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Chair: The Honourable Wayne Easter



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• (1505)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 47 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance. We are meeting on government spending, the WE Charity and the Canada student service grant. Today's meeting is taking place by video conference, and the proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons' website.

I'd now like to welcome the Prime Minister.

Prime Minister, we certainly welcome you and thank you for accepting our invitation to appear before the committee. I was informed, just a few minutes ago, that you've been able to reassign your schedule somewhat so that you can spend at least 90 minutes with us. We appreciate that very much.

With that, I will turn the meeting over to you for your opening remarks, Prime Minister. I believe we'll try to hold you to 10 minutes, and then we'll go to questions.

Welcome, and thank you.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister): Thank you, Chair.

[*Translation*]

This spring, Canadians were plunged into the worst crisis of our generation. Even now, people are getting sick and being hospitalized, and unfortunately, too many are dying from COVID-19. Families are still grieving, losing their jobs or going through very challenging and worrisome times.

Our government had to take action. Our country had to deal with a contagious and deadly virus. Each person's behaviour and decisions could protect or compromise everyone's health. All Canadians had to take action to limit the spread of the virus, but that called for considerable sacrifices.

People had to be able to count on their government. We could not ask them to stay home and avoid going to work without assuring them that we would help them pay for their rent, their mortgage or their groceries.

We knew it was better to take quick and decisive action, even if that meant making mistakes along the way. Taking action slowly while trying to avoid mistakes at all cost would have been just as bad as doing nothing at all.

Given the pandemic and the economic crisis, the government had to be creative and flexible. We could not hesitate or limit ourselves to the normal ways of doing things. The pandemic is clearly not over, but the actions our government has taken have helped protect Canadians across the country.

Throughout the crisis, Canadians have been amazing. Canada is returning to normal. The economy is recovering, but there are still concerns, as we are witnessing the beginning of what could become a second wave. As Dr. Tam said earlier this week, this means that we must remain vigilant.

The pandemic presents a number of challenges for students. Minister Chagger discussed with your committee those challenges and what our government is doing to address them.

We have put forward a \$9-billion plan to help students get through this difficult period. For example, we imposed a moratorium on student debt repayment, increased the number of summer jobs and introduced the emergency student benefit, which gives students \$1,250 a month. The Canada student service grant was also part of that plan. The program was designed with three objectives in mind.

The first objective was to encourage students to get involved in their community during a crisis. The second objective was to help non-profit organizations fulfill their mission and support struggling Canadians. The third was to give students who volunteer financial compensation in recognition of their services.

[*English*]

From the outset, we knew that time was of the essence. After all, even if—

Mr. Marty Morantz (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, CPC): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

I just want to clarify. As per your ruling on Tuesday, July 28, when you said, "If it were politicians, then we'd get into the four-second, four-second", I just want you to confirm that for this round there will be strict adherence to the practice of equal time for questions and answers.

The Chair: I will allow it as a point of order.

I will explain this when we start questioning, Mr. Morantz. The answer to it is really yes, but I will explain to the witness why we're under COVID-19 rules, basically.

Mr. Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: From the outset, we knew that time was of the essence. After all, even the best program imaginable wouldn't make any difference if it couldn't be delivered this summer. We had to quickly connect the thousands of students who wanted to volunteer with the many community organizations that needed an extra hand because of the pandemic.

At first we had hoped to use the Canada service corps. The Canada service corps was created in 2018 to encourage young people to serve and connect them to opportunities in communities across the country. By developing networks, creating partnerships with existing organizations and offering microgrants, the plan had always been to scale up the program over the coming years to ensure that many thousands of young people could serve their communities and their country every year.

When the Canada student service grant was initially conceived, I expected that the Canada service corps would help deliver the program. The service corps is an important and long-standing part of our national youth strategy, and I knew that making it responsible for the CSSG would accelerate its development. Ultimately, however, the public service concluded that delivering the CSSG required a third party partner external to government, and that WE Charity should act as that service provider.

I first learned that WE Charity was being proposed to deliver the program on May 8, when the CSSG was to go before full cabinet. Until that date, I had not spoken at all with my staff about WE Charity in relation to the CSSG. In fact, as of May 8 my expectation was still that a supercharged version of the Canada service corps would likely deliver the program. From my perspective, WE Charity hadn't come up.

As you know, by May 8 the public service had already concluded that WE Charity was the best option to deliver this program. They had formally recommended it. The CSSG, including the recommendation that WE Charity be used, had already gone through the COVID committee of cabinet on May 5. I was not involved in either of those steps.

On May 8 I received a briefing before the cabinet meeting and learned for the first time that WE Charity had been recommended as a partner and was on the cabinet agenda. I asked why the plan didn't involve the Canada service corps. We were told that the Canada service corps wouldn't be able to scale up to deliver the program in time. This was disappointing but ultimately not surprising to me, given my understanding of the state of the Canada service corps' development and other demands facing the public service at the time.

Of course, policy staff in my office had been working with the Privy Council Office and other departments. They knew that WE Charity was under consideration. However, I never spoke with my staff about WE Charity or its proposed involvement in administering this program until May 8. I also never spoke to Craig or Marc Kielburger, or anyone at WE Charity, about the CSSG. I did not speak to either of them at all during this period.

As it became apparent to me, my chief of staff, Katie Telford, also didn't know until the briefing on May 8 that WE Charity was being proposed. My chief of staff and I were finding out about this

important part of the proposal only hours before the cabinet meeting. Even given the rapid pace of work during the crisis, this was not the way things were supposed to go.

We learned that there had been tough questions asked about the CSSG proposal and WE Charity during the COVID committee a few days earlier. We both felt that we needed more time before this item was presented to cabinet—time to consider and understand the reasons behind the proposal that WE Charity deliver the program. On that issue we had several questions that we wanted answered, particularly given my specific expertise in youth issues.

During the pandemic, the government was working very hard and very quickly. We still are. It was not uncommon for me to be briefed on something relatively close in time to the cabinet meeting. Here, however, given the scale of the program, the questions that had been raised and my own commitment to youth issues, we needed more time. As well, we both knew that WE Charity was known to be connected to people in our government, including myself, as I had spoken at their events in the past. We knew that the selection of WE Charity would be closely scrutinized. We wanted to make sure that the process and decision were the best possible in the circumstances, so I decided to pull the CSSG proposal from the cabinet agenda for May 8 so that further work could be done.

• (1510)

This wasn't an easy decision. We knew the urgency. By the end of April, many university students had finished their exams. We were already a week into May, but we pulled the item from the agenda so that we could be confident that we were doing the right thing the right way.

My primary concern was to make sure that the public service could fully support its recommendation that, without a doubt, WE Charity was the right and indeed the only partner to deliver the program. I was briefed again on May 21 and the public service told me that they had done the due diligence we had asked for and that they were confident in the recommendation. In effect, they said that, if we wanted this program to happen, it could only be with WE Charity.

The choice was not between providers. It was between going ahead with WE Charity to deliver the program or not going ahead with the program at all. Given the public service advice, I was comfortable that the CSSG could now be presented to cabinet.

On May 22, Minister Chagger presented the program to cabinet, and cabinet approved it. After cabinet approved the CSSG, the next step was to approve its funding. Here, the briefing note from policy staff in my office recommended imposing an additional oversight measure in the disbursement of the approved funding. I agreed with that recommendation and directed that, before additional tranches of funding were released, Minister Chagger would have to write to the President of the Treasury Board to provide an update on the CSSG.

When cabinet approved the CSSG, obviously I knew that I had spoken at various WE Charity events. I'd never been paid to do so. I was also aware that my wife had an unpaid role as a WE Charity ambassador and ally. I knew she appeared at WE Charity events and that when she travelled to get to an event, WE Charity covered her related expenses. I also knew that Sophie had recently launched a podcast on mental wellness in conjunction with WE Charity. The Ethics Commissioner had approved this role, including WE Charity covering her expenses.

I also knew that my brother and mother had worked with WE Charity as well as with other organizations. However, I did not know how much work either of them had done with WE Charity or how much they had been paid. These were things that I would only learn after the program launched publicly.

That said, sometimes recusing oneself can be the right thing to do even if it's not required. Here, my mother's connection to WE Charity and the other connections in my family could lead some people to wonder whether those connections had played some role in the decision to select WE Charity. That, of course, was not the case.

WE Charity received no preferential treatment, not from me, not from anyone else. The public service recommended WE Charity, and I did absolutely nothing to influence that recommendation. I didn't even know it had been made until May 8, and when I learned that WE Charity was recommended, I pushed back. I wanted to be satisfied that the proposal that WE Charity deliver the CSSG had been properly scrutinized.

• (1515)

[Translation]

As I said, I should have recused myself from that decision to avoid any appearance of favouritism. I know that appearances can hurt a good program, and that is of course exactly what happened in this case. It's really a shame, especially since this program could have been very important for students and our communities.

[English]

To conclude, there was never any direction by or attempt to influence from me or my staff that the public service recommend WE Charity. Getting young people to serve has been a goal of mine well before I ever got into politics, so I deeply regret how this has unfolded.

It's now July 30. Our government is delivering an up-to-\$9 billion aid package for students. Unfortunately, the grant for volunteer service is unlikely to be part of the package this summer, and that is something that I regret.

I'm pleased now to take any of your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Prime Minister.

Before we go to questions, on Mr. Morantz's point and also for relevance, I remind the committee of the original motion. It says, "as part of its study on COVID-19, hold hearings...to examine how much the government spent in awarding the \$912 million sole-source contract to WE Charity, and how the outsourcing of the Canada Student Service Grant to WE Charity proceeded as far as it did".

To Mr. Morantz's point, and I think you are aware of this, Mr. Prime Minister, given the way questions work in the House of Commons—I call it the COVID-19 questioning experience—each member is allocated so much time. We will stick to six minutes for the first round and five for the second today, for questions and answers. As for the process, if there's an eight-second question, we expect the answer to be eight seconds. I will try to track that on my iPad, but I may be a little off from time to time. There will no doubt be interruptions of the witness, the Prime Minister, by the chair and probably by members as well so that we stick to those rules.

In the first round of questions, we'll have Mr. Poilievre, followed by a splitting of time between Mr. Fragiskatos and Ms. Koutrakis, and then Mr. Fortin and Mr. Angus.

Mr. Poilievre, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Prime Minister.

What is the total dollar value of all the expenses reimbursed, fees paid to and any other consideration provided by the WE group to you, your mother, your spouse, your brother and any other member of your family? I'd like just the total, please.

• (1520)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I don't have that exact figure. Reimbursing expenses is something done by an organization, for example, so I don't have those totals.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

What's the relevance of these questions on ancillary fees paid to family members, given the official motion?

The Chair: I don't think that's a point of order, Ms. Dzerowicz.

We'll go back to Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You're telling me you don't know how much immediate family members have been paid in expense reimbursements by this organization.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: My mother and my brother are professionals in their own right who have engagements, and have for many years, with many different—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Do you know?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —organizations across the country. I don't have the details of their work experiences or their expenses.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What about your spouse? What is the dollar figure?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I think WE Charity has been able to share those dollar figures with you.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: When was the last time she had an expense reimbursed by WE Charity?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I believe it would have been for the trip to London, where she spoke at WE, but those expenses were cleared in advance by the Ethics Commissioner.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How much were those expenses?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I don't have that number in front of me.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Prime Minister, it's very hard to believe you don't have that number. You've been embroiled in this scandal for over a month now and these kinds of questions have been asked repeatedly.

I asked this of you in the House of Commons weeks ago. You've had time to get it, so I'll ask again. How much was your spouse reimbursed by WE for her recent trip to London?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: To give an example, a plane ticket that was booked for her flight to London wasn't something she would have paid for to be reimbursed—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What about a hotel?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —by the charity. The WE Charity would have actually paid for that ticket itself, so we wouldn't have those answers on our credit cards, for example.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: So you don't have any idea how much the WE Charity paid for your spouse to travel to London.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Over the past number of months, I've been involved in serving Canadians—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How much?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —and focused on that, but I know that WE Charity has shared those expenses and you've had the opportunity to talk to them.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: They have not shared those expenses, Prime Minister. They have refused to tell us the itemized expenses for that trip. They didn't even confirm she was on that trip.

What hotel did they pay for her to stay at?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I don't know.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. This would have been a very expensive trip, and it would have been paid for in March. Your government then, a month later, was amassing a program of a half a billion dollars, which you now admit you helped approve a month after that. How could you possibly have believed that it was appropriate for you to approve a nearly half-billion-dollar grant to a group that only 60 days earlier was paying for sumptuous travels for immediate members of your family?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: The Ethics Commissioner fully cleared Sophie's volunteer, unpaid work with WE, whether for her

podcast or her appearance at WE events or her work as a WE ambassador and ally. It was all entirely unpaid, but they reimbursed expenses, and that clearance was received in advance from the Ethics Commissioner. So that was not—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did you tell the Ethics Commissioner—

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, we're on equal time here, and the Prime Minister still has time.

Go ahead, Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Obviously, that was not a concern for me, knowing that the Ethics Commissioner had approved of Sophie volunteering her time and having expenses covered for engagements with this—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: When you became involved with the decision to approve the half-billion-dollar grant to WE Charity on May 5, did you then immediately inform the Ethics Commissioner that you were doing that and also inform the Ethics Commissioner that this group was paying expenses for your spouse?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: As I said, the Ethics Commissioner already knew because he had approved Sophie volunteering with the WE organization a long time ago. Second, my knowledge of WE being involved in delivering this program only happened on May 8, not on May 5, as you are saying.

• (1525)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On May 8, did you contact the Ethics Commissioner to seek permission to be part of the decision to approve this half-billion-dollar grant, yes or no?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: On May 8, I received the formal recommendation by the public service that they go ahead—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did you—

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —with the WE program to deliver it, and I pulled it back from cabinet and asked them to do further due diligence because I knew questions would be asked.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Prime Minister. We'll go back to Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How much time do I have remaining?

The Chair: You have about 68 seconds.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Prime Minister, you admit now that you should have removed yourself from the decision to grant this half-billion-dollar grant to the WE Charity. You were found guilty of taking a free vacation from someone who sought a \$50-million grant from you, strike one. You were found guilty of interfering with the criminal prosecution of a Liberal-linked corporation, strike two—

Mr. Francesco Sorbara (Vaughan—Woodbridge, Lib.): Chair, I have a point of order.

MP Poilievre brought up some points that are not relevant to this committee and the motion put forth.

The Chair: I am going to allow the question, but, Mr. Poilievre, please leave time for the answer in your six minutes as well.

Go ahead.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you.

You were twice found guilty of breaking the ethics act before, strikes one and two. Now you admit a third strike by your failure to recuse yourself, and in the process you broke the ethics act a third time.

What happens in baseball when you have three strikes?

The Chair: That's the end of your round, Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Prime Minister, you have about 30 seconds to respond.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: As I said to Canadians a number of weeks ago, I should have recused myself, knowing the connections between my family and the perceptions around this issue. However, I did not intervene to make this recommendation happen. When the recommendation came forward from the public service, I sent it back to the public service to say that they really needed to make sure that this is indeed the only organization that can deliver this program, and that this is done exactly the right way, because there is going to be careful scrutiny on this.

At that point, I should have recused myself, but I didn't. I decided to push back instead, and that I regret because young people aren't having the opportunities they would have had this summer through that program, even though there are many other things we're doing for young people this summer.

The Chair: Thank you, Prime Minister.

We'll turn to Mr. Fragiskatos for four minutes, and Ms. Koutrakis for two, on a split round.

Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Prime Minister, for being here.

First of all, Mr. Prime Minister, is there a personal relationship between you and the Kielburgers? Are you friends? Have you spent social time together? Have you had dinners together or anything like that?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: No. I have seen them at events but not outside of official or public events.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

I want to ask you, Prime Minister, about the lack of recusal. Some have suggested that perhaps the recusal did not happen because the pandemic is forcing decisions to be made more quickly than ever before, and when decisions are made quickly, mistakes are more likely to happen.

First of all, to what extent is that a fair observation, in your view? Second, if it is a fair observation, COVID-19 will certainly set the context within which policy is made for some time to come.

This implies that choices about policy and programs will need to continue to be made very quickly.

Are there mechanisms in place at the cabinet level or in other institutions of decision-making to prevent a mistake of this kind from happening again?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: First of all, thank you for the question.

Obviously yes, during a time of pandemic things are accelerated, and as I said from the beginning and as I have said throughout this pandemic in all my press conferences, we have moved quickly to try to get help out to people as fast as we could, as flexibly as we could and would fix those mistakes as we went on. There was an understanding that if we waited until everything was perfect before doing anything, far too many Canadians would suffer and, because of the health emergency, even die. We needed to act quickly.

That is certainly part of the context, but I don't think it's the whole reason as to why I didn't recuse myself. Youth issues are something I've been deeply involved with through all my career. I care deeply about the idea of youth service and seeing young people be able to help in their communities with organizations across the country.

This proposal mattered to me, and instead of encouraging it along, as some people say, because it was somehow connected to my family, I actually slowed it down and pushed back on it to try to make sure that everything was done exactly right, because I knew there would be questions asked because of the links to the family.

In no way was this benefiting my mother or my brother, to be creating a grant program for students to volunteer in their communities right across the country.

● (1530)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you.

I have a final question before I turn it over to Ms. Koutrakis.

Prime Minister, speaking to the point about youth and the Canada student service grants, it is in principle of course a great idea, a great vision. I am worried, though, about whether or not the program will come to fruition. I've asked this question to Minister Morneau, to Minister Chagger and to the Clerk of the Privy Council. I know that colleagues may accuse me of repeating myself here, but we have you at committee.

I have many constituents anxious to volunteer. I have many not-for-profits and charities in the community of London, Ontario, that want this volunteer effort as they try to deal with the challenge that is COVID-19.

Will this program go ahead? If not, why not? Also, if the program does not go ahead, where will the money that was allocated towards it go?

The Chair: Prime Minister, could you keep the response pretty tight, sir?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Of course.

First of all, young people are right now volunteering in their communities across the country. We're seeing young people step up in big ways to help out, to contribute, in this time of crisis. What they won't be getting through this program is rewards or recognition for 1,000 hours of work or 4,000 or 5,000 hours of work. That was what we were trying to encourage young people to do—even more volunteering that way.

However, at the same time we continue to look for ways to encourage volunteerism, to encourage young people to be involved. I know Minister Chagger continues to work very hard on that, and I am hopeful that we will be able to continue to support young people in volunteerism, as we're supporting them with both the emergency benefit for students and with lots of jobs for students through the summer jobs program.

The Chair: Ms. Koutrakis.

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

Thank you, Prime Minister, for accepting to come to our committee this afternoon to clarify some really important issues for all Canadians.

Let's remind ourselves of the grave and unprecedented crisis that you and our government had to deal with—in a real hurry, as you have said—to ensure the safety of Canadians and to save our economy.

