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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 81 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The committee is meeting today to study the question of privilege related to the member for Wellington—Halton Hills and other members.

I will remind you to not have your earpiece near the microphone, to use your earpiece and not somebody else's. Ideally what I'm realizing, because I am returning to my mission for interpreters and fighting for them, is IT will know when it's your turn to speak, so you don't need to push the button to turn it on or off. That way we make sure one person is speaking at a time, and we let these great people do their work. So just lean in and they'll know it's your turn. I'm confident we can do this very well. As always, we will maintain a consolidated speaking list.

Today we have with us Mr. Vincent Rigby, visiting professor, Max Bell School of Public Policy, McGill University.

Welcome to PROC. I understand that you've shared your comments with interpreters.

With that, I will pass the floor over to you for up to five minutes.

Mr. Vincent Rigby (Visiting Professor, Max Bell School of Public Policy, McGill University, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. It's greatly appreciated, and I greatly appreciate hearing that I have five minutes. I thought I only had four. I have lots of time.

I served as national security and intelligence adviser from January 2020 to June 2021. This term came at the end of a 30-year career in which I held senior positions in a variety of security departments, including National Defence, the Privy Council Office, Global Affairs and Public Safety. In all these positions, I was either a producer or a consumer of intelligence. Security intelligence was at the heart of my public service career.

I am pleased that Canada is finally having a public debate about national security and intelligence. However, this is not the way to go about it.

I condemn the individual or individuals who have leaked highly classified intelligence. These leaks undermine our national security, and they potentially put lives at risk. They also present an incom-

plete and potentially misleading picture of national security concerns. Providing a few examples of isolated intelligence without any context does not make for informed discussions; it is akin to proudly displaying a complicated jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces missing.

The men and women of our intelligence community are highly trained and dedicated professionals, but is that community without flaws? Unequivocally, no. Since I left government, I have spoken publicly about these flaws.

I co-authored a report last year with Thomas Juneau from the University of Ottawa, who I think was a witness before this committee last week. It was supported by retired senior security officials with close to 300 years of collective experience. It identified systemic weaknesses in our national security system, with everything from a lack of security culture and strategy to shortfalls in information sharing, governance and transparency. All of these played out, not only during the foreign interference controversy, but during the “freedom convoy” as well. I have commented publicly about that.

I was once part of that system, and I accept my share of responsibility for those failings, but my point is that even before the current storm over foreign interference, informed commentators were stating that our national security system was in peril and called for a review of related policies, governance and tools to help confront the very dangerous world in which we live. We have had no such review in nearly 20 years.

A highly politicized debate over one specific area of intelligence, however important, seemingly aimed at assigning individual blame is not the solution.

While I was national intelligence and security adviser, the pandemic and other issues consumed much of my time. I discussed foreign interference with the Prime Minister on at least one occasion formally, and I read intelligence reports on the topic and discussed them with colleagues. I fully understood that it was a serious long-standing and growing problem in Canada.

The July 2021 report on the targeting of Mr. Chong and other individual MPs was produced and distributed after my departure, but I am not surprised that this intelligence was not raised to the political level. This is where the system is particularly weak. The intelligence community produces thousands of reports a month, many of which I read over the course of my term. I would estimate that I read probably between 5,000 and 7,000 intelligence reports in my 18-month stint, but we did not have a formal system to flag important pieces of intelligence. What we had was ad hoc, and it was inconsistent.

I knew there was a problem. In response, I created a new DM intelligence committee, the DMIC, which put a greater premium on operational-level intelligence. I was concerned that important and actionable intelligence was not being appropriately flagged or followed up on. This committee was a step in the right direction, but it was still a work in progress when I departed in the summer of 2021.

Finally, I am aware that more steps are being taken to strengthen information sharing, but it should not be just for foreign interference. It should be for all intelligence. Reforms should include, first, a stronger intelligence capability at the centre to flag and fuse important intelligence to the Prime Minister and to other ministers. The government, in my view, should explore creating a position within PCO similar to the director of national intelligence, or the DNI, in the United States and separate from the NSIA.

Second, create a cabinet committee on national security, chaired by the PM, that meets regularly to receive intelligence briefings and discuss appropriate responses.

Last, promote greater transparency. Government should, among other things, produce annual public threat assessments, respond to NSICOP reports, publish intelligence priorities and share more intelligence outside the executive, including with members of Parliament. These are issues that have been discussed in government but have still not been implemented.

I'd be happy to discuss any of these issues in greater detail, especially those moving forward. I am here today as a witness because I care about this issue and I would like to see our national security be improved.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

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

With that, we will start six-minute rounds.

As a reminder, the microphone will turn on and off for you, so you can take that off your plate.

Mr. Cooper, six minutes to you, through the chair.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Rigby, for being here.

Mr. Rigby, in May 2021 you were the national security and intelligence adviser to the Prime Minister. Did you receive the May 2021 CSIS issues management note indicating that there was intelligence that the Beijing regime intended to target MP Michael Chong, another MP and their families?

• (1110)

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Not that I am aware of. I do not recall receiving that [*Inaudible—Editor*].

Mr. Michael Cooper: When did you first become aware of this issues management note?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Through the newspapers.

Mr. Michael Cooper: That would have been in recent weeks.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Very recently. Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: On page 27 of the Johnston report, he indicates that the issues management note was sent to the attention of the then minister of public safety, Bill Blair, along with his chief of staff and deputy minister, via what he called the top secret network email.

Last Thursday when Minister Blair appeared before this committee, I asked him about this. He said that was not correct, that there is “no email account in which top secret information is shared with ministers.”

Given your familiarity, as the national security adviser, whose account of the facts is correct? Is it Mr. Johnston's? Is it Minister Blair's? Both can't be right.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Madam Chair, I can't speak to the details of how intelligence is shared in ministers' offices. It's done in different ways in different ministers' offices.

I, myself, rarely took things right off the system. I had hard-copy packages presented to me. That's the way we did it for the Prime Minister as well. That's how we did it for the Prime Minister's Office.

I'm not aware how Minister Blair organized his office, how they took material off the system and whether CSIS actually delivered this material in hard-copy form. I'm not aware how it would work in that individual minister's office.

Mr. Michael Cooper: The system you're referring to is the top secret network.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: It is a top secret network. There are many different systems, but yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay.

Would there have been emails sent? Minister Blair said there's no such thing, there's no account. But Johnston says, in his report, that this was sent by way of some form of email to his attention.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I honestly can't speak to the details, because I'm not aware. That is a question you'd have to ask the CSIS director or someone in the minister's office.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay.

You talked about briefing the Prime Minister on foreign interference. Did you see the PCO daily intelligence brief of February 21, 2020, which noted that there was a “subtle but effective” interference network by Beijing in the 2019 federal election?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: My understanding is that was part of the daily intelligence brief that was put together by the international assessment secretariat, which worked under me.

I read, as I said earlier, between 5,000 and 7,000 documents. I do not remember that specific piece of intel. Those daily intelligence briefs would have anywhere from five, six, seven to 10 items, and I don't recall specifically seeing that or reacting to it.

Mr. Michael Cooper: So it follows that you don't recall briefing the Prime Minister about that.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I briefed the Prime Minister more broadly on foreign interference. That would have included election interference, but briefing him specifically on that item, no.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Jody Thomas, when she appeared before the committee, indicated that the February 21, 2020, daily foreign intelligence brief would have been part of the Prime Minister's reading package. Is that your understanding?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: What happens is that the daily intelligence brief is morphed into a weekly intelligence brief for the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister does not necessarily get the daily intelligence brief, but rather a weekly. The weekly would not necessarily cover every single item in every single daily.

What was plucked, I cannot recall. Obviously, I can't even recall that specific item, so I can't talk to that. It would be very difficult to categorically say that it automatically went from the daily to the weekly, which was for the Prime Minister.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Does the Prime Minister read his daily reading package, in your experience?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I can't speak to whether he read it on a daily basis. I don't know.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Does he read his weekly package?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I'm quite confident that he read his weekly.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Why are you so unsure about the daily packages?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: That's because he got a PM weekly intelligence brief. That's what he received. I'm not sure if saw the daily.

Mr. Michael Cooper: But Jody Thomas and you just said he had also received a daily reading package, so why—

Mr. Vincent Rigby: The daily brief was not aimed for the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister's weekly intelligence brief went directly to the Prime Minister, usually on a Friday. Whether the Prime Minister was seeing the daily, which had a very wide circulation... The PMO certainly saw it, there's no doubt about that, I would suggest, but whether the PM was seeing the daily and reading the daily, I'm not sure. Again, there were two separate items, and one was specifically aimed at the PM, and that was the weekly.

• (1115)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Who would decide as to what was put in the weekly and was—?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: That was left up to the international assessment secretariat working within PCO.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Would you consider that it was a significant breakdown that we have at least two sitting members of Parliament who were targeted by the Beijing regime and that information was passed along to the Minister of Public Safety, the deputy minister and the minister's chief of staff, and he didn't see it? Then a memo was sent in July 2021 to three deputy ministers plus the national security adviser to the Prime Minister, your successor, and no one saw it.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Certainly, when I saw the news reports, it did raise some concerns. I have not looked—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Some concerns—I'd say they were pretty major.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: It raised some concerns, but I haven't seen all of the intelligence, and any intelligence that crossed my desk... I'm assuming that this document would have been based on some source reporting. I certainly would have wanted to take a look at the source reporting and the nature of the intelligence. Was it a human source? Was it an intercept? If it was a human source, was it a human source with a corroborated reporting history? I would have a lot of questions—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Michael Cooper: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: Mr. Cooper, resist. Mr. Cooper, resist. Resist, Mr. Cooper.

When I hit seven minutes, I provide the courtesy that I have now been known to provide, and then, Mr. Cooper, for some reason, you don't notice that courtesy. I think it takes away from what we're trying to do here. I let you finish your question. You got to six minutes and 32 seconds. I let Mr. Rigby comment back, because it was appropriate. I time this stuff. Maybe I take it too seriously, but I think when it comes to our democratic institutions, we all should.

It's early in the game. I'm letting you know how it operates. I'm asking the mike tech to make sure that only one mike is on at a time. That way we will ensure that what interpreters are hearing... This is a resource that is very limited right now.

I don't want to live in a world where my ears can't hear. It's a blessing to have, and I'm not going to have these people who do this for a living and provide us with our two official languages continue having to have this battle. I will battle for them, and I hope every single member stands with me on it.

Thank you, Mr. Rigby.

Mr. Turnbull, the floor is yours.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Rigby, for being here today.

I want to acknowledge your 30 years of service and say how much we value your expertise and that you can lend some valuable insight into what we need to do in order to continue to evolve our response to the threat environment that we know is changing in terms of foreign interference.

I want to ask you a question. It's something I've been wondering about for a while, and I thought, just based on your experience, that you might be a good person to enlighten us on this.

I know that the government's response has been changing. Certainly, I think we've heard from Mr. Johnston that there are shortcomings we need to address. I think we can all acknowledge that, but what I'm interested in is that it seems to me—and you can tell me whether you would consider this an accurate characterization of the evolution—that we've gone from kind of a siloed approach within a few different departments in terms of foreign interference and perhaps in past governments to what Rosenberg called an electoral ecosystem approach and the four pillar plan to protect Canadian democracy, which was, I think, a change.

It looks to me like it's more a systems approach. Maybe a whole-of-government approach would be a good way to describe it, and I think maybe we're even moving to a whole-of-society approach where we're thinking about engaging citizens and having more of a public dialogue about this so that people are aware.

Do you agree with that assessment, first of all? Do you agree with the general sentiments I'm laying out here that there is this evolution in terms of a more systemic approach to combatting foreign interference?

• (1120)

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I would say that is true. I think the system has matured over the last number of years as we've seen the threat evolve in terms of what's happened in not just Canada but other countries as well. I've advocated on a number of occasions publicly that we need a whole-of-Canada response, not just a whole-of-government response. We need all Canadians informed. We need all Canadians educated. We need all Canadians aware.

