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Chair: Mr. John Williamson



Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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• (1005)

[*Translation*]

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

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to meeting number 122 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

[*English*]

Today's meeting is taking place in hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*Translation*]

Before we get started, I'd like to go over the following important safety measures for all the members and meeting participants in the room.

[*English*]

To prevent disruptive and potentially harmful audio feedback incidents that can cause injuries, all in-person participants are reminded to keep their earpieces away from all microphones at all times.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm listening, Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I just wanted to say that Mr. Sorbara's microphone needed to be turned off, because we couldn't hear anything you said. However, I think it's been resolved.

The Chair: Good. Thank you.

[*English*]

The following measures have been taken to prevent audio feedback incidents.

All earpieces have been replaced by a model that greatly reduces the probability of audio feedback. Those new earpieces are black. Those of you in the room, please ensure that you use a black earpiece.

By default, all unused earpieces will be unplugged at the start of a meeting. If you plug it in, when you are not using it, please place it face down on the middle of the sticker—typically to your right—for this purpose that you'll find on the table as indicated.

Please consult the cards if you have any questions about the process.

As you can see, the room layout has been adjusted to increase the distance between microphones and reduce the chance of feedback from an ambient earpiece.

These measures are in place so that we can conduct our business without interruption and to protect the health and safety of all participants, especially our interpreters.

[*Translation*]

Thank you everyone for your co-operation.

[*English*]

I would remind you that all comments today should, as usual, be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), the committee is resuming consideration of Report 1, 2024 from the Auditor General of Canada, entitled "ArriveCAN", referred to the committee on February 12, 2024.

[*English*]

Before we begin with our witness, I have just three items to highlight.

We've received correspondence from Mr. Paul Girard and his doctor. His condition makes him unable to attend at this time. Based on the information provided, it would be best to discharge the summons to allow the individual to focus on his physical health. In fact, I took it upon myself as chair to inform him of this last Friday.

Could I seek the consent of the committee to discharge the summons, so that it is not active or hanging over him?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: That's very good. That is done. Thank you.

Additionally, I'd like to assure members that, as per the motion adopted on Tuesday, they can expect a subcommittee report presented at each public PACP full committee meeting that proceeds a subcommittee meeting.

I'll note for the record, as well, that this will be the first time that the committee has requested this type of reporting in this Parliament, and I'm happy to work with the subcommittee to oblige and report back to the full committee.

Members will notice that I have added some business after this meeting. This is optional. We can deal with most or all of this on Tuesday. I would like to deal with one issue, which involves the release of documents.

[*Translation*]

I know Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné wants to ask us a question about that.

[*English*]

Here is what I'm going to do. Once we're done with our witness today, if we proceed to business, I will make a commitment to members that, if we deal with that and then want to adjourn, I will vote to adjourn the meeting. This is my commitment to you that this won't turn into a lengthy meeting. Any other business that we have we can deal with on Tuesday. You might still want to wrap it up, and that's fine. That's, of course, your decision, but I am committing.... All I have is my word, and my word is my bond to you. My vote will be to adjourn that meeting should members want to adjourn without any other discussion, if we're able to deal with the document in question.

Further, if we find that we get into a lengthy discussion and members want to end the discussion, I will also vote to end the discussion. If we can wrap it up quickly, we will, and if we can't, we will end it. My commitment to you is to not keep everyone here all afternoon; it is to try to resolve it quickly. Therefore, I'm telegraphing up front how I will vote on these two: I will not allow additional business unless the committee wishes it, and I will not allow the debate to go on for hours and hours or for any lengthy period of time. You can mull that over.

Now I'd like to welcome our witness. We have, as an individual, John Ossowski.

Sir, thank you for joining us today. I appreciate it.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks, and then we'll turn to our questions. I'll turn the floor over to you, sir. Thank you.

• (1010)

Mr. John Ossowski (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will begin by taking issue with repeated references to my having lied, fibbed or been demonstrably dishonest. I corrected my testimony last October, and I apologized for not remembering all those who attended a Teams meeting three years ago. Mr. Chair, not remembering is not lying.

What more does the committee want from me?

On Tuesday, May 14, it was further implied that as a result of my casual employment status with the CBSA, I was gaining some improper business advantage. The sole purpose of this arrangement is to facilitate my access to my emails and calendar and to get the support required to prepare for a committee appearance.

Let me be clear. No business advantage has been sought or received as a result of this arrangement, and I have always followed all conflict of interest requirements of myself.

I would now like to remind the committee of the exceptional circumstances we found ourselves in during the spring of 2020. We

were shutting down the largest unprotected border in the world while trying to ensure that critical supply chains remained functional for the essential trade of food, medicine and personal protective equipment, etc. We had repatriation flights for Canadians returning home and had to manage a myriad of issues with the United States.

Coordinating all of this with our U.S. counterparts and supporting the government in this historic time was my priority. Arrive-CAN helped us administer the pandemic border measures, and I relied upon my officials to deal with the procurement details.

With respect to the Auditor General's report, the agency has accepted the findings and put measures in place to ensure that this type of situation doesn't happen again. As it has been stated by the Auditor General, the rules were in place, but unfortunately, it appears they were not always followed.

I would now like to offer the following important context. We were asked by the Public Health Agency to develop the app to replace a paper process so that it could get critical health information and pass it along to provinces in a timely manner. This was not planned for in any way. Certainly, at the beginning, there was no budget and no project plan, or any of the other things we would normally have in place for the development of a tool like this. It was about responding as quickly as possible, and no one could have predicted at that time the dozens of versions that would be required to support the orders in council.

Mobile app expertise is a relatively new field for the government, and while the agency had some nascent capability, it was not sufficient, especially as the app changed frequently and became increasingly complex. While the Auditor General stated very clearly that, at the outset, getting outside support was reasonable, the value for money assessment appears to be partially based on the expectation that we should have hired public servants at less cost to do this work. I find this expectation downplays some important facts.

First of all, these skills are in high demand, and the committee has heard that there is roughly a 30% vacancy in IT positions in the government, so I'm not sure we could have run a successful staffing process.

Second, it takes months to hire somebody.

Finally, with respect to funding, I would remind the committee that the agency absorbed a significant portion of these expenses and there was no ongoing funding. While “make or buy” decisions are made by managers, hiring public servants without an ongoing source of funds is not considered a prudent management practice. To be clear, as the end of the pandemic was starting to come into sight and border volumes were increasing, what we needed was more border services officers, not app developers.

I'd be happy to answer any questions.

• (1015)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to begin our first round.

Mr. Barrett, you have the floor for six minutes, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Mr. Ossowski, you were the president of the Canada Border Service Agency. Is that correct?

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes, I was.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How are you employed now?

Mr. John Ossowski: I work with PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Mr. Michael Barrett: What's your position with PricewaterhouseCoopers?

Mr. John Ossowski: My classification is managing director, but I'm a senior strategic adviser.

Mr. Michael Barrett: As a senior strategic adviser, are you aware of how much business your firm does with the Government of Canada?

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How much business is that?

Mr. John Ossowski: I don't have those numbers with me today.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Would you care to offer an estimation of how much business it is?

Mr. John Ossowski: That's corporate information that I'm not privy to share.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You're not privy to share it.

Mr. John Ossowski: I'm privy to it, but I'm not in a position to share it. That's something for the firm to respond to.

Mr. Michael Barrett: The value of contracts between your firm and the Government of Canada is not something you're prepared to share with us.

Mr. John Ossowski: That's not my information to share. That's the firm's information.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'm sorry. I think it's germane, but we're going to circle back to it.

We know PricewaterhouseCoopers does significant business with the Government of Canada, and formerly did business with the agency that you were the head of, which is the CBSA. You talked about taking casual employment with the CBSA so that you could access information while you were concurrently working in a senior strategic advisory role for PricewaterhouseCoopers. It's a firm that does significant business with the Government of Canada—it's

an amount so great and so sensitive that you're not even prepared to disclose it to the committee today.

Did you have any restraints put on you on the information you were able to access when you were employed by the current president of the CBSA in preparation for your testimony before a parliamentary committee?

Mr. John Ossowski: The letter of offer that I signed had conflict of interest provisions in it. I had access to my email, my calendar and other documents associated with events in the emails and the calendar.

Mr. Michael Barrett: To be clear, the events—

Mr. John Ossowski: If I may finish, I recused myself from all work with CBSA while at PWC.

Mr. Michael Barrett: We've seen the record of the CBSA on conflicts of interest under your leadership. We heard testimony from CBSA officials about boozy dinners with contractors working for the CBSA, so you'll have to excuse me if I don't put great stock in the seriousness with which you viewed the conflict of interest requirements that you said you would follow.

You said you had access to any documents related to items in your calendar and email. As the president of the CBSA, I'd imagine that would be pretty significant. For a firm that hired the former head of the CBSA, had previously done business with the CBSA and has done in excess of tens of millions of dollars, if not hundreds of millions of dollars, in business with the Government of Canada, it seems there would be a commercial advantage to having its senior adviser, an executive with this firm, gain access to all of the information from your calendar, emails and associated documents when you were given that employment by Ms. O'Gorman.

On what date were you given access to the CBSA?

Mr. John Ossowski: I don't recall the specific date. It was some time in January, initially, to prepare for January 18, and it was restarted in February.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Can you please furnish this committee with the assigned offer of employment?

Mr. John Ossowski: I believe that's in the possession of the agency. I don't have a copy of it myself.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You don't have copies of any of the employment documents. You took a job with the CBSA and didn't keep a copy. Is that correct?

