



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 015

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Monday, December 7, 2020



Chair: Mr. David Sweet

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC)): Good morning, everyone.

Colleagues, I want to advise you right up front that after the testimony and questions and answers today we're going to be going in camera, not for a general business meeting but on something specific to the motion we're studying right now in regard to witnesses. We are required to go in camera. We will be sending you a new password and link for the in camera portion, which will be for only five or 10 minutes at the end of this meeting.

With us today as witnesses, from NATIONAL Public Relations, we have Martin Daraiche and Chantal Benoit; and from Speakers' Spotlight, Martin Perelmuter. The witnesses have seven minutes.

Mr. Daraiche, are you doing the entire seven minutes yourself, or are you splitting them with Madame Benoit?

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Daraiche (President, NATIONAL Public Relations): Good morning, Mr. Chair. Ms. Benoit and I will be splitting the seven minutes.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Daraiche, you're the first one up. Go ahead. You have seven minutes between you and your colleague.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Mr. Chair, Madam Clerk and members of the committee, for over 12 years, I have proudly worked for NATIONAL Public Relations, headquartered in Montreal.

I am appearing before the committee today in my capacity as president of NATIONAL Public Relations. I am joined by my colleague Chantal Benoit, director of consumer relations, at our Montreal office—

The Chair: Just a moment, Mr. Daraiche.

[English]

Mr. Barrett, do you have a point of order?

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Yes. I'm not hearing any translation on the English channel. I just want to be able to hear Mr. Daraiche's statement.

The Chair: Mr. Daraiche, you can begin once again and we'll get our technical crew to make sure that the translation is coming through.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Daraiche: All right.

For more than 12 years, I have proudly worked at NATIONAL Public Relations, whose head office is in Montreal. I am appearing before the committee today in my capacity as president of NATIONAL Public Relations. I am joined by my colleague Chantal Benoit, director of consumer relations at our Montreal office and manager of our mandate with WE Charity.

Before Chantal provides an overview of our mandate with WE Charity, I'd like to say a few words about our firm and what we do.

Today, NATIONAL has nine offices in Canada, from coast to coast. Our pursuit of excellence and our desire to help our clients succeed drive us as we deliver on every single mandate. Each of our 300 professionals embodies our values: quality, commitment, innovation, collaboration, integrity, accountability and respect.

Year after year, more than a thousand Canadian organizations entrust our firm with mandates. The organizations range from small and medium-size enterprises, large corporations and not-for-profit organizations to professional associations, public corporations and umbrella organizations. The mandates can be very straightforward or incredibly demanding, from organizations big or small.

Our area of activity is very broad, attesting to our ability to deliver on the most complex mandates: social acceptability, public affairs, business communications, financial communications, digital communications, stakeholder relations, consumer relations, media relations and so on.

By choosing to work with NATIONAL and surround themselves with seasoned professionals who are active in society and the community, our clients, including WE Charity, are putting their confidence in a partner they can rely on. They look to us for our expertise and our commitment.

Our mandate with WE Charity is no different from the work we do for our other clients. In a world where the number of ways to communicate continues to grow and the flow of information continues to skyrocket, we help our clients promote their projects and organizations more effectively and engage in dialogue with their target audiences.

Clients like WE Charity also look to us for our ingenuity, effectiveness and ability to deploy efforts rapidly in the face of heavy demands and tight deadlines.

WE Charity approached us for support because we have the experience and skills to deliver on such a demanding mandate. A WE employee first reached out to a colleague in our Toronto office on May 15 via LinkedIn. She wanted to arrange a meeting to explain what they wanted to do and initiate discussions so that we could put together a service proposal. That took quite a few days given the complexity and scope of the project.

Cabinet approved the program on May 22, and we began working on the mandate on May 25. At no time were we involved in the contract negotiations between WE Charity and the federal government, either directly or indirectly. What is more, we were never in contact with elected officials or public servants to help WE Charity obtain the contract. We never did any lobbying on behalf of WE Charity.

My colleague Chantal Benoit will now speak to the specifics of the mandate we were given by WE Charity.

• (1110)

Ms. Chantal Benoit (Director, NATIONAL Public Relations): Thank you, Mr. Daraiche.

Good morning, Mr. Chair, Madam Clerk and members of the committee.

[*English*]

National's mandate with WE Charity was for communications. Our mandate was not to manage the Canada student service grant program in Quebec, nor to act on behalf of WE Charity as an intermediary between them and the federal government.

Our role was to provide communication support to WE to raise awareness for the grant program among non-profit organizations, students and other stakeholders in Quebec and in francophone communities outside of Quebec. The objective was to help as many non-profits and students as possible get through the COVID-19 pandemic during the summer.

[*Translation*]

In order for as many people as possible to receive help and for students and non-profits to register, they first had to know about the program. Our job was to raise awareness of the Canada student service grant program among the target groups. Our mandate included preparing the French content, providing program-related media monitoring and developing the social media content.

It was very clear from our earliest discussions that this was a very large-scale project, one with a very ambitious objective and, above all, a very tight deadline—barely a month. Our work on the mandate began on May 25 and ended on July 3, 2020, when WE Charity transferred responsibility for the program to the federal government.

[*English*]

Our mandate was to support WE Charity for its communications, to raise awareness of the program.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

Mr. Daraiche would be happy to answer any questions you have to the best of his knowledge.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Benoit.

[*English*]

We're going to move to Martin Perelmutter now for his opening remarks, but first I want to check with Madam Lattanzio.

Can you hear me okay?

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Yes, I can.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We didn't have a chance to get a sound check for my colleague, so I wanted to make sure she was okay.

Mr. Perelmutter, go ahead for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Martin Perelmutter (President, Speakers' Spotlight): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My name is Martin Perelmutter, and I'm the president and co-founder of Speakers' Spotlight.

Twenty-five years ago, my wife Farah and I got married, quit our jobs and started a business together out of a spare bedroom in our apartment. We had no speakers, no clients, no industry contacts or experience, and in fact, we had virtually no business experience of any kind, but we believed that, if we built our business on a foundation of trust and integrity, then the strength of our relationships with clients and speakers would ultimately determine our company's success.

Over the past 25 years, thanks to a tremendous amount of hard work, some good luck and the kindness of many people along the way, we've built a company we're extremely proud of. We're still a small business and today have a team of 27 of the most dedicated, hard-working and caring people I've ever known. We're honoured to represent many of the country's leading thinkers, inspiring individuals and outstanding speakers.

Our speakers' experience is as broad as it is deep, and they are all leaders in their respective fields, which include business, politics, sports, media, academia, science, technology, culture and entertainment. We book these individuals to speak on various topics from leadership and management to strategy and culture, to disruption and innovation, marketing and branding, diversity and inclusion, health and wellness, inspiration and more. Our clients represent a cross-section of leading corporations, associations, government agencies, colleges and universities, charities, health care organizations, school boards and educational institutions. Our expertise is connecting the right talent with an organization and managing the logistical arrangements so that everything runs smoothly.

A few of our speakers include astronaut Chris Hadfield, Olympian and mental health advocate Clara Hughes, technology entrepreneur Michele Romanow and CFL icon and humanitarian Michael "Pinball" Clemons, to name just a few.

Nine months ago, when COVID-19 hit, like for so many people and so many businesses, our world changed practically overnight. Our industry, the events industry, along with restaurants, bars and the travel and tourism industry, has been hit particularly hard. In just a few days in mid-March, we saw hundreds of speaking engagements that were to take place over the next three months, normally one of our busiest times of the year, wiped off the calendar. When the dust settled, it became clear that not only spring events were cancelled, but we likely wouldn't see any in-person conferences or events for the remainder of the year and beyond.

