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# Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

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Chair: Mr. Tom Lukiwski





## Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

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• (1800)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC)):** Colleagues, since we have a full complement of our committee members, I will call this meeting to order.

This is meeting number 22 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates. Pursuant to the motion adopted by the House on May 26 of this year, the meeting today is at the request of the four members who sent a request to undertake a study on the Canada student service grant.

I believe all of you are familiar with the procedures of this committee. We've been doing these Zoom meetings for quite a few months now. This is just a reminder that this meeting is scheduled for only one hour, so hopefully we can have everything that we need to discuss concluded within that hour.

I would also ask that, for the benefit of our technicians, if you are either asking questions or making comments and you start in one official language, to continue on and do not alternate between English and French. We've found that when you do alternate, even if you switch channels between English and French, it puts a burden on our technicians and sometimes delays the proceedings. Once again, I would simply ask, if possible, when you start making comments in one of the official languages, you continue on in that same language until you are finished your commentary.

As we were talking about just a few moments ago with other committee members, hopefully we'll be able to get everything concluded in this meeting. However, if we do decide to proceed with additional meetings, I wanted the committee to know what my schedule is like. For example, next Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday I will not be available. Thursday and Friday I will. Then, from the 18th to the 22nd I will not be available, but I will be available on July 23. In fact, I will be chairing our next scheduled meeting of this committee. Then, I'm gone away—and Kelly, you would appreciate this as you're going with me—to our Saskatchewan caucus meeting, so I'll be gone again from the 26th to the 29th.

I have a suggestion, and it's only a suggestion. If the committee, at the conclusion of today's meeting decides that you need or require more meetings, additional meetings, I'm suggesting you consider not starting those meetings, so that I can be available as your chair, until perhaps the end of July or the early part of August. That's just for your benefit so that you know my schedule. That's basically all I have to say.

Mrs. Block, I am going to invite you to speak to the motion as our first speaker, since we received the letter with your name on it, as well as the other members. If you have some additional commentary, before I turn the meeting over to you, please go ahead.

**Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC):** No, thank you, Mr. Chair.

I did want to advise you, as the chair, that I wanted to table a motion in regard to what you have just presented. I know it's been circulated—I believe it's been circulated in both French and English—so I'm wondering if it's important for me to read it into the record now.

**The Chair:** You can if you wish. It is not mandatory that you do so, because my understanding is that all committee members have received a copy of the motion in both official languages. It is in order. It is amendable and debatable, so we can consider that to be in complete order.

Since we don't have any witnesses today as well, it's just going to be a discussion among committee members, although there will be others who have joined the meeting and will be observing. We can just start with a speakers list right now—establishing one at least.

Mrs. Block, I had you as our initial speaker. For anyone else who wishes to speak to the motion, I ask that you virtually raise your hand and I will ask Michel, as our clerk, to try to compile a list and advise me as to the correct speaking order following Mrs. Block.

Right now, Mrs. Block, the floor is yours.

• (1805)

**Mrs. Kelly Block:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I believe the letter you received and the motion we have presented speak for themselves. I would simply provide the rationale for why we believe it's important for this committee to undertake this study on this issue at this time, understanding that perhaps there will be a delay in the beginning of the meetings because of individuals' calendars.

We were told by the Prime Minister, on numerous occasions once this story broke, that not only could the public service not handle the administration of this program, but that it was, in fact, departmental officials who recommended that the WE organization was the only one able to administer it.

Because this falls within the purview of our committee, I believe it's important that we undertake this study, as well as hear from the ministers who have been included in the motion.

I will simply leave my comments there. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mrs. Block.

Michel, I have seen a few committee members raise their hands. I'm not sure if you have started to establish a list. The first member I saw virtually raise his hand was Mr. McCauley. Michel, if you're listening to this, you can text me, at your earliest opportunity, with the list you have started to establish.

We'll go to Mr. McCauley first. Then the second member that I saw—at least who caught my eye—was Madam Vignola.

Mr. McCauley, please go ahead.

**Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC):** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

There was an email that came out from the clerk about a couple of minor changes to the motion. I'm not sure if you want to discuss that now.

I wanted to agree with Mrs. Block, but I had a couple of other things to add. The importance of this is also to look at it to see how it falls within the Treasury Board framework. We saw, from an OPQ in the last day in the House, that OFSI was potentially violating Treasury Board guidelines on purchases. This, perhaps, violated them as well.

I believe this has gone through the Treasury Board process, even though it's under Bill C-13, because it's a program. I think this spending program has gone through the Treasury Board process, so I think we owe it to Canadians and taxpayers to take a look to see if it's being done properly.

