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Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC)):
Good afternoon, everyone.

Welcome to meeting number 51 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House of Commons order of Thursday, June 23, 2022. Therefore, members may be attending in person or remotely using the Zoom application.

[English]

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise me. Please note that we may need to suspend for a few minutes as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, May 16, 2022, the committee is resuming its study of the access to information and privacy system.

[Translation]

Since all witnesses are appearing in person, no sound checks were conducted.

[English]

I'd now like to welcome our witnesses for today.

From the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, we have Colleen Calvert, director general, corporate secretary; and Alexandra Drago, director of access to information and privacy.

From the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, we have Derek Melchin, director, access to information and privacy and executive services; and Lesley Soper, director general, national security policy.

From the Privy Council Office we have David Neilson, executive director; and Matthew Shea, the assistant secretary to the cabinet, ministerial services and corporate affairs.

From the Royal Canadian Mounted Police I want to welcome Danielle Golden, director, privacy; and David A. Janzen, the director general, access to information and privacy.

I believe the committee has been supplied with some briefs.

Ms. Calvert, you are going to be starting today. The floor is yours. You have a five-minute opening statement, please.

Thank you.

Ms. Colleen Calvert (Director General, Corporate Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development):
Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the committee for the invitation today and for undertaking a study on the access to information and privacy system.

Global Affairs Canada works closely with the Treasury Board Secretariat, the Office of the Information Commissioner, and other federal institutions to share best practices, to address complaints, and to position ourselves to successfully meet operational challenges.

Most recently, Commissioner Maynard visited our department in early October to meet with then acting Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Cindy Termorshuizen.

At Global Affairs, we recognize the importance of continuing to improve on-time responses, implementing efficiencies and building capacity through education and skills development on ATIP. We can, and must, do better.

[Translation]

This past June, Global Affairs Canada, under the direction of the deputy ministers, adopted an ambitious plan to reduce the backlog of access to information requests, recognizing the need to do better. Targets were established, the responsibility level of assistant deputy ministers was strengthened, and accelerated training was implemented.

To date, since the start of the fiscal year, we have trained 544 departmental employees on access to information. Our efforts are supported by commitments horizontally, that is, throughout the department, and vertically, or at all levels, both of which are essential. Progress is monitored very closely. In addition, gaps are identified and reported as soon as possible.

We are making progress. The proportion of requests processed on time, which had fallen to a low of 19% during the first year of the pandemic, has now risen to 57%. This represents steady improvement. We have achieved this at a time when access to information requests regarding the previous fiscal year have risen by 30%.

• (1535)

[English]

The challenges we experienced during the pandemic have sharpened our understanding of what we need to change. First, we needed to identify ATIP as a critical service to access our buildings during repeated waves of the pandemic. At the outset of the pandemic, our ATIP processing software was housed on a secure network, accessible only from the office. Global Affairs identified access to information as a critical service. Between June and September 2020, virtually all GAC ATIP employees resumed working on site, including processing secret and top secret files.

As we work to fully clear our backlog, I would like to highlight two other areas of focus. First is people. The shortage of qualified ATIP specialists is well known. We work on multiple fronts to fill positions: holding our own GAC recruitment processes, working with the Treasury Board Secretariat and other government departments on the community development office initiative on collective staffing processes and with our internal professional development program encouraging employees to build a career in ATIP.

[Translation]

We also have a number of specialists on contract who are experienced with access to information. All of these efforts are needed to make up for long-standing staff shortages across the federal government in the area of access to information.

Let me talk about our investments in technology. Last year, we set up a new system for processing unclassified documents for ATIP requests, which increases our efficiency and our flexibility for remote work. Over the next fiscal year, we will begin transitioning to a new generation of document processing software for ATIP, taking advantage of the Treasury Board Secretariat's recent approval of new technology resources. This transition will propel our system, currently based on 2007 standards, to the 2020s, with obvious gains in efficiency and the possibility of using tools such as artificial intelligence.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that my department takes the efficient processing of ATIP requests within established timelines very seriously. We will continue the efforts we undertook earlier in the year.

[English]

I would be happy to take your questions at the end of the opening remarks.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Calvert.

Next is the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

I don't have a list of who's speaking, but whoever is next, go ahead, please.

Ms. Lesley Soper (Director General, National Security Policy, Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Honourable members, thank you for the invitation to join you today.

In addition to my counterparts from other departments, I'm joined by my colleague Derek Melchin, the director of ATIP and executive services here at Public Safety Canada.

[Translation]

Public Safety Canada plays a key role by ensuring coordination across all departments and agencies responsible for national security and the safety of Canadians.

Our mandate is to keep Canadians safe from a range of risks such as natural disasters, crime and terrorism. Public Safety Canada therefore works with agencies and review bodies within the public safety portfolio, including the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, which is represented here today.

In terms of access to information, while Public Safety Canada works in close cooperation with partner agencies in the portfolio, each agency is responsible for its own ATIP program.

[English]

Public Safety has had a strong track record for timely completion of access to information requests, completing over 90% of requests within the legislative timelines in 14 of the last 15 fiscal years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, as was the case with the entire public service, the department was forced to shift temporarily to a remote work posture to protect the health and safety of employees. During this time, Public Safety was limited in its ability to process files containing classified or physical records that could not be accessed by employees working remotely.

Over the past year, measures have been taken to restore full capacity to process requests. Substantial progress is being made in addressing the department's backlog in delayed files.

As director general of national security policy, I am the Public Safety lead on declassification. As you know, Canada does not have a formal national security and intelligence declassification policy framework. The Treasury Board Secretariat policy on government security, which governs the management of security and protection of information, does not contain guidance for proactive declassification. In the absence of such a framework, the Access to Information Act has become the primary mechanism through which national security and intelligence records are made available to the public.

• (1540)

[*Translation*]

To help solve this problem, Public Safety Canada, in cooperation with the national intelligence and security community, Treasury Board Secretariat and Library and Archives Canada, has worked to develop a declassification framework setting out a practical approach to proactive declassification within that community.

[*English*]

The framework was tested by means of a pilot project that reviewed the records of the joint intelligence committee that operated between 1942 and 1960, which were held by the Privy Council Office. It aimed to provide an evidence base for future larger-scale proactive reviews of national and security intelligence records and to build consensus on the way forward on declassification.

Declassification is generally understood to refer to the public release of records. It is worth bearing in mind that the level of classification reflects the extent of the injury to the national interest that would be caused if the information were released.

When a document is declassified, it has been determined that the document's release in full, or perhaps still partially redacted, would no longer cause injury, but even after a document has been declassified it may still need to be redacted to remove information that is sensitive for other reasons, such as the protection of personal information.

The records must also be available in both official languages.

Finally, they need to be digitized to support government policies on accessibility, such as being machine-readable for those who are visually impaired.

[*Translation*]

Together, these elements require a great amount of work and financial resources. Implementing a complete framework to support the proactive disclosure of historical documents would require the commitment of considerable resources.

[*English*]

Still, we believe the work we have done is a step in the right direction, as proactive declassification review would significantly reduce the burden of processing access to information requests. The release of historical records would also assist public and academic researchers.

Finally, Public Safety's declassification work reflects the government's national security transparency commitment to better inform Canadians regarding national security in support of democratic accountability without providing information that could compromise Canada's security or the safety of Canadians.

[*Translation*]

I would like to thank the committee for giving Public Safety Canada the opportunity to discuss these requests and any other matter that may be of interest to you today.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Soper.

Next, for five minutes, Mr. Shea, the floor is yours.

Mr. Shea is from the Privy Council Office.

Mr. Matthew Shea (Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Ministerial Services and Corporate Affairs, Privy Council Office): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee.

Thank you for inviting the Privy Council Office to appear before you today to discuss Canada's access to information and privacy system.

[*Translation*]

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are gathered on traditional unceded Algonquin Anishinabe territory.

[*English*]

I am the assistant secretary to the cabinet for ministerial services and corporate affairs at the Privy Council. I oversee all corporate affairs within the department, including the team responsible for coordinating all access to information requests and privacy requests within the department.

