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Chair: The Honourable Wayne Easter



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• (1615)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number five of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance. We're welcoming a couple of new recruits here to the finance committee this evening.

Thank you for coming.

The committee is meeting today to conduct committee business, as we have been doing for a little while.

Pursuant to the motion adopted by the House on Wednesday, September 23, 2020, the committee is meeting virtually. Today's meeting is taking place by video conference and the proceedings will be televised and made available on the House of Commons website. I don't believe it's necessary for me to repeat all the rules, as we don't have any witnesses before us. I think committee members are well aware of the rules.

When we last adjourned, it was reported that discussions would be ongoing to achieve, hopefully, an agreeable settlement on the motion in the name of Mr. Poilievre. I take it that no agreement has been reached as yet, although I understand considerable progress is being made. Therefore, we'll start where we left off on the subamendment to the amendment to the original motion by Mr. Poilievre.

I have on my list to start off the engagement tonight with Mr. Fragiskatos, followed by Ms. Dzerowicz and Mr. Julian.

Mr. Fragiskatos.

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

It's good to see colleagues.

Mr. Chair, I won't take too much of the committee's time. I just wanted to take a few moments, if I could, to recap where we are. For those back at home, after weeks of watching it could be easy to be confused as to why we're here.

We have our initial motion, which pertains to Mr. Poilievre's matter of privilege in relation to redacted documents. These documents were received by this committee in accordance with a motion that was passed by committee members. The documents were in the format as requested in the motion and were provided on time. The redactions that Mr. Poilievre seems to be taking issue with, it would appear, are directly related to the work done by the parliamentary

law clerk. I can appreciate that Mr. Poilievre is not happy with the results of the motion. However, it was his party that drafted the original motion.

Subsequently, we have an amendment and a subamendment on the table related to the production of documents, on which version of documents should be disclosed, how they are compared and whatnot. I won't waste time going into detail on that. What is key to the subamendment is the appearance of the Clerk of the Privy Council. As my colleagues have noted previously, and as my opposition colleagues are fully aware, we are in possession of a letter from the most senior civil servant in the country. The Clerk of the Privy Council and secretary to cabinet is the head of our civil service, the head of the Privy Council Office, which coordinates the functioning of the government in Canada. As secretary to cabinet, they are the chief adviser to cabinet and are responsible for the accurate recording of meetings and decisions. Clearly, the clerk is in a position to be an expert witness on any number of matters, particularly because it was the clerk who pre-emptively ordered the release of documents, including cabinet confidences and the names of relevant public servants, prior to this committee making its motion.

It's important that we focus for a moment on the matters at hand. As I noted, the clerk is the secretary to cabinet and is responsible for keeping information related to cabinet. As a result, he is the keeper of cabinet confidences. He can choose whether they're waived in a particular circumstance, as he did in the matter of the Canada student service grant. He did choose to waive confidence and provide all documentation that flowed through the cabinet papers system. The clerk committed to doing this before we even voted on requests for these documents.

Further to his responsibility to keep cabinet confidences, the clerk did take the position that matters unrelated to the student service grant should not be disclosed. Is this an unreasonable position? I think not. Is this position by the clerk to redact unrelated cabinet confidences outside the normal scope of practice? No, it is not. Is it outside the normal scope of practice for department officials, non-partisan public servants, to redact said documentation at point of source? No. Is it outside the normal scope of practice for the public service to provide completely unredacted cabinet documents to the parliamentary law clerk and for him, and him alone, to choose what should be redacted as a cabinet confidence? Absolutely, 100%.

This is exactly what Mr. Poilievre and my opposition colleagues are calling for here. The opposition majority is calling on this committee to take a position regarding document requests that is very far outside the normal practice. It's happening not just here. We see this happening at other committees as well. We also see it with the structure of the motion the Conservatives made in regard to their opposition motion the other week, again, requesting documents unredacted and calling on the law clerk to make those redactions for cabinet confidences. The parliamentary law clerk has never had powers to review cabinet confidences. There are legal precedents and reasons for this—very good reasons.

For the information of colleagues, I am on point in relation to our subamendment. I believe setting the proper context is important. You will fully understand my point momentarily.

As I have explained, the way in which the majority opposition has requested documents is rather unorthodox and out of the ordinary. To make it even more interesting, the original motion drafted and passed by the opposition recognized that unrelated cabinet confidences would be redacted at source and then forwarded to the law clerk for a personal privacy check.

The motion was structured and passed in that way and no one from the opposition said otherwise. Imagine our surprise when Mr. Poilievre appeared post-document release dramatically throwing blacked out papers around at the press briefing, papers he received from the law clerk and conforming to the exact specifications of a motion that he proposed.

Now this brings me to the Clerk of the Privy Council. In mid-August the government House leader released documents, the exact documents that the clerk had promised and that the clerk had requested in the motion, minus the redactions by the law clerk. This was an extraordinary release of Crown secrets. As has been said in this committee in the past, this release of documents this was unlike any that had occurred in the past. Included in the information was reference to specific public servants, which the clerk took the extreme step of leaving unredacted. This required the clerk to file a notice with the Privacy Commissioner advising him of his move.

I think colleagues need to let the gravity of that decision sink in. We now have two sets of documents, the lightly redacted information from the government House leader, which saw the complete release of information as it relates to the CSSG, or the Canada student service grant, minus unrelated cabinet confidences, which included the names of public servants. We also have the documents from the law clerk, which are a bit more heavily redacted, removing the names of public servants, phone numbers and emails, among some other items.

Now the opposition has taken issue with the preredactions made by the public servants in relation to unrelated cabinet confidences, which again I find strange considering that this was in the motion from the committee. It's the regular practice when documents are sent to the committee as well, though clearly this doesn't fit the partisan narrative of the majority opposition. Mr. Poilievre, Mr. Julian and others have concerns about these preredactions. We can debate all day about how this was to be expected because of the motion that was passed. However, let's set that argument aside for a moment.

As I've said, the Clerk of the Privy Council is the keeper of cabinet confidences and is an expert witness when it comes to their release. He has offered to come before this committee. That letter sent by him states clearly that he and his relevant deputy ministers would gladly come before the committee to explain how they went about reviewing the motion from the committee, compiling documents and complying the best they could with our request.

I know this has been reported in the press as well, so Canadians across the country will be aware of this fact too. Personally I'm not sure why the opposition has questions about why there were redactions for unrelated cabinet confidences. I get that they have their political game to play so I'm willing to play ball on some level. That's why I think it's completely reasonable to have the clerk and his fellow deputies here to explain themselves. What is important for us to remember is that, like us, the amazing public servants who work for the Government of Canada swear an oath, an oath to uphold the secrecy of all matters that come before them in their duties and to uphold the statutes that govern privacy laws in Canada.

As we push these public servants for the release of information, they are conducting a delicate balancing act between our rights as parliamentarians to reasonably access government documents and their sworn responsibility to uphold the confidence of the cabinet process and protect the functioning of responsible government. I think that, up front, the clerk should be commended. He recognized that this program, while on its merits was a good concept as far as the program was concerned, clearly had issues on the implementation front. He recognized the need to be 100% up front and transparent in regard to how the CSSG came into being, and he ensured that the cabinet documents relating to its creation and approval were made available for parliamentarians.

However, as committee members, we have to recognize that this unprecedented move to make the information available had to be balanced with the need to protect cabinet confidences on matters that were unrelated. If we accepted the request from the clerk to appear, I think that is what he would tell this committee. I think he has a measured and reasonable explanation for why some information was released and other information was not. I think the testimony he will give will side with the fact that it is not the responsibility of the Clerk of the Privy Council to assist the official opposition with their politically motivated fishing expedition

● (1620)

I think it wouldn't be appropriate for him to unredact information for purely political reasons, to help the opposition. It would taint the cabinet process. All these explanations would be better heard coming from the lips of the clerk himself.

I think we know what colleagues on the other side are afraid of. They are rather annoyed that we will not allow the tyranny of the opposition majority to rule supreme here in this place. I think they are annoyed that a non-partisan professional public servant is willing to come forward and testify, and that the testimony that would be given would likely counter their narrow partisan strategy. I encourage all my colleagues to vote in favour of the subamendment to allow the clerk to come forward and explain the position of the government in regard to the redaction. It's the right thing to do.

I ask colleagues to do the right thing: Allow the clerk to come before us. Let's move past this matter after he testifies and get to the work that Canadians expect of us. In particular, I am very much looking forward to discussing the motion from Ms. Dzerowicz regarding pre-budget consultations. It's the whole reason this committee exists. Let's hear from the clerk and then let's get to the work on pre-budget planning.

This is a critical point and one that is quite relevant, because, if we think back, this debate around Mr. Kelly's amendment and the subamendment that has been proposed by the Liberal side really does, as we continue with it—and I think we should because the subamendment is tremendously important—stand in the way of our looking at Ms. Dzerowicz's motion, which is completely on par with what this committee, as I just said, needs to do: commence pre-budget consultations so that we can begin to hear from Canadians about what their priorities are.

As we face a second wave, COVID-19 continues to impact almost every part of this country in some shape or form. In my own province, Ontario, we are seeing real challenges, not only in the GTA and in Ottawa, but also in other parts. As we start to grapple with it, we need to hear from experts, particularly on the economy, and consider how COVID-19 is impacting the land. I can't emphasize enough to my colleagues how imperative it is that we move in this direction. If we think back to when we were elected, what was it we were sent here to do?

The committee process for all MPs is central to the job of being a parliamentarian. We all know that this job is many things. It's really two jobs, at the end of the day. You have the constituency work, which is vital, but you also have the work that takes place on Parliament Hill. On this latter point, the work on Parliament Hill, our committee work is crucial, imperative. I have had the honour of serving on the committee for foreign affairs, on the committee for public safety and national security, and now for the previous two years, under your learned leadership, Mr. Chair, and I say this very sincerely.... I know you're a modest man, and you're shaking your head there. You should not. You have led the committee in a very able way, Mr. Chair.

It is a tremendously important thing to sit on the finance committee, and the work we do is varied. We have a role in the gathering of ideas that relate to COVID-19 and the economic response, the gathering of ideas that find their way in the form of recommendations for the finance minister to consider and for the Prime Minister also, of course, to consider. That is not a small thing. It is something that I and colleagues around the table will take pride in, but our constituents also feel a great amount of pride when they know they have MPs representing them who sit on this committee, arguably the most important committee on Parliament Hill.

As we have engaged in this debate, I have thought back to what it is preventing from happening. It is obviously preventing us from dealing with Ms. Dzerowicz's motion, which is calling on us to begin immediately pre-budget consultations.

• (1625)

However, that doesn't mean this debate is one that I'm willing to simply surrender to the opposition, because there are a number of things at stake here. We have the Clerk of the Privy Council, who has made the very important point that he wishes to come before committee to be asked questions, not only by members of Parliament on the Liberal side but by opposition members of Parliament as well. It is an extraordinary move on his part, and we see the opposition standing in the way of that happening.

This is where I have real concerns. We have not dealt in previous meetings with this point that I'm about to make at this committee, but it has been suggested, especially by Mr. Poilievre, and I am disappointed not to hear opposition colleagues challenge him on this point.... I will tell you—and I think I speak for the entire Liberal side—that when Mr. Poilievre suggested that it would not be something he would be open to, that he would not be in favour of having the clerk appear before this committee, because in his view the clerk operates at the whim of the Prime Minister and, as I think Mr. Poilievre put it, is somehow under the thumb of the Prime Minister, is reliant, is “dependent”, on him.... These are the words he continues to use. Mr. Poilievre has said that the Clerk of the Privy Council is dependent on the Prime Minister. It's just not true.

The most senior civil servant in the land is, by definition, neutral and objective. They must be in order to carry out their role, which is what? The clerk has the most important role in the public service, and we need to make sure that, while there naturally will be quarrels between members of Parliament on opposite party sides, we do not attack the public service, which, as we have seen with the issue of the day, COVID-19, were it not for the federal public service.... We could also talk about the public services operating at the provincial and municipal levels, but I won't do that. I'll focus on the federal public service and what an extraordinary job they have done through COVID-19.

By suggesting that the head of Canada's public service is somehow under the rule of and entirely “dependent”, as Mr. Poilievre put it, on the Prime Minister, that is something that besmirches not only the reputation of this particular clerk. It besmirches the reputation of clerks previous and those who will come after Mr. Shugart. It also attacks the reputation and honour of existing public servants at all levels, whether they are public servants who have just recently joined Canada's civil service or whether they are experienced ones as well.

I wonder why it is that my Conservative colleagues continue to do this at almost every opportunity. It surprised me as well that Mr. Poilievre made the point, because he speaks very highly, at least he has in previous sessions and meetings of this committee.... In the previous Parliament, for example, I remember him putting on record that he held Mr. Shugart in high esteem. That was an interesting point, but one that he completely contradicts when he says that Mr. Shugart is under the thumb of the current Prime Minister. It's just not the case. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, when Mr. Poilievre served in cabinet, Mr. Shugart was the deputy minister to Mr. Poilievre and has served under a number of different governments.

All of which is to say, that the moment we begin to attack public servants is the moment when we see a tide or a shift in our democracy that we should absolutely avoid. All of us are in this position as members of Parliament, a position that will not be forever. We are here for sometimes a few years and sometimes a good number of years. The reality is that partisanship plays a role in that process. We've decided to approach our public service in that way, but public servants who decide to work in the civil service, making a contribution along those lines, want nothing to do with politics. Once we begin attacking them, we violate a central, a cardinal, rule in a democracy, and that is that the public service must never be politicized.

• (1630)

Public servants are not politicizing this process but by making the accusations that Mr. Poilievre has put forward, and which again I emphasize to my amazement, the opposition has not intervened to correct him or to voice their view on the matter. We take away, we do away with the need to ensure that our democracy, in terms of the public service, is free of politics.

There's another thing, too, here. I remember Mr. Gerretsen suggesting this, although he didn't complete the thought, if I remember, when he sat at this committee a few weeks back. It was that we have to be very careful about how we decide to engage discussions around the public service because they're not here to defend themselves. When Mr. Poilievre makes these accusations he does so without Mr. Shugart and other public servants present. That to me is offensive because public servants are not to be attacked for all the reasons I've laid out. Also, it's not their position to engage in these debates.

Mr. Shugart realizes that but in a very honourable way has put forward a letter to this committee so he can be heard. If members of the opposition at that point wish to engage combatively with him I suppose that can happen. To launch these accusations without the Clerk of the Privy Council present is quite extraordinary and something I don't think I've seen at any committee level. I wonder if it's happened before in previous committees. Perhaps it has, as that parliamentary history is long. I'm going to assume, because of the strength of our democracy, that the times it has transpired are few and far between.

This point about not attacking the public servants who serve this country—

• (1635)

Mr. Pat Kelly (Calgary Rocky Ridge, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I hate to interrupt but Mr. Fragiskatos has repeatedly asserted, falsely, that wild accusations or criticisms were made of the Clerk of the Privy Council, which is not correct. Mr. Poilievre did not attack Mr. Shugart in any way. He pointed out that he is an employee of the Prime Minister—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: He said he was dependent on the Prime Minister.

Mr. Pat Kelly: In fact, he went on to assert repeatedly that he was, if I can quote him from the record, a heck of a guy. I don't think he at any point attacked the integrity or the—

The Chair: Mr. Kelly, we're into debate, unless you have a point of order.

If you want to make that point you're welcome to it.

Mr. Pat Kelly: There are two points. One point of order was on the correction of the record. The other point of order I have would be relevance. He strayed far beyond the subamendment.

The Chair: I can take relevance.

I'll go to Mr. Fragiskatos on relevance. I do think in part he was refuting an argument that was made in a previous discussion by a member.

Before I give you the floor again, Mr. Fragiskatos, Madam Clerk, you will have to give me a signal if Mr. Ste. Marie wants in. I usually can see him on my screen even when he's in the room but I can't see him tonight. You can give me a shout or wave your hand if he happens to want in.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It was an interesting point of order. I think you ruled it a point of debate. In that vein I would like to thank Mr. Kelly for his intervention because.... I see he's now put his thumbs up. He doesn't realize that he just gave me a new track to follow, one that is actually entirely relevant to the discussion at hand.

Mr. Kelly says that the attack didn't happen because Mr. Poilievre was actually honouring Mr. Shugart. He did have some good things to say. He's also put that on the record in previous meetings, but when Mr. Poilievre uses the word "dependent" it implies that the clerk is not "independent". To make that kind of an accusation against the Clerk of the Privy Council of Canada is probably the ultimate insult that can be launched towards the highest-ranking public servant at the federal level that this country has to offer.

I won't belabour that point, but it's an interesting intervention on the part of Mr. Kelly. He knows I have respect for him. I've been open about the way I've worked well with Mr. Kelly in the past. In fact, I first met him when we carried out pre-budget consultations a few years ago. If I recall, he has a background in business. He is known in the business community.

• (1640)

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): I have a point of order.

I'm sure that singing the praises of Mr. Kelly is something we'd all like to do, but it is not relevant to the subamendment. If Mr. Fragiskatos has nothing else to contribute to the debate, let us proceed to the vote.

The Chair: We have four other people in the lineup at the moment, including you, Mr Julian.

Mr. Fragiskatos, Mr. Julian has a valid point, though, on relevance.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I acknowledge your ruling there, Mr. Chair. I always strive to keep it relevant. If, for a few seconds there, I broke the 20-second rule that Mr. Julian has talked about in the past, I really apologize.

By the intervention here.... If the opposition wishes to raise points of order, it's obviously within their right to do so as MPs working on committee. I have to put on record here again that when the accusations were launched against the clerk by Mr. Poilievre, I didn't hear anything on the part of the NDP. Mr. Julian did not raise his voice. Those who replaced him at committee when Mr. Julian stepped out for a few hours in the last meeting that we had on the subject, and in meetings before that, nothing was put on the record from the NDP that has, at least in its rhetoric, consistently put forward a message that would have Canadians believe that they have real respect and admiration for public servants. Here we have Mr. Julian working with the Conservative opposition and Mr. Poilievre, which is an interesting alliance, to put it mildly and to be polite about it. I leave that there.

I know that others want to speak. I have more ideas on the importance of never attacking public servants, and by extension never politicizing the public service, or at least debates that would tend in that direction. I'm glad to bring those matters up later on, but I know that Ms. Dzerowicz is at the edge of her seat, getting ready to put forward a speech that we're all ready and excited to hear.

With that said, Mr. Chair, I will turn it over to my colleague from Davenport.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

That's quite an introduction, Ms. Dzerowicz. The floor is yours.

I can see it in Mr. Julian's eyes. He's looking for relevance already.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I want to say thank you to my colleague for giving me such an introduction. I'm afraid I'm probably going to disappoint. I am not ready with any oratorical speeches at the moment, although I probably have a few interesting things to say before I go into some prepared remarks. To be honest, a lot of it is expanding on where Mr. Fragiskatos has been. It's been exactly along the lines I've been thinking about, so I am expanding on some of his points.

Here is where I am going to start off. I am going to say that we on the government side do not believe—and I say this wholeheartedly—that we're hiding anything. I always like reminding everyone who is listening, and maybe some of the new colleagues who have joined us today at this committee meeting, that we actually had almost two months of testimony over the summer, just to look into

the WE Charity being selected to deliver the Canada student service grant, the CSSG.

We have heard very clearly through that testimony that there was no corruption, that there was no misuse of funds and that WE was actually independently selected by civil servants. The reason we rushed before the summer was that, we knew that university students really wanted to be able to access as much money as possible so they could fund their continued education. We went to a contribution agreement and not a sole-source contract for very deliberate reasons and we explained that, and we absolutely did this for students.

Not only did we introduce the CSSG program, but we introduced over \$9 billion in supports for students. The vast majority of that money has gone out. It's been very helpful, and it's been very helpful for my nephew, who is now at Brock University. I'll tell you, he laments that school is not fully back in session, but I know that he has taken advantage of some of the programs because he needed to. I wanted to put that out there because I think it's very important.

The 5,000-plus documents—I think there are around 5,600—do not have a smoking gun. There is no smoking gun there. What the subamendment before us tries to get to is to say, let's bring all the parties relevant to this matter—to the redactions, to the documents and to why things were redacted—around the table. Then we can address any outstanding questions and concerns and try to do it in a public way, in a transparent way, so that we can move on to pre-budget consultations. This is a motion I had introduced at our very first session, after we came back from prorogation and after we listened to the Speech from the Throne. That was, I believe, on October 8.

I found something in the paper that I want to share with you. This is from the Toronto Star weekend edition. There was a foundation that decided.... It was a group that actually had been very involved with the WE Charity for over 10 years. They took out a full-page ad and it's exactly relevant to what we're talking about. It says:

The Real #WEscandal is the Loss of #WEcharity

My name is Andy Stillman. I believe in smart, impactful philanthropy. That's why for nearly a decade, my family foundation supported WE Charity. But over the past months I've been confused, reading negative press about WE and its founders. If you're like me, you want to cut through the politics and get to the truth.

So that's exactly what I did. I hired top-rated, non-partisan investigators and forensic accountants, including Matt Torigian, former Deputy Solicitor General for the province of Ontario, and forensic accountant Dr. Al Rosen, who has appeared before the Supreme Court of Canada.

The review included over 5,000 pages released by the federal government, and nearly 400 documents released by WE Charity, as well as a full evaluation of WE Charity's finances and that of the social enterprise ME to WE that funds the charity.

