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Chair: Mr. John Williamson



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• (1115)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick South-west, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 73 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts. The committee is meeting today to discuss committee business and consider draft reports.

[*English*]

There are just a couple of housekeeping items.

I've accepted, on the committee's behalf, a meeting with a delegation from the Standing Committee on the Auditor-General of the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa. We have the calendar, which we will discuss later on in today's meeting, but this luncheon meeting will be during committee time, Thursday, September 28—that's a week from today—from 12 p.m. to 1 p.m.

I will need the committee to adopt the following motion in order to cover the hospitality expenses. The motion is:

That the committee meet, in an informal meeting, with a delegation of members of the Standing Committee on Auditor-General from the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa on Thursday, September 28, 2023; and that the committee defray the hospitality expenses related to this meeting.

Do I have agreement?

Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Yes.

The Chair: I like the enthusiasm. This is good. Thank you.

Is there any opposition? No.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: That is approved, Mr. Clerk, so could you could make arrangements for that lunch?

We'll turn to the calendar shortly. I do want to take a minute just to welcome the new members joining us online.

Mr. Nater, welcome to public accounts.

Mr. Stewart, welcome to public accounts.

Mr. Carr, welcome to public accounts.

Ms. Khalid, welcome to public accounts and congratulations on your appointment as a parliamentary secretary.

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

The Chair: We're pleased to have you all here. That's exciting news right off the top.

Welcome, everyone. I hope you're looking forward to the work. We do have a lot of work ahead of us.

You'll notice as well—I'll just reference it and we can talk about it again down the road—that the Auditor General will be tabling five reports, I believe, on October 19. That will involve, of course, a lock-up as well as a preview with the Auditor General that is open to all parliamentarians in camera, and then our committee will hear from the Auditor General the moment it is tabled in the House of Commons, on that day. You'll note that committee time that day is one hour earlier, starting at 10 o'clock as opposed to 11 o'clock, so please adjust your calendars accordingly.

Madame Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor. Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to come back to a motion of which I gave notice in June. Unfortunately, we didn't have the opportunity to debate it before the summer break. Today, in somewhat special circumstances as we return, I'd like to come back to this motion, which I will explain in a few words before I read it.

We all agreed to conduct a study on the actions and management of the Trudeau Foundation. We've heard from a number of witnesses, but others have not yet appeared. The subcommittee decided not to have another meeting on the Trudeau Foundation with those remaining witnesses. I'm sure you're all aware of the subcommittee discussions and have been briefed by representatives of each party.

To ensure that we follow through on this study and it doesn't get left in limbo, I'd like the Auditor General to review whatever is within her purview to audit, that is to say the original staffing agreement between the Government of Canada and the Trudeau Foundation. If memory serves, the foundation received \$125 million, and so it had responsibilities, objectives and criteria to meet.

I therefore move that the committee ask the Auditor General to conduct an investigation into the funding agreement between the government and the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation regarding the Advanced Research in the Humanities and Human Sciences Fund, particularly with respect to the foundation meeting its obligations under this agreement and under Part II of the Canada Corporations Act. We're talking about the agreement and the act by which the foundation is bound.

As a final point, it's highly unusual for a foundation bearing the name of an individual to receive public funding. There are many foundations that bear the names of individuals, such as the Fondation Marcelle-et-Jean-Coutu and the Fondation J.-Armand-Bombardier. They play a role in our community, but they have never received public funding, unlike the Trudeau Foundation. That carries some responsibilities, and we just want to make sure the Auditor General confirms that the foundation has met those responsibilities. These are criteria in the agreement and in the laws that apply to the Trudeau Foundation.

I'd like to get this motion passed quickly and efficiently, but if you have any comments, please feel free to share them.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

I am going to read the motion in English.

I have a speaking list beginning with Ms. Khalid and then I see Mr. McCauley.

This is the motion:

That the committee ask the Auditor General to investigate the funding agreement between the Government of Canada and the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation for the Advanced Research in the Humanities and Human Science Fund, particularly as regards the Foundation's compliance with its obligations under this agreement and under Part II of the Canada Corporations Act.

