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Chair: Mr. Kelly McCauley

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

Tuesday, October 22, 2024

• (1245)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC)): Welcome back, everyone.

For those joining us at home, we are beginning the public portion of meeting number 147 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

Before we go to Mrs. Vignola—yes, I see that your hand is up, Mrs. Kusie—I have a couple of things.

I have to get approval for our budget for the indigenous procurement study.

I see hands up all around, approving. Thank you very much.

The other thing is this: The PBO has put out his economic update. Is there an interest in having him join us for one hour to discuss that?

An hon. member: Yes, I think so.

The Chair: Sometime down the road....

An hon. member: Sometime down the road....

The Chair: Yes, we're pretty full. I'm thinking November-ish. I will have a chat with them.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): It's for the holidays, as a present.

The Chair: Nothing is 100% guaranteed over Remembrance Day week. You have my absolute word on that.

Mrs. Vignola, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Thank you. Just a moment, please.

[*English*]

The Chair: Before we start with you, I want to thank you for your patience with this.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Mr. Chair, since my motion regarding the Governor General was ruled out of order, I would like to propose another.

We know that, on September 25 of this year, the media reported that the Governor General was unable to converse in French during

a visit to Quebec, despite the \$128,000 in training that was supposed to help her learn French.

My new motion is that the committee report to the House of Commons a reminder to the current Prime Minister and every subsequent one to choose a Governor General who speaks both official languages of Canada. That isn't attack on the person in the role of governor general. Speaking languages other than the two official languages—

[*English*]

The Chair: May I interrupt for a moment?

Did you have a copy sent to the clerk?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: A copy was sent this morning.

[*English*]

The Chair: Do you mind resending it, please?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: All right.

[*English*]

The Chair: Can you double-check and resend it? Then we'll send it out to everyone.

Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: As I was saying, the ability to speak languages other than English and French is certainly an asset, but it isn't a substitute for the ability to speak both official languages. It's important to keep that in mind during this whole discussion. I recognize that the current Governor General is a member of a first nation and that her appointment is part of the reconciliation process. I recognize that the ability to speak an indigenous language is an asset, but it shouldn't take the place of the requirement to speak both official languages.

If the government wishes to seek reconciliation, it should do so with everyone. It shouldn't try to pick a fight with someone else. If the Governor General was able to speak only French and another language that could be considered very beneficial in Canada, such as an indigenous language, people would have taken notice right away. This isn't about the person in the role of governor general, herself. It's about respecting all existing communities, especially official language communities.

I am calling on the committee to report to the House of Commons a friendly and respectful reminder that people mustn't be cast aside. The reminder would be not only for the current Prime Minister, but also for all future prime ministers. An asset is not a substitute for a requirement. I wanted to highlight that, especially under the circumstances, with all due respect to the person in the role of governor general.

Mr. Clerk, would you like me to read the motion? I wrote it in both official languages this morning.

• (1250)

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Marc-Olivier Girard): Do you have the most recent version?

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I'll give you the French version of the motion right away.

The Clerk: All right.

[English]

The Chair: This is what you read into the record right now. Is that right?

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Yes.

[English]

The Chair: We'll just read it in, in English.

We have Mr. Berthold on the list, and then anyone else, just put up your hands, please.

Can we just confirm, Mrs. Vignola, that this is what you had?

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Yes, that's exactly the motion I sent, and was talking about, a few minutes ago. The French version reads as follows:

Que le comité fasse rapport à la Chambre afin de rappeler à l'actuel Premier ministre et aux Premiers ministres subséquents de choisir un(e) Gouverneur(e) général(e) parlant les 2 langues officielles du Canada.

[English]

The Chair: Just read it in English to be on the safe side.

The Clerk: Do you want me to read it in English?

The Chair: Yes, please.

The Clerk: The English version that was just distributed says something like, "That the committee reports to the House a reminder to the current Prime Minister, and every subsequent one, to choose a Governor General who speaks both official languages."

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Is that correct, Mrs. Vignola?

Perfect.

Thanks, everyone, for your patience.

Mr. Berthold, welcome back to OGGO, sir.

[Translation]

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

Why are we here? Because the Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, disrespected French-speaking Canadians. We are here because the Prime Minister chose to flout the Official Languages Act, because he chose to put a very capable and honourable person in a difficult situation, a person who is unfortunately not fluent in both official languages.

We are here because the Prime Minister chose to play politics with an appointment as important as that of the Governor General, instead of respecting official languages. Francophones across the country and all Quebecers find that unacceptable. In fact, a survey showed that 71% of Quebecers felt that the appointment of a unilingual anglophone to the position of governor general was ridiculous and unacceptable.

For all those reasons, we have also tried to get the Standing Committee on Official Languages to adopt a motion criticizing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's lack of transparency regarding the process that led to the appointment of a Governor General who does not speak French in the performance of her duties.