The findings convinced me. So much so that I wanted to pay for these full-page ads to ensure that Canadians have the truth.

Here Are the Top Five Things the Experts Found:

1. The public service considered multiple other charities and groups, and the public service determined that We Charity was the best partner to administer the Canada Student Service Grant (CSSG) to help students.

● (1645)

2. The Prime Minister's Office did not predetermine that WE Charity would be selected to administer the Canada Student Service Grant.

3. WE Charity would have made no profit from the CSSG, but only been reimbursed for eligible expenses to administer the program. WE Charity was clearly motivated by helping students.

4. ME to WE Social Enterprise has created jobs to help lift people overseas from poverty and given 100% of its profits to WE Charity or reinvested funds for social purposes.

5. Marc and Craig are volunteers who never profited from WE Charity. In contrast, the Kielburger family are among the most generous financial supporters of WE Charity.

Simply put, there was no funny business. The real #WEscandal is politics causing the loss of an incredible Canadian charity which has helped millions of young people for over 25 years.

See the facts for yourself at FriendsofWE.org and learn how you can help right this wrong.

I remain a believer in WE Charity and I will continue to support them. Today's world needs more youth volunteerism, not less. We need to take a step back, think critically and check our assumptions.

It is my hope that these reports will renew your confidence in an important organization, like it has mine. If you want to make your voice heard, I hope you'll share your WE story of impact with FriendsofWE.org

I just want to say that because, again, it validates.... The reason we're actually talking about a subamendment to an amendment of an original motion is that the original motion had an implication that there were redactions done by our independent civil servants that were hiding things that were some kind of smoking gun, that were covering up some kind of big scandal or some sort of big cover-up. That is indeed not the case.

Again, because of the two months of testimony we've had.... I found it so amazing that this foundation decided it was going to hire its own independent investigators and forensic accountants to actually see if there was any funny business, and when it found the results, decided to go out and put out these ads, and it was really important to do so. I thought I'd start with that, because it is really important for us to put it on the table.

Getting back to the subamendment, again, the reason we want the subamendment to pass is that it was our attempt on the Liberal side to try to deal with any concerns that there was some sort of document that hid some big secret or cover-up, so that we could move as fast as we could to pre-budget consultations. Now, because we've had a number of discussions, it feels like where we are at is that there is agreement that we'll eliminate cabinet confidence and we'll eliminate anything of national security. However, I think where we are sitting is that there are some redactions within the original set of documents that went to the law clerk that had zero relevance to WE and that never needed to be submitted, but because they were just part of the documents they ended up being submitted and were automatically redacted. What is important to state is that if those sections were not included as part of the submission, no one would have ever complained, because it was never part of the original intention that they be included.

Anyway, I don't know if any of that is clear but we have a few hours to actually make it clearer.

Where I am going to take us is actually what my colleague, Mr. Fragiskatos, talked about when he indicated that Mr. Shugart, our Clerk of the Privy Council, had submitted a very clear letter to the Clerk of the Committee indicating the following:

I am writing further to recent discussions at the Standing Committee on Finance.

My colleagues and I would be pleased to make ourselves available to appear before the committee to speak to the redactions that were made if it would be useful to do so.

I know that we've been discussing the documents requested by this committee for some time now, and I think it is fair to say there is some disagreement among parties in relation to the redactions of non-relevant cabinet confidences by the public service. As well, there seems to be clear-cut confusion as to who redacted which set of documents that are floating out there.

• (1650)

If you look at the subamendment we've put on the table, we've actually proposed to bring forward to the committee both sets of documents. The set of documents that is coming forward that was redacted by our independent civil servants, that's package number one. Package number two is the package that came back from the law clerk, which was further redacted. That way we can see the differences.

In any case, there seemed to be some confusion in regard to who redacted which set of documents. We have the very comprehensive set of documents released by the government House leader, which had some light redactions in relation to personal privacy and unrelated cabinet confidences. We then have redactions completed by the law clerk, which were intensive.

On the first set of documents, the redactions and instructions came from our law clerk. Mr. Fragiskatos talked a bit about how it was the clerk who gave very clear instructions to all departments as to what information needed to be released. I want to add to the discussion that cabinet confidence is very clearly defined. There are six short points that are defined in terms of confidences of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada. It's in a subsection of our Privacy Act, which states:

70(1) This Act does not apply to confidences of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, including, without restricting the generality of the foregoing, any information contained in

- (a) memoranda the purpose of which is to present proposals or recommendations to Council;
- (b) discussion papers the purpose of which is to present background explanations, analyses of problems or policy options to Council for consideration by Council in making decisions;
- (c) agenda of Council or records recording deliberations or decisions of Council;
- (d) records used for or reflecting communications or discussions between ministers of the Crown on matters relating to the making of government decisions or the formulation of government policy;
- (e) records the purpose of which is to brief ministers of the Crown in relation to matters that are before, or are proposed to be brought before, Council or that are the subject of communications or discussions referred to in paragraph (d); and
- (f) draft legislation.

It's important to point that out for anyone who is listening. To be honest, I had to learn this as well. I learned it as part of all of these discussions. It's very clear, when formal documents are actually requested, that there are very clear guidelines about how to define cabinet confidences, how to define items of national security and how to define things that are irrelevant. I wanted to make sure that I put that out there.

As a result of the proper instructions that came from the Clerk of the Privy Council, several departments undertook to release an unprecedented level of information, including cabinet confidences relating to the CSSG, where 5,000 pages were disclosed, including documents that would never had seen the light of day.... It says here in my notes that they would “never have seen the light of day under the previous Harper government”.

That comment just highlights the point that our government is trying its best to be as transparent and as open as possible. The release of an unprecedented number of documents is part of that. I would also point out, and it's important to note, our Prime Minister did not prorogue Parliament until all of these documents were formerly released to the public.

That's a very important note to reiterate, because to me that is another clear action our Prime Minister took that showed there was no desire on our part to not release the full documents, as was agreed to at our July 7 finance meeting.

The release of these documents is significant. The opposition members can now take umbrage with the fact that some redactions were made by public servants, but it's to be expected. I explained that there are very clear definitions about what redactions need to be made. I would also add that there's probably a lot of training that goes into making sure that we only redact what we need to redact, and everything else is made public.

• (1655)

To my friends in the Conservative Party, as they will know, Mr. Poilievre especially, typical cabinet meetings are not solely focused on one topic, particularly during this ongoing pandemic. Countless important topics are discussed at cabinet, and relevant decisions are taken in order to ensure proper functioning and responsible government. Reasonable redactions were made to unrelated topics, including these cabinet documents, so as to allow for their release. This isn't out of the ordinary, and I want to make sure that I reiterate that.

I'll move on here.

We have in possession this letter from Mr. Shugart, who wishes to come before this committee along with the relevant deputy ministers to discuss the documents that were released by the Government of Canada. Because of Mr. Shugart's position and his initial commitment to release all documentation related to the Canada student service grant, he is, in fact, uniquely positioned to answer our questions.

Therefore, it begs the question: Why does the opposition not want to hear from the clerk and the relevant deputy ministers? I'd also ask, as it relates to the subamendment, why we would not want to bring our Clerk of the Privy Council and the law clerk together at the exact same time. This is what the subamendment also highlights.

I also want to mention something that Mr. Poilievre indicated in the last session. I don't know if other Conservatives also mentioned it, but I do recall Mr. Poilievre saying this a number of times. There seemed to be an implication that the Clerk of the Privy Council is not independent, and I think this is troubling. I pointed out very quickly that, if you're in government—and the Conservatives were

in government for a while—Canadians and all other parties assume that our public service will be independent and act independently, and that they will do that irrespective of whichever party is in government. I absolutely believe that this is true right now.

If Mr. Poilievre or other members believe that, for some reason, our public service is not independent anymore, this is a much bigger issue that we need to address. It is not the focus and should not be the focus right now, but I'm pointing out something that is very troubling in terms of that line of questioning or that type of indirect sort of accusation, which it is fairly direct. I truly believe that our Clerk of the Privy Council, who had—and this has been pointed out—been a deputy minister for Mr. Poilievre when he was a cabinet minister in previous governments.... At that point Mr. Shugart acted independently, and I absolutely believe that the Clerk of the Privy Council, who is now Mr. Shugart, is acting independently as well.

I was going to say that it's a slippery slope, but I don't even think it's a slippery slope. I don't even think there should be any kind of a slope that we should be going down in terms of saying our civil servants are not independent and are not acting in the best interests of all Canadians.

Where I am going to go from here? I think one of the things I'd like to get to is the whole thing of why. To be honest, I'd prefer if we were on pre-budget consultations right now. I'm not quite sure why it is that our opposition is not allowing us to hear from the Clerk of the Privy Council and from our law clerk. Honestly, I've never heard of parliamentarians refusing to hear from these independent civil servants, and the very act of refusing to allow them to testify here at committee is effectively politicizing our public service.

The public service in this country is expressly non-partisan for a reason. It's absolutely unacceptable that the opposition is taking the position that they have. Let's put partisanship and politics aside for a moment. Let's acknowledge the fact that, at the instruction of the Clerk of the Privy Council, the public service compiled documentation related to the Canada student service grant.

In keeping with the motion of this committee, cabinet confidences were removed. That is a standard practice, and I talked a lot about that before, and I know everybody knows about it. The clerk added only one caveat to the release of these documents, that personal information was to be removed from the documents. Even then, the names of political staff and public servants were left visible. Only phone numbers and unrelated family member names were removed, as the clerk indicated in his letter to us.

• (1700)

The law clerk, upon receiving the documents on August 8, went about his duty to review the documents for personal information, as indicated by the committee motion, and redacted appropriately. Those are the blacked-out documents the opposition members are waving around in, as it says here, “moments of grandeur”, but I think it's also the opposition waving around the same documents in French and in English.

I want to get this on the record. I have the utmost respect for the parliamentary law clerk and the work he does. I know that the role of the law clerk is essential to the functioning of Parliament and to protecting its rights and privileges. Like most lawyers, he will always defend the rights of his clients strenuously. His legal opinions will always take the most conservative view of Parliament being the ultimate authority amongst the three branches of government. This makes complete sense. That's his job. I'm happy to have him on my side. I think he's done great work on this file under the most strenuous circumstances, particularly the pandemic. However, the Clerk of the Privy Council and public servants at large also have inherent responsibilities. For them it's to the Crown, to protect Crown secrets and uphold and enforce the statutes and legislation passed by legislators.

This leads us to the normal tension that exists, and not just now. It has always existed. There will always be tension between the law clerk and the Clerk of the Privy Council as it relates to this type of release of documents. The law clerk will always take the most expansive position on the rights of parliamentarians for access to documents. The Clerk of the Privy Council, and by extension the public servants, will always take the opposite position, that cabinet confidences have to be protected and upheld at all costs.

Typically, we resolve this tension through negotiation, where a happy medium is found. I think that is where we ideally want to go. I think that's the reason we proposed this subamendment. Let's bring both to the table. As I have said time and time again, we already proved through the testimony in the two months over the summer that there is no scandal and there is no cover-up, as Mr. Poilievre, I think, is very fond of theatrically stating there is. There is no smoking gun in terms of any of the 5,000-plus documents.

Don't just take our word for it. You also have this independent foundation that had been very involved with WE and became very troubled with all these allegations about WE. They independently hired Dr. Al Rosen, a former deputy solicitor general for the Province of Ontario and forensic accountant, who has appeared before the Supreme Court of Canada, to also validate that, as he said, there is "no funny business".

With that, the only thing I would leave with everyone before I pass the baton to the next person who would like to speak is that at this point I will tell you that I am really quite worried about our pre-budget consultations. I wonder whether we can really give the proper time that is needed to the almost 800 organizations, individuals and corporations who have made submissions to us. I have an interview that I'm supposed to be doing about what happens if there are no pre-budget consultations.

I truly believe in the work of our government. I truly believe in the work of this committee. I believe we have important work ahead of us to not only listen to those who are going through an unprecedented pandemic but also to hear their very best ideas about how we can support not only them as organizations, as corporations, but also Canadians overall, how we can get our economy back on track, how we can create a strong economic foundation from which to pivot after we come out of this pandemic, how we can also set ourselves up to be even more competitive and address some of the structural financial issues we have had in the past, how we can put our capital to work to become as competitive as we can,

and how to address maybe some of the bigger issues we have in terms of trade surpluses.

It's really important for us to try to get past this. I've heard Mr. Julian say a couple of times—I know he's about to speak, so he'll probably respond to this—that he has put all these ideas on the table.

Quite honestly, Mr. Julian, I have not heard all your ideas on the table. I've only heard a "no", or there seems to be a reluctance to actually agree to the subamendment so that we can maybe bring all the actors to the table to try to get past this so that we can have a certain number of meetings and considerations for pre-budget consultations, and put forward these very excellent ideas to our Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and to our government so that they can be incorporated into the much-awaited and much-needed budget 2021.

• (1705)

With that, thank you so much, Mr. Chair and everyone, for lending your ears.

Thank you.

• (1710)

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

Next on my speaking order is Mr. Julian and then Ms. Koutrakis.

I still have Mr. Fragiskatos on it. I don't know if you're on after that or if you just didn't take your "raise hand" function down.

Mr. Julian, the floor is yours.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, could the clerk read the subamendment please?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Evelyn Lukyniuk): It is that the amendment be amended by adding after the words "current session" the following:

That the committee requests the complete package of documents provided to the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel of the House of Commons by relevant Deputy Ministers or the signatories of the transmittal letters, as well as the final package of documents that the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel of the House of Commons approved for release, that both of the document packages be provided to the Committee no later than October 19, 2020, and that after the committee reviews the two different versions of documents, the committee invite each of the relevant Deputy Ministers or the signatories of the transmittal letters, as well as the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel of the House of Commons, to give testimony regarding the redactions applied to the documents that were requested and granted in the motion adopted on July 7, 2020, and that until such a time as this testimony is complete, debate on the main motion and amendment from Pierre Poilievre be suspended and that the Chair be authorized to schedule these witnesses, and convene a meeting to resume debate on Pierre Poilievre's motion once these meetings have taken place.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, I'd like to propose the following amendment to the subamendment: It is that we strike everything from "until"—the final sentence that suspends and destroys the point of privilege—and that we add "and, following a vote on the point of privilege, that the committee proceed immediately to committee discussion on pre-budget hearings."

The Chair: Can you, Mr. Julian, go through that again a little more slowly?

Mr. Peter Julian: It's the final sentence. Perhaps the clerk could read it again. It starts with "until".

The Chair: It begins, "until such a time as this testimony is complete".

The Clerk: It is:

...until such a time as this testimony is complete, debate on the main motion and amendment from Pierre Poilievre be suspended and that the Chair be authorized to schedule these witnesses, and convene a meeting to resume debate on Pierre Poilievre's motion once these meetings have taken place.

Mr. Peter Julian: Again, my amendment to the subamendment is to strike everything from "until" to the end of the subamendment, and to replace it with "and that the committee proceed immediately following a vote on the point of privilege motion to discussion of the pre-budget hearings."

The Chair: Madam Clerk, I have to ask this of you because we are into an amendment of the subamendment to the amendment of the motion. Do we need unanimous consent to do that? I believe we do.

I'll wait for the clerk to respond. She knows the rules better than I do.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We are waiting for the clerk to give me clarification on that point. I don't believe it's allowed, but go ahead with your point of order.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I wonder if text can be sent. Mr. Julian did read that, but it's always easier if the text is made available to members, so that we can further consider.

The Chair: Yes. Could you read your amendment to the subamendment again, Peter, while the clerk is clarifying this point?

Mr. Peter Julian: From the word "until" to the end—

• (1715)

The Chair: I'm a little lost. You're removing before "until" or after after "until?"

Mr. Peter Julian: Including the word "until" right to the end of the subamendment, I'm striking that and replacing it with "and the committee move immediately following the vote on the motion of privilege to consideration of the pre-budget hearings".

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: I'm going to need clarification from the clerk before we do anything.

What is your point of order?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I was simply going to ask if that is available in French as well.

The Chair: Okay.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: The motion is to strike everything from the word "until" and to add a point that asks the committee to move immediately to consideration of the pre-budget hearings, following the vote on the motion of privilege.

Mr. Ste-Marie will say that it's not a perfect translation, but it's the best I can do.

[English]

The Chair: Madam Clerk, I think I have to rule the amendment out of order, but I'd like clarification from you.

The Clerk: Thank you.

I'll just draw your attention to pages 542 to 543 of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, third edition. At the last line it says, "Since subamendments cannot be further amended, a Member wishing to change one under debate must wait until it is defeated and then propose a new subamendment".

The Chair: It is out of order, Mr. Julian. This one will have to be dealt with. It's amending the subamendment, so I guess you'd have to start in a new place.

Mr. Julian, the floor is still yours.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

We've been hearing from Liberal members all along that it's something about having the Clerk of the Privy Council before committee. That is obviously not the case.

Their subamendment kills the motion of privilege. The core of the problem is that for a month we've had Liberal members absolutely stonewalling and stopping the work of the finance committee and refusing to proceed to pre-budget hearings. The reason they are doing that isn't because of some differences around witnesses. I don't think there is a single member of the committee who objects to hearing from the Clerk of the Privy Council or the law clerk on this. It's to kill the motion of privilege. This is the core of the issue.

The Speaker, who is elected by all members of Parliament, has the ability to rule on this motion of privilege. All the committee is doing is flagging what is a grave concern. The grave concern is the censorship, substantially, of 1,500 pages of documents. That is what was delivered to the finance committee in response to the motion that I tabled on July 7, which was voted on by the entire committee.

We have substantial censorship and redaction of the documents. The law clerk drew our attention to this immediately. We have a motion of privilege that is a very valid motion, but government members refuse to have this committee rule on that and actually have a vote. Why? What is in the documents that they don't want us to see?

The issue is not, as the government members have tried to put forward, whether or not the Clerk of the Privy Council comes to committee or whether or not the law clerk comes to the committee. The issue is trying to kill a motion of privilege. As you know, Mr. Chair, when a motion of privilege is submitted to the Speaker it has to be in a timely manner.

With the filibuster that the Liberals have undertaken for the last month we can justify not submitting it to the Speaker in a timely manner. For the committee to decide—

• (1720)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have a point of order, Chair.

Mr. Peter Julian: —that it is not going to proceed with it, that means the motion of privilege is killed—

The Chair: Mr. Julian, I do have a point of order. I'll have to take it first and then I'll let you proceed.

Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Chair.

I'm listening to Mr. Julian and he is implying that improper redactions have occurred. That's quite the accusation, so I have a hard time following the argument without disagreeing very strongly—

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, I don't believe that is a point of order. If you want to enter that into debate, you're more than welcome to, because Mr. Julian has made that point. I'll go back to Mr. Julian, because that is debate.

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The reality is that I do feel it was improperly censored. A lot of members of this committee feel the same way. It is not up to me or to any member of this committee to voice their opinion. All we can do is inform the Speaker of our consideration around this, and it is up to the Speaker to judge. That's the issue here. We believe we should be referring this matter to the Speaker.

Government members have been stonewalling now for a month, destroying any possibility of having the thorough pre-budget hearings that committee members would like to have engaged in. They are basically stonewalling the progress of the committee.

If government members feel there is a way through this, it is exactly the amendment to the subamendment that I just tabled. If government members really just want to hear from the clerk and the law clerk, then they should amend their own subamendment, allow for the motion of privilege to be voted on and refer it to the Speaker. The Speaker determines—none of us—whether or not there are grounds for a violation of privilege. That's up to the Speaker, elected by all of us.

If government members are saying they have no confidence in the Speaker, I would be very surprised. In fact, I would be stunned that they would be that critical of the officer of Parliament, the Speaker, who we have chosen collectively as members of Parliament. I have confidence in the Speaker. I have confidence in his ruling on this in an independent way based on what the committee refers to him.

If government members really want to proceed to the pre-budget hearings, if government members really have confidence in the Speaker, and if they are saying, also, they'd like to hear from the Clerk of the Privy Council and the law clerk, I'm fine with that, of course. They then have to amend their subamendment, pull out the part that kills the motion of privilege, that no longer makes it timely, that no longer allows this committee to report back to the Speaker, and ask the Speaker his opinion on this matter. They should amend it as I've suggested. They have the power to do so, and I

hope they do so, rather than continuing to engage in this filibuster, which has stopped the work of the finance committee now for over a month.

They have many different paths they can take to work with the opposition members. They have refused all so far because their intent is to kill the motion of privilege. Their intent is to withdraw the right of the Speaker to rule on this issue. I am in complete disagreement with their approach and I find disingenuous their speeches this evening.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

I believe now on my list is Ms. Koutrakis first, followed by Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Koutrakis, the floor is yours.

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

I want to thank my colleague Mr. Julian for his comments. We, too, have confidence in the Speaker of the House, as does he and all of our colleagues in the House. We also have a lot of confidence in the law clerk to make the judgment based on fact. I think both arguments can be made and should be considered before we make a final decision on how to proceed.

I can remember a time not long ago, watching the proceedings of this place, where members of Parliament were able to set partisanship aside, work together and come to a consensus on how to handle the issues of the day. It really is a shame to see the polarizing politics that have taken hold in other countries throughout the world continue to creep into our own Parliament of Canada.