In the middle of a pandemic, with everyone working from home, we had to completely reimagine and reinvent our business on the fly. That's what we did. We pivoted to offering virtual speaking engagements to our clients. Needless to say, it was tough going, as very few clients were familiar with virtual platforms, and as a result, our business was down significantly. Of course, this is not just our story. This is the story of so many small businesses in Canada and throughout the world.

This brings us to the summer, when we received and responded to an order from the ethics committee to provide records pertaining to a wide range of speaking engagements dating back to 2008. Before I speak to our experience with the committee, I think it is important to make clear that we have no knowledge pertaining to the operations of WE Charity, the Liberal government or the Canada student service grant program. Like most Canadians, the first time we heard about the program was in late June or early July when we read about it in media reports.

I'd also like to make it clear that neither our company, Speakers' Spotlight, nor my wife Farah or I personally have any political affiliation. We have never actively been involved with any political organization, and I don't think we've ever even donated to a political party or campaign. In fact, if you look at our roster of political speakers, you'll see we work with people from across the political spectrum, including Rona Ambrose, Preston Manning, John Baird and Ambassador Bruce Heyman.

Given the scope of the request and the fact that we were given less than three business days to provide records dating back 12 years while our entire team was working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was impossible for us to meet the timeline

set by the committee. Consequently, we asked for an extension to address the order, which was granted to us.

Prior to the new deadline, we were contacted by the clerk of the committee and told not to submit a response due to the prorogation of Parliament. In mid-October, we were once again contacted by the clerk of the committee, and once again, we promptly responded to the clerk's communication and let her know we would co-operate when called upon. On November 17, we received an extract from the Minutes of Proceedings of this committee containing an order for the production of documents. We complied and produced the documents on November 23, yet we've been the subject of many ridiculous claims and false accusations, which I won't dignify by repeating here.

On behalf of my staff, however, I must bring up the fact that, for the past three months, our company has been the subject of harassment, including personal threats to us and our staff. We have also been the target of a campaign designed to discredit us personally and cause reputational damage to our company. This is all outlined in my November 12 letter to you, Mr. Chairman, which I understand has been distributed to all members of this committee.

• (1115)

These events have transpired, despite the fact that we have treated this matter extremely seriously and at all times have responded to and communicated with the committee, following its requests and instructions. We're private citizens in a private company who have been needlessly dragged into the middle of this political firestorm and find ourselves caught in the crossfire.

Finally, I wish to remind members of the committee, as holders of public office in these increasingly divisive times, that your words and actions have consequences and that private citizens should not be used as tools to further political ambitions or agendas.

I now welcome your questions related to the files are that the subject of this order.

The Chair: Thank you very much to the witnesses for their opening remarks.

We'll now go to Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Good morning.

Thank you to the witnesses for joining us this morning.

Mr. Perelmuter, in your August 31 letter to me, you stated that you were unable to disclose client information outside the order of a committee, and I appreciate that. Did you inquire with clients Margaret or Alexandre Trudeau to request their permission to share information about their speaking engagements outside of an order from committee?

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: Yes, I did.

Mr. Michael Barrett: With that said, are you able to confirm if Ms. Margaret Trudeau was paid to speak at the July 2, 2017, Canada Day event in Ottawa?

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: My understanding is that I'm here to discuss the speaking engagements of Justin Trudeau and Sophie Grégoire Trudeau from, I think, October 2008 to the present.

• (1120)

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay, so you're unable to disclose the information.

The Chair: Just a moment, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Perelmutter, you do have an obligation before a parliamentary committee to answer the question that's put to you and to answer it accurately.

Go ahead, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'll just ask if the witness is able to confirm if there were fees paid for that event.

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: Can you repeat the date of the event?

Mr. Michael Barrett: It's the July 2, 2017, Canada Day event in Ottawa.

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: No, that was not an event that we had organized.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

Having had that conversation with those two individuals, are you able to—

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I'm sorry. I apologize, Mr. Barrett. I don't mean to disrupt or interrupt you.

Mr. Chair, does this question fall under the scope of this motion? I think we had a long debate on whether or not information pertaining to Madam Margaret Trudeau and Alexandre Trudeau should be included in the motion. I believe there was a decision on that by this committee. I'm just wondering if this falls under the scope of the motion.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: It doesn't fall directly under the scope of the motion, but it also is not excluded by the motion either, Mr. Dong. Members have quite wide freedom in order to ask questions. That's the way the book says it, as well as the way we've governed the committee so far, so Mr. Barrett is able to ask those questions and should get an answer as well.

I stopped the time there for the point of order. Go ahead now, Mr. Barrett. Continue your time.

Mr. Michael Barrett: If the witness is able to answer, I look forward to the answer. If he's unable to for legal or other reasons and he states as much, that would be appreciated.

Sir, having had those conversations with those two individuals, are you able to disclose today publicly any other information with

respect to speaking engagements by Mr. Alexandre Trudeau or Madam Margaret Trudeau?

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: No, I'm not able to disclose any other information.

Mr. Michael Barrett: All right. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, I'd like Mr. Berthold to have the balance of my time.

The Chair: Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Berthold.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for agreeing to appear before the committee.

The Kielburger brothers' big firm was hired to deliver the WE Charity program. The Kielburger brothers had the capacity to communicate with youth all over the country. On May 15, they began doing business with NATIONAL Public Relations.

Mr. Daraiche, was the purpose solely to reach out to franco-phones?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: It was to reach out to not-for-profit organizations, as well as students in Quebec and other areas with francophone communities.

I'd like to clarify something, if I may. Our mandate was focused on communications. We were not mandated to manage the program; we had asked for—

Mr. Luc Berthold: Sorry to cut you off, Mr. Daraiche, but I don't have much time. Your comments were very clear.

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Thank you.

Mr. Luc Berthold: It is clear that, in reviewing the WE Charity contract, the Treasury Board did not conduct an official languages impact analysis. You said cabinet approved the contract on May 22.

Between May 15 and 22, did your firm, NATIONAL Public Relations, and WE Charity communicate often to define your mandate, to set the parameters? What was the scope of the mandate and how long was it supposed to last?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Sorry, the sound cut out for a moment.

I heard you ask about communications between May 15 and 22.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Precisely.

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Would you mind repeating the question, please?

Mr. Luc Berthold: They contacted you via LinkedIn, which is a bit surprising.

On May 22, cabinet approved the grant program. What recommendations did you make to WE Charity between May 15 and 22? Were you able to deliver on the mandate for all of Quebec? During that time, did WE Charity tell you that it could not meet the requirements in relation to francophones?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: I can confirm that the first contact between WE Charity and our firm was via the network LinkedIn, on May 15.

In the days that followed, a service proposal was established. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, the purpose of the proposal was to define the support that we could provide in terms of reaching out to not-for-profit organizations and students to make them aware of the program.

• (1125)

Mr. Luc Berthold: At which point, WE Charity recognized that it was unable to adequately communicate with French-speaking clients.

What impact did losing the contract with WE Charity have on NATIONAL Public Relations? Did you suffer any losses? You said at the beginning that it was a very big contract. I imagine you had to hire people. What were NATIONAL's losses?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: There are two parts to your question.

The first has to do with deployment capability. You were referring to the organization's capability. The real challenge where our mandate was concerned was being able to carry it out within a very short time frame, between late May and June, before the summer. Our job was to reach out to as many not-for-profit organizations and students as possible to make them aware of the program. The real challenge, then, was being able to deploy outreach efforts to target as many organizations and students as possible.

The second part of your question is about the losses incurred by NATIONAL, so I would appreciate it if you could be more specific. As soon as the mandate ended, our team stopped working on it, so there were no losses in that regard. I hope that answers your question.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Did you hire any dedicated staff, on top of your regular staff?