Mr. John Ossowski: I'll look for it, but I think you would be better off getting that from the agency. They would have a record of that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: If you have it, it would be best to get it from you, because we've asked you for it.

Mr. John Ossowski: I will look for it, and if I have it, I will certainly provide it.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You were paid for your casual employment to access the documents in preparation for your testimony. Is that correct?

Mr. John Ossowski: I was asked to submit hours for my preparation, and I submitted one day.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How much were you paid?

Mr. John Ossowski: It was roughly \$500.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You were paid \$500 to get access to internal files and documents, which, as I think I've already articulated, is a highly questionable decision and certainly raises ethical questions based on your current employment and your employer's interest in commercially sensitive information at the CBSA.

Do you have a list of all of the documents, or are you still in possession of the documents that you retrieved in preparation for your committee appearance?

• (1020)

Mr. John Ossowski: The one document I was actually provided with, besides looking at my emails and calendars, was the ATIP that was provided to OGGO. That is several hundred pages long, and I did not even look at it.

I know you asked Ms. O'Gorman for the forensics of what I touched when I was in there, and I'll leave it up to her to provide that information to you. I think you'll find it fairly underwhelming.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I find it very interesting, because the current president of the CBSA said you had access to any of the documents you would have had access to when you were president of the CBSA.

Mr. John Ossowski: While that may be the case, I did not access anything or take any advantage that would put me in any conflict of interest.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Again, I can't take at face value the seriousness with which you've approached the conflict of interest document that you signed, knowing the casual relationship with the avoidance of conflict of interest that the department had under your leadership.

What better way is there for a big consulting firm to drum up new business with the CBSA, which had been cutting big cheques with very little accountability, than to have the agency's former president, now the firm's employee, given access to all of the documents he had while working as the head of that agency?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. John Ossowski: Mr. Chair, I feel compelled to respond to this.

The Chair: I'll allow it.

Go ahead.

Mr. John Ossowski: Thank you.

Given all that has gone on in this ArriveCAN discussion over the last couple of years, do you really believe that I would further put myself into jeopardy by pursuing something that had some conflict of interest?

The Chair: Thank you. I'll take that question as rhetorical.

Ms. Yip, you have the floor for six minutes, please.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Ossowski, for coming in as a witness today.

Do you want to add anything more to the statement you just gave?

Mr. John Ossowski: No, I'm fine. Thank you.

Ms. Jean Yip: What role did you play in the development and oversight of the ArriveCAN app during your tenure as the president of the CBSA?

Mr. John Ossowski: Obviously, as the president, I was running the agency during the pandemic. We had a request from the Public Health Agency to develop the app, because of the paper process that was in place at the time. I asked my officials to look into it. They came up with the idea, and they went ahead and procured the necessary resources to deploy it.

Ms. Jean Yip: What role did you play in terms of oversight of the ArriveCAN app?

Mr. John Ossowski: Certainly, as the accounting officer at the time, I was responsible for making sure there was a system of controls in place. Those obviously are delegated down into the organization, and specific responsibility was given to the CFO.

There are standard operating procedures. There was training before delegations were provided. There were managers' individual responsibilities to validate the work that was happening with their employees, and then there were sample audits and invoice checks that were done as part of the regular financial management process.

Ms. Jean Yip: Did you have any involvement in the procurement process, specifically when it came to selecting contractors?

Mr. John Ossowski: I was not involved in any aspect of the vendor selection process or any aspects of the contracts whatsoever.

Ms. Jean Yip: What role does the president of the CBSA generally play in the agency's procurement process?

Mr. John Ossowski: Generally, I would only be involved in a procurement process if it required a Treasury Board submission or something that required ministerial approval.

Ms. Jean Yip: Could you please explain to us why it was necessary for you to be rehired for the one day on a casual basis in order to prepare for your committee appearance?

Mr. John Ossowski: Well, you can check my emails on this, but I did not necessarily want to be paid for this. I simply wanted access to my computer emails and calendars so that I could prepare for the committee.

As the committee is aware, relying on my memory in the first instance when I came to the committee didn't work too well for me, so getting some facts and some clarity of my records was important for subsequent testimonies.

Ms. Jean Yip: Do you know why they offered you this one-day contract of \$500?

• (1025)

Mr. John Ossowski: In order for someone to have access to the government account and check for their information, they need to be on strength, so I was offered a position so that I could access my emails and calendar and [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Ms. Jean Yip: Did this one-day contract also cover any expenses?

Mr. John Ossowski: No.

Ms. Jean Yip: Were there any expenses incurred in that one day?

Mr. John Ossowski: Just personal expenses.

Ms. Jean Yip: Was this in order to prepare for your appearance at the OGGO committee on January 18 of this year?

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes.

Just to clarify, when I say “personal expenses”, I mean on my personal well-being because of the time I spent preparing. There were no expenses submitted to the agency.

Ms. Jean Yip: There were no personal or work expenses.

Mr. John Ossowski: No.

Ms. Jean Yip: You mentioned something about emails that you were looking for to support your appearance.

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes.

Ms. Jean Yip: Could you provide more detail on that?

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes, sure.

I've gone to committee on three separate occasions before now. As the committee's inquiries have progressed, they've asked for very precise, detailed information, so it behooved me to be prepared for these types of questions. In order to do that, I needed access to my emails to refresh my memory and make sure the committee was getting the most accurate information possible to continue its deliberations.

Ms. Jean Yip: In an earlier answer as to your responsibilities as president of the CBSA, you mentioned that you also oversee sample audits.

Mr. John Ossowski: No. I said that the agency would perform sample audits of invoices as part of the financial management process. I think the CFO testified to that to you a couple of weeks ago in terms of the sampling they did of invoices around ArriveCAN.

Ms. Jean Yip: Why were you not rehired for your previous committee appearances on October 24, 2023, and in 2022?

Mr. John Ossowski: That's a good question.

I probably, in retrospect, should have sought that support from the agency to prepare for those appearances.

Ms. Jean Yip: You mentioned support from the agency. Could you elaborate a bit?

Mr. John Ossowski: I mean access to my emails to get a correct record of events for the committee's use.

Ms. Jean Yip: During your time as president of the CBSA, do you recall the agency providing support to past or current employees to aid their preparation for appearances at parliamentary committees?

Mr. John Ossowski: I don't recall that specifically, but it's not an uncommon practice, as Ms. O’Gorman pointed out the other day.

Ms. Jean Yip: Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You're at zero. If you have a quick question, I'll allow it, but you are spot-on at that.

Ms. Jean Yip: Okay. I'm just going to leave it, then.

Thank you, Mr. Ossowski.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have six minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Ossowski, you're a managing director at PwC. Do you know many clients who would be willing to pay you \$500 to read your old emails? I don't know any myself, and I built my career at PwC.

How can you believe that taxpayers want to pay you \$500 to read your old emails? Taxpayers paid for that. Does that seem normal to you?

[*English*]

Mr. John Ossowski: My best explanation of that would be that as a government employee, I was required to submit hours to the agency. I submitted one day's worth of hours, and they chose to give me a paycheque.

You can probably best get the answer on the rules around that from the agency.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Why didn't you refuse to take the \$500? Given that you're a PricewaterhouseCoopers employee, I don't think you need it.

Why did you agree to an exchange? Was it to protect the CBSA's reputation? Were you asked for anything in return?

[*English*]

Mr. John Ossowski: It was not to get anything in exchange. My initial response was that I did not want to get paid. They asked for my hours and they paid me. I'm happy to pay the money back.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I think that this would be a good start because taxpayers shouldn't have to pay you to prepare for a committee appearance. Since the ArriveCAN issue occurred under your watch, it's normal for you to have to answer questions.

My first questions are on that subject. According to The Globe and Mail, Botler AI submitted to the CBSA, specifically to Mr. Utano, warnings about misconduct involving GC Strategies, Dalian and Coradix on two occasions, in September 2021 and November 2022. You were still there in September 2021.

When did you first hear of the complaints being made by Botler AI?

• (1030)

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: The first time Botler made a complaint that I was aware of was during the committee proceedings. It happened after I left the agency, in the fall of 2022.

This is well-trodden ground at the government operations committee.

Mr. John Ossowski: To be clear, I received no allegations from Botler during my tenure as president.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Okay.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Do you think it's normal that complaints that later led to an RCMP investigation didn't reach your ears while you were the CBSA president? Do you think that's normal and that you were doing your job as head of the CBSA if you weren't even aware of such serious complaints?

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: As I mentioned, the complaint didn't happen during my tenure. Ms. O'Gorman received the first complaints and allegations in the fall of 2022. I had retired. If something had happened during my tenure, I would have investigated it and done whatever was required.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Yet, according to our information, the initial complaints made to Mr. Utano were submitted in September 2021. You were still on the job, according to The Globe and Mail. It seems strange that you didn't know and that everything happened after you left.

I'd like to ask you another question on this matter. During Mr. MacDonald's testimony before the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, we heard that Mr. Doan was the person in your office who chose GC Strategies, and that you were the person who put Deloitte, a PwC competitor, in the penalty box.

Why did you rule out Deloitte?

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: You had two questions there.

Mr. Utano testified at committee that the email he received from Botler in 2021 was about a pay issue, and they resolved it at his level. Nothing was brought to my attention.

With respect to Mr. Doan's testimony on the choice of GC Strategies, he made it clear that he was offered a choice between a technical, managed service, outsourcing option that Deloitte had put forward and something else that apparently had no reference to GC Strategies on it. I would refer you back to Mr. Doan's testimony.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I'm asking you the question, since Mr. Doan said, when he left your office, that Deloitte had been ruled out. Why was Deloitte ruled out? Above all, as the CBSA president, how could you not know or care about the details of

complaints from subcontractors such as Botler AI, but care about a contract being awarded to GC Strategies rather than Deloitte?