There has been a suggestion that WE Charity started to pay your mother in 2016 because of your role as Prime Minister. Can you please speak to your mother's personal experience, her advocacy and commitment to mental health before you were elected as Prime Minister in 2015 and to her qualifications as a speaker on this issue?

As a follow-up, because I know I'm short on time, did you at any time encourage your mother to be involved in the WE organization or other charitable causes?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: My mother has had a fascinating but challenging life in many ways, and she shared that story in her 2010 autobiography. After that, she started speaking, sharing stories and encouraging different organizations who were working particularly in mental health but in other areas. As she did that, she realized there was a need and a demand for more destigmatization around mental health issues and better advocacy for it, so she actually wrote another book called “The Time of Your Life” that is focused on mental health issues, which she published in 2015. Publishing that book also involved working with doctors and experts in the field of mental health.

She has been empowering people and supporting organizations across the country professionally for a long time since then with the greater focus on mental health that has come over the past five years. It is not a surprise at all that various organizations would turn to her expertise and her involvement, but I never directly or indirectly encouraged her to work for WE or any other specific organization.

The Chair: Okay, we will have to go on to Mr. Fortin.

Mr. Fortin, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Prime Minister, in terms of your relationship with WE Charity over the past few months, did you check the registry of lobbyists to make sure the people the government was dealing with were registered?

• (1535)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I have personally had no interaction with the people from WE over the past few months. I expect the ministers who have engagements with various organizations to check the registry of lobbyists.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: My understanding is that you have not personally checked, nor have you asked your chief of staff to do so. Is that right?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: My chief of staff had no interaction with WE.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Did you ask to check whether the Kielburgers or other members of the board of directors were in the registry?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Neither I nor my chief of staff had any interaction with them.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: So you did not ask to have that checked.

We know that Mr. Morneau and his family went on a trip with the Kielburgers and that your family had ties with them. In addition to finding out whether or not giving talks was appropriate, the fact remains, and it must be said, that there have been fairly close ties between the Trudeau family and the people from WE Charity.

However, you have never checked this issue in the Registry of Lobbyists or asked anyone you know to do so. Is that correct?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: First, Mr. Fortin, you talked about close ties with the Kielburgers. I am not friends with the Kielburgers. I know them, but we have no close ties. I have actually done youth work for a long time, long before politics. So I have some knowledge of their work. I have participated in their events a number of times in my life as Prime Minister and beforehand.

However, in terms of the Registry of Lobbyists, you know full well that it is up to individuals and businesses to take action in that regard. Those checks are not really a political responsibility.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: In your opinion, when someone approaches you or a member of your cabinet, you are not required to ensure that they are in the registry?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Yes, that is absolutely the case when we have a meeting for lobbying purposes. However, on no occasion did the Kielburgers or anyone from WE Charity have any lobbying involvement with my government. It may have happened before, but certainly not in the last few months.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Trudeau, how many millions of dollars have been given to WE Charity or to an organization in the WE network since your election in 2015?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I know we are looking at several million dollars, but let me emphasize that previous governments, such as the Conservatives and provincial governments, have also had commitments and contracts with the organization, which is doing an outstanding job for young people across the country.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I am not putting the WE Charity on trial, but the question I am asking myself is whether or not our money is well managed. You can understand that some questions seem important to us.

Let me come back to the Registry of Lobbyists. I understand that, since you became Prime Minister in 2015, millions of dollars—I saw figures like 5 or 10, but we no longer know for sure—have been given to WE Charity.

I imagine that you knew that Mr. Morneau had travelled with WE Charity recently. Is that correct?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: First, with respect to your question about contributions to WE Charity, neither my office nor I were involved in any of those agreements with WE.

As for Mr. Morneau, I was not specifically aware that he had travelled with WE, but I was aware that one of his daughters—not the one who worked for WE—was involved with the organization, in one way or another.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Prime Minister, what does that mean: “I was not specifically aware that he had travelled with WE”? Did you not know, or did you know, but not specifically? What does that mean exactly?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I am not surprised, because I know how involved Mr. Morneau is in many causes, including causes for youth. No, I did not know that he had travelled with WE specifically.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Okay.

So you knew that his daughter had worked for WE, that his daughter was involved.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: No, no, I'm sorry. I knew that one of his daughters had done projects with WE, and that she had written a book on women's engagement, which I had received at one point. However, I did not know that he had another daughter who was working as such for the organization.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Did you ask Mr. Morneau?

[*English*]

The Chair: You have a minute left, Mr. Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Prime Minister, did you, at any point, ask Mr. Morneau to ensure that the WE people were properly registered in the Registry of Lobbyists?

• (1540)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Since I was not aware that there was any interaction with WE with respect to the COVID-19 program, I had no reason to ask about lobbying and the Kielburgers.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Did you ask Ms. Chagger about it?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: As I said, while the process was taking place, I was not aware that WE was chosen to deliver this program. So there would have been no reason to ask Ms. Chagger about lobbying.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: If I am not mistaken, you announced the program on April 29, and immediately afterwards, WE came into the picture. You know that WE has been in the picture for a long time. To your knowledge, you never asked any of your ministers, any of your staff, or anyone else to check whether WE was in the Registry of Lobbyists?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: First, it is not the Prime Minister's role to ask all his ministers to check on lobbying issues; we have people in our offices to do that, and I expect them to do their job.

Second, I did not know about WE's involvement until May 8, once all those decisions and recommendations had been made by the public service.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Fortin. We're a little over.

We'll turn to Mr. Angus for six minutes, who will be followed by Mr. Poilievre and then Mr. McLeod.

Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Prime Minister, for joining us today.

I agree with you. Canadians are in the worst medical and economic catastrophe in a century. What's very frustrating for me is that we've worked very hard across party lines to reassure Canadians that we are putting their interests first, yet we're here today because of this, I think, very unnecessary scandal, and it comes down fundamentally to a question of your judgment.

There were numerous red flags with this proposal. It fell apart the second it was announced, but the question that sticks with people is that you've been found guilty twice of breaking the Conflict of Interest Act. You seem to have this.... You give an impression, anyway, that you don't believe that the laws that define what politicians can and cannot do apply to you. So here we are with a case—that was such an obvious conflict of interest because of your connection with the Kielburgers—that has derailed so much good work and hurt students.

Do you recognize what you've done here and the damage that has been done to all of us trying to reassure Canadians?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: First of all, Mr. Angus, through this pandemic, which, as you say, has been extraordinarily difficult and impactful on Canadians, we have remained focused on them. We have delivered, to over eight million Canadians, the Canada emergency response benefit, a wage subsidy that has kept businesses going, commercial rent assistance, support for seniors and support for students—a \$9-billion package, of which, yes, this volunteer program was a part. It is disappointing that we're not going to be able to give grants to students who are volunteering across the country so far. We still are working on that, obviously.

At the same time, Mr. Angus, you need to know that we have delivered concretely for Canadians. Also, when I received the information that the WE Charity had been chosen, recommended by the public service, to deliver the student grant program, I pushed back, perhaps because of the experience that you highlighted, that we have had push-backs in the past.

Mr. Charlie Angus: But Mr. Prime Minister—

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I wanted to make sure that all the i's were dotted and all the t's were crossed. The public service was ready to fully justify that choice of WE Charity as the only organization—

The Chair: We'll have to go back to Mr. Angus, Prime Minister.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I guess the issue is that, for Canadians, the idea that this was the only game in town, that WE was the only game in town.... I'm sure around your cabinet it probably was, but the fact is that the Kielburger brothers carefully cultivated their relationship with you and your brand. After you became Prime Minister, they put you on the stadium circuit. They hired your family members to the tune of half a million dollars. They hired the finance minister's daughter. They flew him around the world. They even made their staff go to his parties.

Do you think that's not conflict of interest? Is that conflict of interest, yes or no?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: From the very first, Mr. Angus, you were, unfortunately, misleading people with your proposal. This was not something that we selected. This is not something that cabinet selected.

Cabinet was presented a choice by our professional public service, saying, "If you want to deliver this summer volunteer program, the summer grant program, it's going to have to be through this third party organization." They didn't give us a choice of two or three different organizations, so when you say that it was maybe the reality around the cabinet table but it wasn't necessarily the reality out there, you're actually impugning the very fine public servants—

• (1545)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Oh, Mr. Trudeau, please....

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —who have done extraordinary work across this pandemic on delivering for Canadians. If they said that there is no other organization that can deliver the scale of grants to students across this country, then I believe them.

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Angus, Prime Minister.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

Well, Mr. Prime Minister, I totally agree with you about the civil service. That's why your decision to privatize this and give it to the Kielburger brothers really concerns me, and what really concerns me is you didn't answer the question about whether or not you thought that your close family financial relationships and the Morneau family's close financial relationships were a conflict of interest. That is why we're here. We're not here because of the civil service. We are here because you don't seem to understand, Mr. Prime Minister, that conflict of interest applies to you.

When you tell us that WE Charity was the only game in town, well they were in your world, but, obviously, this deal fell apart, and you need to understand that your conflict of interest has put you here.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Angus, your statement that in my world or in our cabinet, WE was the only game in town is simply untrue.

Mr. Charlie Angus: That's what you said.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: It is the professional public service that put forward the recommendation that said to us, having done their due diligence, that the only organization with the scale and the capacity to deliver this grant program would be WE.

Personally, I thought we were going to be able to deliver it through the Canada service corps, which I created two or three years ago and was all about rewarding service and creating opportunities for service for young people. I would have loved to see it supercharged and accelerated to be able to deliver many thousands of opportunities for young people throughout the country.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Not a dime went out the door. You failed them.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: But that wasn't able to be done. The public service, themselves, made the recommendation that we had to go with WE Charity, and I was not involved in that recommendation at all—

The Chair: Thank you.

This is your last question, Mr. Angus, and it will have to be a very quick one.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Very quickly, Mr. Prime Minister, as a former youth voice, you could have been talking to the Federation of Students when you were telling them that they were not eligible for the CERB, when you told them to work for less than the minimum wage, when you pushed this deal with the Kielburger brothers and refused to recuse yourself, and not a dime has gone out the door, Mr. Prime Minister—

The Chair: We'll go over to you, Mr. Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Thank you.

Mr. Angus and the NDP have said this a few times, this idea that volunteering is somehow working for less than the minimum wage. I'd like to remind—

Mr. Charlie Angus: That's what the legal—

The Chair: Mr. Angus, the Prime Minister has the floor.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —Mr. Angus that volunteers are the heart of this country. People get out and volunteer, not for money but because they want to make a difference in the world. If you start calculating every volunteer as working for less than the minimum wage, then you are missing a really important part, Mr. Angus—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Student debt.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —of the fabric of Canada. Getting young people to step up and volunteer is something—

The Chair: We will have to end that round there, gentlemen.

We are going now to five-minute rounds. We'll start with Mr. Poilievre, followed by Mr. McLeod.

Mr. Poilievre, you have five minutes.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Mr. Chair, I'll be taking Mr. Poilievre's time.

The Chair: Okay, sorry, Mr. Barrett. I had Mr. Poilievre on my list. I'll not take my talking from your time.

You have the floor.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you.

Prime Minister, I'm just looking for a number. How many times would one of your ministers need to be found guilty of breaking the Conflict of Interest Act for you to fire them? How many times, sir?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Obviously, our cabinet is formed of extraordinary individuals who serve their country, and I have confidence in their ability to do just that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How many times would they need to break the act before you would fire them?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Obviously, any time someone contravenes the Ethics Commissioner's act we take it very seriously. We look at each situation based on the gravity of the situation.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay. Well, you claimed in your opening remarks that you had basically no idea what was happening in your government. Who are you holding accountable for this decision?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Barrett, over the past number of months, as a government and as a Prime Minister I have been involved in the decisions around CERB, around the wage subsidy, around helping Canadians through this extraordinary time of crisis. We've been involved in working quickly and flexibly, with an extraordinarily professional public service, to deliver tremendous programs to help Canadians—

• (1550)

The Chair: We will have to go back to Mr. Barrett, Prime Minister.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Prime Minister, there was no vetting done of WE Charity. There are major concerns with this organization. Who is responsible for the vetting?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: The public service would have done their due diligence to ensure which organizations could deliver the program as we had laid it out. They found that only WE Charity had the ability to do that through their due diligence process.

Mr. Michael Barrett: The organization that you approved, sir, was....

You had a massive contract given to a shell company with no experience running a government grant program. That's a problem. Someone should be held accountable. Who are you going to fire?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Barrett, the public service has delivered extraordinary programs, including with third party organizations. When we wanted to help out shelters, we went through United Way. When we wanted to help food banks, the public service reached out to Food Banks Canada to make sure they could get that money out. They have consistently worked with third party organizations. As part of their decision to do that, they have done full due diligence on that organization's ability to deliver the program, and—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Prime Minister, cabinet is responsible for decisions, not the public service. A major mistake was made. Someone in cabinet should be held accountable. Which minister will you fire: Minister Morneau, Minister Chagger? Which minister?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: The decision in cabinet was not as to which organization should deliver the Canada student summer grant. The decision in cabinet was, should we have a summer grant program or not? That was the binary choice given to us by the public service and the minister. Cabinet made the decision that making training opportunities for young people to serve—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Do you still think WE was a good choice to run this program, sir?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We will never know, because they pulled out of being able to deliver the program, partially because I hadn't recused myself and created complications here. That's something I deeply regret, because creating opportunities for young people to serve is something that matters deeply to all Canadians across the country.

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*].

The Chair: I won't take the time from you, Mr. Barrett, but somebody has their mike on and some sound is coming through.

Go ahead, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Were you aware that the WE organization had fired its board chair shortly before they were given this contract?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: No, I was not.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Were you aware that WE had fired a very large portion of its staff?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: No, I was not.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How many times did your family members receive remuneration from this organization since you were elected as Prime Minister?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: As I said, my wife works on an unpaid basis for WE and other organizations, and had it cleared by the Ethics Commissioner in advance for both her engagement—because she's been an advocate and a TV and radio host professionally through her entire career—and her activities with this organization and other organizations, for free, being reimbursed for expenses. It was cleared by the Ethics Commissioner when she first wanted to become an advocate around these issues with that organization.

The Chair: You have a minute left, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: So every dollar that your wife received in reimbursement or in payment was cleared in advance by the commissioner.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: As I said, Mr. Barrett, this was unpaid work my wife was doing for a cause she believes in deeply, talking about destigmatization of mental health and empowerment of young people, particularly girls. This is something that she believes in deeply, and, yes, we got approval from the Ethics Commissioner that she could volunteer with this organization and have expenses related to that volunteerism reimbursed.

The Chair: This is your last question. Keep it tight.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I want to know if the Prime Minister can tell us what due diligence looks like. We have an organization that had no assets, it was a shell corporation, they were in violation of bank covenants, a fired board chair, they were firing employees and the Government of Canada handed over a \$500-million contract for them to administer. What was the due diligence that was done, sir?

• (1555)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: The public service ensures that any third party partner we work with on the delivery of a program is capable of delivering the program. They have a rigorous and strong process to do that, and I have confidence in our public service to be able to do that, particularly because during this time of pandemic they had demonstrated, with many third-party organizations, an ability to get help to Canadians in record fashion when people needed it the most.

The Chair: Thank you, both.

We're turning to Mr. McLeod, who will be followed by Mr. Poilievre on my list.

Mr. McLeod, you have five minutes.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to the Prime Minister for joining us here today.

I'm glad that when the question was brought to the cabinet table to run a summer student program you said yes. I think it's very important that we do so, and I think it is something that we should continue to try to achieve.

This is our fifth meeting on the topic of government spending, WE and the Canada student service grant. Throughout this whole study my greatest concern is that, for the whole month since it was

determined WE was no longer going to administer the program, the program is now in jeopardy. That is one whole month that youth have missed out on the experiences and assistance the Canada student service grant could have provided in many parts of the country, including here in the north—I'm the member of Parliament for the Northwest Territories, for those that don't know—and indigenous communities. Many of our youth already face many barriers to opportunities that other parts of the country enjoy. We are remote. We struggle with connectivity. There's a high cost of living.

Is the government is going to address the fact that our youth have lost out because of this delay?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. McLeod, for your words and, quite frankly, for your advocacy for northern youth and indeed all youth across the country. I share those concerns. That's why we moved forward with multiple ways to support young people throughout this pandemic. We looked at a \$9-billion package to support young people that included deferral of student loans and creation of summer jobs and opportunities for them at a time when we know their regular summer jobs may not exist because of the pandemic. It also included the Canada emergency student response benefit that gives \$1,250 per month to students who need it and \$2,000 a month to students who have dependants, and that was something we worked out with other parties as well. There are many different things we're doing for young people.

This particular program, the Canada student service grant, was created to incentivize and to reward young people who are stepping up in their communities. It was about giving a grant to young people for that service that so many of them were doing already. What we continue to see—even without this financial reward we would have been able to deliver and its coordination across the country—are young people in the north, in the south, right across the country, stepping up and volunteering in community organizations because they know this is a historic time in which their actions, their voices, their efforts can shape our country for the better. Again, I'm always deeply grateful to young people and their leadership within our country.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you for that response.

I heard your response to my colleague when he asked about this program earlier. I'm hoping I can use this opportunity to encourage the delivery of this program, maybe through the public service instead, and the consideration of adjusting the original eligibility period to sometime down the road into October, or perhaps re-profiling the grant funding into another program to support young Canadians.

Is that something cabinet would be interested in talking about?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Absolutely. We know that we need to do more for young people, and encouraging young people to volunteer and be involved in their communities is a great way of not only giving them experiences and opportunities but tangibly helping out seniors, young people, marginalized people and community organizations. These are things that young people, young students stepping up, can make a huge difference in, so we're going to continue to look for ways to do this.

As I said, the Canada service corps, which was created a few years ago, is exactly about that, about coordinating volunteer organizations to create opportunities for young people across the country. It wasn't able to scale up in a way that allowed the public service to choose it to deliver the CSSG program, but as we continue to look for other ways to deliver the CSSG, I know that the Canada service corps, which is internal to government, is something people are looking at very carefully.

• (1600)

The Chair: You'll have to split 30 seconds with the Prime Minister, Mr. McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I just wanted to ask if he could lay out some of the challenges that the Canada service corps program faced that made it unable to deliver the program initially.

The Chair: Please do it very quickly, Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We were hoping to launch a first pilot project with about 7,000 volunteers this September, as a way of starting the activities of the Canada service corps in a tangible way. That's a far cry from the tens of thousands of volunteers that we would have needed or wanted, through this program, to give grants to in this time of pandemic. It was a scale problem and a program delivery challenge.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Poilievre, who will be followed by Ms. Dzerowicz.

Mr. Poilievre, you have five minutes, please.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I have a yes-or-no question.

Prime Minister, you twice were found guilty of breaking the ethics act. After those two convictions, did you decide to read the act?

