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Chair: Ms. Valerie Bradford



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• (1640)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order. We're already starting late, and I know we don't want to be any later than necessary.

Welcome to meeting number 107 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

I'd like to remind all members of the following points.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. All comments should be addressed through the chair. Members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak, whether participating in person or via Zoom—though I don't believe we have anyone on Zoom today. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. Thank you, all, for your co-operation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(i) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, September 17, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of the mission, mandate, role, structure and financing of the new capstone research funding organization announced in budget 2024.

It is now my pleasure to welcome Dr. Amy Parent, co-chair, indigenous leadership circle in research, and Dr. Mona Nemer, chief science adviser of Canada.

You'll be given up to five minutes for opening remarks, after which we'll proceed with rounds of questions.

Dr. Parent, I invite you to make your opening statement of up to five minutes.

Dr. Amy Parent (Co-Chair, Indigenous Leadership Circle in Research): I'm going to apologize in advance. I'll be five minutes and 34 seconds.

[Witness spoke in Nisga'a]

[English]

I will begin by acknowledging and showing my deep appreciation to the unceded and unsurrendered lands of the Anishinabe Algonquin peoples.

My Nisga'a name is Sigidimnak Noxs Ts'aawit. I carry maternal responsibilities to the Nisga'a Nation. I'm here in my role as co-chair of the indigenous research leadership circle with the tri-

agencies. In my spare time, I'm also a Canada research chair in indigenous education and governance, tier two, at Simon Fraser University.

Before I begin, I'd like to take a moment to honour the passing of Chief Justice Murray Sinclair, who undertook such respected leadership to advance reconciliation priorities here in Canada. It is in this spirit that I invite you to continue advancing reconciliation by helping to ensure that self-determination for indigenous research and our research governance is meaningfully respected and strengthened in Canada.

I'd like to briefly explain a little bit about the role of the indigenous leadership circle in research.

I will talk a little bit about the role of the indigenous research leadership circle and our responsibilities. Our circle members include first nations, Métis and Inuit leaders who come from diverse indigenous-led research backgrounds. I'm very grateful for their collective guidance and wisdom, which has configured into my statement with you today.

We are responsible for guiding the implementation of the tri-agency indigenous research strategic plan, SIRC, which goes from 2022 to 2026. Ultimately, we provide deep guidance and leadership by advising on matters that may impact the agencies' support for indigenous research, training and leadership related to the implementation of the SIRC plan. Ultimately, we communicate directly to the tri-agency presidents as well as the indigenous strategy team and the multiple committees that come to us in terms of our monitoring of this plan.

The plan itself is quite broad. It has four priorities—building relationships with first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples; priorities for indigenous peoples in research; creating greater funding accessibility; and championing indigenous leadership self-determination and capacity building in research.

I'll briefly highlight some of our concerns related to the capstone development and the Bouchard report, but I also look forward to your questioning.

Our first concern relates to insufficient indigenous engagement. The circle had minimal input on the capstone development. Of deep concern is that the Bouchard report lacked genuine indigenous representation on its advisory panel. It therefore poses significant legal challenges due to insufficient alignment with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as well as the SIRC plan.

Another concern is related to indigenous representation in the capstone governance structure. We see a single indigenous board member in the proposed capstone's governance as being inadequate to address what we would consider an increasingly complex and distinctions-based research landscape.

Within the report itself, we also saw significant epistemic bias. The Bouchard report has a very narrow and epistemic focus on the broad ecosystem of science, and has completely negated the holistic and transdisciplinary nature of indigenous knowledge systems.

We also saw a misalignment of priorities. The capstone's focus on mission-driven and international research misaligns with many of our local, national and international indigenous priorities and mandates, including Canada's SIRC plan.

Our final concern relates to budget sustainability. There is no clarity on how funding priorities for indigenous research will be governed by indigenous peoples, nations and organizations across this country.

We have four broad recommendations. I'd be happy to go into more detail on those.

Our first recommendation is to increase indigenous research funding and indigenous oversight. Current funding levels need to be maintained and extended to support indigenous-led research and governance needs. This includes integration with the Canada Foundation for Innovation to support indigenous infrastructure needs.

