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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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• (1110)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ)): I now call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 72 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, April 28, 2022, the committee is resuming its consideration of the follow-up study on report 3, “Access to Safe Drinking Water in First Nations Communities—Indigenous Services Canada”, found in the 2021 Reports 1 to 5 of the Auditor General of Canada.

For your information, we held our first meeting on this study on June 14, 2022, at which time we heard from witnesses representing the Office of the Auditor General and the Department of Indigenous Services.

We reinvited people from the Office of the Auditor General to appear today, June 19, but they respectfully declined, as they have not done any additional audit work since the report was tabled, and are therefore unable to provide any clarification or nuance to what the Associate Deputy Minister would say, or about the progress made in the departmental action plan.

We reinvited a witness from the Department of Indigenous Services, but he was not available today or Thursday, June 22.

We also invited people from the Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs. They first refused the invitation, saying that the subject matter falls under the responsibility of the Department of Indigenous Services. However, when we informed them that the audit was from before 2017 and that it also concerned their department, they reconsidered the invitation, but they were also not available today or on Thursday, June 22.

With that in mind, I will now turn the floor over to Mr. Desjarlais.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

It's good to see you in the chair for our final committee. It means a lot to have representation by women, particularly you, in this committee. I know how important your judgment is to our good work here.

Madam Chair, I'd now like to table a motion, which I provided to the clerk's office this morning, in relation to the study we are undergoing right now:

That, in relation to the Follow-up Study on Report 3, Access to Safe Drinking Water in First Nations Communities—Indigenous Services Canada, of the 2021 Reports 1 to 5 of the Auditor General of Canada, the committee calls on the Minister of Indigenous Services and the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations to appear at the Public Accounts Committee in light of the seriousness and urgency of the issues raised by this study.

Madam Chair, it means a lot, I think to this committee in particular, that we voted unanimously to ensure that this work was done in the past. It's extremely disappointing to me that the ministers have declined to appear in this committee on something so serious.

We're talking about clean water, Madam Chair, something that is a fundamental right to life in this country, and what we're witnessing is ministers choosing to actively ignore the reality and the work of Parliament to ensure that we actually have a comprehensive study that tries to get to the bottom of this. We've heard from countless numbers of Auditors General—three Auditors General—who have said that this is simply unacceptable, and they have each called for accountability.

We have now asked twice for the deputy minister to come to present to this committee on this issue to clarify who's accountable. We've been unable to actually ascertain who is responsible for this.

We can't continue to see first nations and indigenous communities go without. I think it's imperative—and actually an emergency—that we take this crisis seriously. There will be a day—today—when children will be unable to get clean water as we speak. The fact that this has been going on for a decade—decades and decades—is simply unacceptable, and I think this is something that is very much shared by most of my colleagues.

I implore all my colleagues to see the importance and relevance of ensuring that the ministers understand this issue, are present to the committee and are also accountable to Canadians, and in particular to indigenous people, who continue to have no clean water for their children. They're feeling helpless.

At this point in time, I'd like to reassert my thoughts from the previous meeting about how devastated I am about this fact that we continue to not see this, and my understanding is that the government's approach to this is that things are better than what we think. That's something that we simply can't demonstrate to be true if we don't actually have the ministers here to account for it. I implore the committee to take this motion seriously.

I apologize to the clerk, and to you, Madam Chair, for not providing translation.

Thank you.

• (1115)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): The clerks are telling me that the motion will be distributed in a minute.

Mr. McCauley, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Madam Chair, thanks very much.

I want to thank my colleague Mr. Desjarlais for bringing this up. I think it is very important. I know we've heard constantly from the government side that this is not the account to hold departments accountable. I disagree greatly with that comment.

I'm going to follow up a bit. I spoke about this previously, about when we discuss the follow-up reports, and there's one I'd like to wrap in. If we cannot wrap it in at this time, I think this amendment is too important to amend, but we do need the minister here on that issue. I will be talking about the other issue, which is the 2018 report entitled "Socio-economic Gaps on First Nation Reserves—Indigenous Services Canada". This was part of Auditor General Ferguson's "incomprehensible failures" report. People think it was about Phoenix, but it was also about gaps in first nations services.

I'm going to read a couple of items from that report. First, "Indigenous Services Canada overstated First Nations' secondary school graduation or completion rates by up to 29 percentage points." That's percentage points. That's not per cent: It was 91%. When I spoke to Mr. Ferguson at committee, he said that for at least a decade, Indigenous Services, which of course was Northern Affairs before, was purposely doctoring graduation rates for indigenous. It was 91%. The report also states that they "found that education results for First Nations students [had] not improved relative to those of other Canadians". This was "despite commitments the Department made 18 years ago".

Now, this was 2018, so this goes back to the year 2000 as the year he was referring to. It has been 23 years now. We're now in our eighth Parliament since this report came out. I do not want to be sitting here in another Parliament and I don't want other MPs sitting here looking back at our failure to act on this, just like I don't want another group looking at our failure to act on the clean drinking water issue.