There seems to be a gap in decision-making with regard to two very important decisions. On the one hand, a supplier submitted a major complaint. On the other hand, a major non-competitive contract would ultimately be awarded to GC Strategies, a two-person company that provides no actual services.

Once again, why were you involved in a decision about that contract? Furthermore, why was Deloitte ruled out?

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: Well, I'm not sure what your reference is to Mr. Doan's leaving my office, but I've stated on multiple occasions at other committee appearances that Mr. Doan never corresponded with me or provided me with any...asked me for any advice on anything to do with the contracts or the options with this, so I don't.... The testimony is there. The departmental records have been provided. There are thousands of pages of ATIP the committees have access to. I was not involved in the vendor selection process, and nothing was brought to my attention about allegations of wrongdoing by Botler during my tenure.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: So, only Mr. Utano, Mr. MacDonald and Mr. Doan knew how GC Strategies was selected. You were never made aware of anything related to the selection of GC Strategies for the ArriveCAN file.

• (1035)

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: I was not involved in the vendor selection process. There's no record that I was involved in the vendor selection process. Mr. Doan was offered a technical choice, in terms of a managed service by Deloitte or a staff augmentation approach, and he's testified to that. I believe you have all the documents around that. I was not involved in the vendor selection process in any way, shape or form.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next up is Ms. Blaney. It's nice to see you again. You have the floor for six minutes, please.

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

It's nice to have some time with you, Mr. Ossowski.

I think the biggest challenge, of course, is that for Canadians, who are living through so much in a time of inflation and a cost-of-living crisis, seeing all of these resources go out the door has really made a huge impact on them. I think of how a lot of money, like \$60 million in profits, would have made a huge difference in multiple ridings across the country to help people alleviate food insecurity, for one example.

This committee heard valuable testimony, in an earlier meeting with the national president of the Customs and Immigration Union, that frontline officers were never consulted on the development of the app or any of its 70 updates. This really concerns me, especially as someone who works closely with people out on the front line, because they often have the most effective solutions since they're the ones doing the work. I know that my colleague Blake Desjarlais also brought up this issue with the current president, Ms. Erin O'Gorman, but since you were the decision-maker during the development of that, can you tell us why it is that frontline border officers weren't consulted for this app development?

Mr. John Ossowski: I think it's important to remember that, when these changes happened, they were as a result of public health orders or orders in council, so there was a necessary confidentiality until they came into force: It was usually a very short time period, often less than 24 hours. Before any changes happened—and while we certainly would have taken into account any feedback from the front line with respect to what was working, what wasn't and how to make it more useful—we were not ever able to disclose in advance what the upcoming changes were going to be, aside from within that very short window, to make sure they were aware if a change in posture or some change in process was required.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That's interesting to me. It's fascinating to me that there was no process in place. I understand what you're saying about the confidentiality and all of the requirements, but for me, looking at the fact that there were 70 updates, it seems like there was no process during this time when you actually selected some frontline workers to help guide you. The background of this app failed again and again—it was all over the media—so I'm just wondering, is there no process internally that you have whereby you actually work with frontline folks, who deliver the service and are often the ones who can give you the most effective information? There was no strategizing internally about how to do that work in what, I understand, was a dire circumstance. However, I would also say that during a dire circumstance is when you want to get it right the most, and it doesn't seem like that was, in any way, a priority.

Mr. John Ossowski: Mr. Chair, I would say that we had regular meetings with the union. We were in constant contact with our frontline officers and the regions during the pandemic. Anything that wasn't working, we tried to take into account, to make sure the border process would be as smooth as possible.

I would remind you that the officers themselves were vulnerable here. Especially in the very early days, when little was known about how the disease was transmitted and there were paper processes, we were very concerned with the front line and the personal protective posture that they had as they did their duties to ensure the flow of people who were entering back into the country.

We did our best to consult with them, but at the end of the day, there were very tight timelines and, because of necessary confidentiality around public health orders or orders in council, we weren't always able to do it as fulsomely as we might have wanted to.

• (1040)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay.

We also heard from Mr. Weber, the president of the union, that the CBSA was short-staffed by about 2,000 to 3,000 workers prior

to the beginning of the pandemic, which gave way to the need for an application in the first place, and which I think tells you that if you're not working on the ground when crisis strikes, then you really have a problem. This is devastating to understand, so it gave way to the application in the first place, and the funds allocated to the ArriveCAN app could have hired 500 officers instead.

I understand that we were in the middle of a pandemic, but I'm wondering if there's any reflection on what happened prior to the pandemic and how not having enough people trained and ready created this crisis in which we've seen a huge amount of taxpayer dollars go to someone out there who's walking away with a huge amount of profit when the app didn't even work and we could have seen officers on the ground, providing services and doing it safely, if there had been planning put into place. I'm just wondering if there's any reflection on making sure you listen to the union, and that when there are not enough people to do the job, that is rectified.

Mr. John Ossowski: I would say that we would hire as many border services officers as we could afford to. It's as simple as that. We're always trying to rebalance the workforce in terms of retirements, attrition, workload changes and volumes, but to be clear, the purpose of the app was not to replace officers. The purpose of the app was to collect health care information from individuals so that it could be passed along to the provincial authorities and for the Public Health Agency to use in understanding how this virus was circulating around the globe. They're mutually exclusive in that regard.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Beginning our second round, Mr. Brock, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Larry Brock (Brantford—Brant, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Current CBSA president Ms. O'Gorman and suspended or on medical leave Minh Doan, a senior executive at CBSA, have been caught repeatedly lying to this committee and other committees.

In fact, the RCMP are investigating currently Minh Doan's allegations that he deleted purposely tens of thousands of emails over a four-year period. Are you aware of that, sir?

Mr. John Ossowski: I'm aware of what's been said at committee about this, but I have no other details.

Mr. Larry Brock: Did you ever engage in that type of activity? When you had access to your own emails after leaving the agency, did you delete some of your emails?

Mr. John Ossowski: I've always honoured whatever information management and document management principles were imposed on me by the government, so no, I have not inappropriately deleted any emails.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you.

Any and all emails relating to your communications with Minh Doan or your communications with GC Strategies or anything in relation to ArriveCAN or Botler AI would be preserved at the CBSA. Is that what you're saying, sir?

Mr. John Ossowski: I've reviewed my emails, and I have no evidence that anything has been changed or removed, from what I remember.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you.

Now, let's end this speculation once and for all. There's fairly clear evidence on the record at this committee and other committees that it was in fact Minh Doan who finally made the decision to select GC Strategies. Do you agree with that?

Mr. John Ossowski: I would go back to Mr. Doan's testimony, and he said he was offered a technical decision—

Mr. Larry Brock: Mr. Doan's testimony is rife with inconsistencies and outright lies. There is evidence from other witnesses, including written evidence, that clearly supports that there was one person who was in charge at the time at CBSA. It was Minh Doan who held that position and who ultimately selected GC Strategies.

I'm asking you, sir, whether or not you agree with that.

Mr. John Ossowski: I do not agree with that.

Mr. Larry Brock: That's fine.

The RCMP, as I said, are investigating this as well as a number of other issues surrounding CBSA and other agencies. Have the RCMP contacted you, sir?

Mr. John Ossowski: No, they have not.

Mr. Larry Brock: Have they requested any documentation from you?

Mr. John Ossowski: No, they have not.

Mr. Larry Brock: Will you co-operate with them when and if they decide to talk to you?

Mr. John Ossowski: Absolutely.

Mr. Larry Brock: The president of the CBSA, Erin O'Gorman, appeared two days ago. She was quite clear that only one casual employee contract was offered to you, and that was the one-day contract we spoke about. That's not accurate at all. In fact, you've received more than one contract since you left CBSA. Isn't that correct?

• (1045)

Mr. John Ossowski: Mr. Chair, the initial contract that occurred was for my appearance on January 18. After we closed out that contract, I was invited back to OGGO in February, but it didn't work out for scheduling reasons, so that contract was restarted. I believe what she said was that under her tenure, it's happened only once. Maybe she was just referring to me once, but in fact there were two separate contracts. Actually, I would just clarify that they're not contracts; I'm on casual employment status.

Mr. Larry Brock: Did you, in fact, sign a contract in relation to your appearance today?

Mr. John Ossowski: I signed a casual employment letter of offer.

Mr. Larry Brock: Okay.

How much are you receiving?

Mr. John Ossowski: Nothing.

Mr. Larry Brock: All right.

Now, in relation to the documentation, you claim you accessed only your emails and your calendars, but again, that's not accurate, because you had access to literally everything at the CBSA surrounding this scandal. Isn't that correct, sir?

Mr. John Ossowski: Notionally, that would be the case.

Mr. John Ossowski: You have the department records of what I've accessed.

Mr. Larry Brock: Right.

Mr. Larry Brock: Yes.

Mr. John Ossowski: I think you'll find them underwhelming.

Mr. Larry Brock: Well, Ms. O'Gorman was asked two days ago what documentation you had received, and she very curtly said that she didn't know and we'd have to ask you, so we're asking you.

Isn't it true that Ms. O'Gorman actually furnished you with a number of documents in relation to your committee appearances, including the statement of allegations against Mr. MacDonald and Mr. Utano?

Mr. John Ossowski: Ms. O'Gorman has not personally provided me with any information, and I have never seen the statement of fact or allegations against Mr. Utano or Mr. MacDonald.

