the Prime Minister was scammed, the Prime Minister mislead Canadians. He said, in reference to—

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I have a point of order.

Madam Chair, under Standing Order 18, it is inappropriate to make reference impugning the integrity of a sitting member of Parliament, so I ask the member opposite to withdraw that statement.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I believe that I said “mislead” and not “deliberately mislead”. I'll put the words of the Prime Minister into the record. He stated, “CSIS made the determination that it wasn't something that needed to be raised to a higher level because it wasn't a significant enough concern.”

Those were the Prime Minister's words. He made that categorical statement, except for the fact that this was simply not true. CSIS had alerted the PCO. They had shared that information with the rel-

evant departments. It's not as if the Prime Minister said that he didn't know and that this was the first he learned of it. He very specifically said that they made a determination not to raise it to a higher level. Why would he mislead Canadians on something as serious as that?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, the Prime Minister would obviously never want to mislead Canadians on something as important as that. He subsequently said that he learned of those allegations surrounding—and this is where I agree with Mr. Cooper—the unacceptable circumstances involving Mr. Chong. He learned about those when they became public.

Again, it's a he-said-she-said scenario where I'm going to some extent by comments I've seen in the public space. I would draw Mr. Cooper's attention to the former national security adviser, Vincent Rigby, who was in that job for many of those critical months and who said that he himself had not seen what the advice was that had been sent to Privy Council.

Parsing who saw what piece of information when is interesting, and it makes a great episode of *Matlock*, Madam Chair, but I would think what's important is for the government to strengthen—

• (1255)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, with the greatest respect, those were—

The Chair: I'm going to pause this real quick because it's tough when both of you are speaking.

I'm going to give the last 10 seconds to Mr. Cooper because it's the easiest way.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister misled Canadians. He made a very specific statement that proved not to be true. It's part of a continued pattern, and it's all the more disturbing that the Prime Minister claims he was kept in the dark, this from a Prime Minister who is supposedly briefed on national security matters, reads everything and from whom nothing is currently held back.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to continue with Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Minister, thank you for being with us today.

Sometimes MPs make all sorts of accusations. In this case, however, the situation was quite simple.

Could you explain what happened in Mr. Chong's case and tell us about the briefings the Prime Minister received? Can you elaborate on that?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I will address Mr. Fergus through you.

I think this is the appropriate question, in that there has been a failure to share information on Mr. Chong's situation, which was very serious. This situation, which should concern all parliamentarians, is of great concern to our government. The fact that the information did not get to the Minister of Public Safety, at the time, nor to his boss, the Prime Minister, is not acceptable. As we said at the very beginning, this is precisely why the Prime Minister has mandated our colleague, the Minister of Public Safety, to issue new instructions, specific and in writing, to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

I've seen drafts and I know it's being done, but I can also assure you, given that the Prime Minister has spoken about it publicly as well as privately, at meetings where I was present, that federal agencies are already becoming apprised of these instructions. When the Prime Minister was advised of the situation, he asked the Canadian Security Intelligence Service to inform Mr. Chong, based on the information available to them, of the disturbing circumstances surrounding this allegation, which was done. As I don't have a roadmap, I'm answering from memory. It's essential to have accurate information during this kind of discussion, which is why I make sure to add a small reservation to what I say.

Your colleague Mr. Cooper alluded to statements made by the Prime Minister. It's true that he was informed of the situation when he read about a public debate in a newspaper. Subsequently, the Prime Minister's National Security and Intelligence Advisor also spoke to Mr. Chong to correct information or provide him with more details, which may not have been very obvious at the time of the first meeting. However, as I didn't attend these meetings, I'm basing this partly on what I've seen in the public context.

The lesson we need to learn from this is that all of our parliamentary colleagues, in both the House of Commons and the Senate, need to be notified when there is a potential threat, and offered tools as well as advice from national security experts on how to protect themselves and their families, as well as their staff. The best way to ensure that these attempts at interference don't result in contaminated election results is to take a defensive stance, which is what the government has always done.

The idea, I think, is to help our parliamentary colleagues become aware of these threats, of the tactics of certain countries. China is not the only country involved, as we've stressed on numerous occasions. Indeed, other countries have attempted to interfere, and not

just in Canada. I think we'll have to make an ongoing effort and make sure we take all the necessary measures.

● (1300)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. LeBlanc, I'd like to give you a chance to elaborate on your response to Ms. Blaney's question.

Can Canada follow the Finnish model, while taking into account areas of federal and provincial jurisdiction?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I thank the member for his question.

As an MP from the province of Quebec, Mr. Fergus knows the importance of respecting absolute provincial jurisdictions, especially when it comes to education. However, Ms. Blaney is absolutely right to say that in some of Canada's allied countries, Finland being a prime example, the national government—I don't know if I'm using the right word—seems to be deciding to invest more in educating school-age children about these threats and the importance of protecting institutions. If we can offer support to provinces that want to do that, we certainly will.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

With that, Minister LeBlanc, as you have shared your schedule, and you have somewhere to be, we're going to thank you for your time and your attention today.

Mr. Sutherland, you were very eloquent in all of the comments that you shared as well.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Is that just Mr. Sutherland, Madam Chair, or is that me as well? Did you find the eloquence was shared equally between Al and me?

The Chair: We might have to set up a committee to discuss that.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Maybe you'll invite us back and we can compare.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: If there is anything else you would like to share, please send it to the clerk and we will have it distributed.

With that, have a good day.

The meeting is adjourned.

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