Unfortunately, this is most present in the tactics or strategy of my colleagues from opposition parties. Before Mr. Julian begins to play defence for Mr. Poilievre and tries to call relevance on me, I'm hoping for a few moments of latitude because I will be coming to my point in regard to the subamendment, not the subamendment of the subamendment that Mr. Julian discussed, but the first one. However, it requires a few moments to lay the track before arriving at that station.

It is so clear in the attitude of my Conservative colleagues, especially, that they have fully bought into the misinformation tactics of the extreme right. It's never been more present than in the initial purpose for the debate that we're having here today. We are here on Mr. Poilievre's privilege motion, and in debating that we have an amendment and further a subamendment on the floor, and perhaps another one now in regard to that motion. The initial motion is what is key here. It is the reason behind the subamendment before this committee today.

The Clerk of the Privy Council is an expert witness on the release of cabinet confidence. It was Mr. Shugart who agreed to release all documentation related to the Canada student service grant, even prior to this committee making any requests. The appearance of the Clerk of the Privy Council really is important as it relates back to Mr. Poilievre's initial motion. The truth is, this matter of privilege raised by the honourable member is nothing but what appears to be a cheap partisan stunt. It is complete mistruth wrapped in a procedural bow meant to further the narrative of the Conservatives. That is a tactic of the extreme right, which we have seen throughout the world as of late—this penchant for casting the truth aside and continuing to make an argument that has no basis in reality.

As many of my colleagues have said before this committee, over 5,000 pages of documents were released by the Government of Canada with all information relating to the design and implementation of the Canada student service grant present and accounted for. I think the opposition was just plainly dumbfounded at the level of detail that the non-partisan public servants left unredacted. Mr. Poilievre must have been completely stunned to see that documents stamped “Secret” and “Confidence of the Queen's Privy Council” were actually included in the documents and unredacted. We can find out exactly why those documents were included if we have the clerk come before us and testify about that, yet for some strange reason my opposition colleagues are blocking that attempt.

It's a whole new world, when opposition members are blocking the appearance of the non-partisan head of the public service. It's truly a real shame.

Getting back to my point, I'm very sure that my colleagues were shocked at the level of detail included in these documents. At this point, the Conservatives and perhaps other opposition colleagues had a problem. They were likely sitting there thinking that since all the documents were actually released, between that and the testimony, they have nothing.

• (1725)

I cannot imagine the sinking feeling they had when they realized this, yet what is the truth? To my colleagues on the other side, truth is in the eye of the beholder. Taking a page from these extreme-right groups that have sprung up around the world, they have perhaps decided to obfuscate and create their own narrative. When you think about it, this explains why colleagues do not want the Clerk of the Privy Council to testify before us today, because his testimony would very likely crush the narrative that they have been trying to peddle for weeks now.

As I noted earlier in my remarks, there was a time when civility would win out and parliamentarians would work together to fix the problems of the day. There was a time when the truth would have been accepted when the facts were presented. Unfortunately, we no longer live in those times. We now live in a time when, if, after being presented with the facts, your argument is disproven, you double down anyway. When you are presented with expert witnesses—

• (1730)

Mr. Philip Lawrence (Northumberland—Peterborough South, CPC): I have a point of order.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: —you attack their credibility or stop them from speaking.

The Chair: Ms. Koutrakis, there is a point of order from Mr. Lawrence.

Mr. Lawrence, go ahead.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: I'm a patient man. I have a five-year-old and a six-year-old, and they've taught me patience, but when we're talking about Mr. Julian perhaps being part of the extreme right, I think we've gone too far. I have no idea how this has anything to do with the subamendment.

The Chair: I don't—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: That wasn't a point of order. It was a point of debate.

Mr. Fragiskatos, is yours debate or a point of order?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I believe it is a point of order, Mr. Chair. It is simply a matter of being respectful and collegial towards colleagues to allow them to finish making their points and not twisting around their words for political purposes.

The Chair: I don't think that's a point of order, Mr. Fragiskatos. That's debate.

We'll be going back to Ms. Koutrakis.

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

I thank my colleague for his point of order. I guess we're going to agree to disagree on that point.

I'll go back to my comments and say that I have never, in all my time as an MP—and it's been just a little bit over a year—seen an opposition party refuse to allow a public servant with relevant information to testify before a committee, especially when that public servant is the top boss. I've said this before in previous comments, and I echo what my colleague Ms. Dzerowicz said earlier. If we place doubt in the Clerk of the Privy Council, then we absolutely have a much bigger issue on our hands than debating the subamendment to the subamendment to perhaps another subamendment.

It was clear from the outset what this committee requested in regard to documentation, and it was clear from the testimony of the Clerk of the Privy Council here what we would receive from him. In fact, again, over 5,000 pages of relevant information were released with limited redaction. The clerk noted that he would endeavour to ensure that this committee would have the information it needed to fully understand what occurred with the design and implementation of the Canada student service grant.

He kept up his end of the bargain. My colleagues on the other side know full well that the redactions present in those documents are about unrelated matters, but due to the nature of the document, they were redacted to allow for the information about the CSSG to be present. The law clerk himself redacted further, not only when he received the documents but he redacted some of the redactions. That is my understanding.

The motion by this committee recognized that these unrelated cabinet confidences would be redacted. This committee also understood that the parliamentary law clerk would remove some personal information from the documents as well. The Clerk of the Privy Council could be saying this himself if we were to invite him here. I'm happy to hear that Mr. Julian says he wouldn't have a problem to have Mr. Shugart before us because I really believe we should, sooner rather than later. He actually took the extraordinary step of leaving in the names of public servants, and advised the Privacy Commissioner that this would be the case. The Clerk of the Privy Council cannot control the fact that it was the motion by this committee that later caused the law clerk to redact those very names that the clerk endeavoured to release. If he could be here, he could explain that positioning himself.

This committee received these documents on time. They were forwarded to the law clerk, as was expressly stated in the initial motion, and here we have the law clerk completing his own redactions right around the time of prorogation. The law clerk released these documents to the members of this committee. The interesting thing here is that clearly the redactions by the law clerk are much more intensive than the redactions in the original documents handed over by the public service.

In order to ensure full transparency, the government House leader released the less-redacted documents anyway. In essence, the Government of Canada fulfilled the promise of the Clerk of the Privy Council and the request of this committee vis-à-vis the motion requesting documents. If the Clerk of the Privy Council were allowed to testify, he would back up this very simple fact.

This brings us back around again to why we are still here debating this subamendment. Quite simply, we are here because the opposition majority cannot accept that they were actually given everything they wanted. It doesn't square with the narrative that they are trying to put out in public, just as the testimony of the clerk would not fit the narrative they are trying to put out in public. Here we are debating a subamendment to an amendment to a motion that, in the end, is just a procedural trick to try to further this cheap political stunt that is now falling apart day by day.

We are weeks into this at this point. We have pre-budget consultations that this committee is mandated to complete, and I fully agree with Mr. Julian that we have to get to that.

• (1735)

We have a fix before us. With one simple vote we could set aside Mr. Poilievre's motion today, not defeat it but set it aside. We can invite the head of the public service, the Clerk of the Privy Council, Mr. Shugart, to this committee, and then he, along with relevant deputy ministers, can present their thinking and reasoning around the documents that were provided.

They could walk us through how all discussions and decisions regarding the Canada student service grant were unredacted. They can walk us through why some matters were redacted, and how they were unrelated to our topic of study. They can finally put to rest any concerns of the opposition.

I know this wouldn't fit the narrow political interests that the majority opposition has tried to push. I know this would completely

blow apart the fictitious narrative that Mr. Poilievre is trying to spin; however, so be it. Mr. Poilievre and the other opposition members want to get to the truth, so here we are. Let's get to the truth. It's time for the non-partisan head of our public service to come before us and give us the truth.

I have done this before. I am going to repeat my comments. I urge colleagues to put aside their partisan differences, to finally return to past times of collegiality and decorum in Parliament, to remember we are here in this place to serve our constituents and to put their interests first. Let's show some respect for our professional and non-partisan members of the public service, not use them as ploys in a political game.

Mr. Chair, I ask colleagues to work with us to approve the subamendment to invite the Clerk of the Privy Council and other deputy ministers here forthwith.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis. I am hopeful for discussions on the side as well.

I have on my list Ms. Khalid, Mr. McLeod, Mr. Fragiskatos and Ms. Dzerowicz.

Go ahead, Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the members for indulging my participation in the committee today.

Mr. Chair, if it's okay with you, can I please concede a few minutes of my time to Ms. Dzerowicz?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

It's my understanding that every MP is an associate member of the committees of Parliament, so it's no indulgence at all. Ms. Khalid is here by right, and she is very polite and generous to talk about indulgence. It's our pleasure to have her here. I want to put that on the record.

The Chair: It's absolutely our pleasure to have her here, and Mr. Lawrence. We've had others from time to time. You are sworn in, Ms. Khalid, in place of Mr. Fraser, I believe, and notices went to the clerk that you are in his place.

• (1740)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much for that.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: As I was saying, Mr. Chair, is it okay to have Ms. Dzerowicz take a few minutes of my time at this point? I'd like to add on to what she has to say as well.

The Chair: It's okay if you're ceding some of your time to Ms. Dzerowicz.

Go ahead, Ms. Dzerowicz.

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

Thank you to my honourable colleague Ms. Khalid.

Welcome to our committee.

I appreciate the nobleness of Mr. Fragiskatos' comments. He is indeed correct.

Sometimes when people make a point, I kind of forget it. As I get older I do forget my comments and I prefer to make them almost right away. Mr. Julian made a number of comments, and I want to address them directly.

The first is that we're holding up the finance committee from moving forward to pre-budget consultations. In this meeting I've not said this and it's very important for me to reiterate it.

On October 8, when we first convened as the finance committee after we had elected our chair and our vice-chairs, I presented a pre-budget consultation motion. I was the first one out the door to do so. We could have gone ahead with it if Mr. Julian or any one of the opposition members decided they were going to support it. That did not happen.

Mr. Poilievre interrupted our ability to move to a vote to decide on pre-budget consultations with a motion on a point of privilege, following which we have gone to a subamendment to an amendment of the original motion. I want to make sure I put that on the table. We wanted to go right into pre-budget consultations. I do not take lightly anyone saying that in any way the Liberal government team has been trying to stop us from moving directly to pre-budget consultations.

I want to get to Mr. Poilievre's motion. In his point of privilege that he says we should vote on, he said, "Your Committee has concluded that the government's response failed to comply with the order"—which is the July 7 order—in terms of having all of the WE documents submitted to the public and the law clerk for redaction.

We have spent every single meeting since October 8 proving that we have completely followed through on that July 7 motion. We've explained why we followed through on it. We have explained what cabinet confidences were. We explained the transmittal letters. We have gone through every single bit of it. We even gave examples ad nauseam of what was actually redacted. We then put the subamendment on the table in order to say, look, even if you don't believe us, why don't we bring the people to the table? Let's bring the Clerk of the Privy Council. Let's bring the law clerk. Let's bring any relevant deputy ministers, and let's, in public, transparently, deal with this once and for all, because we don't think there is any smoking gun. There is nothing that we are trying to cover.

We proposed that motion fairly early on, and that was, again, not taken up by Mr. Julian or by any of the other opposition members. I do not take lightly anyone saying that we have in any way tried to hold up the pre-budget consultations. If anything, we have done our very best at every moment to try to move as quickly and as expeditiously as possible to pre-budget consultations.

I want to reiterate another point I've made. Mr. Julian has proposed zero new ideas for how we can actually break this logjam.

With that I want to say a huge thanks to Ms. Khalid for allowing me a few minutes to address Mr. Julian's comments.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dzerowicz.

We'll go back to Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

As Mr. Fragiskatos pointed out, I am an associate member of this committee but I only watch the committee proceedings from the outside. I don't get to see what is happening within the committee and to understand the intricate delicacies of all the motions and the various amendments to the motions, and then the various subamendments to the motions, and then, as Mr. Julian tried to do today, a subamendment to the subamendment.

As I get on the phone with my constituents about what happens in Ottawa, I had a very interesting call with a young lady who had been following what's been happening with this specific topic over the past number of months. She asked me to explain to her what is going on. She asked what exactly is the objective of doing all this? What are we trying to prove here? Is this going to better our government services in any way? How is this going to impact me personally?

I listened to her and her frustrations, and initially I started to try to explain exactly what was going on. I think we both got lost in all the proceedings, etc., and then she told me to stop. She asked if I could tell her one thing that was going to help her as my constituent out of all these documents that were being put forward, all this questioning of the integrity of the public service or the integrity of x, y or z people among those whom we elected to serve us. I thought about it for a minute and I said I really couldn't point to a single thing that would impact the challenges she was having at this time with affordability, housing, finding affordable child care, worrying about her kids and their safety in their school—how that's going to go—and her job.

As I sat here today, watched the discussions with intrigue and saw the subamendments being proposed here in front of me, I tried to get a grasp of this myself. I think my two cents to this debate would be to help us understand and to add that extra value of why we're sitting in these seats in the first place, why we are working long hours, why we travel all across the country or halfway across the country, whether it's virtually or in person, to sit in the House and to debate a lot of these important issues.

Really why we do all of that is to serve Canadians, to ensure that the time we're spending in these debates is of value to individual Canadians and to young families who are trying to thrive and strive in this very serious pandemic, and to make sure that the health and well-being of Canadians is well taken care of. I think that's our obligation as members of Parliament, regardless of what side of the aisle we sit on.

I know for a fact how hard each one of us works. I sat on committee with Mr. Falk in the last Parliament. We were on the justice committee together and we had such a wonderful relationship with respect to the work we were doing in that committee, again serving Canadians.

We've travelled together—

• (1745)

The Chair: Ms. Khalid, I believe Ms. Jansen is making a point. I see her waving her hands around. I don't hear her through the system, but I think she is making a point on relevance, although I know Mr. Falk wanted you to talk about him on the justice committee.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: If yours is a point of order, go ahead, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I believe it is a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I don't know Ms. Jansen very well. Obviously, she is a newly elected MP. I would just ask her, if she does, indeed, have an issue, something that she wishes to raise by way of a point of order, that she actually formally intervene because it's not parliamentary practice to wave one's arms. I also noticed that when she does have particular issues, she seems to be laughing along. I'm not sure if that is done as a measure of goodwill or if that's done because she disagrees with the speaker.

• (1750)

The Chair: I don't think that is the—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: She can simply say, "I have a point of order," and intervene that way, rather than forcing you to guess, which is very unfair to you, Mr. Chair.

Frankly, the point of order that she apparently wished to make is one that I take issue with. Ms. Khalid was staying entirely relevant, and I think was putting on the record very pertinent points.

The Chair: We'll go back to Ms. Khalid—

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I have a point of order.

The Chair: —and let her start—

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: —and Ms. Jansen wasn't waving her fist. It was just her hand.

Ms. Dzerowicz, go ahead.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Do we have quorum? I see that there are some Conservatives missing and Mr. Julian is missing. Perhaps we don't have quorum anymore.

The Chair: We do have quorum.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I'm sorry. It was just in case.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much for that, Mr. Chair. I do appreciate your proactivity and your diligence in ensuring that members all have their say and are well respected with their perspectives here in this committee.

As I was saying, the point that was being raised that I was trying to lend to this debate is an outside perspective of what the Canadians we serve as members of Parliament see and what they interpret when they see all of these amendments, subamendments, subamendments to the subamendments, and all of this questioning

around the integrity of the public service, the integrity of elected officials, regardless of what side of the aisle they're on.

I was giving my personal anecdotes as to what Canadians see, what my constituents see, the feedback that they've been providing me over the past number of months, as well as the issues they've been telling me that they're faced with on a daily basis as they deal with this pandemic.

There have been a number of organizations that have reached out to me, to my constituency office, to my Hill office, to ask if they could participate in the pre-budget consultations. I know how important it is that we hear from Canadians to really form that policy and to really provide that assistance and that help to Canadians as we spend so much time travelling across the country and doing that hard work that we're elected to do.

I'll hit on one more phone call that I had quite recently. It was from a gentleman who had just at the beginning of this pandemic lost his job, and he was able to get the CERB to be able to keep the lights on in his home. As we were having a discussion last week about his job situation and his intrigue with the new CRB and when that was going to be put forward, he again asked me, from that public perspective, what is going on in the House. I again tried to explain to him, and he used a very interesting phrase that I questioned him on.

He said, "It looks like, Ms. Khalid, you've been CoNDP'd," and I said, "What's a CoNDP?" He said, "Well, it looks like the House has been taken hostage, dealing with and just falling into completely irrelevant matters, into amendments and subamendments and all of this extra language that just does not impact Canadians at all." I told him that using a term like CoNDP is probably not the best way—and if Mr. Chair had been there on that call, he would probably have told him it was unparliamentary.

However, it's again to the point that we need to ensure that whatever we're doing as parliamentarians, we're doing with integrity and we're doing it with a commitment and a focus to support Canadians in this really important time. They have been telling us consistently that now is the time that they need that help and that support.

I will leave it there, Mr. Chair. I see that you've unmuted yourself. Perhaps it is to talk about something?

• (1755)

The Chair: I was going to ask you to tie this into the subamendment to the amendment, if you could.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Absolutely. As I said, I have been trying to give that outside perspective on what Canadians are seeing when they see all of these debates. To them, in layman's language, they just do not understand why we're spending so much government time and resources, when what they really want and what they elected us to do is to provide support to them during this pandemic during the toughest time in our country in our history.

I will leave my remarks there, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much again for your indulgence.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will go to Mr. McLeod, who is followed by Mr. Fragiskatos and then Mr. Kelly.

Go ahead, Mr. McLeod.

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

It's certainly an honour for me to sit here to serve on the finance committee. I have been doing exactly that for the last three years. I'm trying to listen very patiently to everything that's being said.

I have been around for a long time on this committee. I'm second only to you in terms of longevity and tied with Mr. Poilievre. Over the last three years, we've certainly all worked really hard to speak freely and allow people to speak freely, although it has been a little bit challenging sometimes.

Over the last couple of years, our committee has done some very good and important work that we can be proud of, from our review of the Proceeds of Crime (Money Laundering) and Terrorist Financing Act to our hearings on multiple budget implementation acts, our meetings earlier this year on our government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the work and the efforts we made to deal with the WE Charity issue. A lot of information was requested and received that I don't think we really did justice to by not getting together and putting all the documents on the table to go through as a committee.

I come from a different style of governance. The Northwest Territories practices a consensus government. The basis of a consensus government is good communication. It includes trust and also includes respect. We also go to great lengths to make sure that people don't attack staff, public servants or other people who are not present to defend themselves. It really is troubling to hear somebody say that the clerk's bonus depends on this Prime Minister. It's almost implying that the clerk would be dishonest and would do it for money. That's a very offensive comment in my view.

Amongst our most significant work is the committee's pre-budget consultation report, which is required by the Standing Orders, and this upcoming study would be my fourth with the committee. I found every one of these studies to be very valuable to my work as a member of Parliament, and I believe it's the same for all members I have served with. It allows us to hear from many witnesses, from coast to coast to coast, and it brings many requests for the government's next budget, and this year is no different. These recommendations would be brought forward to several dozen final recommendations for consideration by the government.

Not only do we hear from groups and advocates that we deal with regularly in our constituencies, but it allows organizations whose members we may not otherwise hear from in our regular day-to-day work to address us.

I'm one of three members who represent the northern territories, and I'm one of 10 indigenous MPs. I always try to make it a priority to have northern and indigenous voices come before our committee during consultations. The Standing Committee on Finance has been able to hear from many of these voices during our in-person Ottawa meetings and our committee tours, which, because of COVID, we will not be able to do.

• (1800)

Mr. Pat Kelly: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Kelly, on a point of order.

Mr. Pat Kelly: I sincerely apologize to Michael McLeod for the interruption, but I want to ask the clerk to clarify. If we go past 6 p.m., will that interfere with a—

The Chair: It's a very valid point, Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Maybe the clerk could tell us what—

The Chair: I was interrupting Mr. McLeod due to capacity problems on the Hill. The heritage committee can't meet if we continue to operate, so the meeting is suspended.

[The meeting was suspended at 6 p.m., Thursday, November 5.]

• (1800)

(Pause)

• (1602)

[The meeting resumed at 4:02 p.m., Tuesday, November 17.]

• (30400)

The Chair: Okay, we'll try this one more time.

We shall call the meeting to order. We're now resuming meeting number five of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance. Pursuant to the motion adopted by the House on Wednesday, September 23, 2020, the committee is meeting virtually in a hybrid format.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference, and the proceedings will be televised and made available on the House of Commons website.

We're meeting with just committee members, both here in room 025 and virtually across the country. I think that all the members know the rules by now, so I don't think I need to go through them.

We're starting where we left off.

I have first on my list, Mr. Peter Fragiskatos, but Mr. Poilievre you had...?

• (30405)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Yes, I put my hand up before everyone else and I'd like to have the floor.

The Chair: Okay, you can do that. I don't have a screen with the hands on it here.

Mr. Fragiskatos has informed me that he wants to speak, but your hand is showing up on the deck here, Mr. Poilievre. You're coming through bigger than in life right in front of me, so go ahead.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I don't even know how that's possible, but thank you very much for saying so.

It's great to be with you today, Mr. Chair.