Mr. Larry Brock: You would disagree that emails exist from Ms. O'Gorman to you, including attachments with documentation regarding the statement of fact against Mr. MacDonald and Mr. Utano. Is that correct?

Mr. John Ossowski: I have no knowledge of any emails from Ms. O'Gorman about the statement of fact or the allegations.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That is your time, Mr. Brock.

Next up is Mr. Sorbara.

You have the floor for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

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

Thank you, everyone. Welcome and good morning to everyone.

Mr. Ossowski, welcome to the committee today, and thank you for availing yourself and answering the questions that have been posed.

Before I begin my line of questioning, is there anything, John—I can just refer to you by your first name—you'd like to add in terms of the questions you've answered to date from any of my colleagues? Is there any clarification or anything you wish to expand on?

Mr. John Ossowski: Thank you for the offer. I think I'm fine for now.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Okay. Thank you.

John, in your comments to date, you've commented that as CBSA president, you were not involved in the vendor selection process. Can you elaborate, please?

Mr. John Ossowski: As I've said, generally speaking, as a deputy minister, I would get involved in a contracting process only if it required ministerial authority or briefing or a Treasury Board submission. None of those occurred in this case.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: I'm a recent member of this committee, and I know many questions have been asked on this issue.

Mr. Ossowski, in terms of your professional background, how long have you been working in the public service?

Mr. John Ossowski: I spent just over 32 years in the government. I worked as a deputy minister, in the deputy minister ranks, for 10 years, serving both the Conservative and Liberal parties.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: You have served under both administrations in a deputy minister role?

Mr. John Ossowski: At the deputy minister rank, yes.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Mr. Ossowski, and thank you for your service to the Government of Canada and, obviously, its citizens.

In terms of your experience in going into when the pandemic happened, obviously it was what we call a once-in-a-lifetime event, hopefully not to be repeated any time soon. In terms of the challenges of ramping down and then ramping up and the staffing challenges that you saw and obviously were intricately involved in just because of the nature of what was happening, can you comment on that with regard to the early days of the pandemic and what you were seeing?

Mr. John Ossowski: You know, when you go back and look at your emails, you see the complexity of the environment that was happening at the time.

As I mentioned, we had to deal with fear in our own workforce around our frontline officers and the exposure that they might have despite their training. There were a lot of unknowns, and there was a lot of hesitancy in terms of what was coming. We were constantly readjusting our resources. We were shutting down the largest unprotected border in the world. It took a lot of effort to coordinate with our U.S. colleagues to make sure that there would be continued flow of food, medicine and supplies in and out of the country. It required a great deal of co-operation from everybody involved, and it was a hands-on, 24-7 environment until we faced whatever the next change was that was happening.

There was remarkable flexibility on behalf of the workforce and all of my colleagues in other departments to do the best we could. There was no playbook.

In fact, I was reading in the paper today about fears of avian flu and another potential pandemic. I hope there were a lot of lessons learned here in terms of what the future might hold for us in terms of how we would respond to a situation like that.

• (1050)

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Of course, sometimes we need to remind ourselves that nearly 60,000 Canadians died of COVID-19 during the pandemic. It behooves us to remember that we needed the government to marshal all the resources via the various agencies, including the CBSA, to protect Canadians and to protect our

economy so that we could snap back out as soon as possible and ramp back up, which we did.

Mr. Ossowski, much mention has been made of your role in the CBSA and in terms of meeting with vendors, third party suppliers. There's an RFP, which goes out at all levels of government and stuff. How would you characterize when you would meet or not meet with contractors and subcontractors? Would it be only within the work purview, or would it be outside of the work purview?

Mr. John Ossowski: Certainly, it was only ever in the work purview unless there was some sort of event that I was at where vendors were present. In terms of people pitching me, that happened very infrequently to me directly. Usually that was handled within other parts of the organization.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you for that clarification, Mr. Ossowski.

In terms of the rollout of the ArriveCAN app and that app process, is there anything in hindsight that you think we could have done differently regarding the development oversight of the application?

Mr. John Ossowski: First of all, it's important to understand...and the Auditor General said that it was reasonable to go and get outside help at the beginning. This procurement vehicle that we used was the only option that was available to us. Speed was of the essence. It was the quickest way to ramp up our capacity to deliver a very simple app at the beginning to replace a piece of paper with people's basic tombstone information—biographical information.

As you've heard from others, in retrospect, yes, there should have been financial coding set up right at the very beginning so that we could track the expenses more carefully. However, I want to remind the committee that, as I said in my opening remarks, all the rules were in place. It appears, unfortunately, that they were not always followed. I make no excuses for the lack of documentation and the other things that the Auditor General found in her study. That's not acceptable. That should not have happened. I'm sure that, as we move forward, the agency is putting in measures to make sure that doesn't happen again.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Ossowski.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Ossowski, I will continue on that last point. While you were the CBSA president, the Auditor General issued a devastating finding: All CBSA's expenditures were poorly documented, public funds were mismanaged, there was a general lack of basic information and some public servants engaged in questionable practices. All this happened while you were the CBSA president.

Do you believe that you did a good job as head of the CBSA?

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: I always try to do the best I can possibly do.

• (1055)

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Right.

If you were in my shoes, would you think I was right in saying that the CBSA president didn't do his job during those years, particularly at that time, given everything we now know thanks to the Auditor General's report?

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: Obviously, as the person responsible for the day-to-day agency, responsible to the minister of the day for the running of the agency, in hindsight, yes, there are lessons learned. If I could roll back the clock, there would be some changes, but I remain proud of the work that I did and that my team did during the pandemic.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Let's move on to an interesting subject, which is the awarding of non-competitive contracts. In that respect, ArriveCAN is only the tip of the iceberg.

When the CBSA was under your leadership, the number of contracts awarded to companies and consulting firms exploded, as did the number of non-competitive contracts. At the end of your tenure, nearly 20% of all contracts were awarded on a non-competitive basis, which is high.

Were you aware of that? Otherwise, how did the CBSA lose control of the situation?

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: I have no recollection of the percentages of contracts that were awarded competitively or non-competitively. Obviously, if something is valued under whatever the threshold is—I think it's \$25,000—

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I know the rules, but there are many—

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: —then it would be awarded non-competitively, so—

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Yes, I know the rules.

The Chair: Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, your time is up.

[English]

Next is Ms. Blaney.

You have the floor for two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I found it interesting.... Mr. Ossowski just said that he is proud of the work that happened around the app.

It is shocking to me that this would be your testimony. I understand that it was also your previous testimony at OGGO.

It's an app that cost Canadian taxpayers millions of dollars, and now we're spending a lot of time trying to get to the bottom of this. If that is your opinion, I'm just curious.... You talked about doing things differently if you could go back. What would you change if you could restart this process?

Mr. John Ossowski: There was no choice but to develop an app. It was clear that the Public Health Agency needed a better way to collect this information. I am proud of the way the agency responded.

Obviously, I'm basing it on what I knew then versus what is being revealed now. The app was still the right answer to the challenge we had. It facilitated our ability to manage the border, and it will continue to facilitate, in its new form, legitimate travel and trade across the country. Other countries are using similar approaches. In terms of how it was...what was spent, that's the debate of the procurement system, and people are looking at that in terms of how to manage that better. However, it was the only option available to us at the time—to procure these outside resources to help us build the app.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: My next question is this: Were you aware of the initial allegations of misconduct made by Botler?

Mr. John Ossowski: As I've answered, those allegations did not come to the agency, as Ms. O'Gorman has testified, until the fall of 2022, and I had already retired at that point in time.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Looking back, do you see any serious concerns with internal processes and mechanisms because that didn't come up? Is there something that you would do differently?

Mr. John Ossowski: If the allegations of wrongdoing had been brought to my attention, I would have done something about it, but they were not.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That goes back to the question I asked, though. It wasn't brought to your attention. What mechanisms need to change so that it could be brought to the attention of this important role?

Mr. John Ossowski: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Dutt was free to email me directly, and she did not. My officials dealt with her complaints, and Ms. O'Gorman dealt with her subsequent issue around their complaint.

Mr. Utano testified that the first issue that he received from Ms. Dutt was around pay. It was not about a complaint per se that needed any further investigation, and it was certainly not brought to my attention.

• (1100)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next up, Ms. Block, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I echo my colleague's comments when it comes to the fact that it is absolutely mind-boggling to have the former president of the CBSA state that he remains proud of the work his department undertook, when it is actually the CBSA that has served as a bellwether for the complete debacle we are studying, now known as arrive scam, and all of the other issues that have started to arise when it comes to procurement and contracting across all departments in the Government of Canada.

I'm going to circle back to some of the questions that my colleague Mr. Barrett asked, just to make sure I heard your answers correctly, Mr. Ossowski.

I'll start by restating the umbrage you seem to have taken or are taking with the fact that individuals have accused you of lying when you came to committee, yet when you appeared before the government operations and estimates committee, you did lie about ever meeting Kristian Firth. You did not say, "I do not recall," when the question was asked of you. You gave a definitive no. We have that in the testimony.

As we know, at a subsequent meeting, you then corrected the record to say that you had in fact met with him. You stated that you were able to make the correction because the CBSA paid you to provide you with a document stating that you had in fact held this meeting. I think most Canadians would find it strange that a former employee gets rehired as a casual employee under a temporary contract to gain access to information needed to correct the record or defend themselves when most people pay to get access to information from the Government of Canada through ATIPs.

From your earlier response, are we to understand that this is a common practice, people getting hired to gain access to information so they can defend themselves?

Mr. John Ossowski: Let's be very clear here. When I originally answered no, I testified in December 2022. I did so without the benefit of any support from the agency. It was based on my recollection. I answered too quickly. I should have gone to the agency afterwards and asked for them to verify my testimony. I didn't.