I was here in the last committee meeting and I followed up with the PBO's office and they believe that some of the estimates and the spending has perhaps not followed the Treasury Board rules and framework either, so I think we owe it to ourselves as a committee, but also to taxpayers, to take a look at this, especially in light of the fact that we heard in our last meeting that ATIPs are not being done right now. This is something that, even if we or other Canadians tried to access it, it could be months or a year before we could bring this to light.

Then, just on your availability and Mr. Drouin's availability, I have some of the same concerns coming up—travel concerns and unavailability concerns—so I'd be happy to start the study off, if it's agreed to, when you're back and available for the full set of meetings.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Again, I saw, from my perspective, that Madam Vignola is next, but if anyone wishes to participate, please virtually raise your hand so that I can hopefully get everyone who has a question or a comment on the speaking roll.

Madam Vignola.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ):** I'll try to keep this as brief as possible.

The fact that we're examining the awarding of the contract to WE Charity affects not only the organization itself, but also the potential for abuse going forward, which we absolutely must prevent, no matter the government in power. We need to examine the process, and if it wasn't conducted properly, we need to figure out why. We need to do what we must to ensure this is done quickly, but also properly and transparently. I think that's really important, even if it is the summer, it's hot outside and we all need a break.

My wedding anniversary is on July 21. Mr. Lukiwski, you'll be on holiday at the same time I am. I'm open to starting in late July or a bit later, in August, but no later than that. This is an issue that's important now and will be in the future, as well.

• (1810)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

I see some hands raised: Mr. Green, Mr. Drouin, Mr. MacKinnon and Mr. Aboultaif.

We'll start in the order I just described, starting with Mr. Green.

**Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP):** I think we've turned into an auction here. We have a lot of buyers on this motion, it looks like, and I'm one of them. I think I have some really deep concerns about the evolving nature of the information that is rolling out. This certainly deserves more scrutiny, not just for the past perceived indiscretion but also for me, as a committee member, to understand how these systems work on a go-forward basis, to ensure that this is never duplicated and to ensure that these ministries are living up to the standards that are in their mandate letters and in the policies and procedures and practices. I mean, if this last week is any indication of the evolving nature of the information and the depth to which this file is problematic, I can only imagine how the next few weeks might unfold.

I'm in full support of this. I'm also in full support of working around any schedule issues that you all may have.

I think it will be important, Mr. Chair, to have you there, and to have Frank there, and to have a really good balance of opposition and government to make sure that we have a fulsome discussion and to make sure that we have the full time and attention of the ministers who are responsible for this, ultimately, and the cabinet that's responsible for this, ultimately.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Drouin, I have you next on my list.

**Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To start, we don't necessarily have an issue with said motion. We do know that finance is also looking at this. I'd be curious to know what other committee members think about that. Perhaps once we go down that line of conducting the study, we may want to coordinate with what finance is doing or decide that we're our own beast and proceed with what we want.

I have just a couple of points on the motion. I know that there has been a lot of talk about this being a "contract". Naturally, people would be driven to ask about the role of PSPC. I know for a fact that it's not a contract. It wasn't a sole-source contract, per se, in government terms, so PSPC had zero role to play in this particular matter.

Again, I know it's up to the committee to decide who we want to invite, but there will be strong language from PSPC saying, thanks, but we were not involved in that particular matter. Mr. McCauley alluded to it by saying that this was passed through Bill C-13. Yes, there was a Treasury Board process, but then this money was allocated to a department...and then departments decide whether or not to sign a contribution agreement with whomever they choose. That's a different process than there would have been for a procurement process. In normal times, for instance, with a sole-source contract, there would have been an advance contract award notice, or in national security exceptions, when the clause is invoked.

There's a difference in the language that we're using. I want to make sure to inform committee members so that we're not sent on a wild goose chase, where we have departments come up and say, well, thanks, but we had nothing to do with this. I'll just caution members that some of the witnesses we're asking for have nothing to do with said matter.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Drouin.

Before I go to Mr. MacKinnon, Mr. Drouin raised a point about scheduling. We do have, in a sense, the luxury of time, inasmuch as finance has said they want their study completed in early August. I think they had August 8 as the completion date. If we reconvene or hold our next meeting in early August, as an example, by that time there may be a number of pieces of information that would be germane to this committee's decision on whether to study a particular aspect of the CSSG or talk about ESDC.

In other words, we may find out more information in the intervening weeks that would be helpful to the further discussions of this committee. I think it's probably a good thing for us to be able to have a couple of weeks behind us, between the completion of this meeting and engaging in future meetings, if that's what the committee wants to do.

Mr. MacKinnon, We'll move over to you.