Absolutely, I'd like to see us move not just whole of government but also whole of Canada.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Got it. I recognize that this seems to be the next chapter in this evolution.

What I wanted to get at in relation to this is that I studied systems theories. When you add a whole bunch of new mechanisms and actors and departments into a more complex threat environment, you're likely going to increase the chances that information flow and structural challenges arise. Would you not agree with that? It's almost a natural evolution in challenges that we're now confronted by and are having to overcome as a result of the next stage of the evolution of our response.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I would suggest that what you have here is the perfect storm. On the one hand, I think you're 100% right. Elec-

toral interference is not new. It's been around for a long time, but I think it has become more intense in the last number of years. The challenges have become more complex. The way we're responding has become more complicated, with greater attempts at using different mechanisms. There are a lot of, as you say in terms of the systems, moving parts, etc. We're probably still experiencing some teething problems. That's pretty clear.

Having said that, the perfect storm emerges when a lot of the problems with respect to information flow and information sharing have been there for a long time. Those are legacy issues. You have new systems being put in place, and new mechanisms like the panel of five and SITE, etc. Then you have old problems with respect to sharing intelligence, having it fuse properly and having it pushed up at the political level and the right people seeing it at the right time. That's the perfect storm.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Right. We heard from Jody Thomas as well that there needs to be a focus on what advice is given and recommendations are made as to what should be done about the intelligence, even when it does flow correctly, at the right pace, to the right people, at the right time, which is a bit of an orchestration. It's complex. I'm just acknowledging that it's complex and it's changing, and therefore there will be challenges.

In terms of the general sentiments here, there are some shortcomings in terms of structural challenges and communication flow. There's also a significant cultural change within the intelligence agencies and the intelligence community in general. Can you speak to maybe the cultural shift and describe that a little bit further for us?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Well, a cultural change has to take place within the public service but also at the political level. Again, this is operating at two different levels. Within the public service and within the government writ large, yes, absolutely; I think the S and I community, the core agencies of PCO, CSIS and CSE, take this very, very seriously. We may not have it perfectly right....

I'm sorry. I keep referring to "we". I'm retired now.

Certainly, best efforts have been made to improve that culture. The problem is more across the public service writ large and trying to bring other government departments into the intelligence picture, making sure that, again, this intelligence gets outside not just the core 10 or 12 S and I departments but to other spaces in between. I think the political level, in many respects, is the most important level. You can get the best intelligence in the world up the chain and it can go to the political level, but you need someplace to actually receive that intelligence and discuss it.

One of the problems I've had for a long time is the fact that you really don't have anywhere for this intel to go right now. The NSIA briefs the prime minister. Other deputies brief their ministers, such as the minister of public safety. The CSE chief briefs the minister of national defence. You have occasional briefings to cabinet committees. I gave a lot of those briefings. Once in a blue moon there was a presentation to full cabinet.

I think it would have been really useful here to have the prime minister with key ministers sitting around the table in a cabinet committee on national security talking about this stuff on a regular basis so that we wouldn't get to crisis mode. You'd be getting regular intel briefs. The PM would be able to talk about it with his ministers.

We've never truly had that in this country. We've made a few attempts, but that's what we're missing. I think that would have helped in this situation.

I'm sorry to go over time, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rigby.

[Translation]

Before giving the floor to Ms. Gaudreau, who may use either official language, I want to inform you, Mr. Rigby, that the time taken for interpretation won't be counted against Ms. Gaudreau's time. I therefore invite you to take the time you need to listen and answer her.

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor.

• (1125)

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I also thank the witness.

In your speech, you said you had co-written a report with Mr. Juneau. What was the publication date of that report?

[English]

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I believe the exact date was May 28, although I may be mistaken, but it was about a year ago, in 2022.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Excellent.

I'm trying to make the connections and understand how, based on what we heard, even with all the witness's professionalism, the repeated warnings, a reform has been needed for 20 years...

The Chair: Excuse me, there is a point of order.

Ms. Sahota, you have the floor.

[English]

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): I apologize. Maybe I'm on the wrong channel, but I wasn't getting interpretation. It might be my fault.

I'm sorry. I'm okay.

I apologize for interrupting you, Madam Gaudreau.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Madam Chair, when the mic is always on, it's harder to hear the interpretation. I'm often having fun, but I don't want to lose this time. The witness's answer is nearly inaudible when my mic is on.

The Chair: I asked for only one mic to be on at a time. The time it takes to turn off one mic and turn on another is time that will be granted to you. If we let the technicians do their work, we will hear everything.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Very well.

I would like to know why for 10 years, even 20 years, interference issues have been worsening, so much so we find ourselves here today.

Given your broad national security experience and your role as Associate Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, why wait until the media sounded the alarm? Is there something else we need to understand? Then, we'll talk about the future.

What must we understand?

[English]

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Thank you, Madam Chair, for the question. I think it's a very important question.

There were two reports that came out a year ago, 18 months ago. The first report was done by CIGI. It was co-authored by Wesley Wark, who I think you know well, and Aaron Shull. That came out in December 2021. Then the Ottawa U report, co-chaired by Thomas Juneau and me, came out in May 2022, if I am not mistaken.

I remember talking to CIGI and talking to my colleagues at the time and thinking, boy, what a one-two punch this is going to be for these two reports to come out, because they came to almost identical conclusions and almost identical recommendations: that (a) the national security structure in Canada was in peril, and (b) massive, massive changes needed to take place. We thought, "Boy, this is going to get some headlines, and this is going to get some action."

I'll be perfectly honest: I was disappointed in the response.

There was some media that did pick it up—a lot of interviews. The media was actually quite good, but I don't believe there has been a lot of pickup at the political level. But I could be wrong. I don't know what goes on behind closed doors right now, and maybe some of those recommendations I'm talking about, like a cabinet committee, are now being explored.

I do find it interesting that almost all of the recommendations with respect to foreign interference and information sharing and governance played out during whatever you want to call it—the storm right now over foreign interference—and a lot of the recommendations and material that we had in there about information sharing played out also during the convoy. We talked a lot about sharing information better with the provinces, with the territories, with the municipalities, and it all played out.

I take no credit for having a crystal ball or being a clairvoyant, but I just found it very interesting that this stuff has been out there. Everybody is now walking around going, “Oh, my God, I’m so surprised. I can’t believe this is happening. I can’t believe we have these kinds of issues in our national security system.” They were actually laid out in two major, major reports in the space of six months.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair. I will stop my timer as well.

It worried me when Ms. Jody Thomas told us there’s 3,000 to 4,000 reports to read almost every month. You’ve just said you might have read between 700 and 5,000 reports. There comes a time when we just can’t do it anymore and need help. We’re hearing that the culture of intelligence is lacking. I dare to hope it will improve, since the situation has been a concern since last November.

I would like you to tell us about the 180-degree shift... You already talked about some public measures intended to reassure people. I just want to take a moment so you can tell us what we need to do to recalibrate after all these years. All is not lost, but these are grave times.

• (1130)

[*English*]

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I suggested three or four recommendations at the end of my opening statement. I honestly believe we do need to fuse the intelligence better and flag it better. I think that my successor has taken some steps in that direction.

As I’ve said, I made some early attempts with the creation of this DM intelligence committee, which had always focused on strategic level foreign intelligence assessments. I wanted to focus a little bit more on domestic stuff that was happening inside Canada, intelligence that was actually actionable. When you do a very strategic foreign intelligence assessment that say is looking at what is country X doing in region Y, it’s not necessarily immediately actionable. But I and a number of colleagues, including David Vigneault, the director of CSIS, said there’s stuff coming out that we’re not necessarily looking at and thinking about what we need to do in terms of follow-up. So I created that committee.

I think it’s a legacy issue. I think it had been there for a long time. I created the deputy minister intelligence assessment committee when I was the head of the international assessment secretariat from 2008 to 2010. I think it was a gap and that’s why I created a different committee with a focus both on the strategic assessments and the operational level intelligence.

Does that answer the question that’s probably coming as to did anything with respect to Mr. Chong or other targeted MPs come before that committee? No, it didn’t. That committee was having teething problems as well.

I’d love to come back and talk about some other ideas. Maybe I’ll get another chance.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: With these recommendations...

Madam Chair, I admit that I blanked on my question, but I know it would’ve been too long. Let me take my remaining 30 seconds and add it to my next turn. I will ask it then.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair.

Thank you to the witness for being here today. I appreciate your testimony.

I’m just trying to clarify a few things. We had Ms. Thomas in the committee very recently. She said that she was not provided with the Michael Chong CSIS memo, but that her predecessor had seen it. I’m hearing from you that you haven’t seen it.

I’m trying to figure this out, because it feels like there’s some sort of process that’s missing. I’m trying to understand that. I’m wondering if you could speak to that.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I did not see it because I retired on June 30, 2021. The memo came out in July. It was prepared and distributed after I left. I did not see drafts of it or anything along those lines or any other intelligence that I can recall referring to this. That’s why I personally didn’t see it.

As to what happened after that, there was a long lag between myself and Jody being named as the NSIA. It took six months to name a new NSIA. There were interim or acting NSIAs in the meantime. I think you’re having one or two of them appear before the committee.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that. I appreciate that clarity.

It’s interesting to me that you did say in your testimony earlier that you did talk to the Prime Minister once about foreign interference, if I got that correctly.

But in the list of dates of the briefings provided to PROC, there was nothing in there that mentioned that. Was this a different sort of communication process?

Again, I’m just trying to clarify the information that I have before me.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I looked at that list as well. I think what happened was that it was a briefing that was done, I believe, in early 2021. It was listed—and again, this would have to be confirmed; you would have to go back to PCO—as a briefing done by David Vigneault. David Vigneault was the lead briefer. I was with David. It was actually a joint briefing between the NSIA, me and David Vigneault.

• (1135)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. That is helpful for me.

You said very clearly that you have some concerns about the process and that when you were in the role you put some things together, and there are some other ideas that you have.

One of the things that I think you were saying in the last questioning was about the committee of intelligence and that you were looking at what was happening internationally and that foreign aspect but also within the country.

I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you were seeing within the domestic actions. If you can't talk specifically, I understand that. What were the processes you were looking at and how were you trying to make that information clearer so that when it was delivered to the Prime Minister it could be understood in a way that action could be taken?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I think the deputy minister of the intelligence assessment committee, which was in place before.... Again, there were very high-level foreign intelligence strategic assessments looking at the big picture—geostrategic issues, functional issues, etc. I wanted a greater focus on domestic issues, because of hostile-state activities, so I looked at the environment. Whether it was China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, whatever the case may be, or violent domestic extremism threats inside the country, all those kinds of issues—technology, nefarious attempts at investment by foreign actors—I wanted a little bit more of a window into some of that intelligence. If they weren't actual strategic assessments, I even wanted to look at single-source reporting, intelligence reports that were not necessarily analyzed, but we all looked at them and went, wow, that's kind of important. Let's talk about it. What are we going to do about it, but then where do we need to send it? Do we need to send it up to the political level?

When I was in the job, this was very nascent. That committee was up and running for six months. I don't know where that committee is now, how often it meets. It was meeting every two weeks, and there was a standard agenda. The first agenda item was strategic international assessments, the second item was actionable intelligence that we needed to discuss, and the third item was broader coordination issues across the community.

I think that reflects my attempt to try to get on top of this in early days; and then I had my 30 years, and I left at the end of June. I would have loved to worked on that a little bit more if I had stayed in the job longer.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I'm wondering in the work that you were doing over the time period that you had, if there were any discussions about how to address information that may impact members of Parliament and candidates during elections and the process that you had. What I think is most frustrating as we go through this is that members of Parliament were not notified that there were things happening about them, and now of course you know, and Ms. Thomas has talked about this, that they're going to do the absolute opposite, which is just give information as quickly as possible. I'm wondering if there was any discussion. Was that something you were looking at, and how were you looking at it?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I'm sorry. I have to be careful here, because I can't get into specific advice that I gave to the Prime Minister and the conversations that happened.