We also highly recommend further consultation on indigenous research needs and the development of an indigenous research agency. This should follow a distinctions-based approach and involve partnership with meaningful and robust consultation with indigenous rights holders.

We also recommend continuity of the existing tri-agency indigenous bodies, including the circle itself as well as the SIRC indigenous advisory circle, and adherence to UNDRIP while contemplating extending and really embracing the SIRC plan beyond 2026.

● (1645)

Our final recommendation relates to the appointment of distinctions-based indigenous representation on the advisory council on science and innovation to support the implementation of the national science and innovation strategy.

I'm very grateful to be sitting beside Dr. Nemer here, as well.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Dr. Nemer, the floor is now yours for an opening statement of up to five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Dr. Mona Nemer (Chief Science Advisor of Canada, Office of the Chief Science Advisor of Canada): Good afternoon, Madam Chair and distinguished members of the Standing Committee on Science and Research.

Thank you for inviting me to discuss the capstone organization project. It's always a pleasure to support the important work you do.

Let me start by saying that I welcome the modernization of our research funding ecosystem.

[*English*]

Two independent reports in the past seven years—the Naylor report in 2017 and the Bouchard report in 2023—have identified similar ongoing challenges and proposed convergent solutions.

One must therefore acknowledge that for the research enterprise in Canada to continue to prosper and benefit Canadians, business as usual is not an advisable option. Indeed, a lot has changed in past decades in terms of the research questions we need to tackle, the way we carry out research, the tools we use and the collaborators we choose. In spite of much effort, maximizing the benefits of research to society remains an area in need of attention in Canada.

It is therefore timely to examine how our federal funding mechanisms are fit to support research and development in the 21st century. Since my last appearance before this committee, my office has continued to promote science and provide advice to government on important issues affecting the lives of Canadians.

In so doing, we have come to appreciate the many strengths of our present research funding system but have also recognized persistent gaps, particularly when it comes to tackling complex challenges that require multidisciplinary, multi-sector and often international collaborations.

[*Translation*]

For example, our recently released report on the use of science in emergency management illustrates the vital need for research coordination, both in peacetime and during national emergencies. Preparing for and responding to domestic threats requires a focused and integrated approach to discovery, evidence generation and analysis.

● (1650)

[*English*]

It also requires built-in knowledge translation mechanisms to ensure that research is co-designed for the intended needs and that results inform communities, policy-makers and inventors alike.

The efforts of successive Canadian governments to support basic and applied research are laudable, but the disconnect between research and innovation programs has limited our ability to valorize, develop and commercialize research outputs for socio-economic benefits and gains in Canada.

The capstone organization must, therefore, maintain disciplinary excellence and ensure that fundamental research and talent development continue to thrive in all fields and disciplines. At the same time, it must address existing gaps, especially with respect to intellectual property protection and the support of the early critical stages of innovation.

[*Translation*]

In other words, it must facilitate the implementation of a research and innovation strategy for Canada and strengthen Canada's position on the world stage by clearly signalling our commitment to a strong and coherent research and innovation regime. To achieve this strategy, the umbrella organization must work collaboratively with other stakeholders to fund and build a world-class, inclusive research, knowledge and innovation system that benefits Canadians.

[*English*]

Its governance and workings must reflect international best practices, including inclusive representation of a broad range of stakeholders such as researchers and research institutions but also end-users, like employers and actors in the innovation ecosystem.

The organization must maintain the agility to responsibly embrace needs and challenges. Its workings must be grounded in evidence and excellence, which includes appropriate peer review, the selection of relevant criteria for the adjudication of funds and the evaluation of program performance in line with objectives.

[*Translation*]

My office would be happy to work with such an organization.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead on a point of order.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Chair and Clerk, I was wondering if you have any news on the ministers who are avoiding this committee.

We are waiting to hear back from Mark Holland, the Minister of Health, and Mr. Champagne, Minister of Innovation, as well as the heads of the tri-councils. It's been another week that they've been avoiding this committee. I was wondering if we have any news on those dates.

The Chair: I don't believe we're expecting them to appear today, so I think it's kind of unfair to say that they're avoiding the committee.