[*Translation*]

I am joined today by David Neilson, executive director, access to information and privacy, at the Privy Council Office, a position he has held for over 10 years.

[*English*]

Together, David and I are responsible for leading and implementing the Access to Information and Privacy Acts within PCO, including developing internal policies and procedures.

We have a dedicated and very hard-working unit responsible for managing requests for departmental and personal information, ensuring corporate understanding and compliance with the acts and fostering corporate awareness of access and privacy rights and responsibilities for all Canadians.

PCO fully appreciates the importance of making government more accessible to everyone and providing Canadians with greater transparency of government programs, activities, publications and spending, and we are committed to those objectives.

• (1545)

[*Translation*]

We strive to meet our legislative timelines and ensure that government information is available to Canadians.

PCO's combination of information holdings is unique compared to other institutions. The documents within our control include cabinet confidences, secret and top secret information holdings including sensitive intelligence assessments in addition to more traditional information holdings that many departments have.

[English]

Like many departments, the pandemic impacted our ability to meet our access to information obligations, particularly early in the pandemic. Many of our access to information requests involve secret and top secret information, which is stored in vaults or on segregated networks for security purposes.

This made the early days of the pandemic particularly challenging for PCO at a time when public health advice required us to minimize the number of employees in the office. This led to a sharp increase in the number of active files and ultimately a large backlog, which we continue to work hard to address. Compounding this challenge, throughout the summer of 2020, PCO received almost double the amount of ATIP requests compared to the same period before the pandemic.

As a department, we have taken several steps to proactively address this challenge. We took steps to transition from a largely paper-based process to an electronic process where possible, allowing more non-sensitive files to be processed remotely. We have identified ATIP as a critical service, which allowed us to have more employees in the office to process files.

[Translation]

We added additional budget to both our ATIP and information teams to assist them in addressing the backlog. We have made information management and ATIP a priority within the department and a regular topic of conversation at our departmental management committee.

[English]

As an aggregator of information, PCO holds a large volume of information from other government institutions. We are coordinating with other institutions to ensure we work together closely to find efficiencies in our efforts.

[Translation]

Our focus and investment has resulted in two key outcomes.

[English]

First, we have identified ATIP as a critical service. That quickly allowed us to begin to flatten the growth curve of our ATIP backlog. Simply put, we stopped the bleeding.

Second, by establishing a dedicated team to address the backlog, we are systematically chipping away at it. We are deeply committed to eliminating this backlog as soon as possible, but we acknowledge it will take a concerted effort for several years. In 2021, we closed far fewer files than we received, resulting in a large backlog. In 2021-22, we received 509 requests and closed 532 requests. In the current fiscal year, we believe we are on track to make further improvements by closing many more files than we have received.

In conclusion, I would say that we take very seriously any shortcomings in the service standards that Canadians have come to expect from public institutions. We are committed to eliminating the backlog and ensuring that requests receive a response in a timely and reasonable manner. We are very committed to ensuring that Canadians have access to government information and the important role this plays in a healthy democracy. We will pursue continuous improvements to accomplish this.

[Translation]

We look forward to elaborating on some of these elements in response to your questions. Thank you again for this opportunity.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shea.

Next are members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. I don't have a list of who's going to be speaking, but please go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. David Janzen (Director General, Access to Information and Privacy, Royal Canadian Mounted Police): Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen of the committee, hello.

[English]

My name is David Janzen. I'm the director general of the access to information and privacy branch at the RCMP.

[Translation]

I am joined by my colleague Danielle Golden, our new director of privacy.

[English]

I'm honoured to be invited to speak to you today on this important issue from the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

I'd like to start by addressing a point that will come as no surprise to this committee. For the last decade, the RCMP has struggled in its responsibility to be compliant under both the Access to Information Act and the Privacy Act. The Information Commissioner's 2020 systematic investigation of the RCMP outlined this in stark detail and directly led to the minister issuing a direction to develop a strategy to address the report's recommendations.

I'm pleased to say that we have not only embraced the recommendations in this report, but we've taken it as a rallying cry for change.

For the RCMP, this is a critical issue as without transparency, we cannot build trust and without trust, citizens are less likely to work with us in investigations. That is why we went further than addressing the systemic investigation in our five-year strategy, “Access Granted: Restoring Trust in the RCMP’s Access to Information and Privacy Program”.

• (1550)

[*Translation*]

This strategy is an ambitious plan to modernize from not only an access to information perspective, but privacy as well, which I am sure is of interest to you.

[*English*]

I encourage anyone with interest to review the strategy and follow our progress on our ATIP modernization page, which is on our external website.

While we are still early in this effort, we are seeing some results. Firstly, we have succeeded in resolving one of the Information Commissioner’s key concerns—evidenced by the title of the review and her recent testimony to this committee—which is the need for leadership.

Just two years ago, our program was led by a single director supported by three managers. Neither my position nor my colleague’s position existed.

[*Translation*]

Today, we have a director general and three directors each leading dedicated streams for information access, privacy and operational support, supported by eight managers.

Our staff is growing, from approximately 60 FTEs toward a funded FTE complement of over 100 FTEs.

[*English*]

We contracted business consultants to help us improve processes, created intergovernmental fora to share best practices, and implemented new training and guidance material for our personnel. We have and continue to invest in new technologies to help process requests more efficiently and to help us leverage the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to create a more national workforce.

In terms of concrete results, in the last fiscal year our information compliance rate increased to 40.1% from 26.4%. The Privacy Act compliance increased to 46.1% from 32.8%.

[*Translation*]

These results were achieved thanks to the hard work of our personnel, the support of our senior leadership, and despite the numerous challenges that continue to impact our chances at success.

[*English*]

For example, we all share the challenge of attracting new staff. Let’s be blunt. There are currently far more positions than candidates in ATIP, particularly at the most demanding levels. While the RCMP is trying to change this with clear career streams, the fact remains that there are insufficient numbers of candidates to fill our vacancies.

[*Translation*]

Staffing challenges make it difficult for us to manage some of the RCMP’s unique challenges that result from our mandate.

The RCMP is front and centre at the major events of public interest in Canada, which inevitably result in a significant number of requests.

[*English*]

Tasking, collecting and reviewing records in a situation when the very employees who hold them are assisting in a flood evacuation or investigating a tragedy is a unique challenge. This requires experienced and informed ATIP personnel, who are extremely difficult to replace. The RCMP also remains a largely paper-based organization, such that manual searches through boxes of files are still necessary.

This committee is also no stranger to our need to conduct robust privacy assessments of new technologies. We have created an entire stream for privacy compliance, which includes reviewing and approving privacy impact assessments, to ensure that we have the capacity to stay ahead of critical but invasive emerging technologies.

In closing, I want to stress that the RCMP is committed to modernizing, and that I and my employees are passionate about improving this critical function at the RCMP. However, I do not want to paint a picture that we are satisfied with the early progress we have made. We know we must keep building on this, and these efforts will take continued investment.

[*Translation*]

However, these early results provide much needed momentum to fuel the changes that need to take place.

I am happy to provide the committee with any information you require for your review. I look forward to the results of your study to further help us refine our modernization effort to better serve Canadians.

[*English*]

We look forward to your questions and the forthcoming discussion.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Janzen.

Thank you to all of our witnesses today for sticking to the timelines. You can imagine how difficult that is when there are eight of you at the table.

We're going to open the rounds of questions. We're going to start with Mr. Barrett, followed by Ms. Hepfner, Monsieur Villemure and Monsieur Green.

Mr. Barrett, you have six minutes, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Thanks very much, Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Neilson, how many staff in PCO are subject to ATIP protocol?

Mr. David Neilson (Executive Director, Access to Information and Privacy and Executive Correspondence Services, Privy Council Office): How many staff are in the ATIP office working on ATIP requests?

Mr. Michael Barrett: How many staff in the Privy Council Office...?

Mr. David Neilson: There are....

Mr. Matthew Shea: There are approximately 1,200 employees at PCO, and they're all subject to the act.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'm going to work across the table to get a response to my next couple of questions, if I can, from each agency.