I mentioned to you at the end of my opening remarks some of the things that I think we need to do a little bit better in terms of transparency. Certainly there were discussions about giving briefings to all members of Parliament with respect to foreign interference, a general sense to all MPs of the dangers of foreign interference, not just in the context of elections, but more broadly other attempts at coercive foreign interference efforts. There had been a little bit of a talk about that.

Certainly there was a lot of talk about the security of ministers in particular and MPs more broadly. That's not specifically foreign interference, but it could move into the realm of foreign interference on a certain level. All that is to say that there was a great deal of talk about members of Parliament and their roles, including NSI-COP, including their possible access to intelligence, talk about giving intelligence clearances, classified clearances, to leaders of the opposition, things like that.

The Chair: Thank you.

We are going into five minutes for Mr. Calkins, followed by Ms. Sahota. I would like to keep it tight so that we can try to get through a full round.

Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Rigby, for being here today and for your years of service to Canada.

I want to go back to this international assessment secretariat. They were ultimately responsible, you said, for producing the weekly briefing that the Prime Minister got, which is the only one that you've assured us that the Prime Minister actually sees, so this obviously is the focal document according to your testimony.

What process did that take? Who signed off on that assessment secretariat? Did that go up the chain through the NSIA? Where did it go through the PCO? Where was the hand-off to the political level? Can you give us a sense of where that document chain would go?

• (1140)

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Just on what the PM saw or what the PM didn't see, that's to the best of my understanding, certainly when I was an NSIA. I want to be absolutely clear on that. I can't promise you that the PM didn't see some of the dailies, but all I'm saying is that there was one document in particular that was aimed at the Prime Minister on a weekly basis.

In terms of the sign-off, that is signed off, I believe, at the level of the head of IAS. When I ran IAS, I signed off on it, because I was the one who actually introduced.... I don't know if I introduced the daily, but I think it was a weekly back then, but I signed off on it. I tried to give the IAS as much freedom as possible in terms of producing the intelligence and signing off on.... I didn't want a long chain in terms of what went in or what went out. They knew the intelligence. They knew what was important.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: What I'm hearing you say is that, while you were there, the weekly would have gone through the hands or across the desk of the NSIA before it went to somewhere else in the PCO or before it went directly to the Prime Minister's Office.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: No, it would not go through my hands for sign off. I did not sign it off.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Would it go directly from the IAS to the Prime Minister's Office?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Certainly while I was NSIA. By the time I left, I don't know if that was still the process. Again, you would have to check that with PCO and confirm how it is done now, but that's the way it was done with me.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: That's the way it was done with you. So it would have gone straight.... It would have gone to everybody who had the authority to see that document in the PMO, or would it go to a specific hand-off person when you were there?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: There was a distribution list. Certain people saw it. Certain organizations saw it. Sometimes there were names. Sometimes there weren't names; they were just organizations.

David Johnston's report talks about that in terms of consistency, but there was a distribution list as to who saw it and who didn't see it.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: You would, as the national security adviser, have been on that list. Would you have been privy to who else was on the list?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I can't remember off the top of my head.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: No, but you would have been privy to it. I'm not asking you to recall names. I'm just asking if you would have been privy to it.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I would have been privy to it. At the bottom of the document on the second page, third page, there's a long list of who it was circulated to. I recall that, but I can't tell you who was on it.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: You testified earlier that every minister can set things up differently in how they receive information through the process we have, but we also have a document tracking system, so I'm assuming that everybody was at least consistent with document tracking. There's a flexibility permitted in how intelligence is shared as long as it's able to be tracked by the tracking system. Is that right?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I'm simply telling you how the document is shared with the minister. I can't tell you how it's done in different ministers' offices at the end of the day.

The documentation is circulated. You would have to ask CSIS, especially in this specific context, how they circulated this document and whether it was just sent electronically or put in a package and sent to the minister. I don't know; I simply don't know.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: It would have been reasonable that the Prime Minister's chief of staff would have probably been included in the distribution list.

Was there ever a circumstance while you were the national security adviser where you wanted access? Did you have direct access to the Prime Minister, or did you need to go through people in order

to get there? Were you ever denied a meeting with the Prime Minister that you requested?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I was never denied a meeting. I dealt regularly with the chief of staff, and if I needed to see the PM, I got to see the PM. It was sometimes difficult getting on his agenda, because he's an incredibly busy man, and don't forget this was during the pandemic, but if there was an urgent matter, the chief of staff would take my call.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: You were quite assertive in your opening remarks. I appreciate the candour and the frankness, and I believe you do have a lot to share. Would you like the opportunity? We only have a few minutes here in this committee today. It sounds like you have a lot to say. Would you like to be able to say that at a public inquiry?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Are you asking me whether I believe there should be a public inquiry?

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I'm asking if you would relish the opportunity.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I would relish the opportunity to speak at a public inquiry if there were one. I would relish the opportunity to speak to public consultations if those happened under the auspices of Mr. Johnston. I would be happy to be consulted as part of a government review of national security policy, foreign policy and any other policy relating to security. That would be wonderful, but I have to say that my views are pretty well covered in that document from last year. I would strongly encourage all of you who have a chance to read it to do so and also to read the CIGI report, because, going back to the previous question, there's a lot in those two reports, and I think you will be quite amazed when you read them how they played out a lot of the recommendations in both the convoy and foreign interference.

A lot of my views are already on the public record, but I would be happy to re-engage and get into the details.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you.

I appreciate the shout-out to CIGI. It happens to be based in the riding of Waterloo, so keep up the good work.

I would just say—and I should have said this after Ms. Blaney—that next week's notices for Tuesday have both been published, and David Vigneault will be appearing on Tuesday.

Ms. Sahota, five minutes go to you.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Rigby, I want to get your thoughts on how this has all transpired, how it has come about and the leaks that went to the media as a result. Some are saying that this is whistle-blowing.

I personally believe that some good may eventually come out of this, because we're trying to correct the gaps that may exist, but what is your belief? What are your thoughts regarding the leaks that have taken place, the responsibility of the media and basically what has transpired here? Do you think this is good for our national security?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: In terms of the leaks, categorically and unequivocally it's wrong. It's against the law. It undermines our national security in terms of potentially exposing to hostile state actors where our strengths and weaknesses are. It potentially exposes human sources to retribution. It literally puts lives at risk. This is not the way to go about this.

I know there are a lot of people out there saying the whistleblower is a Canadian hero—not in my books. Not a Canadian hero and not a whistle-blower: There's been no explicit wrongdoing in terms of laws of being broken, malfeasance or anything like that. You can certainly be upset that the government did not respond in certain ways to some intelligence, if that's the way you feel, but if you start having public servants releasing—illegally—highly, highly classified intelligence, then you are trending in the direction of chaos.

In addition to undermining all of our national security interests and so on, it sets a bad examples for others who are then going to start leaking documents. Every time somebody is a little bit upset that they're not being listened to and they feel that...“I'm going to go directly to the Canadian public.” You're going to have everybody in every department going, “Oh, well, look at all the exposure we got on foreign interference, so why don't I try that?”

That's not the way a parliamentary democracy works. The government—ministers—are accountable to the public. Public servants report to the government. There was an excellent article in *The Globe and Mail* a while ago by Jim Mitchell and a former clerk of the Privy Council to this effect in terms of how our system works. This is not the way it works.

Did some good come of it? Well, as I said earlier, if people had read those two reports.... Honestly, I'm not going on about these reports because my name is on the cover. I just think they're pretty solid reports. If people had read those reports, they would have realized that there's a lot happening here and we could have started to try to fix the system that is broken.

But for people to do this, it's categorically wrong, in my view.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Mr. Rigby.

You mentioned reading the reports, and also parliamentarians. Specifically, leaders of different parties have been offered the opportunity to also view the evidence and intelligence that helped David Johnston to arrive at his report and other things amongst it.

Do you think that would be a good idea for policy-makers, for our active legislators, whoever is afforded that opportunity, in order to be able to make good decisions moving forward or to continue either to criticize or to hold our government to account? Do you think they should be viewing those documents?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: It's an idea that was explored a bit when I was NSIA in terms of providing security clearances to those outside the public service or outside the political system, not just to members of the opposition, to leaders of the opposition, but also even to the private sector. We'd often brief the private sector—CSIS, for example—and research institutions on threats. They'd say, “You're not giving us enough detail.” We toyed with this idea. We didn't go anywhere with it at the end of the day—not yet.

I think we need to share information more broadly. I think we need to move outside of the pure executive and share as necessary. Not necessarily every single piece of intelligence needs to go to the leader of the opposition, but certainly in some cases it would be useful.

In my own personal opinion, speaking as a private citizen, I think that if I were the leader of the opposition and I had a chance to take a look at the intelligence that right now was being offered to me, I would take that opportunity, because I think it's in the interest of Canada's national security for the leader of the opposition to understand that intel and what it says—but that's me.

● (1150)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Mr. Rigby.

There's another thing I wanted you to comment on. The Right Honourable David Johnston, in his first report, talked about communication gaps. In your position as a national security adviser before, do you have any comments or recommendations for us as to how those can be corrected?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Communication gaps in what context?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: In the PMO, within the government apparatus.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Well, as I said, if it's about sharing information, I've mentioned a number of things that we could possibly do, I think. A stronger centre.... I think that we need to look very closely at the role of the NSIA. We recommend in our report that basically—it's my own personal view as well—someone should come in and take a look at the role of the NSIA.

It's been around now, that position, for about 20 years. It's been performed in different ways by different NSIAs. It's ebbed and flowed in terms of the strength, the capacity, behind the NSIA. The job jar shrinks, expands.... I think it needs to be strengthened. I honestly think it needs to be strengthened, so I'd start there, and we can talk off-line about some other ideas that I have.

The Chair: Thank you. You can also always provide them to committee. We'll have them translated into both official languages and shared with all members. Any insights are always welcome.

[*Translation*]

You will have the floor for 2 minutes and 50 seconds, Ms. Gaudreau.

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

I only have two questions to ask.

First, we see you have a great deal of information to offer. You talked about your retirement, but you remain quite active and are entirely willing to share all you know.

Is there an explanation for your retirement or resignation? You've only been there for 18 months.

[English]

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I came up to 30 years, so I was at full retirement. It was a very difficult decision to retire. A number of people said I was just hitting my stride and it looked as though I was finally making sense of this job, and I should stay on a little bit longer. I wanted to stay on a little bit longer, but I also wanted to leave the job still on my feet and have my health and so on and so forth, so it was time for me. But there was a part of me—and I hope you'll see that from the passion that I bring today—that did want to stay on and try to improve the system a little bit more.

I know there have been some very interesting questions around this committee table about the duration of the NSIAs and that, in the last four or five years, you've had quite a turnover. I know there's been quite a turnover and there have been some suggestions by former clerks that maybe there should be a five-year term. I think that's something worth exploring. I share the concern that NSIAs are coming through so quickly, often at the end of their career, and often as they are retiring, so I think that's something that does need to be looked at.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: So, it was a choice you made. That was what I wanted to be sure of.

Mr. Johnston met you during the process of tabling his report, didn't he?

[English]

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Yes, and it's in his report that he met with me. I will point out that my name was misspelled in his report, but I won't make a big deal out of that.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I see.

What was the gist of the questions Mr. Johnston asked you?

[English]

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I'm not sure I'm at liberty to talk about that. I wasn't expecting a question like that. I can certainly answer that, but I can't get into the specifics.

There was a lot of discussion about how to improve the system and conversation such as we're having today about measures and cabinet committees. He mentioned in his report the possible creation of a cabinet committee on national security, greater transparency and information flows generally speaking. We talked about those kinds of things. It was, in a lot of ways, similar to the conversation we're having today.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I'm curious about something you said at the beginning of your testimony. You talked about some needs for systemic change within the system and about how some of the processes in place were not necessarily as effective, and how you were working really hard to see what you could do to clean those up.