[*English*]

The Chair: That's all the time we have right now, colleagues.

We'll move on to Madam Shanahan for six minutes.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

First of all, to the witnesses, thank you very much for appearing before us here this morning.

If my colleagues won't do it, I will do it. Speaking to Mr. Perelmuter, I will apologize on behalf of those of us on this side for the distress that your employees and your company have experienced as a result of the actions of certain colleagues on this committee.

I understand that we, as parliamentarians, sit in a very privileged position and we have the bully pulpit and so on. To be casting those

kinds of aspersions and putting people at risk.... I do apologize, certainly, for this side of the committee.

[*Translation*]

I want to thank the NATIONAL representatives.

You do honourable work, and I'm very curious to learn more about how you do what you do.

[*English*]

Chair, I find it curious that members of this committee were very keen to have these witnesses here, but we only have an hour to ask questions. I invite the witnesses, if they want to follow up in writing with more detailed answers to any of the questions that we ask here today, to please do so.

My first question, in fact, Mr. Perelmuter has already referred to. Indeed, can you tell me whether you have ever been a member of the Liberal Party in any way, shape or form? I'm making an allusion here to the McCarthy era when many innocent people were dragged in front of committees and aspersions were made.

Mr. Perelmuter, can you tell me, to your knowledge, if you or your company has in any way acted in an improper manner?

Mr. Martin Perelmuter: No, we have not, and I've never been a member of any political party.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you very much for that.

Again, the opposition in their zeal to tarnish anyone or any company that is even remotely connected to the Liberals, as we witnessed at last Friday's meeting with the ridiculous attacks, if I may, Chair, on Baylis Medical, was shown to be nothing but a smear campaign.

The opposition has made a number of public comments about your company in turn. Would you like to respond to the attacks made upon you and the effects they have had?

• (1130)

Mr. Martin Perelmuter: Yes, thank you.

I understand how politics works as an outsider and I understand that it can be a tough business. I understand that you may have disagreements among or between yourselves in the parties. As members of public office I think you signed up for that and you've taken on a public role, so if you don't like something the other party is doing, I understand the need to call each other out at times. I think you should be civil, but I understand how that works.

We are tangentially connected to this matter. As I mentioned in my statement, we don't have any knowledge of the student service grant. We have nothing to do with that.

It was very surprising, a week after we received a call from the clerk of this committee telling us not to submit documents, to receive a letter from a member of the committee, on House of Commons letterhead, asking us to "do the right thing" and release all the documents.

We retained a counsel who is an expert in privacy law because we realized from the beginning that this was probably a complex matter and we probably should make sure we proceeded properly at all times. I sent that letter to our counsel and she was actually quite upset by the letter. She said that it was an illegal request and that if we complied with the request it would be breaking Canadian law. We would be violating our clients' privacy rights.

I was surprised that a member of this committee would ask us to do that, to contravene Canadian law. What was more surprising was that I received the letter on the morning of August 27, and at the same time I received it, I also received a letter from a journalist, a reporter from The Canadian Press, attaching a copy of the letter and asking for my comment.

I was actually confused and baffled at how a reporter had a letter that was sent to me that I hadn't even had a chance to read yet. We don't have time to get into it, but a series of events that happened after that put us in a really difficult situation, something I've never experienced before.

As a leader of a small company I feel that my first obligation is to ensure the physical, emotional and mental health safety and well-being of our employees. For the first time in my 25-year career I was in a situation where I didn't feel that I could properly protect everyone from what was going on. We had to get the police involved. It was a really nasty situation.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Mr. Perelmutter, did you feel that you were being intimidated by a member of Parliament?

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: Yes, I definitely felt like we were being intimidated.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you.

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: It was frankly quite shocking to be completely honest.

If the letter was sent to us privately, we could have responded privately and that should have been the end of it. We could have given our response, which was that we were prohibited by law from doing what was asked of us, but because it was thrust into the public sphere, we didn't have that opportunity to respond.

We've been dealing with the ramifications of that for the past three months now.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Perelmutter.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I'm very sorry.

The Chair: That's all the time we have. We're a little over time, but I wanted you to finish your answer.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, of the Bloc Québécois, for six minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Good morning everyone.

I appreciate your valuable time.

To start, I want to provide you with some context for what is happening here. It is important for you to understand the situation we, as parliamentarians, find ourselves in. Much can be blamed on the pandemic, to be sure, but taxpayer money is a precious thing.

I know what you've been through and it makes me very uncomfortable because we have had the same experience. We need to know the facts as they pertain to taxpayer money, and that is why we are here today. You should take pride in speaking up today to set the record straight by answering our questions. I, too, have some questions at random.

I had a look at the documentation. My first question is for Mr. Perelmutter.

Mr. Perelmutter, I would like to know when you became involved in the speaking engagements and contracts relating to Mrs. Grégoire and Mr. Trudeau from 2014 to today.

I would like you to tell us about your involvement with them.

• (1135)

[*English*]

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: Is it in terms of our working relationship with Justin Trudeau and Sophie Grégoire Trudeau? I want to make sure I understand.

The last time we worked with either of them was, I think, 2013. We did two speaking engagements with Justin Trudeau in 2012. When he decided to run for the leadership of the Liberal Party, that's when he decided to stop doing any speaking engagements. That was the last time we dealt with him. We did a couple of events in 2013, I believe, with Sophie Grégoire Trudeau. Since that time, we've had no dealings with them.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Are there ever events where the speaker does not receive a fee? Would a client still use your services in that case?

[*English*]

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: It rarely happens when we're involved, because we don't charge a retainer fee for our clients. We earn a commission on the fees for the speakers we book. Once in a while, we do get involved in a pro bono situation to help out a client, but for the most part, it's only paid speaking engagements with which we're involved.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I see.

How do you determine the fee for the speaker or person you are dealing with?

[*English*]

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: The market determines the fees. We try to best understand what the market is, where the individuals we work with fit into that marketplace and then we test it out when we're working with someone new by setting a fee. If we can't seem to get any momentum going, it might be a fee issue and we might have set the fee too high.

We tend to go below the market value at the beginning to build some momentum, and then work from there, assuming the feedback is good. It's really the market that determines the fees.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's great.

I gather that you have had no dealings with Mr. Trudeau since 2013.

I'm not sure whether you know, but Mrs. Grégoire gave talks in London a few months ago.

Were you aware of that?

[English]

Mr. Martin Perelmuter: She was in London.... I'm sorry. When was that?

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: It was in February or March of this year.

[English]

Mr. Martin Perelmuter: There was a WE event, I believe, just before the pandemic hit, but Speakers' Spotlight was not involved with Sophie Grégoire.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Very well.

My next question is for Ms. Benoit and Mr. Daraiche.

You said a WE Organization employee contacted you on May 15. If you can remember, can you tell me who it was?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: It was Leeanne Comish who sent the message via LinkedIn.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: On August 6, La Presse reported that your firm had approached federal MPs from Quebec for a list of community organizations that were short-staffed.

Is that true?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: We know that, as members of Parliament, you are in contact with many organizations and sometimes students. People regularly tell you what their needs are. It happens often.

We did indeed reach out to MPs' offices. We wanted to make sure that they were passing on the information, which was already public, about the Canada student service grant to organizations in their ridings.

[English]

The Chair: That's all the time we have for that round.

Thank you, Mr. Daraiche.

• (1140)

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: We'll now move to Mr. Angus for six minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you very much.

I really appreciate both organizations appearing.

As part of our committee, I want to make it clear that your presence here does not mean that you were involved in doing anything

wrong. This has been a very complex issue with a lot of questions. My interest is to get clarification on details from you. When I ask you questions, I don't want you to feel that we're judging you or believing that you did something wrong. We need to get some answers here to clarify this.