In October of last year—

Mrs. Kelly Block: Mr. Chair—

Mr. John Ossowski: Mr. Chair, may I finish my answer, please?

Mrs. Kelly Block: No, that is not the answer to the question I asked.

Mr. John Ossowski: I'm getting to it, if I may, Mr. Chair.

Mrs. Kelly Block: No, Mr. Chair. This is my time—

Mr. John Ossowski: Mr. Chair, I did not go back to the agency—

Mrs. Kelly Block: This is my time.

Mr. John Ossowski: —as a part of a casual contract—

Mrs. Kelly Block: I have asked a question, and I expect an answer.

The Chair: Ms. Block, hold on. I've stopped the clock.

Mr. Ossowski, I know it can be frustrating, but the time is for the members. There are other members who will be asking questions, and I am sure they will allow you to come back to it.

I do recognize that you provided an answer. The time is now Mrs. Block's. I'm going to turn back to that, but first, Mr. Drouin has a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Mr. Chair, just a reminder that the rules need to be followed. When two witnesses or a witness and an MP are speaking simultaneously, it's hard for the interpreters to do their job. I want to ensure that we carry out our duties respectfully.

The Chair: That's true.

[*English*]

That's another reason for it, to maintain order as well to ensure members are not speaking over the interpreters. I know committees can clash, so I do try to maintain order.

Ms. Block, you have the floor again for two minutes and 10 seconds.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and I apologize. I expect that, when a member indicates that they are receiving an answer to a question they did not ask, the witness will respect that.

My question to you, Mr. Ossowski, is this: Is it a common practice for individuals to get hired as casual employees under temporary contracts in order to gain access to information they need to defend themselves in front of committee?

● (1105)

Mr. John Ossowski: To be clear, I was not on casual employment status in October when I apologized, and yes, it is normal practice for people to be given access to their information through casual employment. I did that, for example, for the public order inquiry. This is common practice so that people can refresh their memory and provide committees with the most accurate information for their deliberations.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Who was your contact at the CBSA for requesting these documents?

Mr. John Ossowski: I didn't request documents; I requested access to my email. I've been given a laptop so I can sign on with my credentials to access my emails and calendar.

Mrs. Kelly Block: President O'Gorman stated you had access to all of your emails and any other information you requested, so that is in direct conflict with what you just stated. You testified here today that you accessed information only to confirm a meeting and, I'm assuming, a calendar. Did it really take you eight hours to review your calendar event in order to confirm your meeting with Kristian Firth?

Mr. John Ossowski: I already replied that I was not on casual employment status in October when I had that validated around the Teams meeting with Kristian Firth, so that was just based on me. I requested documents from the agency to validate that, but I was not on casual employment status at that point in time.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That is the time.

Up next is Ms. Khalid. Ms. Khalid, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to our witness for being here today.

Mr. Ossowski, can I just, first and foremost, confirm this with you? Did you have any interaction with any ministers while you were dealing with the ArriveCAN app?

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes, I was involved in cabinet meetings and briefings of the ministers regularly, in terms of the border aspects of how we were managing the pandemic.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Did any ministers sign off on any of the contracts that are in question today?

Mr. John Ossowski: No, I don't believe the minister was ever required to sign off on any of these contracts.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: When we're talking about your involvement with these three companies, does this date to pre-COVID or pre-ArriveCAN? Prior to COVID, did you have interactions with these organizations that we're talking about today?

Mr. John Ossowski: Which three companies...?

Ms. Iqra Khalid: We're talking about Dalian. We're talking about the ones that are associated with the ArriveCAN app, the contractors.

Mr. John Ossowski: No, the only interactions were the well-noted one with GC Strategies and the Botler interaction.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: What kinds of interactions did you have with them pre-COVID?

Mr. John Ossowski: Pre-COVID...? I have to go back and check the dates specifically, but there's a record, I believe in the government operations committee, that I was initially approached while there was an opportunity to use a tool that Botler had developed, and then there was a subsequent Teams meeting, which Mr. Firth attended, at which I was actually pitched the approach. I think that was during the pandemic. It was not before the pandemic.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: When you interact with them, how do you conduct yourself and how does your department conduct itself when you're dealing with companies like this?

Mr. John Ossowski: If I'm being given a demonstration of something, I pay attention to the demonstration and I ask questions. It's as simple as that.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Okay.

Can we turn now to how you've engaged with Kristian Firth of GC Strategies? Can we talk about the infamous whisky...whatever it was, and that organization or event that happened? Can you tell us a bit about that?

Mr. John Ossowski: I have no knowledge of that event, aside from what's been revealed during these proceedings.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Have you met with Kristian Firth?

Mr. John Ossowski: I have never met Mr. Kristian Firth.

He was on one Teams meeting when I was being presented with the Botler AI solution. He had no speaking role in the meeting. To this day, I don't recall him even being at the meeting.

• (1110)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Have you met with any of his organization's contractors or subcontractors in an outside setting beyond the work that was being done?

Mr. John Ossowski: I have no recollection of meeting any of these contractors in or outside of the workplace.

I will just caveat that by saying there was a recognition event for the team working on the app. There may have been contractors present at that, but that was a virtual "thank you" for the people who had been working very hard to get the app out the door.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Were you aware of CBSA employees who had been hanging out with GC Strategies and its contractors, etc.?

Mr. John Ossowski: No. It was never brought to my attention.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Okay. Is there anything you would like to add?

You know what? I understand and I appreciate it. I really want to thank the CBSA and the officers who were on the front lines during COVID-19, which was the most difficult time Canada has gone through in a very long time. Our CBSA officers were there. They were supportive. They were trying to make sure that Canadians were protected.

Going through all of this... Just to reframe exactly what we're doing, we're talking about the ArriveCAN app, which we think cost too much money. It is not about the fact that the app was not effective, that it didn't work or that it was not helpful to Canadians. It is literally about the fact that it cost too much money and about how that procurement process happened.

I just want to differentiate between the work our CBSA officers do and what happened here with the ArriveCAN app.

Mr. Ossowski, I'll leave you with the last words, if there's anything you want to add to that.

Mr. John Ossowski: Thank you.

As I say, I am and I will remain proud of the way the agency responded during the pandemic. There were obviously lessons learned from the app and the procurement process, which everyone regrets and wishes had not been the case. They're being corrected. The agency will be in a better posture to deal with whatever curveballs it gets thrown down the road.

If I could just go back, Mr. Chair, if there's some time just to clarify Ms. Block's—

The Chair: Actually, we're well over the time.

I'm sure you'll have a chance to come back to that. I appreciate that you have a lot to say. That's why we're just going to begin our third round.

Mr. Barrett, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did you have access to the binder prepared for CBSA President O'Gorman before her appearance at committee, either in an electronic format or in a paper format?

Mr. John Ossowski: I have not accessed, seen or been sent any briefing materials for Ms. O'Gorman's use.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Was one offered? Was any of that material offered to you?

Mr. John Ossowski: Do you mean in terms of her briefing book?

Mr. Michael Barrett: I mean any preparation material that was used or designed for the use of the current president of the CBSA.

Mr. John Ossowski: The only thing I recall is that around our January 18 appearance, when we appeared together, we exchanged opening statements in advance.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How far in advance?

Mr. John Ossowski: I think it was the day before.

Mr. Michael Barrett: That's interesting. Ms. O'Gorman made a point in her appearance this week of saying there was no effort by anyone to get their stories straight, but certainly, witnesses—a former employee of the government and the current head of an agency—exchanging opening statements days prior to their appearance at committee looks like exactly that.

When you accessed files or resources of the CBSA while in your casual employment status, where did you do that? From what location?

Mr. John Ossowski: There was no intent to get our story straight. It was a courtesy to share opening remarks.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Answer the question, sir.

Mr. John Ossowski: The answer to the question is that I accessed these emails and my calendar through a laptop at my home.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did you attend a CBSA office to receive the laptop or sign the offer of employment?

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes, I went to the office to receive the laptop and sign my letter of employment.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Which campus?

Mr. John Ossowski: It was the office headquarters on Laurier Avenue.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You were an employee of PricewaterhouseCoopers on the date that you had access to the CBSA materials. Were you also being paid by PricewaterhouseCoopers on the same day that you were being paid by the Government of Canada?

• (1115)

Mr. John Ossowski: I don't even remember the exact day that I billed for, so potentially, yes.

Thank you.

Mr. Michael Barrett: It sounds like a yes.

We've heard a lot about double-dipping, where we have folks who are providing services to the Government of Canada while also working for the Government of Canada.

We know that PricewaterhouseCoopers does hundreds of millions of dollars in business with the government. The fact that this is further evidence of the disregard for the public dollar in the ongoing scandal of double-dipping is unsurprising, of course, but troubling for Canadians.

You said that you were proud of ArriveCAN. I've talked to front-line border services officers. I speak to them regularly. I spoke to them during the time that you talk about, the challenging time of 2020 to 2022 and in the time since then.

This cost \$60 million, and it wasn't necessary. It absolutely was not necessary. You know, you said you would have spent more on hiring border services officers if you had money to do it. However, you had the money. The border services officers have been very clear with me that they could, with resources made available to them, have done more than was done with the app. They would also have been able to do the job they're there to do: to make sure that the travelling public is safe and that we have the proper flow of commerce into our country.

Instead, scammers and grifters were paid. Pools and decks were put on the houses of contractors who added no value to this app, charging 30% in commissions and bonuses paid to executives, while border services officers weren't able to execute their core functions.