The question is whether you use any tech or artificial intelligence facilitated by the government contractor GC Strategies in relation to your ATIP protocols.

• (1555)

Mr. Derek Melchin (Director, Access to Information and Privacy and Executive Services, Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): I'm not aware of any technology at Public Safety Canada related to that company.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you.

Mr. David Neilson: I'm not aware of PCO using that technology.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

Ms. Colleen Calvert: I'm not aware of any for GAC.

Mr. David Janzen: From the RCMP, we're not aware of that technology.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Great.

We'll go in the same order again. Do you use any consultants to fulfill your ATIP requests or obligations?

Mr. Derek Melchin: At Public Safety, we don't currently employ any consultants working on access to information.

Mr. David Neilson: The PCO does not use consultants at this time.

Ms. Colleen Calvert: We do at GAC. I would say it's between an average of maybe eight to 10 contractors who also work directly in our ATIP division.

Mr. Michael Barrett: That's from a total of how many?

Ms. Colleen Calvert: It's from a total of...fully staffed, we would be at 69, but at the moment, I think we have 41 or 42 indeterminate staff. It's 42.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Wow. Okay.

Thank you.

Mr. David Janzen: Yes. The RCMP has contracts with two consulting firms for a total of about 12 consultants. Our total FTE count is around 70 FTEs, and our final funded amount is just over 100. It's about 110 FTEs.

Mr. Michael Barrett: It's just GAC and the RCMP.

Are all of the consultants based in Canada?

Ms. Colleen Calvert: Yes.

Mr. David Janzen: It's the same for the RCMP.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Are the names of the consultants...? They would be sourced through a consulting firm, not as individuals, I'd imagine.

Ms. Colleen Calvert: All are with firms. Yes.

Mr. David Janzen: It's the same here: it's through the two firms previously mentioned.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Are the names of those firms available? That would have been done through a public procurement process, so are you able to tell us what the names of the firms are?

Ms. Colleen Calvert: Could you tell us offhand, Alexandre?

Mr. Alexandre Drago (Director, Access to Information and Privacy, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Yes, we are working with Altis and CANADEM.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you.

Mr. David Janzen: For the RCMP, I can confirm that we're also working with Altis.

Forgive me; I don't have the second contract off the top of my head, and so I'll have to get back to the committee. My apologies.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I appreciate your offer to get it to the committee. Thank you.

In the Privy Council Office, who would decide which information is confidential and redacted? Is that a responsibility that's shared, or is it the responsibility of one person that can be delegated? If so, who is the responsible individual?

Mr. David Neilson: At the PCO, it's a shared delegation between the ATIP office, the delegated authorities and subject matter experts in the department.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay, so it could vary depending on the request?

Mr. David Neilson: Yes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

How often, as a percentage—I'm not sure how best to be able to quantify it—would you cite cabinet confidences in your returns of ATIP requests?

Mr. David Neilson: I don't have the numbers in front of me.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Are those data and stats that you keep?

Mr. David Neilson: Yes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Is that something you'd be able to provide to the committee when you return to your office?

Mr. David Neilson: Yes, we could do that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I appreciate that. Thank you.

What is the longest outstanding ATIP request?

I ask that question of each of the agencies at the table, please, for your department.

Mr. Derek Melchin: I don't have the exact timeline. Public Safety recently completed a parliamentary question where we were asked about this. We have at least two requests of around five years.

Mr. David Neilson: For the PCO, I believe it's about six years.

Ms. Colleen Calvert: It's around five for GAC.

Mr. David Janzen: Our backlog dates from around 2017 as well.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

• (1600)

The Chair: You have about a minute.

Mr. Michael Barrett: My question for everyone is, why? That predates COVID and the staffing challenges that each of your respective departments is facing. We've gone through a few different economic cycles since 2017. I do want to know why.

I guess I would ask, what is the consequence for not returning the ATIP in time? What's the consequence for having an outstanding ATIP in excess of five years?

Mr. Derek Melchin: With Public Safety, the ATIP requests that I spoke of were recently asked about in a parliamentary question. That information is publicly available.

The two requests predate the Information Commissioner's order-making powers, so there is not the possibility of the Information Commissioner's ordering Public Safety.... It's obviously publicly known, and we're working to address those requests as quickly as we're able to.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

Next we'll go to Ms. Hepfner for six minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you also to the witnesses for being with us today.

[English]

I'd like to start with Mr. Janzen from the RCMP.

You all talked about this a little bit. We know that right now departments are trying to put information out in the public before people have to make an access to information request. We also know that a record number of people are looking for information. We've just come out of a period of turmoil with the pandemic.

Starting with you, what are the operational difficulties you're facing right now?

Mr. David Janzen: Forgive me; do you mean operational difficulties in terms of proactive disclosure, or operational difficulties just for the ATIP branch at large?

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: It's for ATIP. I think proactive disclosure is an extra step that everyone's trying to accomplish.

With all of those new factors, what are the operational difficulties that you're facing?

Mr. David Janzen: The RCMP is a relatively unique organization in the sense that one of our challenges is that when we have big events like we've seen in the last couple of years, like major floods, evacuations, the Emergencies Act, the deployment of RCMP personnel, that takes members' attention away from processing requests and files.

One of our other challenges is the fact that we are an organization with 30,000 members across the country. Unlike some of my colleagues who have more centralized areas to go to grab those reports or files from personnel when there is an ATIP request, we have to leverage our network across the country to go to grab those files, which adds a little bit of complexity.

I would say that our most significant challenge, though, is that our information management systems are not centralized. There's often a public perception from police procedurals or whatever that an RCMP officer or a police officer can access any information about anyone from a centralized position, and nothing is further from the truth. It creates a lot of challenges for us. Just last week, for instance, I had nine bankers' boxes full of papers to go through that were sent to me by a force airplane. That not only requires personnel from an investigative unit to go through with an ATIP analyst, but adds additional pressures on us, and all those records have to be digitized, etc.

I can go on at length. We have a fair number of challenges. Our software remains out of date. We're currently trying to upgrade that. The number of staff in our shop.... We're actively recruiting. We're doing a lot to bring in new talent to the organization, with new perspectives, new ways of analyzing files. But our vacancy rate remains high. We can't continue poaching from our partner agencies, because everyone is modernizing in the Government of Canada right now. We are doing some innovative stuff to try to hire from a national perspective. We have employees in Vancouver and Toronto now, just to try to expand the base from which we draw those employees so that we're not just stealing from each other, and we're still bringing the level of expertise we require to process the requests on time.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you.

That paints a really good picture of where you're at right now.

I'm wondering if I could just go to Global Affairs, to Ms. Calvert, and ask the same question about the specific operational challenges you're facing at the moment.

Ms. Colleen Calvert: Thank you for the question.

I would say that our challenge with staffing is definitely a big one for the ATIP shop itself in terms of keeping the numbers of staff high enough and the experience needed to get people to the level to provide the advice function.

Similar to what the RCMP mentioned, the people who are often the most pressed to act on emergencies are the ones who are getting the most ATIP requests on something that's very much in the public eye. It's very challenging to meet those operational requirements at the same time as dealing with ATIPs. That's definitely a big challenge.

In this time of clearing the backlog, one of the biggest challenges is clearing the backlog while staying on time with our current responses. We're very mindful of not wanting to fall behind on new requests, but we're trying to clear the backlog, and that balance is, really, a challenging one to achieve.

Then, finally, I'll just mention the technology. We are on the cusp of next fiscal year moving to a new processing system that we really need. However, our technology is not very capable compared with the information age we're in and the amount of information we have just going through emails every day and so forth. We need help reviewing that information. If it's just humans reviewing it, it's not quite fast enough.

• (1605)

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you very much.

I'll turn to Ms. Soper from the Department of Public Safety.

Do you want to sum up your current operational challenges?

Mr. Derek Melchin: Since it's a question on ATIP, I'll speak about that.