We did have Ms. Thomas in. She talked about the process of intelligence information sharing with the government and how she had corrected that process, and how she believed there would be no further problems. Even based on the questions that I asked the last time around, one of the things we see is that when information comes sometimes it gets lost. Ms. Thomas talked about being away for a month and then not going back to that information. It seems a little concerning.

I'm wondering if you could talk about whether you think the process Ms. Thomas outlined will address the issue. Is there anything else you think is important for us to address, especially when it comes to this point of privilege? To me the biggest issue here is, in this particular context, how do we make sure that MPs have the appropriate information at the appropriate time so they can respond in a way that is effective?

I heard from you, I believe, and from Mr. Chong as well. Mr. Chong talked about receiving a briefing, just a general briefing on what foreign interference looks like. He felt that it was very helpful, but he knew that only a small number of the members of Parliament actually got it.

There are two separate questions. With regard to the process, has it been addressed? Are there gaps that you in your role see and would want to point out and draw to the attention of the committee? How do we make sure that the information is clear so that members of Parliament, and in fact all parliamentarians, are getting information that will assist them in having a point of view with more wisdom in terms of foreign interference?

Thank you.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: With regard to the changes that the national security intelligence adviser has introduced, I think they're a great start; I really do. I have tremendous respect for my successor, Jody. She's a really great Canadian.

I think the idea of setting up a committee, which I think she mentioned before this committee, to focus on actionable intelligence, especially with respect to foreign interference, is really great. Again, I tried to set that up within the DMIC. If she's created it as a separate new committee, that's great. Have deputies sit down, talk about this kind of intel and move it up.

I'm a little nervous about suddenly sending up every single piece of intelligence about foreign interference and potential threats to members of Parliament. The reason I'm a little bit concerned is that you could possibly go from famine to feast in the sense that every single piece of intel, whether it's corroborated or credible or not, goes up to the top. That could potentially gum up the system.

Can I make one quick last point? Getting it right at the deputy level is really important, but it still has to go somewhere when it gets to the political level. You need that central, functional body to have those discussions. That comes back to the idea of having some kind of a committee, chaired by the PM, to actually talk through the intel and the response.

The Chair: Thank you.

Our next panel has arrived, and we're excited for it. We'll be going slightly over.

[*Translation*]

First, I will give the floor to Mr. Berthold for five minutes. Then, it will be Mr. Fergus's turn, also for five minutes.

Time required for interpretation will not be counted during speaking time.

I ask you to speak according to the rules so that the interpreters can do their job.

Mr. Berthold, you have five minutes.

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

Mr. Rigby, I'd like to come back to a question you asked my colleague about the discussion you had with Mr. Johnston.

You said the discussions focused mainly on possible solutions for the process. Is that right?

[*English*]

Mr. Vincent Rigby: We talked about solutions. Again, I'm at sea a little bit here because I'm not sure to what extent I can talk about these discussions, so I'm going to be very careful.

We talked about a broad range of topics. Certainly, I was questioned about processes, about what I knew about what happened in the past, and also about the future. It was a backward-looking conversation and a forward-looking conversation, as you'd expect.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: During those conversations, did Mr. Johnston try to shed light on the events that supposedly led to no one among the political staff in the Prime Minister's Office seeing the famous memos we've been talking about from the start? I'm referring specifically to the February memo that talked about a network of 11 candidates funded by the regime in Beijing.

[*English*]

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I don't recall his mentioning that specifically. If he did, then I don't think I'd be in a position to reveal that information.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: So, what I understand is that you don't remember him talking to you about it.

It seems that Mr. Johnston didn't really want to go look for the causes in that file, and that he was more interested in the second part of his study.

Mr. Rigby, in your report from May of last year, you made the following observation:

Many Canadians today mistrust government. This has major implications for national security.

Unfortunately, despite this report and despite everything you flagged, this does not seem to resonate much on the government side.

Do you think that the current situation is worse than when you tabled your report in May 2022, in terms of the trust Canadians have in their government on national security?

[*English*]

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Madam Chair, just for the record, I did not make any reference to Mr. Johnston not focusing on causes. That is the member's statement. I will not say that.

With respect to confidence and trust in the government, what we said in the report is that there is not a particularly strong culture of national security in this country at the governmental level or with Canadians. Governments traditionally—not just this government but governments writ large—have not always had the support and trust of Canadians when it comes to national security because they haven't had the information. They haven't had the chance to talk about it. It was in that context that we made that phraseology.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Rigby, you took the time to correct me. I will therefore ask you the same question I asked earlier, so that you can answer it this time.

In terms of trust in the government, do you find that the situation is worse now than when you did your study and tabled your report in May 2022, yes or no?

[*English*]

Mr. Vincent Rigby: I can't answer that question with a yes or no, because I haven't seen opinion polling, and I don't know if Canadians have less trust in government. Certainly there have been a series of events over the last year since both the Ottawa U report and the CIGI report came out that I think have confirmed a lot of our concerns. Those are probably somewhat alarming for Canadians without a doubt.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Rigby, I'm a little surprised to hear that, before coming here, you did not familiarize yourself with all the newspaper articles and information saying that people do indeed trust the government less and less. If the people are demanding an independent public inquiry, it's not because they trust the government, it's because they want to shed light on the national security file.

In your testimony, I was very disappointed to hear that in all the documents and reports you read, and all the memos sent to you, a subject like funding a network of candidates in an election campaign did not attract more of your attention. I understand that one can read a lot of information, but when it comes to a direct attack on democracy, I don't understand why it didn't raise certain questions, why the situation wasn't dealt with on a political level and why we aren't sounding the alarm.

You yourself said you had direct access to the Prime Minister when you asked for it. Why did you fail to do so with this file, Mr. Rigby?

[English]

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Madam Chair, I read 5,000 to 7,000 documents, and I would suggest that a lot of those documents, probably the vast majority of them, represented threats to the democracy of Canada.

Foreign interference is not the only threat to democracy at the moment. There is a whole range of other issues. I was dealing with a multitude of threats, a multitude of issues. There was a pandemic going on, so if—and it's if, I don't know if I missed these documents or not—I missed a document or two, I will take full responsibility for that. But for someone outside the system who's never been in that kind of work to suggest, I'm really surprised that you didn't pick this up, it's easy to say, it really is, and I would suggest walk a mile in the shoes of the NSIA.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fergus.

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I also thank Mr. Rigby for his 30 years of service to our country. We are very grateful to him for it.

[English]

Mr. Rigby, being a local MP I have the privilege of running into former retired deputy ministers from time to time and engaging them in informal conversations.

One of the conclusions that I've gleaned is that there is, I would call it, a cultural reluctance sometimes for deputy ministers to share routine intelligence issues with their ministers with no possibility for resolution. The time with the minister is limited, and they always want to make sure that it's used most effectively. In other words, this is sort of the intelligence to evidence problem. Does my interpretation rhyme with your experience?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Madam Chair, I think those are two different issues in terms of intel to evidence, which speaks to courts of law, criminal prosecution, etc. So that's one basket.

The other basket with respect to deputy ministers and what they tell their ministers.... I think deputy ministers make a thousand judgment calls a day in terms of what they put before their minister. As you said, ministers are incredibly busy people, and deputy ministers are incredibly busy people, so a lot of judgment goes into de-

termining what to put before a minister on any given day. Sometimes it's just situational awareness, "Minister, you should know about this important context; it may come down and bite you at some point at a later date." Then there's the stuff, "I need to speak to you now, Minister, because this is very important." You're always as a deputy, I think, sensitive to the fact that you don't want to gum up the system. You don't want to fire too much at the minister. You don't want to fire too much at the Prime Minister.

I remember with the Prime Minister seeing stuff all the time and trying to decide: Do I fire this off to the PMO; do I fire this off to the PM; do I ask for time right away knowing how busy he is? If it's a really important issue, of course that's what you have to do, but you have to make that judgment. It's a tough call every single day for deputy ministers, but it's why they're paid the big bucks.

Hon. Greg Fergus: And to be fair, and just for the record, by and large it works.

Mr. Vincent Rigby: It does work, absolutely.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Also, we recognize there are gaps in the system.

This gets me back to more of a forward-looking question. Because you had raised the importance of setting up a type of cabinet committee on intelligence, can you explain a little further how you would expect, in large terms, that kind of committee could work? Also, are there examples in other jurisdictions that you're aware of in your experience in dealing with some of your international colleagues where they have something to this?

Mr. Vincent Rigby: We are the only Five Eyes country that doesn't have that type of body. The United States has a national security council, which is actually in legislation. The other three Five Eyes countries, I believe—I don't know if all of my information is up to date—have cabinet committees with their prime minister heading that up.

What I'd love to see is a cabinet committee that is chaired by the prime minister with key national security ministers—the minister of public safety, the minister of national defence, the deputy prime minister and the minister of foreign affairs—meeting regularly, every couple of weeks. Don't wait for the crisis to happen to call an incident response group meeting. They are great, but they're always trying to catch up.

If the Prime Minister and his ministers together were being briefed on the intelligence on a regular basis—every couple of weeks—and then having discussions about what that intelligence means, asking questions of the directors of CSIS, CSE, Public Safety or DND, and then talking about responses.... To me, especially given the security environment that we live in, with Russia, China, pandemics and climate change—all of these are national security concerns—it is just so logical to create that kind of body at this time in our history.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I have a final question.

Should it be limited to just government? I'm thinking of former governor general David Johnston's conclusions that there needs to be a greater baseline level of understanding of security and intelligence issues by the public, but especially by parliamentarians.

Would you agree with that recommendation, as well, and how would you foresee that?

• (1210)

Mr. Vincent Rigby: Madam Chair, I would totally agree with that.

That's why I'm a strong advocate of doing a full-scale national security review. Whether you do a public inquiry focused narrowly on foreign interference in elections, which is kind of a burning tree, or you look at the whole forest, where there are lots of burning trees.... If you were to do a full-up review with full-up public consultations, that is the government showing leadership and helping to inform Canadians.

Governments will often say, "It's not a big concern for my constituents." You have to educate your constituents about the state of the world and the things that the government needs to do. That's why I think what Mr. Johnston is recommending, or a full-scale national security review launched by the government, is not a bad idea at all.

The Chair: Thank you.

As the chair, I don't really get to have an exchange with Mr. Rigby. I feel like it's been a lot of time.

The thing I really appreciated was the reference to reports and the importance of reading them in their entirety. I know, as somebody who's going through Mr. Johnston's report, that it's a pretty good read. It would be really important to see how Canadians communicate and how it is resonating, because sometimes the work you do is tough, and if you're not in that national security space, it's very foreign to those of us who have confidence in the people in those roles, because we know you do your best.

I want to say, on behalf of PROC members, thank you for your time today. Thank you for responding to us and being able to be present. If there's anything else that you find you would like to share with us, just send it to the clerk and we'll have it translated and shared around.

With that, we wish you the best.

We're going to suspend for a few minutes, as our next panel is here.

Thank you.

• (1210)

(Pause)

• (1215)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

For our next panel, we have with us, Mr. Eric Janse, acting clerk of the House of Commons, Monsieur Michel Bédard, interim law clerk and parliamentary counsel, Jeffrey LeBlanc, acting deputy clerk of procedure, and Patrick McDonell, Sergeant-at-Arms and corporate security secretary.

I understand that, combined, you are bringing readings. Mr. Janse, five minutes go to you.

Mr. Eric Janse (Acting Clerk of the House of Commons, House of Commons): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you for inviting me and my colleagues to appear today on the question of privilege concerning alleged acts of intimidation towards the member for Wellington—Halton Hills and other members.