To be clear, you're proud of the \$60-million price tag on the app.

Mr. John Ossowski: First of all, I take umbrage that I'm being referred to as double-dipping to prepare for this committee.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You have been, sir.

Mr. John Ossowski: Second, there was no ongoing source of funds to hire border services officers. My point in my opening remarks was—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Ossowski, you spent \$60 million on this thing, so there were funds available. You made a choice, and the choice was to spend it in the way that you did, with 30% commissions going to people who added no value.

You talk about programmers—

The Chair: Do you have a question, Mr. Barrett?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Kristian Firth and Darren Anthony are not programmers, but the people who—

The Chair: Do you have a question?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Are you proud of doing business with these grifters instead of properly funding frontline border services officers?

Mr. John Ossowski: There was no choice at the time but to use this procurement vehicle.

Mr. Michael Barrett: It's a failure of leadership.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Drouin, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Ossowski, for being here.

I certainly don't want to comment on PwC. It is a respectable firm that has done business with the Government of Canada under red leadership and under blue leadership. I think it's unfair the way we or certain members are treating your relationship with PwC. It has nothing to do with the issue at hand.

I want to go back to the early days of the pandemic, when the CBSA was seized with borders that were closed. What was the rationale and the thinking when the borders were closed? Were you able to predict everything that was going to happen when the border was closed?

Mr. John Ossowski: It is a profoundly complicated and blunt process to shut down the border. As you may recall at some point in the beginning of the pandemic, only Canadian citizens were allowed to return home. I had border service officers who were married to U.S. border service officers, in fact, who could not go back home or could not come across with their family members, because they were not Canadian citizens. This was very hard at a personal level for everyone involved in terms of—for lack of better words—the rough justice that was required to manage and contain the spread of the virus.

We did the best we could. We had established criteria. We had to make adjustments all the time. I had a full-time 24-7 border operations centre trying to apply judgment in tricky situations that could not have been anticipated. It was incredibly complicated and stressful. I am proud of the way the agency responded in that, because it was hard on everyone, but, at the end of the day, it was the right thing to do.

• (1120)

Mr. Francis Drouin: I recall even truck drivers weren't sure at the time whether or not they were insured if they were crossing the border for commercial purposes. I had several chats with constituents at the time.

I want to go back to developing the app, an app that there was no time to test properly, to release slowly to the public. I don't know if you have general experience in developing an application, but a lot of accusations have been made about how the app should have cost only \$84,000. I'm just wondering.... With other applications across the IT space, there are hosting costs. The more customers or the more clients sign on, the more it costs. Can you elaborate on that?

Mr. John Ossowski: People often refer to the fact that it blew past its \$80,000 budget. There was no budget. The \$80,000 was what they estimated was the cost of the first release of the app. The Auditor General has said there were 177 versions of the app. Each of those apps required incredible efforts to put together. It required cloud service access to support it. It required security work to be

done to it. It required a call centre for people to access. It required a web-based version. It had to go through the app stores to be vetted before it was released. The time frames were incredibly tight. The user testing was not always able to be done in time.

Obviously, there was one big error, which involved putting folks into quarantine who should not have been put into quarantine, and we apologized for that. But this was a very sophisticated tool, and I've seen no credible evidence from any witness to say that they could have done it much less expensively than was done, notwithstanding the procurement issues at play. This was a very complicated app. There were many, many different versions, which were not able to be predicted in advance. We were always playing catch-up, quite frankly, to see what the art of the possible was for what the Public Health Agency needed to do to manage the virus properly.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Just for the record again, you had no direct involvement in signing the ArriveCAN contract at all?

Mr. John Ossowski: I was not involved in the contracting process in any way, shape or form.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Mr. Ossowski, don't worry. If I disagree with your comments, I won't insult you, unlike some.

I'd like to ask you a final question. Had you known that employees or public servants reporting to you had taken part in whisky tastings, dinners at restaurants, golf tournaments or similar events with consultants, what would you have done? Would you have dismissed them, for example, particularly if they had failed to report the events?

[*English*]

Mr. John Ossowski: If, in fact, it had been brought to my attention, there would likely have been an investigation. If wrongdoing had been found to have happened, there are a range of penalties that could have been applied to the person.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Given what we know, do you believe it's wrong to participate in that kind of event without reporting it, and to accept gifts such as expensive whisky tastings? You're not going to tell me now that this didn't constitute wrongdoing. I think a dismissal, or at least a suspension, was in order, don't you?

[*English*]

Mr. John Ossowski: The code of conduct is very clear on this. If an employee receives an offer, they're supposed to report it—

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Yes. However, what would your decision have been?

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: —and it is not something that I would expect them to do.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Right.

I'll ask you the same question again. What would your decision have been?

• (1125)

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: If one of my direct reports had said they'd received an offer such as this, I would have hoped they had turned it down. If they had not, we would have had further inquiries.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: So you're refusing to answer the question. Understood.

You're appearing here as an individual. You're refusing to answer the question, which is quite mind-blowing, since you were the CBSA president when public servants did this. You now have the chance to say that, had you known, you would have taken serious action, including dismissing those employees. It's really unfortunate that you're refusing to answer that question.

You're appearing here as an individual. On Tuesday, we learned that some employees who attended these events were still working at the CBSA. Not only are they still working there, but they haven't faced any consequences and they have even been promoted. Do you believe that this is normal? I'd like a clear answer, please.

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: I did answer the question. There is a code of conduct. Employees are to report offers of hospitality like this. If they have not done so, it needs to be investigated and they need to be reprimanded.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Cannings, it's nice to see you, sir. You have the floor for two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Richard Cannings (South Okanagan—West Kootenay, NDP): Thank you, Chair. It's a pleasure to be here this morning, bright and early out here in British Columbia.

I sit on the international trade committee, and we've studied the ArriveCAN situation from the perspective of how it affected movement and trade across the border. Here we are today, talking more about the financial misdoings, I would say.

All of this irresponsibility, in addition to the facts the Auditor General has brought to light, leads me to believe there was misconduct or, at the very least, some terrible management practices at the highest level of the CBSA. There was no formal agreement be-

tween PHAC and the CBSA between April 2020 and July 2021 to clarify roles and responsibilities. There was the absence of a designated lead, and good project management practices—such as developing project objectives, goals, budgets, cost estimates and risk management activities—weren't carried out. There was also a lack of financial record-keeping. Eventually, it became impossible to have a check and balance system.

My simple overall question is this: Wouldn't you say, in the end, that this is your legacy and that the CBSA, under your tenure, is responsible for this?

Mr. John Ossowski: There are lots of regrets here around things the Auditor General and others have found out about how this happened. I would say, as I said in my opening remarks, that this was an emergency situation. Eventually, we had an agreement with the Public Health Agency, which was the business owner of the app.

There should have been better documentation. There should have been better recognition of the controls and procedures, and I regret that that did not happen under my watch. I hope that's not my sole legacy as the president of the CBSA.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Those are all the questions I have.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next up, we have Mr. Brock for five minutes, please.

Mr. Larry Brock: You said Minh Doan didn't choose GC Strategies. Who did?

Mr. John Ossowski: This has come up multiple times—

Mr. Larry Brock: Just give me a name, sir.

Mr. John Ossowski: I think the question and the issue are really who proposed GC Strategies—

Mr. Larry Brock: Just give me a name, sir. Who ultimately signed off on and chose GC Strategies? It's a simple question. I want a simple answer.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: I have a point of order, Chair. I want to get your attention.

I think the tone of the questioning from my colleague on the opposition side.... We've had a really good meeting today, and the tone of his questions, to start off here, has veered off to somewhere that is, if I can use the word, disrespectful. I think that would probably be apt.

The Chair: I don't think it's disrespectful. It's certainly sharp, but it's within Mr. Brock's ability to decide how he would like to question the witness. It has certainly been respectful.

Mr. Brock, you have four minutes and 40 seconds.

• (1130)

Mr. Larry Brock: Give us a name, please.

Mr. John Ossowski: I do not know who chose GC Strategies. The Auditor General was also not able to determine who chose GC Strategies.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you, sir. This is my time.

For the record, the president of the CBSA, an extremely large ministry, is unable to give evidence to this committee as to who ultimately chose GC Strategies. That's absolutely incredible, sir.

Moving on, I want you to table, within three weeks, all emails and attachments sent to you by Erin O'Gorman since you left the agency.

A document tabled by the CBSA called—

The Chair: Hold on. I want to get an acknowledgement from the witness if he's prepared to do that. Generally, and I'm sure you're aware of this, committees, or members, through committees, can request information. Is that something you'd be prepared to provide to us or—

Mr. John Ossowski: You're asking for all emails that I received from Ms. O'Gorman.

The Chair: Is that correct, Mr. Brock? I stopped the clock.

Mr. Larry Brock: It's all emails, all attachments and any other pieces of correspondence since you left the agency....

The Chair: Okay, I think that's clear. Thank you.

Mr. John Ossowski: I'd be happy to do that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Brock, you have four minutes.

Mr. Larry Brock: There's a document, which came out of the Auditor General's report, from the CBSA called "Lessons Learned". A highlight in the conclusion of that document indicates that a central governance authority was needed. You previously said that you briefed ministers and cabinet during your tenure as president. Did you raise that issue with them?

Mr. John Ossowski: I'm not aware of the document that Mr. Brock is referring to.

Mr. Larry Brock: I'm asking about the concept of a central governance authority. Did you raise that with ministers and cabinet?

Mr. John Ossowski: I have no recollection of raising that with ministers or cabinet.

Mr. Larry Brock: Did you advocate for this?