The challenges we face at Public Safety are similar to those discussed by my colleagues. Within the ATIP community there's a shortage of trained personnel. Like David mentioned, we're all stealing from each other, and we've all recognized the need to move to something more constructive. Treasury Board Secretariat has ac-

tively been putting in place initiatives to help with centralized staffing to increase the size of the ATIP community, so we're actively participating in that work and supporting it. In the meantime, working to recruit and train up analysts from the ground floor is something that we're actively working on, and that does take an investment of time. While managers and supervisors in the ATIP office are doing that recruitment and training work, they're not necessarily working on files, so we have to divide our time and our energies.

That's one of the biggest things for us as a small department. The other issues that were mentioned by my colleagues, like technology and information management within the department, are certainly things that all ATIP offices face. I think that for Public Safety, as a small department, the resourcing is the really key one for us, so we're actively interested in being part of that effort.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I don't think I have time for Mr. Shea, but maybe one of my colleagues can get there.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hepfner.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Villemure, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I suggest the committee resume debate on the motion I moved on November 30, 2022.

[*English*]

The Chair: Are you proposing that in the form of a motion, Mr. Villemure?

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: I propose that we continue debating this motion, which was moved on November 30, 2022. We adjourned debate on that motion last week.

The Chair: All right.

Just one minute, I'm going to discuss this with the clerk.

Mr. Villemure, if you wish to resume debate on the motion, we will have to vote on it.

[*English*]

There's no debate, and it's not amendable, from what I understand, so if you want to resume debate, we will have to go to a vote to resume debate on the motion that was presented or proposed on November 30, 2022.

[*Translation*]

I understand that it is the motion proposing that the committee undertake a study of China's interference in the 2021 general election.

[English]

We were debating this last time, Mr. Barrett. I've been advised by the clerk that it's non-debatable and non-amendable.

Mr. Fergus.

Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): I have a question for you before you take the vote as to whether or not we should move to that debate.

When we last left, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: You had the floor. I'm fully aware of that. I asked the clerk to make that note, and she did in my notes, in the event that we were in this situation. If this motion passes, Mr. Fergus, I will ensure that you have the floor, sir.

Thank you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: We're going to the vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 10; nays 0)

The Chair: The motion to resume debate carries.

Before I proceed to Mr. Fergus, I will remind the committee that this does have consequences for the witnesses who are here today. I am going to hold the witnesses for approximately 10 minutes in the hope that we can dispose of this matter quickly. If we're unable to do that, then I will dismiss the witnesses and we will continue with debate.

Mr. Fergus, you have the floor.

• (1610)

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I believe that if we decide to resume debate on this motion, we should show courtesy towards the witnesses by dismissing them and inviting them to come back at another date.

I have a lot of things to say about Mr. Villemure's motion, which I find lacking in many respects.

[English]

The Chair: I'm going to interrupt you on that point before you continue. Can I have consensus from the committee that we allow the witnesses to be released?

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): If you don't mind, Mr. Chair, I was wondering whether we could perhaps pose the questions we have for the witnesses today, based on their statements, and ask for written submissions in response.

The Chair: We could do that, or we could invite the witnesses back at a later time. I'm certainly at the will of the committee on this one.

Is it the consensus of the committee to have the witnesses submit written responses, based on the lines of questioning? I remind you that we only got through two lines of questioning. Mr. Villemure was supposed to be next, then Mr. Green. I have two choices here. I can either invite the witnesses back at a later date to conclude the line of questioning, or I can dismiss them.

What would the preference of the committee be, on Ms. Khalid's point?

Mr. Kurek, I see your hand.

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I would note it's unfortunate that this can't be disposed of quickly. I think it would be entirely fair... A fairly extensive conversation took place at the last meeting and, since the witnesses made their way to the committee—and just to note I thank all the witnesses for doing so—I think it would be unfortunate to drag this out in a prolonged filibuster, as Mr. Fergus seemed to suggest will be the case.

My preference would be for this to be disposed of and voted on. Then, we can get back to the business at hand.

The Chair: Thank you. There is still debate to occur, Mr. Kurek.

I'm going to make a decision on behalf of the committee. I'm going to dismiss the witnesses. I'm going to ask them...we may potentially need them available at a later date.

In the meantime, based on some of the discussion that's happened, we'll take two paths here. If the witnesses can submit anything in writing to the committee that they think is relevant to the access to information study we're pursuing, I invite you to please do that, but I may invite you back to finish the lines of questioning that were available.

I'm going to dismiss the witnesses. I'll suspend for a minute so we can do that, because there are many witnesses. We are then going to resume the debate.

Mr. Fergus, you will have the floor.

• (1610)

(Pause)

• (1615)

The Chair: I'm resuming the meeting.

I want to thank the witnesses again for appearing. I remind them that, if they are submitting some stuff in writing, we would need it sooner than later.

We are going to recommence with debate. Mr. Fergus, as I indicated, has the floor.

I want to remind all members of the committee about chapter 20. Under "Committees and Questions of Procedure and Privilege, Disorder and Misconduct", it says:

In addition, the Chair may, at his or her discretion, interrupt a member whose observations and questions are repetitive or are unrelated to the matter before the committee. If the member in question persists in making repetitive or off-topic comments, the Chair can give the floor to another member. If the member refuses to yield the floor and continues talking, the Chair may suspend or adjourn the meeting.

There was a lengthy discussion about this, last time. There was a lot of information put to the committee. Let's try not to make it repetitive. If we are going to debate this, let's try to have some new information.

Mr. Fergus, you have the floor, sir.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: I agree wholeheartedly.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry. I was speaking with Ms. Khalid. What was that, Mr. Fergus?

Hon. Greg Fergus: I was going to continue, but do you want to—

The Chair: She was just indicating to me that she wanted to be next on the list.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, I wholeheartedly agree with you on the fact that we should limit ourselves to remarks that contain relevant information, and I will adhere to this.

I have a comment for my colleague, Mr. Kurek, as well as for the Canadians who are watching us. I wish to reassure them that I am not filibustering. I would also like to reassure them that I am going to seek ways to improve the motion moved by my colleague, Mr. Villemure, who is asking us to duplicate the work of another committee of the House of Commons on essentially the same subject contained in his motion.

Let me begin by informing you that today, I attended a reception organized by the former Speaker of the House of Commons, the Honourable Geoff Regan, for three minutes, and I have with me a compilation of his decisions. Obviously, the decisions taken at the House of Commons do not always apply to committees, but they are very similar to the decisions taken by our committees. One of the principles of the House is not to redo the work that has already been done during the passage of a bill. A similar principle applies to committees, i.e., they should not duplicate the work done by another committee.

The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, of which I am a member, is already looking at the influence of foreign countries on politics here in Canada. We mustn't duplicate this work, because it is a waste of time for MPs and a waste of House of Commons resources. My question is very simple: what witnesses who haven't already been invited by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs of the House of Commons could we summon to our committee on the same subject?

My colleague is refusing to answer this question, why, I do not know. He has enjoyed a long career in ethics. He is a philosopher and I have a tremendous amount of respect for him. We get along very well on a personal basis. However, we have to ask him this question, because it is a serious issue.

Imagine if every committee of the House of Commons decided to do so, whether it be the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, the Standing Committee on Finance or any other committee. We would be keeping MPs from doing their work and things would grind to a standstill.

But it is precisely at committee that we do our real work as legislators. Everyone thinks that this happens during Question Period. I'm not saying that Question Period is not important, but it is all a

bit theatrical: We ask questions to which we don't want any answers, and the answers provided don't fit with the questions.

• (1620)

Mr. Chair, I tip my hat to you as well as to your predecessor, Mr. Kelly. Both of you have chaired the committee since I have been a member, that is to say since the beginning of the current Parliament. We haven't played any political games here. You have always sought to establish a consensus. I congratulate you. That is precisely what we should be doing away from the cameras. I know that our committee meetings are televised, but we don't have the same viewership that the House of Commons enjoys during Question Period.

That's one of the reasons why we should take MPs' work seriously. Our work has to be relevant. We have to be efficient here in committee. I would like to congratulate the chairs once more for encouraging MPs to rise to the challenge, that is to say overcoming partisanship and making sure that we gather information from our witnesses.