[*Translation*]

To begin my remarks, I would like to inform the committee that I do not have first-hand or specific knowledge of the circumstances surrounding this incident. I leave it to other witnesses to clarify those circumstances.

The contribution I believe I can make, for the committee's study today, is in providing high-level observations on the central role that parliamentary privilege plays in the proceedings of Parliament. In addition, I hope to also be able to offer insights into the role the committee can play in examining this question of privilege.

Parliamentary privilege refers to the rights and immunities that have been deemed necessary to allow the House of Commons and its members to carry out their parliamentary duties, free from undue influence.

[*English*]

In the 30th Parliament, the Special Committee on Rights and Immunities of Members, chaired by then speaker James Jerome, succinctly enunciated the reason for parliamentary privilege in its first report, presented to the House on July 12, 1976. It stated:

The purpose of parliamentary privilege is to allow Members of the House of Commons to carry out their duties as representatives of the electorate without undue interference.

The Speaker is entrusted with the responsibility to ensure that the House and its members can go about their work freely, without interference or threats. In his ruling of May 8, 2023, the Speaker emphasized this point:

The Chair has no higher responsibility than to ensure that the rights and privileges of the members, and of the House, are respected. I considered the gravity of the information that has been put before the House, the origins of the information and the potential impact on our parliamentary duties.

On May 10, 2023, following the Speaker's ruling, the House decided to refer the prima facie case of privilege to this committee. As the Speaker pointed out in his ruling, his role is not to make a finding of fact. It is, rather, to determine whether, on the face of it, the matter appeared to affect members' privileges in a way that was serious enough to warrant priority consideration by the House.

In adopting an order of reference to this committee, the House has determined that this matter required further investigation and that this committee is the most appropriate vehicle to achieve this objective.

[Translation]

Generally, in examining a question of privilege, a committee will seek first to establish the facts of what occurred. It can then consider whether the events in question do indeed, in its view, represent a breach of members privileges or a contempt of the House. Finally, it can look at what remedy, if any, it would propose in the circumstances and make recommendations, either to the House or to the government, of ways to prevent such events from occurring in the future.

All the usual powers of the committee are available, including the calling of witnesses and the ordering of the production of documents it deems necessary to further its study. It can meet in public, or in camera if it feels some discussions should be kept confidential.

If the committee chooses to make a report to the House, I would urge members to phrase their recommendations carefully. Where the House itself is expected to take action, recommendations should be phrased as orders which could be executed, should they be concurred in by the House. In the case of recommendations to House Administration or the government, they should be phrased in such a way as to be actionable, and should fall squarely within the committee's mandate.

• (1220)

[English]

This committee likely has never been called upon to consider a question of privilege that arose from the intimidation of a member by a foreign government. In a ruling on October 29, 1980, at page 4214 of the Debates, Speaker Sauvé made an insightful statement:

When new ways are found to interfere with our proceedings, so too will the House, in appropriate cases, be able to find that a contempt of the House has occurred.

I am confident that this committee and the House have the capacity to effectively respond to this new threat.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate the support of the House administration in helping the committee address such threats. With that, I would like to thank you again for having invited me to appear at the committee. My colleagues and I will be happy to answer any questions you might have.

The Chair: We thank you for taking the time to appear with your colleagues to answer what I'm sure will be a great exchange.

We will have six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Nater, followed by Mr. Ferguson, Madam Gaudreau and Madam Blaney.

Go ahead, Mr. Nater, through the chair.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Through you, thank you to our witnesses for joining us this morning.

I'm frankly quite surprised that we don't have the same volume of media here for your testimony as we had earlier in the week. I'm a little disappointed by that, but I'm sure everyone's tuning in from elsewhere.

I'll begin by talking a little bit about the production of papers. Mr. Janse, you mentioned that in your comments, and Monsieur Bédard, you were with us earlier this week at the OGGO committee. At that committee, it was unfortunate, I think, that some departments, including PCO, perhaps didn't fully understand the powers of Parliament, including its committees, to compel the provision of documents.

I was hoping that either you, Mr. Janse, or Mr. Bédard could confirm for this committee our power to compel the production of documents and its authority superseding all other government rules or non-constitutional measures.

Mr. Eric Janse: Thank you very much, Mr. Nater.

Indeed, that's a very good question. It's not a new issue. Absolutely, Parliament, the House, has the authority and the power to demand the production of papers, but maybe I will, indeed, turn it over to Michel because he's been addressing this very issue with a number of committees over the past few months.

Mr. Michel Bédard (Interim Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, House of Commons): Among the parliamentary privileges that the House and its committees have, there is the right to send for records and papers. Parliamentary privileges, in general, are rooted in the Constitution and have constitutional status, so they will prevail over ordinary legislation that would provide that information is to be kept confidential or secret unless there's an explicit provision to the contrary.

Documents that could be sought and obtained by committee include solicitor-client privilege, documents dealing with national security....

Now, if there is some concern about the production of documents, there could be a dialogue between the committee and the government or the other party that is in possession of the documents. The committee could decide to put measures in place to protect the confidentiality of the documents, could insist on its original request, or could decide not to ask for the production of the documents.

Ultimately, it's for the committee to decide.

Mr. John Nater: Certainly, just to follow up on that and to confirm.... We can compel the production of any documents, but it's certainly also within our purview, in terms of how those documents are dealt with, that they're not necessarily made public. We could make provisions for whether they're dealt with in camera, in redacted formats, or some forms such as those, but it would be the power of the committee to make that determination as we're compelling documents.

Mr. Michel Bédard: Yes, and in doing so, the committee may put measures in place to address concerns that were raised respecting the protection of the confidentiality attached to the documents.

Mr. John Nater: I appreciate that.

With regard to the Winnipeg lab documents, there were some suggestions from the government that perhaps the then law clerk didn't have the necessary security clearance to deal with top secret information. Could you confirm whether you do have the requisite security clearance to deal with that information, were you to receive it?

Mr. Michel Bédard: First of all, the right of this committee and the House of Commons to obtain documents is not subject to any specific clearance from the government. This committee has the right to obtain the documents.

Now, if it's relevant for the committee and for the government in considering measures to be put in place to protect the confidentiality of documents, there are two counsels in my office, including myself, who have top security clearance.

Mr. John Nater: Would you also have the necessary provisions to keep any such documents secure within your facilities?

• (1225)

Mr. Michel Bédard: Right now, we're equipped to have in possession paper documents and to consult documents. We don't have a room that is set up to discuss top secret information, but we can make arrangements to have a room set up temporarily to allow the discussion of top secret information.

Mr. John Nater: I appreciate that.

I'll move on. This question is for Mr. Janse.

Last month, our committee invited Beijing's ambassador to appear before this committee. Obviously, we have a few questions we hope to be able to ask him. To my knowledge, he has not yet responded. Committees have, in the past, heard from diplomats voluntarily.

Should this committee decide that it must hear from the ambassador, instead of just letting his silence speak volumes, does this committee have the authority to compel his attendance?

Mr. Eric Janse: The short answer would be no, but I think my colleague might have a more detailed response.

Mr. Michel Bédard: The power of the House of Commons and its committees is limited to the Canadian territory, so if an ambassador or any foreigner is outside of the country, the House or its committees would not have the power to compel the attendance of this individual.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you for that clarity.

Mr. Janse, I want to follow up a little bit on the Speaker's ruling on Erin O'Toole's question of privilege. The Speaker said, "Given that the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs has already been instructed to investigate the matter of foreign interference, the Chair believes that it is the appropriate forum for further discussion of this issue."

In your view, do the matters that Mr. O'Toole raised fall within the scope of our May 10 order of reference, or would this committee need to pass a new motion to expand the scope of that study?

Mr. Eric Janse: It was the Speaker's ruling, but I think his interpretation was that the mandate currently before this committee is

sufficiently large to include the issues that were raised by Mr. O'Toole, and potentially other members, as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I thank the witnesses for their appearance and for their work, which they give to MPs every day.

Mr. Bédard, I would like to follow up on the question posed by my colleague, Mr. Nater. You replied that three people in your office have the highest security clearance, meaning Top Secret clearance. Did I understand that correctly?

Mr. Michel Bédard: Two people in the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Council have that clearance.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Okay. So, there are two people, and you are one of them.

Mr. Michel Bédard: That's right.

Hon. Greg Fergus: You told Mr. Nader you're equipped to read top secret documents in your office, but you cannot store them.

Mr. Michel Bédard: We can read and store them as a hard copy, but discussing top secret documents requires other measures, which we don't have right now.

We can therefore receive documents, consult them and allow other people to consult them, if it's authorized, but we can't have any discussions about them.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Can you explain to me the process by which you determine which passages of a document require redaction? I imagine more than one person is involved, and you must have discussions. Do you go to another location to have those discussions and decide which parts of a document require redaction?

Mr. Michel Bédard: Mr. Fergus, my understanding is that you are referring to a motion before the committee. It compels the production of documents, and would require my office to redact them. To my knowledge, the motion has not yet passed.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I'm not referring to any motion. I just want to know if you've been through that kind of situation before and what you did in those cases.

• (1230)

Mr. Michel Bédard: It depends on the information's confidentiality level. In the past, we never had information classified as top secret. It also depends on the volume of the information.

Following a motion passed by the House of Commons in October 2020, tens of thousands of pages were sent to my office for redaction. Information contained in those documents was not classified as Secret or Top Secret. We therefore used computer systems that meet confidentiality standards for those types of documents.

So, we have to adjust our methods to the nature of the documents.

Hon. Greg Fergus: What you just said indirectly is that, until now, you've never had to redact Top Secret documents.

Your predecessor said the same thing in 2021.

[English]

Regarding the ability of your office to redact documents, he said that there “may well be some factual information and knowledge that the government or other entities have that we don't have, because it's their information and their concerns”.

[Translation]

In light of that quote, how does your office and how do your colleagues know what must be redacted? Which aspects do you consider relevant to national security?

Mr. Michel Bédard: You must understand that, to my knowledge, the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel redacted documents for the first time in 2020. In the beginning, during the first mandates we received, we had little contextual information from the department or agency that had given us the information. Now, when a motion for the production of documents gets passed, we consult with different caucuses and parliamentarians to suggest best practices. One often-accepted recommendation is for the entity that generated the documents to also suggest redactions.

With a document containing proposed redactions and one without, we're able to compare and analyze them much more easily. Indeed, some information could reveal intelligence sources without us being aware of it, because we lack context. That's why we asked for proposed redactions and a line of communication with the entity or department that generated the document; to get more context if needed.

Hon. Greg Ferguson: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Nader had six minutes and seven seconds, so your turns were similar.

Ms. Gaudreau, it is your turn.

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

I thank the witnesses. It's always an honour to have them.

I'd like to better understand the present and look into the future. Having had the opportunity to meet with the United Kingdom's legislative assembly—I know you did too—I'd like to draw a parallel between our practices and theirs so we can talk about them in the report.

You may be aware that in January 2022, the British MI5, which is responsible for domestic security, sent a note to all members of Parliament reporting a threat against a woman lawyer. This information came from a security intelligence agency. That's like the Canadian Security Intelligence Service flagging a threat to the official presidency, and then sending that warning out to all elected officials.

How does it work here in Canada?

[English]

Mr. Patrick McDonnell (Sergeant-at-Arms and Corporate Security Officer, House of Commons): Through you, Madam Chair, yes, it would be much like the model in the U.K. If information came to light that affected all MPs and was a concern of all MPs,

CSIS would likely go through my office to warn the MPs of any potential interference.

• (1235)

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I want to be sure I understand this. If CSIS determined that a member could not exercise their parliamentary privilege because threats had been made against the member, your office would be notified, and you would then advise that individual.

Is that how it currently works in Canada?

[English]

Mr. Patrick McDonnell: It's a hypothetical question, so I'll do my best to answer it.