Mr. Perelmuter, thank you for supplying those documents. They end in 2013, so that was the end of your working relationship with Madam Grégoire Trudeau at that point, because she did a number of other WE events. Was she involved with your organization after 2013?

Mr. Martin Perelmuter: That's right.

We were not involved in any events with her after 2013.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

I think what made this question such an incendiary issue in the media was that when the issue first came up, it was stated by WE, I believe, and certainly by the Prime Minister's Office, that his family were not paid at all. I find it very surprising that this was said.

Madam Douglas, who was the chair of the board, specifically asked if any payments were made to members of the Trudeau family. We're told by the Kielburgers that no payments were made, which I also find is extraordinary because it then came out in the media that over \$300,000 had been paid to Margaret Trudeau and Sacha Trudeau.

When that news broke, were you surprised that people had been saying they were not being paid when you would have been negotiating fees for them to get paid?

Mr. Martin Perelmuter: I wasn't sure what to think of it. There are different entities, as you know. It's a complex structure. The speaking engagements were paid not through the charity but through I think ME to WE Social Enterprises, if I have the name correct.

My understanding was that they were saying that the charity didn't pay the speakers and that it was a different entity, a social enterprise. That was my understanding of that.

Mr. Charlie Angus: The charity did make at least one payment. Is that correct?

Mr. Martin Perelmuter: There may have been one. I don't recall off the top of my head, but I think there may have been one.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I'm sorry. Who was the point person you dealt with at WE for arranging Margaret Trudeau's and Sacha Trudeau's events?

Mr. Martin Perelmuter: Marc Kielburger was the person that I dealt with initially. The logistics were then coordinated by someone on our team and someone on their team. I don't know who.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you very much. That's very helpful.

I'm interested, because when we had the Kielburgers at committee and we asked them why they said nobody was paid, or also why we found out they were being paid when all the other speakers were supposed to be volunteers for the WE work, they said that Margaret and Sacha weren't paid to public speak, even though Margaret is very well known as a speaker on mental health, and that she was paid for the ancillary events afterwards.

Were these after-events written into the contract?

Mr. Martin Perelmuter: Yes.

The agreements for those engagements were quite involved. There were a number of events. Normally, when a speaker does an event, they speak and there might be a reception or a meet-and-greet, and usually the commitment is for about a couple of hours. These events had numerous receptions, dinners, meet-and-greets and so on, so everything was included in detail in the agreement. It was a requirement that the individual would participate in all of those events.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I have some copies of some of WE's ancillary event planning and it is very complex, because this is where they were really trying to work the corporate angle. That would have been worked out as part of their... They would come, they would speak and then there would be these obligations to work the corporate event, and that would have been laid out in the contracts.

Mr. Martin Perelmuter: Right. Usually they came in, I think, the night before or the day before because I think there was usually a dinner the day before the event or the night before the event, and then a number of things happening the day of the event.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you very much for that. I have a question for NATIONAL PR to clarify.

I was a little confused this morning. I believe you said that you were hired by WE for communications and media in Quebec. Was that your only obligation? You weren't there to try to build their grassroots organization in Quebec?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Daraiche: You have it right, Mr. Angus. We were there to raise awareness of the Canada student service grant among both not-for-profit organizations and students. Basically, we were hired for communications.

• (1145)

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay. I find that's very surprising because Madam Al Waheidi from WE was asked specifically about this issue by one of the Liberals on August 13 at the finance committee. She said, "National PR was hired to assist us in the process to reach out to francophone and Quebec organizations especially in the area of engagement of not-for-profit organizations." Is that not true?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Yes, that's true, Mr. Angus. We began reaching out to not-for-profit organizations to make them aware of the program on May 25.

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus: You were engaged in working with them to find the non-profit organizations. It wasn't just communications.

You were actually finding the non-profit organizations, as Ms. Al Waheidi stated at the finance committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Daraiche: The goal was to reach out to as many organizations as possible, so yes, we had to seek out organizations, in both urban and rural areas. To deliver on our mandate, we had to find them to, then, reach out to them and make sure they knew about the program.

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

The Chair: That's all the time we have on that round. In fact, we're over, but I wanted the witness to be able to complete the answer for you, Mr. Angus.

We're going to the second round, now. The second round is only five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gourde, it is your turn for five minutes.

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

I would like to thank the witnesses for being with us this morning to help us get to the bottom of this.

My first question is for you, Mr. Daraiche.

I was quite relieved to hear you say that you didn't suffer any financial losses.

Between May 22 and 25, you established the mandate and, most likely, the contract.

Was it a general contract, or was it based on an hourly rate?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: It was a regular contract, sir. We were paid for the hours of work our professionals put in.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I see. It was an hourly rate contract, then.

I'm glad that you were paid, because we, as Canadian taxpayers, also paid WE. Had you not been paid, it would have been even worse.

Later today or sometime this week, could you provide the committee with the contract you signed with WE Charity?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: I am happy to answer any questions you have about the mandate, sir, but if you are asking me to disclose our service proposal, it's not information I am prepared to volunteer. I'll explain why.

It's a contract between two private organizations, so it contains highly commercially sensitive information. Given the type of firm we are, it could affect our ability to be competitive. What's more, the information could affect our entire clientele.

In light of that, I will answer any questions regarding our mandate, but sharing our service proposal with the committee would amount to disclosing commercially sensitive information, which could be detrimental to all of my staff around the country. For that reason, it's not something I am prepared to do.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: It is possible for the committee to look at it in camera. We can discuss it after.

When I received the communications from NATIONAL promoting the program, I must say I was rather surprised. Even though the program had been announced, we, the MPs, did not know it had been rolled out. It was done very quickly.

Did you get information even before the opposition parties did, so you could promote the program?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: I want to put things in their proper context. We began distributing information to constituency offices and MPs at the end of June, and Canadians were well aware of the program by then. I believe the government held a press conference about it on June 25.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I understand what you mean. At press conferences, the government announces the program, but not always the details; they come later. At any rate, for just about every program launched this year, the program would be announced—usually by the Prime Minister, himself—and only rolled out four or five weeks later.

It came as a big surprise to me that you were working on the program with WE Charity.

Do you not see promoting the program to MPs as a form of lobbying?

• (1150)

Mr. Martin Daraiche: No, Mr. Gourde.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, what we were trying to do was reach out to as many not-for-profit organizations and students as possible. When we contacted constituency offices, it was so that the MP would pass on the information regarding the grant program to the same audience, not-for-profit organizations and students. We were not trying to influence you in any way, shape or form.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I understand what you were trying to do, but when a communications firm the size of NATIONAL approaches us or sends us an email, as MPs, we are somewhat skeptical. We are always careful in light of the Lobbying Act, which governs the contact people have with us. You engage in lobbying on other issues, so when NATIONAL communicates with us to promote something, it is a request by NATIONAL to work with us as MPs, so we are on guard to a certain degree.

Could you have been clearer in your explanation to MPs?

Could you have let us know that you wanted to work with us on communications?

Personally, I was quite surprised.

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Mr. Gourde, our communications with members of the House of Commons were extremely clear, in my view. The purpose was always to have you pass on the information. Since you brought up lobbying, I want to make sure this is understood: on some occasions, professionals from our firm do indeed communicate with public office holders, elected officials, or public servants in—

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you. I understand. I'm almost out of time.

I have one last question.

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Those activities, Mr. Gourde, we report through the registry of lobbyists. It's important to make that distinction.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I understand. Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Gourde, that's all the time we have. Sorry about that.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: We'll now move on to Mr. Fergus for five minutes.