I'll continue with what he stated in the report. Indigenous Services "did not collect relevant data, or adequately use data to improve education programs" and "did not assess the relevant data it collected, for accuracy". He said that the department "was still unable to report how federal funding for on-reserve education compared with the funding levels for...education systems across Canada". He said that the department "did not assess relevant data it did collect", and "it did not know to what extent First Nations students were graduating from high school with diplomas recognized by post-secondary institutions, or with completion certificates".

Apparently, what Indigenous Services is doing is that if you're indigenous and you drop out on the very last day of grade 11, they're not counting it as a dropout. It's only if you drop out in grade 12.

Again, this is 23 years. I looked it up. We had one progress report in five years. We had 30 pages of recommendations and one progress report that addressed three of these items.

I think it's desperately important that if we are going to be doing our jobs as MPs, or as humans, or even working toward reconciliation, we need to have the minister in, and the department and the deputy ministers, to actually update us and explain that this is fixed once and for all and that the water issue is fixed once and for all.

I wholeheartedly and 100% support Mr. Desjarlais' motion. I hope the rest of the committee will as well so that we don't have MPs one Parliament or two Parliaments from now thinking, "What the hell did they do in public accounts that they didn't actually hold government responsible? What did they do to actually improve people's lives?"

We have the stuff right in front of us about what has to be done. It's not good enough just to do a report, look at it and then wait for some department to maybe do one update over five years. It's 23 years now. It's not acceptable. I think we owe it to Canadians and to the indigenous that we actually get answers, and not from a partisan point. I will pledge right now that when the minister's here, I will not make it at all a partisan issue, because it's both parties. We just want answers on what is done to fix this and what needs to be done to fix this.

Again, we'll be supporting Mr. Desjarlais's motion. I sincerely thank him for bringing it forward.

• (1120)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Ms. Shanahan, you have the floor.

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

I have been aware of the scope of this problem since 2015. That said, I think a clarification needs to be made.

The clerk could confirm this, but it seems to me that we agreed with Minister Hajdu for her to appear before the committee in the fall. This is what Mr. Williamson told us at the committee's last meeting. Even if it is not usual for the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to hear from ministers, it has already been done. Ms. Hajdu appeared before us. Normally, on this committee, we hear from deputy ministers, since we oversee the concrete implementation of policies and programs. Minister Hajdu came to see us because of the magnitude of the problem.

This is where I would like to make a clarification, in terms of the government's commitment to resolving the issue of drinking water advisories. We have seen progress in this regard, and it is important to recognize that. What is even more important is to understand what factors have enabled this progress and what obstacles, such as lack of resources, still stand in the way of 100% elimination of the advisory problem.

I fully understand our colleague's frustration and the desire to hear from ministers at the committee. However, I believe that this process is already under way. If this motion is simply to formally emphasize that the Committee considers this as important, it will set a very interesting precedent for years to come. When there is a problem of this magnitude, almost systemic, that really needs political change to be resolved, no government will be able to say that it is up to civil servants to sort it out, not ministers.

The only thing I would like to point out is that the request to appear has already been made and, from what committee chairman Williamson told us last week, we now only need to sort out scheduling conflicts.

Madam Chair, I would like the clerk to tell us what the current status of the invitations is.

• (1125)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Go ahead, Ms. Dallaire.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Aurée Dallaire): Indeed, the ministers were first invited to appear today, Monday, June 19. They were not available. The invitation was reissued for Thursday, June 22. Once again, they were not available. So the Chair of the committee asked me to inform them that they would be invited back in the fall.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: In light of what's been transpiring in the last little while, I think it's.... Inconvenience is often what's cited, but I think what's often inconvenience is for these communities to continue to wait. If this was a matter of urgency.... It is a matter of urgency. There isn't one settler community in Canada that is on a boil water advisory—not one.

If the government members can't make themselves press the ministers for something as important as getting water to children.... Madam Chair, I'm not certain as to what excuse could seriously trump the fact that people aren't going to get water today. Not one settler community in Canada lacks clean water.

I'm just very nervous and cautious to the fact that this has been going on for decades and decades and decades. There have often been excuses made for the absence of ministers held accountable on these things. There has to come a time where we, as committee members and also as representatives of Canadians, exercise our force to ensure that the ministers actually come. If it means passing another motion to request that they come to demonstrate the urgency of this and, hopefully, that we're united in our call for accountability, then I think we would do this.

As a matter of fact, given that we've heard from all sides now, I would like to move to a vote on this if we can. Should I call the question?

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Mr. Fragiskatos, you have the floor.

[English]

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

I want to ask our colleague a question.

I understand why the Minister of Indigenous Services is mentioned in the motion. I'm not perplexed, that's probably not the right word, but I'm looking for an explanation as to why the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations is mentioned.

Are there land claims issues that add a layer of complexity with respect to water services somehow? Logistically—and it is mostly a question around logistics—why is it the two ministers instead of the one when we've heard at this committee and others, in very clear terms, that the focus of water is the business of the Minister of Indigenous Services Canada?

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): I have an answer for you, Mr. Fragiskatos. In fact, it was in the remarks I shared with you at the outset. That is because the audit took place before the 2017 government reorganization. That year, what used to be one department became two separate departments. That is why people from the Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs refused our invitation at first. However, when reminded of this fact, they accepted the invitation. They were not available on short notice, but they will be invited back, and rightly so.