CSIS is responsible for the first communication with an individual MP. If they have a concern regarding foreign interference, for example, with that MP, that MP's office, that MP's staff, that would be CSIS reaching out to the MP first. They wouldn't go through a third party, which would be us. We would become aware of it at some point, depending on the circumstances of the interference.

My job, my primary role, is to do my best, and my folks do their best, to ensure the physical security of members of Parliament and their staff and this place. That's our primary role. Foreign interference is something new on our plate, in the last few months.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you. I feel that my physical security is protected.

Our counterparts across the pond have a much clearer protocol than we do when one of their members is the target of a threat. The information doesn't go to deputy ministers or a national security adviser to the prime minister such as Jody Thomas. There is direct communication with the individual.

Going forward, should you automatically be among the first to be notified of something that's going on, on the same basis as the Prime Minister?

[English]

Mr. Patrick McDonnell: Through you, Madam Chair, currently, we have a memorandum of understanding with CSIS and their integrated threat assessment centre. As I mentioned the last time I appeared here, that was signed on March 30.

We're still developing our model, our way forward and our process, and we're doing that also in consultation with Five Eyes. In particular, we've had in-depth discussions with the U.K. on several occasions. We hope that our model, once it's in place, will be reflective of what our members expect.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's reassuring, and that's why we are having these meetings.

Are there other things we should include in our report? We talked about a direct line whereby information would be shared regarding a threat against a member. Are there other powers you should have so that you're aware of possible interference?

[English]

Mr. Patrick McDonnell: Nothing comes to mind at this time, Madam Gaudreau.

[Translation]

Mr. Eric Janse: I would add that, if decisions are made or an intelligence agency has information to share with all members, the House administration could help to coordinate that flow of information, through the offices of the Sergeant-at-Arms and the Speaker.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I want to stress how important it is to ensure impartiality and to not filter the information. I would be more reassured knowing that you were aware and would be passing the information on to us.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Go ahead, Ms. Blaney.

• (1240)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to those who are testifying today. I want to start off by saying how much I appreciate all the work that you do for this place. It is incredibly difficult and challenging, and I appreciate the non-partisan people who get the work done while we do our political work, so I want to thank you all for that first.

What I'm trying to wrap my head around is this. We know that foreign interference is ever-changing and it is a considerable issue, and we need to figure out the best pathway forward.

We heard from Mr. Chong. He raised a powerful question of privilege, and he has suggested that maybe CSIS should tell the Speaker about any sort of threat activities and then have the Speaker inform members at will. He used the example from the U.K. Parliament to illustrate the process that is taking place in other countries.

I'd like to ask all of you for your thoughts on that process. Knowing that there's something fundamentally broken in the system, we need to find a way to make sure that members of Parliament and parliamentarians are made aware of any threat that's coming toward them, and what that means for them in taking the next steps to protect themselves.

Also, one of the things I've left this process with is an understanding of what's coming at us and being able to observe the world, perhaps, in a different way so that we can better see what is coming. We can reiterate that back to all the relevant departments to make sure that we're all collectively working together to make sure there is no foreign interference.

I'll leave it to you, Mr. Janse, to start us off. Do you feel there's a key role in the office and the work that you do that we could be exploring? Are there other countries that are doing a good job that we

should be looking at? Of course, if any of your colleagues are willing to answer that question, I would deeply appreciate it.

Mr. Eric Janse: Thank you very much, Ms. Blaney, for the question. I'll start, and then I'll turn it over to the Sergeant-at-Arms.

As it was just mentioned, obviously, yes, this is an important issue, which is why, in part, there has been a memorandum of understanding signed between the House and CSIS. As it was just explained, the details of how to operationalize that agreement are still being determined now, so any recommendations from this committee, of course, would be very timely.

I'll turn it over to Pat to provide a few more details on timelines as well.

Mr. Patrick McDonnell: Through you, Madam Chair, we've been in discussions with CSIS over the last couple of weeks about how to come in, or even virtually, to best inform our members of Parliament in groups. We have 338 members of Parliament, so one large group would be rather difficult if you're going to a Q and A session.

We've discussed possibly bringing in CSIS and approaching the parties' caucuses to see if they would be interested in having a CSIS briefing at their caucuses, as well as doing one generally. That's the stage we're at now. "Generally" means all MPs, all at once.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. I really appreciate that response.

I am just trying to figure out, too, what department.

To come back to the Sergeant-at-Arms, I understand you've signed this agreement and I understand that you're in the process of unfolding what this is going to look like in the future.

One of the things we have also heard from Mr. Chong is that there was an orientation for him about what foreign interference looks like. That information was extremely helpful for him in being able to assess and see things that may have been a threat. He said that before that training he may not have noticed those particular nuances.

I am wondering if there are any discussions at that level that you're working in about making sure that members of Parliament have better awareness and understanding so that we can assess what might be a threat, and alert the appropriate people. How will you be working with CSIS to perhaps implement that into the future?

Mr. Patrick McDonnell: There have been those discussions much along the same lines. My role and the role of my folks would be as logistics officers and bringing CSIS in and facilitating their briefing the members of Parliament on foreign interference or threats.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

I think my next question would be for Mr. Bédard.

I appreciate some of the questions you were answering earlier and the work you're doing around exploring what you might be able to do in terms of having top secret information. I think it was very helpful for me to hear that at this point this is not something you've done.

In the capacity of the work you do, how do you assess issues of national security? If you were provided a request to do something that would have you looking at that information—and I understand your assessment level is at that space—how would you assess your ability to do that, and the impacts it might have with other Five Eyes partners, for example?

• (1245)

Mr. Michel Bédard: In the work of the law clerk's office, if we are asked to redact documents, our marching orders will come from the committee. We'll look at what the committee has asked of us.

As I indicated, it is proposed that if there is any mandate to our office to redact national security information or top secret information, that would be provided with proposed redactions so that we could assess and have context and, I trust, a line of communication with the department or the provider of the document or the information.

In some cases if there is a tough call, I will err on the side of caution and inform the committee accordingly, but that is what we will do to ensure that we are not compromising national security.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cooper, you have five minutes, followed by Ms. Sahota.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Janse, I want to follow up on an answer you provided to a question posed by Mr. Nater. It was in regard to the ability of this committee to compel Beijing's ambassador to Canada, in which you said that the jurisdiction of this committee to order the compelling of attendance is limited to that of Canada. What about in the case of the ambassador being present in Canada, as he is?

Mr. Eric Janse: That's a good question. I am actually going to turn it over to Michel to answer that one.

Mr. Michel Bédard: The power to send for persons and, as I referred to earlier in this meeting, the power to send for records, is constitutional in nature and has no limits for those who are expressly permitted by Parliament. There is no explicit limitation on that power to compel persons. That said, there are some authorities in other jurisdictions—in the U.K. and Australia—for whom, as I said, it is against their practices of Parliament to compel foreign diplomats.

There is no known case in Canada of a committee compelling the attendance of a diplomat. Even if this is allowed by parliamentary law, parliamentary procedure, I would suggest that the committee be careful, because there might be other considerations, public policy considerations, to take into consideration. It could be seen as a breach of international law even if that specific provision of international law has not been codified in the laws of Canada.

Mr. Michael Cooper: To the greatest degree you can, given it is a hypothetical situation and it hasn't happened before, how do you see this potentially playing out? You said the committee should be cautious. You cited international law, the Vienna Convention, for example. I will give you an opportunity to maybe elaborate on your thoughts, recognizing that you're not here to provide us necessarily with advice. Well, you are to some degree, as to the parameters of what we have the authority to do.

Mr. Michel Bédard: I referred to the fact that in more than 150 years of history in Canada there are no known cases, and there are some parliamentary authorities outside this country that recognize it's not within the power of Parliament. I also suggest there are serious policy considerations to take into consideration. This is my answer.

• (1250)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay. Thank you very much for that.

Mr. Bédard, I will continue with you. Through you, Madam Chair, in an answer that you had provided to a question, I believe, posed by Mr. Fergus, you said you haven't had any experience redacting classified documents. That would be because the government hasn't turned over to you any such documents to redact, such as in the case of the Winnipeg lab.

Mr. Michel Bédard: We did receive unredacted documents that were classified at a certain level that contained personal information, commercially sensitive information that we were tasked with redacting. And thank you for the opportunity to clarify my remarks. We did not receive any documents that included national security information.

Mr. Michael Cooper: That's right.

I'm not going to ask you to comment on what I'm about to say, but that was as a result of the fact that the government blocked the production of those documents, took the Speaker to court, shut down Parliament, and then the Prime Minister called an unnecessary election, illustrating the lengths to which this government will go to cover up. It also demonstrates the utter contempt this Prime Minister and this government have for parliamentary committees and for Parliament as a whole.

I would further add that what Mr. Bédard described as PCO undertaking proposed redactions of classified documents, and then having the opportunity to review that, erring, as he said, on the side of caution as to how he would approach things, is precisely the process we have put forward in the way of several motions that have come before this committee.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to go back to you, Mr. Bédard, regarding the said intelligence that you might be receiving.

We've heard from many witnesses here before that those who are experts in the intelligence community find that it takes them a lot of experience and a lot of time to differentiate between what type of intelligence is actually evidence or has more weight, or what the context of the intelligence might be. Raw intelligence is often incorrect or misleading and requires that specific context to properly be understood.

Does your Office of the Law Clerk have the necessary expertise? You've already testified here today that this would be the first time you would be doing this. I would take it that the expertise is not necessarily there. If it's not there at this time, how would you gain that expertise in time? How would you understand the context that's needed to ensure that the proper elements of those documents are redacted?

Mr. Michel Bédard: Thank you for the question.

Through you, Madam Chair, there are two parts to the question. The first is the capacity of the office. I heard you referring to the interpretation of intelligence and being able to draw conclusions. This is not part of our mandate. We do not have a capacity to develop it. This is a specific skill that is beyond the mandate of the Office of the Law Clerk.

Now, in order to make redactions to what information could be particularly sensitive, as I mentioned earlier, there are two means in particular: put those redactions, and also the ability to talk with the provider of the documents to assess the context of the proposed redactions.

I don't know if my colleague, the Sergeant-at-Arms, wants to add anything about the interpretation of intelligence.

Mr. Patrick McDonnell: No.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: If my understanding is correct, in order to have the capacity, you would also have to co-operate and work with the provider, whether it's CSIS or another agency. They would have to walk you through what is sensitive in nature and what isn't.

• (1255)

Mr. Michel Bédard: That was the gist of the answer. That said, I haven't seen any documents. I haven't seen any proposed redactions and I haven't received any explanation about documents. At this stage, I'm not in a position to answer more. That would be speculation.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Hypothetically, let's say there was a huge document dump. That's what we would be expecting, right? We have seen already in reporting what has happened. There were aspects of intelligence out there; however, after having reviewed different versions of drafts, perhaps ones that were translated, were not translated properly, or draft versions that interpreted the intelligence one way and then final versions that interpreted the intelligence another way.... If you were to get all of these documents, how would you understand one version from another?

It sounded very complex to me when the Right Honourable Mr. Johnston was here explaining that there were different versions and even interpretations within the agencies themselves when it came to looking at those documents and what they should be conveying to parliamentarians and to average Canadians who will then be consuming the information that comes to committee.

Mr. Michel Bédard: Is the question how will I go about assessing multiple drafts?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Yes.

Mr. Michel Bédard: Again, I'll have to refer to any proposed redactions from the provider and any conversation that I might have with them.

As I said, the mandate of the Office of the Law Clerk will not be to provide an interpretation or draw any conclusions. It will be to redact sensitive information. If there are various drafts of the same information or a variation of the same information is in all these drafts, we'll be consistent in our redaction, but we're not in the business of drawing conclusions. That will be for the committee to do.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I understand and that's exactly my worry. It's that you won't be looking at that evidence and drawing any conclusions. However, if the evidence that needs to be redacted gets missed or is not redacted, we would then draw certain conclusions and Canadians would draw perhaps potentially incorrect, dangerous conclusions from the evidence.