The Chair: You have 14 seconds, Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Yes, I have read the act a number of times.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Are you aware of section 21?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Yes. Since I've read the act, I'm aware of section 21.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What does it say?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I can pull it up for you, but if you have it in front of you—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It says, "A public office holder"—and you are one—"shall recuse himself or herself from any discussion, decision, debate or vote on any matter in respect of which he or she would be in a conflict of interest."

What you've admitted today is not just that you were in a conflict of interest, but that you consciously recognized in your May cabinet meeting that such a conflict might exist. It didn't just slide by your desk. You were consciously aware that there was an inappropriate link to your family that would put you in a conflict.

Why did you, at that moment, not call the Ethics Commissioner and recuse yourself?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: That is simply not true, Mr. Poilievre. The issue of advancing issues for one's own family... By the way, the Ethics Commissioner is looking into this right now and I fully trust his judgment in determining it. At the same time, my concern around recusing myself was a question around perceptions, because I knew full well that this Canada student service grant program—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Your 16 seconds are up.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —was not going to directly benefit my mother or my brother—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Your 16 seconds are up.

I'm going to ask you again, because nobody believes you when you say you don't know how much money your family has gotten from the WE group. You've had a month to look into that. You knew you were going to testify here.

Again, how much money in total has your brother, mother and spouse received from this organization?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: That information has been publicly shared, but I will highlight—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, then tell me what it is. How much?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —that my mother has worked—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I just want the dollar figure.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —throughout her life, in various ways—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Tell me the dollar figure, Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —and is proud of the work that she's done, and I'm proud of her as well.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How much? I'm looking for a dollar figure.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We can get that number for you, if you like. It's been out in the media. I don't have it in front of me.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It's been out in the media, but you don't know it.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I don't have it in front of me, and quite frankly—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You don't know how much your family has received from this organization that you tried to give half a billion dollars. Really...?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Can I answer, Mr. Poilievre?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'm waiting. You haven't given an answer so far. Let's make this the first one.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: My mother has worked as an advocate—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I want a dollar figure, Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —and professional speaker for many—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How much?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —good organizations across the country for many, many years—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Prime Minister, you are being asked a direct question at a parliamentary committee.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —and she is proud that she doesn't have to rely on a husband or a son to support her, because she does her own work. I'm proud of the work that she has done.

Mr. Sean Fraser (Central Nova, Lib.): I have a point of order.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I do not feel that it is my responsibility—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Answer the question.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —to peer into the work my mother is doing, because I have confidence—

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: I have a point of order to suspend.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —in the work that she is doing.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I have come to learn that the chairperson's power has gone out, and he is no longer part of this meeting. May I propose that we suspend for a few minutes for Wayne to—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: That's okay. The Prime Minister and I can continue talking.

An hon. member: No.

• (1605)

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: No.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I suspected that might be a problem. It's very convenient timing for the lights to go out.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I got a message to the effect that his power's gone out. I have no reason to distrust him.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I hope you don't pull the fire alarm now.

Mr. Sean Fraser: There's no intent.... In my own private home here, in the middle of a pandemic, I don't have a fire alarm. I propose—

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Mr. Fraser, the general process is that the vice-chair assumes the chairing of the meeting, so we'll continue.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Pierre Poilievre): That would be me. We'll continue the meeting and I now give the floor to the member for Carleton.

Mr. Prime Minister, you have.... I'm going to ask you one last time. How much did your family get from this organization? How much?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Have you read the Conflict of Interest Act, Mr. Poilievre?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Pierre Poilievre): Yes, I have.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: How does it define “family”?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Pierre Poilievre): I'm asking you how much your family got.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: The Conflict of Interest Act defines “family” as spouse and direct dependants.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Point of order....

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Pierre Poilievre): Right, so you're not going to answer the question then.

A voice: Wait a second.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I can say that my family has not received any money that was paid—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Pierre Poilievre): So you're not going to answer the question about how much your family received.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: My wife did not receive any payment—

The Chair: Hold it, gentlemen, if you....

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —for working with WE, and it was cleared by the Ethics Commissioner ahead of time.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Prime Minister—

Mr. Charlie Angus: On a point of order, can I welcome back Wayne Easter, a man we've deeply missed?

Come on, Wayne, where have you been? Were you out getting a coffee?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I had things under control for you while you were gone.

The Chair: I imagine that, Pierre. It wouldn't be the first time you tried to put my lights out, and that's exactly what happened. We get a thunderstorm here.

Anyway, you're well into your five minutes, but go with one last question.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Trudeau, I'm going to conclude by asking you....

You claim that you have no knowledge of the amount that has been paid in expenses to your spouse. You correctly pointed out that the act defines “family” as including a spouse. Therefore, you know you're under investigation regarding the act....

I'm going to ask you again. How much, in total—and I'm looking for a dollar figure here, sir—did your spouse receive in reimbursed expenses or other benefits from this organization? How much?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Your original question, Mr. Poilievre, was how much was my immediate family paid for—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I asked you a different question just now. How much?

The Chair: Mr Poilievre, the Prime Minister has the floor.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —their work with WE. My wife has never been paid since I became Prime Minister.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I said reimbursed for expenses. How much?

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, could we please have order? We'll allow the Prime Minister to answer the question and then we'll move on to Ms. Dzerowicz.

Mr. Prime Minister, you have about 30 seconds.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: The Ethics Commissioner has fully cleared my wife to continue her advocacy and her work with WE Charity and other organizations—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How much?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —in the kind of work that she's been doing all her life. She's doing it—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I just want the dollar figure.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —unpaid for WE. She is not being paid by WE for her advocacy or for her podcasts. They are simply reimbursing her for expenses.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister and Mr. Poilievre, and I'm sorry for leaving the line.

We'll go to Ms. Dzerowicz next. Then we'll follow with Ms. Gaudreau and Mr. Angus.

Ms. Dzerowicz, you have five minutes.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Prime Minister, I want to say a huge thanks to you for being here today. I also want to say a heartfelt thanks on behalf of Davenport residents. Particularly during the early days of the pandemic, the daily announcements you made were a lifeline for them, both in terms of information and in terms of the support that we were providing. They really received the feeling that we had their backs, so I want to say a huge thanks to you.

The first thing I want to talk about is your recusing yourself. You had indicated you felt you should have recused yourself because of the perception. I want to ask a question.

If you were to recuse yourself from every decision that might indirectly impact your family, how would that affect your ability to serve as Prime Minister and MP for Papineau?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I think, obviously, that is an important question. There are many things I do and we do as a government that impact millions of Canadians across the country.

For example, my mother is a well-known, long-standing advocate for mental health issues. One of the very first commitments we made to Canadians was to invest \$5 billion into mental health supports across the provinces. It is possible that I shouldn't have been involved in that decision, because my mom is a well-known advocate and works in the mental health universe. Obviously, that would be silly. It is not a conflict, but these kinds of things constantly come up.

That's why, when the issue of WE came forward, my concern was to push back on it, to delay its going forward to cabinet so that more due diligence could happen. In that case, looking back on it, it

would have been better, for perception's sake, had I simply stepped away and not been involved at all. Perhaps, then, the organization and the program would be delivered right now. I always look to serve Canadians in the best possible way, and around youth programs I have a level of experience in them that meant I felt I was useful in contributing. None of this program was in any way going to benefit any members of my family. That was something I was very comfortable with.

• (1610)

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you.

You've made it clear that... There were a number of questions around board governance for WE and the number of layoffs that had taken place at WE Charity. You clearly articulated for Canadians and anyone listening that the due diligence is the responsibility of our civil service.

I want to ask this, though. Mr. Shugart testified that no one in the public service raised any red flags about the WE Charity's financial well-being. I want to directly ask you, did you see or hear about any red flags being raised concerning the WE Charity's finances and resources?

The second part of my question is this. You asked Minister Chagger to speak with the head of Treasury Board for some additional oversight.

Could you talk about both of those issues? I see a bit of a correlation there.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Obviously there are now certain media reports and questions about the WE organization's financial structures and activities. Those obviously weren't public knowledge and weren't flagged to me at any point during the May 8 conversation or the May 21 or 22 conversation.

In regard to the extra oversight that I recommended we bring in between Minister Chagger and the Treasury Board, that was designed to lay out the payments to this third party WE organization for delivering the program in specific tranches that would provide an update before further funds were flowed, once they'd worked through the initial cohorts.

The Chair: There's time for just a quick question, Julie.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you.

Minister Morneau mentioned to us that more than 70 emergency programs were introduced, with a spend of over \$200 billion.

Can you give Canadians an idea about what your involvement is in the big policy decisions that come before cabinet?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Through the months of April and May specifically, I was working all day on policy briefs and design for the Canada emergency response benefit, for the wage subsidy, for supports for Canadians, for responding to PPE challenges. It was a time of extraordinary activity for the government as the civil service stepped up to deliver things that had never done before, in time frames that would have been unimaginable.

We as a cabinet and I as Prime Minister were tremendously active in this time, because we knew that Canadians were counting on us to be there for them as we asked them to do extremely difficult things—to leave their jobs, to stay home, to hunker down so that we could defeat this virus or slow this virus. We needed to be there for them and we were deeply involved in every aspect of how we—

The Chair: We will have to move on, Prime Minister.

I have Ms. Gaudreau next and then Mr. Angus—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

I would like to give my time to my colleague Mr. Fortin.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay, we're going to Mr. Fortin.

Before you start, Rhéal, we will have a slot open for the official opposition—okay, Mr. Poilievre will be on—and then we will end the day with Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Fortin is next, for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Trudeau, on April 29, when you announced the program, would it not have been simpler to be transparent and to disclose to people all the relationships you and your family had with WE?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: On April 29, I was not aware that WE was involved in this program. The decision had not yet been made.

• (1615)

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: When you announced it, you did not say that you had ties with WE. Surprisingly, on April 22, Mr. Kielburger seemed to say that he had received a call from your office telling him about the decision.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: No, Mr. Fortin. You do not have the correct dates.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Okay.

At the end of the day, Mr. Trudeau, do you not feel that you have betrayed the trust of Quebeckers and all Canadians by acting in this way?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: In what way, Mr. Fortin?

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: You say that you apologized and that you even postponed the decision to give the mandate to WE, because you knew that there might be careful scrutiny. You postponed that decision. You knew you were in a conflict of interest.

Despite the fact that you knew it, you never asked to recuse yourself from the decision table. You knew it when you awarded the contract. You knew it when you voted at the cabinet table.

Why did you do that, Mr. Trudeau? Quebeckers feel betrayed, Mr. Trudeau.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Fortin, I was not in a conflict of interest. I am not in a conflict of interest in this situation.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Why did you apologize?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I apologized because, given the perceived connection to my family, it would have been easier. I should have recused to allow the program to move forward.

We were in a pandemic, as you well know, Mr. Fortin.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: You say that today, but why did you not do it at the beginning?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: During the pandemic, we had to quickly launch programs in innovative and quick ways to help people in different situations. That is exactly what we did.

As I said, when we announced the program, I was not aware that WE was part of it.

[*English*]

The Chair: This is your last question.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Trudeau, you were blamed in the Aga Khan matter and blamed in the SNC-Lavalin matter. You are now under investigation. Your Minister of Finance is under investigation.

When are you finally going to make the decision to step aside and ask Mr. Morneau to step down as Minister of Finance?

You are the one who is accountable. It is all very well to tell us that due diligence is up to public servants, but you are responsible for it.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Fortin, over the past four or five months we—the government and the Minister of Finance in particular—have provided assistance to millions and millions of Canadians who were in a terrible situation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Fortin, your time is up.

The floor is the Prime Minister's, if he could finish, please.

[*Translation*]

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We are delivering programs that make a huge difference to Canadians and that remains our focus.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: That is disappointing, Mr. Trudeau.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister and Mr. Fortin.

Mr. Angus, you have two and a half minutes, and then we'll move on to Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Prime Minister, in 2017 after you were found guilty with the Aga Khan deal, you said you were going to work with the office of the Ethics Commissioner in the new year to ensure that as you went forward you would be in full and complete compliance with the rules and the rules in place. You tell us that you held back this project, you did the due diligence and you were aware that there were perceptions that might be problematic. We're not talking about perceptions. We're talking about breaches of the law.

In your due diligence, why did you not bother to talk to the Conflict of Interest Commissioner? It is so obvious, Mr. Trudeau, that these conflicts were there. Why did you think it didn't apply to you?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Angus, the public service came forward with a recommendation to cabinet to move forward either with this specific third party provider—that was WE Charity—or else not move forward with the program at all. That was the binary choice proposed to us. I did not influence the public service to choose this organization, and indeed, when the public service came forward with this organization, I said we should put the brakes on it to make sure we've done absolutely everything right because there are going to be questions because of the connections with my family on this.

Yes, in hindsight, I should have recused myself, and perhaps the program would be delivering for students across the country right now, but I did not. Instead, I put the brakes on it and said let's make sure that it is doing things the right way so that we don't have any communication or public problems.

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: With all due respect, instead of continually throwing the public service under the bus, I'm asking about your judgment, about your legal obligations, because the real losers here are the young people. Statistics Canada says it's going to take five to seven years for them to recover from the damage. We had students asking why they were being denied CERB, asking why you were telling them that volunteerism was going to be great and that they could work for less than minimum wage. Students who have massive levels of debt don't have \$41,000 cheques to cover their losses.

They were looking to you as their champion, and I'm really concerned, Mr. Prime Minister, that you think this issue of paying university students a fair wage is somehow an attack on volunteerism. To be the champion of youth isn't to do a high-five with Craig Kielburger. You need to—

• (1620)

The Chair: Mr. Angus, ask your question, please.

Mr. Charlie Angus: None of the money got out, not a dime. These students are still waiting. You failed them.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I'm happy to correct Mr. Angus.

The Canada emergency student benefit, since May 15, has given to 724,000 applicants a total value of \$2.1 billion directly for students. That's part of the \$9-billion package. The students' CERB has made a huge difference. The summer jobs we've created, the deferral of student loans.... Yes, I regret that we weren't able to—

Mr. Charlie Angus: [Inaudible—Editor].

The Chair: Mr. Angus, the Prime Minister has the floor.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —put in place a grant program to recognize the volunteerism that young people are doing right across the country. That is a piece of it that is disappointing and that I regret and I apologize for, but the ensemble of things that we've done to help students across this country in this historic pandemic has made a real difference in the lives of students and in communities across this country that are seeing young people step up and contribute—

The Chair: We've had equal time, Prime Minister.

We'll have to move on to Mr. Poilievre, and the concluding questions will go to Mr. Fraser.

You have five minutes, Mr. Poilievre, and please don't shut my lights out this time, will you?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Don't shut your own out either.

You claim that the program's purposes were threefold: help you through the pandemic, help charities get through the pandemic and help students pay for their post-secondary in the fall. Which of these could the Canada summer jobs program not have done?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: The three aims that I listed for the CSSG were to encourage young people to step up, to help out community organizations and to recognize volunteerism and reward volunteerism by students as a way of making a difference in this pandemic.

The Chair: We go back to Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You can't name a single one of these objectives that could not have been fulfilled—

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Yes, the third one, that third one is not—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: —by the Canada summer jobs program.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: That's not true, Pierre. The third one, recognizing volunteerism, is not done by the Canada summer jobs program.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right, recognizing paid volunteerism. You called it volunteerism so that you could take it outside of the Canada summer jobs program and give it to your friends at WE.

My next question, when you directed—

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, can I just respond to that?

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, the Prime Minister has got about eight seconds to answer that one, and then we'll go to your question.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: The CSSG was about recognizing and rewarding volunteerism. It's not about jobs. It was about volunteerism, and that, unfortunately, is something that we can't do because the program—

The Chair: We go back to Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You just misused the word so that you could justify outsourcing a program that already effectively exists within the government.

Now when you did that, you directed a half-billion dollars, and... Yes, you did. You're the head of the cabinet.

Did you know that the group to which you were directing that half-billion dollars was in violation of its bank covenant, yes or no?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: That is not something that we had as information at that point.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did you know that the government money would go into a real estate shell foundation instead of into the WE Charity, yes or no?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: The details on the payment were worked out by our professional public service in terms of how the contribution agreement flowed.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did you know that the chair of the board had resigned, yes or no?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: No.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You clearly did not do any due diligence of your own. As the chair of the cabinet responsible for approving a decision, you should have had some basic facts. Sir, you were using half a billion dollars of taxpayers' money here. You had a fiduciary responsibility. Why didn't you ask these questions?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We have flowed tens of billions of dollars through the CERB—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right. The question isn't about the CERB.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —through the workers benefit, through various ways to help Canadians, and we were very active in making sure that flow was right.

There are many different programs, and in cabinet, in government, we trust the ministers and the public service to do their jobs and make sure that things are delivered in the right way, and in this case, they did.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Chair, the time has come for the Prime Minister to stop blaming public servants. This was his decision.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, just hold on. You're going to have to switch to your French channel because I can't make you out. I'm hearing two languages at once.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The time has come for the Prime Minister to stop blaming public servants. He is the one who was elected to be accountable to Canadians and who was responsible for ensuring that the money was well spent. Public servants are not the ones who forced him to pay nearly half a billion dollars to a group that had paid his family nearly half a million dollars.

Is the Prime Minister taking personal responsibility for approving this huge amount of money that he spent by giving it to his friends?

• (1625)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: First, I want to set the record straight. I have nothing but admiration, respect and deep gratitude for the public service that has been able to professionally launch extraordinary programs during this pandemic to help millions of Canadians. These programs have had a real impact because of the work that public servants have done and continue to do, and their excellence is thanks to these youth services that make it possible to launch youth programs. I am sure that they made the appropriate recommendation, which is to launch this program in the best possible way. Unfortunately, in part because I did not recuse myself from the process, there was a perception that prevented us from launching this particular program. However, all the programs that we have provided to Canadians—

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Poilievre.

You have to split about 40 seconds.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I have a straightforward question. How many times must a minister in your government violate the Conflict of Interest Act before being fired?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We take it very seriously any time ethical issues arise, and we will deal with every situation head-on.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How many times? How many times?

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, the Prime Minister has the floor. He has the right to answer.

Mr. Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We will always take seriously—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How many times?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: —any breaches of official codes. We will ensure that there are consequences and we will look at every situation differently.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Fine. In English I'll ask my last question.

The Chair: Your last question is over.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: My last question, in English, would be—

The Chair: You're over your five minutes.

Last night you people were giving me the gears for not sticking and adhering to time. I'm adhering to time today.

Mr. Fraser, you have the last round for five minutes. Then the Prime Minister will be released.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Prime Minister. Before I begin, I want to express my gratitude for your assistance in securing a public inquiry into the mass shootings that took place in my home province of Nova Scotia. It means the world to us at home.

To the matter at hand, you've acknowledged during this meeting and previously that you should have recused yourself from the decision. I appreciate your willingness to admit that. You've also mentioned that, when it first came up in cabinet, you pushed back against the competing concepts of the need to conduct due diligence and at the same time to recuse yourself.