Ms. Khalid, you have the floor.

● (1120)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I want to seek some clarification.

Do we, as a committee, have the ability to ask the Auditor General to do something, or would that be within her purview?

The Chair: The auditor comes in and she views this as her committee. This committee can request that the auditor investigate. It doesn't necessarily mean she will, but she has told us that she will give it high consideration.

Just to inform you and other members, she has indicated that she receives correspondence from Canadians at large from across the country, which her office considers. As well, she receives correspondence from the Senate, the other place, and from members of Parliament as individuals. She considers those and gives those requests more weight. With this committee, she gives it considerably more weight because of the makeup and the fact that she's here frequently. Of course, ultimately Parliament, since the last Parliament, has made several requests of her office, which she has acted on.

The answer is yes, but I just wanted to give you that background. She receives all kinds of requests, but she does consider these ones seriously.

Mr. McCauley, go ahead.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank my colleague for the motion. I'll be supporting it.

As we mentioned previously, we had some other motions going on regarding this situation, including the one that has been filibustered out for six hours, I think. This is a good compromise so we can get it off our table and, in a bit more roundabout way, have the Auditor General look at some of the behind-the-scenes facts from the origin of this project.

We will be fully supportive of it, and I think it will be a much better use of our time than continuing to filibuster our motions on the foundation.

The Chair: Are there any others who want to speak?

Ms. Khalid, your hand is up. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, but I guess I'm just diving right in.

Are we asking the Auditor General to investigate, or are we asking them to review the agreement between the Government of Canada and the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation? Is there a distinction between the two? If there is, I think we should clarify that in our language as well.

The Chair: For all kinds of other reasons, which I'll discuss later with the committee, that is an interesting question.

My understanding—and I'll refer back to the motion's author—is that this is an investigation that would produce a report, should the auditor agree to pick it up. That is what's being asked here. It's an investigation leading to a report that she would publish in due course, as she does as part of her workload.

You can speak to that, Madame Sinclair-Desgagné, but please keep it short.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Of course, the language could not be clearer. We're asking for the investigation. So I think it's pretty clear. That's what the Auditor General does, in general: investigations.

The Auditor General would not review the agreement, because the government should review the agreement. The Auditor General conducts investigations and studies.

[*English*]

The Chair: I see you, Mr. Desjarlais, and I will turn to you shortly.

The reason I note that distinction is that in the course of my summer readings and investigation I discovered that the public accounts committee in Westminster, in Britain, distinguishes two different types of reviews. One is a value-for-money audit, which is what we do here, based on Auditor General reports, but a separate track is called “investigations”, which are a little less time-consuming. That's not what we're considering here and this is not something our committee has done, so this would be a value-for-money audit.

I'm going to turn to Mr. Desjarlais first, and then I'll recognize you, Ms. Bradford.

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor.

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

I, too, want to welcome the new members to our committee. It's one that I'm sure you'll find interesting in the way it forms, and it takes a keen eye to see how quickly some of these things could go.

In terms of the motion presented by our colleague, Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, I think it comes on the heels of what has been a very long and I'd say onerous process that we've endured here in the committee. That was by way of a filibuster. We've spent quite a bit of time on this, Mr. Chair. I'd like to signal my support for the motion. Once you exhaust the speakers, I'd be happy to vote.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desjarlais.

Next is Ms. Bradford. Of course, members will know that as long as there are speakers, I will recognize them.

Ms. Bradford, you have the floor.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I feel that if we're proceeding with this motion, it should be accurate. This corporation, being not-for-profit, is actually under the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act. I suggest that we amend the motion to make sure it's worded properly.

The Chair: Is that in the last couple of lines you're suggesting here?

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Yes. It says, “this agreement and under Part II of the Canada Corporations Act.”

I don't know what part. I just know that this is a not-for-profit. I have a document here that shows that it is actually under the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act that this organization functions. We should amend the motion to reflect that.