I believe that is my time. There are so many more questions to ask other witnesses and [*Inaudible—Editor*].

The Chair: There is.

Madam Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

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

I'm learning quite a bit, and I want to learn more. Something that came up a lot in everything we've heard so far is that foreign interference is happening more and more and that it's important to be cautious about who has all the necessary expertise to receive material classified as secret.

We are talking a lot about national security and foreign interference.

I'd like you to talk more about that, because I'm not sure I fully understand something. We're being told that we have to be cautious when it comes to national security, but that foreign interference is on the rise.

Can you enlighten me on that? You have a solid minute to answer my question.

[*English*]

Mr. Patrick McDonnell: I think the best organizations to provide information to our members of Parliament on national security would be the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. On foreign interference, it would be CSIS. Those are our best resources.

I think if I would try to do that here, I would be doing you and them an injustice.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'm well aware that you're waiting to see what the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs recommends. Nevertheless, considering everything the committee has heard so far, I imagine you have some sense of the measures that will be taken right away.

Can you share some of what your action plan will cover to help us turn the corner, and really counter foreign interference attempts, threats and so forth?

• (1300)

[*English*]

Mr. Patrick McDonell: Our plan is to start off with an initial series of briefs to the members of Parliament and to follow up with regular awareness sessions on any developments relating to national security and/or foreign interference.

More importantly, when the members are first elected to the House, we want to beef up our member orientation program and inform them of these concerns right at the start, as they're starting their duties as members of Parliament, and not wait a year or two and brief them after something may have happened.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think I will go back to the law clerk.

Thank you, Mr. Bédard, for your patience with me. If I understand this correctly, from what I've heard from the other testimony, you could receive the information. You feel you have the security clearance. I guess what I'm trying to get clarity on is this: How would you identify what is appropriate to redact? Have you done any research on how other countries that we receive information on do this? Is this a practice?

One concern I have is that if we're doing a practice that doesn't make sense to our partners, it may limit their feelings of comfort to share information with us. That is a significant challenge around national security. When I'm making decisions, I really try, especially on these issues, to not be partisan but to be very mindful of the role that we all take to support the well-being and health of all Canadians. As we move through this process, I am just trying to understand that.

If you could answer that question, it would really support me in understanding what thoughtfulness I need to take as things come before me.

Mr. Michel Bédard: Thank you for the question.

In terms of practices in other jurisdictions, I'm not aware of any similar practices where the law clerk's office or its equivalent is asked to make redactions. That said, as I mentioned earlier, this practice of having the administration, be it the law clerk or the clerk of the committee, redact documents is a new practice in the Canadian Parliament. We didn't have the opportunity to do deep research in other jurisdictions to see if there are other jurisdictions that have a similar mandate.

In terms of how we would proceed with the redactions, as I indicated, we will rely on proposed redactions, provided that any order for the production of documents includes also the requirement to propose redactions as well as the ability to speak with the providers of the documents so that we can get the proper context to assess the sensitive nature of the information—and also, in case of doubt, err on the side of caution.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: That was two minutes and 40 seconds. The beep didn't go off, but thank you for being you, Ms. Blaney.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper. You have exactly five minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Cooper: Madam Chair, I will be moving the following motion:

That, in relation to its order of reference of Wednesday, May 10, 2023, concerning the intimidation campaign orchestrated by Wei Zhao against the Member for Wellington—Halton Hills and other Members, the Committee invite, to appear within 10 days,

- a. Sheila Block, counsel to Special Rapporteur David Johnston, on her own, for two hours;
- b. Valérie Gervais, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, RKESTRA, on her own, for one hour; and
- c. Don Guy and Brian Topp, founding partners, GT&Co, together on a panel, for two hours.

The motion has been distributed to members in both official languages.

Through you, Madam Chair, I will now speak briefly to the motion.

Since his appointment as special rapporteur, there have been troubling questions of conflict—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I have a point of order, Chair.

I'm sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Cooper.

• (1305)

I just checked my emails. I have not received the motion. I'm just checking to see when that's coming. I couldn't retain everything, so it would be helpful for me, as we discuss this motion, to actually have it.

Mr. Michael Cooper: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: Mr. Cooper, you don't have the floor. When I give you the floor, you have the floor. We know how this works.

I'm glad you're smiling and finding it entertaining. I don't.

Regarding the people who run the House of Commons, do we need them here for this or can they get back to doing what they need to do?

This is a regular occurrence. We invite witnesses. People have questions lined up, and then.... I don't even know what it is you think you are doing, Mr. Cooper, because we can function. These are democratic institutions, for goodness' sake, people. This is not a different—

I have the floor, Mr. Cooper. We don't push the button, as I've said, because of interpretation and the people who provide us with both official languages.

Ms. Blaney, do you have it now?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I just received it. Thank you so much, and I apologize for disrupting the process.

The Chair: I appreciate that. You didn't disrupt the process.

I'm going to give the floor back to Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Turnbull, I know that you have questions, and I will do my best.

I also will just note that we're not new here. We know that resources are limited. We know that we don't have extra resources today. I went around, and I said the first panel is going to go over by five minutes. We're going to keep everyone here tight. We gave everyone who is helping us function that information, and then there's just this whatever happening.

Go ahead on a point of order, Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: No, I just want to be added to the list.

The Chair: I'll add you.

Mr. Cooper, you have the floor.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all, I think it would be appropriate that our panel of witnesses be dismissed.

The Chair: Can Mr. Turnbull have his five minutes? He's on the list of people who are supposed to be asking questions.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Well....

The Chair: You don't have questions.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Well, no, I think we should be dealing with this motion. This takes—

The Chair: Do you not have any more questions for the panel?

Mr. Michael Cooper: —precedence, so I'm prepared to.... I would like to deal with this motion, but you asked if they could be dismissed. I'm saying that's fine with me.

The Chair: Mr. Cooper, I asked if you had any more questions for this panel.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I have lots of questions I could ask, but I realize what the time is and the importance of getting this motion debated and voted upon.

The Chair: He does not have questions for this panel. I am going to—

Mr. Michael Cooper: I didn't say that. I said the opposite of that, so don't put words in my mouth, Madam Chair.

The Chair: You do it for a living, so I think it's going to be okay. What's good for the goose is good for the gander.

I am going, just for the record—

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

The Chair: Mr. Berthold, go ahead on a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: What you said about my fellow member was inappropriate, Madam Chair. You put words in his mouth, things that weren't true.

I would ask you to please retract your comments.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry; I pushed the button, and I shouldn't have.

What I think we should do as our way forward is allow Mr. Turnbull to ask his questions—

Mr. Luc Berthold: On a point of order.

The Chair: I'm just going to make my comment. As a path forward, we've done this before.

Go ahead on a point of order, Mr. Berthold.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: I raised the point of order because I reject the remarks you made about my fellow member. What you said he said was not true. You put words in his mouth. You made an assumption about what he was thinking. You characterized his work. It's inappropriate for a committee chair to do that.

Please retract your comments.

[*English*]

The Chair: If it makes you feel better, Mr. Berthold, sure, but I'm just saying that, when it comes to putting words in the member's mouth, it's happened before.

I asked if Mr. Cooper had any more questions, because then what I could suggest is that, if he doesn't, I would go to Mr. Turnbull and then give him back the floor to continue with his motion, as we have done in the past.

I think we would be able to get agreement from the Bloc and the NDP to finish this, release the witnesses, and then give Mr. Cooper back the floor to finish this. I feel this is a plausible way forward.

Is that a plausible way forward?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Madam Chair, I just want to be sure. To help you do that, I am requesting unanimous consent to proceed as you suggested.

[*English*]

The Chair: That's an excellent idea.

Are we okay with giving the floor to Mr. Turnbull for his five-minute round, trying to keep it shorter, and then we'd give it back to Mr. Cooper?

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Calkins.

● (1310)

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Madam Chair, I don't believe we can make up the rules as we go along. A motion has been moved. Nobody has indicated that the motion is not in order, and I suggest, if you seek advice from the clerk, that the clerk will advise you that the business of the committee is now the motion.

The Chair: Ms. Blaney, I'm assuming your hand is still up to be on the speaking list for the motion.

Is there not agreement to allow Mr. Turnbull to have his time with the witnesses?

Mr. Michael Cooper: The motion is before this committee.

The Chair: There is not agreement to give you the floor, Mr. Turnbull.

Is there agreement to release the witnesses?

Mr. Michael Cooper: Yes.

If Mr. Turnbull wants to keep them here, that's his prerogative.

The Chair: Ms. Blaney, are you okay with the witnesses being released?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I am.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I'm not okay, Madam Chair. I would like to have my spot to ask a question, but if that's the will of the committee....

The Chair: With that, I would like to thank you for your time and attention today.

We wish you the best and thank you for your service. If there's anything else you'd like to add, please send it to the clerk and we'll have it translated into both official languages.

Mr. Cooper, the floor is yours.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

From the moment the Prime Minister's so-called special rapporteur was appointed, there have been serious questions about conflict of interest around Mr. Johnston, given the fact that he was a long-standing friend of the Prime Minister's father, the fact that he has had a relationship with the Prime Minister for decades and the fact that he, up until his appointment as so-called special rapporteur, was a member of the Beijing-financed and Beijing-compromised Trudeau Foundation.

Since Mr. Johnston's appointment, new conflicts have emerged. It turns out that not only is he a friend of the Prime Minister and was a member of the Trudeau Foundation—which, on both counts, disqualify him from being appointed to such a role to investigate Beijing's interference on matters that implicate the Prime Minister over what he did or failed to do to respond to Beijing's interference, where part of Beijing's strategy, of course, was to benefit the Liberal Party—but it has now been revealed that Mr. Johnston selected as the lead counsel for his supposedly independent investigation none other than Sheila Block. She is a major Liberal donor who has, over the last several years, donated nearly \$7,000 to the Liberal Party of Canada and who was rubbing shoulders with the Prime Minister and the Minister of National Defence, at least virtually, at a recent Liberal Party fundraiser.

He hired another Liberal, Valérie Gervais, who is a former ministerial staffer, as a communications adviser. We now learn that he's taking advice from Don Guy, who is another Liberal and former chief of staff to Dalton McGuinty, as well as Brian Topp, who was a chief of staff to an NDP government.

In light of that, what we have are conflicts everywhere around this so-called special rapporteur. On that basis, it's appropriate that these witnesses come to answer questions before this committee.

I'm not sure where the chair is, but thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Chair.

I thank Mr. Cooper for bringing this forward.

I am going to offer an amendment to remove paragraph c. I'm not averse to having the conversation, but I'm not prepared to make that decision. I know that the people in paragraph c are not receiving any compensation. I think that's something I could explore at a later date, but today, just to get things done quickly, I think that would be the best way to move forward.

Madam Chair, I am officially asking for that to amend the motion. I hope to see paragraph c removed.

The rest of it I can support, just for clarity.

• (1315)

The Chair: I have Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Madam Chair, I appreciate Ms. Blaney's comments. I am amenable to removing paragraph c. I think both witnesses should appear, but this is something that perhaps could be looked at on another day.

The Chair: On my list for the motion and then for the amendment, I had, following Ms. Blaney, Mr. Fergus, followed by Mr. Turnbull.

Go ahead, Mr. Fergus.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Madam Chair, I appreciate the amendment or the suggestion by Madam Blaney. I also appreciate that Mr. Cooper is willing to remove paragraph c. However, I do have some problems with this motion as it stands, and I would like to make a modification.

I think we've gotten into a bad habit, Madam Chair, of detailing who comes and for how long before committee. I think it's been very good that we've been able to do this, but now we're getting into the short strokes before the summer. I would like to suggest that we maintain paragraphs a and b, but we remove the times that are added to their appearances.

Of course, we'll ask the chair to please schedule this, respecting the times within the next 10 days for these folks to come, and just allow the chair and the clerk to determine for how long these folks would appear before committee.