During the first round of questions on access to information, which is the subject of our study today, before even taking the opportunity to ask a question, my honourable colleague decided to go back to his motion and a debate which I would qualify as being sterile.

I'm good with numbers, just like the other MPs, and I knew what was going to happen. I therefore told myself that I would vote for the motion so that we can have this debate now and decide what will happen. I don't believe the motion is in the interest of our committee and that the subject is relevant to our mandate. However, I have to accept the fact and the decision that was taken, i.e., that the motion is admissible.

However, I think there are ways of improving the motion and that it would be important to do so, and I will not hesitate to propose an amendment or two in order to improve the motion. I think that one of the biggest weaknesses of the motion that we are talking about is the notion of priority. There's one thing that I'm not convinced of...

• (1625)

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but could you please speak a little louder? The interpreters are having a hard time hearing you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: My voice isn't loud enough? It doesn't happen often that people tell me that I'm being too shy. I apologize profusely to the interpreters, as well as to the Canadians who are watching us.

I think one of the ways to which we could improve the motion would be to limit the number of witnesses that we would invite for the study. We could avoid inviting the same witnesses that have testified before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, because they would simply repeat their testimony.

I heard my honourable colleague say that we have to do a better study of the issue than the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. I don't agree. I believe the best course of action would be to widen the scope of the study proposed by the motion. I see the sponsor of the motion nodding, and I hope he will agree. Rather than limiting ourselves to one country, in this case China, it might be better to look at all the other countries that are acting in bad faith.

Everyone knows that China is guilty of interference and meddling in our elections. But we know very well that Russia also does the same thing and, increasingly, Iran. We know that there are actors present in various countries, even in allied and friendly countries, who act in bad faith. Maybe we should widen the scope of what we study. In that way, we would, at the very least, accomplish more than what my colleague is proposing.

I do not wish to repeat myself nor go against the instructions given at the beginning of the meeting before I had the opportunity to speak, but if we do the almost exact same work as another committee, we are wasting our time.

If my colleagues agree to do things differently and widen the scope of the study, that could make things more palatable. I think that that would be a good idea. I have proposed a way of going forward. I see my colleagues' reactions, which leads me to understand that they might have something to propose. For my part, I believe that this would be a good way to proceed and would make the motion more acceptable. I hope that we will have a consensus amongst committee members to widen the scope of the motion.

• (1630)

I don't want to take up too much time. I will let another member speak.

I hope that someone will propose an amendment to recognize the relevance of my objections. That said, I hope that we will get the chance to do real work that is more relevant. I don't want our work to duplicate that of another committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fergus.

• (1635)

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Fergus.

Next I have Ms. Khalid on the list.

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

I wholeheartedly agree with everything that Mr. Fergus has indicated. I was unfortunately not able to attend the meeting where we had this really fulsome discussion. I really would love to have participated in it and shared some of my thoughts on this.

First and foremost, I want to say that regardless of the fact the study is happening already at PROC, I don't want to take away from how important it is for us as a country to really take a deep dive into what foreign interference is today in its current shape and form.

I think in order for us to fully understand what that foreign interference is, we have to put it into the context of where it came from over the past number of decades.

My colleague is absolutely right that this is not just a communist China issue, but the changing dynamics of how the world operates and how we work with one another, how we build allies across the world, and how we partner with other nations to build upon the democratic values that we care so deeply about.

Chair, I do sit on the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, so I think my perspective on this is quite heightened. I really strongly believe that we do need to do a lot more to ensure that we are safe from political interference. I do believe that we need to look beyond the one nation that is listed here in this motion.

Mr. Fergus is absolutely right: we have Russia, we have Iran, we have other hostile actors that do need to be looked at. I think that we do need to see how foreign interference or espionage has evolved over the past decades and how technology perhaps plays a role in it, and how the Government of Canada ensures that we're safe and in what context over this past number of decades. I think it is paramount that if we are to dig into this very important issue, we make sure that it is not a repeat of the work that is happening in PROC already. I do believe that expanding the scope of this motion would perhaps be the better way to go.

In that spirit, Chair, I would like to move an amendment to the main motion that, after the word "interference", remove the words:

particularly in the 2021 federal election, through the use of funds from foreign-influenced organizations affiliated with the United Front of the Communist Party of China

I'll pause there if you want to pull it up, Madam Clerk.

The Chair: I'm not sure that we have a copy of it yet.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I'm sorry.

I'm just amending the main motion that was presented by Mr. Villemure.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Vanessa Davies): Yes, I'm just trying to pull up the main motion.

The Chair: Okay, I see. I have the main motion in front of me as well.

Just give us a second until the clerk pulls it up for her own benefit.

Go ahead, Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I will just repeat this.

What I'm proposing is that, after the word “interference”, which is on that first line, we remove what follows: “particularly in the 2021 federal election, through the use of funds from foreign-influenced organizations affiliated with the United Front of the Communist Party of China.”. I'm proposing that we remove that.

I say this because I think this will not only expand the scope of the motion to include more hostile state actors in what we're studying, but will also include what's been happening in the past and how we've dealt with this issue of foreign interference then. Obviously, 2021 was not the first election we've had where there were suspicions of foreign interference. I think that going back and looking at how we've dealt with it in the previous elections, and going back and putting into context how that political interference is changing in today's day and age, in this digital space, would be a really good way for us to expand the scope of the motion. This would allow us to do something meaningful and really take a deep dive into how we, as a committee, can provide recommendations for the improvement of our democratic values and democratic institutions here in Canada.

Mr. Chair, I propose that amendment. I'm really hopeful that members will support my motion to expand the scope beyond just the CCP.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Khalid.

We do have an amendment to the main motion.

I'll just repeat it for the sake of the committee.

It is to remove the part after the comma after “interference” that says “particularly in the 2021 federal election, through the use of funds from foreign-influenced organizations affiliated with the United Front of the Communist Party of China.”.

[*Translation*]

The motion should be amended by deleting the words: “, particularly in the 2021 federal election, through the use of funds from foreign-influenced organizations affiliated with the United Front of the Communist Party of China.”.

[*English*]

The motion, as amended, would read: “That the Committee undertake, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h), a study of foreign interference and the threats to the integrity of democratic institutions, intellectual property and the Canadian state itself that arise from this foreign interference; and that the committee report to the House.”

Now, on the main motion, I have a list. I'm now on the amendments. I saw Mr. Green's hand up first, and he is followed by Mr. Bains and then Mr. Villemure.

[*Translation*]

Is it a point of order, Mr. Villemure?

Mr. René Villemure: There's a problem with the translation here. The words “*notamment*” and “particularly” do not mean the same thing at all. The term “*notamment*” includes other countries as well as China, whereas “particularly” implies they are excluded.

The motion was originally written in French. There is a translation problem here.

The Chair: Okay. Can we correct the translation?

What do you recommend, Mr. Villemure?

Mr. René Villemure: I will use the French version and call upon the interpreters to help me, because “particularly” is not an exact translation of “*notamment*”.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: “Particularly” is precise, whereas “*notamment*” is more vague, which takes into account Ms. Khalid's intent.

• (1645)

The Chair: All right.

When you moved the motion, you used “*notamment*”.

Mr. René Villemure: If I had to translate the French motion right now, rather than saying “particularly in the 2021 federal election,” I would say “including in the federal elections”.

I would therefore say “including” rather than “particularly”.

I don't know how this error in translation was made, but the intent of the motion is the one that was written in French. We use “*notamment*” to say “including”, so as not to limit ourselves to what comes afterwards.

The Chair: All right. I understand.

[*English*]

Ms. Khalid, if your amendment is to be carried, then—and I'm asking because I'm looking for clarification on this—would it not have the same impact as what Mr. Villemure is proposing here? He talks about “particularly”, but it's also open to other organizations or other countries as well, perhaps. I'm looking for some clarification on that.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Absolutely, I'm happy to clarify.

The only country mentioned in the motion as it stands, the main motion, is China. I think that the fact that you're confused by the wording of the motion, Chair, speaks volumes.