Of course, you remain responsible for the oversight of the policy direction and program implementation of the Government of Canada. Though I believe you were right to say you probably should have recused yourself from that conversation, I have difficulty with how you would have simultaneously exercised the kind of oversight that caused you to push back during that May 8 meeting.

Had you recused yourself, how would this additional oversight have taken place if you had not been involved in the process and the discussion at the cabinet table?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: That is an excellent question. The quick answer is that other members of cabinet would have stepped up and ensured proper oversight, but you do highlight one of the challenges of making policy in as condensed a fashion as we have during this pandemic. We have been flowing aid to Canadians, to different groups, and filling gaps across the country with innovative partnerships, with creative ways of approaching things, because we needed to be there for Canadians. Yes, things were truncated. Things were shortened. Programs that would have taken six months to develop and deliver were instead done in a matter of weeks. It was a particularly challenging situation.

If you'll allow me, Mr. Fraser, let me also say thank you to you and to your fellow Nova Scotia MPs for being so strong in your advocacy to make sure that answers get given to those families. Your leadership on this has been both personally and professionally appreciated.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Thank you very much.

In terms of the process that we've learned to date, there was a public service recommendation. We learned two days ago, when the Kielburgers were at committee, that the public service actually recommended that they adopt a new foundation, essentially, or at least approve a new foundation to have the flow-through money to make sure that WE Charity was willing to accept liability. They said only a third party can do it. I understand, to your point about other members of cabinet providing that oversight, that it would have gone to cabinet committee before it came to full cabinet on May 8, where you still pushed back.

I'm curious. It sounded like your reservation was about the possibility that there might be a perception that your family or people close to you would have directly or indirectly benefited. Were you satisfied when it came back to cabinet, when this was finally approved, that there was no possibility that your family, directly or indirectly, was actually going to benefit from the Canada student service grant program?

• (1630)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Yes. There was no way that my family would have benefited from these grants to students across the country.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Let's get back to the matter at hand. I was a former youth leader and I took part in different programs: the Canada summer jobs program, student government and the like. They hugely shaped who I am.

I want to build on Mr. McLeod's line of questioning.

Where do we go from here? I still very much support the values that you outline behind the student service grant program. I understand there are going to be difficulties over the course of this summer implementing something that will provide that kind of opportunity, but what's the next step? How do we get this program or some other support on the rails to provide the kind of support to students that you have clearly communicated is important to this government?

The Chair: Your answer will have to wrap it up, Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: First of all, throughout this pandemic, we've had to deliver certain things and suspend other things. Our priority has been to help people through this pandemic. That really needed to be our priority, particularly for students. That's why we put out the student CERB. It's why we've created new jobs and why we are deferring student loans.

This was an additional way for young people to be involved, to volunteer and to reward volunteerism among young people throughout the country. It is still a goal of this government. That's why we created the Canada service corps a number of years ago. Actually, youth volunteerism is one of the things that brought me into politics a dozen years ago. I was working with Katimavik and realized that we needed to do more youth volunteerism and youth service in this country.

This will continue to be a goal of mine and something that is really important for the country—to see young people stepping up in their communities, helping out people who need help, discovering the value of service and becoming engaged, active citizens in their communities and in their country for the rest of their lives.

This was an opportunity to fit this into a COVID context. However, even as COVID continues, and even beyond COVID, getting young people to serve in their communities will always remain a goal for this government.

The Chair: With that, on behalf of the committee, Prime Minister, I thank you for appearing before the committee and spending an extra 32 minutes with us today.

We will suspend for five minutes and come back with the chief of staff.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: We'll call the meeting to order and reconvene.

Just to remind people, we welcome you to the second panel of meeting number 47 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance. We are meeting on government spending, WE Charity and the Canada student service grant.

On this panel we welcome Katie Telford, chief of staff to the Prime Minister. I believe she has about 10 minutes for opening remarks in a two-hour session.

Am I correct on that?

Okay.

I'll turn over the floor to you.

I might say to the clerk before we start, Ms. Telford, that my connection got blacked out once today already. There is an unbelievable thunder-and-lightning storm here. If it happens again, you will know why.

We will turn it over to you, Ms. Telford. Welcome.

Ms. Katie Telford (Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, Office of the Prime Minister): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, members of the finance committee. I would first like to thank all of you for your important work and for giving me the opportunity to answer your questions here today on the implementation of the Canada student service grant.

Let me start by saying that this is a remarkable time. From the day we learned that a Canadian had contacted COVID-19 to what is happening during the time period you're interested in, this pandemic, which we are still fighting, represents a once-in-a-generation challenge for our country.

I started working for the Prime Minister after my maternity leave, and what a journey it has been. I ran his leadership campaign in 2012-13 and went on to lead the 2015 campaign, and I have been his chief of staff ever since. Unbelievably, my son just turned nine.

Some of you may know that I am a person interested in data. Data has always helped me to assess what we are doing well and what we need to do better. These past few months, every day I woke up to some very alarming statistics, as we all were. They were more than statistics: hundreds of people dead because of COVID-19; hundreds of people were applying for the CERB because they had lost their job; millions of families were going through a really tough time; millions of women in lower-wage jobs were being especially hurt, and women's participation in our economy being set back.

Every day, daily projections were telling us and still tell us that if we weren't and aren't successful in slowing the spread of the virus, things would get much worse.

• (1640)

[*Translation*]

The Prime Minister's job is to help Canadians in need. I am his chief of staff, so my job is to support him in everything he does. I've been in politics for quite a while now, and this pandemic is a challenge unlike any in history.

Having the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives is very rewarding. Since the beginning of the crisis, we've announced a host of support measures to protect Canadians' health, to help those who lost their jobs and to prepare for the economic recovery.

[*English*]

We acted as fast as we could, knowing we might make mistakes along the way because people were really struggling, so we needed to move quickly. Take the emergency response benefit or the Canada emergency wage subsidy, for example. We'd already announced these programs when we realized that we needed to make them more accessible, more generous and simpler, but job one was to get these programs out the door to help people.

When we realized that improvements were needed, we made changes. The CERB and the wage subsidy have since helped millions of Canadians right across the country. Moreover, back in April, our government announced a \$9-billion plan to help young people get through the pandemic. It included measures such as the Canada emergency student benefit, deferring student loans and, yes, the Canada student summer grant.

I want to go back to the first time we discussed a potential aid package for students. On April 5 there was a meeting by phone, as they all were at that time, between the Prime Minister and the finance minister. It was a stock-take on the entirety of our government's ongoing economic response to the pandemic.

There were 15 decision points on the Canada emergency wage subsidy that Sunday evening, and it was being announced the next day. That was the focus of the call. We also talked about an orphan well program for Alberta, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland to help workers in the energy sector who had been hit especially hard by the crisis.

At the end of that conversation, the finance minister spoke about gaps he had identified in existing programs like the CERB. We knew that some people were still falling through the cracks, people like seniors, seasonal workers and, yes, students.

At the time, the Ministry of Finance was thinking about some form of financial assistance, more Canada summer jobs and a moratorium on student loan payments. We also talked about using the Canada service corps to encourage and support young people who wanted to volunteer and help their community during this pandemic. That was a very brief part of a larger conversation, and everyone agreed that there was more work to do.

Just a few weeks later, after a lot of hard work by many people across the government, the Prime Minister announced a \$9-billion aid package for students that included the items I just listed. The Canada summer student grant program was one-tenth of that package.

[*Translation*]

When I think back to that time, it was at the end of April that the public service informed us, in a briefing note, that an outside organization could be used to administer the Canada student service grant program. Questions had been raised about the government's capacity to implement such a program and about whether we could provide financial compensation directly to students.

However, it was only on May 8 that I saw for the first time, along with the Prime Minister, the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth's proposal to have WE Charity administer the program. The recommendation prepared by the public service had been examined and approved by the special cabinet committee on May 5, and we had a quick glance at it for the first time before the cabinet meeting on May 8, at which, the recommendation was supposed to be ratified.

As the Prime Minister mentioned in his opening statement, both of us had concerns. That's why, on May 8, we took the Canada student service grant off the agenda for the committee meeting. The Prime Minister, whose commitment to helping youth precedes his involvement in politics, and I both had questions. We wanted more information on the effectiveness of such a program and the use of an outside organization to administer it. To be perfectly frank, we were worried about how it would be perceived. We work in politics, so it matters how our decisions are perceived. We sought assurance from the public service that WE was indeed the only organization with the capacity to administer the program and that, beyond a shadow of a doubt, WE was the right partner for this initiative.

When the funding note was approved, the Prime Minister added a stipulation to the effect that, should the program be expanded, the minister had to submit a written request to the President of the Treasury Board for additional funding.

• (1645)

[*English*]

This proposal to help students was recommended by the public service. This was not a choice between different organizations to deliver the program; this was a choice between going forward with the program or not.

I will add that we had previously received the Ethics Commissioner's approval for Sophie Grégoire Trudeau's work engagement with the WE Charity, so I wasn't aware of any conflict.

You have heard the Prime Minister say that he regrets not recusing himself. I have regrets about that too. Obviously, this didn't happen as we intended it to, and this is not what we had envisioned, and I share in that responsibility.

Over the past few weeks I have thought a lot about this program. I have thought about what we could do better, and how we could apply lessons we've learned going forward. In hindsight, I recognize that while we did ask many questions to make this program a success, we could have done better. We could have done more. We could have added yet another layer of scrutiny to avoid any potential perception of favouritism.

Mr. Chair, I work with a team of committed, hard-working individuals. We're not perfect, but we are committed to being better and to doing more and, perhaps most importantly right now, we remain committed to serving and supporting as many Canadians as we can, as quickly as we can.

As the daughter of retired public servants, I have the utmost respect, not only for public service but also for those who choose it as a career. I want to take this moment to thank them and my colleagues for the work they continue to do under especially challenging circumstances. I believe that we all get into public service to help others—and what a time it is for all of us to be doing that. We thought that renegotiating NAFTA was a challenge. Well, this pandemic, I am sure, is the challenge of our generation and of my life. To have the chance to take up this work during this time, with this team, under the leadership of this Prime Minister has been and remains a privilege.

With that, I'm pleased to take your questions.

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

The first round of questioners I have on my list for six-minute rounds are Mr. Barrett, Ms. Dzerowicz, Mr. Fortin and Mr. Julian.

Mr. Barrett, you're on for six minutes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Ma'am, this committee passed a motion calling on the Prime Minister to testify for three hours. This meeting is the only one listed in his schedule for today. Frankly, I find it a bit disrespectful to Canadians that he couldn't find a couple of extra hours to answer questions. Why couldn't the Prime Minister respect the House of Commons and attend for the full time today?

The Chair: I don't know whether that's on the topic, but we'll let it go.

Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: I believe, Mr. Chair, that the Prime Minister not only accepted the invitation, and was pleased to come before the committee, but that originally the invitation was for one hour, which he accepted, and then he extended his time and stayed for just over 90 minutes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Will you schedule him to attend for the remaining time requested?

Ms. Katie Telford: I believe that is perhaps a discussion for another time, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: This is the third time the Prime Minister is under investigation for breaking ethics laws. He's already been found guilty twice of breaking the law, and we'll see what's going to happen a third time. We did hear an admission from the Prime Minister today that he ought to have recused himself.

We know the regard the Prime Minister has for ethics laws. I recall it's been referred to as "Harper's law", so why is it that this Prime Minister think he's above the law?

• (1650)

The Chair: I am going to take a moment here, Ms. Telford.

On the question of relevance, I remind members again that we are here to examine how much the government spent in awarding the \$912-million sole-source contract to WE Charity, and how the outsourcing of the Canada student service grant to WE Charity proceeded as far as it did.

I'll allow that question.

Go ahead, Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: First of all, when you suggested there was an admission in his remarks and his answers to your many questions earlier, I want to correct you by saying that he said this to Canadians some time ago. I believe the Prime Minister and our entire office and government take ethics extremely seriously. It's a very important thing for us. It's why we go back and forth with the Ethics Commissioner's office all the time, and we fully cooperate with anything the Ethics Commissioner asks us to look into or to do.

The Chair: I'll go back to Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: He's been found guilty of breaking the act twice. I know the back and forth goes on often, and that's because he's been under investigation so many times.

As his chief, did you read the act after the first time he was found guilty of breaking it?

Ms. Katie Telford: I actually read the act before that, but when you say that's.... Again, you're suggesting the reason we're going back and forth with the Ethics Commissioner's office was for reasons that.... Yes, that was the case, but we also go back and forth with the Ethics Commissioner's office all the time, whether it's annual disclosures or questions, because we want to make sure we're getting interpretations that do also change over time, so that we interpret things as accurately as possible as often as possible.

The Chair: Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: After March 1, how many times did the PMO communicate with the Kielburgers or any of their intermediaries?

Ms. Katie Telford: I looked into this. There were a handful of interactions with the Prime Minister's Office and the WE organization around the Canada summer student grant between then and the launch of the program. There was only one prior to the launch of the program. It was in early May, when one of the policy staff did

what is very normal in their jobs, which is to speak to stakeholder organizations.

It was a very general discussion. They actually redirected the stakeholder, the WE organization, to ESDC officials. ESDC was a more appropriate place to get answers for the questions they were asking.

The Chair: We'll have to come back to Mr. Barrett.

I didn't outline at the beginning, Ms. Telford, that we are under what we call the "COVID-19 rules". We try to keep the answers as tight to the questions as we can—or I try to. Sometimes I succeed.

Mr. Barrett, I won't take that time from you. Go ahead.

Mr. Michael Barrett: What day did that interaction occur, Ma'am?

Ms. Katie Telford: I believe it was on May 5.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

Are you able to tell us which policy staffer made that inquiry?

Ms. Katie Telford: I was a member of the policy team.

Mr. Michael Barrett: The Prime Minister claimed today that his staff were working on the program before May 8. Can you provide this committee with a list of everyone who was involved?

Can you furnish the committee, in writing, with the names of everyone who was involved in the decision?

Ms. Katie Telford: It's public information who all the staff in the Prime Minister's Office are, and I am here to represent all of those staff, as the senior-most member of the Prime Minister's Office. If you have questions about any of them, or for any of them, I am happy to take them today.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

The Prime Minister testified today that the option given to the cabinet was WE or nothing. Ultimately, the outcome was nothing.

Why did the cabinet accept this supposed binary choice? Why not ask for options? Is this a government run by the public service, or is it run by cabinet? The accountability rests with the head of government. It rests with the cabinet.

I am getting pretty frustrated hearing how much respect the members of cabinet have for the public service while throwing them under the bus instead of taking accountability for their decision.

Why wouldn't they have required options?

Ms. Katie Telford: I want to address two things you said. First, no one is throwing anyone under the bus. I am explaining, and I am happy to explain, what happened. We relied on the public service and their recommendations, and their recommendation was to proceed.

The question you're asking about your your being frustrated that it was a binary choice is exactly the kind of question that the Prime Minister and I were asking on May 8, which caused it to be pulled from the cabinet agenda that morning so that we could confirm that that was truly the case.

• (1655)

The Chair: Last question, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: From March 1 until now, when did you speak with the Prime Minister about the WE organization?

Ms. Katie Telford: On May 8, we first learned that the WE organization was being proposed as the organization to deliver and administer this program, so that is when we spoke about it.

The Chair: Thank you, both.

We'll turn now to Ms. Dzerowicz, for six minutes, followed by Mr. Fortin.

Ms. Dzerowicz.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Telford, for joining us today. We really are grateful. We always remember to thank our ministers, our Prime Minister, our bureaucrats, but we often forget the amazing team of people who sit in the Prime Minister's Office, so I want to say a huge thanks to you and the amazing team there. I can only imagine how crazy the last few months have been, so thank you for your extraordinary effort.

You rightly talked about how we've gone through an unprecedented time and that the impact on Canadians has been extraordinary. We have asked our politicians, our civil servants, and our staff to work at an extraordinary pace to deliver over 70 emergency programs, with spending of over \$200 billion.

This is just a general question: Were there any additional processes put in place, or any special oversight mechanisms because of the increased level of spending and the speed of the decision-making?

Ms. Katie Telford: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

That's actually one of the things my team and I have been reflecting upon in this last period of time, whether additional rigour could be put in place even in a time of crisis.

Our focus, for the reasons you mentioned and the reasons I gave in my opening statement, has been on getting support to Canadians as quickly as we can and to as many as we can. That does not mean—and this is why we held up the proposal on May 8—that rigour does not need to be applied. We know that rigour has been being applied by the public service throughout and by staff in ministers' offices and ministers throughout.

Obviously, however, things have moved in compressed time periods, and thus the time isn't necessarily spent in the same way as in the past. We need to think about how to ensure that we continue to have the rigour we would have in a normal time in a time of crisis as well.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you for that.

Many questions have come up at our committee around the change in the WE board, the layoffs that took place and whether or not WE had registered as a lobbyist. We have heard, and we have a lot of confidence, that our bureaucrats have done their due diligence. I just want to make sure that Canadians understand what the responsibility of the bureaucrats is vis-à-vis what actually comes to cabinet.

If you could elaborate on that, I'd be grateful.

I want to make one more point, just because I think we received a little bit of misinformation. We heard from Rachel Wernick that eight organizations were assessed by ESDC officials to potentially deliver the CSSG. We also heard that ESDC officials held two calls with the Canada service corps to discuss this particular program. Could you speak to how people can understand that division?

Ms. Katie Telford: Especially at this time, everyone was rolling up their sleeves and working on a number of different projects at once, and various departments were supporting each other with their work in truly unprecedented ways.

What ultimately comes to cabinet is a memorandum to cabinet that summarizes those recommendations, summarizes the due diligence that has been done. It was there that we saw the recommendation saying that there is this one organization that is able to deliver this program.

One of the differences is that all kinds of briefing notes go back and forth between departments on all kinds of details within the memorandum to cabinet; these were looking at some of the assessments you described. I know you've had officials come to committee who have described them. There's all kinds of work done between ministers' offices and departments leading up to the memorandum to cabinet, which then summarizes the information they've put together and makes a recommendation to cabinet.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you.

I know there was a lot of anxiety to ensure that the programs for youth were accelerated as fast as possible. Can you describe to us your understanding of what was behind the Prime Minister's motivation to deliver the program as fast as possible—the CSSG program as well as all the other student programs that were introduced?

• (1700)

Ms. Katie Telford: The April 5 conversation I referred to was a relatively brief conversation, but it does, I think, summarize an answer to what you're asking. We talked about the fact that there were gaps in our existing programs and that key parts of our population weren't yet getting the support they needed. As I mentioned, we have talked about seniors, we've talked about seasonal workers, and in this case we talked about students.

When it came to students, first and foremost, job one was how to help those students who all of a sudden found themselves heading into summer. Not only was there a pandemic, but it was the end of their school year, or it was about to be. How do we help those students who had rent to pay and who needed to put groceries on the table?