As you may have heard, there's been some debate in the public realm about the proceedings we've had over the last several weeks. I think we all agree that it's time to get moving on our work and put an end to this Liberal filibuster. As a result, I am prepared to move a motion that would achieve that goal. This motion would effectively set aside for the time being my point of privilege until it can be addressed, and hopefully, the breach of privilege that precipitated it removed.

In a manner consistent with the words that members of the government have spoken, I have a motion that I think should garner unanimous consent here today. I think my assistant Craig has sent this over to you and to your clerk so that it can be distributed to all members. It is translated in both official languages and it is in order, because it, of course, is on the subject at hand.

It reads as follows:

That the committee temporarily set aside the motion relating to the point of privilege put forward by the Member for Carleton on October 8, 2020, and the subsequent subamendments moved by the Member for Calgary Rocky Ridge and the Member for Kingston and the Islands, and that the committee adopt all evidence heard in the First Session of the 43rd Parliament during the committee's study on "Government Spending, WE and the Canada Student Service Grant"; and that the committee order that by November 20, 2020, the government provide the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel with all documents originally requested in the July 7, 2020 motion moved by the Member for New Westminster-Burnaby, without any redaction, omission or exclusion except as would be justified in sections and subsections 69(1) through 69(3)(b)(ii) of the Access to Information Act, and that the Clerk of the Privy Council and the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner appear no later than November 25, 2020 to discuss "cabinet confidence" exclusions to public disclosures, and that the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel testify before the committee regarding documents received from the government pursuant to this motion.

I believe my assistant Craig has shared that with all members of the committee. I think this should pass without any controversy, given that it's consistent with what government members have been stating publicly for the last week.

We have a tweet from Mr. Rodriguez saying that he wants to end the Liberal filibuster and he is prepared to release everything except for cabinet confidences. Hopefully, we can dispense with that and then quickly get on to discussing committee business.

I'll conclude by saying that this has been five weeks of delays. Government members have now spoken for 28 hours over five weeks, some 171,000 words. This is at a time when our economy is effectively in a depression. We are the finance committee. It is our job to respond to that.

The Conservatives have been trying to get us back onto financial issues so we can help Canadians protect their lives and livelihoods. Given that the Liberals have agreed to change course and release documents that they previously had redacted and guarded jealously, and given that they have said the only objection they have now is to the release of cabinet confidences, then I think we have a consensus to move forward and release all other documents that are not cabinet confidence, while we talk to the Privy Council clerk to find out his rationale in defining what he considers to be a cabinet confidence for the purposes of the July 7 motion.

I think we have a solution. After we pass this, Chair, I'm hoping we can take a few moments to get on to the agenda of the committee.

Thank you very much.

• (30410)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Poilievre.

We haven't received a copy of it yet, or the clerk hasn't, so we certainly would have to receive a copy of it before we go to debate. We have a problem procedurally as well. We can't take another motion when one motion is on the floor, so technically we'd have to adjourn debate on the previous motion we were debating in order to get to this one.

There are a couple of problems. One—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Chair, if I may, this could simply be considered an amendment to the previous motions and thereby supersede them.

The Chair: Yes, I understand that, but we can't take an amendment. We already have a motion, an amendment and a subamendment. We can't take another amendment.

Mr. Julian has his hand up.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You can take as many amendments as you like. You can have a thousand amendments to a motion, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: No, we can't.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. That's new.

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

The Chair: If I have missed.... We have a point of order. Then I think Mr. Julian is going to speak.

Point of order, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Sean Fraser: There are two issues that I want to raise.

The first is of a purely technical nature. I saw a couple of notes coming through staff members stating that there was an issue with hearing the phone line. I don't know if that's been resolved. I just wanted you to confirm that's okay.

The second issue, though there might be a procedural snafu, is that I haven't actually seen the suggested motion. It might make sense if we could get our hands on a copy so that we could actually read it before we decide what to do with it. Would a 10- or 15-minute suspension be okay with committee members so that we would have an opportunity to review what has just been proposed?

The Chair: I'll see if people are willing to do that.

Did we get a copy?

Mr. Poilievre, we haven't got a copy of that yet. You can ask your staff to get it to us.

I'll take your point of order under advisement. I think we could possibly suspend.

I want to go to Mr. Julian first, though, to hear his comments. I expect this is related to the same issue.

Go ahead, Peter.

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, Mr. Chair, but I think the path forward, if government members are amenable to this compromise, is that the government would withdraw its subamendment, which would allow the amendment that was proposed earlier to be.... This would be the subamendment to the amendment to the motion. Procedurally, there is a way forward, but the government members would have to get the ball rolling by withdrawing their subamendment.

The Chair: Procedurally, there are a couple of ways forward: to do as you suggest, Mr. Julian, or to adjourn debate on the motion as a whole and consider this proposal.

Are we agreeable to suspending until 4:30 p.m., Ottawa time? Hopefully, we have a copy here so that people can look at it and we can resolve this issue. Are we agreed? Okay.

Before I suspend, Mr. Poilievre, did we get the copy?

The clerk now has the copy, so we will get it out to everybody. We'll reconvene at 4:30.

Thanks, all of you. The meeting is suspended until 4:30.

• (1615) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1630)

• (30435)

The Chair: We shall reconvene and see where we are on this particular issue.

Mr. Fraser, you are on deck.

• (30440)

Mr. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, I hope you'll be forgiving in the procedural scenario, because I don't plan to address the subamendment but I do want to have a conversation with committee members.

Thanks, Pierre, for putting something forward. I think there's a starting point for us to work with. I have questions about a couple of things and I don't know if I'll be satisfied about them in the next hour.

Your motion, towards the end, mentions having the Clerk of the Privy Council and the Ethics Commissioner appear. Was that supposed to say the law clerk?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: No, it's supposed to say the Ethics Commissioner.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Okay.

There are a few technical issues on the timing of what's feasible for the government to get their hands on and get to the law clerk. I'm not sure about whether.... I don't want to set up a potential violation of privilege by saying that documents have to arrive by Friday if in fact they can't get them for a few days after that.

The bigger thing here—and I don't know how committee members will react—is that I could use a little bit of time just to make sure I understand the motion and that we're not being rushed to the point that I make a mistake in my understanding of it.

I'm curious to know if committee members would be amenable to suspending until either our next meeting or the next available meeting slot, whenever it may be, in hopes that we can use this suggested language as a starting point for a solution to move on with the committee's work.

Is that something the committee members would entertain?

The Chair: I will first go to Mr. Poilievre and see where the others are following that.

Mr. Poilievre, do you have some comments you want to make? We're certainly out of procedural order, but given the amount of time we've been spending on this issue, I don't think anybody will challenge the chair on that.

Mr. Poilievre, respond in kind if you could, please.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On the procedural question, as you know, Chair, committees are their own masters, so it is possible for us to do whatever we want from a procedural point of view if we all agree.

The Chair: We can, with unanimous consent. It's not a problem.

On Mr. Fraser's point that he needs some time to go back to his colleagues, the government as a whole, are we amenable to that to see if we can come to some agreement?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How long is this going to take?

Mr. Sean Fraser: I don't know. I don't want to commit to being back here in 90 minutes, which is the ordinary schedule for our meeting. I would suggest we look at whatever the next available slot is for the committee to sit.

I do want to solve this problem, and I don't want to continue to kick the can down the road. Ideally, if we can reach a solution, we are looking at having the Governor of the Bank of Canada here as soon as our next meeting. I would love to be able to solve this problem before that.

Obviously, this is not something I control. It's a committee decision, and I'm here in good faith. I do want to solve this problem, and I appreciate efforts of different committee members, Pierre in particular. I think what you're trying to do is put forward something productive, and I would like to work with it.

I haven't even had the chance to review section 69 of the Access to Information Act, since we got your motion just after this meeting started. I really do want to find a solution here, so I would take the next available slot in hopes we can solve this problem and still have the governor attend our Thursday meeting.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: When is the next slot?

Mr. Sean Fraser: I don't know.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Chair, can the clerk or someone tell us?

The Chair: Our next regular slot is Thursday. Certainly, if there's any availability tomorrow,,, There's no availability, Madam Clerk.

That's one of the problems we have in the world we live in now. Normally, we would be able to find some time tomorrow. Unless another committee forgoes their spot tomorrow, it would be our next regular meeting.

I would suggest, if there are also some backroom discussions, to see if we could be relatively certain when we got to committee that we're going to solve this impasse. I think we could still deal with getting the pre-budget consultations lined up and probably hear the Governor of the Bank of Canada and the deputy governor in the second hour on Thursday, if behind the scenes discussions look like this could be solved.

You can think about that, Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Julian had his hand up.

Peter.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, I'm a little perplexed because this compromise proposal basically corresponds to things that government members have been offering for weeks. I'm a little surprised when the documents have already been provided. We already know which documents are subject to cabinet confidence so the deadline of this Friday should not be a problem.

The issue around the Privy Council and the Ethics Commissioner is upon invitation. That shouldn't be a problem either.

I'm a little perplexed. This is a compromise that seems to meet the government more than halfway, maybe three-quarters of the way, and we have not had a functioning finance committee since August, as you know, Mr. Chair, since the Prime Minister abruptly prorogued Parliament and shut down all the committees.

I don't understand why we would take more time to meet what the government members have already offered. I think we should be able to resolve it at this meeting.

● (30445)

The Chair: I would note one thing as well, Mr. Julian and Mr. Poilievre, that in the motion there is really not a clear direction, I think, to what we want the law clerk to do. That may have to be rectified as well, if we're going to try to deal with what's here. That was drawn to my attention by the clerk.

In any event, I will go back to Mr. Poilievre.

Members, my screen is not working. The only members I can see are in this room. If you want in, raise your hand. The clerk will notify me and we'll get to it.

Mr. Poilievre is next...or Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Pat Kelly: I'm happy to let Mr. Poilievre speak instead, if you're going to give him the floor. My only contribution is just to say that I heard what Mr. Fraser said. I understand his concern around wanting to review the section that is referenced in the motion and his desire to ensure that he actually knows what he is agreeing to. I understand that.

I wouldn't think we'd need to wait until there is another committee meeting available. Maybe he can get back to Mr. Poilievre or other members of the committee outside of the committee structure and meet maybe later on this evening. I wouldn't think that would be too soon for him to review the section, maybe talk to his colleagues, and satisfy himself that he knows what he is agreeing to.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre or Mr. Fraser, whoever wants to go next.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Sure, Mr. Chair.

Pierre, I hope you don't mind me shortcutting you here.

Just in response to Mr. Kelly, I would plan, if this meeting were to suspend or adjourn, to get on the phone and open up some of the legislation and review a few pieces of the motion this evening. I can't guarantee saying it will be two hours and I'll have an answer. If I do, I'll call Pierre as soon as I do, or the other members of this committee who are interested in speaking, with a view to resolving the situation as soon as possible.

I do hesitate, having just received the motion, to make decisions on it. I would like to satisfy myself that I'm confident on what I'm agreeing to. There are a few items in there that we hadn't discussed before as a committee, including the Ethics Commissioner. I mentioned the technical possibilities of just getting documents quickly, but I do want to take the time to fully appreciate what the sections of the legislation that have been cited actually say. I would undertake to have a phone call tomorrow morning with anyone on this committee who wants to speak.

The one caution I have is that I am booked for a couple of meetings later this evening that will eat into a few hours up until about 10 p.m. It's not as though this is the only task I'll be working on this evening. If it's possible for me to get through my concerns that soon....

I will give it my best effort, Mr. Kelly, to resolve it on that timeline, and if not, hopefully as soon as tomorrow.

The Chair: Mr. Kelly wants in next, and then Ms. Jansen.

Mr. Pat Kelly: I think you were going to let Mr. Poilievre get in.

The Chair: Okay. I can't see people, as I said.

It will be Mr. Poilievre, then Mr. Kelly, and then Ms. Jansen.

Did you want to hold back, Pierre?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, I think Ms. Jansen was before me, so I think we should go to her first.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Jansen, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen (Cloverdale—Langley City, CPC): Thank you.

I'm just worried for Canadians, who are in an incredible time of crisis, that we have been just holding off and stalling. This feels like more stalling, giving, perhaps, the Prime Minister more time to do his great reset. I'm getting all kinds of calls about this right now. It's a big concern.

I'm begging you. We have come this far. We have come where you wanted us to come. Please let us go forward with this now so that we can actually help Canadians where they most need it.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jansen.

Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I agree entirely with Ms. Jansen.

On the first point regarding the WE scandal, this is five weeks that the government members have been dawdling and giving 171,000 words of speechifying. They're talking about the Bible, the Torah, the Koran, Greek philosophers, cartoon characters and everything under the sun to run out the clock and avoid releasing these documents.

Today I came forward with a motion that reflected the compromise that the Liberal House leader effectively agreed to when he tweeted about it earlier this week. Now we're finding that tweet isn't consistent with what the Liberals are prepared to do. We said we would be willing to put aside for now the documents that the government claims are cabinet secrets and that the government would release everything else. They claim it was cabinet confidentiality that they needed to protect, and that was their major objection with releasing these documents unredacted. We put forward a motion that does what they wanted to do, and now they're saying they're not so sure.

The timelines are not an excuse either. The documents are in the government's possession. All they have to do is send them over without the black ink. If they have versions with black ink, they must also have the pre-existing versions without black ink. These are digital documents. I presume that the copies sent over to the committee were not the only copies, that they are now blacked out and there's no way to get hold of the originals. The originals are there. The government knows what they are. They have an army of public servants who can produce them without the black ink. They could send them over on a USB stick, or possibly even an email attachment, to the law clerk this evening if they wanted to. To suggest that they can't get it done by Thursday—sorry, Friday.... I gave them until Friday, for God's sake. I don't know how long it takes it to send an email.

Then to claim that they can't get their act together and have the Clerk of the Privy Council come to testify by the date in the motion, which is I think mid next week...that too is ridiculous. He lives in Ottawa. He has access to electronic communications. He certainly can make himself available. It would not be hard for him to move his schedule around because the Parliament of Canada has asked him to do so.

There is no logistical reason that the government can't simply agree to this motion tonight. It's more dawdling and more delay. Meanwhile, we have millions who are without work and businesses are getting evicted, because the government once again messed up the rent relief program, a program that could have been fixed here in this committee but for the fact that we're paralyzed by a five-week Liberal filibuster. Now we're being asked for another 48 hours for them to go back to read a one-paragraph motion.

With regard to section 69, Mr. Fraser, I think you're being a little bit modest about your abilities. You are a skilled lawyer and a learned gentleman. You can read section 69 of the Access to Information Act in a couple of minutes. You are more than intelligent enough to do that. In fact, I rather suspect that you know the section already, because I know you spend a lot of time reading these statutes. I don't say that facetiously. You could master that section

very quickly. It's short. It's about 100 words long and basically says "cabinet confidences".

None of the excuses we're hearing today make any sense. It looks like we're being sent off on another wild goose chase to waste 48 hours of our time, rather than getting this done so we can get back to our jobs.

Ms. Jansen is quite right. I sometimes wonder if the government is not just covering up the WE scandal here with this endless filibuster but also doesn't want any scrutiny of this grand reset that the Prime Minister is now talking about, this idea that he is going to renovate Canadian society to fit his "Trudeaupian" ambitions. This is not a time to re-engineer society to his liking or his socialist ideology.

● (30450)

This is a time to get people safely and securely back to work, to protect their lives and livelihoods, not a time for government to take advantage of the crisis in order to massively expand its powers at the expense of Canadians' freedom. That's what we should be talking about here in the finance committee. We should be standing up against government power grabs like this grand reset the Prime Minister is discussing.

I'm beginning to wonder if this filibuster is about more than just covering up the WE scandal, and also about covering up the government's grand schemes for social and economic engineering, to cover up the power grab that he has lusted over since the beginning of this crisis. Frankly, we've lost patience. We want an answer. We want to get on with the job.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (30455)

The Chair: I have three people on my list: Mr. Kelly, if you still want in, Ms. Dzerowicz and Mr. Julian.

Mr. Kelly, do you still want in?

Mr. Pat Kelly: No, I don't think I'm on the list, or I don't need to be.

The Chair: That's not a problem.

I have Ms. Dzerowicz, Mr. Julian and then Mr. Fragiskatos.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's nice to be back here in Ottawa, actually. It's nice to see everyone in the room.

For Ms. Jansen, I absolutely agree with you, and I think we probably all agree that we all want to get back to business. Getting back to business for me, at this moment, means that we want to get right to pre-budget consultations.

I'll just remind everyone once again that on October 8 when we first met, within the first few minutes of our actually convening the committee, I did introduce a motion for us to get started on pre-budget consultations. I will tell you that if we want to get right down to business, we can get down to business ASAP if the point of privilege that Mr. Poilievre introduced after my motion to start pre-budget consultations were withdrawn. There is absolutely no delay on our part.

There was a motion that I'm very grateful to Mr. Poilievre for putting forward today. I will say to you, though, that it was given to us during committee. If this were something that we would have wanted to already have decided on, it would have been.... Often, it's not uncommon for us to be given these motions beforehand. We could have contemplated it beforehand. We could have already read and reviewed it and then have come here today for a decision, but that was not done. It was given to us during our meeting.

Again, I am very grateful that Mr. Poilievre has proposed something. As my colleague Mr. Fraser has indicated, I think it looks promising. I think there are a lot of elements that could get us to where we all want to end up, but we do want a little time to actually reflect on it properly.

My understanding of what Mr. Fraser has proposed and what our chair has actually tried to relay is that we've proposed something very expedited that maybe could set us back on track by the time we get here on Thursday. If I heard my colleague Mr. Fraser correctly, he has indicated that he is willing to start working on this immediately this evening, in addition to a couple of other things he has on the table, and that he has offered a phone call tomorrow to whomever would like to discuss it—from all parties—so that we could maybe answer some questions and continue to proceed toward what we are hoping is some sort of agreement.

I think I heard that we could also figure out—if we do find some agreement—a way to deal with it procedurally at the onset of our meeting on Thursday if we are not able to find an available meeting space tomorrow, if one doesn't miraculously come free. Then we can actually get down to business and hear from our governor and deputy governor this Thursday.

I didn't hear anybody trying to say “let's just keep on waiting”. What I heard is, let's try to move as quickly as possible, let's fairly have a chance to actually look at this motion and let's make sure that we understand it completely. We're going to start working on it right away. We're willing to actually meet on this by phone call tomorrow morning and try to figure out all the steps we need to be able—if we have some sort of agreement—to resolve it within the initial part of our Thursday meeting so that we can get right down to business on Thursday.

That is what I heard, and I don't think that in any way is us trying to delay or any further delay tactic. I think that is just responsible on our part in terms of reviewing the motion that was presented to us here at committee.

I also want to address Mr. Poilievre. He always makes me laugh with some of his references. I just want to correct for the record that there was no one who was bringing up the Quran or the Torah or some of the other references he was mentioning earlier today dur-

ing our last few weeks. I think we were desperately trying to find a compromise, and we had proposed a subamendment that we had hoped would address the issues raised by the opposition—

• (30500)

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: On a point of order, is that not changing the actual testimony—

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: That is not a point of order.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: —with what she just did...?

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: That is not a point of order.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I'm just worried that you're changing the testimony.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: No. I'm just saying that—

The Chair: No, Madam Jansen. She is relating to what Mr. Poilievre said in his remarks, so I think it is.... We're not on regular procedure at the moment—we're batting this issue around—so there is a fair bit of leniency.

Ms. Dzerowicz.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you so much.

I also agree with Mr. Poilievre when he says that my colleague Mr. Fraser is extraordinarily capable. In spite of his great capacity, I do think it is fair for us to make sure that we understand the motion to ensure that we have a chance to read the references relayed in the motion to be crystal clear because no one wants to delay this any further.

The last thing I'll mention, again, is that it's important to remind the committee that we have spent almost two months of testimony relaying why there wasn't a WE scandal and why there wasn't a cover-up. If we go through all of the testimony of July and the beginning of August, you will see that this has been very clearly articulated through the numerous witnesses who have come before this committee.

I also want to relay that there's no conspiracy around the economy or a fiscal position. Indeed, our government House leader, I believe, has proposed a motion to create a special committee to oversee investments related to COVID-19. For a while we were desperate to try to ensure that we continued to provide maximum accountability and transparency to the Canadian public during this unprecedented time. We're at a time when we all absolutely agree that we are spending a lot of money very quickly. We're trying to find ways, in addition to this finance committee, to ensure that we have an additional committee to oversee the investments so we continue to be transparent and accountable for every single dollar of taxpayer's money that we spend during this unprecedented time in our history.

Those are my remarks for now, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for allowing me to say a few words.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Julian, then Mr. Fragiskatos, then we'll have to see where we're at.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The finance committee was charged back in March with overseeing government spending. There were two roles to that, making sure that people were being helped through this pandemic, and also making sure that the government was actually spending money in a way that ensured that people, small businesses, the folks who needed it, received those funds. We had those twin responsibilities, and we performed them admirably until August 18 when the Prime Minister unceremoniously and unilaterally prorogued Parliament.

Since then, for the last three months, between the prorogation and the filibuster, the finance committee has been unable to perform its duties it was charged with by a unanimous motion of the House of Commons. The government members have been saying that the opposition needs to compromise. There has been a whole range of suggestions brought forward. Every time it's greeted with, "Let us have some time to consider it", and then the response that has come back has been no.

I'm deeply concerned by this idea that, again, even though every single element in Mr. Poilievre's motion has already been suggested by government members, the government again wants to consider it for a period of time. We have seen in previous manifestations of this process, or this strategy, that the response that comes back is then negative.