The Chair: Just so that we're clear, where I'm confused is, it does say “a study of foreign interference”, and then “particularly” in the—

Ms. Iqra Khalid: In my view, that really narrows the scope down to the 2021 federal election and the CCP. I did not interpret this to be broad ranging, and I don't think that Canadians, as they try to understand what the scope of the study is, would be particularly enlightened by this wording as it stands right now. I think that removing those two references would help us broaden the scope, step away from that narrow focus and have a more peripheral vision on what it is we want to study, Chair.

The Chair: Okay. I'm telling you that I see it the same as a study on foreign interference narrowed down to the United Front of the Communist Party of China. In my view, if we are to delete that portion of it, I don't think we can end up broadly studying the issue of foreign interference. Maybe I'm wrong on that, but that's the problem as I see it.

Go ahead, Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you, Chair.

What I'm proposing through my amendment is that we study foreign interference and the threats to the integrity of democratic institutions, intellectual property and the Canadian state itself arising from this foreign interference.

To me, I think that is a sufficient scope that removes reference to any one specific instance. This gives us the ability to broaden what it is and what kinds of witnesses we bring in to testify before us. It gives us the ability to look at specifically what kind of evidence we want to dive into. It doesn't limit us to a specific election. It allows us to be nimble, to be versatile.

For example, if we have a witness here before the committee and something comes up, we won't have to put forward a new motion. We can really take ownership of what that foreign interference is and how we protect our democratic institutions and make sure that we are talking about how we protect the Canadian democratic values as opposed to saying, "Oh, look at this bad state actor" or "Look at that bad state actor".

I think that through my amendment we'll be able to have that effect, as opposed to, if my amendment does not pass, looking specifically and only at the 2021 election and looking only at China. This is how I read it.

I understand and appreciate that this is a study that's already happening somewhere, right, and we're looking forward to seeing what the outcome of that study is going to be. What I'm trying to say here is that foreign interference is a really big issue. It matters, we need to look into it and we need to look into it with a bigger scope rather than narrowing it, to broaden the horizons of what it is that we're trying to achieve here.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Khalid. I think you've provided some clarity for the committee on what your intent is on the amendment.

On the amendment, I have Mr. Green.

Mr. Green, the floor is yours, sir.

After that, we're going to go to Mr. Bains on the amendment.

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to take this opportunity to go on the record to do something I don't normally do, which is to agree with my Liberal friends across the way. I'm not interested in getting bogged down in this kind of hyper focused avenue of China. I think it would be naive for us to think that they are the only ones. I don't think it would be productive to spend all of our time in this kind of hyper focused way when, quite frankly, it has been my experience and observation in southern Ontario that there are plenty of foreign actors on the ground, from nomination processes all the way through to election days.

I think that for the public interest of this committee we ought not to get bogged down in the language either. I think the point has been made. It's certainly not a revelation that China was implicated in alleged interference in the last two elections, so I could see that as the bulk of our focus, given the last two elections and given their proximity to our own personal elections. But beyond that, I think it's important that the committee take the opportunity to expand the study and include any and every particular investigation or information that we might have, because ultimately the cynicism in this country, Mr. Chair, is only served by us pulling back the veil and having a full and frank discussion about it so that Canadians, when they go to the polls, know that they have engaged in a free and fair election.

In speaking with my good friend from the Bloc, René, that's how I understood his motion and the spirit of his motion. That's why I supported it. That's why I supported continuing this discussion. As important as the work we do around access to information and everything else is—it's very important work—the allegations of having some kind of interference and tampering with our democratic processes are I think a grave concern for all of us, so I'm hoping that we can just move forward.

I'm in support of the amendment. I could care less whether it talks about the United Front of the Chinese Communist government. We know that's the impetus for the study, but when we start talking about it, I think we're going to find that this goes well beyond just China.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Green.

We have Mr. Bains next.

The floor is yours, Mr. Bains.

Mr. Parm Bains (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll be quick. I'll echo the comments just made by Mr. Green and my colleague, Ms. Khalid.

I support this amendment as it allows us to take a broader focus. I think it's definitely an important matter. There are way more bad actors, if you may. I think that maybe we should even explore the interference that takes place domestically against our institutions and the way we conduct our democratic process.

I live in a large Chinese Canadian community. I'll just give a quick example. We went through a recent court case where a coffee was spilled on a Chinese Canadian and the community generally was in fear that nobody liked them anymore. I want to just state that I think that a key focus on the one community when we're definitely aware that there are many different actors out here, interfering in elections.... Like Mr. Green mentioned, it's everything from nominations to general elections.

I think if we were to adopt this study, we must do our job as legislators to take great care to not reinforce these stereotypes of one specific community.

I'll just leave it at that. As I mentioned, I support this amendment.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bains.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Berthold, you may comment on the amendment.

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): First of all, I would like to say that it is important that we know what the vote is on before we vote, that is to say are we voting about the words “*notamment*” and “*particularly*”. There is a very important nuance here.

Secondly, I want to correct something. The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs was seized with an emergency motion on the 2019 general election in the wake of revelations made by Global News on November 7th. We have been given permission to undertake a study on the election, that is to say the 2019 election, with four supplementary meetings.

At first blush, it seems to me that it would be absolutely relevant that your committee looks at the 2021 general election and what happened between the 2019 and 2021 elections, especially as the mandate of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics is to scrutinize at the behaviour of elected and non-elected government officials in light of the revelations made about 2019, i.e., alleged corruption and influence in the offices of MPs.

We have to ask ourselves a very important ethical question: what will we do if we learn that an MP's office was infiltrated by a foreign agent, such as one from Beijing's communist regime? Actually, we learned that in January last that MI5, which is the British equivalent of our Canadian Security Intelligence Service, had publicly identified an agent working for the communist regime of Beijing, and had informed the office where that person was working that the agent had provided financial support to candidates and MPs and that she had worked with them on certain files.

I just wanted to highlight that fact, given that I am a member of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs of the

House of Commons. Our study is focused on the 2019 general election. I thought you should know, as you have warmly welcomed me here at your meeting today.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Berthold.

We are happy to have you here.

[*English*]

Mr. Bains, I saw your hand up, but I think you then took it down.

Mr. Parm Bains: It was residual.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

We have an amendment on the floor. I don't see any further discussion.

I did not see any further discussion until the hand went up. We're good? Okay, there is no further discussion.

I'm going to call a vote on the amendment proposed by Ms. Khalid.

Is there consensus on the amendment, first of all?

• (1700)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I would like a recorded vote.

The Chair: Ms. Khalid has requested a recorded vote, so we will proceed to a recorded vote.

Madam Clerk, if you would—

Mr. Kurek, we'll have to consider your vote an abstention.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 6; nays 3[*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: *Merci*. The motion as amended carries.

Now the debate is on the main motion.

Ms. Hepfner, I had you on the main motion before. Please go ahead.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Perfect. Thank you, Chair.

I would like to continue in the same vein of putting up this study a little more. What we have right now is a focus on 2021, 2019, but really if we are going to look at foreign interference, we know it has happened for a lot longer than that and I would go back further.

Just to save you all the debate, should I just read what I proposed to amend?

The Chair: The motion as amended is not prescriptive to any particular date. It doesn't say 2021. It doesn't—

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Okay, I would like to make it more prescriptive in my amendment.

At the end of the whole paragraph, after the words “that arise from this foreign interference”, I would add:

That the committee review the work of the previous Ministers of Democratic Institutions related to the last five federal elections to combat foreign interference.

This way it's a non-partisan look at the whole of government and what has happened since 2008.

We would go back to when there was a previous government running the country and really look at this issue. It would be non-partisan. It would be more wide-ranging and we'd really get to the bottom of it.

You might be interested to note that the last two Ministers of Democratic Institutions for Steven Harper were Tim Uppal and Pierre Poilievre. It is interesting. It does go back further.

I think that the more recent work of our Ministers of Democratic Institutions is all public. It's online. You can go on and search for it, but going back further it's more opaque and it's harder to find that information.

This is why I'm proposing this amendment, and I look forward to further debate.