They have been reached out to in writing and we're waiting to hear. That's the update.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you both for your opening remarks.

I'll now open the floor to members for questions. Please be sure to indicate to whom your questions are directed.

We'll start that off with MP Tochor for six minutes.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses.

Dr. Nemer, the office of the chief science adviser was created in 2017. You have held that role throughout its whole existence.

In 60 seconds, can you kind of regroup what the top achievements of this role are that you would say have truly made the most enduring and positive impact on Canada? You could give a couple of examples, maybe.

Dr. Mona Nemer: Thank you so much.

Since we created the office, we have endeavoured to enhance the quality and the integrity of the science and the science infrastructure in the country. We now have a science integrity policy across all government departments. We have provided a road map for open science. We actually inaugurated last January a repository, so that everybody from the public can see how the funds are used in terms of research by government.

We provided a lot of advice during the COVID pandemic. We've provided a number of reports that are online.

I guess the list can go on. Suffice it to say that we've fulfilled all the mandates that were given to us in terms of advice to government and enhancing the advisory system by having science advisers in several departments. We've managed to connect with the international community as well.

● (1655)

Mr. Corey Tochor: What are the new objectives or goals for your organization now that this is done?

Dr. Mona Nemer: The organization is here to support and to provide advice on requests and to also have some foresight so that we're ready when governments ask us for advice on certain issues.

Right now, we're working on a number of complex issues for biodiversity science and technologies.

Mr. Corey Tochor: That'll be exciting. I know there will be future committees that will go through some of those goals and what you've accomplished. Thank you for answering that.

I'll switch gears a little bit to the goings-on in Ottawa.

In June, you received a letter that was to the presidents of the federal research granting councils from the ministries of health and innovation, calling for development of the capstone. The tri-councils were asked to work with and confer with you in your capacity as chief science adviser.

How many meetings have you had with the heads of the tri-councils since that letter was sent out?

Dr. Mona Nemer: This would be since June. I'm a member of the Canada research coordinating committee, which has those—

Mr. Corey Tochor: Have you had specific meetings with them on the capstone?

Dr. Mona Nemer: On the capstone, they have conferred with me twice. They showed me what they had developed in terms of their consultation strategy, and I provided comments on it.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Okay.

In terms of the need for the capstone, you support the capstone. Is that right?

Dr. Mona Nemer: Yes.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Could you provide some examples of issues or failures in the present tri-council funding model that make the capstone necessary?

Dr. Mona Nemer: As I said, if we're looking at the funding of disciplinary science, the granting councils have certainly done a good job. We can always have improvements.

I think the challenges have been when we try to.... I know people sometimes don't like the term "mission focused". You can call it "challenge" as well. We have examples during the pandemic, for example.

I can give you a couple of examples and areas where I feel that the system has not been as supportive. Agriculture is one of them. Agriculture requires natural sciences, social sciences and health sciences. It falls between the cracks. Biomanufacturing—

Mr. Corey Tochor: Would the capstone stop that, in your view?

Dr. Mona Nemer: The capstone should be addressing gaps, which means that it should be addressing these areas that are at the nexus of these different specific disciplines.

There's the life sciences and biomanufacturing strategy. We all realized how this was a national security issue during the pandemic. To have a specific focus on biomanufacturing, we had to...because it doesn't fall on one granting council only. We had to work with all the granting councils, the departments, etc. We had to have four layers to make sure that we stayed on focus.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Who do you think would be a good pick for the capstone chairperson or the president of the capstone? Who do you think that should be? Who would be on a short list for you?

Dr. Mona Nemer: It would be competence-based. I think it has to be someone with research credentials, for sure, but also with past leadership accomplishments. This is going to be a big job, and I'm sure that there are many qualified applicants in the country.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Thank you so much for the testimony today.

The Chair: You're right on time. Thank you very much.

We'll now turn to MP Chen for six minutes.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to both of our witnesses. This is for the chief science adviser.

You talked about your support for modernization. Can you share with our committee what is at stake if Canada does not move forward with a project like the capstone? What is at stake for Canada?