I'll say this facetiously, Mr. Chair, but the motion has less than 200 words. That means the government is now asking for 48 hours to consider this motion, which means about 15 minutes for every single word of this motion to be scrutinized. Part of the motion says "member for Westminster-Burnaby". Those are four words. That would be an hour of consideration that the government members seem to be asking for. For the life of me, I cannot understand why the government members are stalling, when what has been suggested by the government is being brought forward, albeit with the addition of one additional witness, which is the Ethics Commissioner.

We've now had three months when we should have been focused on government spending, and making sure that people are being taken care of. This is all through unilateral Liberal actions, first the prorogation and now the filibuster. We have an opportunity today at this meeting to adopt this motion, to have Liberal members withdraw their subamendment that is blocking it, and move forward.

There is really no reason to do anything but adopt the motion that Mr. Poilievre has put forward. I certainly support it. It's a reasonable compromise, and it would hopefully allow us to move back to doing what we were asked to do by the House of Commons at the beginning of this pandemic: scrutinizing government spending, making sure that as much as possible people are being taken care of during this pandemic.

I don't understand the stalling technique. It is reasonable to expect, with this motion coming forward, that the government members would have already done the consultation over the past hour. They've got another hour to do it, to make the phone calls. Let's just get it done, so we can move on to do the work we were charged by a unanimous motion of the House of Commons at the beginning of this pandemic. We've been unable to perform for the last few months, first, because of prorogation, unilateral, and now, because of five to six weeks of filibusters.

• (30505)

The Chair: I don't want to burst anyone's bubble, but the motion is technically not on the floor, because it's not in order. We're bouncing it around to see if we can find a way through this, and get to a solution before the Thursday meeting.

Next I have Mr. Fragiskatos. Are your comments going back to your original thoughts, or are you on the point we're working on here?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I was going to share some thoughts in general with where we are, and where we might be going, but I see Mr. Poilievre has jumped back into the meeting. If he wanted to come back on to revisit his position that he expressed a few moments ago with respect to what Mr. Fraser proposed, I would be glad to hear him out, but if not, then I'll continue.

I don't see him motioning to speak, so I will share some thoughts with the committee.

The Chair: Are your thoughts on this proposal of Mr. Poilievre's or do they go back to the original?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have a few thoughts on the proposal that's been raised, and also on the subamendment that we are still technically debating.

The Chair: Let's set aside the subamendment for the moment. We'll take your thoughts on this issue.

If we can't come to a compromise on this issue to see our way forward and break the impasse, then we'll just rule the motion out of order and hope that some discussions take place in the backrooms before Thursday.

You're on.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: First of all, Mr. Chair, it's a shame Mr. Poilievre has disappeared again. I wanted to tell him, in a very friendly way, that I feel a bit left out. I think other Liberal members might feel a bit left out too. I mean, Mr. Fraser is a very good guy, but what about the rest of us? There were some very nice things said about Mr. Fraser, but nothing nice was said about Mr. McLeod, Ms. Koutrakis, me or Ms. Dzerowicz. I was hoping, seeing Mr. Poilievre commenting there, for maybe some compliments our way, but that's fine. It's all in good fun and all good-natured, always.

More seriously, Mr. Chair, I want to make the case that in contrast with what Mr. Julian just shared a moment ago, I think we're dealing here with elements of a motion that are new. I don't think it's uncalled for here that Mr. Fraser suggested that we would need a bit more time to reasonably examine what has been proposed. It's not as though the proposal we came back with as Liberal members is somehow unreasonable. We're not asking for another week or another month. We're asking for just a bit more time to examine what's been suggested.

Again, there are things in there that haven't been suggested before. What is wrong with taking that into account? If we were allowed to take that into account by adjourning today's meeting, then we would hopefully get beyond this impasse and deal with matters that we've been talking about doing for weeks.

I think it's a great thing that we would have the new Governor of the Bank of Canada come in and speak to us in a few days' time. The sooner the better. I would very much appreciate hearing the new governor's perspective on a range of matters but certainly as it pertains to COVID-19 and where things currently stand. This is a new governor. He has put his views to the committee before with respect to COVID-19, but not in a very detailed way. He has given public speeches on the matter as well, but we as a committee have not had an opportunity to engage with the governor meaningfully, I'd say.

I think you'd accept, Mr. Chair, that meaningful engagement has yet to take place. I would like to ask the governor his thoughts on a range of issues and his thoughts pertaining to the bank's approach to COVID-19 from a fiscal perspective. As well, much has been said in the business press and elsewhere with respect to new approaches that central banks are seeming to embrace. I'm thinking about modern monetary theory. What is the new governor's view on that perspective in terms of economics? What interactions has he had with other central bank governors around the world on how they are addressing COVID-19? How does Canada's approach compare and contrast with what other bank governors are doing? I think that would be an opportunity, and hopefully the sooner the better. I think if Liberal members were given an opportunity to examine what's been suggested, we could get to that in a meaningful and timely way. It doesn't sound like Conservative members are anxious to go down that path.

That's how I see this. I did have some thoughts on the subamendment that was originally being debated and discussed, but I'll leave my thoughts there for now, Mr. Chair. I think I see other hands up of other Liberal members.

• (30510)

The Chair: We'll let you hold on to those thoughts for the moment on the subamendment.

I'm not sure if I have the right order here, since I'm dealing with different systems, but on my list I have Mr. Fraser, Mr. Poilievre and Ms. Dzerowicz.

Is that the right order, Madam Clerk? Okay.

Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Thanks.

Going back to the issue of the proposal, I appreciate Mr. Poilievre's commentary. I enjoyed the job I had before politics. I felt most days that I was half decent at it.

There is no circumstance in the world where I would have committed to a binding decision minutes after receiving a motion, or even an hour after receiving whatever the suggestion would be, if I was engaged in another meeting during that time to consider it.

I'm not trying to be tricky. The reality of the next couple of hours or evening, whatever it might be, is that I'm going to be engaged in this meeting until this meeting is done. I have a few other obligations tonight. I think it would be a more productive use of time if I could work on trying to figure out whether we can work with this motion.

To Mr. Julian's point about being x number of hours per word, obviously that's silly. The reality is that had we had this motion a few hours before the meeting began, maybe we could have gotten somewhere. I didn't see it until the clerk circulated it during this meeting—I'm not trying to pull the wool over anybody's eyes.

If we can't agree to suspend until the next available slot—and I would invite House leadership of each of our parties to have a conversation to see whether another committee would yield time for us tomorrow—then we can continue to debate the subamendment. It will delay my consideration of the motion and some of the conversations I would otherwise have. However, I really am trying to use this as a helpful starting point. I think the Cabinet confidence piece is a significant movement from where we last left off.

If committee members want to go back to debating the subamendment for the evening, we can do that. I honestly believe it would be a far more productive use of time for me and others to consider what's been proposed and to see if it's something we can agree to in advance of the Thursday meeting.

I'll leave my comments there, Chair. If opposition members would agree to a suspension or adjournment, I think that's the best possible route so we can consider it. If not, it looks like we'll return the subamendment.

• (30515)

The Chair: Okay, I have Mr. Poilievre next. Go ahead.

What are your thoughts on what Mr. Fraser said, or anything else for that matter, on where we're at right at the moment?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Listen, we've had five weeks to talk about this. We've, in fact, had longer than that.

Mr. Julian's original motion for the disclosure of WE scandal documents was passed—it's hard to believe, Mr. Chair—on July 7. It was July 7. We're closing in on December and we still don't have the documents.

Now they're saying, "Oh we just need a little itty-bitty more time to try to figure it all out." Then we'll get here on Thursday and they'll say, "Oh, it's still not enough time. We maybe need to give another five weeks of speeches."

Meanwhile, people are losing their livelihoods. We have the biggest deficit in the G20, the worst unemployment in the G7, other than socialist Italy, whose policies the government is desperately trying to emulate here in Canada. We have easily the weakest economy in our peer group. We've increased our national debt by about 40% in seven months.

We have all of these problems—

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, I have a point of order from Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: The member knows very well that it is not appreciated or acceptable to put points on the parliamentary record that are simply not true. In the interests of having a parliamentary record that is accurate and reflective of what is actually going on in the world and in this country, I would ask for the member to reframe the argument, or rethink—

The Chair: I will have to cut you off, Mr. Fragiskatos. It's really debate.

I will say that I didn't think Italy had a socialist government at the moment, but maybe it does.

Go ahead, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: In the amount of time that you gave my friend Mr. Fragiskatos to raise his point of order, which was a very generous amount of time, he managed to claim that I had stated a falsehood, but he couldn't think of a single example of anything I said that was false.

I think it's quite clear that what I was saying is precisely true. We do have the highest unemployment in the G7, but for socialist Italy. We have the highest deficit in the G20 as a share of our GDP at \$380 billion. That is far and away the biggest deficit. We have added about 40% to our national debt in seven and a half or eight months.

Those are all factual statements. They are not pleasant things to say, but they are true, and we need to start saying them more and more because here we have a government that is trying to impose a socialist agenda on Canadians. Government spending in this country is now 55% of GDP. When the majority of the economy is controlled by the government, you have a socialist economy.

• (30520)

The Chair: I do think, Mr. Poilievre, we are straying far away from trying to establish some way of breaking the impasse with your motions on the floor. On Mr. Fraser's point, is there a willingness to try to allow Mr. Fraser—I would expect the House leaders as well—to try to come to a conclusion based on your motion here today and to get it in place by tomorrow. If we can find time to have a meeting tomorrow, that would be even better—or it's not time that we need to find, but the space to meet. Otherwise, hopefully at the start of the meeting we can round this out and come to a conclusion on what documents are going to the law clerk so he can review them and come before us and he and the Clerk of the Privy Council can tell us if everything was according to the way we'd originally asked for it.

Could you stick to that area? Otherwise I'm going to rule the motion out of order, and we'll go back to the subamendment.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right. Mr. Chair, I know you have been extremely liberal in permitting members of the government to discuss everything from ancient religious texts to cartoon characters. I'm sorry if I managed to talk about economic—

The Chair: I've been extremely liberal with you.

I don't think there's any question about that, giving you a wide range to make comments, so if we could come back to Mr. Fraser's suggestion it would be awfully nice.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The difference is that when you're presiding over government members, you are liberal with a small "l", and when you're presiding over me you're a Liberal with a big "L". I would ask for the same licence to address issues as they have been given in their interventions.

We have work to do. We have facts to expose. We have asked this party, this government, to allow us the chance to do so, but so

far we've got nowhere. Even though we brought forward a motion today, which reflects what the Liberal House leader has been tweeting about, and we thought he would be delighted to see us put forward what he tweeted, now we get a "maybe". We try our best to match the demands of the government to deliver a solution that will get us back to work, and then what do you know? They show up and say it's not good enough, that they need to think about it for another 48 hours.

Where does all this end? When do we get back to work? It's been five weeks.

The Chair: I take it that you're not going to accept Mr. Fraser's offer.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It's just a little bit interesting that you said to us, Mr. Chair, that you thought we could maybe meet tomorrow and then you changed your mind and said that, well, we're not sure if we can do that either. So we're being told—

The Chair: Let me clarify that. In normal times, we normally could. I talked to the clerk, and I am told that there is no space available for us tomorrow. That's a problem, given what we're dealing with in the COVID world we live in and having to deal with Zoom and scheduling, etc. in here. Normally, we could meet five days a week as a committee, but we're not in those kinds of time frames now, and that's a problem. I didn't change my mind. I just had to face the reality, I guess, that there's no space for us tomorrow.

I do have Ms. Dzerowicz on my list, and then we're going to go back to the subamendment, but just to give committee members something to think about, I really do believe that if we work at it, we can have a solution to this issue for the Thursday meeting.

I want to mention this just for members to think about, because I know that we all want to get to pre-budget consultations. We want to read the 793 submissions that have been submitted. There are a lot of good recommendations in them. We've seen some of the briefs—at least some of us have because they've been sent to us directly.

This is just for the committee to think about. Under our normal standing order, we would have to report on our pre-budget consultations by December 8. There are, as I said, 793 briefs that have come in prior to August 15, so we would have those to work with.

I know that the analysts have been working on them and trying to get them into summary order so that we could have a look at the recommendations, etc. That would mean that we would have hardly any time, I guess, to really hear from witnesses in person, and we would probably need two or three meetings—three, more than likely—as members to propose recommendations, discuss them and agree on recommendations. That's scenario number one. That would be a possibility.

The other possibility would be that we could ask for permission from the House to table in the first week of February. To do so would actually require getting permission from the House for the allowance of virtual hearings beyond December 11, because I understand the motion that's in the House allows them only till December 11.

If we went with that scenario, we'd have a few time slots between now and December 11, but after December 11 other committees are not meeting, or I don't think they are. If we were to hold three-hour meetings or more on December 14, 15, 16 and 17, in a three-hour slot we could hear 12 witnesses, six in each hour and a half. That would allow us 48 priority witnesses. It would give the analysts January to draft the report, and we could do our work in the last week of January to get our report done and in. As I said earlier, they are working on an appendix on the written briefs that will be very helpful to us.

The other point I'd make—and this, as I say, is just to think about, because we do have to get this work done somehow to benefit Canadians—is that the analysts have also worked on our COVID-19 hearings in the spring.

I've seen a bit of a summary of what the analysts put together prior to prorogation. They have now continued on that work. There are a lot of good suggestions in those COVID-19 submissions that we've seen. They have put together a comprehensive summary of the COVID-19 suggestions. We could also bring that forward—either report it as a summary to the House—to give the Minister of Finance and others the opportunity to see what others said in those hearings in the spring. That would be in addition to whatever work we may decide to do on pre-budget consultations.

● (30525)

I'm just taking the leeway as chair to lay that out there. I do think people need to think about where we're going and how we can do the best we can to get the information that Canadians spent time on when writing and submitting briefs to us and appear before us in the spring.

That's just there for your information.

Ms. Dzerowicz, you're still up for Mr. Poilievre's motions proposal. It's not really a motion that's allowed on the floor, but we'll allow you in. Then we'll go back to the subamendment.

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

I did want to start by replying to a couple of things that Mr. Julian has talked to, and then I want to end where you just finished right now.

Mr. Julian had indicated that there was nothing new in the motion that was presented today. I agree with my colleague Mr. Fragiskatos that there are at least a couple of new elements. One is the Ethics Commissioner coming into it, which I don't have problem with at the moment. It's just that it is a new element.

The other new element that I just noticed is that the committee adopt all of the evidence from the first session around the WE Charity study. Again, I don't have a problem with that, but there are some new elements in this motion that I just wanted to mention.

I could be wrong, but it seems that when Mr. Julian was talking, he knew about the motion or had read the motion beforehand. Someone cynical might say that if not all of us had access to the motion beforehand, maybe there wasn't really truly—

● (30530)

Mr. Peter Julian: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I received and read the motion at the same time as other members.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you, Mr. Julian. I stand corrected then.

Then my point is just the one that was already made, so I won't spend more than a second on it. I think if we wanted to come to an agreement, it would have been helpful for us to have received it beforehand.

I do want to thank Mr. Julian for reminding all Canadians and everyone who is listening that this committee was charged with financial accountability for all of our COVID expenditures. I want to remind Canadians that our former minister of finance and our finance department officials did an extraordinary amount of work to ensure that every two weeks we did receive a biweekly report on every single bit of spending that was approved, followed through on and spent. That report actually continued right up until prorogation in August.

I want to make sure that Canadians are reminded that we have been accountable. We have been transparent. We continue to be committed to both of those principles in as fulsome a manner as possible.

I also wanted to address some of the comments that Mr. Poilievre has made because I don't like leaving things hanging. This government doesn't have a socialist agenda. He has indicated that a number of statements he has made are true. I will say that we have spent an extraordinary amount of money, and most economists have said and said that our federal government was right to actually spend as deeply and as widely as we have because of the unprecedented pandemic and what our economy is going through.

I'll also say, since Mr. Poilievre has thrown out some numbers, that 75% of Canadians have returned back to their jobs. Our unemployment rate has moved from 13.7% to 8.9%. These are positive moves. Indeed many economists have said that we are faring better than some other G7 nations, including the United States, in terms of trying to restart our economy and move our economy forward as we move through this pandemic.

There are over \$230 billion in direct support measures for Canadians that have already been spent. You can tell how helpful they've been by the number of Canadians who have taken advantage of those programs, including the 8.8 million people who have received CERB. Now it's been transitioned to CRB and to EI. More than 3.5 million employees are supported by the wage subsidy and 380,000 students are benefiting from the Canada emergency student benefit.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Are we still talking about the motion, or are we getting a little liberal here?

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: It's not a point of order, Ms. Jansen.

The Chair: This is not a big “L” or a little “I”, Ms. Jansen. I think she is refuting some points in debate that Mr. Poilievre made. I'll let her close quickly, and we'll go back to the subamendment.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I'm only going to be another couple of minutes, Mr. Chair. I will not be speaking for many hours. I just think that, if someone is throwing out misinformation, it's important to correct it for the record.

Mr. Poilievre also indicated that we have not submitted the WE documents. All those documents have been submitted. They've been redacted. They've also been submitted to the Law Clerk. There are two sets of documents that are out there. That has been completed, so I wanted to correct that for the record.

I also wanted to indicate that there's been no conversation in our deliberations over the last few weeks, since October 8 when we reconvened, around cartoon characters. I think there was a reference to a Polkeroo, and the only reason we mentioned Polkeroo was because there were large periods of time when Mr. Poilievre was missing. I think we made a reference to a Mr. Polkeroo at that point in time.

I want to end off with the proposal where Mr. Fraser has left us, which is to say that, in whatever remaining moments we might have of this meeting, which is 25 minutes right now, I think it's better spent on our trying to find a solution.

I also want to thank you, Mr. Chair, for doing a really fine job of outlining an alternate proposal in terms of a calendar. I think that clearly illustrates that we are willing to work, that we want to get to pre-budget consultations, that we've looked into how it is that we can do some credible work around pre-budget consultations and hear from some of those who have submitted the 793 submissions, that it might take some extra effort on our part in December and January in presenting, unusually, in February this report to the House and that we're willing to really get down to business.

I thank you for your work in doing that and outlining that to the committee.

● (30535)

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, we will be going back to you in a moment.

I don't see unanimous consent to allow the motion Mr. Poilievre has put forward, so we will go back to the subamendment.

I would wish Mr. Fraser and Mr. Poilievre well in terms of trying to find a solution to this little bit of an issue that's left on this matter over the next 12 hours or so.

If the House leaders are involved, I would just absolutely plead with them to find a solution and allow us to go ahead so that we can, as a committee, get to the pre-budget consultations and to other issues that must be addressed from the finance committee's point of view.

I rule the motion as proposed out of order without unanimous consent.

Mr. Fragiskatos, the floor is yours on the subamendment from the business that was left unresolved from our last committee meeting.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I will echo what Mr. Dzerowicz said about your stewardship of the committee. I just wanted to take a moment at the outset, if I could, to commend you on your leadership at the committee level. I know our deliberations have been going on for some quite some time, and you continue to do your best to guide us through the process, often while being an hour ahead of us and for a period of time while self-isolating.

I also want to take a moment and thank colleagues for their continued participation in this process. While we may not agree, I think it would be fair to note that we are all here for the same reason, to advance the interests of our constituents and Canadians.

Mr. Chair, I would like to begin by taking a moment to reflect on why we are here. Yes, it's to debate a subamendment, and yes, it is to come to a fair and equitable agreement in relation to the situation regarding WE documents. However, what is at the core of this debate that we have been debating here at the committee is our work in service to our constituents. I can say, at least for my part, that working day in and day out to advance the interests of my constituents is my first and primary thought.

Now, I know my colleagues in opposition may be fed up with this debate we are having, and that is understandable. They have their goals, and they are trying to achieve those goals. They need these motions to go through quickly and without much scrutiny.

Mr. Chair, I'm going to continue, but something could be wrong with Ms. Jansen. I'm not sure if she's wanting to get in or to raise a point of order. I'm not sure what's going on, but she seems anxious and on the edge of her seat to intervene, or highly amused by the introductory remarks I've given, which I didn't think were all that amusing. However, if Ms. Jansen has something to say, I'm glad to yield the floor for a brief moment. She's saying no.

The Chair: I think Ms. Jansen is saying no. She is sitting on the edge of her seat though, Mr. Fragiskatos, just so you're aware.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Fair enough. I thought she was ready to intervene there. Being a good committee colleague, I was willing, even in this case, to yield some time to the opposition even. That shows the good faith that Liberal members are bringing to the committee level.

Getting back to what I was talking about, I think robust debate is needed to ensure that we get this right. There is already confusion on the opposition side after they passed a motion that specifically removed cabinet confidences and they received exactly what they asked for. It seems in their rush to pass this motion, they confused themselves, unfortunately.

In regard to all these stories that the opposition is trying to weave together with respect to WE Charity, it's no wonder that they find themselves confused. You really do have to be immersed in what has been going on and in the debate we're having to understand the intricacies of what is going on here. What I can say for certain is that constituents are not bogged down in this minutiae on the WE Charity affair, at least not the constituents in my riding. Frankly, they have looked at this matter closely over the past few months, and the conclusion of most Canadians seems to be clear: Nothing improper occurred.