Then our second objective, a very important one, was.... We were starting already to see research and stories being told and people telling us directly about the impact. I heard some members talking about this in the committee with the Prime Minister earlier as well. I know you all recognize, because you hear it from your constituents, the concerns around mental health for young people—the concern about wanting to make sure we don't have a lost generation here that has to spend years catching up from this period of time.

We wanted to see in what ways we could ensure that we were connecting young people to their communities, and we were encouraging people to be innovative in that regard. This is something the Prime Minister has talked about for a long time as well.

The Chair: We'll have to move on, Ms. Telford.

We'll turn to Mr. Fortin, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Telford, the Prime Minister has already been found to have broken the ethics rules twice: once involving the Aga Khan and once involving SNC-Lavalin. It didn't end there. When the time came to make a decision on WE's involvement, initially, the Prime Minister said he postponed the meeting—the decision—because he wasn't comfortable. You confirmed that was the case; you felt there was a possible conflict of interest.

How do you explain the fact that he has been caught, yet again, with his hand in the cookie jar, despite all the red flags that were right in front of him?

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: Mr. Chair, I have to reject what the member is saying about what happened here, other than his opening comments, which were that the Prime Minister did have concerns at the meeting on May 8 when he was first briefed on this. He said that he wanted to get more information by way of briefing, and that's what he did.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: After receiving that new information, he was reassured. He thought there was no longer a conflict of interest. However, here you are today, in it up to your necks. How do you explain that?

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: We were reassured that the only way this program could happen this summer in this unprecedented time was for the WE organization to administer and deliver it. That was the reassurance we were given, and at that point it was determined that it should proceed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: The head of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, however, told us that the public service could have easily administered the program. Do you disagree with him?

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm sorry, but what—

The Chair: Ms. Telford, I believe Mr. Fortin might not have come through in interpretation.

It was the president of the Public Service Alliance, I believe, who said the public service could deliver it, was it not, Rhéal? That was the question. The president of the Public Service Alliance indicated that the public service could deliver it. Why not?

Ms. Katie Telford: We were briefed at the time, on more than one occasion during that period and based on other experiences, that this was the only way the program could be delivered this summer.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Trudeau, knew, however, that there was a conflict of interest. That's why, on May 8, he didn't want to make the decision. He wasn't comfortable. He knew. You knew. He had already been found guilty of violating the ethics rules twice. In spite of that, you went ahead, knowing that WE had hired and paid the Prime Minister's mother and brother, not to mention his wife. Mr. Morneau and his wife received gifts. Others may have as well. The last time, Mr. Trudeau said that he would never again be caught red-handed.

What mechanisms did you introduce then, to land yourselves in the same hot water today? It doesn't seem as though anyone learned anything from the previous scandals.

• (1705)

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: There's a lot in there. I'll start with what we knew both at that time and when we were making the decision.

What I knew at that time, which the Prime Minister has spoken to, is that the Prime Minister had gone on stage for some WE Day events. He was never paid for speaking at those events. They were youth-empowerment events that he'd gone to as someone passionate about empowering youth, but also as the youth critic and later as the youth minister, in the first mandate.

I also knew, as I said in my opening remarks, that we sought advice, from the Ethics Commissioner, related to Sophie Grégoire Trudeau's role with the WE Charity organization, and we received clearance that she could both take that role on and have her expenses covered by the organization.

The Chair: We will go back to Mr. Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Ms. Telford, in your capacity as the Prime Minister's adviser and chief of staff, did you ever say to him, Mr. Trudeau, that he should not be involved in this decision?

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: As I said already, what we discussed and what we knew at the time was that this was a binary choice, as one of the other members said earlier. It was a choice about whether to proceed with the program to support students this summer in this way of connecting them to their communities or not, and there was no conflict discussed at that time.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: What was your recommendation to Mr. Trudeau? Did you recommend that he proceed despite the conflict of interest or appearance of a conflict of interest, shall we say?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: So, first of all, again as I said in my opening remarks and as the Prime Minister referred to and I believe the Clerk of the Privy Council made reference to as well, I did have questions on May 8 and had some concerns. I had concerns about ensuring that this was the right organization to do this, that it was truly the only organization that could do this, that all of the t's had been crossed and the i's had been dotted.

Yes, as I said in my opening remarks, I had some concerns about the perception, knowing that Sophie Grégoire Trudeau's podcasts had just recently been launched, but I also knew that the Ethics Commissioner had cleared that and so, on that basis, we decided to proceed, and I support the Prime Minister on that.

The Chair: We have to go back to Mr. Fortin for a last question.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Ms. Telford, you're telling us that the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner gave the go-ahead for Mr. Trudeau to do as he did, awarding the contract to the WE organization and participating in the decision-making process, despite the appearance of conflicts of interest. Is that what you're saying?

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: What I said, which I also said in my opening remarks, is that we had clearance from the Ethics Commissioner for Sophie Grégoire Trudeau to do the work she was doing with the WE organization.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: That wasn't the question.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Fortin, we're out of time in that round.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I question the witnesses in French, so I lose roughly 20% to 30% of my speaking time because of the interpretation delay. On top of that, the answers I'm getting don't correspond to the questions I've asked, and I can't address the witness, who clearly can't understand what I'm saying, anyways.

The interpretation is so poor, Mr. Chair, that you, yourself, are having to translate my questions for the witnesses. I say that with all due respect, because you're doing a good job of it. Just think how much time that leaves me as compared with the members from the other parties, especially since we have way less time than the Conservatives and the Liberals, to begin with.

By the way, the Liberals are putting us through commercial breaks, here. They've asked the witnesses to toot their own horn and to say how good and smart the Prime Minister is. I am there-

fore asking for speaking time equivalent to what the Conservatives get, to be able to do my job properly.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fortin. I do believe you have a legitimate concern. When you're asking questions, I have a hard time keeping up, because I have to wait for translation too. We'll have to deal with that at a committee level some time, but I think it is a concern.

Mr. Julian, you have a six-minute round and will be followed by Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Julian, go ahead.

• (1710)

Mr. Peter Julian: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thanks, Ms. Telford, for being here today. We appreciate your being available for the full two hours.

I have a couple of quick questions to start. You mentioned earlier fully co-operating with the Ethics Commissioner. We'll recall, of course, that with the previous scandal, the SNC-Lavalin scandal, the Ethics Commissioner said 11 months ago that he was "unable to fully discharge the investigatory duties conferred upon me" because he wasn't getting the documentation from the PMO and the PCO.

Can you state that you are willing to co-operate with the Ethics Commissioner and also with this committee and provide all of the documentation, including the recommendations that went forward on May 8 and May 22 concerning the WE program?

Ms. Katie Telford: Of course, I've always been happy to co-operate and coordinate with the Ethics Commissioner and will continue to do so. In terms of documents, I would have to look into.... I'm not sure what documents you're looking for, but I'm happy to look into any specific requests.

Mr. Peter Julian: The specific request is for the memos that went to cabinet on May 8 and May 22. Those are very specific requests, and the PCO has already indicated that they will be providing those to us, and we would appreciate having the co-operation of the PMO.

We know that you have a background with both WE and its predecessor organization. Have you or any member of your family, either directly or indirectly, through Artbound ever received expense reimbursement, free travel, financial payments or the use of WE staff time?

Ms. Katie Telford: No.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

My third question is around Mr. Morneau's deep connections with WE. Were you aware of Mr. Morneau's family connections with the WE organizations?

Ms. Katie Telford: The only connection, which only really came back to me recently, was the fact that, as the Prime Minister mentioned, his daughter had written a book. When I saw the cover shown recently—I'm not sure if it was the front or the back—it did have a quote from a Kielburger on it. That was really the extent of my knowledge of the connections.

Mr. Peter Julian: Were you aware of the private travel that was not reimbursed, the use of private aircraft? Were you aware of any of those cases with Mr. Morneau?

Ms. Katie Telford: Not until recently.

Mr. Peter Julian: Were you aware that WE used their staff on staff time and basically provided them with expense reimbursements to help fill seats and act as backdrops at Mr. Morneau's events?

Ms. Katie Telford: No.

Mr. Peter Julian: Given those direct benefits, would you agree that Mr. Morneau was clearly in a conflict of interest around this WE proposal?

Ms. Katie Telford: Minister Morneau has already apologized and said he wished he had recused himself from this cabinet decision. I obviously support that.

Mr. Peter Julian: If you believe he was in a conflict of interest, would that not apply to Mr. Trudeau as well?

Ms. Katie Telford: The Prime Minister has also recently said, and it was out of concern for perception, that he wished he'd recused himself from this. I support that as well.

Mr. Peter Julian: But you would agree that they were both in a conflict of interest—in other words, had contravened the Conflict of Interest Act.

Ms. Katie Telford: No. I think that is.... No.

What both of them said, .and what the Prime Minister said specifically was that he wished he had recused himself from this particular decision at cabinet so that there weren't any concerns around perception of favouritism.

Mr. Peter Julian: So you see it as a perception, not as a violation of the Conflict of Interest Act. Okay. Thank you for that.

Moving on to the actual decision, were you involved or was the Prime Minister's Office involved in any way in the decision not to adequately fund the Canada summer jobs program for students? As you and MPs across the country are aware, it was basically a program that was shortchanged. Right across the country, positions were not filled because of the inadequate funding provided to Canada summer jobs.

Was that a decision that you were aware of or that you took part in?

• (1715)

The Chair: I do believe that differs from the issue we're discussing today, Peter.

But go ahead, Ms. Telford. If you have an answer for it, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Julian: It's very relevant, Mr. Chair; very relevant.

Ms. Katie Telford: I know how important the Canada summer jobs program is to both students and all of the honourable members in the House of Commons. We hear from caucus members on a regular basis about how important it is in their ridings.

I was pleased to hear recently that over 85,000 jobs have been approved through the Canada summer jobs program this summer.

Mr. Peter Julian: Well, my question was actually, were you involved in that decision or who took that decision, but I'll move on.

I will quote from the Public Service Alliance of Canada's national president, Chris Aylward, who appeared before this committee. He said, "Mr. Trudeau's claim that WE Charity is the 'only one' that can administer the new grant program is not only factually wrong, it's also insulting to our members." That means that both in terms of the Prime Minister's testimony and yours, factually, you are giving information that is simply incorrect.

To what extent was the public service actually involved in this decision, when clearly public servants wanted to be involved in the program, were ready to be involved in the program, and don't appear to have been considered at any point in the elaboration of this scheme?

Ms. Katie Telford: We can go based on the information that was recommended to us at the time by public servants, and public servants themselves said that this was a program, at this time, that was best administered by a third party organization.

Mr. Peter Julian: I just quoted a public servant who said the contrary.

The Chair: Mr. Julian, I took a little time from you talking there, so I'll give you one more question.

Mr. Peter Julian: The public servants have indicated that they could administer the new grant program. My question for you comes back to the underfunding of Canada summer jobs as well. Who made these decisions? Were they passed on to you? Were you aware in the Prime Minister's Office, or did the Prime Minister's Office participate in, these decisions that had such wide-reaching consequences?

Ms. Katie Telford: It's my job to give the best advice I can based on the best information I can to the Prime Minister on all the decisions coming before him and the cabinet, so to the extent that any of the various student and youth programs were coming to cabinet, I was giving advice to the Prime Minister on those programs.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, both.

Now we'll go to a five-minute round. First up will be Mr. Cooper; then Mr. Fraser, Mr. Cumming and Ms. Koutrakis.

Mr. Cooper, the floor is yours.

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

Thank you very much, Ms. Telford, for being here today.

You and the Prime Minister said that the Ethics Commissioner gave clearance to the activities of Ms. Grégoire Trudeau with respect to WE. The Prime Minister said that clearance had taken place a long time ago.

Would you not see that there might be a need to talk to the Ethics Commissioner on May 8 in the face of a half-a-billion dollar contribution that the Prime Minister would be involved in discussing and ultimately deciding at the cabinet table?

Ms. Katie Telford: When clearance was sought for the work that Sophie Grégoire Trudeau has been doing on destigmatizing mental health and empowering young people, the Ethics Commissioner explicitly stated that she was asked to be doing this in her own right, not as the wife of the Prime Minister, and that her expenses could be covered as part of that work. So we had clearance for her to do the things she was doing. It also explicitly stated that it did not put us into any position of conflict.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Ms. Telford, that was in the abstract. Now you had before you a half-a-billion dollar contribution that was being discussed and decided upon at cabinet.

Did you advise the Prime Minister that he ought to consult the Ethics Commissioner and if not, why not, and why didn't he? Obviously it's been proven, as it turns out, to be of some interest to the Ethics Commissioner.

Ms. Katie Telford: I don't believe it was entirely in the abstract. We had a very complete description of what Sophie's work was going to be and its scope. That's what had just recently launched: the podcast was part of that scope. It also included clearance for her to be able to travel for some of her speaking engagements with the organization.

• (1720)

Mr. Michael Cooper: You said and the Prime Minister said you were concerned about people's perceptions. I take it that would be perceptions of conflict of interest, and I would submit actual conflicts of interest, so it is inexplicable why you would not have advised him, or why he would not have taken it upon himself, to go to the Ethics Commissioner.

However, I want to ask you about May 8 and what you said and what he said, namely that he pushed back when he learned about the proposal and had questions.

If in fact the Prime Minister pushed back, how do you explain that the WE organization was collecting eligible expenses as of May 5?

Ms. Katie Telford: I think that is a question that is best placed to the officials who made the arrangements with the WE organization, and I am sure you did. I believe you asked those questions of the WE organization as well in terms of the specifics within the contribution agreement, but you suggested that it was perhaps....

You said, if he pushed back. I can assure you that he did push back with a number of questions in that briefing, which is why it didn't go to cabinet that day.

Mr. Michael Cooper: However, for two weeks between May 8 and May 22, WE continued to incur eligible expenses, so it doesn't add up to say that the Prime Minister pushed back, but it wasn't frozen, that the message wasn't conveyed to WE and it continued to proceed with moving ahead as though it were about to administer the program.

How do you explain that?

Ms. Katie Telford: Again, I would encourage you to ask those questions of the WE organization, if you haven't already, though I'm sure you have, and of the officials involved in the crafting of the contribution agreement.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Clearly the message didn't get very far if the Prime Minister, in fact, pushed back.

Ms. Katie Telford: The program was launched, as you know, at the end of June. It was only at that time, or just prior to that obviously, that the agreement was finalized. I cannot speak to how they structured the details within the agreement.

Mr. Michael Cooper: They continued to incur expenses as the Prime Minister supposedly pushed back.

I want to ask you.... Mr. Julian had raised the issue of Artbound. I want to pick up on that and ask more broadly what the total value is of expenses, benefits, reimbursements or any other in-kind or monetary consideration that you have received from the WE organization, or any organization affiliated with the Kielburgers.

Ms. Katie Telford: Nothing.

Mr. Michael Cooper: That would include your travel with Craig and Marc Kielburger to Kenya in February 2011?

Ms. Katie Telford: I did not travel anywhere.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You did not travel anywhere in February 2011? I have pulled up an article profiling Jason Dehni, which notes that in February 2011 he, along with Seamus O'Regan, Craig and Marc Kielburger, Amanda Alvaro and Katie Telford, among many extraordinary others, travelled to a region of Kenya to build an art school.

You know nothing about that trip?

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm familiar with how they went on that trip. I was not on that trip.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay.

The Chair: Okay, we'll have to end it there, Mr. Cooper.

We'll go to Mr. Fraser, followed by Mr. Cumming.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms. Telford, for being with us today.

I want to prod into the May 8 meeting a little, where there was push-back and concerns were raised. In response to Mr. Barrett's question earlier, you indicated the kind of thing that was pushed back on was the binary choice presented by the public service.

I'm curious. Did you or the Prime Minister actually push back on the idea that it had to be a binary choice? Did you ask that they consider other organizations?

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes, those were the types of questions we were interested in. As the committee has heard, I believe, from some of the preceding witnesses, they had considered and assessed a number of other partners, but that was exactly the kind of thing that we wanted to know.

• (1725)

Mr. Sean Fraser: Nevertheless, they remained confident that the choice was binary. "We go ahead with WE Charity or the program doesn't happen." Is that fair?

Ms. Katie Telford: That's right.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Did you or anybody else at PMO ever ask WE Charity to administer the Canada student service grant program?

Ms. Katie Telford: No.

Mr. Sean Fraser: There was evidence tendered before this committee previously. There was some other unsolicited proposal for a youth entrepreneurship strategy. Did you or anybody at PMO ever have conversations with the Kielburgers, or others at WE Charity, about that program?

Ms. Katie Telford: I don't believe so.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Frankly, did you ever speak with the Kielburgers personally since—I don't know, we'll pick a date back around the beginning—say, the first of March, before the pandemic began?

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm pretty sure, because I have been racking my brain on this, that the last time I saw Marc Kielburger was at an event with hundreds of people in Toronto, where I met his wife and exchanged pleasantries. It was a Toronto Life event, or something of that kind, in December 2017.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Did you or anybody else in the Prime Minister's Office have any role in actually negotiating the contribution agreement?

Ms. Katie Telford: No.

Mr. Sean Fraser: All of the details around which entity was being paid would have been done through the public service, not through political office?

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes. There were.... On the specifics, I would just say more broadly that policy staff in different offices were ensuring certain objectives were being met through the contribution agreement, but the negotiation absolutely was not happening through the political staff at all.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Thank you. I appreciate the clarification as well.

I'm curious. As a local MP I get unsolicited proposals all the time for projects, usually in my own riding. Is this something that you find comes up, perhaps with organizations that are bigger than the ones in my backyard, that actually pitch unsolicited proposals to the Prime Minister's office for policy ideas or programs?

Ms. Katie Telford: That does happen. It did not happen, in this case, that I received any unsolicited proposal directly, but that absolutely does happen from all kinds of organizations.

Staff in the Prime Minister's office.... I encourage them to be talking to stakeholders and staying connected to the ground, talking to MPs of all parties when they have something that they want to pitch that they believe the government should be doing that allows us to serve Canadians better.

Mr. Sean Fraser: The reason I ask is there was an innuendo through the course of this committee hearing that it was somehow inappropriate that an organization would have had an inside track to make unsolicited proposals, but I agree with you. I think it's actually a positive thing. In fact, those kinds of pitches have led to projects going ahead in my own community from non-profits routinely, frankly, that don't know the best way to turn.

I'm curious. Have you actually seen any positive programs implemented as a result of those kinds of unsolicited proposals?

I hate to put you on the spot. If there's not one front of mind, I'll let you skate on this one.

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm sure there have been. I can think of a number of examples of women's organizations in particular that have contacted me over time that felt they had an open door with me to try to see if they could have more of a role in working with the federal government to promote women in all kinds of different sectors.

I can't think of a specific example off the top of my head, but there certainly have been some.