[English]

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: If I can just respond—I appreciate the explanation—I'm aware of the nuances of that. However, it's also my understanding that when that change happened, all the work that was being carried out on water shifted to indigenous services and the minister responsible for indigenous services. I'm still at a loss to understand why we would have both ministers appear when it's clear, and it has been the case for a number of years now, that issues of water on reserves are the business of the Minister of Indigenous Services.

I'm looking for more of an explanation.

• (1130)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): We still have Mr. Genuis, Mr. Desjarlais and Ms. Shanahan.

Mr. Genuis, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Chair, very, very briefly, I think it's important to remind the committee that we don't have to be constrained by the existing time slots. I acknowledge the importance of this issue.

Although the House is not scheduled to sit next week, if the minister is available next week, we don't have to wait until the fall. I think this is an important issue. In scheduling one extra meeting at the end of this week or early next week, whenever the minister is available, I don't think there will be the same resource crunch that we normally have. Let's get this done.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I do appreciate the comments and questions from the member and from the Liberals, but there are two points.

One, to the point of the chair, is the fact that during the time of the audit.... This was an audit that was directly related to INAC, indigenous and northern affairs Canada, which was subsequently divided into two ministries. One of them was subsequently divided into another ministry, which is northern affairs, but I digress and leave that aside to demonstrate the point that largely the protocol issues that are present within the culture of the ministries is sourced from indigenous and northern affairs Canada.

Even the point the member makes about believing that all of the responsibilities transferred to one ministry over the other is not proven. It is absent from our report. It's something that we don't have clarity on, actually. We don't know. That's probably why it's important to ask the minister what level of responsibility she's inherited since that audit. I think that's part of the relevance for why the minister should be present here. It's because of the scope of the transition itself.

The ministers aren't solely responsible for the administration of the ministry. They've been asked to do mandate letters to help in the transition of the division of this massive ministry.

We don't have, for example, clarity from the Auditor General or even from the ministers themselves as to level of responsibility or where the grey area persists.

To give clarity to where grey areas exist between these two ministries, Métis and Inuit groups, for example, do not fall under the auspices often of Indigenous Services Canada, but are communities that are currently without clean water. How are their claims of no clean water heard? Their mandate is within the ministry of Crown-Indigenous Relations.

You're telling me that we're just supposed to isolate all the first nations to Indigenous Services Canada, isolate all of the Métis and the Inuit to Crown-Indigenous Relations and then only ask questions about clean water for one of them, when this issue is impacting all three of them.

I want to be clear. A large community, Iqaluit, had no clean water in the last 24 months. They of course have had support from the federal, municipal and territorial governments for the reconstruction of their pump stations and their desalination stations, but that was something that could have been stopped. We could have had relevancy to that if we had, for example, jurisdictional clarity or even department clarity as to who was responsible—whether it was Marc Miller or Patty Hajdu. We still don't know. The territory of the northwest, including the Inuit, still has no idea. Is it maybe northern affairs, as a matter of fact?

The question of whether or not these ministries have properly administered their mandate to ensure that these ministries are properly divided and it's clear to first nations, Métis and Inuit who their Crown partner is for something as simple as clean water.... Maybe this issue wouldn't persist.

It is extremely relevant that we have the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, who is the minister responsible for taking up the concerns particularly, and not just land claims. It seems to be a claim by Mr. Fragiskatos that they deal only with land claims. That's not the totality of it. This is the same ministry that's administering housing and clean water. They're administering other aspects that are contained within this audit.

Even to the point Mr. McCauley made, which was the incredibly important point of the doctoring of information, we don't know how that issue persists. Was it inherited from indigenous and northern affairs? Did it persist in both or all three ministries? These are questions of relevance and why the ministers need to be present. These are ones that the deputy ministers themselves could not admit. It's not their mandate to divide the ministries; it's their mandate to run their departments. It's the mandate of the ministers to ensure that there is clarity.

We need to have maybe even all three ministers, now that you bring it up. Maybe we should have the northern affairs minister, too, to give clarity as to why there's no clean water in communities like Iqaluit when they need it most.

I'll limit it, of course, to these two because we're dealing with first nations in particular and some overlap with some of those other communities south of 60. I hope you can see that there's a real relevance. Mr. Fragiskatos and Ms. Bradford, if you both had the mandate to divide a massive ministry, it would make sense that you communicate with each other and with Canadians as to how you're going to delineate that responsibility.

Madam Chair, with that, I'd still like to move to a vote.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): I just want to point out to all members of the committee that Mr. Bédard is here and that, at this time, we should normally move on to the next items on the agenda.

Ms. Shanahan, you had your hand up to speak. Do you still want to do that? Otherwise, we can either vote or adjourn the debate. It is up to you to tell me what you want to do.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: We can proceed with the vote.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): OK, we will now proceed to the vote on Mr. Desjarlais' motion.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 8; nays 0)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): I would like to thank the members of the Committee.

I must now suspend the meeting, then we will go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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