[Translation]

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

I want to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I must say I'm a bit disappointed, Mr. Chair. The members of the official opposition had three opportunities to apologize for dragging the reputations of these two firms through the mud. The fact that, as members of Parliament, we enjoy legal protection in terms of what we say here—

Mr. Luc Berthold: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The honourable member is claiming I said things I did not say. I did not drag NATIONAL through the mud. NATIONAL is a public relations and communications firm I respect. I especially don't want the honourable member's claim regarding my supposed comments to be replayed. I would ask that he please withdraw his remarks.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Berthold. That's not a point of order.

Mr. Fergus, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: I am not trying to claim that Mr. Berthold, in particular, made the comment. I am referring to some of his fellow members, actually one specific member who made certain statements. In reference to Mr. Perelmutter, I believe he made the following statement:

[English]

“legally ordered WE documents have been destroyed.”

[Translation]

It implies that the firm's leadership did not want to abide by the committee's decisions or requests.

My question is for Mr. Perelmutter.

[English]

First of all, let me just ask you this quick question.

You said you have 27 employees.

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: That's right.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Before the tweets and the attacks in the media this summer, have your employees ever faced any opprobrium or threats in the course of the duties of their work?

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: No, nothing like this.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Since Mr. Barrett had taken those actions, could you tell us what effect this had on you, your family and your employees?

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: I'm sorry. It's cutting out a bit, but I think you're asking about the effect—

Mr. Greg Fergus: Yes, that it's had on you, your family and your employees.

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: My wife was actually.... I'm sorry. It's a little bit difficult to talk about it. My wife was in fear for her own personal safety for a while. She didn't want to leave the house. When people are coming at you.... One of the individuals somehow found her personal cellphone number and posted it on some Facebook group with a photo of her, calling her disgusting and derogatory things. Her phone started ringing day and night, with all kinds of people calling. It was really unsettling. That obviously affected her greatly, and me as well.

Some of my staff let me know that they were concerned about their own safety. Many of our staff are young women in their twenties and thirties, so to have someone coming after them.... We actually tried to pre-empt some of it when we found out who the individual was and blocked them. I had to reach out to our staff and let them know to block this individual from social media before he started coming after them on social media.

It's something that we never thought we would have to deal with. We're not in a controversial type of business. We're in a business of sharing ideas, sharing hope and sharing inspiration. We've never had anything like this, and it was something that, frankly, we weren't quite prepared for.

• (1155)

Mr. Greg Fergus: Again, Mr. Perelmutter, as Ms. Shanahan said, I am terribly sorry that you, your family and your employees had to face this. I would hope that the members of the official opposition will profit from the time they have here to also present their apologies to you directly.

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: Thank you.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Sir, I know that going to court is a long and costly process, especially when you know that MPs enjoy certain immunity for what they say in the House and, by extension, what they say at committee, but have you ever considered filing suit against some members for the untrue statements they've made about you or your company on social media, which is not protected by parliamentary privilege?

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: We've been very busy just managing our business and trying to get through the pandemic and so forth, but certainly it's crossed my mind. Probably when I have a moment to breathe and things slow down a bit towards the holidays, I may reach out.

I should say that I am not a litigious person. I've never brought suit against anyone. I would not want to do that, but if there were ever a situation where I would consider it, this would be one, because it's been really disappointing that this would be brought on at all, and in particular, the circumstances and how it came about.... It was just unnecessary.

Mr. Angus mentioned something earlier about getting answers. I believe in this process. I believe in this committee. That's why we're here. That's why we've co-operated through the whole process. That's why it's doubly disturbing, because if the work was done here at the committee, I would have no issue with answering questions and providing the information or documentation that was requested. That's the disappointment: It was taken outside of the committee and thrown into the public sphere, I guess, and we were just held out to dry.

We're not a big company. We can't hire a communications firm like NATIONAL Public Relations or someone like that. We're dealing with this on our own, and it's not fun when the first thing you do when you wake up in the morning is check to see what kind of nonsense is on social media and what people are saying or doing. It's been tough.

The Chair: That's all the time that we have. I gave an extra minute there because I felt that Mr. Perelmutter deserved to be able to heard, but we're over time.

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Colleagues, we're going to go to the next round, which is that flash round of two and a half minutes each.

Before I do, Mr. Daraiche, you were directed by a member of the committee to deliver some documents. I want you to know that's an obligation that you have. They'll be treated with respect and no business secrets will be released from the committee. Just as Mr. Perelmutter had to produce documents, we'd ask you to produce the contract.

I'd also like to ask you this as well. You've mentioned several times a May date that you were engaged with WE Charity. Do you have other partners in your firm that work with WE Charity?

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Daraiche: No.

[English]

The Chair: Jean-Pierre Vasseur was not involved in the management of this contract or another contract with WE Charity?

• (1200)

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Mr. Chair, the sound cut out. Would you mind repeating the question?

I answered the question about whether other partners had had any dealings with WE Charity.

[English]

The Chair: Certainly. I just want to make sure you've heard everything I said.

You have on record the demand for the documents that Mr. Gourde said you'll need to produce to the committee in regard to the agreement with WE Charity. Then I started with a question about whether there was another partner in your organization who had any dealings with WE Charity in a separate contract prior to May.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Daraiche: The answer is no, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

Upon my request, would you also make sure you submit to the committee, along with the contract, any emails in regard to your communications with WE Charity and the federal government in this case?

We'll now move to the next round, colleagues.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Sorry, Mr. Chair, but the sound cuts in and out when you speak. Your mike might be too far away, I'm not sure.

We took note of the committee's requests and we will get back to you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go to the two and a half minute round with Madame Gaudreau.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

I want to reiterate what we are trying to do here. As members of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, our job is to bring to light any potential conflict of interest. There is no doubt that this whole situation is doing harm.

I am new to Parliament. I have learned a lot about my duty to disclose information, but I have also learned to be wary when mistakes are made. You are business people, so when you know that a government has already made mistakes and has ventured onto fuzzy territory for a third time, do you take that as a sign to be cleaner than clean, so to speak? For instance, Mr. Perelmuter said earlier that he had never made a donation to the Liberal Party.

Did it worry you knowing that the government had publicly been found to have made a mistake twice before?

Who would care to answer?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: I can answer, Ms. Gaudreau.

As I mentioned, cabinet made a decision on May 22. From our standpoint, when the government makes a decision of that scale, with all the steps that have to be completed beforehand, we were certain the program was legitimate. Cabinet made a decision to proceed with the program. For us, that was enough.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I see.

Earlier, Mr. Perelmuter explained that he was very neutral. Now, I would like to hear your position, because it's important to get your point across. On your website, you talk about your extensive political experience and your knowledge of the workings of government. I imagine that you, too, are mindful and want to show that you are completely neutral.

What have you done to do that?

[English]

Mr. Martin Perelmuter: We don't have any connection with anyone in government. I'm not a 100% sure I understand the question, but we've never used any political contacts to secure agreements. We just—

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: You showed us that, Mr. Perelmuter. The question was for Mr. Daraiche. He has extensive political experience, so he must know how the system works.

[English]

The Chair: Madame Gaudreau, that's all the time we have.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: He must know how it works.

• (1205)

[English]

The Chair: In fact, you were over quite a bit on that one. I know two and a half minutes flies by pretty fast.

Mr. Angus, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you very much.

When the Kielburgers were pitching this they claimed a lot of partnerships. Volunteer Canada they said was on board. Volunteer Canada walked away. Imagine Canada walked away. The YMCA didn't get involved. They claimed to the Treasury Board that WE Charity "has a significant presence in Quebec", yet, Mr. Daraiche, they hired a PR firm and they said your job was to reach out to the francophone and Quebec organizations in the area of non-profit organizations. Only 4% of the people who signed up were young people from Quebec. I would think that would be registered as quite the abysmal failure of outreach in Quebec.