Mr. Sean Fraser: One of the things I'm curious about.... I was a bit involved through the finance team's efforts to take feedback from stakeholders all across Canada on some of the emergency measures our government has put forward in response to COVID-19. Frankly, I was not engaged in consultation processes with the Canada student service grant.

From your perspective, how much time did this eat up in comparison to the other programs? I'm thinking about CERB, the wage subsidy, rental assistance, programs to support women's programs, to support charities, etc. I don't want to rhyme off a list of dozens of programs here.

What was the time breakdown? Was this a major time-suck of the policy development, or how does it compare to the other programs?

The Chair: That'll have to be the last question, Sean.

Go ahead, Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: I can't speak for everyone involved in this, because I'm sure it took a lot of work by both policy staff in different offices and of course the officials who worked on this program, though I do know that many of those same people were working on more than one program and issue at a time to support Canadians.

As you've heard, in terms of the Prime Minister, I think probably in normal circumstances there would have been some greater lengths of time between cabinet committee and committee and briefings. What has made this time so unprecedented is that things are moving from one....

As I said on the Canada emergency wage subsidy, there were 15 decision points on April 5 for a wage subsidy that was, I think, desperately needed by Canadians and Canadian businesses, and it was being announced the next day. That's how quickly things have been moving.

● (1730)

The Chair: Thank you both.

We are turning to Mr. Cumming, followed by Ms. Koutrakis.

You have five minutes, James.

Mr. James Cumming (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Telford, for being here today.

On which dates since March 1 did you communicate with Minister Morneau or his staff about WE?

Ms. Katie Telford: I don't know.... If you mean ahead of the cabinet meeting, I don't believe there were any dates.

Mr. James Cumming: You had suggested before that you're aware of the Morneaus' connection with the daughter with the book, but I want to clarify that you were unaware of any travel that Minister Morneau might have taken or of family travel.

Ms. Katie Telford: That's right.

Mr. James Cumming: Given what we know now with the Morneaus' direct involvement in this project, his failure to recuse himself and his illegally sponsored paid travel from the organization in question, do you think the minister should step down?

Ms. Katie Telford: I think some of the things you're saying have not been determined. I believe the Minister of Finance has already said that he wished he had recused himself. He's apologized for that and does not believe there is a conflict beyond that, but that is for the conflict commissioner to spend time on, and everyone has agreed to co-operate fully.

Mr. James Cumming: When did you become aware of WE's April 9 proposal?

Ms. Katie Telford: The April 9 proposal—do you mean the Canada summer student grant proposal?

Mr. James Cumming: No, that was their initial proposal about social entrepreneurship.

Ms. Katie Telford: Right. It was in a very large briefing package that we received on April 20 ahead of an April 21 briefing. It was annex 9 of that package when I looked back to get some of these things straight for all of you. That annex ultimately was never followed through on, and that proposal was turned down.

Mr. James Cumming: What was contained in that large briefing package? What were the specifics in there?

Ms. Katie Telford: It was so large because that was the package that led to the \$9-billion announcement by this government to support students. It included everything, and it was, again, being briefed on the 20th for an announcement that was coming within hours, not days.

Mr. James Cumming: Related to that April 9 proposal, did anyone in the PMO communicate with Ministers Morneau, Chagger or Ng about that proposal?

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm sure that policy staff, as they do on every issue that comes up within the government, were talking to each other between ministers' offices.

Mr. James Cumming: Can you provide the names of the staff members who were communicating regarding that proposal?

Ms. Katie Telford: Can I provide...? I'm here on their behalf, so I'm happy to take a question on it if you like.

Mr. James Cumming: Would you know what level of communication there was regarding that proposal between those ministers' offices. Was it one person? Was it lots of chatter? What was the extent of the discussions with the other ministers' offices?

Ms. Katie Telford: That was a proposal that ultimately was not one that this government proceeded with and that the Prime Minister's Office did not approve, so there was obviously analysis done to that extent. There would have been conversations between the different ministers' offices to come to that determination.

Mr. James Cumming: The issue there, though, is that they submitted a proposal and then, lo and behold, WE submits another pro-

posal. Were there any instructions back to those departments or to WE to come back with a modified proposal?

Ms. Katie Telford: When the first proposal came through, in terms of the briefing note that I saw, it was actually recommended by our policy team to not proceed with that proposal. That was the total sum of the advice on that proposal—that we not proceed on it.

• (1735)

The Chair: You have one last question, Mr. Cumming.

Mr. James Cumming: When was the first time you communicated with Minister Ng about WE or the Kielburgers since March 1?

Ms. Katie Telford: I don't believe we have communicated about WE or the Kielburgers in that time period at all.

The Chair: You have time for one more, James. That was a quick question and a quick answer. Go ahead.

Mr. James Cumming: You don't believe or you don't know whether you or your staff or anyone in the department had any kind of discussions with Mary Ng about WE since March?

Ms. Katie Telford: I thought your previous question was about me. I personally did not have a conversation with Minister Ng about that proposal. I would have to....

I'm unaware of staff having spoken directly to her, though I suspect they did speak, as I already said, and that they would have been speaking with her office on that proposal.

The Chair: Thank you both.

We'll now turn to Ms. Koutrakis, and then we go on to Ms. Gaudreau and Mr. Julian.

Ms. Koutrakis, you have the floor.

[Translation]

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Telford, for being with us this afternoon.

The WE organization sent its social entrepreneurship proposal to the government in April 2020. Were you aware of that proposal at the time?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I want to make sure I'm talking about the right.... Are we talking about the social entrepreneurial proposal?

[Translation]

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: That's correct.

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I was not aware when it first came in to the Prime Minister's Office. As I said, there was advice that came through from our policy team.

To provide a little more on that, one of the reasons in terms of not proceeding with that proposal was that it seemed like it might be a better program fit from a recovery standpoint, perhaps, but it wasn't the right thing at this time. Right now we are focused on emergency measures, and we needed emergency measures to support students. That was the phase we have been in from April, and we continue to be in that phase.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Given the importance and scope of the Canada student service grant program and the fact that the program was developed and implemented so quickly, could the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance have recused themselves completely from the decision-making process?

Would the timely delivery or quality of the program been significantly impacted had the Prime Minister recused himself completely from the decision-making process?

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: Both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance have said that they wish that they had recused themselves. It's hard to speak in terms of what might be the case, but I don't believe, because the program was being offered as a binary choice on whether to proceed or not proceed, that the program would have been any different if they had not been there. In retrospect, they have both said, given the potential for concern around a perception of favouritism, that this was reason enough for them to have recused themselves.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Can you please describe how a program of similar size and scope as the CSSG would be designed, outsourced and then administered under normal circumstances? Can you compare that process with the process used to determine how this program would be outsourced and implemented, given the current crisis situation we are facing?

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm not sure that it would be any different if we were in a non-pandemic crisis time, except for one very big factor, which is that obviously things were moving very, very quickly and there was a high volume of work being done. We had people working from their homes, obviously, and everyone was separate from one another and had to work right around the clock. It was 15-hour to 20-hour days seven days a week. Those were some not insignificant differences. They don't explain anything, other than that those were the true differences between now and perhaps a normal time.

I would add that during this time and even in the past, there have been several examples—and I believe the Prime Minister may have referenced at least one of them—of working and partnering with third party organizations to help deliver programs.

• (1740)

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I have a final question, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Telford, can you expand on the lessons learned throughout this process and comment on how these lessons will be applied going forward to avoid similar confusions or perceptions of conflict of interest? What more can we put in place for all cabinet members and especially for the PM?

Ms. Katie Telford: As I said in one of my earlier answers, a reflection we've had, knowing that this crisis is ongoing, is that even within a crisis, we must ensure that we are adding layers of protection, adding rigour to the process, even if it means slowing down slightly despite the fact that we still need to move very, very quickly to support Canadians and continue doing that while finding the right balance. This has obviously given us pause to make sure that we keep improving.

The Chair: Thank you both.

We're down to a round of two and a half minutes.

Go ahead, Ms. Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

I forgot to mention—and I hope this will not come out of my time—that I'll be giving my time for the remainder of the meeting to Mr. Fortin.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. I will not take that time from either of you.

Mr. Fortin, you're on. My apologies.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair. That's kind of you.

I'd like to start by apologizing, Mr. Chair. Earlier, I said that the interpretation was putting me at a huge disadvantage, causing me to lose roughly 20% of my speaking time. That comment wasn't aimed at the interpreters. I want to make that clear, because they're doing an excellent job.

Now, Ms. Telford, you said that, if you had to do it over again, you think it would be appropriate to improve the protections in place to keep something like this from happening again.

That's surprising, given that this is the third time the Prime Minister has been caught red-handed. He had a similar issue involving the Aga Khan, when he was first elected.

How come you haven't improved those protections already, since the Aga Khan scandal?

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: As I said in my opening remarks and I think in a couple of answers already, we should always be working to improve and to find different ways to make sure we are being as careful and cognizant as possible, even of the perception of favouritism or conflict or anything else. I think we've been reflecting on that.

We are going to keep working hard to improve. We will be working with the Ethics Commissioner, taking any advice that he has as well.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: We certainly agree on that, Ms. Telford.

What I don't understand, though, is why it hasn't been done already.

In any case, Mr. Morneau and Mr. Trudeau both apologized for not recusing themselves at the time that the decision was made. They said they regretted not doing so.

What's your view? Do you agree that they should have recused themselves at that point?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes, of course. I supported both of them in terms of their statements to Canadians.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: You agree, then, that they shouldn't have been involved in the decision to award the administration of the program to WE? Do you agree with that?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I think they've both said that in hindsight and upon reflection, they wish they had recused themselves, and I agree.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Do you agree that they shouldn't have been involved in this decision?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I think I'm answering your question, sir. I support both the minister and Prime Minister in what they said.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Very well.

[English]

The Chair: This is your last question, Mr. Fortin.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Now, Ms. Telford, you agree that they should have never been at the decision-making table and the two politicians in question agree as well. How do you explain that, between May 8, when the first red flag went up—which should have been sooner, if you ask me—and the day the decision was made, all of you, together, decided to vote on the matter, and yet, here you all are today, saying you shouldn't have in the end?

How do you explain that about-face?

• (1745)

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I would just take you back to what we talked about in terms of what we were aware of at the time. The Prime Minister, when he became leader of the Liberal Party, disclosed all of his financials and proactively disclosed all of his previous paid speaking engagements in a way that I'm not sure any political leaders have done in the past. It's something we've been very transparent about.

I knew that he had never been paid to speak for any WE Day or WE functions. I similarly knew that none of Sophie Grégoire Trudeau's work since we were in government had ever been paid, and we had clearance from the Ethics Commissioner for the role she had taken on, so there wasn't discussion of conflict at that time.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Julian. You have two and a half or three minutes, Peter.

Following Mr. Julian will be Mr. Morantz.

Mr. Julian, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

I'm interested in going into the due diligence between May 8 and May 22 that Mr. Trudeau alluded to in his testimony.

We've already determined that the public service was perfectly willing and able to assume the program, so there's no longer this binary choice that seems to have been part of testimony to justify it.

I'm interested in the issue of liability. During that two-week period, was there an investigation, and were you aware that the contract would be signed with the WE Charity Foundation, which is basically a shell foundation with no assets? That would increase liability challenge for the students if they were involved with the program, but also for the federal government. Were you aware of that? What due diligence was done around that?

Ms. Katie Telford: I was not aware of the distinction between WE Charity and the WE Charity Foundation at the time. That is something that would be left for political staff to sort out the details, and it is wise, I believe, to leave it to the public servants to sort out the details of how a contract and how a contribution agreement should flow.

Mr. Peter Julian: Okay, so there was no discussion of that.

The code of ethics governs teachers, and I'll mention BCTF. Of course, as you know, the Prime Minister was briefly a teacher.

Two sections of the code of ethics include the following. Section 2 says, "The member respects the confidential nature of information concerning students and may give it only to authorized persons or agencies directly concerned with their welfare." Section 3 says, "A privileged relationship exists between members and students" and "The member refrains from exploiting that relationship for material...advantage."

Of course, in the WE scheme, there was a \$12,000 payment to teachers that, I think, quite clearly violates those two components of the code of ethics for British Columbia and would do so right across the country.

To what extent was due diligence performed to ensure that the scheme itself met codes of ethics for teachers across the country, who of course maintain the highest possible standards?

Ms. Katie Telford: I have, in my career, done a lot of work with teachers organizations and teachers associations as well, but I can't say. I was not involved in sorting out this part of the agreement.

The Chair: Be very quick, Peter.

Mr. Peter Julian: Ms. Telford, who was in the room? Who was making these decisions for this proposal? Who was in the room? Are you aware of the people who made this decision? The public service, obviously, says that they could have done it. All of this mess has blossomed forward, and no one seems to be wanting to take responsibility for it. Who was in the room?

Ms. Katie Telford: I think you've actually spoken to quite a number of the people who were in the room, Mr. Julian. I think you've spoken to some of the most senior officials and you've spoken to the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth, so I'm not sure how you're confused on that.

Mr. Peter Julian: I'm not confused. I'd just like to know if you are aware of who was in the room developing the a scheme and if you can provide those names to us.

Ms. Katie Telford: I would have to look into that with the Clerk of the Privy Council, but I believe you've actually already spoken to all of the key people who would be able to answer that exact question for you.

The Chair: Thank you all.

I have Mr. Morantz on my list. Is he next? No, it's Mr. Poilievre. Okay. Mr. Poilievre will be followed by Mr. McLeod.

You have five minutes, Mr. Poilievre.

• (1750)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The WE Charity says it had authorization to begin implementing the program on May 5. Did anyone in the PMO speak to the organization on May 5, yes or no?

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes. I already stated that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Who?

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm here on behalf of my staff—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Who?

Ms. Katie Telford: —and I'm happy to answer any questions you might have for them.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Who?

Ms. Katie Telford: Is there a question you have for them?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes. I'd like to know the name. What is your name, sir or madam, whoever it is?

Ms. Katie Telford: So you don't have a question for them—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, I do.

Ms. Katie Telford: —but you would just like their name?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Please.

Ms. Katie Telford: It was our director of policy, Rick Theis, a very long-time, hard-working political staffer in this town.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It was Rick Theis. Okay.

Was that the only conversation the PMO had with the WE Charity or its associated groups?

Ms. Katie Telford: No. As I previously stated, there was a handful in total—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How many?

Ms. Katie Telford: Well, a handful usually suggests around five. I don't have an exact number. There were a few interactions—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay, which staff member did that—

Ms. Katie Telford: —around the time of the announcement.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Which staff member?

The Chair: Give Ms. Telford time to answer, Mr. Poilievre.

Go ahead, Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: There was some back-and-forth around the time of the launch of the program. It's perfectly normal and actually expected.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. We want their names, and we expect that you will submit their names. Will you give us the names, yes or no?

Ms. Katie Telford: I can get back to you.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes or no: Will you give the names?

Ms. Katie Telford: I can look into that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay: so you're obviously trying to cover up who they are and their identities—

Ms. Katie Telford: No, I'm trying to answer—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: —so we're onto something here.

Ms. Katie Telford: —whatever questions you might have for them.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'm sorry; I have the floor now and I have a question right now.

Is there anything that might have happened in the conversation with Rick and WE that would have alerted WE that they could begin implementing the program on May 5, yes or no?

Ms. Katie Telford: No, I don't believe so.

Actually, as I already stated, he actually redirected the organization, with which he had a very general discussion. He redirected them to ESDC.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay, that's interesting, because ESDC, we're told, is the one that then told them they could start working on May 5. It's very strange, because the Prime Minister claimed that the decision was not made in cabinet until May 22. If the PMO was not directing the work to begin, then who told WE that they could start working on a project that would not go on to exist for at least another 12 or 13 days?

The Chair: Ms. Telford, you have about half a minute.

Ms. Katie Telford: One of your colleagues already asked me about this, and I will repeat my answer, which is that the program only launched at the end of June. In terms of the details of how the program was constructed and the—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: That's not true.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, give the witness time without interruption. We give her equal time.

Go ahead, Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: The program was announced at the end of June. In terms of the details around the contribution agreement, I would refer you back—I know you've already spoken to them—to officials from the department who were involved in that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right. Your office spoke to WE on May 5, and May 5 is the day that WE believed it could start spending money and implementing the program. Is that just a coincidence?

Ms. Katie Telford: The policy staff person in our office did what they do all the time—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes or no?

Ms. Katie Telford: —which is to take phone calls from stakeholders. He took a phone call from a stakeholder and redirected it—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes or no?

Ms. Katie Telford: —to ESDC.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It wasn't a stakeholder; it was a group that was implementing a taxpayer-funded program on behalf of your government, one that hadn't even been approved by cabinet. I asked you if it was mere coincidence that WE began implementing this program on the day that the group spoke to Rick in your office, and you refused to answer that question.

The Chair: Ms. Telford, you will have about 30 seconds to answer this question, and then you're going to have to split 30 seconds between the two of you.

The floor is yours, Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: I can't speak to how the contribution agreement constructed the details around how they looked back at that time period. I do believe it was that.

In terms of the conversation involving my office, it was a general discussion that was then redirected to ESDC. It actually was as simple as that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It sounds like the PMO directed the ESDC to give the go-ahead for the program to begin on that very day, before cabinet—

• (1755)

Ms. Katie Telford: That is not true.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: —before cabinet even approved the decision.

Ms. Katie Telford: That is not true.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: This is the timeline you're expecting us to believe: that the Prime Minister would not approve this in cabinet until May 22, even though a month earlier the department had told the charity that it would receive the program, and two weeks earlier—before that cabinet decision—they would begin working on it.

That timeline is not just hard to believe. It is chronologically impossible.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, that will end your round.

I will give Ms. Telford ample time to reply in detail if she likes.

Ms. Katie Telford: I would just add that May 5—to add to the things that happened on May 5—was also the day that this proposal

went to the COVID cabinet committee. It's possible officials were in touch with them in and around that, but I can't speak to that.

What I can speak to is what I know, which is that it went to cabinet committee that day. It was going to go to cabinet on May 8, and it was then that we were first briefed on that.

The Chair: Thank you both. We'll go to Mr. McLeod.

Who is up next from the official opposition? You can give me a hand in a bit.

Mr. Marty Morantz: I'll be up, Mr. Chair, in the next round.

The Chair: It's Mr. Morantz. Okay.

Mr. McLeod, you have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the presentation today and for joining us to answer our many questions.

There is a lot of work that's been happening on this issue. As I mentioned to the Prime Minister, we have now had five meetings on this study. I think there are probably going to be two other committees, if they're not already in place, and reviewing and studying this is all happening in the middle of a pandemic.

After every session that we have, I always get a lot of calls. People ask me about certain concerns they have, certain issues that they don't understand, or they ask me to explain things.

You've mentioned the COVID committee a couple of times now. Could you elaborate a little bit on what it does and what its responsibilities are?