The Chair: Would you do me a favour and read that out one more time for me, please?

I see your hand up on the amendment, Mr. Green.

Go ahead and read it out one more time for me.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: At the end of the paragraph, after the word “interference”, I would add “That the committee review the work of the previous Ministers of Democratic Institutions related to the last five federal elections to combat foreign interference”.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We have an amendment on the floor. This is pretty significant to the amendment that was made and as it relates to the motion as it is now.

I would like to suspend, so that we can send the amendment to the rest of the committee. We'll suspend for however long it takes.

Thank you.

• (1700) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1710)

The Chair: I'm going to call the meeting back to order.

The amendment by Ms. Hepfner has been circulated to the committee members. I remind everyone that we have until 5:30, so if we can dispose of this quickly, I would appreciate that. If not, I understand.

Mr. Green, you are first up on the amendment.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm trying to figure out—I'm not decided yet—whether or not the filibuster is going to be worse than whatever other amendment the government side has coming next.

Look, I think this is a redundant motion. I think that within our committee processes we have the full ability to call for whatever witnesses we want. Surely, our analysts would include the work of previous committees. We'll see. We'll see how many other amendments they have to offer.

I don't think this is necessary in any stretch of the imagination. I'm starting to wonder. I should have known when there was a unanimous vote to actually continue this debate that something was coming our way. Here we are.

I look forward to hopefully getting this motion passed. Again, when we come back to picking the witnesses, then absolutely, move a motion to call Pierre Poilievre and Tim Uppal to have them testify. I mean, knock yourselves out.

Right now, I feel like we're just going to see a series of more amendments that might take us off the main motion, which is really what I'm looking for.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

I do not see any other hands up. We will proceed to a vote on the amendment.

(Amendment negatived: nays 6; yeas 5 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: The amendment fails. We are back on the main motion.

Go ahead, Ms. Saks.

Ms. Ya'ara Saks (York Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In the effort to make this quick and to find collaboration among all of us here, it's been made clear by many members of the committee that this issue is important to them. I think it's an issue that's really important to Canadians.

That's why I would like to propose an amendment “That this study be the committee's next order of business, and that the committee undertake no other business until the study is complete.”

I'd like to just clarify this. We dismissed witnesses today in order to debate this, so it's clearly an issue of concern to my colleague from the Bloc and my Conservative colleagues across the way. All parties agreed to table this study. We're here. We're debating it. We're making sure that we get a study that is comprehensive.

As I mentioned in our last meeting, I'm not a fan of doubling up work. I would like to see work—and I'm willing to stay all night to do it—that makes sure we really get through what Canadians are asking us and instill trust in our democratic institutions. I think that's what this really is about.

• (1715)

The Chair: Can I just interrupt for a second?

You put an amendment on the floor.

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: Yes, I can read it into the record, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: If you can read it again, I would appreciate that just so that members are clear.

I'm not going to seek—

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: I have it in French, if needed.

The Chair: If you want to distribute it, that would be great.

Once the amendment is on the floor, then we'll open it up for debate.

You started debate before the amendment had been acknowledged. I want to make that clear.

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: I'll send it right now.

The Chair: We'll get that distributed to members of the committee as quickly as we can.

I'm not going to suspend.

While we wait for that to be distributed in both languages to the committee, I'm going to encourage you to continue, Ms. Saks, if you want.

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: As I mentioned, Mr. Chair, in the PROC committee both the Bloc and the Conservatives voted against a motion to extend the foreign interference study by four meetings. They wanted to focus specifically on the CCP interference. We've gotten some agreement here about widening and broadening the scope of the study and making sure that we get a comprehensive view, both historically and what's currently happening; so there clearly is an interest in prioritizing this.

There's clearly an interest in looking at this in depth. Since it seems to be a priority for me, colleagues here and across the way, I really feel strongly that this is the business of the day that we should be engaged in. We should get through it and leave no stone unturned, as many of us like to do in this committee, to make sure we have a comprehensive and fulsome review. That's really all I have to say on the subject. I'm happy to open it to debate.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Saks.

On the amendment I have Mr. Fergus followed by Ms. Khalid.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Actually, Mr. Chair, aside from what my colleague said on this seeming to be an important file and that we should proceed right away, to be consistent with that I will stop talking.

The Chair: Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thanks, Chair.

I would just reinforce the fact that we dismissed so many important witnesses today because there was a will by Monsieur Villemure, respectfully, to really bring up and study this issues. I think Ms. Saks' amendment really gets to the crux and the heart of what this committee wants.

The way we've been functioning so far is that we're doing a little bit of an ATIP study, a little bit on ArriveCAN and we're thinking about the Lobbying Commissioner, but I think if we really are serious about making some strong, fulsome recommendations to the government with respect to the foreign interference level, the danger and the risks here in Canada, we need to show that by making sure that we're prioritizing this study, that we're moving aside all other things on the agenda until we get to the bottom of what is so important.

We hear it in question period, we hear it from the media and we hear it from the members opposite—and from ourselves—just how important this issue is, so let's put everything aside and actually do this study. Let's bring out those witnesses. Let's put forward some concrete recommendations on what the next step going forward is. Let's get to the bottom of this issue, Chair.

I really think we should be prioritizing this and I'm looking forward to the support of all colleagues—especially in the opposition—to ensure that we are prioritizing this the way they've been wanting it to be prioritized over the past couple of weeks.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Khalid.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Villemure, you have the floor.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

We have gone from having a “sterile” debate, which, in my opinion, is a value judgment, to having “a very important one”. We have come a long way.

We are talking about the integrity of the State and we all agree here that it is important. I moved the motion initially so that we could have another perspective, another point of view. I believe I have some expertise in this type of exercise, if I may say so.

I hope that our colleagues' opposite are not able to dilute the essence of the motion through a series of amendments. This has not happened yet. However, I would like to go beyond the filibustering and get to our goal.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

[*English*]

Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks, Chair.

The witnesses had to be dismissed today because there was a filibuster at the end of the last meeting we had. Had we voted on the question at hand then, we wouldn't have had the business to deal with again today, and it looks like this will carry forward to another meeting.

We can walk and chew gum—I can—so I'm prepared to have multiple studies happen at one time, so I support the main motion. I don't support the amendment. We'd be cancelling on our upcoming witnesses, and I think we can do both at the same time.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

Go ahead, Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thanks, Chair.

Just to clarify, prioritizing this motion is not diluting it. It is making sure that our priority and how we feel about this motion is shown by way of our schedule and how we are ensuring that this study will be completed in a timely and effective manner.

I know we have been talking about this, and the only way that we move forward is to have the fulsome debates to make sure that what we are doing at committee is important work to Canadians. I think that members have made it very clear how important this foreign interference issue is, and I think it needs to be reflected in our schedule. It needs to be shown. Let's get this over and done with before moving on to other things.

Amongst all of the studies that we have, this is the one that members have really expressed a lot of urgency about. I think we should have that reflected within our schedule, Chair.

The Chair: I do not see any other hands up, so we are on the amendment proposed by Ms. Saks.

Mr. Green, I see your hand up.

Mr. Matthew Green: I just want to clarify that the only bone I have to pick.... I would agree that, if we're going to make this the priority, we need to make the priority. I have a keen interest in hearing from Amazon on a whole host of issues.

Through you to the clerk, when would be the next available opportunity to bring in the folks from Amazon, given this motion?

The Chair: The expectation was that we were going to have the folks from Amazon here on the 14th. The invitation has been sent out, but we haven't heard anything at this point in terms of a commitment to appear.

I will tell you, Mr. Green, that the schedule is that on Wednesday we have the ATIP study. We're continuing on that with representatives from the media. Next week we have the commissioners who have all committed to come in to talk about the supplementary estimates, and then on the 14th, we were going to return to the ATIP study.

I'll remind the committee members as well that last week we approved a motion to have the lobbying commissioner come in to talk about the proposed changes to the lobbyists' code of conduct. My expectation is that we're not going to get to that until January 30 at the earliest, after the Christmas break, and then the schedule beyond that point hasn't been set yet.

Hang on a second.