Dr. Mona Nemer: I think that what's at stake is not only our own global competitiveness, which translates into being able to keep the best researchers and the best innovators in the country, but also our ability to actually develop the solutions and technologies that we need to address the challenges we face. They all require different disciplines coming together.

I'll give you an example. I mentioned earlier the biomanufacturing strategy. In Canada, we have fallen behind in terms of the important area of medical devices and drug development, which are areas that require engineers and chemists to work with physiologists, clinicians, etc. I can give you many examples of these.

We have a lot of things falling between the cracks right now, and I think that we need to address that. Other countries have all addressed it. We're one of the few countries—one of the rare G7 countries—that has granting councils that are still discipline-based.

• (1700)

Mr. Shaun Chen: It sounds to me like a lot of opportunity is there in terms of what the capstone can accomplish.

In this committee and through the testimony, we've heard concerns around pandemic preparedness. We've talked about the COVID pandemic as an example, and you have referenced it today as well.

How can we enhance the linkages between health research and the work of government through Health Canada under an organization like the capstone?

Dr. Mona Nemer: I think we need a lot of research and a lot of solutions in health. Many of them come from the research that we perform, whether we talk about neuroscience or medical devices. There's also a very important component, which is research informing public policy. That's what I mean when I say that it's not always only creating products but also informing on policies and on things that work or don't work—for example, when we talk about addiction or about homelessness. I think it's very important that research also benefits society through policy and the actions that we take.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Both the Naylor and Bouchard reports identified challenges in a similar way with respect to Canada's research system over the past decades. You rightfully point out that they bring convergent solutions to the table.

What are the most compelling, in your opinion?

Dr. Mona Nemer: I think, in both cases, they've raised the importance of bringing the different disciplines together with a harmonized approach to project funding and talent development. They've raised the issue, also, of the connection with innovation. Right now, innovation is viewed as totally separate. We have a bunch of programs for innovation, but we don't have.... No one is looking after the first “valley of death”, because it is not really in the granting councils' mandates. The innovation programs address issues that have already been in industry.

I think that's something we all care about. We all care about seeing things happening in this country in terms of benefits. We need to ask ourselves the question of how best to link these. This is why creating an organization to address not just the gaps but also the needs is very important.

Mr. Shaun Chen: You've been reappointed to another term. Congratulations.

You've been in the role of chief science adviser since 2017. Could you share with us the most surprising thing you have encountered in your role?

Dr. Mona Nemer: I'm not going to tell you about the resistance to change, because that wouldn't surprise you.

Everywhere, needed things have been developed over time. These things became siloed. You have to break the silos. I saw it at the university. I see it in government. I see it in funding. We have to embrace change a little more enthusiastically.

• (1705)

Mr. Shaun Chen: In terms of the capstone and welcoming modernization, what would you say is the biggest opportunity that can come from that modernization?

Dr. Mona Nemer: You don't get to change your system every five years. I think it should be something that addresses our present needs but also has the flexibility to address future needs.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now turn to MP Blanchette-Joncas for six minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses who are with us today.

Dr. Nemer, it's great to see you here again today. My first question is for you.

We've been thinking about it and holding consultations for eight years. Two committees were set up at the government's request, and produced the Naylor report and the Bouchard report. These two committees have consulted and analyzed the scientific ecosystem, and they are both calling for the creation of an organizational framework to strengthen the coordination and effectiveness of research funding in Canada.

If anyone in Canada knows about the science ecosystem, it's you. That's your job.

Dr. Mona Nemer: I know.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Congratulations on that.

Today, I would like to know how many more years we'll have to wait before we have a capstone organization. Do you think we have all the information we need to set up a capstone organization? What are we missing?

Dr. Mona Nemer: The answer is simple. Yes, we have the information we need to take note of the information and do what needs to be done.

That said, as I just said, change is always difficult, but there are ways to do it. Of course, we don't want there to be a breakdown in the system. Researchers must continue to operate while a new system is put in place. It's feasible, it can be done, and it needs to be done.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Okay.

If I understand correctly, it's not a lack of information, but rather a lack of will and a lack of action.

Dr. Nemer, how do you see this organizational framework being put in place to address coordination and fairness, and to ensure that we have better interdisciplinary research? One of the recommendations highlights the importance of creating this capstone organization.