Mr. John Ossowski: I don't even know what the reference is without looking at the document and seeing how it's been explained.

Mr. Larry Brock: If it's not you and if it's not the current president, President O'Gorman, then who is it?

Mr. John Ossowski: I'd be happy to review the document if the member would like to provide it to me.

Mr. Larry Brock: Is it likely the Minister of Public Safety?

Mr. John Ossowski: Again, I'd be happy to review the document if the member would provide it to me.

Mr. Larry Brock: Given everything that has transpired with this scandal, do you think it's highly appropriate for this committee, if not other committees, to have the former minister of public safety, Marco Mendicino, testify on these issues?

Mr. John Ossowski: I have no opinion on what the committee chooses to do in terms of who it calls for witnesses.

Mr. Larry Brock: Do you think he has relevant information?

Mr. John Ossowski: I have no comment on who would provide relevant information.

Mr. Larry Brock: Marco Mendicino essentially said to Minh Doan that, "Someone's head should be on a platter," with respect to the controversy surrounding GC Strategies. Are you aware of that?

Mr. John Ossowski: I believe those comments and that testimony happened after I left the agency.

Mr. Larry Brock: All right.

Are you surprised? I know how proud you are of the work you did and the value that you claim was delivered to Canadians against the backdrop of all the scandals and a very damning Auditor General report about mismanagement at the CBSA under your leadership. Are you surprised, now that the RCMP is actively investigating not only the ArriveCAN debacle but circumstances surrounding GC Strategies?

Mr. John Ossowski: I look forward to the outcome of the RCMP's investigation.

Mr. Larry Brock: The question is, are you surprised? Do you think it's appropriate that the RCMP is investigating criminality surrounding ArriveCAN contracting under your leadership and the very fraudulent and forged practices exhibited by GC Strategies? Does it surprise you?

Mr. John Ossowski: I think that an unbiased, thoughtful and full-some investigation is warranted.

Mr. Larry Brock: The procurement ombudsman found that Justin Trudeau's government favoured McKinsey contracting, a Liberal-connected firm with over \$100 million in government contracts. In one case, the CBSA saw that McKinsey had not applied for a contract under your leadership, sir, so the CBSA revised the statement of work, with no documented explanation, allowing McKinsey to qualify. Were you part of that decision?

• (1135)

Mr. John Ossowski: I have no recollection of being involved in the contracting around McKinsey.

Mr. Larry Brock: How many millions of dollars, under your leadership, were awarded to McKinsey?

Mr. John Ossowski: I have no recollection of how much was spent with McKinsey.

Mr. Larry Brock: Will you table that information? Will you ask Erin O'Gorman to assist you in tabling that information?

Mr. John Ossowski: I think that question would be better posed to the agency.

Mr. Larry Brock: I'm putting it to you, sir, because I don't know when Ms. O'Gorman will attend again.

The McKinsey contracts were under your leadership, so will you undertake to speak with Ms. O'Gorman and tell this committee how many millions of dollars in contracts, under your leadership, were awarded to McKinsey & Company?

The Chair: Thank you. Mr. Brock, hold on—

Mr. Larry Brock: Perhaps you could ask for another one-day contract.

The Chair: Mr. Brock, your time is up. I gave you more time, because you're trying to get information.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you.

The Chair: I allowed that, and I will allow the witness to answer, but then we'll go to Ms. Yip.

Mr. John Ossowski: Mr. Chair, I am here as an individual. I'm sure Ms. O'Gorman has officials watching the testimony today who are taking note of the request.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Yip, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order in follow-up to Mr. Brock's questions.

The Chair: Yes, go ahead.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Ossowski repeatedly gave the answer that he has no recollection of that. I assume there would be agreement from the committee to ask him to provide clear yes-or-no answers on the matters he claimed to have no recollection of and to follow—

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, you're a skilled parliamentarian. Witnesses are here to answer questions, and members are free to pose them. I cannot compel answers. If there's business to take up later, we can do that.

I'm going to turn now to Ms. Yip for—

Mr. Michael Barrett: On a point of order, Chair, the chairs of standing committees can certainly compel answers from witnesses.

The Chair: Pardon me. We are getting answers from the witness. If you don't like them, we can take it up later.

I'm going to turn now to Ms. Yip.

You have the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Jean Yip: Thank you.

Mr. Ossowski, I believe you wanted to provide us with clarification during Mrs. Block's questions.

The Chair: Just one second, please.

Was that clear for everyone? It sounded awfully low, so I want to make sure. Could you hear Ms. Yip okay, Mr. Ossowski?

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I stopped the clock. You have four minutes and 45 seconds.

Go ahead, please, sir.

Mr. John Ossowski: Just to go over this again, when I initially replied to Mr. Barrett's question in December 2022, I did so as an individual, with no support from the department and with no access to my information.

Mr. Curry subsequently found out that there was another meeting completely unrelated to ArriveCAN. I immediately came to the committee and offered my apologies for not having had the agency validate my testimony. I had no recollection of Mr. Firth's attending that virtual Teams meeting, which had nothing to do with ArriveCAN. I was not an employee of the agency at that time, so I was not paid to do anything at that point in time. It was a correction to an error in terms of what I recalled, and that's the end of the story. It's nothing more than that.

Ms. Jean Yip: Did you work directly with Diane Daly?

Mr. John Ossowski: I have no recollection of working directly with Diane Daly. She was in the information, science and technology branch.

Ms. Jean Yip: Do you know if she was involved in procurement or contracting decisions?

Mr. John Ossowski: I know that only from what has been revealed in testimony.

Ms. Jean Yip: Did you learn anything new from, or were you at all surprised by, any of Kristian Firth's responses before the House last month?

Mr. John Ossowski: I have many thoughts on Mr. Firth's response and his appearance before the House, but none of them are of relevance to this committee.

Ms. Jean Yip: Would you like to share some thoughts?

Mr. John Ossowski: I'm fine. Thank you.

Ms. Jean Yip: When did you begin working for PricewaterhouseCoopers?

Mr. John Ossowski: I started with PricewaterhouseCoopers in August 2022.

Ms. Jean Yip: What is your role there?

Mr. John Ossowski: My classification is managing director, and I provide strategic advice to the organization.

Ms. Jean Yip: Does this position involve any engagement with the federal government?

• (1140)

Mr. John Ossowski: To be clear, I was subject to all kinds of post-employment conflict of interest requirements, which I have always scrupulously maintained and adhered to.

I have very limited direct interaction with government clients. I'm more of a back-office strategic adviser support person.

Ms. Jean Yip: Thank you.

Are there no other post-employment limitations?

Mr. John Ossowski: I still am subject to all kinds of limitations in terms of lobbying and things like that, but I had a one-year cooling-off period. I'm not allowed to switch sides. They're all outlined in the Conflict of Interest Act, and my initial employment with the firm was approved by the Conflict of Interest Commissioner.

Ms. Jean Yip: Do you agree with the Auditor General's recommendations in this report?

Mr. John Ossowski: It's not for me to disagree. The agency has agreed with them and is putting in steps to make the appropriate changes.

Ms. Jean Yip: Looking back, do you have any recommendations of your own to improve the procurement process?

Mr. John Ossowski: The procurement process is a very, very complicated regime, for lack of better words. I think that there is room for improvements and these types of things as a result of what we've discovered through the committee's work on ArriveCAN.

Ms. Jean Yip: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Mr. John Ossowski: I'm really not a specialist in procurement. I think there is always room for things to be better. I think the government will always need the support of the private sector as it's trying to do transformative and big-system changes, and finding a co-operative way forward would behoove both industry and the government.

Ms. Jean Yip: Is there anything else you would like to finish off in terms of your testimony here?

Mr. John Ossowski: No, that's it. I think I'm good. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Yip.

I just have a question.

You mentioned—and I think this is believable—that if wrongdoing had been sent to you, you would have acted on it. You said something at the top that was interesting, which is that the Auditor General found that systems “were in place, but...they were not...followed.”

Who's responsible? That's what we're trying to get at here. You seem to be... You were in a unique position to be responsible. In fact, you said that you were the person responsible and that you were proud of the work. Can you answer that question for us? Who was responsible when rules were in place to ensure that tax dollars were wisely spent and accounted for, but the system broke down internally? Was it officials under you, or was it officials over you?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel (Pontiac, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You have the floor.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: I'm new to this committee, so I'd like some clarification from you. Can the chair of a committee participate, as you are now doing?

The Chair: Yes. It's common practice for the chair to ask questions. However, it doesn't last long and these aren't usually partisan questions. So, to answer your question, yes, I can ask a few brief questions.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Did you say that you could ask partisan questions? Sorry, I'm not sure I understood.

The Chair: I'm entitled to ask questions.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Does that include partisan questions?

[*English*]

Mr. John Ossowski: Mr. Chair, shall I respond?

The Chair: Please do. Thank you.

Mr. John Ossowski: My responsibilities as the accounting officer are laid out in section 16 of the FAA. With respect to some of the findings that you're referring to, those are delegated down into the organization. Ultimately, the person who signs off on section 34 of the FAA is attesting to the fact that the goods or services have been received. Whoever has that delegated authority and the manager who oversees that person are the people responsible for those decisions, based on the delegations that have been given to them and the requirements under the FAA.

The Chair: Here's my last question.

I've worked on the executive side. What kind of pressure were you and your department under from the Privy Council Office to get this done? I can certainly see how the non-partisan Privy Council Office would be tremendously worried about cross-border relations, given what the U.S. administration was signalling on border travel. What kind of pressure was the department under to just get this done? “Damn the torpedoes—we need to have this done immediately.” Did that have an impact on rule-following internally? That's my last question.