What happened?

They said they had significant presence in Quebec. They said you could get them organizations on the ground. Why were only 4% of the youth from Quebec?

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Mr. Angus, if you're asking about the program's effectiveness, I can only provide a partial answer. It's a question government officials might be able to answer.

I want to set the record straight. We only had a few weeks to reach out to people. That brings me back to how challenging implementing the program was. For the month of June, we had a mandate to inform organizations and students. Basically, we were working on it just a few weeks, less than a month. That is the extent of our involvement. We did indeed endeavour to inform as many organizations as possible, but the time frame was very limited. As you know, WE Charity decided to hand over the program's administration to the federal government on July 3.

I can only comment—

[English]

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you for that. I'm running out of time so I will move on.

Students applied from across Canada but only 4% from Quebec.

Mr. Perelmutter, I want to apologize that you and your staff were abused like that. We live in a very toxic climate. I have certainly been abused relentlessly on Twitter and Facebook for my work on this file. I hope some of my abusers and trolls aren't the same who went after you. Some of them were pretty ugly. I want to apologize. I don't think that should have happened. I appreciate the fact that you've come here and given us clear answers. That's what we've asked of you and you've delivered, so thank you for that.

Mr. Martin Perelmutter: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Colleagues, we have names down for one more round and we have time. Unless there's an objection I'll give those members the go-ahead. Two of them are going to split, one Conservative and one Liberal. Are there any objections?

[Translation]

Mr. Berthold, you may go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to revisit the period between May 15 and 22 with Mr. Daraiche.

My first question is this. Is it common in your industry for someone to approach you on LinkedIn about such a major contract or mandate?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Mr. Berthold, our clients approach us in various ways. Over the past few months, more of them are reaching out to us via our website and social media. We don't have a lot of people contacting us through LinkedIn, but it does happen from time to time.

Mr. Luc Berthold: That's surprising considering the size of the mandate and the file. We are, after all, talking about a \$1-billion program of the Canadian government. I must say I do find it surprising.

When you were contacted, I imagine you felt a sense of urgency on WE Charity's part to have something ready for May 22. Was that the case?

What exactly was the nature of that first contact with the organization? What were you asked to do?

Were you asked to put something together for cabinet's consideration on May 22?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Absolutely not, Mr. Berthold. No urgency was expressed in relation to a specific date.

There was a need to explain WE Charity's role in delivering the Canada student service grant program if it received cabinet approval. On our end, that meant explaining how we could support them in getting out the information about the program. That was the focus of our communications.

• (1210)

Mr. Luc Berthold: Did you sign any agreement with WE Charity prior to May 22, in other words, between May 15 and 22?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: We had some back and forth to figure out the details of the service proposal. We ended up receiving confirmation of our mandate at the end of May. The mandate was confirmed and our work began at the end of May, after cabinet made its decision.

Mr. Luc Berthold: I'll be specific about what I'm trying to find out, Mr. Daraiche.

A major rule was broken in the awarding of the contract to WE Charity: an official languages impact analysis was not conducted, even though the Treasury Board Secretariat requires one. From the discussions that took place, I gather that WE Charity realized it could not provide service to francophones in Canada and decided to quickly reach for the panic button.

You seized the opportunity, and there's nothing wrong with that. That is your job, as a communications firm. Nevertheless, that back and forth, those discussions, take on major importance for those of us trying to figure out how a contract this big escaped the watchful eye of Treasury Board, the agency that was supposed to conduct the official languages impact analysis.

The reason we asked you to provide us with a copy of the contract is to shed light on that, not to find out any trade secrets or what have you. All we want to know is how that step was missed for a contract of this size.

You said you started contacting MPs after the press conference, and I think that was in NATIONAL's interest. There's something I want to check with you, though. At 8:06 a.m., before the press conference, we received communications from NATIONAL asking for our co-operation. It's a small detail, but since we are dealing with ethics, we should put things in their proper context.

How did you find out that your contract was terminated?

What information did you receive telling you that your services were no longer needed?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Our client told us that they had handed over administration of the program to the government. Under the circumstances, it was as simple as that. On our end, there was no longer any reason to contact not-for-profit organizations and students. It was as simple as that.

Mr. Luc Berthold: The government did not contact you to ask you to resume your mandate, then?

Mr. Martin Daraiche: No.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Okay.

Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I'll give my last minute to my colleague, Mr. Gourde.

[*English*]

The Chair: Unfortunately, only about eight seconds remain, not a minute.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Okay.

[*English*]

The Chair: That's pretty much all we have for that round.

Madam Shanahan, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you very much, Chair.

[*Translation*]

I want to start by clarifying one thing. When we ask for documents during a meeting, it isn't the same as a motion for the production of documents. We're always grateful when witnesses can provide additional information in response to our questions. I think that we should make this clarification.

[*English*]

The Chair: Madam Shanahan, this is the first time I've ever had to interrupt someone.

To be clear, as the chair, I've demanded the documents. They are subpoenaed to the committee, or have the force of that level, so those documents on which I've been clear as far as NATIONAL Public Relations is concerned have been officially requested. It is not anything that is voluntary.

Go ahead with your time.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: All right. It is news to me that the chair can subpoena unilaterally, but I'll continue with my questions.

[*Translation*]

I want to give Mr. Daraiche and Ms. Benoit the chance to talk a little bit about lobbying.

Are your employees involved in lobbying activities? If so, are they following the rules of the Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying of Canada?

• (1215)

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Certainly, yes.

The professionals who work in our firm are well aware of the rules, Ms. Shanahan. Every time they need to contact a public office holder, elected government officials or representatives of the officials' offices, it's a communication of influence. Our advisors will register with the registry of lobbyists in advance.

[*English*]

Mme Brenda Shanahan: Just before continuing, Chair, I would like to understand what authority you have to unilaterally subpoena documents.

Could you give that reference to the committee proceedings? Otherwise, I'm going to challenge that ruling.

The Chair: That's okay, Mrs. Shanahan.

There is one legality we have to clear up in regard to that. Mr. Gourde had requested the documents, and I had taken that as a motion and asked Mr. Daraiche for that.

I will ask Mr. Gourde for the official language of a motion in order to do that, but it was a request from one of the members of the committee. If Mr. Gourde wants that level of document request and moves that motion, that's what we would need to have those documents summoned.

Mr. Charlie Angus: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I wasn't aware that when we ask for documents, we have to vote on a motion. We have asked for documents at committee before. If the committee requests it, we get documents. I don't believe we have to actually vote on a motion.

The Chair: No, but a member has to put a motion for the documents.

We'll suspend for a few minutes to make sure that everything is done appropriately.

• (1215) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1215)

The Chair: Colleagues, we're back.

With regard to Mrs. Shanahan's and Mr. Angus's concerns, and my direction to the witness, generally speaking, most of our requests are voluntary.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Mr. Chair, the interpretation isn't working.

[*English*]

The Chair: Please try again. I believe that has been resolved.

Generally, colleagues, when we request documents or anything else, even when we request witnesses, there's no objection. However, when we desire documents or desire witnesses, and someone has indicated they don't want to comply, as Mrs. Shanahan mentioned, it requires a motion.

We'll deal with that after Mrs. Shanahan's time, but that's the differentiation, Mr. Angus, with regard to requiring a motion.

Mrs. Shanahan, you have two more minutes, please continue.

• (1220)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I'd like to return to Mr. Perelmuter. As I'm the last member to speak before the panel, I am extremely disappointed and shocked, but maybe not surprised, that Mr. Barrett was present here and that he did not use his time to offer a complete apology for his actions.

Mr. Perelmuter, would you expect and accept an apology from Mr. Barrett?