Dr. Mona Nemer: I don't know if you want me to tell you something specific, but I'll give you the example of Quebec. We've gone from three boards to one. As far as I know, research in Quebec has continued to go very well. There are ways of doing things. We certainly don't want to destroy things that are going well, but we want to deal with the things that need our attention.

I see that there are ways to improve the system while keeping what is good in it.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I appreciate that.

Dr. Nemer, from what I'm hearing today, the chief scientist spoke with the government, participated in two advisory committees and issued recommendations. It's been eight years.

Like the people listening to and watching us, I want to make sure I understand correctly: Did the chief scientist give the green light to the deployment of the new capstone organization?

Dr. Mona Nemer: You're giving me powers that, unfortunately, I don't have.

I would like to point out that, when I took up my position, the Naylor report had just been tabled. When I was asked what I thought, I said that I supported the recommendations. As I said, I participated in the interim phase of the Canadian Science Policy Centre. I think we're ready to move on, and I don't think we need to wait. In fact, I don't see what we would gain by waiting.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you for giving me a clear answer.

Dr. Nemer, there's an issue that I know is near and dear to your heart. I'm talking about the issue of francophone researchers. During our study on research and scientific publication in French, you made a number of recommendations, and I thank you again for that.

What specific measures could be taken to integrate more francophone researchers into the organizational structure that is the umbrella organization?

• (1710)

Dr. Mona Nemer: It certainly has to be representative, both in terms of individuals and institutions. I think that's important.

That said, we must also not say to ourselves that the umbrella organization is the answer to everything. There are other organizations that need to be worked on as well.

I'm pleased to see that the Department of Canadian Heritage, for example, has set up a committee for science in French, and a member of my team is in fact on that committee. We continue to work on translation, with algorithms and artificial intelligence, among other things. The Association francophone pour le savoir, or Acfas, received funding.

I think we need to continue to move forward on all fronts. We aren't yet where we should be, and we must not stop.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: You talked about representativeness and size.

During our study on the distribution of funding, we regularly heard that there was a challenge for large, small and medium-sized universities. The challenge is related to the distribution of funding, but also to representativeness.

You're an expert on the Canadian science ecosystem.

When small and medium-sized universities aren't consulted, what harmful effect can that have?

Dr. Mona Nemer: If we are to have an organization that coordinates, assesses needs and handles missions, it's imperative to know the terrain where this will be done, to understand the strengths and challenges of the various communities and regions of the country.

If we don't do that, we'll have programs that are poorly adapted.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We're over our time, but that was important. Now we'll go to the five-minute round—

An hon. member: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I'm sorry.

First of all, welcome, MP Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): It's a filibuster...

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Charlie Angus: It's not my first time here.

The Chair: We're very pleased that you're here.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

The Chair: Please proceed for your six minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

Ms. Parent, I wanted to begin with you and where we stand in terms of indigenous research: in the training that's necessary, the funding that needs to be in place and the independence to be able to carry out this research from an indigenous perspective. What's the state of the land?

Dr. Amy Parent: Thank you very much for that question.

I think it's important to really provide some further context to the development of the SIRC plan itself. This plan is directly connected to the progressive expertise and feedback that we have received from generations of indigenous research leaders and is informed by research studies and data as well.

What we've been able to see is a sort of incremental progression in terms of the work and the priorities that have been embedded into the strategic plan. Of course, it's not a perfect plan, but I can say that it has taken us decades to get here. I think that's a really important starting point.

When I look at what has emerged with the capstone, I can say that the SIRC plan didn't evolve over three weeks. There is a really strong disconnect between the consultation process that has happened with the capstone versus what we've seen within the SIRC plan itself and also in terms of representation and representation of diverse indigenous rights holders.

Mr. Charlie Angus: It might surprise you, but I'm not a scientist. I got 48% in grade 10, and they told me to start another career, so I became a politician.

However, I was an organizer for the Algonquin nation and what I learned very quickly was that knowledge is power, because the only time they ever wanted indigenous information and traditional ecological knowledge, they said, "Here, we'll give you some money. Do some research and then bring it to the table and we'll negotiate." Who were we negotiating with? We were negotiating with forestry companies, mining companies and hydro companies. The departments were never our friends, but knowledge in the communities was what gave them strength.