This makes sense, Mr. Chair, because after hours of testimony by those the opposition majority allege are involved, and after thousands of pages of documents have been released to the public, it's clear that nothing untoward took place.

Now, I understand that Mr. Julian may be itching to call me on relevance, which he hasn't done yet—it will be first in a while, but I guess the night is young—to the subamendment. That's understandable. I apologize. I am a sucker for a good preamble. But I do promise that I'm getting to my point. I feel that we must lay this out properly for those who are watching at home so they can understand exactly what we have going on here. In fact, I think it's paramount that in all the things we do, we keep our constituents informed and ensure that they can follow along and understand the false narrative that the opposition majority on this committee and in Parliament is trying to weave.

Chair, it's clear that my opposition colleagues know full well that the public is not biting on this web of stories that they're trying to push. Here we are, still debating documents, unredacted versions that are in the hands of the law clerk, that really do paint a clear picture of what occurred and support the position of the government. Mr. Poilievre can argue all he wants about privilege and documents being redacted. However, the truth is clear. The motion that Mr. Poilievre put forward specifically noted that cabinet confidences should be removed. The documents provided by the government via the House leader were very clear and transparent in regard to the student service grant and provided an unprecedented look behind the curtain. Mr. Poilievre is not pleased that his plan to have the law clerk review the documents backfired, that in fact it was the clerk who redacted a significant amount of information in the documents. It was those documents that Mr. Poilievre held up in his display in front of the press gallery back in August.

It's completely understandable that Mr. Poilievre is now upset. It's because the Clerk of the Privy Council, who was our topic of discussion with this motion, I remind committee members, ordered an unprecedented release of cabinet documents as they relate to the student service grant. In August the government House leader released those documents. I know that my colleague was expecting full well that in some fantasy scenario we would be completely redacting those documents. That just wasn't the case, however, and this upsets him.

We are here today because we have a motion, an amendment and a subamendment, all of which deal with these documents in question. Part of our discussion has focused on comparing the documents, which Mr. Poilievre does not want to happen because this will show it was in fact the law clerk who redacted the documents more fully and not the public service. He doesn't want the Clerk of the Privy Council to testify or any of the deputy ministers to testify because their testimony will also support that the public service was open and transparent.

If we actually had the ability to hear from Mr. Shugart, I'm sure he would tell us the same thing that he has said in testimony previously at other committees and at this committee, that he ordered unprecedented unmasking of cabinet confidences and personal information for public release. He would likely attest to the fact that the minor redactions that were done on cabinet confidence documents were done because the information was unrelated to the CSSG. He

would likely remind us that the cabinet and the government were navigating the first wave of the global pandemic, and some decisions being taken were not relevant and were related to national security and other matters that should not be made public. However, we cannot know any of these things for certain, because the opposition majority continues to reign supreme here.

• (30540)

I truly believe that each of us needs to have reverence for this place. We are trusted by our communities to represent them in Parliament. It is a unique privilege that few before us have had. When I was first elected in 2015, in London North Centre, I had high hopes for what could be achieved. I heard past stories of members from all sides coming together to work toward the common good. In fact, I've seen at least a few examples of this through the years.

Sitting here, and debating a motion that is being blocked by the opposition to allow the highest ranking public servant in Canada from testifying before a parliamentary committee, frankly, is unacceptable.

I thought that at some point we would be able to come to a compromise, and this subamendment seemed like a fair and equitable way to get to the bottom of the story around these documents. It would allow us to hear from those who control the redaction processes. It is truly unfortunate that partisan politics are stopping us from coming to that agreement. It's even more unfortunate that these partisan games are having the effect of politicizing the position of the clerk, who has worked under governments from both parties, and has been nothing but an upstanding and well-respected civil servant.

Sometimes as elected officials we have to stand back, and realize the effects of the actions that we take. Unfortunately, because Mr. Poilievre did not get what he wanted out of the initial request for documents, he is now willing to go to any length to find a way to continue his narrative.

We have a subamendment before us that could answer all the questions that all parties have, and because it doesn't fit the narrow partisan interests of the opposition majority, we have yet to reach a consensus.

I implore my colleagues to put aside the partisanship, to put aside their personal vendetta against the Prime Minister and his family, to look at the facts that are clear and surely out there, testimony that has been more than apparent, to vote in favour of this motion, and do the right thing, allow the clerk to come before us to explain that nothing nefarious took place, and to finally put this matter to rest once and for all.

We have important work to do. We are far behind on our work to conduct pre-budget consultations as mandated in the Standing Orders of the House of Commons. This is the work that our constituents are expecting us to do. This is the work that will help the economic rebuild for us. This is the work that we were elected to do.

In fact, Mr. Chair, if I could follow-up on that last point, it's so critical that this committee think long and hard about the path ahead. The subamendment sketches out a meaningful way to address exactly what the opposition has been calling for, what Liberal members are more than prepared to get behind in the form of a sub-amendment, but for some reason they continue to delay. They continue to throw up road blocks.

We have something here that's indeed quite reasonable, Mr. Chair, and when you think about the work that could be done right now... We could be holding pre-budget consultations. We could be hearing about the best way forward, not only in terms of dealing with the pandemic, but in the economic rebuild that must follow.

We could be hearing from organizations across the country focused on the environment, focused on indigenous issues, focused on urban transit, focused on rural issues, focused on all these issues that should be seizing this committee, a committee that is arguably the most important in Ottawa.

When the time comes around to deciding committees, every MP in the House of Commons wants to serve on the finance committee. It is a unique role and honour. Instead of doing the work that I expected to be doing at this time, and all members around the table expected, we continue to debate these matters when a meaningful solution is on the table that opposition parties should get behind.

The position of the opposition members on the matter is such that they have in fact worked to politicize the role of the Clerk of the Privy Council, the chief public servant in all of Canada and the highest ranking public servant in all of Canada, by suggesting, as they have in previous meetings, time and again.... It hasn't only been once.

● (30545)

I think each Conservative member.... If I'm going to single anyone out, I won't call out Mr. Julian or Mr. Ste-Marie on this, but Conservative colleagues have suggested that the Clerk of the Privy Council is somehow controlled by the Prime Minister. They have politicized his role. The Clerk of the Privy Council is an independent public servant, full stop. Someone in the form of Mr. Shugart has served Conservative and Liberal prime ministers, and when these allegations are made, it undermines public confidence in the institutions of the country, not only in the Privy Council, Mr. Chair.

These allegations are not just inaccurate, but pushed, and reveal in the Conservatives an approach to the public service that we must fight against, because if you look at the tendency in modern democracies, you see a populist right-wing that is rising. Thankfully it hasn't hit Canada, but you do see it in other mature democracies, whereby members of the public service are belittled and the end result is that citizens lack faith in democracy. I would call my opposition colleagues to be more careful, because when you have someone in the form of the Clerk of the Privy Council who has not just expressed in verbal form but also through a letter to this committee a desire to appear to make his case, to answer any questions, and yet we are told by the Conservatives that he cannot do so because he is somehow being controlled by the Prime Minister, it is a bizarre argument. It is an argument without any merit, but more than that, it's not laughable because it has effects, and the effect is,

as I said, to undermine public confidence in the institutions of federal government.

No doubt the rise of social media means that the democracy before us has been reduced in many ways to an algorithm. When the Conservatives put forward these sorts of ideas, inevitably these find their way onto Facebook and the like. It doesn't take much. All of a sudden, an image develops and someone who is objective and non-partisan then bears a reputation saying the opposite.

The way things work now, the person I'm talking about, the Clerk, Mr. Shugart, could be dismissed by Canadians as not being objective. And all of a sudden, the institutions of the land are not able to serve the public interest.

Ms. Jansen is agreeing with me as she continues to follow along, and I'm seeing that she's deeply amused with the argument, which says to me that she's in violent agreement with exactly what I'm putting forward to the committee. I say that, of course, rhetorically, and I would say to her very respectfully, because I know she's not going to interrupt me—she's too polite to do that—that I will not interrupt her when she speaks.

I would ask her to carry the message to Mr. Falk, Mr. Poilievre and to other Conservative members of the committee. I see Mr. Kelly has disappeared. Mr. Poilievre is having an influence on him. Mr. Kelly is usually quite good at staying at committee meetings, but he's suddenly gone, and I guess that's the influence of Mr. Poilievre. Oh, there he is. Okay, So Mr. Poilievre has not had a tremendous influence, but there, he's disappeared again. Mr. Kelly is gone.

Not to joke around too much, Mr. Chair, we're all colleagues here and we're all striving to find ways to work with one another. If it's Ms. Jansen or if it's Mr. Falk, I don't know, but this idea that the Clerk of the Privy Council is somehow under the thumb of the Prime Minister of Canada, please do away with that. It's not acceptable and let's not besmirch the reputations of public servants.

In my remarks, Mr. Chair, I think back to what it means to be an elected member of Parliament and the work that one expects to carry out when here. I've always seen the job of an MP...and granted, I'm still relatively new to the job, five years in now. But I think it's fair to say that the job is really two jobs.

● (30550)

There is the constituency role, and there is the role that one has on Parliament Hill. As far as the constituency role goes, it is the most important element of the job. The assignment to the finance committee has allowed for the merging of the two. You can take local concerns and bring them to the level of the finance committee, even having the privilege of suggesting witnesses from one's own riding.

You might recall, Mr. Chair, that London-based organizations have been invited a few times over the years to present at the finance committee, whether in pre-budget consultations or otherwise. My colleagues have sometimes accused me, jokingly and in good spirits, of talking too much about London, but I will never apologize for that, Mr. Chair. I will never apologize for making my community a key agenda item of my work in Parliament.

The point I'm making is that we could be engaged in pre-budget consultations right now. I could be inviting local-based organizations and stakeholders...and I know that other committee members would have the same right and privilege to do so. Instead, we continue to be here. We continue to waste time because the opposition does not want to deal with the subamendment in a meaningful way.

I'll leave my comments there, Mr. Chair, because I'm not the sort of member who wants to occupy all the space here.

I see that Mr. Fraser's hand is up. In the spirit of being collegial and the like, he wants to speak, and I think I'll turn it over to him.

• (30555)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Next on my list is Mr. Fraser.

To throw in a friendly reminder to the House leadership of all parties, try to solve this by tomorrow somehow.

Go ahead, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Before I begin, I'm looking at the “raise hand” function. I see that Mr. Poilievre's hand is up as well. I think he preceded me, but I'm not sure.

Shall I go ahead?

The Chair: You can do that. I think Mr. Poilievre forgot to take his hand down after he put it up.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Sure. That's not problem at all.

Where to begin? Before I get into any remarks, I am sincere in saying that I am going to try to fix this. I want a chance to look at what Mr. Poilievre has put forward. I've had a few conversations with him and others over the past number of weeks. I'd like to get on with business as much as anybody would.

The reality, though, is that it was probably not on the point of relevance, when Mr. Poilievre was making arguments about Canada's position compared with our global comparators. Much as I disagreed with just about everything he said, I kind of enjoyed getting to hear somebody's perspective on the fiscal track of our country.

I'll turn to the subamendment, since that's what we're debating, and I'll do my best to bring it back to solution-oriented topics as we go.

The original motion that caused so much consternation at this committee was made pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), and it asked the committee to order that any contracts concluded with WE Charity and Me To We.... Where am I? It reads as follows:

all briefing notes, memos and emails, including the contribution agreement that the government and organizations...from senior officials prepared for or sent to

any Minister regarding the design and creation of the Canada Student Service Grant, as well as any written correspondence and records of other correspondence with WE Charity and Me to We from March 2020 be provided to the committee no later than August 8, 2020; that matters of Cabinet Confidence

—Obviously that has been the subject of a lot of our more informal chats—

and national security be excluded from the request; and that any redactions necessary, including to protect the privacy of Canadian citizens and permanent residents whose names and personal information may be included in the documents, as well as public servants who have been providing assistance on this matter, be made by the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel of the House of Commons.

If we start with the motion, I think the controversy that seems to be the subject of the current piece is the fact that some of the redactions were made by the Clerk of the Privy Council as opposed to the law clerk. For weeks, we debated whether cabinet confidences ought to have been redacted by the government or by the law clerk.

It's pretty clear, from my initial reading—

• (30600)

The Chair: Mr. Fraser, I hate to interrupt, but I don't want to take away from other committee time. I'm going to interrupt you, and that will give an opportunity for the various players to find a solution so that we can settle this problem early in the meeting on Thursday, and hopefully meet the Governor of the Bank of Canada, and find a path forward on the pre-budget consultations.

With that, we are suspending.

Thank you.

[The meeting was suspended at 6:00 p.m., Tuesday, November 17, 2020]

• (1800)

(Pause)

• (1530)

[The meeting resumed at 3:30 p.m., Thursday, November 19, 2020]

The Chair: We'll call the meeting to order. We're now resuming meeting number five of the Standing Committee on Finance.

Pursuant to the motion adopted by the House on Wednesday, September 23, 2020, the committee is meeting virtually—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Point of order, Mr. Chair. Has everybody been sound-checked? I was, and a couple of other people.

The Chair: Yes, Mrs. Jansen. I think they were. The only one—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I got a chance—

The Chair: Yes, your video was off. They thought you were in the wilderness somewhere.

We'll give you a little check now, Pierre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I've been here all along. I was just hiding from you. That's all.

The Chair: Oh, I can't imagine you in hiding. You just like it out front too much.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It's good to see you, Wayne. I wish we were together in person.

I hope my audio here is clear enough for our friends in the technical branch.

The Chair: Are we okay?

Okay. You're good.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Excellent. Thanks, Wayne.

The Chair: You're always good, I know. You're just better today.

Pursuant to the motion adopted by the House on Wednesday, September 23, 2020, the committee is meeting virtually. Today's meeting is taking place by video conference and the proceedings will be televised and made available on the House of Commons website. As usual, for too many meetings now, it's just committee members, so I won't go through the other rules. We all know them; they'll be in our heads.

With that, we will try to start where we left off. I know there are some people on the speaking order, but I believe Mr. Fraser and Mr. Poilievre, and probably others, were in some discussions on amendments to the motion that we were batting around the other day, which wasn't the original motion.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Fraser first and then go to Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Sure. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Actually, I don't want to lead where I left off. I was about to make an intervention on the subamendment where we left off, and I'm pleased to report that's not where I plan to start.

As you signalled, there have been a couple of conversations on the basis of the proposal that Mr. Poilievre put forward. I received just a few moments ago an email from Mr. Poilievre with some modest tweaks to the last version of the motion that I had discussed with him.

Pierre, if I can keep this informal, I think they seem quite minor and fine, despite our point about the Ethics Commissioner, and I think that's an accommodation that we'd be happy to make.

Mr. Chair, I just flipped the most recent copy of this to you. I appreciate that not all committee members will have seen it. It's substantially similar. What I propose to do is just read it aloud. I do apologize, Mr. Chair. The most recent version that I sent to Mr. Poilievre was translated in both official languages, but I don't have the French language for the version that I've just received now.

I'm sorry. I have a little technical issue here. I have too many things popping up on my phone at once, but I'll read this in a moment.

Pierre, for what it's worth, I'm reading directly from the email you sent to me: That the committee temporarily set aside the motion relating to the point of privilege put forward by the Member for Carleton on October 8, 2020, and the subsequent subamendments moved by the Member for Calgary Rocky Ridge and the Member for Kingston and the Islands....

Just one moment, please.

I'm sorry, Pierre. Can I ask for just a point of clarification before I continue reading this?

I thought for some reason that there was an amendment put forward by Mr. Julian, not the member for Calgary Rocky Ridge. Has that been changed? Just to reflect what has actually taken place, I want to make sure we're parking the entire debate on the privilege motion we've been dealing with.

● (35135)

The Chair: It was Pat, Sean.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Okay. Thank you.

I will continue: ...and that the committee adopt all evidence heard in the First Session of the 43rd Parliament during the committee's study on "Government Spending, WE and the Canada Student Service Grant"; and that the committee order that by November 24, 2020, the government provide the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel with all documents as originally requested in the July 7, 2020 motion moved by the Member for New Westminster-Burnaby, without any redaction, omission or exclusion except as would be justified in sections and subsections 69(1) through 69(3) (b)(ii) of the Access to Information Act, that the information remain in the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel and be used exclusively by him to determine the government's compliance or non-compliance with the July 7, 2020 motion, and that the Clerk of the Privy Council and the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner appear no later than November 25, 2020 to discuss "cabinet confidence" exclusions to public disclosures, and that the law clerk testify before the committee regarding documents received from the government pursuant to this motion to provide his views on the government's compliance or non-compliance with the July 7 motion.

As I said, Mr. Chair, it is substantially similar to the version that Mr. Poilievre pitched—

Mr. Peter Julian: I have a point of order.

Mr. Sean Fraser: —with some accommodations to draw a box around what the parliamentary—

Mr. Peter Julian: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Can we let him finish and then go to the point of order?

Mr. Peter Julian: No. The point of order is a request that he read it smoothly a second time so that we can track—

The Chair: We will get him to read it again.

We will let you finish first, Sean, and then come back to read it slowly again.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Certainly. Of course, before I finish my minor submission and read it again, I would be quite happy to give members an opportunity to review it if the clerk could circulate this version of it.

Substantially, I was going to say, it's very similar to Mr. Poilievre's motion yesterday. The only significant change from our perspective was drawing a bit of a box around what the law clerk will do with the documents, but I think the motion explains it in a rather straightforward way.

I will read it once more for the benefit of members.

It reads: That the committee temporarily set aside the motion relating to the point of privilege put forward by the Member for Carleton on October 8, 2020, and the subsequent subamendments moved by the Member for Calgary Rocky Ridge and the Member for Kingston and the Islands, and that the committee adopt all evidence heard in the First Session of the 43rd Parliament during the committee's study on "Government Spending, WE and the Canada Student Service Grant"; and that the committee order that by November 24, 2020, the government provide the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel with all documents as originally requested in the July 7, 2020 motion moved by the Member for New Westminster-Burnaby, without any redaction, omission or exclusion except as would be justified in sections and subsections 69(1) through 69(3)(b)(ii) of the Access to Information Act, that the information remain in the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel and be used exclusively by him to determine the government's compliance or non-compliance with the July 7, 2020 motion, and that the Clerk of the Privy Council and the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner appear no later than November 25, 2020 to discuss "cabinet confidence" exclusions to public disclosures, and that the law clerk testify before the committee regarding documents received from the government pursuant to this motion to provide his views on the government's compliance or non-compliance with the July 7 motion.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I have a point of order. It's just a quick question.

The Chair: Yes, Mrs. Jansen, go ahead.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Mr. Fraser read that extremely fast again. I'm wondering how the interpreters are doing because I can hardly imagine that was easy to translate so that anybody would know what's going on in French.

The Chair: Mr. Fraser, is it possible to send a copy of that text to the clerk? Then the clerk can send it to members, and we will take a few minutes to read it.

Mr. Ste-Marie, go ahead.

• (35140)

[Translation]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie (Joliette, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to make sure that the final motion will be distributed only when it has been translated into French.

[English]

The Chair: Could you come at that again, Gabriel, please?

[Translation]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: I would like the motion to be sent to us by email when it has been translated.

[English]

The Chair: Yes, I think I had the original motion and there aren't many changes to it.

Maybe we'll suspend for 10 minutes. Mr. Fraser, can you send the copy you have to the clerk?

Mr. Sean Fraser: I'll send a copy to the clerk of the English version that I have. I will send a copy of the nearly identical motion with the changes highlighted so both official languages are there to start.

The clerk may have to interpret just a few of the words—Pierre, it's what you've added—and then I'd suggest that we resume from this suspension as soon as the clerk circulates the text of the motion in both official languages.

The Chair: Okay, that's what we will do. We'll suspend—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I'm sorry; I have one more point of order. I know this is extremely difficult for those who are working in French when these kinds of changes are made. The Liberals have said over and over how committed they are to ensuring that French is going to be top of mind.

I'm a bit stumped why on earth we are not coming here with proper French translation. We saw that already this morning with Mr. Thériault in the justice committee. They were trying to force him to vote on an English amendment.

I wonder if we—

The Chair: Just to interrupt, Mrs. Jansen, Mr. Fraser has sent copies of the full motion in both French and English—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: But that's of the original motion, correct?

The Chair: No, it's the one that he and Mr. Poilievre were talking about. Mr. Poilievre made a couple of changes, adding "compliance or non-compliance" in a couple of areas, so it's a small amendment. I think he also added in the Ethics Commissioner in another section of the motion. Most of it is in both official languages.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Which I appreciate, yes.... But, again, we had the same thing this morning, where they say most of it is in French. "Most" is not the entire thing.

The Chair: What I'm saying is that Mr. Fraser did everything he could in both official languages, and then in the discussion that he and Mr. Poilievre had, where they made a little change, that is the only part that is not translated. I don't want the wrong opinion to go out on here. It's just a couple of minor changes that were related to the last-minute discussions.

Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Jansen has just raised an important point. We won't be able to discuss the motion until it has been properly translated. That is a principle that we must adhere to. I am making the same request as Ms. Jansen and Mr. Ste-Marie.

[English]

The Chair: There's no disagreement from me or anyone else on that, Peter. We're going to get that to the clerk with the slight changes to be amended and put it out.

Mr. Poilievre.

[Translation]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I agree with the comments by Ms. Jansen, Mr. Julian and Mr. Ste-Marie. I would add that Mr. Fraser has acted in good faith. His intention was for us to have the document in both official languages before we vote. There was not a lot of time to translate the minor changes.