Mr. Martin Perelmuter: I don't know if I would expect one, but I would accept one, yes.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

My question is for the NATIONAL representatives.

You have a great deal of experience with members from all political parties. Are you also requiring an apology from one of the committee members?

I want to give you the chance to say whether the publicity surrounding the WE Charity and the fact that you worked with the charity has affected your business. Do you expect an apology?

I'm still very bothered by the attacks on companies that carry out their work properly.

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Thank you, Ms. Shanahan.

The committee gave us the opportunity to clarify the true nature of our mandate. For us, that's what matters today.

We're able to clarify the nature of our work. We don't expect an apology from any member or members of Parliament.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, colleagues.

Now, to clear up the legalities of the request I made, Monsieur Gourde, you mentioned the documents, so now you will need to move a motion in that regard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Chair, I'd like to move a motion.

That the committee request a copy of the contract and mandate of NATIONAL Public Relations, in addition to any communications between NATIONAL Public Relations, the federal government and the WE Organization. That these documents be submitted to the committee by Friday, December 11, 2020 and that these documents be reviewed in camera.

[*English*]

The Chair: In respect to documents, Monsieur Gourde, just to be clear, we're talking about any contracts with WE. Are you talking about communications as well?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: No, I'm just talking about the mandate.

There's the contract and the mandate. They're two separate things. The mandate is usually attached to the contract.

I'd like to have these documents by Friday, if possible.

[*English*]

The Chair: There is a motion for that, colleagues. Is there any objection?

Madam Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yes, I really regret that the motion has come to the floor in this way. I think we were just trying to clarify that at any time MPs can request additional information and documents from witnesses. I really don't see the necessity for this motion at this time. I think the whole issue around the confidential information, personal information and business information as well is one that needs to be discussed further.

I would suggest that the member come back with a motion that he's had time to put together that is clearer. I think that's something we would be prepared to look at, but we're already 30 minutes past this meeting. You called for an in camera committee meeting. I don't see the necessity for this motion at this time.

• (1225)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: My points are along the same line. First of all, I was a bit confused by that order by the chair. It sounded like we were subpoenaing a document that was refused to be provided by the one of the witnesses. I didn't hear a clear no. I don't even know if the witness was given the chance to think over the request and see what they are obligated to do or what they are not obligated to do. I don't think it's fair to the witness to make that determination without even knowing the power of this committee.

I would suggest, if I may, that the clerk make an official request for the document to the witness and give the witness a chance to respond after understanding the request. Then, if the answer is no, we can consider an official motion on whether or not we would subpoena that document.

I think that's a better way to go for it, but I'm suggesting this as a permanent member of this committee.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Chair, I would normally take my Liberal colleagues' thoughts and really reflect on them, but I have seen nothing but obstruction from them since the get-go. Every time something comes forward, they find ways of obstructing, trying to stop it and slow it down.

It was a fairly straightforward request. These requests are made all the time at our committee. My understanding is that the witness was ready to present those documents, so I don't think we need to have the Liberals jumping in front and trying to stop us from seeing this.

We will see it in camera. This is about government spending. It's a pretty straightforward request. You asked the witness and my understanding is that the witness agreed, so I think we should move on.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: I have a point of clarification, Mr. Chair.

With regard to the motion that was put forward by the opposite member, are we to understand that if there is confidential information that is included in those contracts, witnesses must abide by the motion? How do we treat a contract or document that would contain confidential information? That would be my question for my opposite member.

The Chair: Of course, the committee treats all inbound documents with the greatest of care. Any trade secrets would be protected. As Mr. Angus said, they would be viewed in camera in the clerk's office.

Now we go on to Mr. Fergus and then Madame Gaudreau because I know Madame Gaudreau has indicated that she would like to speak.

Mr. Greg Fergus: I have nothing further to add that wasn't already added by my colleagues, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay.

Madame Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I want to say that I attended all the meetings before the prorogation. The goal is to shed light, especially when there's nothing to hide.

I can see that we won't have enough time to complete our work. We'll already be receiving, perhaps in the next few minutes, the contract to wrap up the end of the year. I urge my colleagues to understand that it's perfectly legitimate to make this request and to

handle the request properly, as we've done with all the Speakers' Spotlight documents.

I don't see why the time would be extended. Instead, we should move forward while ensuring respect for each one of us.

• (1230)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Gaudreau.

Mr. Sorbara.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara (Vaughan—Woodbridge, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, this is the first time I have spoken in this meeting. It's quite an interesting meeting.

Mr. Perelmuter, again, I join my colleagues in apologizing in terms of what you and your family have had to endure these past few months. It's quite unfortunate, the environment sometimes via social media and what individuals may or may not say. The indirect consequences and the direct consequences I think we need to think about as individuals across society. I do wish to apologize as a member of Parliament and as someone who also has a family at home. I can only imagine what you and your loved ones were going through during that time.

Mr. Chair, could we get some sort of text for the motion?

I've heard it stated, but if we could get some sort of text or anything, that would be great. I'll just stop right there.

The Chair: Mr. Gourde, do you want to take a moment to type up your motion and send it over to the clerk?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Yes, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Then we can distribute it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: No problem, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll suspend, yes.

• (1230)

(Pause)

• (1230)

The Chair: Colleagues, we're back in session, but don't be alarmed. I just want to be able to excuse the witnesses. Then we're going to suspend again until we get all clear on the language.

Mr. Daraiche, Madam Benoit and Mr. Perelmuter, on behalf of the committee, I want to give you our sincere apology for any of the intended consequences that came from any actions of the committee members with regard to the obligations of our office here at the committee. I'm certain that all committee members feel that way.

I also want to thank you for the time that you invested today in order to answer questions.

We will excuse you now, and we will continue our debate without having to take up any more of your time.

• (1235)

Mr. Han Dong: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Before the witness leaves.... I'm honestly very confused by the motion that we're going to vote on because I'm not sure if the witness said a clear no and refused to turn over those documents, which would make the motion necessary. I don't see it as necessary if the witness is willing to offer these documents. I'm just a little confused.

Through you, I just want to clarify with the witness whether he's okay or not okay to respond to Monsieur Gourde's request.

The Chair: That's a very good point, Mr. Dong.

Before Mr. Daraiche leaves, we will ask him if he's okay to voluntarily comply with the request.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Daraiche: Mr. Chair, we'll wait until we see the motion, if a motion is carried.

As I said earlier, the document to which the member referred contains sensitive trade information. If the committee agrees that we should send a document, the committee can forward the motion to us and we'll look at it.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The witnesses can be excused. Again, go with our thanks and our apologies for any unintended consequences.

We'll suspend again.

• (1235)

(Pause)

• (1245)

The Chair: Madame Gaudreau, go ahead with your comments again, now that we're back in session.

[*Translation*]

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

I carefully read the motion moved, which corresponds exactly to Mr. Gourde's wording. Given where we are and all the time we've had, we're ready to vote now. I, for one, am ready to vote.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

I appreciate the motion because I was very confused this morning when I was trying to get an answer. It's nothing against NATIONAL PR. I just want to get clarification because they said their job was communications and media, which is very different from doing actual outreach and building the organizations in Quebec. However, at the August 13 meeting of the finance committee, WE said:

NATIONAL PR was hired to assist us in the process to reach out to francophone and Quebec organizations especially in the area of engagement of not-for-profit organizations.

By that it seems that they had a very specific mandate of doing the outreach, but when we were told they were there for communications and media, which makes sense because they're a media company, there's a gap that I'd like explained.

I understand that they were only involved for a month, but when only 4% of the young people who signed up were from Quebec, something went wrong. I don't think this was probably something that went wrong on NATIONAL PR's end, but I'd like to know what they were mandated for. We have to understand why, in the space of a month, 96% of the people who signed up came from other parts of Canada and only 4% came from Quebec.

