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Chair

Mr. Bob Zimmer

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• (1200)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC)): We're going to call the meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics and it's meeting 130.

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(4), the meeting was requested by four members of the committee to discuss the situation surrounding investigations into the activities of the member for Brampton East.

I have first up to speak Mr. Kent and then Mr. Angus.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you, Chair. I'm sure we all have the letter in front of us here. We certainly, on the opposition side, have some serious questions, as the letter says, about exactly when the Prime Minister's Office first became aware of the RCMP investigation into the various activities of the Liberal member of Parliament for Brampton—East.

I'm asking because the stories from different unnamed sources in the PMO, from answers in the House, and from the member himself have changed and evolved over the course of the last couple of weeks. It goes beyond the original explanation of a health problem, to a gambling addiction, to millions of dollars, to repayment of those millions of dollars ostensibly or allegedly or as claimed to be from family members, but we don't know where those family members sourced the provenance of all of these dollars and these payments. We have the questions that the member asked before he was removed from the finance committee by the government, which raised very serious questions about his motivation as a member of that committee at a time when, we understand, the RCMP was tracking his heavy gambling activity, and then all of this on top of the questions about his outside employer as a member of Parliament and the continuing questions, the unexplained questions, about the invitation of that employer into the Prime Minister's embarrassing trip to India and the appearance—it may not in fact be the reality—of a different form of cash for access.

All of that said, and coming back to the standing order that I quoted, Standing Order 106(4), we on the opposition side are calling for a briefing with the Clerk of the Privy Council and with officials from the PMO to testify as to what, in fact, they do know and when they were first informed that there was an RCMP investigation into Mr. Grewal's activities.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent.

Next up is Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): This issue is a very important one for the ethics committee to consider. I want to begin by saying that I would normally be, and in the past have been, very wary of using the ethics committee to look at individual MP cases, because the separation between what an MP does and sometimes gets into trouble over and the role of an ethics committee to look at that would be very problematic. It could be seen as a witch hunt.

My concern here is on the issue of security and whether or not we have the proper protocols in place in the Prime Minister's Office and in the Privy Council to alert the government of the day if there are problems.

I refer you to the article that was just written, which said that the weak link in national security may be members of Parliament. That's not an accusation we've really seen raised before, but there have been a number of troubling cases recently.

It's really important to have representatives of the Privy Council and of the Prime Minister's Office come before us, because we know that the initial complaint to the Ethics Commissioner related to a business deal that the member for Brampton East set up with a construction company. That, I think, is troubling, but it was something the Ethics Commissioner was looking at under his purview to decide whether or not breaches in obligations had occurred. That is certainly not the role of this committee.

However, out of that business relationship came the invitation on the India trip, which is very problematic because it raises questions as to how he was put on that trip. Resulting from the Atwal case, many questions were raised about who is making sure the Prime Minister is being protected from these kinds of invitations where people shouldn't have been on there.

That investigation with the Ethics Commissioner is ongoing and has nothing to do with our committee, but in light of the reports on the gambling, we can talk about issues being addiction. Many MPs have had addictions over the years, and MPs have stepped down because of addictions. Some of them fortunately have recovered from their addictions. However, what was concerning was that this was an RCMP investigation. The RCMP do not investigate people who have addictions. They investigate people when a crime has been committed.

I'm very concerned about reports that say the RCMP were following the member for Brampton East when he was leaving Parliament. I would think the Prime Minister should have been made aware of that. To me, that is a national security issue.

The stories we're picking up that the member was being mentioned in wiretaps into investigations into people who were involved in possible terrorism financing and money laundering are deeply concerning, so certainly the Privy Council should have been made aware that there were problems, because he was sitting on the finance committee.

Members of Parliament, whether they are parliamentary secretaries, ministers or even backbenchers, have an enormous amount of power that has to be maintained in doing public service. The question of whether or not the member misused his position on the finance committee by asking leading questions about FINTRAC and about how to avoid money laundering should have raised serious red flags. Again, I'm surprised that nobody in the Privy Council or the Prime Minister's Office was made aware of this.

This is not something I would expect to be made public if the RCMP or investigators were looking at it. However, a prime minister of any party needs to be aware if there are potential security risks, because someone who owes millions of dollars in gambling debts is, by definition, a security risk. If people who are involved in wiretaps on money laundering are aware of this, that member is a security risk, so it's up to us to ensure that we have security protocols in place to address these issues.

I think this is an important issue, and that we should have representatives from the Privy Council and the Prime Minister's Office explain to us what the protocols are, when they know and how they know these things. If there are no protocols in place, then Parliament is going to have to say there needs to be a protocol in place in future to deal with a case like this. We're talking about security and ethics, but security to me is certainly the predominant issue here.

• (1205)

The Chair: Mr. Gourde.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My comments will be in the same vein as those of my colleague Mr. Angus.

The security of people participating in those types of trips raises questions and concerns. There is a protocol in place. It makes no sense to get no answer to the question of who invited people to that trip. They must have been invited by the Office of the Prime Minister or the member.

Often, members who have always been invited to those trips are asked whether they want to be accompanied by people from their riding or people they know who would be interested in joining them. In this case, we are talking about a trip to India. Those people did not show up at the airport that morning with their luggage in case there would be a spot for them. They were invited. There is a security protocol, and the RCMP investigates.