As you suggested, Mr. Chair, we should take 15 minutes or so for the interpreters to do a reliable and complete translation and for all members of the committee to receive the new motion in both official languages. We could then move to a vote.

• (35145)

[English]

The Chair: Okay, that's where we're at.

Are there any other comments before we suspend for 15 minutes? We will reconvene at five o'clock, Ottawa time.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Mr. Chair, I believe Mr. Fraser had his hand up.

The Chair: I don't have you all in front of me, so I can't see you.

Mr. Fraser, did you want in?

Mr. Sean Fraser: Certainly, Mr. Chair.

For the sake of absolute clarity, all members of our caucus are in complete agreement with all of the points made. For the record, the minor changes are ones that came in just minutes before. They are quite minor. I think it is fair and essential that we have a full translation for members in the language of their choice.

With that on the record, we could move forward with the suspension, so we can deal with the translation, and reconvene as soon as the clerk sends the full text of the motion in both official languages. That would be the appropriate next step.

The Chair: That sounds good to me.

The meeting is suspended for 15 minutes.

• (1545)

(Pause)

• (1600)

The Chair: We shall reconvene.

We'll go to a discussion on this. I know we're batting it around out of procedural rules. If we are agreed on going forward, we will have to have unanimous consent to basically move this motion and do what we want to do with this motion. Once we deal with that, then we can go to whatever we want to do.

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Actually, I don't think it's that complicated. If the subamendment is withdrawn, then the motion could be put as a

subamendment to the original motion of privilege. Then we can go from there.

The Chair: That would be one way. The other way would be unanimous consent to allow this motion. The other motion would stay intact, as it is. That's probably where people want to go.

I have Mr. Fraser, followed by Mr. Poilievre and Mr. Julian.

Mr. Fraser, go ahead.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I don't think this has to be a lengthy intervention.

I seek the unanimous consent of committee members, pursuant to your advice, that the motion be moved as it was read out and circulated by the clerk.

Mr. Peter Julian: I'm not prepared to give that.

The Chair: Mr. Julian isn't prepared to give that unanimous consent. That leaves us where we are.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, I'd love to hear from Mr. Poilievre. I think it would be... I'd like to hear from Mr. Ste-Marie as well.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, do you want to speak? Then it will be Mr. Ste-Marie, and back to Mr. Julian.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: This compromise is a step forward. It's imperfect and incomplete, but it is a step in the right direction.

There are about a thousand redactions and exclusions in the bundle the government handed this committee. This motion would require the government to hand over, unredacted and unexcluded, about 54% or 55% of that material. We would be removing black ink from about half of the pages that are currently covered up.

The motion requires the government, basically, to give over everything except that which is excluded or redacted under section 69 of the Access to Information Act, which deals with cabinet secrets. If you take that bundle of documents, everything that isn't stamped with justification under section 69 must be given, unredacted, to the law clerk to read.

That is the strict interpretation that I impose on this motion. If that is not honoured, I reserve the right to reintroduce my point of privilege and resume talks on it.

Again, Mr. Fraser has committed to me, by virtue of this motion, that every single redaction or exclusion except those justified under section 69 will be removed, so that the documents can be handed over to the law clerk for his perusal. He will be able, then, to testify before the committee as to whether the government is in compliance with Mr. Julian's original motion of July 7.

Mr. Fraser, do you agree with that statement?

• (35205)

The Chair: I'll come back to Mr. Fraser after I go to Mr. Ste-Marie and Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: It seems like a reasonable compromise, for the same reasons as those Mr. Poilievre stated.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Julian, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Julian: I yield to Mr. Fraser to respond to Mr. Poilievre's question and reserve the right to come back.

The Chair: Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I think the goal, if I can put it even more simply, is to give everything from the original motion to the law clerk and have the law clerk conduct an assessment as to whether the government is in compliance, and then report to this committee where we can ask questions.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'm sorry, just to clarify—because I think that's probably where you were leaving a little bit of ambiguity—of the original bundle that the government handed over to the committee, everything in that bundle will be given to the law clerk unredacted and unexcluded except that which is currently marked by section 69.

Is that correct, Mr. Fraser?

Mr. Sean Fraser: I think the only things that we're looking to protect under section 69 are the cabinet confidences, and we have agreed, with the exception of what's been handed over that would normally be subject to cabinet confidences, that's not going to the law clerk.

Everything else that we've been looking for would be going to the law clerk—not to share with the committee—for him to look at, conduct an assessment of, and then come back to the committee so we can ask if the government has done what they've said they were going to do or what the committee has asked them to do.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Just to clarify, in the bundle that the government handed over to the committee, that bundle will be given over to the law clerk with no redactions or exclusions except those justified under section 69 of the Access to Information Act. Is that correct?

Mr. Sean Fraser: Yes. I think the motion says that the redactions are only for cabinet confidence. That's explicit in the motion, is it not?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It is, but again, the bundle of documents that the government gave the committee in response to Mr. Julian's July 7 motion will be handed over to the law clerk, and it will have no exclusions or redactions except those justified under section 69. Is that right?

Mr. Sean Fraser: I want to be careful, because.... I'm comfortable with the language that you've pitched to me—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Sorry, you're getting a little bit sneaky here. Tell me the answer to the question.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Look, I'm not trying to be sneaky. I think it was your motion. I plan to support it.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Is that your interpretation, though? I just asked it three times now. Is that your interpretation, that all the doc-

uments that the government gave to this committee will be handed over to the law clerk unredacted except for those marked under section 69 of the Access to Information Act as cabinet secrets?

Mr. Sean Fraser: I think the motion asks for that. One of the things I want to be careful about is that.... The committee is asking for things. The government is going to produce a response to the motion, and I'm not speaking for what the government is going to do.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, yes, you are. You're the parliamentary secretary, so you're a member of the executive. That's what you're doing here, so you are speaking for the government.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I'm not speaking to the government's response to the motion. I haven't seen what the government has not yet done. That's my only concern here, Pierre.

● (35210)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Have you spoken to the government about this?

Mr. Sean Fraser: I've spoken to members of our—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: So, you know what their intentions are.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I don't think that anybody is trying to be tricky here.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay, so I'll just ask you one more time, then.

There's a bundle of documents that the committee got, and this motion will have the effect of having the government give the law clerk all those documents that were in that bundle unredacted and unexcluded, with the exception of those excluded or redacted on the grounds of section 69 of the Access to Information Act. Is that correct?

The Chair: Let's give some time for people to think here.

Just on your point, Pierre, there's a bundle of documents that went to the law clerk at the committee's request. We never got them, and then we got them after the law clerk, just to be clear.

Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Look, Pierre, the only reservation I have is that we kind of went back and forth on the language of it. The government is going to produce this, and the law clerk is going to say, yes, you complied or didn't comply. I think if we fail as a government to satisfy what you've asked for, the motion protects your right to go immediately back to your privilege motion.

I only hesitate because it's not going to be me who is saying, here are the documents that are being produced. I don't want to give you information that I don't have, based on my speculation.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: But it's not speculation. You wouldn't be supporting this motion if you didn't think the government was going to comply with it.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I'm satisfied with the motion. I think the government will comply with it.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. Good.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I will ask them to comply with it.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right. And your intention here is that all redactions and exclusions, other than those justified under section 69 of the Access to Information Act, will be removed in the submission that the government makes to the parliamentary law clerk, yes or no?

Mr. Sean Fraser: Pierre, I feel like you're grilling me as the witness who's producing these documents. I think that's the whole purpose of having the law clerk come, to tell us if the government has complied. I'm comfortable with the motion that you sent to me before this meeting. I would like to let the motion dictate that, not to have me make representations on behalf of someone else who's going to be complying with this motion.

The Chair: The motion and some late amendments to it, I might add....

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: This is actually a key question, Mr. Fraser. I understand you can't necessarily reply for the government, but it almost sounds like what will happen, or what could happen, is that there will be a new list of pages of cabinet confidences that are excluded from a new batch.

The question Mr. Poilievre asked was very specific. On the 5,000 pages that we got, some of them excluded certain pages from cabinet confidences. Now you're saying that there will be a new batch prepared. Ultimately, it's quite possible, because you're not the one doing the redaction, that we may find a different list of cabinet confidences—in other words, different pages excluded.

This is really the crux of this particular motion. It only works if it's the same 5,000 pages with the same cabinet exclusions. It doesn't work at all if we're talking about a new mix of papers. From what I gather from your responses.... You're honest; you're saying you can't guarantee that. My concern is that we're potentially having the documents redacted a second time, with potentially pages added to the cabinet confidences that were excluded the first time.

That was the direct question that Mr. Poilievre asked that you can't answer. I'm not criticizing you for that. You're being honest. But I am worried about that fact. I think that's the crux of the concern around this motion. If we're talking about two different piles of paper, we're no further ahead in terms of getting to the bottom of what we requested in July.

● (35215)

The Chair: Mr. Fraser, I'm just reading this motion over again.

Mr. Julian, if you read the motion closely, I don't think the government can send a different batch of documents. We're really dealing with the same documents related to the motion.

Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Thank you.

Yes, Peter, I don't think that's the case. In fact, part of the motion brings the Clerk of the Privy Council here to explain why the particular redactions were made. I don't anticipate that this motion creates a wiggle room for the government to use a different reason for the redactions than was given before.

I only hesitate, as you pointed out, because.... The government is going to respond to this motion. Then the law clerk will come and say whether they've satisfied the motion or not. If the law clerk says no, the motion we've discussed today does not preclude us from immediately coming back to the debate we've been having over the past number of weeks.

Mr. Peter Julian: I'm not asking that. I'm saying that the reason is very clearly cabinet confidences, but you are unable to—and I understand this completely—assure us 100% that the pages that were excluded last time under cabinet confidences will be the only pages excluded this time.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I think the motion tries to cure this very issue.

I don't want to stick my neck out on something that a different person is going to respond to. The protection that we baked into this suggested motion was to have the law clerk come and testify about his review of the documents and to say whether the government satisfied the original motion or not. Presumably, if they say no, we're back where we are. If they say yes, it's satisfied, I would assume the privilege point would disappear.

I don't know how else to solve this problem, other than the language that I thought we were on the verge of agreeing to. If you're not comfortable with the language, then I guess we'll go back to the drawing board.

I feel like I've said what my understanding of it is. We should see if the committee has the will to support it.

The Chair: Just so we're all clear, if what is done here doesn't meet with the law clerk's approval, then we go back to the original motion, amendment and subamendment. Is that correct? Is that the protection there for committee members who've had this concern in the first place? I want to make sure that for those who had concerns, the protection is there to go back to the original motion should the law clerk decide that's not the case.

We have Mrs. Jansen and Ms. Dzerowicz.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I'm just wondering if Mr. Fraser is willing to use the term “same batch” when he's explaining to us what documents this includes. Are you willing to actually use that terminology? It will be the same batch of documents that were sent the first time.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I assume we're dealing with the same batch of documents.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Assuming is never a good thing, especially when you're doing something this legal. I'm asking if you are willing to use the words “same batch”.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I'm not fussy about it. The language came from Pierre. I don't have problems with that. My reservation—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Are you willing to use the words “same batch”, then? That's the question. You are willing to say that.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I've just indicated that I am and that I think it's all the same documents.

My only reservation is that it's not me who is going to be responding to this motion, so I can't predict what the exact response will be.

• (35220)

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: You are clear that what this motion is talking about is the exact same batch of documents as the previous.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I expect that the motion is dealing with the same batch of documents. I don't want to just repeat my reservation. I think you know what it is.

The Chair: Ms. Dzerowicz.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: In response to what you said, Mr. Chair, if for some reason those who feel that...once the law clerk comes, we come back to this motion, amendment and subamendment.

I also want to point out that it's fairly quick. It's November 24, which is next Tuesday, and before November 25. It's actually being done very quickly and as expeditiously as possible. I think if we pass this today, we can then move to submit those documents immediately to the law clerk and have the law clerk come before us before the 25th, which is next Wednesday. We could then just proceed.

I know we all want to get to pre-budget consultations. I think Mr. Fraser has done an outstanding job in explaining what was agreed to with the motion.

The Chair: Mr. Ste-Marie.

[Translation]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I still agree with the arguments that Ms. Dzerowicz is making. There is a risk. Are we, or are we not, talking about the same batch of documents? The committee's calendar shows that our next meeting will be next Tuesday. That is when we will know.

Now I would like to ask Mr. Fraser a question.

As Mr. Poilievre said, you are a parliamentary secretary. When you speak, you do so on behalf of the government. I understand that you cannot tell us at the moment whether or not this is the same batch of documents. But how long would it take you to send a text to Mr. Rodriguez about this, or to go and see somebody from the government who could give us an unambiguous answer? If we are talking about five or 10 minutes, I feel that it's worth it. It could calm all the apprehensions that committee members are feeling. We could then continue our work.

[English]

Mr. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, just to simplify this, I think we're asking for the same batch of documents subject to the conditions we've laid out in the motion we've discussed.

One of the issues I have, Gabriel, is that there are different batches of documents within the batch, if you'll pardon me, and the custodian of each of those is a different ministry. Each of those ministries will have to respond to the motion for the documents that are within its custody. I'm not trying to be tricky. I don't want to start speaking for the person who is going to be responding and providing these documents in accordance with the motion.

I expect that the government will satisfy the motion. If it doesn't, I think the safety valve that is baked into this motion is that we immediately come back to the point of privilege.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I think I have a solution, and I'd be curious as to how Mr. Julian, Mr. Fraser, Mr. Ste-Marie and whoever else would comment on this. We could simply say "including all documents the government provided the law clerk in August".

It would then read, "that the committee order that by November 24, 2020, the Government provide the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel with all documents as originally requested in the July 7, 2020 motion moved by the Member for New Westminster-Burnaby, including all documents the government provided the Law Clerk in August, without any redaction, omission or exclusion except as would be justified in sections and subsections 69(1) through 69(3)(b)(ii) of the Access to Information Act".

That would just clarify that the entire bundle is coming back, this time with all of the redactions removed except for those justified under section 69.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Pierre, can you just tell me what words you're adding? You read a lot, and I think most of that is already in the motion. I am just not clear on which part of what you said was different from the existing motion.

• (35225)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: After the word "Burnaby", you would put—and you can do this in brackets or you can put it within two commas—"including all documents the government provided the Law Clerk in August".

The Chair: What I would suggest, so that you're not in an impossible position, Mr. Fraser, is that we maybe suspend for another 15 minutes if we're all clear on that. Is everyone okay with that?

Mr. Sean Fraser: Just before we do, Pierre, can you just repeat those words so I know exactly what I'm dealing with here?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes. It would be after "the member for New Westminster-Burnaby" and would read "including all the documents that the government provided the law clerk in August" and then you would continue with "without any redaction, omission, or exclusion".

It would now read:

That the committee temporarily set aside the motion relating to the Point of Privilege put forward for the Member for Carlton on October 8, 2020, and the subsequent sub-amendments moved by the Member for Calgary Rocky Ridge and the Member for Kingston and the Islands, and that the Committee adopt all evidence heard in the First Session of the 43rd Parliament during the committee's study on "Government Spending, WE and the Canada Student Service Grant"; and that the committee order that by November 24, 2020, the Government provide the Parliamentary Law Clerk with all documents as originally requested in the July 7, 2020 motion moved by the Member for New Westminster-Burnaby, including all documents the Government provided the Law Clerk, without any redaction, omission, or exclusion except as would be justified in sections and subsections 69(1) through 69(3)(b)(ii) of the Access to Information Act....

And rest would continue completely unchanged.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Okay.

Can you give me a few minutes to look at this?

Mr. Peter Julian: On a point of order, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: —I would just add that it should be “as was originally justified in sections” instead of “as would be justified in sections”.

The Chair: Where do you see that?

Mr. Peter Julian: What we're talking about is that it's about the same documents that were excluded as a result of cabinet confidences “as was...justified”.

The Chair: Just hold on. Where in the motion are you referring to that, Peter?

Mr. Peter Julian: It's as we get to the exclusion. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shut that window.

The Chair: I like dealing with paper, not these units, to be honest.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Yes, I know.

Mr. Peter Julian: It's “as was justified originally by sections...69(1) through 69(3)(b)(ii) of the Access to Information Act”.

The Chair: It's at “as would be justified”.

Mr. Peter Julian: It is “was justified”, right? We're talking about the same—

The Chair: You're saying to change “would be” to “was”?

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, to “as was justified originally”. I think the order then becomes very clear, both in terms of the original pile of documents but also the original exclusions on the basis of cabinet confidence. That certainly would make it very clear, I think, on both counts.

The Chair: The change would be, then, with what Pierre put in and then “without any redaction, omission or exclusion, except as was justified in sections...”. Is that right?

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, “as was originally justified”. It's the first pile of paper.

The Chair: Okay.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Sean, I just want to make sure of this. I know that I read it out slowly and meticulously, but I just want to make sure that we're all leaving with the same understanding.

What do you have as wording, then, Sean?

Mr. Sean Fraser: I was actually just going to ask, because I got distracted when Peter made his submission, although I don't think it's problematic.

Is it possible for the clerk to resend to committee members the full body with both Pierre's and Peter's suggested changes?

The Chair: Do you have that, Madam Clerk?

Yes, the clerk will send that.

[Translation]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: I would also ask that it be in both official languages.

[English]

The Chair: Yes. That's a good point, Gabriel.

• (35230)

Mr. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, are we going to briefly suspend so we can review what the clerk circulates?

The Chair: We'll have the clerk send out the information, if she could, in both languages.

We'll suspend—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Madam Clerk, my staff will be sending you an email as well, just so you that have my spoken words in writing.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. We'll suspend for 15 minutes.

Hopefully, we can get back to this, because we're going to run in to another committee as well.

This meeting is suspended.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1645)

The Chair: We shall reconvene.

I believe all members have received a copy of the two amendments in both official languages.

We'll go to, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Could we ask that the clerk read the motion?

The Chair: Can you read the motion in full, Madam Clerk?

[Translation]

The Clerk:

That the committee temporarily set aside the motion relating to the point of privilege put forward by the Member for Carleton on October 8, 2020, and the subsequent subamendments moved by the Member for Calgary Rocky Ridge and the Member for Kingston and the Islands, and that the Committee adopt all evidence heard in the First Session of the 43rd Parliament during the committee's study on “Government Spending, WE and the Canada Student Service Grant”; and that the committee order that by November 24, 2020, the Government provide the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel with all documents as originally requested in the July 7, 2020 motion moved by the Member for New Westminster-Burnaby, including all documents the government provided the Law Clerk in August, without any redaction, omission or exclusion except as was justified originally in sections and subsections 69(1) through 69(3)(b)(ii) of the Access to Information Act, that the information remain in the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel and be used exclusively by him to determine the government's compliance or non-compliance with the July 7, 2020 motion, and that the Clerk of the Privy Council and the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner appear no later than November 25, 2020 to discuss “cabinet confidence” exclusions to public disclosures, and that the Law Clerk testify before the committee regarding documents received from the government pursuant to this motion to provide his views on the government's compliance with the July 7, 2020 motion.

• (35250)

[English]

The Chair: You have heard the motion.

Mr. Sean Fraser: We've talked this one through, Mr. Chair, I'm ready for a vote.

The Chair: Is there unanimous consent to go with this motion?

Mr. Peter Julian: I'd love to just hear from Mr. Poilievre and Monsieur Ste-Marie to be certain.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre and Mr. Ste-Marie, are you okay with this motion for unanimous consent? I assume if you're with unanimous consent, you're okay with it.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I think this is a step forward and a significant improvement that will also let us get on to the committee's business.

I think this is the best we can do for now.

The Chair: Mr. Ste-Marie.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Yes, me too. It's an acceptable compromise.

I would like to add one new amendment. No, just kidding, I'm ready to vote.

[*English*]

The Chair: You're a good man, Gabriel.

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Our committee is funny in both official languages.

Mr. Peter Julian: It certainly is.

I'm reassured by the modifications that have just been accepted, so I'm prepared to give consent as well.

The Chair: Okay. We have unanimous consent to deal with the motion.

Okay then, all those in the favour of the motion?

Madam Clerk.

The Clerk: Do you want a recorded division?

The Chair: Yes, we'd better go with a recorded division.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

The Chair: Thank you all.

Ms. Dzerowicz, your motion is next, please.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Oh, my goodness, I just want to say this is a momentous moment.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): I'm glad I could be here for the beginning and the end.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Mr. Chair, I don't know what the proper way of doing this is.

I would like to move a motion to start our pre-budget consultations. I can read it out. It is exactly the same motion that was introduced on October 8, other than the dates being updated.

Do you need a copy of it, Mr. Julian?

Mr. Peter Julian: That would be very helpful.

Thank you, Ms. Dzerowicz.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: The clerk has the motion in both official languages.

[*English*]

I will have the clerk send it to you. It's already been submitted in both languages, of course.

I will read it out.

Do you want me to wait until everybody has received it? I could wait a minute.

The Chair: I think you can read it. It is not substantially changed from the other.