How do we ensure that the indigenous research that's being done...? There's the whole question of IP. In the nations, it's collective knowledge. How do you make sure that we are adequately funded, but that we also have provisions to ensure indigenous empowerment in how their research is handled and who benefits from it?

• (1715)

Dr. Amy Parent: Thank you. That's a beautiful question.

I can say also that I don't have a full science background, but many within the circle do. Some of us are trained scientists, and we represent what we would consider transdisciplinary expertise. That includes members of our circle who have health and science, education, social sciences and language and cultural revitalization expertise.

Yes, you're certainly correct that our knowledge is embedded in communities. I think that's one of the tensions we feel in recognizing this large, overarching structure of the capstone and its imposition at this point. Recognizing indigenous knowledge and languages and our support for indigenous research, which very much helps with that revitalization, lies within communities and community governance structures. Certainly, that's the trajectory of where we are with the SIRC plan.

In terms of overall recommendations, yes, I would totally agree with you that there needs to be ongoing development to support the protection of our intellectual and collective intellectual property rights. An important starting point is for Canada to adhere to UN-DRIP, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. There is a specific clause in there.... I don't know if I have time to share that with you or if that's enough, but it's article 31.

Mr. Charlie Angus: We may do it in the next round.

What we've heard about is the whole role of graduate students and post-doctoral fellows on the governance board, and how they're always at the low end of the stick in any kind of research. I'm wondering if you've looked at it from an indigenous perspective, ensuring fairness and equity, to make sure that they are also able to be part of decision-making.

Dr. Amy Parent: For sure. That is one of the core pillars of our current strategic plan, which is enhancing indigenous research leadership capacity. Even when you look at the circle composition, which I think is a healthy model of respectful indigenous engagement, we have several members who are graduate students and we have a post-doctoral research member with us.

A lot of our work really questions how effective we are at the ground level and how we are training the next generation that comes behind us, but also considers succession planning and makes sure that there is diverse representation across all different training levels and positions in terms of what is needed to fully support indigenous self-determination in all capacities.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

I think that's super important because, again, it is about building up this next generation, so if we're getting students to the post-doctoral level, we're making sure that they have the support and we're not losing them in indigenous communities. That's super important.

I want to end this round.... I don't know whether the government's offering a whole whack of new dollars for research. We have world-class institutions that are going to be competing, yet many of the indigenous programs that I'm aware of are the smaller ones. They're in the far north, but they're doing vital work that nobody else is doing.

Do you see that we have to have a special carve-out to make sure that we get fairness, or is it just going to be gobbled up by the usual players?

Dr. Amy Parent: I really appreciate that question.

One of our first recommendations is the retention of existing indigenous research funding. I have done some research with my Canada research chair program but also in my role here.

First of all, I think it's important to applaud the additional investment that was made in the spring by the Government of Canada in the spring budget, but we also would encourage that the current budget be maintained and increased. We're currently at \$268.75 million of the tri-agencies' larger budget, and that's roughly 5%. What's not included right now is the \$13.2 million per year that should also be allocated from the Canada Foundation for Innovation.

I have much more finite data that I can share with the committee once I've completed this here today. I really hope this research budget is maintained.

The Chair: That's almost a minute over, but I'm sure someone else might want to pursue that.

Thank you. That was great testimony.

Now we will turn to our second round of five minutes, and we'll kick that off with MP Lobb.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our guests today. The first question is for Ms. Parent.

In your opening statements, you commented about the lack of consultation. I'm just curious. Is it zero? Is it some? Do you believe that they should start over and go through it until they get it right?

• (1720)

Dr. Amy Parent: I will start off with this: Yes, I would agree that there is insufficient indigenous engagement to date, and we don't see a proper form of engagement proposed at this point by ministers Champagne or Holland.

Just to provide a bit of historical context to our awareness of the capstone, we only became informed about the Bouchard report on June 21, 2024. That's three months after the spring federal budget announcement. The first thing we did as a circle was to review the Bouchard report. We learned at that point that there was only one indigenous representative who was a part of the advisory panel. That was Dr. Vianne Timmons, and some folks may be familiar with her.