I think it's entirely appropriate that we report our dissatisfaction to the House, out of respect for all French-speaking Canadians. We are talking about a process that led to someone who does not speak both of the country's official languages being appointed to the role of Governor General. It is entirely appropriate and normal for the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates to condemn the situation and report this to the House. We will therefore be supporting the member's motion.

• (1255)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I wanted to start off by emphasizing, highlighting and underscoring the fact that my colleague, Madame Vignola, has been steadfast at this committee, really from the moment that she set foot on this committee, as a champion of the French language and francophonie rights. I wanted to acknowledge her tremendous championing.

Having said that, it's important to also note that, even as this motion is phrased here, the work of understanding this issue belongs in the Standing Committee on Official Languages. I think it's important. I know OGGO is the mighty OGGO, and we tend to want to study a wide variety of issues, but we need to be very strategic about making sure that what we study is in the mandate of this committee. I believe that this issue, which is so vital and so important, belongs in the Standing Committee on Official Languages. It's important to respect the work of the Standing Committee on Official Languages and allow that committee to do its work, the work that it was established to look at.

Again, that has been my concern with this motion from the very beginning, that it does belong to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, but I just wanted to emphasize, acknowledge and respect the tremendous work and championing of Madame Vignola on this very important, critical issue.

The Chair: We have Mrs. Vignola and then Mr. Berthold.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

With all due respect to my fellow member, I have to point out that all the motion does is call on the committee to report to the House. It does not call on the committee to conduct a study or spend more time on the matter other than the discussion we're having right now.

The Governor General's expenditures do fall within the committee's mandate. I'm sure the honourable member recalls discussing the matter a few months ago as part of another study. We were looking into the travel expenses of the Governor General and her team on a trip to the Middle East, and we heard from protocol of Canada representatives. At the time, we had to take a close look at the mandate of the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates to confirm that examining the expenditures of the Governor General was indeed part of the committee's mandate.

Clearly, my motion does not formally refer to the expenditures on her French training. I have no issue with anyone taking French training, whether it's the Governor General or an MP. I strongly encourage it, in fact. The language of Molière is a wonderful language. The French we speak here, with the accents of the Americas, to quote a certain singer, is even more wonderful because it travels through time and space. Those accents are as wonderful as the river with which they are entwined, dancing along it like the wind and waves. I urge anyone who wants to take French classes to do so.

In the case of the Governor General, however, I'm disappointed to see that, despite those classes, her skills have not improved. I did not include the cost of her French training in the motion because I didn't want to press the point unnecessarily. This is not an attempt to humiliate the Governor General. I didn't want to demean the Governor General or her efforts. A person can learn French and still not be able to speak it. I know people who understand French but are always shy to speak it because of their accent. However, the more accents there are, the more beautiful and vibrant the language. That is why I removed the costs from my motion. That is also why I did not ask for a study. In my view, we can simply report the situation to the House and signal that we would like the current Prime Minister and those who come after him to appoint people who can speak both official languages. I mean no disrespect to anyone who was chosen in the past or who may be chosen in the future.

I really don't see anything to debate here, since I took out all the language that some members found contentious in my first motion. This version merely makes a point.

The Governor General's spending is still within the committee's purview, as was previously established. That's why I'm proposing that the committee report to the House without further preamble.

• (1300)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Berthold.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: I'll be quick, Mr. Chair.

I would hope that the Liberal members will stand with Quebeckers and French-speaking Canadians, who take great offence to the situation. It is the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates' responsibility to examine the expenditures, appointment process and overall functioning related to the Governor General's office, and to report to the House of Commons its dissatisfaction with the process that led to the appointment of a Governor General who does not speak one of the country's official languages, French.

As far as I'm concerned, this motion is entirely appropriate, and the House should debate the matter, so that something like this doesn't happen again. Members can't continually defend the bad decisions of a bad Prime Minister, as they are doing right now.

[*English*]

The Chair: We will go to Mr. Kusmierczyk and then Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I would simply state that whereas I agree that this committee studies issues of expenses, travel and supply, this clearly is an issue that does belong in the Standing Committee on Official Languages. This is a debate and a discussion on official languages. For that reason, I would move to adjourn debate.

The Chair: We will take a vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 4)

The Chair: The debate on this is adjourned.

Mr. Bachrach, you blocked yourself from speaking on this with your vote.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: It's to your benefit.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We do have some extra resources.

Ms. Kusie, go ahead.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Well, today, Mr. Chair, we had more bad news for Justin Trudeau but great news for Canadian taxpayers. The Auditor General of Canada, Ms. Karen Hogan, has made the decision to adhere to the September 17 vote of the House of Commons, which unanimously adopted a motion to concur in the 13th report of the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates—this very committee—to request that she complete an entire performance audit, on a priority basis, of all payments to GC Strategies.