● (35255)

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: The motion reads:

That, pursuant to its mandate under Standing Order 83.1, the Standing Committee on Finance begins the Pre-Budget Consultations 2021 on Thursday, November 26, 2020, and that

- a) the Deputy Prime Minister and departmental officials appear before the committee;
- b) the evidence and documentation received by the committee during the first session of the 43rd Parliament on pre-budget consultations be taken into consideration by the committee in the current session;
- c) the committee allow witnesses to change their testimony if they feel so obliged based on the rapidly evolving situation around COVID-19;
- d) each party submit a preliminary witness list no later than 6:00 p.m. on Monday, November 23, 2020;
- e) each party submit a final witness list no later than 6:00 p.m. on Wednesday, November 25, 2020; and
- f) the committee request permission from the House to table its report on pre-budget consultations no later than the week of February 1, 2021.

That is the motion.

I'll just mention one more thing, Mr. Chair. You had very kindly mentioned at the last meeting that you had checked with the clerk about the availability of the rooms and there is a possibility for us to be meeting the week of December 11 or maybe December 14, I believe. That would allow us to conduct a certain number of pre-budget consultations and would actually force us, in terms of timelines, to push out the delivery of the report until the first week of February at the earliest.

I've encompassed what you had suggested from the last meeting in the dates I've proposed in this motion.

The Chair: It's on the floor. I would say, though, that it's something that all parties would likely talk to their whips or House leaders about. If we were to be able to meet the week of December 14, if we could take four or five days there and meet three hours a day, we could get through 50 or 60 witnesses, but we couldn't do that, I don't believe. I'm not a hundred percent sure on this. I do think we would need a motion of the House to.... I believe committees can only meet virtually until December 11. You might be more aware of this than me, Peter. The clerk is shaking her head yes. For us to be able to meet virtually and do that the week of December 14, we would need permission of the House or the authority of the House in order to meet virtually. For everything to fall into place, that would have to happen.

Peter, do you have anything you want to add?

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, you're absolutely right, Mr. Chair. I think those discussions now about meeting virtually beyond December 11 are starting, but I'm not sure they'll be concluded in the next few days.

I do agree with you that there are a couple of motions that have to go through the House on this, so it's best for us to consult with our folks, our whips and our House leaders in each of the parties before we come back to discussions Tuesday.

I'd also say that I think it's probably worthwhile over the next half hour to talk in principle about this approach, and I have some comments I'd like to make about that aside from the technical stuff.

The Chair: Yes, that's not a problem. It's on the floor. I think key at the moment is bringing forward the submissions from the previous parliament. I think any number of organizations, everything from the Canadian Chamber of Commerce to others, certainly want their submissions to be considered as part of the pre-budget consultations. Whether we get to many witnesses or not.... There are 793 of them, so we need to be able to bring them forward. We would need to hear from the Finance minister for sure. We have to get that done.

The floor is open for any concerns or ideas.

Ms. Dzerowicz, Mr. Kelly and then Mr. Julian.

• (35300)

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

I just wanted to point out a few other things. One is the reason I had put it in terms of beginning November 26 is.... In addition to the fact that we just want to release the documents to the committee, that's one I thought was important, and you mentioned that. Two, the reason I mentioned that we start on Thursday, November 26 is that I want to make sure that the motion that we have just adopted formally has time to be able to.... We basically have the next meeting, which is on the 24th, taken, so that's the reason for the 26th.

In terms of the witness list, to me it's just kind of as soon as possible, but there's flexibility around those dates. I just want to point out that in f) it says "...permission from the House to table its report on pre-budget consultations no later than the week of February 1". That means, if there's no agreement and we have to submit it before December 11.... I'm not sure if that's even possible and what we would be able to do before then, but it doesn't preclude that happening in December if it has to happen that early.

Anyway, those are my comments.

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Kelly, before I get to you, I forgot to mention that we weren't able to hear from the Governor of the Bank of Canada, and he and the deputy governor can come on November 26, which just throws another little wrench into the ointment. In any event, for pre-budget consultations, we need to hear from the Governor of the Bank of Canada anyway, given the world situation.

Go ahead, Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Pat Kelly: The Bank of Canada will be a critical witness, as will be the Minister of Finance. Recognizing that the Minister of

Finance hasn't been to committee yet, we should set aside probably a minimum of two to three hours with the Finance Minister.

As far as how we handle the rest of this meeting, I wonder...if we're operating under the rubric of debate on this motion, I don't know if it's easier if we simply pass the motion, let it come to a vote, and devote the rest of the meeting to committee business. I'm trying to figure out how to make this go smoothly.

The minister and the Bank of Canada are critical top priority witnesses we need to hear.

The Chair: We can deal with the motion at any point in time, if there's agreement to do that.

What the motion sets out is for parties to have their initial list this Friday, is that correct?

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: The initial list is Monday at 6 p.m.

The Chair: The initial list is Monday, and the final prioritized list is on—

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Wednesday at 6 p.m.

The Chair: The clerk can work from number one on down, based on proportionality, because if we're in a very short and tight timeframe, we're going to have to get some pretty critical witnesses in pretty fast.

Mr. Julian, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Julian: There's another scenario that doesn't require a number of unanimous consent motions. We've received about 900—

The Chair: 793.

Mr. Peter Julian: Sorry, 793 different submissions. To have the analyst begin to prepare the pre-budget report, that gives us over the next three weeks the chance to hear from the Finance Minister and the Bank of Canada. We'll also be hearing from the Privy Council clerk, the law clerk and the Ethics Commissioner. At the same time, we'll need a number of committee meetings to finalize the pre-budget report.

That's an alternative scenario that is legitimate, as well, that allows us to meet the original House deadline without the unanimous consent required to extend the deadline. It gets the report in from everybody who has been providing that information to us, 793 witnesses, and we could certainly remind people to provide us with their submissions.

It allows us to meet the deadline in a way that prioritizes the Finance Minister, Bank of Canada, and is compliant with the motion we've just adopted.

I certainly will consult on Ms. Dzerowicz's motion, but it's worthwhile taking a few minutes to look at alternatives. That's what I put forward as an alternative. It allows us to do everything that we have to do based on the submissions we've already received, 800 or so.

I'm not sure it's realistic for us to be.... We're going to be doing all this anyhow. I gather we will be having a week of hearings prior to Christmas, and then perhaps a week of meetings in January to finalize the report.

It's all very rushed. I'm not sure there's a value-added to that when we have a three week period where we can hear witnesses, prepare and discuss, pass the report, and meet the deadlines that the Standing Order has set.

● (35305)

The Chair: Do I have anybody else on the list to throw into this discussion?

I don't think Ms. Dzerowicz's motion compromises the idea...if we decide to table the pre-budget report in December. I don't even know if it's possible for the Library to do that. That's another angle.

I think the other problem we have is that normally this committee...because we'd be on the road and we could meet for five days, we could meet for sometimes six and seven hours. We are limited to two meetings of two hours per week until the place adjourns on December 11, I think. That's the other problem we're up against. I've already asked the Library of Parliament, and they are working on a summary of those briefs, so that's already in progress.

I think the other thing we may need to consider is there was...although it was under a different topic—it was under the COVID-19 submissions when we did that review—we had about 300 witnesses; it was close to 270 I think. There were some good recommendations in those submissions as well, and the Library of Parliament has done a comprehensive summary of them. I guess we'll probably also need a motion to go forward on that.

We might want to think of that, because those could be considered, for us as members at least, as part of the recommendations to be considered in the final package. We don't have that in the motion. However, I think those witnesses came forward in good faith. Although it was not on pre-budget, it was on COVID-19, it very much relates to the issue of where we are. I think we probably need to add that in a motion, that the evidence for whatever the name of the subject title we were doing—COVID-19—should also be brought forward from the last Parliament and considered as part of the pre-budget consultations.

That's where we're at now.

Could we add an amendment to that effect so we deal with that as well?

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I'd suggest that we make an addition after (b). Paragraph (b) reads, “the evidence and documentation received by the committee during the first session of the 43rd Parliament on pre-budget consultations be taken into consideration”. Then paragraph (c) currently says, “the committee allow witnesses to change their testimony”, which refers to (b). I think (c) could also say “the evidence and documentation received by the committee during the first session of the 43rd Parliament on” —

The Chair: We'll get the right title of it.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: —“COVID-related”—I don't know how to say that—“be taken into consideration by the committee in the current session.”

The Chair: Okay, that sounds good.

The motion is on the floor. Is there any further discussion on the motion?

Ted, did you want in to speak? I see you looking hard into the camera there.

Mr. Ted Falk (Provencher, CPC): No, I'm good. I'm just very attentive. Thank you for noticing.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Falk.

Mr. Julian.

● (35310)

Mr. Peter Julian: I'm not prepared to vote on this now. If I wanted to sort of change the perspective, I could offer an amendment that would then take the alternative timeline I've been talking about of preparing a report for the date we have in December.

I think I'm more interested in hearing from members about that alternative timeline, allowing us, as you mentioned, Mr. Chair, to table all of our COVID evidence, to build on the 793 submissions we've received in pre-budget, and to have the Bank of Canada, the finance minister...and at the same time meet with the Privy Council clerk and with the Ethics Commissioner, as we've just stipulated in our motion, without presuming that there's an acceptance in the House for both extending our deadline and also meeting virtually.

If we don't have acceptance on meeting virtually, that means we have members of Parliament coming back to Ottawa before Christmas, at a time when we have very high transmission. I'm not sure that's wise. There are so many pieces in place, I don't think it's wise for us to vote right away. I think it's more of an informal exchange to find out how people feel about an alternative pre-budget report that builds on the work we've already done and the submissions we've already received and that allows us a different road map over the next three weeks.

The Chair: I've got Ms. Dzerowicz next, and others might come in.

I would just say, though, I don't think Ms. Dzerowicz's motion precludes that point.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Exactly. That's what I was going to say.

The Chair: My only concern is that if we don't move on this motion today, we've got to go through these 793 briefs and I want to start to see them.

Ms. Dzerowicz.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Mr. Chair, I have to confess that I don't completely understand what Mr. Julian has proposed, but I think it's basically that if we still have to submit a report on December 11 and we're not going to meet after that, then we should get the submissions, have the research team start putting together some thoughts on that, and then have meetings with the Deputy Prime Minister, departmental officials, and various other people. Nothing in my motion actually precludes that from happening. The last thing it basically says is that the report will be tabled no later than the week of February 1.

Also, I just sent an updated version in both official languages to include that paragraph, which basically says, “the evidence and documentation received by the committee during the first session of the 43rd Parliament on COVID-19 consultations be taken into consideration by this committee in the current session”. That text is with the clerk right now, and it's the only thing that's been added.

I would propose that we vote on this today, because we have to get going. Let's schedule next Thursday, and if we have the governor next Thursday, then maybe we can have him for maybe the first hour and a half, and then maybe government officials in the second half, and then the Deputy Prime Minister the following week. Maybe we can start with the Deputy Prime Minister for an hour and continue with her the following Tuesday, but I would say, let's get going.

Then there's also the release of the documents. We need to start reading these things, so it would be really good for us to have a sense about what's been submitted and then start thinking about our witness list and if we have only have, say three sessions, who we like to have before us and if there are going to be more sessions, who would be in those additional sessions.

This motion allows us to get going on that work, whether it's with the option that I've proposed, which our chair has suggested might work, or whether it's the alternative that Mr. Julian has proposed. I don't think that precludes it at all.

The Chair: We do have to deal with the items in the previous motion we just passed, so that will have to be scheduled in too.

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, as a friendly amendment, would Ms. Dzerowicz be prepared to strike or suspend paragraph (f) where we would go to the House for what is an extension? We could certainly come back to that. I would like the opportunity to consult, of course, so if we're voting on the other components and not on (f), I'd feel more comfortable.

• (35315)

The Chair: Could somebody read (f).

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: It's actually the new (g) because I have added a new paragraph, Mr. Julian, that the evidence and documentation received by the committee during the first session of the 43rd Parliament on COVID-19 consultations be taken into consideration. So it's now the new (g).

What the (g) says is the committee request permission from the House to table its report on prebudget consultations no later than the week of February 1, 2021.

The Chair: You're asking for a friendly amendment to take that out. What are the implications of taking that out, though, Peter?

Mr. Peter Julian: We can come back to it next week. The implication is that right now, if we pass the motion with that, then we're requesting of the House... and not only requesting that, but there are other discussions taking place around extending the ability of committees to meet virtually. By taking that out, I think it's more respectful of these other discussions. We can come back to it next week under committee business.

I have no problem at all with the rest, and I certainly understand Ms. Dzerowicz's proposal. I think there are a couple of doors and I think we're closing them if we have (g) as part of the motion, but if she'll accept taking that out temporarily and we come back to it next week, then I would be much more at ease and we could just get moving.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Listen, I think we can address both concerns. The concern that we get down to business is a legitimate one, but so is Peter's concern that we line up our work schedule with the House's plans and give all members the chance to consider the logistics of this proposal. I think we can achieve all of that.

What I would suggest is that we simply get started with the Deputy Prime Minister and departmental officials and the Governor of the Bank of Canada—those should be our next two separate meetings—and that we task the subcommittee to work out all of the details on the plan for the pre-budget consultation and come back to our next meeting with a consensus. That way we can dot all our i's and cross all our t's without any delay, because we'll use the interim period to hear from the finance minister and the Governor of the Bank of Canada. That gives us the chance to work through this and get it right without having any delay. That's my first point.

My second point is that we need the finance minister to be here for three hours. We need the Governor of the Bank of Canada to be before the committee for a separate three hours. There's been so little committee scrutiny of governmental decisions because of the way that the last five or six weeks have unfolded. We need an extra-long testimony so that we can address the minister and the Governor of the Bank of Canada on the enormous public policy developments that have been happening without any scrutiny.

The Chair: Okay.

I can tell you that I went up the avenue on the three-hour business, and I know that's impossible because for us as a finance committee what works well is the three-hour meeting where you can have six witnesses per hour and a half. That has not proven to be possible with the structure here with Zoom and where all the whips and House leaders have agreed to committee time frames.

The best we can do on anything, I'm told, until December 11, is two hours, no matter what. We don't even have a say in that. That's the problem.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, that's unacceptable. I don't understand. We've been in this pandemic since March. People are organizing Zoom meetings to bring together their Little League baseball teams and other volunteer organizations, and they figure it out. Somehow we haven't been able to figure out how to hold a meeting longer than two hours. I find that hard to believe—

• (35320)

The Chair: The problem, Pierre, is there's no sense in you and I getting into an argument about it because this is beyond us. This is what the whips and House leaders of all the parties have agreed to. It relates to Parliament Hill and the capacity to handle not just our committee but all the committees, and the capacity for interpretation for all.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes.

The Chair: There's nothing I, or we as a committee, can do. It's beyond our ability. It's with all the parties in the House of Commons.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: They're talking about putting a man or woman on Mars.

The Chair: You talk to your House leader about that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: We can't hold a three-hour Zoom meeting.

The Chair: You'll have to talk to your House leader and get Mr. O'Toole or somebody on that one.

Ms. Dzerowicz.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I think for next Thursday, perhaps we should just go with what was proposed, as we have it. I think that the governor's been very patient with us. I think we've cancelled a couple of times, and perhaps we could already schedule the governor for next Thursday.

Is it possible, Mr. Chair, that the subcommittee, which usually deals with the agenda, set the agenda for whatever the pre-budget consultations...whether we go with option one, option two, the alternative option...? Today I just want to provide a framework that would allow us to get going. It isn't just about the alternatives; it's also about the release of the documents so that everyone can start looking at them and working on them as well.

I don't know, and maybe, Mr. Chair, you might be able to help out on this. To Mr. Julian's point, I wonder if we could say, just to keep everything open, because instead of the committee requesting permission from the House to table this report on pre-budget consultations, we could just put "the committee table its report on Pre-Budget consultations no later than the week of February 1". That means we don't have to ask anybody; it basically says that would be the latest. It allows for the most flexible, timely motion on our side; it allows for the alternative of Mr. Julian's on the other side; it allows for the release of the evidence and the documentation in terms of pre-budget documentation, as well as the COVID-19 consultations and best ideas to come forward. It allows the subcommittee to actually meet; it allows us to actually move forward and invite the governor for next Thursday, and it allows for a subcommittee meeting to battle it out as to when the Deputy Prime Minister comes in and speaks to this committee, and for how long. I don't mind meeting for seven hours on pre-budget consultations and hearing from our Deputy Prime Minister.

I do want to note, though, that she was already before the committee of the whole for four hours, I believe, last week, so I know that she's been front and centre and trying to be accountable and

present and making sure that she is responding to questions that are brought forward by all members of the House.

Thank you.

The Chair: Are you okay with that bit of a change, Peter? What it would do is get us started. I think we could have a subcommittee meeting.

What day's today, Thursday? You may have to fly or something tomorrow, but could we have a subcommittee meeting tomorrow or Monday? The difficulty on that one is we have to be able to get time as well. Could we have a subcommittee meeting—I'll put it this way—at the earliest opportunity, as soon as it can be arranged? Hopefully, it would be tomorrow, but at the latest, Monday. Then we can do the rest of the planning. The motion that's on the floor with that kind of suggestion would allow the discussion on all of those other options, and still bring forward everything from the previous Parliament, so we have that available in our inbox on our iPads, or on our system that we use.

Would that do the trick and not compromise what your problem was?

Mr. Peter Julian: I agree with everything, except the point of requesting of the House, I—

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I suggested taking it out.

The Chair: She suggested taking it out.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I suggested "that the committee table its report on Pre-budget consultations no later", so we take out the words "request permission from the house", so it moves "the committee table its report on Pre-Budget consultations no later than the week of February 1". It leaves both your option and my option open.

• (35325)

Mr. Peter Julian: Okay, why don't we just talk about that next week?

The Chair: We're not requesting—

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: If we vote on this today, we release the evidence and documentation received by the committee. We already put on notice the Deputy Prime Minister and departmental officials that we want them to start coming; we've said that we want the subcommittee to figure out the dates on that; and then in the release of that evidence and documentation, we could all get access to those documents. For all of those reasons, that's the reason it would be good for us to vote on this today.

Mr. Peter Julian: I agree. All I'm saying is let's just strike that reference to February 1, and have the steering committee look at it and come back to committee. That's all I'm asking. Everything else, I agree with, so let's—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I agree with Peter on this one.

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, so let's just strike the reference to February 1, and everything else is fine. We move ahead. I agree with Mr. Poilievre on the three hours, I think that's probably a discussion we'll have at the steering committee too, but let's.... You've certainly convinced me of everything, we have a few minutes left, just strike February 1, and I guarantee that I'll be able to get a reference in a timely manner and come back and we can have that discussion around the deadlines at the steering committee, and then back here at the committee.

The Chair: That would get us started.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I'm okay with that. That would be a friendly amendment if we eliminated paragraph (g).

Madam Clerk, I haven't provided the updated one with the COVID-19 consultations. Actually, what I could do—because it takes me two seconds to do this—is just delete (g) and send you the updated version.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The only objection I have here is that we're calling for the Deputy Prime Minister and departmental officials to be here. I understand we're doing that in this motion. If we pass this, I would like to specify that it is our intention to have her here for three hours so we don't have one of these situations in which they come back and say, "Sure, we'd be happy to come in for an hour", and then, as old Bill Morneau used to do, blow 15 minutes on their opener and then do a little bob and weave and be out the door without having addressed any of the real issues. We need the minister for three hours.

The Chair: Just to make sure the record's clear, Mr. Poilievre, Bill Morneau never went 15 minutes at committee. We always held him to 10. He might have gone to 11 at one time, but—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It felt like it was longer.

The Chair: —I don't think he bobbed and weaved. Let's be fair.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Each minute felt like two.

The Chair: He always, I felt, answered your questions very directly.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Fraser.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: If we just make it clear that it's three hours, then we can all agree to this motion with the adjustments that Mr. Julian's made, and in the spirit of collegiality that has characterized this entire engagement, we can move on, arms locked.

The Chair: I think I'm going to go to Mr. Fraser first, and then we'll come back to the motion.

Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Sean Fraser: It strikes me that this is something that the subcommittee can probably sort out. I know you raised a technical

issue. I would normally think three hours is excessive. I haven't seen that in my time as an MP, but I don't think we need to debate the merits of that here. I think this seems like the precise thing that the subcommittee exists for—to sort out this plus the technical detail that you mentioned around meeting slots and time availability given the number of committees. Can we do the same thing on this time commitment for the minister's appearance that we did with the timeline for our report—just deal with it at subcommittee rather than sort it out here?

The Chair: I think that's a fair suggestion.

The motion is on the floor.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Does everybody have the updated motion? I deleted paragraph (g).

I sent it to you, Madam Clerk. It's version six.

The Chair: We understand that the time frame is—

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I moved from version two to six today.

The Chair: We'll go to the vote on the motion.

Madam Clerk, could you do the go-round?

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Just for members' information, we will try to get a subcommittee meeting as quickly as possible given the conditions under which we operate in this place at the moment.

With that, thank you all—

• (35330)

Mr. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Just before we break, look, I'm not on the subcommittee, but I know that it's difficult to secure time for ordinary meetings. I don't know if the subcommittee is bound to meet during official time slots, but if this helps speed things up, just in the interests of getting it sorted out, you might want to consider whether a Zoom meeting could be arranged that's not an official House of Commons meeting. I don't know what our rules provide for, but I thought I'd toss that out as a suggestion so we don't delay the work further.

The Chair: We appreciate that.

The big thing is that the chair is not bilingual, and we do have to proceed bilingually.

That was the point, I think, you were going to make, Gabriel.

Thank you all very much.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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