What concerns me is that people are denying having been invited. As for the protection of the Prime Minister, I understand the protocol and the fact that the RCMP did their search. However, those

individuals said that no one invited them. I cannot imagine that. It's impossible.

Either we are being lied to, or something related to national security is being concealed from us. When it comes to that, I don't think anyone on that airplane was a threat to national security. If so, they should not have been there. They should not have been there either way.

The background of the member for Brampton-East also raises many questions. Having gambling debts is a personal problem, but the way we obtain money may become a public problem. In fact, whether we like it or not, we are accountable to Canadians in terms of showing who we are and especially proving that no money issue may interfere with certain political decisions or votes in the House of Commons, among other things.

We cannot be influenced by money coming from others, be it given or borrowed. We must declare that money and prove that we can pay it back. If our gambling debts amount to several million dollars, with the salary we have as members, it would take more than 150 years to pay them off. They will probably never be paid back.

The member must prove that he managed to accumulate that kind of a debt through his possessions or other economic activities he is involved in, but if there aren't any, he really has a problem in terms of ethics, and that raises questions.

Canadians have a right to know what is happening. In addition, this will help future members. If amendments or recommendations are necessary, it is our duty to make them. We represent Canadians and we have a duty to do so ethically, simply put.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1210)

[English]

The Chair: Next up is Mr. Kent.

Hon. Peter Kent: Mr. Chair, I'm reminded that I didn't formally put the motion forward.

To conclude, there's agreement on the opposition side of the committee that I would put the motion that this committee call the Clerk of the Privy Council and the named members of the Prime Minister's Office to attend committee to explain and brief us on Mr. Grewal's activities, and on when they became aware, first and foremost, of the RCMP investigation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Erskine-Smith.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (Beaches—East York, Lib.): I have a few points.

I understand PROC to be the appropriate committee for individual MP cases in relation to violations of the code.

In relation to this case, we know that an ethics investigation is under way. It's not yet concluded. I think that's an important point.

More importantly, though, there's no evidence of any wrongdoing of the named individuals in the Prime Minister's office or the Privy Council. This would be akin to my moving a motion to invite the chief of staff to Andrew Scheer in order to talk about Tony Clement.

Personally, I think that's excessively partisan for this committee and the good work we've been doing on this committee. I think it's overreaching. I think it's inappropriate. For that reason, I don't plan to support this motion.

The Chair: Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I thank my colleague for that. Certainly PROC is the appropriate place to deal with individual cases. That's why I said that it would not be appropriate at the ethics committee.

We don't know what all the Ethics Commissioner is going to find. He does not engage with us, so we have no awareness.

To me, the issue of the RCMP being concerned about money laundering and possible terrorist financing puts this into a different realm, which is why it's legitimate to ask the Privy Council and the Prime Minister's office to actually tell us whether there are protocols in place. Certainly one of the key jobs of the Privy Council is to protect the government in whole, not to protect the political party in power. The Privy Council has an obligation to oversee the practice of government.

Having been here these many years, I was actually pretty astounded that if there were that many red flags being raised about an individual, the Prime Minister's office said they learned about it when everyone else did, which is when they opened up the Globe and Mail. That's not a really good standard in terms of dealing with security risks.

I think that in the coming years we will see increasing security risks of foreign interference and that, so we need to make sure there are protocols in place. I think it's a fair motion.

• (1215)

The Chair: Mr. Kent.

Hon. Peter Kent: I agree with Nathaniel that this committee has worked well together over the course of the last couple of years. I know he considers that the opposition members of the committee have been reasonable in our various determinations and decisions.

With that in mind, I would accept a trimming of the motion to specify only that the Clerk of the Privy Council attend committee, and to remove the names of the officials from the Prime Minister's Office.

The Chair: Are you officially amending that?

Hon. Peter Kent: It's a proposed amendment.

The Chair: He's proposing that, so are there any comments?

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: [*Inaudible—Editor*] support, regardless, so do what you need to do.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Can I suggest a friendly amendment? It had been my concern initially, when I talked to Mr. Kent, that if we had the Clerk of the Privy Council, then it's clear that we're not doing this in a partisan manner. We would leave the Prime Minister's staff out of it. I would put forward a friendly amendment, hopefully supported by my friend from Skeena—Bulkley Valley, to amend the motion so that we're asking the Clerk of the Privy Council to appear before us.

The Chair: Okay.

The question now is on the amendment to the motion. Is there any further discussion?

I did have Mr. Saini. Did you have your hand up? Okay, I thought you did.

Let's vote on the friendly amendment, as Mr. Angus termed it.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: It doesn't matter. It's your motion. Change it, and....

The Chair: Will you abstain, or will you...?

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Well, I certainly have no interest in the amended motion, so if you're so inclined to and intent upon changing the motion, I defer. You can change it, and we'll vote on your amended motion.

The Chair: It comes down to you, though, so are you supporting it, or are you...?

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: No. I will abstain on this motion.

The Chair: Okay.

(Amendment agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

Chair: Just to be clear, you have abstained from that, correct? I just wanted to make sure, for the clerk's purposes.

So now we have the amended motion before us. Is there any further discussion on the amended motion?

(Motion as amended negatived [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

Chair: Thanks, and we'll see you on Tuesday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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