The Chair: I'm going to refer back to the motion's author in a second. In the meantime, I'm going to turn to our trusted analysts to see if they have a comment. You do have a couple of minutes while I first check with Madame Sinclair on that.

Madame Sinclair, could you speak to that? You're probably checking with your research as well, which is totally understandable.

I'm just going to pause for a second.

Do you have some language, Ms. Bradford?

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Yes. I just provided to the analysts the actual governing act that they refer to.

The Chair: Thank you.

Could you please read it again if you have it there as well?

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Yes. With regard to “the Foundation's compliance with its obligations under this agreement and under”, I'm not clear whether it's part II or not, because it is a different act, but it is the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act.

The Chair: Okay.

We could maybe be silent on the part. The auditor could figure that out.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: I think that would be safe.

The Chair: This is an amendment that you've put on the table.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, we would replace the reference to the Canada Corporations Act with a reference to the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: The Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act came into force in 2011, but the staffing agreement dates back to 2002. Which law applies here? We're getting into the details of the various parts of the motion, into the legal specifics, and our analysts should normally be able to answer this kind of question as to whether the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act or the Canada Corporations Act applies.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes. I think the analysts have some light to shed. Give me one second.

Could I propose some wording so that we're not in the weeds on acts? I propose that we strike “and under Part II of the Canada Corporations Act”, as well as what Ms. Bradford is suggesting, and just put “per the relevant Canadian legislation”? Our able Auditor General and her team will certainly look at the blues of this meeting and deduce, as she so often does, where we want to go.

It will say, “particularly as regards the Foundation's compliance with obligations under this agreement and per the relevant Canadian legislation.” Did I get that right? That way, we don't have to become corporate lawyers.

• (1130)

I'm going to have the clerk read the full thing. We're going to read the full motion, from the top, with the language the chair is proposing as a compromise on the advice of our analysts. The clerk will read it in English first.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Cédric Taquet): The motion would read:

That the committee ask the Auditor General to investigate the funding agreement between the Government of Canada and the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation for the Advanced Research in the Humanities and Human Sciences Fund, particularly as regards the Foundation's compliance with its obligations under this agreement and per the relevant Canadian legislation.

The Chair: I'll turn to Madame Sinclair-Desgagné first, and then Ms. Bradford.

Does that sound like something you could live with?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I'd like to hear the French version, please.

The Clerk: You'll have to give me a minute to prepare it.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'll give you a minute.

I'll turn to other members.

Ms. Bradford, does that sound like something that we're getting—

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Yes. I think, at least, it is not inaccurate now. It's broad enough. That would serve the purpose.

The Chair: Yes. It's an old editorial trick. We fudged it a bit, but it's not wrong now.

Give me one second, Madame Sinclair-Desgagné. We will get the French version.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk: The motion would read as follows in French:

Que le Comité demande à la vérificatrice générale de mener une enquête sur l'accord de financement concernant le fonds de recherche avancé en science hu-

maine et sociale entre le gouvernement et la Fondation Pierre-Elliott-Trudeau, notamment en ce qui concerne le respect des obligations de la Fondation en vertu de cet accord et en vertu de la législation canadienne pertinente.

[*English*]

The Chair: Before I seek unanimous consent for this, I'll just see if there is any opposition or if there are any concerns.

Do I have unanimous consent? I'll do it in two stages. For the first, is there unanimous consent to accept the wording as it is? I'm jumping a few hurdles, as opposed to unwinding what Ms. Bradford said, and making the amendment.

Do I have UC to accept this wording? This is just the amendment.

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

The Chair: No opposition, so this is the new motion.

Are there any comments? If there are no comments, I will turn to a vote, but of course I will take comments until they have been exhausted.

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 10; nays 0)

The Chair: Very good. Thank you very much.

Mr. Clerk, if you could send that off to the Office of the Auditor General forthwith, that would be wonderful.

If there is no other pressing business, I'm going to suspend this meeting so that we can go in camera. I will suspend for just five minutes.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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