• (1815)

**Mr. Steven MacKinnon (Gatineau, Lib.):** I think that's wise, Mr. Chair.

As the PS, I wanted to indicate, not knowing what Mr. Drouin's comments would pertain to, that of course neither Minister Anand nor PSPC were involved in this particular endeavour, nor were some of the others whom Mr. Drouin mentioned. I just wanted to make sure that.... All good parliamentary studies need to be well

scoped, and in this case we do risk the kind of missives or communications that Mr. Drouin indicated we might receive.

I think bringing some focus to this exercise would probably be more becoming of, and more befit, a study of this nature.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Abouttaif.

**Mr. Ziad Abouttaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC):** Yes, I have a couple of things. On Mr. Drouin's comment, the coordination with the finance study on this, I think it's mandatory and it's good to do, of course, and within the time frames we have.

As far as involving the PSPC and the other departments on this study, I've been receiving some disturbing details and emails and pressure from.... It's not disturbing pressure but it's a lot of pressure actually. Some information and feedback is coming from the public, from constituents, telling me that we are indebted to the public to do this study and to push forward. From the emails I've received, I'm telling you, we will be very, very busy as a committee looking into this, because there's an obligation right now on me and I believe on other members of the committee.

Being on this committee, being a member of Parliament from this side of the row, there is an obligation that we take our responsibility and push these studies forward in the best format, in order to be able to bring to the public the reality and the truth. I think that's something on everybody's shoulders. I trust that every member on the committee feels the same way, if he has the same pressure.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Abouttaif.

Mr. Kusmierczyk, I see your hand raised.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.):** Thank you very much.

Again, I just wanted to reiterate some of the comments that were made by my colleagues in terms of making sure that the study, or this discussion, is focused on the appropriate elements and the appropriate witnesses and the appropriate people. I can tell you that our minister, Minister Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, stated in the status of women committee that she really had no line of sight on this particular issue. She was not involved on this file and on this issue. Again, just to reiterate, I think we're all interested here in moving forward with this discussion, this debate and this study, but I think it behooves us as well to make sure that we maintain a focus on the appropriate areas of study.

I just wanted to add my voice and say that I definitely support waiting until the finance committee completes its work as well, so that we have additional information with which to work. I think that's a sensible path forward.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

I'm looking to see if there are any other committee members who wish to participate in this debate.

Mrs. Block, I see your hand up.

**Mrs. Kelly Block:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If nobody else wants to weigh in, perhaps it's appropriate that I make some closing comments on this.

I appreciate the observations around whether or not we are sticking to the mandate of our committee. I think that we'll be able to demonstrate, through the hearings that we hold, that there definitely are linkages to the individuals we have included in the motion. I appreciate the concerns that have been raised, but I do think that, as others have said, this is our responsibility and we need to undertake this study.

I would also say that I want to follow up on what Kelly McCauley raised in regard to the wording changes that the clerk put forward. I just want to make sure, Chair, that the motion you have in front of you, which I did not read into the record, is the motion with the wording changes, the latest version of the motion.

• (1820)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mrs. Block.

What I'm going to do, colleagues, is have Michel read the suggested amended motion. Primarily there were two minor changes, which I am sure you've all been made aware of. The one is with reference to the various ministers coming to appear as witnesses. They should just be coming to appear, because ministers themselves do not appear as witnesses. They just appear to provide testimony. Also, there was one other minor change.

Michel, do you have an amended or a proposed amended motion that you could read back to the committee?

**The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Michel Marcotte):** Virtually, as you know, I am having problems. I don't have access to the document I sent you by email. I'll try but my connection is really choppy.

**Mrs. Kelly Block:** Mr. Chair, I do have a copy.

**The Chair:** In that case, Mrs. Block, since your connectivity does not seem to be an issue and you have the revisions that were suggested, would you be able to present that motion with the proposed revisions? Then all committee members will be able to listen to make sure they are completely onside with the motion that we will be voting on shortly.

**Mrs. Kelly Block:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The motion reads as follows:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(c), the committee undertake an emergency study of four meetings into the awarding by the federal government of a \$900 million sold-sourced contract to WE Charity, as well as prior contracts to this organization; that the study include an inquiry as to why the federal public service was unable to administer the Canada Student Service Grant; and that the following Ministers be invited to appear before the committee: the Minister of Public Services and Procurement Canada, the President of the Treasury Board, the Minister of Employment and Social Development Canada, and the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mrs. Block.