The Chair: Mr. Turnbull is next.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Madam Chair, I am obviously a little disappointed that I didn't get my round of questions in, but I've let that go at this point. Looking at this motion, I don't really comprehend how this has to do with the question of privilege that we're undertaking a study on here. I can only speculate as to what the real motivations of calling these particular witnesses are, but based on what we've seen from the Conservatives in terms of dragging people's good names through the mud, I have concerns that this is just another way to attack people who don't really deserve to be brought into this.

I don't have any problem with them in particular being witnesses. At the same time, I just don't understand the motives of Mr. Cooper. How does this pertain to the question of privilege? To me, that's what we're doing the study on. We realize that this may now include several other members of Parliament—we'll see—but as a study that we're doing....

What we're trying to get to the bottom of is whether Mr. Chong's privileges were infringed upon by a threat of intimidation or interference that never materialized, which has been documented multiple times by national security experts, including previous witnesses.

National security and intelligence adviser Jody Thomas said that there was no actual threat. There is confirmation from Mr. Johnston's report as well.

That's not to say it isn't a serious matter and that we don't take this seriously because we do, but I don't understand the motive here. I think it's to bring additional people into this to then drag them through the mud for political gain, and if that's what the Conservative Party's motivations are, which seems to be the case based on the experiences that I have had on this committee, then I can't support this motion. I would suggest that maybe we should consider some amendments to it. While I'm not opposed to what Ms. Blaney has said, I'm just looking at what value this motion would bring to our current work, and I don't see it. I don't see the value of it, let alone the amount of time that's been specified here, which I think is a lot of the committee's time for witnesses whom I don't see as being relevant to the particular study.

They are another example of trying to create suspicion out of someone who has integrity and credibility, who has been cited by the Conservative Party because they need to attack the person and discredit Mr. Johnston because they don't like the conclusions in his report that are based on facts and evidence.

When you're desperate and you don't have truth on your side, what you do is attack the person, which is a well-known tactic that's been used in rhetoric since time immemorial. It's attack the person—

• (1320)

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The member's comment seems to relate to the main motion, when we're discussing the amendment that's been proposed. Shouldn't we be discussing the amendment?

The Chair: Yes, that's right.

Mr. Turnbull, I realize that you had more to say because it relates to the broader conversation. Sometimes, we do things this way, but let's try to stick to the amendment.

Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Sure. I generally support the amendment that Ms. Blaney has put forward. Perhaps I'll cede the floor for the moment, and maybe we'll be able to get to a vote on the amend-

ment. Then I'd like to put my name back on the list for the motion itself, please, Madam Chair.

The Chair: I already have you on the motion itself, so I'll revert, because you and Mr. Fergus are on it and I just came to you because of it. I'll add you.

I don't have any other speakers for the amendment. I'm going to call the question on Ms. Blaney's amendment to Mr. Cooper's motion.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0 [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: On the motion as amended, I have Mr. Fergus, Mr. Turnbull and Ms. Sahota.

Mr. Fergus, go ahead.

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Madam Chair, as I suggested the last time I spoke, I would like to propose an amendment that the references to the duration of the witnesses' appearances be removed.

I suggest we leave it to you, Madam Chair, and the clerk to determine how long the witnesses appear before the committee.

Obviously, we'd like to have a full discussion with the witnesses while taking into account their availability. I think my amendment makes sense. We've gotten into the bad habit of asking witnesses to appear for a specific amount of time. I think this amendment makes things easier.

That's my amendment.

• (1325)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, can you repeat your amendment?

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: I propose removing all references to how long the witnesses would be appearing.

[English]

The Chair: We'll vote on the amendment.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5 [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, to confirm what our records show, you're moving the two hours—one hour for paragraph a and one hour for paragraph b. Are you also removing the 10 days or not?

Hon. Greg Fergus: It's not the 10 days.

The Chair: It's just the hours. Thank you.

We are now back on the main motion as amended twice.

My speaking list is Mr. Turnbull followed by Ms. Sahota.

Mr. Turnbull, go ahead.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Madam Chair.

As it stands now, if I'm correct, we have paragraphs a and b. We've eliminated paragraph c. I'm just verifying this. We've removed the reference to the number of hours from both paragraphs a and b. Is that correct? Thank you, Madam Chair.

I still have, I think, similar concerns that I was expressing earlier in relation to this motion. I really don't see how Ms. Block and Ms. Gervais are going to contribute to the work we're doing.

I think the appointment of the special rapporteur, Mr. Johnston... We had him come before the committee for over three hours. It was about three hours and 15 minutes, if I'm not mistaken, which is almost unheard of in terms of the amount of time a witness would appear. I thought he was very forthcoming and gave us lots of clear responses and really spoke well, I think, to the detailed work he's undertaken as the special rapporteur.

I know that the committee has benefited greatly from his testimony, and I'm not sure why.... I think what we witnessed, certainly from the Conservative Party, was an attempt, which they're not even doing subtly at this point, to drag Mr. Johnston's good name through the mud. Personally, I think it's disgusting. I apologized to Mr. Johnston, in a way, on their behalf, even though I have no right to do so in a sense.

I just feel horrible for how he's been treated, someone who was appointed by Stephen Harper, whom Mr. Poilievre sang praises about for numerous years—as we all did—as a pre-eminent Canadian who served this country so well as the Governor General. To have his reputation be tarnished for political gain just seems to me to be beyond the pale. It makes me feel really badly for him. I really do feel for him. I'm not saying that he deserves, necessarily, to be protected or that he needs it, per se, but I really think it's not merited in his case.

I don't understand why and how these two witnesses will give us more testimony that's really useful for the important work we're undertaking. There are so many witnesses we could be hearing from who I think have an ability to look forward and say how we can improve our response on foreign interference, or witnesses we could have just heard from, if Mr. Cooper hadn't used his opportunity to move a motion like this in the middle of a meeting where we had scheduled witnesses, who were really relevant to a question of privilege.

When we have a question of privilege, and we have the law clerk, the clerk of the House of Commons and the Sergeant-at-Arms here, we have important work to be done on the actual question of privilege. I had clarification questions for them and, I think, very important questions as to how we can understand the potential infringement of one of our MPs' parliamentary privilege.

The Speaker ruled that there was a prima facie case here, and that's why it was referred to this committee. That's why we're undertaking this work, but it seems a little strange to me that we wouldn't have the opportunity to fully utilize the expertise in the room.

• (1330)

really just don't see the value of these witnesses for the current study. I've stated that and given you some of my reasons.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you for not being repetitive, Mr. Turnbull.

Go ahead, Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Madam Chair, I wanted to state my frustration or bewilderment with the last four committee meetings we've had. Perhaps my count is off. I don't even know how many meetings we've had on the question of privilege so far. It doesn't seem any different from the foreign interference study. It's all blending into one.

I've been on this committee for quite some time. We've had other questions of privilege. It's a constitutional and legal matter, like we've heard here today.

I believe the witnesses who were before us today were extremely valuable, and I think they would be beneficial in our getting down to the definition of intimidation. What we've heard from them today about this type of foreign action never having been looked at... We're sitting on something that is precedent-setting and I think it's quite exciting for us to explore how we adapt and evolve with these given threats in the coming time.

My bewilderment and confusion come from an area...we aren't even exploring that. We've already heard from testimony that threats were made. We've already heard that. We're coming from a place of knowledge where we know foreign interference exists. We know that in terms of election interference, the last two elections may have had attempts, but the elections were decided by Canadians and Canadians alone. We know that.

What we should be deciding at this committee now is whether the level of threat or the type of threat, or if in the absence of knowledge of a threat...whether we would now make a precedent-setting decision as to this being a privilege matter. That is before us.

We haven't even begun to explore the actual issue. The witnesses who have been put before us today are not going to get us any closer to making that determination.

What is the point of our going in circles just for the circus that serves the CPC's political intentions and motivations? That's exactly what it is. It's all political tactics to see how far they can take this game of leading Canadians down this road of mistrust in our democracy, and how they can destroy and maybe burn down our institutions. That is the goal of the CPC, and that's all I can really make of all of this, because we're not getting down to what we should be doing to protect our institutions.

Yes, we already know certain things exist, so we need to now move forward from those. We know a colleague of ours, who happens to be a member of the CPC.... I feel bad for what has happened. Now we need to figure out how to solve that problem.

One thing that's already happened—and we've heard this—is a directive has been given by the public safety minister to make sure that any incidents of intimidation or foreign interference involving parliamentarians are quickly elevated and brought to the attention of our security agencies and, ultimately, the Prime Minister. This is important. This is a good outcome, I would say, as I was questioning some of the witnesses here today.

Although it's taken us getting through a lot of mud and unnecessary stuff, we're getting to some good conclusions, but I don't believe having this meeting with these witnesses is getting us any closer to answering the question of whether this is a matter of privilege or not.

These witnesses would not be coming here with any knowledge of whether this is a matter of privilege or not in this House of Commons. What is the point?

The point is to distract and to create mistrust. That's all we've seen in Pierre Poilievre's campaign so far. There are no solutions and no ideas. It's just, "Let's tear this place down. Let's see how angry we can get people. Let's cause confusion and chaos where we can cause them."

That's exactly what these witnesses are being brought here in an attempt to do. I'm sure the witnesses will be wonderful and great, because they're eminent top professionals in their areas, but what's the point of this? It's definitely not to get to the answers that this committee has been mandated to look into by the Speaker of the House of Commons.

It is not our mandate to drag other people's names through the mud unnecessarily or to attack them about what they did 30 years ago. This is becoming normal, I guess, in politics in the last couple of years, but it's disgusting, quite frankly. It's absolutely disgusting.

• (1335)

I don't think any knowledgeable, eminent person is going to want to advise parliamentarians anymore, which is going to be a real shame because we respect professionals in their fields and require their guidance and their advisement at times like this when we are going through unprecedented situations—that we have their service at our disposal. However, no one is going to come forward anymore.

Quite frankly, I don't even think anyone's going to want to become a parliamentarian in the near future if we keep going in this direction, at least nobody who has a reputation that they care about.

All I can say is that I'm a little frustrated by the joke that we're creating out of this whole situation. Even what we saw in the House of Commons yesterday, running out there so the budget could not come to a vote—running out and hiding in the lobby, voting on your phones and saying that you're having technical difficulties when, quite frankly, it's evident that no one's having technical difficulties.... It's just to delay and waste time.

This is another tactic to delay, to waste time, to confuse matters, and I don't agree with it. I don't intend to vote if you cannot explain to me what your intention is and what type of evidence you think you will be garnering from bringing such witnesses that will help us in the question of privilege that is before this committee now.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

My list is exhausted, so I would like to call the question. Is that suitable?

I am just going to make a comment really quickly.

Today is Thursday. With regard to Tuesday, the notice is out for Duheme for one hour, as was requested by this committee, and Morrison for two hours. That evening, as was requested by this committee, is Vigneault for two hours. On Thursday, as was requested by this committee, Minister Mendicino is appearing. Then we have two of the people who were on that list of witnesses we had asked.

The 10 days will be pending a deviation request, which the clerk has already put through. Otherwise, it will probably be 10 business days. We will try to swap around, but cancelling people doesn't get us further ahead, so just be mindful that we will do our best to have them here within 10 days. Should a deviation request not happen, it will be the 20th where we'll try to put them in, unless something changes.

[*Translation*]

Did you have something to add, Mr. Savard-Tremblay?

• (1340)

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: In response to all that, I just want to mention that Ms. Block worked on the report in question and that we know she has something to contribute. We aren't looking to pillory her. We are simply looking for answers.

The various comments that this is a smear campaign are unfounded. We have a report that raised questions, that was challenged and that is ultimately raising more and more questions. For that reason, asking Ms. Block to appear is far from holding a public trial on the matter.

Our goal is to get to the bottom of all this. We have a duty to do so.

The Chair: Thank you.

I will call the vote on the motion as amended.

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

• (1345)

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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