That's my first question.

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes. I'm not entirely certain of the date, but I believe it would have been in early March—it might have been as early as late February, but I believe it was early March—that the Prime Minister struck a cabinet committee that we refer to as the COVID cabinet committee, which Deputy Prime Minister Freeland chairs and the treasury board president Jean-Yves Duclos vice-chairs.

It has been a place to move and take proposals that involve the emergency measures and the restart. As we've all said, it's an incredible time. It's an unprecedented time. Things are moving extremely quickly. The committee has been meeting multiple times a week for months now, for many hours a day at a time. They look at all of these emergency measures and apply a lens that the cabinet committees, pre-COVID, would have done as well in other areas.

Of course there were cabinet committees on reconciliation and on the economy and on global security. We consolidated things to deal with the emergency measures and the restart with COVID in the COVID committee. Things would go to the COVID committee before then coming to cabinet meetings, which have also been happening more frequently than before COVID.

Mr. Michael McLeod: It sounds like they're a very busy committee.

Ms. Katie Telford: They are.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Could you give us an idea of how many other programs have gone through the COVID committee and/or cabinet during this time period since this committee was formed?

I know there are many things on the go right now.

Ms. Katie Telford: I am not sure how many exactly, and I don't want to guess, but there have been, as I mentioned, the Canada emergency wage benefit, the CERB, the programs for seniors, vaccine development, the manufacturing sector and bio-manufacturing. It's an endless number of programs. This is going to keep going for quite some time. They're doing, as you said, a lot of work.

• (1800)

Mr. Michael McLeod: Through all these programs that you mentioned—and there are more that you didn't mention—is the advice of the public service taken on the implementation of all these different programs? Is there a mechanism for input from the public service?

Ms. Katie Telford: Absolutely. Everything that comes as a memorandum to cabinet is something that is crafted by the public service.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I want to ask one final question, because it's very important to me. The opportunity to help students through a summer volunteer program was brought to cabinet, and a decision was either to make it happen or not to do anything about it. I'm glad that cabinet decided to go forward. Unfortunately, it rather went off the rails.

The need that was identified when initially cabinet was considering this program is still there. Is there opportunity to revisit this issue, maybe rejig the terms, maybe have a different agency deliver it, maybe change the time frame so that it goes even into October? Is there opportunity to do something like that to save what's left of the summer and maybe go into the fall to help the students? They still need the help.

Ms. Katie Telford: They do. Fortunately, this was one of many programs put in place to help young people. As I mentioned earlier—and this is not to diminish it at all—it was less than one-tenth of the package that was announced, even just for the COVID period. As some of your colleagues on the committee have previously mentioned, there's a long-standing Canada summer jobs program and other programs also in place to help youth.

Having said that, in terms of this program specifically, I know that the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth is looking at all the options. I hope that, as you're suggesting, something can be figured out.

The Chair: Okay. We are a little over time.

We'll go to Mr. Morantz, followed by Mr. Fragiskatos.

Marty, the floor is yours.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Telford, I want to return to the question of the timeline that my colleague Mr. Poilievre was asking you about.

On April 22, the Prime Minister, from his front steps, announced this program, the Canada student service grant. You testified that you didn't learn about it until May 8 and that in fact you didn't

know WE was being considered until May 8. In fact, you say the PMO policy people didn't speak to WE until May 5.

When the Prime Minister announced this program on April 22, how did the PMO think this program was going to be administered?

Ms. Katie Telford: Just to clarify for you, on April 22, when he announced the \$9-billion aid package to support students through this time, you're right that he did announce as part of it the Canada summer student grant, but it was—

Mr. Marty Morantz: There was no plan for having it administered, though.

Ms. Katie Telford: There were a lot of things during this period, and it was important for us to be transparent with Canadians on what was coming. It was important for us to let students know that this kind of program was coming, and at that time—

Mr. Marty Morantz: But you said yourself—

The Chair: Mr. Morantz—

Mr. Marty Morantz: —the Prime Minister said it was a binary—

The Chair: Mr. Morantz—

Mr. Marty Morantz: How could he announce a program when he doesn't know how it was going to be administered?

The Chair: Mr. Morantz, it took you—

Mr. Marty Morantz: I'm just asking a fair question, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I know, but you took about 50 seconds to ask the question. I'll give Ms. Telford, without interruption, the same time to answer.

Mr. Marty Morantz: It does stretch credulity though, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: At the time, and I believe the Prime Minister spoke to this when he appeared before committee earlier, he believed that the option for administering the program might be the Canada Service Corps, which he'd long been looking at and working on. He was, I think, a bit disappointed much later when he learned that the only way it could be done was to go to a third party organization for the purposes of this summer.

Mr. Marty Morantz: In other words, the Prime Minister announced the program, a \$9-billion program, part of which is the Canada summer student benefit, and really had nothing nailed down as to how it would be delivered. In fact, on May 8 he was advised that it was a binary choice, that it was WE or nothing, and it ended up being nothing. It just stretches credulity.

Let me ask you this: In your long tenure in politics and as the chief of staff, have you ever had a situation before in which a program was announced, and you and the office you're responsible for had no idea how it was going to be administered?

• (1805)

Ms. Katie Telford: There are a lot of things that have happened in the last number of months that I don't think any of you on this committee or any of us in government have experienced before. Actually, something really important that this government has been doing is letting Canadians know what's coming and what we're working on, and being extremely transparent, including by saying that things will not be perfect and that we'll need to adjust as we go.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Yes, but this is different. This is announcing a billion-dollar program without knowing how it's going to be administered. How can Canadians have any faith that you are respecting their taxpayer dollars when the Prime Minister announces a program but has no idea how it will be administered?

Anyway, you know—

Ms. Katie Telford: Would you like me to answer that?

Mr. Marty Morantz: Sure, go ahead.

The Chair: Please do, Ms. Telford. The floor is yours.

Ms. Katie Telford: I think Canadians can have faith in how this government is delivering because of the supports they're feeling, the fact that this government is being responsive—

Mr. Marty Morantz: No, not for students.

Ms. Katie Telford: —and the fact that when the CERB and the wage subsidy weren't as simple and generous as maybe they needed to be—

Mr. Marty Morantz: Students have been let down.

Ms. Katie Telford: —we made sure to make those adjustments.

Mr. Marty Morantz: You really let them down.

The Chair: Mr. Morantz—

Ms. Katie Telford: We did this for students as well. There was a \$9-billion package announced for students, the large majority of which still—

Mr. Marty Morantz: It was done without your knowing how it was going to be administered.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, as you've made very clear on a number of occasions that the rules for this committee are the same rules that the COVID committee has been using, in that the questioner and answerer have equal time, without interruption. I would ask that my hon. colleague show a modicum of respect to our witness and give her the time to answer the question, because, quite frankly, as a parliamentarian who is trying to pay attention to what's going on, I cannot hear the answer that is coming out. I would ask that you enforce the rules that you made clear were in application at the beginning of this meeting.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Marty Morantz: I will, Mr. Chair, and I apologize, but I ask that you not take my time away for that interruption.

The Chair: We won't take the time away from you, Mr. Morantz, but I will give Ms. Telford time to respond.

Go ahead, Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: One adjustment that has happened during COVID, which we haven't seen by any governments in the past, has been hugely beneficial to the relationship between a government and Canadians. It is how transparent and forthcoming the government has been in saying what might be coming, what it's looking at, how it's going to adjust and when things are not exactly right.

I believe there are many reasons, especially in the programs that got out the door so quickly thanks to the very hard work of the public service in the early weeks of the COVID shutdown.

The Chair: We will go back to Mr. Morantz, and this will be the last question.

Mr. Marty Morantz: I still have not heard an answer to the question about how the Prime Minister announced this program without having any idea how it was going to be administered.

That wasn't an answer, quite frankly, Mr. Chair, and maybe they don't have one, because they knew otherwise.

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm happy to try again.

Mr. Marty Morantz: It seems to stretch credulity that the Prime Minister did not know, when he announced it, how it was being administered. Did he know or not?

The Chair: Ms. Telford, you have about 30 seconds to answer.

Ms. Katie Telford: The Prime Minister announced a \$9-billion package to support students, and that particular element of the package was still to be determined. He had a number of ideas at the time of how it might be administered, but he moved on to work on a number of other emergency measures while others worked it up. It then came back to him later that the only way to do this was with the binary choice that we've described to you.

The Chair: That's it, Marty. Sorry for that.

We'll now go to Mr. Fragiskatos, then to Mr. Fortin for two and a half minutes, and then to Mr. Julian. If it's okay with the committee, I will allow Ms. May in for two minutes, then go to an official opposition member, and we'll probably wrap up with Mr. Sorbara.

Go ahead, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Telford, thank you for being here and for the work you've done in these past few months.

First of all, Mr. Chair, it would have been good if Mr. Poilievre had read the blues from the meeting we had the other day. I have those blues in front of me. He was trying to connect dots that, frankly, do not exist. Let me quote from those blues.

Ms. Dzerowicz asked the question to Marc Kielburger, and I'll quote her as follows: "There is another thing that I'm a bit unclear about. I see the contribution in front of me"—that's the contribution agreement, Mr. Chair—"and it was signed on May 5. Was it signed on May 5; or did the agreement begin on May 5? If you could, just explain the logistics around all of that."

Marc Kielburger replied with the following: “Thank you for asking. The agreement technically began on May 5. We were working in advance with ESDC on putting resources to help develop the program. The turnaround time was so tight and we were, of course, so passionate about helping young people at this time that we got to work right away with the full risk and understanding that if this agreement did not go forward we would be at the financial risk of doing so. We accepted that risk because we really wanted to help.”

That's directly from the blues, Mr. Chair. Obviously the organization made the decision of its own volition to proceed on May 5. I wanted to clear that up because, as I said, Mr. Poilievre is trying to weave things out of thin air, as he often does.

Leaving that aside, I actually do want to go back to the meeting, if I could, Ms. Telford. I'm talking about the meeting to which the Kielburgers both came. I'll quote from that meeting as well.

They said in their introductory remarks.... I believe it was Craig Kielburger and I'll quote him here now:

As per the contribution agreement, WE Charity would only be reimbursed for its costs to build and administer the program. To be clear, there was no financial benefit for the charity. WE Charity would not have received any financial gain from the CSSG program—

That's the Canada student service grant program, of course.

—and it's...incorrect to say otherwise.

Ms. Telford, does that correspond with your understanding?

• (1810)

Ms. Katie Telford: I apologize, Mr. Chair. Something has just come up on my screen. I just need someone to come and....

Sorry, there's a big something.

The Chair: We can see you, Ms. Telford, and we can hear you.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you're coming across kind of gravelly. Can you adjust your mike somewhat?

Did you hear what Mr. Fragiskatos said, Ms. Telford?

Ms. Katie Telford: Sorry, I didn't catch the last part. I had big exclamation marks flashing at me.

The Chair: Okay.

Then if you could repeat the last part.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: It could be the connection. I'm sorry about that.

I was quoting from Craig Kielburger, who came and testified two days ago. I'll repeat the statement, because I'm not sure what part you heard and what part you didn't.

He said:

As per the contribution agreement, WE Charity would only be reimbursed for its costs to build and administer the program. To be clear, there was no financial benefit for the charity. WE Charity would not have received any financial gain from the CSSG program, and it's...incorrect to say otherwise.

My question to you, Ms. Telford, was whether or not that explanation matches with your understanding.

Ms. Katie Telford: I believe it does, yes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Okay. Thank you very much.

I also had a question relating to WE's network and its being in touch with 2.5 million students and 7,000 schools.

When the public service advised that WE would be the charity organization to move ahead with administering and building the Canada student service grant, that was a key reason. Is that right? That's our understanding, as a committee. That has come up before.

Can you speak to that at all?

Ms. Katie Telford: Absolutely.

Despite all the things that are being talked about now, this was an organization that was internationally renowned, that was nationally renowned. I can tell you that my nine-year-old son knows the name of this organization, and not from me. There's a school named after a Kielburger. This is a very large organization in this country. It was not surprising, in many ways, to see it as being an organization that could do this.

Having said that, it was still surprising to see it as a binary choice and that is why we asked a lot of questions around it.

The Chair: You can have a final quick question, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Sure.

Something along these lines has been asked already by Mr. McLeod. I took the opportunity to raise it earlier with the Prime Minister, and I've raised it before. Simply on behalf of constituents, though, I have to ask it again.

For youth going forward, if the Canada student service grant does not materialize, what can members of Parliament tell the youth in their communities about supports that will continue to be made available?

Obviously, there's the Canada emergency student benefit that's being accessed by so many young people across the country, but in terms of further supports that can be there for students, on the one hand, but also for not-for-profits, Ms. Telford—

• (1815)

The Chair: Quickly, Mr. Fragiskatos....

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: —many in the community that are reeling right now, what is the message you would put to them?

Ms. Katie Telford: I think there are a lot of other programs that are there to support students, and obviously there is more work to continue to do.

As I said, I know the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth is passionate about this and is working very hard, along with her colleagues, to look at more solutions and supports for students in terms of the non-profit sector more broadly or specific to youth. It's interesting because these are organizations that were used as third party organizations, and contribution agreements were organized with these organizations like Community Foundations of Canada, Canadian Red Cross and United Way-Centraide Canada.

There are a lot of different... Minister Hussen has been actively engaged and announced a number of supports for non-profits and the charitable sector as well.

The Chair: We will have to move on.

See if we can get the technology people to look at that mike sound there, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Fortin, you're on.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Telford, I gather that your role as chief of staff—and your entire team's role, actually—is to advise the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister and his finance minister said they don't think they should have been involved in the decision to award the contract to WE back in May. Now, we hear that they regret what they did and are apologizing for it. You agree with them that they shouldn't have been involved. Would you say you're satisfied with the work you and your team did on this issue?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: As I said at the outset in my opening remarks, this obviously did not go the way it should have gone. I do share in some responsibility for that. Of course I do, as the person who is giving advice to the Prime Minister, but I do the best I can with the best information I have. That's what I'm going to keep doing to help serve and support Canadians.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: How many discussions did you have with the Prime Minister between May 8 and 22, before he made his decision? I'm referring to discussions about this issue, obviously.

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: Okay. If it was more generally, I wouldn't be able to answer. I have no idea. It's been a lot during this period.

Specifically on this subject, during that period from May 8 to the following cabinet meeting that it went to—it was about two weeks later—we certainly had a briefing again ahead of the next cabinet meeting, and then there was another briefing, I believe, just before that as well, when we took a longer period of time to go through the details.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Who took part in those briefings?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: It's pretty usual. It's the senior officials within the Privy Council Office as well as senior staff within the Prime Minister's Office.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: All of those people were there, and yet, no one was able to stop the Prime Minister from deciding to award the contract to WE on May 22, given that he now recognizes he should not have been involved and should have recused himself? Was there no one who was able to convince him not to do what he did?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: As I've already stated, we spent our time trying to ensure that due diligence was done on this and that this was the right thing to do to support students at that time. We knew the facts as we knew them at the time in terms of the Prime Minister's having spoken at some events and in terms of Sophie Grégoire Trudeau's connection to the WE organization. We knew that had been cleared, so there wasn't a discussion on conflict at that time.

The Chair: You have time for a last question, Mr. Fortin.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Did you also know that the Minister of Finance had travelled on WE's dime, that WE had paid for his trip?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: No, we did not know that or discuss that at that time.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, both.

Mr. Julian, the floor is yours, and you will be followed by—if it's okay with the committee—Ms. May.

Mr. Julian, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Prime Minister's testimony seems to be collapsing like a house of cards. First he said he didn't know anything, and then he said that they all did their due diligence, but to date we have not had a single indication of what due diligence was done.

These positions were advertised as volunteer jobs, yet that of course would violate both minimum wage laws across the country and labour standards legislation. To what extent was due diligence done on this project, this scheme, to assure that it was in conformity and legal according to minimum wage laws and labour standards across the country?

• (1820)

Ms. Katie Telford: Look, a memorandum does not go to cabinet without due diligence being done, and it was then held up so that extra layers of due diligence were done to ensure that everyone felt comfortable recommending it to cabinet a second time.

As I've already said, this didn't go the way it should have gone. There are additional layers of scrutiny or questions, knowing what we know now, that would have been good to ask at the time, but we only knew what we knew then.

Mr. Peter Julian: Has the RCMP contacted the PMO, any officials in the Prime Minister's Office, so far, since the scandal broke?

Ms. Katie Telford: No.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: I'm going to switch languages now.

This is the third time this has happened. After the first scandal, the Prime Minister said that, if he had it to do over again, he would have done things differently. He would've reached out to the Office of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner from the outset to have everything they were doing and did approved.

Indeed, none of that happened.

Since the Prime Minister had supposedly learned his lesson from the previous controversies, scandals, why wasn't it obvious the third time around that all the applicable procedures and laws had not been followed?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: We talk to the Ethics Commissioner's office all the time, or I wouldn't be able to tell you that we received clearance from the Ethics Commissioner's office for the work that Sophie Grégoire Trudeau was doing with the WE organization.

I can tell you that it is an office that everybody in our office respects, that we take very seriously and that we go back and forth with on a very frequent basis.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: It was actually a very straightforward question. Who at the Prime Minister's Office is in charge of making sure that these laws are followed, not flouted?

Is it the Prime Minister? Is it you?

Who is responsible for the fact that the laws governing our country are being violated?

[English]

The Chair: That will be the end of that round, Mr. Julian.

Go ahead, Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: I will repeat what I stated before, which is that the Prime Minister has never received any payment, any income of any kind, from the WE organization, both before and since becoming Prime Minister. That was something we were clear on, and that we had gone to the Ethics Commissioner in terms of the potential involvement. We went before there was any involvement. We got it signed off ahead of time in terms of Sophie's involvement, in terms of podcasts, in terms of potential travel, in terms of potential expenses.

We take those steps very seriously.

The Chair: Thank you.

Do we have any objection to allowing Ms. May in for a couple of minutes?

Who do I go to in the official opposition after her, if she's allowed to question?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It will be Michael Barrett.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. May, you've been at every meeting. Go ahead. You have a couple of minutes.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Thank you, colleagues.

I just want to say, for Canadians who may find it hard to believe, that civil servants and cabinet ministers and everybody, including a bunch of us on this screen, worked 20-hour days, seven days a week, at the beginning of the pandemic. We all witnessed it.

I don't want to let the remark that you made, Ms. Telford, go forward without corroboration. You guys all worked.... You were killing yourselves in this period, but that doesn't mean we can't investigate.

I find it hard to believe that the Prime Minister was.... I'm not doubting that he did, actually; I just want to know. He seems very convinced that he thought Canada service corps was going to deliver this program up until May 8. He'd announced it on April 22. From the testimony of civil servants, including Rachel Wernick, we knew that they were considering WE before the announcement, at least a week before the announcement, and that on May 5, as we know, Minister Chagger took it to the COVID committee, clearly putting the WE Charity as the agency to deliver this.