If everyone has heard that motion, in just a moment I will ask for a recorded vote on that motion, but before I do that, we've heard suggestions from several committee members, including commentary by yours truly, that delaying the first meeting until sometime in the early part of August might be a more prudent approach because of holidays, but also because of the finance committee's study, which will be close to completion by the first week in August. If you are all in agreement, and I will only make this suggestion if you are in agreement, if you give the ability to the chair to call the next meeting when I believe it is appropriate, and if you also have any particular suggestions as to dates to avoid and you could allow those comments to be funnelled through the clerk, we'll try to then come up with a schedule of next meetings.

Do I see some nods of agreement there?

I see some thumbs-up by a few people.

In that case, the next meeting will be at the call of the chair, but do not expect the next meeting to be called before the early part of August and perhaps even after August 8, which is the deadline for the finance committee to have completed its study. It will certainly be in the early part of August. In the interim, if you have dates that you wish to avoid, which are in conflict with your own personal schedules, please get your available dates in August as quickly as possible to our clerk, and then the clerk and I will try to establish a meeting schedule.

Lastly colleagues, start thinking about additions to the ministers who will be asked to appear on the motion of Mrs. Block. If you have other witnesses, non-ministerial witnesses, that you think would be helpful to provide testimony to this committee, start assembling that witness list and at your earliest opportunity I would suggest you start getting those names to our clerk as well.

Our regular clerk Paul will be back on the 20th of this month, and I believe that's it for his holiday session. I think he's going to be around for the rest of the summer.

We thank Michel for pinch-hitting for this particular meeting, but we should be able to proceed hopefully without undue delay, once we get into the meeting schedule itself sometime in early August.

With that, unless there's any other commentary, as per the rules established by the House, I will ask the clerk to proceed with a nominal vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 10; nays 0)

• (1825)

The motion is carried, colleagues. Thank you very much for that.

As my closing comment, I will simply say thank you to you all for your input. I will be getting back to all of you in a call of the chair sometime in early August. In the interim, please let the clerk know—Paul will be back on Monday—what your schedule will be like over the course of the summer, your availability and any potential witnesses you would like to have.

Madam Vignola, you have your hand up.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Julie Vignola:** The Standing Committee on Finance will have finished meeting with witnesses on July 28. We could meet on July 30 or 31, or even August 3. I know the Standing Committee on Finance is tabling its report on August 8, but by the end of July, we'll already have a good sense of what's been said.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Certainly.

As I said, I think the best course of action is to have all of you first give your schedules to our clerk. I want to try to ensure that all of you, if at all possible, will participate in the study and we don't lose anyone due to holidays. If you will all send your current schedule of availability to Paul as quickly as possible, Paul and I will determine a course of action as to the next meeting. That meeting will take place shortly after the completion of the study but probably before it's tabled.

Michel, I see your hand raised.

**The Clerk:** Yes. I'm sorry, Mr. Chair.

If I may, I would suggest that you send all emails to the committee's mailbox, oggo@parl.gc.ca, just to make sure there's follow-up on any emails.

Thank you very much.

• (1830)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Members, thank you so much. I know it's a busy time for all of us. We wish you well in the intervening weeks. Hopefully, we will see you all again sometime in early August. Well, we'll see you on July 23, which is our next scheduled OGGO meeting, but to discuss this particular motion it will be sometime in early August.

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** Mr. Chair, before we break, are we going to have a subcommittee meeting to discuss what we're discussing

on July 23? When we set the two ad hoc meetings in the summer, I don't think we decided on a subject.

**The Chair:** One of the reasons I'm asking you to supply to OGGO, to our clerk, your proposed witness lists is that, once we have them, I can certainly call a subcommittee meeting to discuss the agenda.

As you know, Kelly, the normal practice over the course of the last year, probably, has been that we take these suggestions to the full committee. Even though the subcommittee is empowered to come up with a proposed schedule, normally we just go straight to the committee as a whole once we have an idea of the witness lists that have been submitted. Either way, I will ensure that we have, at a minimum, a subcommittee meeting to discuss the agenda. That will then be presented to the entire committee. We will have a finalized and approved agenda moving forward for the four meetings that we are empowered to have as a result of the motion we passed today.

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** I was referring to the stand-alone July 23 meeting. Maybe I'm missing something; I apologize.

**The Chair:** The meeting on July 23 has already been preset. It's a regular OGGO meeting. It has been established. We have witnesses who are being contacted right now to see if they can come.

However, the special meetings of this committee will take place—

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** Okay. I'm referring to something else. I'm referring specifically to July 23.

**The Chair:** All right.

With that, colleagues, I thank you very much. I hope you all have a good weekend coming up. I hope the heat subsides so much in eastern Ontario and Quebec. We'll see you all, hopefully, in no more than two or three weeks.

Have a great evening, everyone. We are adjourned.







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