It's fantastic that someone listens to the adopted motions of the House of Commons. This is very good news today, given all the work we have done here at the government operations committee to unearth and continue to dive into the arrive scam scandal. That's the good news, Mr. Chair.

The bad news, Mr. Chair, is that we have received another communication from the president of Canada Border Services Agency, Erin O’Gorman, in which she states that the committee had requested that the clerk contact Canada Border Services Agency to ask whether there are intact backup copies of Minh Doan’s emails—yes, Minh Doan, that name again—when he was an employee of the agency. That is part of the study of the ArriveCAN application. The committee ordered the production of all text messages between Cameron MacDonald and Minh Doan from 2018 to the present.

Canadians will be shocked with the response that we received, as I’m sure all committee members were, when they read this communication. It stated:

With respect to backup copies of Minh Doan’s emails: Mr. Doan’s email account was deleted following his departure from the CBSA in accordance with Treasury Board Secretariat’s Directive on Service and Digital, which outlines how Government of Canada organizations manage service delivery, information and data information technology and cybersecurity.

With respect to the text messages between Minh Doan and Cameron MacDonald: The CBSA does not have access to the requested text messages. I would draw your attention to a recent decision by the Information Commissioner in which she references the TBS Information Management Protocol—Instant Messaging Using a Mobile Device, which states: “...Instant messages that do not have business value are deemed to be transitory, and should be deleted as soon as possible”.

That’s very interesting, because Minh Doan, in his own arrive scam testimony, stated:

I needed to change my laptop because the battery on my current one was failing. When transferring files from my old computer to my new one, files were corrupted and the emails were lost. I personally reported this to my team to attempt a recovery of the emails. I believe CBSA still has these laptops and files in its possession.

Hmm. Apparently they do not.

He continued:

Everyone knows emails do not reside solely on a particular computer or laptop. They are delivered through servers where they are usually backed up. In the case of CBSA, the servers in question are under control of another department—Shared Services Canada. More importantly, all recipients, senders and people on cc would still have copies of their emails from me and could have produced them as required. Neither I nor anyone else can delete other individuals’ copies of emails. The loss of emails from my laptop would not result in them no longer existing anywhere else.

This is problematic for two reasons. The first reason is, are Canadians to believe that you can conduct shady business action which may not be favourable to the government—in this case, favourable to the people of Canada—leave your job, and just have none of your poor previous actions follow you? That’s what this letter from Ms. O’Gorman says, that you can do wrongdoing in your position as a public servant, in Canada, and leave your position, and the trail behind you is deleted of what you did. This isn’t right, and this has to change.

The second thing that’s very concerning regarding this letter from Ms. O’Gorman, and Minh Doan’s statement, is that there is an inconsistency with what this letter says and the testimony given by Minh Doan. Minh Doan, I will remind you and Canadians, was the CIO of the Canada Border Services Agency. How would the CIO not know the practices with regard to the management of technological information?

• (1305)

Something is rotten in Denmark, Mr. Chair. It’s very concerning.

Now, you may want to go to the Information Commissioner. She has indicated that this is under the realm of the Treasury Board.

The Integrity Commissioner certainly needs to be brought in again. Unfortunately, Mr. Chair, the Integrity Commissioner is also suffering as a result of being overwhelmed. In an October 7 article, she states that she is “so overwhelmed with tips about wrongdoing, from mismanagement to violations of departmental codes of conduct, that [her budget] needs to double...just to keep up.” The article also says, “She said it’s already causing two- to three-year delays in analyzing new cases.” It goes on to say that she says, “If we don’t get to the investigations, we can’t get to the conclusions and we can’t make recommendations.”

She then goes on to say in the article—and this part, Mr. Chair, is relevant to the letter from Madam O’Gorman—“We may get to the point where...evidence may no longer be available. People may move on, we may not be able to find them.” Hmm. This sounds very familiar, Mr. Chair. “People’s memories fade”—so conveniently they fade, Mr. Chair—“and so it will impact the outcome”—as we are seeing here.

However, unfortunately, Mr. Chair, she is not the only one who is impacted, perhaps intentionally, by underfunding by this government. The procurement ombud has also indicated that he is severely underfunded, which I believe is having an impact on the review of contracting with this government and the ability to make recommendations to move on.

In a December 13, 2023, article, the procurement ombud indicated that “Every year—except last year—we’ve seen a steady increase in cases.” So, that’s two years ago. He continued, “Without the appropriate resources we’re not able to do our jobs as effectively as we should.” Oh, that’s interesting. He also states, “There is inflation.” No kidding. “We’re just not able to do what is necessary moving forward [with] our existing budget.”