I've just been updated on the invitation for the 14th. We haven't heard any response at this point. I'm going to give it a couple of

more days, and then we'll determine where we're going to go from that point forward.

Does that clarify anything for you, Mr. Green?

• (1725)

Mr. Matthew Green: It does, and I would admit we're in a bit of a dog's breakfast with our work plan. That's just the nature of shifting priorities. I'm guilty of it, and I'm certainly supportive of exploring some of this stuff.

I'll just share quite candidly, in a vulnerable way, that I'm a little bit torn about how are we going to prioritize this in a way that does respect some of the other work that's happening, because it's also a priority of mine as well.

I'll just listen to the other comments and see where we land.

The Chair: I appreciate that. Part of the challenges that we're dealing with is witness availability as well, so there are a lot of moving parts involved in some of the studies that have been approved by the committee as well.

I certainly know that the clerk and the analysts are trying their best to accommodate the will of the committee.

I don't see any further discussion on the amendment.

Go ahead, Ms. Saks.

Ms. Ya'ara Saks: If I may, through you, Mr. Chair, I'll respond to Mr. Green.

I noted this in a prior meeting, that witnesses who were quite vulnerable were brought to committee without a lot of planning and timing.

I agree with you, Mr. Green, that I'd like to hear from Amazon as well, and we haven't heard from them yet. Perhaps in prioritizing this, since this is the issue of the day, it will allow us to really build the schedule out on issues that are important to you like Amazon and make sure that we give witnesses the time to respond and plan.

As we saw in the last round of the ATIP, we had some vulnerable folks here and testimony that was quite quick in the turnaround.

I think we can be mindful and careful in our planning, and I believe that this is really the issue of the day to committee members and to Canadians.

Mr. Green, I'd be happy to see us work on a well-planned, scheduled work plan for after the break.

The Chair: I don't see any further discussion.

Take the vote on the amendment of Ms. Saks, Madam Clerk.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 6; nays 4)

The Chair: I'm going to ask the committee for some indulgence on this, because I know that we have an ATIP study—

Let me finish first.

I'm going to ask for the committee's indulgence on this, because we have witnesses who have been scheduled to appear for some time on Wednesday on the ATIP study. I know there's a keen interest in their appearance, and they want to appear in front of this committee. What I would like is some indulgence from the committee, or some direction from the committee.

If we can start this with the amendment.... We still have to vote on it, but keep in mind that if you want to start this, we can start it next week, because we're going to have difficulty getting witnesses here for Wednesday—let's be frank—and I don't want to put the clerk or the analyst in that position.

We haven't voted on the main motion, but I throw that out there for the committee's consideration. I think it's a dutiful consideration.

Go ahead, Mr. Fergus. We're on the main motion as amended at this point.

• (1730)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, I'm going to be very quick, because I want to respect the time that you have, and I know that honourable colleagues have another engagement to go to. This, I hope, will be very quick and we'll get a lot of support.

I'd like to move one last motion. It's one that's important to me. It's one that we've seen. It has real consequences. As I say, the indirect yet very real consequence of foreign interference is that it has led to a lot of social divisions within our own country.

[*Translation*]

China has been seen as the villain and, on the face of it, the Chinese government seems to warrant this criticism.

However, Canadians of Chinese origin have been the victims of xenophobic attacks, and we have also seen similar behaviour towards other groups in our country.

I would therefore like to amend Mr. Villemure's motion by adding after the words “until the study is complete” the following: “that one meeting be dedicated to the rise of xenophobia in Canada”.

[*English*]

The Chair: Have you shared that with the clerk? Has it been distributed among the committee?

We have to be mindful of the time here. Mr. Fergus has proposed an amendment.

Monsieur Villemure, I'll hear you on the amendment.

Did you have your hand up, Mr. Barrett? I'm sorry.

It's Mr. Barrett first, and then we'll go to Mr. Villemure.

Go ahead, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, I look forward to debating this fourth or fifth or sixth amendment, but as noted by my honourable colleagues, there are multiple other engagements for members of the committee.

I move to adjourn.

The Chair: We have a motion to adjourn. It's non-debatable and non-amendable.

Do we have consensus to adjourn?

We don't.

Let's go to a vote, please, Madam Clerk.

(Motion negatived: nays 6; yeas 4)

The Chair: The motion to adjourn fails.

I am going to adjourn the meeting.... Can I do that?

Let's keep in mind.... The reason I was mindful of this is that we do have a hard stop at 5:45 tonight, just so that everybody knows. I was hoping that we could adjourn, but the vote failed and we're going to continue.

Mr. Fergus, your hand is up.

• (1735)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, I'm hoping that we can vote on this amendment and then on the main motion without further debate.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Fergus has moved the amendment on the one meeting.

I have Mr. Kurek on the amendment.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I do find it interesting. I would pose somewhat of a question, and then I may have a few further comments.

I agree entirely that we have seen significant divisions that have taken place, and we've seen instances of xenophobia and racism that have unfortunately been directed towards minority communities in this country. In fact, speaking with a former colleague who was not re-elected in 2021, I heard some incredible stories from this colleague I'd served with for not quite a couple of years about some of the instances of racism he had experienced, in particular because he took a fairly firm stand regarding some of issues.

My question would be this. In the context of there being one meeting, it being prescriptive to one meeting, I'd be curious as to what that would look like in terms of the greater context of this study. Is it something that is meant to ensure that we have perspectives heard so that it would provide context from academics? Are we looking for election officials?

We have the amended motion before us. Certainly voting on this is a laudable intention, and I'd be very supportive of it. Perhaps Mr. Fergus would outline maybe some examples of who might be included as witnesses in that meeting so that we can understand what we're trying to get to here.

The Chair: The question is posed to you, Mr. Fergus. If you want to answer it, you're more than welcome to.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I'm very reluctant to answer, because I'm afraid of the time running out for those who have commitments. All I can say is that it would be up to members to determine, using the example of Mr. Kurek, or examples that other members can talk about. It will be up to this membership to determine who would be the witnesses.

• (1740)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Damien Kurek: I think that when it comes to ensuring that we have the full understanding of what... I'm just hesitant to proceed without a better understanding, because in the context of election interference I think this is totally reasonable in terms of some of the peripheral discussion. I'll use an example that is somewhat unrelated.

I know that there's a committee currently undertaking a study on some abuse within sports in Canada—a very, very serious issue—and having listened to some of the testimony and hearing some of the witnesses...it was absolutely heartbreaking.

One of the meetings they undertook had to do with the committee hearing from experts, and the committee members, my understanding is, heard from experts related to trauma so that the members knew how to appropriately ask questions, in some cases making sure that.... Although it's a very different subject matter, the reason I bring this up is that in their case they heard from experts who understood the details of trauma so that they could equip members of that committee to better understand how they should be approaching the subject from the perspective of dealing with situations in order to not revictimize anyone, and then, further, to provide supports for members of the committee, because some of the language that has been heard is quite traumatic.

My question is, there's precedent that I can certainly think of that fits within this. However, I'm curious as to if we want to look at examples where there was xenophobia and some of the causes of that. Was that some of the interference that is being referenced? To add this as a specific element of it, just for more guidance as to what that might look like, I think would be a helpful element to ensure that we are just better understanding it. I know that there are people of colour and of minority groups around this table, and I think that certainly they've experienced things that I cannot necessarily directly relate to.

Mr. Chair, through you, the question would be—and I'm just trying to better understand in the context of the motion that we have before us—is it something that's directly related to the report or is it something that is meant to help this committee understand some of the greater challenges that exist in this space so that we are not finding ourselves in the position where members of this committee from any party, from any background, end up putting themselves in a place where it would be not understanding where certain individuals within our society may find some challenges?

I would pose that question: Is it directly related to the study to be included in the report or is it more for the knowledge and understanding of members of this committee to understand where things are coming from?

The Chair: Thank you for that question, Mr. Kurek.

I have to advise the committee that we had been granted an extra 14 minutes despite the resource limitations, taking us to 5:44. We're at that point right now, so I have no other option at this point but to adjourn the meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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