The Chair: Madame Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Chair, I wonder, because you had made it clear earlier that any documents that would be submitted to us would be treated with the same care and confidentiality, and so on. Therefore, I am suggesting a friendly amendment regarding the same type of in camera consultation of the documents that we had for the Speakers' Spotlight documents. Would staff be permitted to see them? I would say it would be members only, as we had before. Will electronic devices be banned and so on?

Again, this seems to be a rush job. We're having trouble between the English and the French. What are "any communications"? What does that mean? What types of documents are we talking about in that case?

I feel that this is rushed. In another way, I certainly don't want to stand in the way of the committee receiving any documents that we would want to have for our consultation. Therefore, I am looking for some further discussion with colleagues on this issue before we vote.

Chair, is that what you were intending, that the documents would be consulted in camera?

• (1250)

The Chair: We had a specific motion around Mr. Perlmutter's documents, which listed out a bunch of things. Generally when we request documents, we would guard any trade secrets exactly the same as we did with Mr. Perlmutter's.

Clerk, please correct me if I'm not right.

As Mr. Angus has just said, anything that pertains to the management of the WE contract is obviously what members want to have access to and is part of the evidence that they're concerned about. That would be generally the way I would see them manage that. Any trade secrets that would harm the business, we would obviously treat exactly as we treated the documents from Speakers' Spotlight.

In regard to operations, on the specific issue, that would be part of our general evidence.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Does that need to be included in the motion?

The Chair: No. It's on record right now that it would be the way we would manage it. In this case, because there are trade secrets, I think having only the members view it would be acceptable, unless Mr. Gourde or some other member of the committee has a problem with that.

I'll go to Mr. Dong now, who has his hand up, and then I have Mr. Fergus and Mr. Angus.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Chair.

To my colleague, Mr. Angus, I am not trying to obstruct the process. I'm just purely trying to get some clarification because it seems to me that every time I raise my hand to speak, that's the label I get.

I have some questions similar to those Madame Shanahan asked. Listening to your explanation, I get it. It's on record. The question is this: Who's going to make that judgment on whether or not they're trade secrets? Are we allowing the witness to make that judgment for parts that would be for MPs' eyes only and others are more a general pile of evidence? I want to make sure, because it's not covered in this motion. As well, there is no specific time frame. I see that it has to do with the WE organization. I want to make sure of that. There's no specific time frame.

I'm okay with it. I'm just raising with my colleagues whether that needs to be considered. Judging from what the chair was saying, we're giving that judgment power to the presenter or the witness to make a determination on what documents fall under trade secrets and which are for MPs' eyes only, no electronic devices, the same parameters we set to protect those documents in our previous or larger motion. I want to clarify that and make sure of that.

The Chair: Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, what you'd said before Mr. Dong's comments, if that's the procedure, then I'd feel very comfortable with that. I do believe that we should extend the same courtesy to NATIONAL as we extended to Mr. Perelmuter and Speakers' Spotlight.

If Mr. Dong's interpretation of your comment is correct, then I'm quite happy to go to a vote immediately

The Chair: MP Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: One of the reasons we put all these parameters on the first set of documents was that we were told we shouldn't be dealing with the Trudeau family, and these were individuals.

I think it's a different thing when we're dealing with a contract and a mandate about how the federal government contract was going to be spent. I am very wary about saying we could only see it without staff. It's something we should be able to discuss in camera and then decide if it belongs in our committee report. If it has to do with the mandate of what they were given and what they were supposed to deliver, we have to be able to report whether they were asked to this job and it didn't seem to have been done.

On the issue of trade secrets, I think that would be very specific.

As for emails with names, if they're people who are involved directly with WE, we want to know. Who were the civil servants? We want to know. We can block out their email addresses. I think maybe it could be done, if the clerk can do it, but I'm very wary of saying nobody else is allowed and we have to have this top secret agenda.

That wasn't what was done with the finance documents. They were turned over to finance and the government redacted many, but I think we have to have a reasonable approach to this. I say we look at it in camera and decide. Considering our respect for the privacy laws and the fact that as the privacy committee we have to respect those, I think I can trust my colleagues that we can agree to do this in a proper manner. However, we have to be able to report on whether there's something in that mandate that should have been dealt with or shouldn't have been dealt with. We have to be able to put that in the report.

• (1255)

The Chair: Madam Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Chair.

I would like to suggest an amendment. I'd like to move an amendment that the words "the federal government" be removed and that the words "that by Members only with no recording devices be present in the room" be added after the words "in camera".

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Chair, I want to make a comment.

We'll certainly be delayed. However, I'm against the idea of amending my motion. If there's any type of communication between the three organizations, I want to know about it. I understand that Ms. Shanahan wants to protect the government. That said, I think that we should stick to the original motion.

[English]

The Chair: The amendment to the motion has been moved. Mr. Gourde has just spoken to it. Are there any other comments on the amendment?

Mr. Sorbara.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: I thank my colleague MP Shanahan for putting forward that amendment. If it's the will of the committee, could we vote on Ms. Shanahan's amendment?

The Chair: Mr. Dong, did you want to speak?

Mr. Han Dong: It's exactly what Mr. Sorbara said. I'm ready to vote.

The Chair: Is everybody clear on the nature of the amendment? Yes. Okay.

The clerk will take a recorded vote now on Madam Shanahan's amendment to the motion.

We have a tie vote.

I'll vote against the amendment to maintain the status quo.

(Amendment negatived: nays 6; yeas 5)

(Motion agreed to: yeas 7; nays 3 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Colleagues, to give you some assurance...and I like Mr. Angus's comment in regard to how we shepherd these documents. Again, I'm always careful to say things in case I put the clerk in an impossible situation. My suggestion is that we have these documents in limited printing in a committee meeting that's in camera. We would look at the information and decide amongst ourselves what are trade secrets and what pertains specifically to the operations of what we're studying in regard to the motion that was passed that we're hearing witnesses on.

Is that clear and fair enough? That way everybody has a say in it.

Mr. Dong.

• (1300)

Mr. Han Dong: Chair, I just want to quickly make a comment. I understand that this is a very important committee and it's a high-profile committee, especially on this case, but judging from the behaviour of the members on this committee in the last little while, I'm not so confident that there will not be unintended or intended consequences that will harm private businesses in this country. I made this comment in my previous debate. I have been the target of all kinds of negative comments. I saw that Mr. Angus has been a target as well. That's fair game; we're public officials. We are members of this committee, and that's all fair, but I just have to raise this concern.

We heard today from the witness that there are a lot of harmful things being said and done on this issue. Just going forward, can we keep that in mind and make sure that no further harm is done, especially to our witnesses and innocent—well, I shouldn't say innocent. I don't know but I would like to give the benefit of the doubt to all witnesses who come forward to this committee and not put them in an even worse situation, given that it's COVID and they're trying to survive.

Thank you.

The Chair: On that note, I have three people who are on the speakers list right now: Madam Lattanzio, Mr. Fergus and Mr. Angus. We're getting into the weeds on the details of this and I have concerns because we're not in camera. What you're actually saying, Mr. Dong, might happen as we're getting into the weeds on this. If it's okay—because we are already set up to go in camera—with all of my colleagues here, we'll go in camera to discuss further the finer details of this so that something doesn't happen to be said that will do harm to someone. Do I see consensus on that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Colleagues, you've all been emailed the new link as well as the new password to go in camera. It will probably take us about 10 or 15 minutes, but we'll go through that transition now and we'll deal with what we're discussing right now as well as a couple of small things that I want to deal with in regard to upcoming witnesses and our schedule.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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