Can you explain how it's possible...? Did no one want to tell the Prime Minister, to burst his bubble and tell him, that his favourite operation, Canada service corps, was just not going to be able to do it? Why did no one tell him before May 8 that Canada service corps was out of it and WE Charity was delivering the program?

• (1825)

Ms. Katie Telford: To be fair, that was a question he had on May 8 as well and it's why this was pulled back. It's so that he could get a better understanding of things. It partly speaks to the speed and volume of work during that period, as well as to other events during that period that I know I don't need to remind anyone about. It has been an incredible time, above and beyond the pandemic, given what this country has been going through.

One thing that may help clarify this is in the package that I was referencing earlier, from April 20, I believe. It was the very large package, which came ahead of the announcement, that had the nine annexes to it. Annex four, page 5, mentions the Canada summer student grant and talks about the potential need at that point, because that was all that was written into it at that time, for a third party to make this work. It gave some examples of delivery agents and administrators, that kind of thing. WE was one of the examples in there at that time, but it was an example of a potential method of doing it.

That was as far as it had come. We knew people were working on these things. The Canada service corps was still on his mind and was still in the mix, and we didn't actually see the return on their further work on that until May 8.

The Chair: Okay, I will have to end it there. Thank you, Elizabeth.

We'll go to back to five-minute rounds with Mr. Barrett, who will be followed by Mr. Sorbara.

Go ahead, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Ma'am, you said a handful of people spoke to WE before the agreement was announced. You've given one name. Who are the other four?

Ms. Katie Telford: I already said there were some communications staff around the time of what was a big announcement and launch, so it's perfectly normal for our communications staff to go back and forth with those involved.

Mr. Michael Barrett: What were their names, Ma'am?

Ms. Katie Telford: I said I would look into that for you.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Do you commit today to providing those names to the committee and the dates on which they communicated with the WE organization?

Ms. Katie Telford: I will look into it. I can consult with folks.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

This is information the committee is entitled to receive. The witness knows the names. If she didn't, she wouldn't be able to enumerate how many there were.

Mr. Chair, she is obliged to answer the question, and I ask that you require that answer right now. We want the names of PMO staffers who spoke with WE. There's no need for a cover-up.

The Chair: I believe Ms. Telford is agreeing to provide us with the names after she looks at her records.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, that's not what we've been told.

The Chair: Okay, then I'll ask for clarification.

Ms. Telford, can you provide the committee the names after you look at your records?

Ms. Katie Telford: Just to be clear, Mr. Chair, they're not my records. I will need to consult with the individuals involved. I can tell members that I am here on the staff's behalf and happy to take any questions they have for them.

The Chair: I think the question was a little more than that. I'll go to Mr. Barrett while we think about this for a moment.

Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Ma'am, you're required to disclose this information. It's necessary for us to know. This is why we have things like a lobbyist registry. We need to know who has contacted whom and on what dates. This is germane to this study. It's germane to the committee's work. I'm going to ask you again to commit that you will provide the names and the dates of the communications.

The Chair: I would point out, Ms. Telford, that there was a request from the committee for documents that was carried, and the Clerk of the Privy Council committed to getting those documents. I'm not sure if these are in them or not, but I believe that's where we're at.

Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: Just to be clear, I didn't enumerate, as alleged earlier, the exact number of staff. I said there was a—

Mr. Michael Barrett: You said a handful and usually that means five.

• (1830)

Ms. Katie Telford:—handful of interactions.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Telford, before you were interrupted.

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes, it's in and around that number. There was only the one prior to around the time of the launch. Around the time of the launch, there was some back-and-forth, the usual media relations check-ins.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Do you know the names of any other individuals who were in the room?

Ms. Katie Telford: I would want to check before I give them to the committee.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How are we only learning today that the Prime Minister came and pulled the agreement from cabinet on May 8? We've had testimony from the Clerk of the Privy Council, from multiple ministers, including Minister Chagger and Minister Morneau, and the Prime Minister up until today has not said that.

How is it that you've just saved this amazing story for today?

Ms. Katie Telford: When you say the Prime Minister just said that, well, the Prime Minister was only just a witness at your committee. He was happy to provide this information, as am I.

I believe also that the Clerk of the Privy Council did make reference to the questions I was asking around this and the due diligence around this that we were pushing on.

The Chair: Yes, he did.

Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: He did not say that the Prime Minister pulled it. Is that correct?

The Chair: No, I believe what he said was due diligence.

Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm not certain what the clerk said to the committee, other than I do know that he made reference to the due diligence that we had asked for.

Mr. Michael Barrett: In your office, are people typically held responsible for errors? Who in government do you think has been held responsible for the errors that led to where we are today?

Ms. Katie Telford: Look, as I've already said, this obviously didn't roll out in the way we would have liked. A number of us, including me, share in that responsibility.

Mr. Michael Barrett: If this committee ordered all communications, emails and texts between the PMO and WE, would you comply with that order? This was a commitment made by your government when you came to office, that the PMO would release this type of information freely. Will you hide behind cabinet confidences and the Access to Information Act, or will you disclose this information?

Ms. Katie Telford: Mr. Barrett, I would have to seek advice on what I can and can't, when it comes to cabinet confidences.

The Chair: Mr. Barrett, this is your last question.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I should have about a minute and a half left, Mr. Chair. There were substantial interruptions and clarifications there.

Now, iwanttohelp.org is the name of a website to apply for the CSSG. Did the government create this website or was it created by WE? The reason I ask, ma'am, is that in the April 22 announcement, it mentions the "I Want to Help" platform twice, which is the origin of iwanttohelp.org. What I'm looking for is the origin of the "I Want to Help" branding, because that April 22 announcement includes branding from the company WE.

The Chair: Mr. Barrett, you will have one more question. You are correct; there were interruptions.

Ms. Telford, if you could answer that, please, we will then go to one more question from Mr. Barrett.

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm sorry. I don't know the answer to that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: In fairness, ma'am, I'd ask that you commit to undertaking to provide that answer to the committee.

I guess my last question would be this. Between those dates that you mentioned before and that were referenced by one of the other members—between May 8 and May 24—what allowed you and the Prime Minister to take this project from yellow to green?

Ms. Katie Telford: It was having the opportunity to have a longer conversation with senior officials and senior staff around why it did come back the way that it did. As per one of your colleagues on the committee's question earlier, there had been different thoughts around what this might look like when it was first discussed, so we wanted to have a better understanding of that.

We also wanted to have an understanding that all the t's had been crossed and the i's had been dotted. As the clerk said, that's why we were asking questions around due diligence and making sure also that it was the right method to do this—that not only was it the right organization but entering into this contribution agreement was the right way to do it—and we were assured that it was.

The Chair: Thank you, both.

Mr. Sorbara, you have five minutes.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the committee members for asking all these insightful questions today.

Ms. Telford, thank you. It's nice to see you this afternoon.

First, what process is in place in your office in relation to consulting on issues of ethics?

Ms. Katie Telford: When staff start here, and oftentimes before they start in these roles, as was certainly the case in my situation and I know in others', we sit down with either the Ethics Commissioner, as was the case for me in 2015, or with one of the officers in the Ethics Commissioner's office to go through what all of the different considerations are in starting these positions.

There are a number of other documents. We have a head of HR. They make sure that a number of other documents are reviewed by staff when they're starting so that they're onboarded appropriately. We encourage all staff, all the time, to take all ethical matters extremely seriously. We are in privileged seats serving Canadians here, not only now but at any time. These are incredibly.... We're all very privileged and honoured to be in the roles we're in, serving Canadians, so we take that very seriously.

We encourage everyone, when they have a question, to check, to ask, to go to the Ethics Commissioner, to talk to one of the senior staff about it. We can help them if we know any history on it, but ultimately, it's always that we try to go to the Ethics Commissioner when we can to get clarification, or to go to the Privy Council Office.

Most importantly, it is ensuring that everyone is onboarded properly and that we follow all of the different interpretations and advice that comes from the Ethics Commissioner's office. When we're not sure, we check.

● (1835)

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Ms. Telford, for that very clear answer.

In terms of due diligence—because the words “due diligence” have come up quite a bit—our government has put in place a number of programs that are helping Canadians from coast to coast to coast. We see the Canada emergency response benefit, which is being delivered through Canada Revenue Agency, or we see the Canada emergency business account, which is being delivered through our financial institutions, everything from small credit unions to the big banks. Then we see programs like the emergency community support fund, which is being delivered through the United Way and various partner agencies.

Obviously there is a level of due diligence that is done by governmental officials that is higher. You know, you're dealing with the CRA, an agency that is well known to the government, part of the government, but then you're dealing with the United Way, or organizations in this place, volunteer organizations about which we receive recommendations from government officials, public servants who have done a phenomenal job for Canadians coast to coast to coast. The due diligence on our part is higher because we are dealing with third parties. We are not dealing directly with government organizations.

I would like to understand that process, looking at due diligence when it refers to third party organizations and how important it was for the Prime Minister, for you and for others around cabinet to ask those tougher questions with the information that is presented to you when you're looking at third party organizations.

Ms. Katie Telford: I think you just touched on exactly why we paused and, as someone else described it, went from yellow to green, or perhaps went from green to yellow. It had already gone from the cabinet committee and was heading towards cabinet ratification when we actually turned it yellow. Part of the reason was what you said. It was a third party organization, and we wanted to make sure that everybody was perfectly comfortable with it and that the public service truly was recommending it as the way to go. They stood by that recommendation over the coming two weeks, and I think all the reasons you're noting are really important.

I'm sure there will be a lot of reviewing done in the coming weeks and months to make sure that as much due diligence as necessary is always done on these third party organizations, but at the time, the assurances were given that this was the right organization to proceed with.

The Chair: This is your last question, Mr Sorbara.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: In terms of moving forward, I think about the number of youth across Canada who had signed up for this program and how important it was for them to sign up. I've read some of the statistics. Over 50% came from marginalized or racialized communities, whichever term you would prefer, and it is disappointing to now know that we had to hit the pause button on this program. Other programs are running, and I'm glad we did expand the Canada summer jobs program by offering an extra \$60 million for that program. But I do hope that going forward we can restart a similar type of program to which youth are invited to apply to get that volunteer experience, because we know how valuable and enriching that volunteer experience is for them.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: I hope the same. I know there are people working very hard on this. It is really important. As I said, there were, kind of, two jobs as we saw it when we talked about youth and young people and students back on April 5, which feels like a lot longer ago now than the date implies. When we talked at that time, job one was making sure we got students, which we did to the best of our ability, the support they needed to be able to pay rent and put groceries on the table. Number two was finding ways through existing programs as well as potentially through some new programs, which we were hoping this would be, to allow young

people to stay connected to their communities and even to have an experience that they might not otherwise have had during this pandemic.

• (1840)

The Chair: Okay, Ms. Telford. We thank you for your testimony. We have now reached the two hours that we asked you to come for and which you accepted. We're a little over it actually.

I would also, before we close off, certainly like to thank the translators and the Library of Parliament folks, who have worked so diligently this week in order to make all of these meetings that we've had possible.

With that, Ms. Telford, you are free to go.

Are we ready to close the meeting?

Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I'd like to make a motion that the committee ask the Prime Minister's Office to release the names of all of the staff members who spoke to the WE organization, to the Kielburger brothers and to any affiliates of the WE organization after March 1.

The Chair: Okay. The motion is, I believe, in order.

Is it, Madam Clerk? Go ahead.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Caroline Bosc): Could he repeat it so that I could have it for the record?

The Chair: Okay. Could you repeat it fairly slowly, Mr. Poilievre?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I move:

That the Prime Minister's office release to the committee by the end of the next calendar week the names of all staff from the Prime Ministers' Office who communicated with WE Charity, the Kielburger brothers, or any affiliates of the WE Charity, since March 1, and that the Prime Minister's Office provide the dates, participants, and contents of those meetings.

The Chair: Okay. The motion is on the floor.

Do you want to speak to it further, Mr. Poilievre, or will I go to Mr. Julian?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'll speak very briefly. I think there should be no controversy about this issue. The chief of staff was asked repeatedly. She said, as to whether or not there were PMO staffers who spoke to the WE organization in the period in question, that, yes, there were. A handful of staff members in the Prime Minister's Office, a handful she later defined to be five, spoke to the Kielburgers during the period in question. Then she said she would not release their names and she did not release a chronology of the dates of their conversations, nor did she release the content of their conversations.

Obviously we need to know this, because the government's entire case is that this whole strange program was dreamed up by the public service with no involvement or influence by the political arm of the government or the staff of the Prime Minister, but if these conversations occurred, then that might contradict that.

Finally, the Lobbying Act requires that all of these interactions be registered, and we have no registry of any such conversations, so we need to find out if the Lobbying Act was violated in the course of these conversations.

Thank you.

• (1845)

The Chair: Okay.

I'm just wondering if this is already included in the correspondence from the Clerk of the Privy Council.

Go ahead, Mr. Julian. The floor is yours.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll be supporting the motion, but I'm offering a friendly amendment to Mr. Poilievre that we include the cabinet memos with recommendations on WE for the May 8 and May 22 cabinet meetings.

The Chair: Is that a friendly amendment, Mr. Poilievre?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. It is a friendly amendment.

The Chair: Okay.

Madam Clerk, I expect you got that as amended?

I see Mr. Sorbara's hand up. Who else was yelling? Does anybody else want in?

The Clerk: Before we move on, sir, can I make sure that's an addition to the end of the motion? Okay.

To be sure I have it right, that was "including the cabinet memos for May 8th and May 22nd"...?

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, "concerning the WE Charity recommendations."

The Chair: Okay. I have Mr. Sorbara. If there's anybody else, let me know.

It's Mr. Sorbara and then Ms. Dzerowicz.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We sit here for what I believe is the fourth or fifth hour consecutively on the second day. This afternoon obviously we have had testimony from the Prime Minister of Canada, who came into committee for 90 minutes and answered many questions and, I think, clarified many issues that I wanted to hear about. We also now have had the chief of staff to the Prime Minister come to committee for two hours and answer many questions and provide clarity on many of the issues that have been raised and the questions that have been asked. It just seems to me, with this motion that's being put forward by MP Poilievre and with an amendment by the NDP, that it's, if I can call it this, scraping the bottom of the barrel. It's a witch hunt for junior staff members and so forth. We had today the Prime Minister and the chief of staff here at committee answering questions. It seems as though this is, if I can call it this, more desperation, scraping at the barrel again. That's my view of it.

Plain and simple, we've heard testimony over the last several weeks, extensive testimony, about the program, about how the program came about, about the recommendation that it be provided via a third party and about how it went to cabinet, and further questions

were asked. This, to me, is an unnecessary scraping at the bottom of the barrel by the opposition.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Okay.

I have Ms. Dzerowicz. Is there anybody beyond that before I go to the question?

Ms. Dzerowicz, you're on, and then we'll see if anybody raises their hand.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I think Mr. Sorbara was literally reading my mind. I was going to say exactly the same words. This is a desperate attempt. After we have very thoroughly investigated the intention of the original motion; proved there's been no misspending of any money; proved it has been responsibly signed, responsibly negotiated and responsibly selected, and that there's been no interference by the Prime Minister or by any cabinet minister; proved that it was suggested by civil servants and that they have done an excellent job, a responsible job, it's unfortunate that we have this ending right now. It seems as though, in a desperate attempt by the Conservatives to keep this alive somehow in the media—somehow they need to continue to keep this in the media—they're scraping the bottom of the barrel.

I will also point out that a motion was put forward by Mr. Julian on Thursday, July 2. We discussed it a few days later. All the relevant information around the decision regarding WE Charity and ME to WE and the design and creation of the Canada student service grant, the written correspondence, everything from March 2020 onward, is going to be provided no later than August 8. I think all of that information will be provided. I think we'll be able to validate everything we have heard over the last couple of weeks and over five meetings. I just don't understand why there is a need for this motion today, so I will not be supporting it.

• (1850)

The Chair: Okay.

Is there anyone else, or are we ready for the question?

Mr. Fraser, you will probably wrap it up.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Certainly. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I might just add my voice to that of some of my colleagues. There are two points in particular that rub me the wrong way when it comes to the proposed motion.

I think chiefly my concern is about the precedent that this would set to start bringing more junior staff within political offices than those we've already heard testify. The Prime Minister of Canada and his chief of staff were here during this meeting. I've seen what has happened when we have had civil servants brought before the committee and badgered in a manner that I think is the kind of thing that will cause civil servants to more broadly be careful about giving open and honest feedback to governments. I don't appreciate the practice this committee has implemented in their treatment of certain witnesses. I think we will potentially go down the same path should we continue to pull more junior staff as witnesses in this testimony.

I also want to raise the point that we don't actually have any evidence that there's been an effort by anyone at the political level to influence the workings of the civil service. If I heard evidence to that testimony, I would think otherwise. Starting to request documents that are subject to cabinet confidence when there's no evidence whatsoever that they will suggest what the opposition has been hinting they might suggest, I don't think is a useful exercise for the purposes of this committee. For that reason, I won't be supporting the motion.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Then maybe Mr. Julian is going to wrap it up.

Mr. Julian, I saw your hand up.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

It's true I sponsored the original motion. Throughout the last three weeks we've been hit by revelation after revelation, things that were told to us that were supposedly facts that turned out to be very different. That's why this scandal has exploded. For any member of this committee to say we don't want to go any further because we may uncover other contradictions, other dishonesty within what we and what Canadians have been told originally, I think would not be doing the due diligence that we as a committee need to undertake. We need to get that information and we need to get these answers for Canadians.

It's very clear that, as this has gone along, a massive number of revelations have come in around the finance minister, around the

Prime Minister's involvement and around the complete lack of due diligence in this mess. I can understand Liberals putting on a partisan hat and saying they don't want to get any further information, but we, all of us, do have a responsibility to get that information and to compare the facts so that we know what has actually occurred. That's why I'm supporting the motion. I think we have to do that due diligence. It did not happen in the government. Our responsibility as parliamentarians is to perform that due diligence.

The Chair: Madam Clerk, we will go to a recorded vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

● (1855)

The Chair: The motion is carried and that information will be passed forward.

We are in a position to adjourn.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I promise this will be my last.

I wanted to thank you for your good work throughout this meeting. I know it was a tough meeting to chair, and you did a fine job. I was happy to help in my own small way where it was possible and I want to let you know, if there's ever a big storm again out in P.E.I., you can give me a call. I'd be glad to come out and help you through it again.

The Chair: All right, thank you for that.

Yes, it was a big storm. It's the first time I got blacked out.

With that, again I want to thank the Library of Parliament people because I know they've been doing yeoman's work. Thank you, Madam Clerk, and all the other clerks who have helped us this week, and the interpreters. I know we have a steering committee meeting tomorrow as well.

In any event, thank you one and all, and I thank the members for their efforts this week.

The meeting is adjourned.

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