• (1145)

Mr. John Ossowski: I don't recall any direction from the Privy Council Office to get this done. It was really just us trying to help the Public Health Agency do their part.

Obviously, we were a key lever in terms of advising them about what was operationally possible at the border, because we are the experts on how the border works, but in terms of the information they wanted and how they chose to proceed with the orders in council, there was no pressure on us. There were times when they wanted to do something more quickly, and we told them it simply was not possible to do it that quickly, because of the complexity the changes would require.

It was very co-operative, but it was done very quickly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Ossowski, for your testimony today and your participation in relation to our study of “Report 1: ArriveCAN”.

[*Translation*]

You can provide additional information to the clerk. If you have any questions, please consult the clerk.

[English]

I'll suspend for five minutes before we bring on our next witness.

The witness is excused. Thank you.

• (1145)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: Let's resume the meeting, please. We are back in order.

I made a commitment to keep this very brief and even, subject to everyone's agreement, to proceed with it. This is an issue that Madame Sinclair-Desgagné raised to me. I'll speak to it and then turn things over to her.

This is in regard to information provided by TBS on April 15. We received media requests to have these documents shared. The documents were distributed to members and, as they themselves are not confidential, we can choose to publish them on our website or look at adopting a routine motion in regard to how to treat these types of requests, given the number of documents we received. Maybe we won't have a long discussion unless members want to.

Madame Sinclair-Desgagné, would you like to address this, since I know you raised it with the clerk and me?

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Yes, of course.

In light of the article that appeared in The Globe and Mail on Monday morning, it seems quite obvious to the people following the ArriveCAN file that the newspaper received copies of the documents sent to the committee on April 15. To be clear, these documents contained written answers to questions put to witnesses by MPs during public meetings. Those responses were provided to a journalist. Consequently, the information in these documents became public without the committee's consent, which I find unfortunate. I'd like to correct this mistake on behalf of the committee by making these documents public for a number of reasons. I'm talking about the documents from April 15 only.

First, this article was published in English. I believe that journalists representing the francophone media should also have access to the Treasury Board documents translated for the committee. That would be normal.

Second, this is about fairness to the media, the fourth estate of a healthy democracy. When documents are shared with a newspaper, the least we can do is to make them public, so that there's some transparency in this democracy.

I'd like the committee's opinion on this matter. It's important to right this wrong. I suggest that these documents be simply published on the committee's web site. Again, I'm speaking specifically about the April 15 documents sent to us and made available to the committee members. This is the Treasury Board document on conflicts of interest, as well as the amounts allocated to Dalian, Coradix and GC Strategies over at least 15 years. This includes years spanning two successive governments. I'd like those two documents made public, now that the most of the information has been disclosed to a single journalist.

• (1210)

[English]

The Chair: Just to summarize, then, there is a motion to have these documents, which were shared with members, put on our website. My view is that when they are made public, they should be released to anyone who asks for them. The clerk recommended that I hold on and bring it back to the committee, but it is something that I think should be addressed.

Ms. Khalid, you have your hand up. The floor is yours, please.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thanks very much, Chair.

I really appreciate Madame Sinclair-Desgagné's raising this very important point.

I, for one, would really like to know who in our committee is leaking these documents, and who in any committee is leaking documents that are supposed to be confidential. We are supposed to maintain respect and decorum in our committees. I'm hoping that we can find the answers to those questions. If Madame Sinclair-Desgagné has those answers, I would love for her to answer them.

However, I think this is a very important point: We must always maintain the decorum of our committees, Chair. I know I have raised this with you, in many ways and at many different points, to ensure that each and every one of us is respecting how our committees are operating, because if we don't operate effectively and respect the democratic values that govern our committees, then we're not doing our country much of a service, to be honest.

I would love to understand exactly what happened here before we go into the depth of Madame Sinclair-Desgagné's motion.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Drouin, you have the floor.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I agree with the representative for the Bloc Québécois, Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné. I'm fairly certain that she's not responsible for leaking the documents. If that had been the case, a French-speaking journalist would have written this article.

We need to respect the rules of the committee concerning the documents we receive. I support what Ms. Khalid said. Someone should find out how these documents were released to an English-speaking journalist. I'm not accusing anybody. However, English-speaking and French-speaking journalists should have the same rights.

The Chair: Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I would just like to answer Ms. Khalid's question. We don't know who leaked these documents, and we'll probably never know. In any case, that isn't the point of my motion. The point of my motion is for the committee to do the honourable thing and make these documents public. I absolutely do not want to start a witch hunt. We can resolve this issue quickly by putting these April 15 documents on the committee's website. That way, we can quickly settle this fairness issue.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Yip, I saw your hand up. Do you have a comment to make?

Just in the meantime, Madame Sinclair-Desgagné, could you read out your motion, please?

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Yes, of course. The French version reads as follows:

Given that the information contained in the written response from the Treasury Board Secretariat, which was transmitted to committee members on April 15, 2024, appears to have been disclosed to a Globe and Mail journalist, as per the article titled "Three firms tied to ArriveCan app got \$1-billion in federal contracts, Ottawa reveals", published May 13, 2024,

That the committee make public on its website the said documents sent in the written response from the Treasury Board Secretariat dated April 15, 2024.

The Chair: Thank you.

• (1215)

[English]

I'm not seeing more hands. I have Ms. Khalid and then Monsieur Drouin.

Our regular clerk is not here today to maybe give us an update on what happened, at least behind the scenes. I'm not in a position to do so either.

I guess I'm looking to the committee on how to proceed. Do we want to deal with Madame Sinclair-Desgagné's motion to release these documents?

[Translation]

Should we also ensure that these documents are available in French and English? These two points have been raised today.

[English]

Then, of course, we can come back and have a discussion another time about a protocol, because it did put the chair in an awkward position when documents were available to some but not all.

Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much, Chair.

I am very agreeable to the main motion. I think it is unfortunately lacking a big aspect, which is why we are in this position right now. I think we should amend the motion to investigate who released these documents and give discretion to the chair to deal with the repercussions accordingly.

I think this is a very serious issue. We abide by very stringent rules as to what is in camera, what kinds of sensitive documents are

presented to us and how we study them. I used to sit on the international human rights subcommittee, where the release of documents or the release of the names of witnesses would often have severe impacts on the security and safety of the witnesses who came before our committee. I think protecting the sanctity of what is presented to our committee is very, very important. As the public accounts committee, I think it is incumbent upon us to really investigate this matter and figure out why this happened, who did it and what the consequences are.

I sincerely believe, Chair, that there should be consequences to this.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I have a point of order.

Did Ms. Khalid move a specific amendment, or was she making suggestions? If she moved—

Ms. Iqra Khalid: No, Chair. I moved a specific amendment.

The Chair: I'm in a position where I am certainly open to hearing more about this. I consulted the clerk on it. I don't want to speak for her, so I'm going to nudge the committee to push this off and deal with it when the clerk is here to speak to what is considered in camera, confidential information and what is not.

From my point of view, both in discussion with the clerk and as a matter of practice, a response to a public question is certainly not in camera sensitive. Now, having said that, there's no doubt that information provided to members is committee business, but this is not at the level of a report being made public.

Having said that, we can discuss this, but I think we should hear from the clerk before we proceed too far down this path.

I have Madame Sinclair-Desgagné.

Ms. Khalid, is your hand up again, or is that a previous hand?

[Translation]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné now has the floor.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Mr. Chair, I think we're getting bogged down in the details. The motion is clear. If it's approved, having the documents on the website isn't a problem. I don't think the clerk will have an opinion to share. Actually, she doesn't. I think we need to move forward on this issue as quickly as possible. If there's a procedural issue here, any clerk can speak to it. The clerk currently with us could answer any general procedural questions.

I'm not particularly supportive of the amendment. I'll wait to hear from the Conservatives on the original motion before I decide how to respond to this amendment.

• (1220)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Barrett is up.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks very much, Chair.

On the main motion, we support the motion. With respect to the secondary issue raised by Ms. Khalid, having heard your comments, notionally, that's fine. I'll defer to the chair's suggestion, so I want to put that off as a separate issue until the clerk returns.

Generally speaking, however, on the issue of the chair reporting back to the committee following an investigation of the particular circumstances, that's fine, but if we could deal with the main motion and then, if we have consensus, direct the chair and the clerk to be prepared to report back to the committee at its next sitting, that would be great. It would achieve both objectives. It would satisfy exactly Madame Sinclair-Desgagné's motion, but it would also then chart us to the right place.

We'll hear from the clerk, through the chair, at the next meeting. If more steps are required, generally speaking, we'll be supportive of that, but let's deal with the main motion. We'll support that.

The spirit of what Ms. Khalid is asking is fine, but if we could hear from the clerk and then vote on that as a separate issue, that would be our preference.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Genuis, and then I'll see Ms. Khalid after that.

Mr. Genuis, go ahead.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'll strike, Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you, Chair.

This hour, which you scheduled, was supposed to be for a witness who.... I'm not sure what happened. I was able to hear her very clearly, sitting in Mississauga—Erin Mills. I'm really wondering how those technical issues occurred.

However, I believe the amendment I have proposed and moved is a big part of the motion that Madame Sinclair-Desgagné has moved.

I take your advice, Chair, and I think we should perhaps wait until our clerk is back at this committee. In so doing—taking your advice, Chair—I move that this meeting do now adjourn.

The Chair: All right, we'll do a roll call on adjourning.

(Motion agreed to: yeas, 7; nays, 2)

The Chair: This meeting is adjourned. We'll see you on Tuesday. Have a nice long weekend and happy Victoria Day.

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