Later in the article, he says, “We’ve put forward a financial ask for new permanent funding that would allow us to be much more proactive in our approach.” That’s a good idea. “Being reactive isn’t actually a solution to the problem. We want to provide solutions to problems before they escalate. We need an increase to our permanent funding for that.”

Further on, he says, “The lack of transparency and trust means that bidders just aren’t participating in the competitive process.” He goes on, “The first thing...is to provide more accurate and complete proactive information about contracts.”

Finally, it goes back to our initial concerns, which, thank goodness, the Auditor General has started to dig into today. The procurement ombud is quoted in the article, saying, “Transparency matters” because “the taxpayers have a right to know”—you, the Canadian, have a right to know—“how their tax dollars are being spent, and if the goods being acquired are actually being delivered.”

Mr. Chair, there's overwhelming evidence—

• (1310)

Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

We're at 13 minutes over time. I just want to ask how much more time we have to end this, and when we can get to the motion.

The Chair: Yes, we do have resources for this.

However, please, if we could get to the motion....

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

There's overwhelming evidence from the statement by the Auditor General today, from the letter provided by Ms. O'Gorman, from the opposing testimony provided by Minh Doan, from the request by the Integrity Commissioner and finally from the request by the procurement ombud. It is necessary that we bring forward and pass this motion, I believe, at this time.

Given that the president of the Canada Border Services Agency, or CBSA, Erin O'Gorman, wrote the committee that the emails and text messages requested from Minh Doan were deleted after his departure, and that these emails were the subject of an Information Commissioner investigation, and that the procurement ombudsman is reviewing many of the contracts approved under Minh Doan's management at the Treasury Board Secretariat through his new study on bait and switch, the committee call the following witnesses:

President of the Treasury Board, Anita Anand,

Treasury Board officials,

President of the CBSA, Erin O'Gorman,

Information Commissioner of Canada, Caroline Maynard,

Public Sector Integrity Commissioner, Harriet Solloway,

Former Chief Technology Officer of Canada, Minh Doan,

Chief Technology Officer of Canada, Luc Gagnon,

Former Assistant Deputy Minister Health Canada, Cameron MacDonald, and

Procurement Ombud, Alexander Jeglic.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The motion has been distributed. We'll start a speaking list.

Mr. Kusmierczyk, please go ahead.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We very much welcome the work of the Auditor General on this important matter. Canadians want us to get to the bottom of this issue and make sure we strengthen the procurement processes and the contracting processes that are in place. That is the work of this committee. It's the reason we've had the Auditor General here. It's the reason we've had the procurement ombudsman here. It's the reason we've had countless witnesses here, including officials from CBSA, procurement and Treasury Board—to answer the questions that we expect answers for in this committee.

I want to emphasize that in the letter we received from the Auditor General, she states that she will be looking at the 118 contracts that were provided to GC Strategies since 2011, a period that dates back to the previous Conservative government of Stephen Harper.

I welcome this expanded review by the Auditor General to look at GC Strategies and the people who are part of it, and to look at the procurement practices around it dating back to 2011, which is when

the Conservative government of Stephen Harper was in power. This is a procurement issue. This is about accountability and transparency, and this committee is 100% committed to getting to the bottom of this issue and finding answers for Canadians.

I did want to put that on the record.

We just heard quite a lengthy preamble from my colleague Ms. Kusie. There is a lot to digest in this motion, which we are just seeing for the very first time. Mr. Chair, I would ask for a brief suspension, so that we may take a look at it and respond to it.

Thank you.

• (1315)

The Chair: We'll suspend for five minutes.

• (1315)

(Pause)

• (1320)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Just as a reminder for everyone, the email from President O'Gorman that was discussed was sent out at 9 a.m. yesterday, but the clerk has just resent it as well.

Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, we take this very seriously at committee. I want to underscore the fact that we had the procurement ombudsman and the Auditor General look at this issue. The RCMP, of course, is open to investigating this issue. Again, this committee has had 25 meetings on this issue. We know other committees have studied this, so we are committed to studying this issue. It's absolutely vital.

The motion that was put forward is quite substantial. We received the letter from Ms. O'Gorman yesterday, so I would move that we adjourn today to give ourselves an opportunity to read that letter and bring forward any changes to that motion that we see fit.

• (1325)

The Chair: Are you moving to adjourn the meeting or the motion?

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I'm moving to adjourn the meeting. We would like to come back to this motion at the next meeting, so we'd adjourn this meeting.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 4)

The Chair: Thanks, everyone, for your patience.

I'm sorry. Before we adjourn, please take a quick look at the outstanding recommendations. There are some that overlap with those of other parties. Please reach out and we'll get them settled in advance.

Thanks very much.

We are adjourned.

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