Of course, we learned right away that Dr. Timmons, at the end of 2023, came out as a pretender; she was an ethnic fraud. That means that there was no indigenous representation that supported the development of this report.

In addition, we also saw a lack of engagement with our circle directly for the development of the Bouchard report, despite our outlined responsibilities in the SIRC plan. Therefore, when I hear Dr. Nemer respectfully share her testimony, I do think that important data and voices are still missing and that we can't rush to any decisions.

I also just wanted to point out again that there really is not enough consultation for us to be in alignment with UNDRIP, and that can pose some serious significant legal risks if we proceed without proper consultation with all indigenous rights holders. That includes first nations, Métis, Inuit, indigenous organizations, indigenous-controlled institutions, indigenous researchers and existing oversight bodies within the tri-agencies themselves.

Mr. Ben Lobb: On your website here, talking about your organization, \$824 million over 10 years, was that yours?

Dr. Amy Parent: That's not my website.

Mr. Ben Lobb: It's not yours but the Government of Canada's website.

Dr. Amy Parent: Which department are you speaking about?

Mr. Ben Lobb: You got me there. It says that it's to support indigenous research and research training in Canada.

Dr. Amy Parent: Can you read me the number again?

Mr. Ben Lobb: We'll have to off-line on that one, I think, because it'll take me probably five minutes to get all this information for you.

Dr. Amy Parent: I'm happy to provide that data, the most recent data from the tri-agencies themselves.

Mr. Ben Lobb: No, it wasn't a criticism. It was a question on how it was going. I was just going to ask how it was going.

Dr. Amy Parent: I see.

Mr. Ben Lobb: We can follow up on that later.

Dr. Nemer, thank you for your work. I appreciate your qualifications, and I give you credit for taking on this job, because I'm sure some days it seems like a thankless job. There's probably a lot more criticism than thanks. You've taken it on, and thanks for doing it.

Your study that you came out with, just in the last month or so, talked about emergency preparedness. In there, it talked about communications and information—I think it was recommendation number seven, if I can go back to my notes—and transparency, etc.

Is that saying we're going to look forward, or is that looking back and saying that, with COVID, we looked at it, and maybe there were some issues about transparency and openness and forthrightness? Is that what you're trying to get at on that one?

Dr. Mona Nemer: I think it's the former. It's saying that moving forward, this is what we need to do. As I mentioned at the beginning of the report, it was informed by the lived experience in terms of science advice during COVID. It was also informed by best practices and by two tabletop exercises that we carried out.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Again, I don't want to relitigate COVID because I know that's in the past. If you're doing this study on this, people in my community ask, "How come a nurse one day was a hero, working in the emergency room on the front line, and then the next day, they're faced with the fact that if they didn't want to get a COVID shot, they were going to be suspended?"

Did you examine any of that in terms of the actual people who potentially provided the frontline service and were included or excluded maybe, when not all of the science was there to support their employment decisions?

Dr. Mona Nemer: No, we did not do that study.

I think COVID was a great learning experience in terms of science literacy in this country. That empowers people to make decisions for themselves—being able to tell misinformation and disinformation from information.

I have great respect for all of the health care workers who saved lives during the pandemic.

• (1725)

The Chair: That's our time. I'm sorry.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Don't be sorry. That's it.

The Chair: Now we will turn to MP Diab for five minutes.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab (Halifax West, Lib.): Thanks very much, Chair.

It's a privilege for us on the committee to hear from two brilliant witnesses today. We very much appreciate your respective expertise and presence here with us.

Let me start with Dr. Parent.

Who, in your opinion, are the key players in this space, whether individuals or organizations? Whom should we be consulting in regard to the capstone? It would be helpful for us to have that.

Dr. Amy Parent: That's a wonderful question.

I think all first nations, Métis and Inuit political advisory bodies would be a good start, as well as the existing indigenous oversight bodies within the tri-agencies themselves.

Another important caveat is with respect to indigenous-controlled institutions, indigenous-controlled post-secondary institutions and indigenous knowledge-holders themselves—the elders who hold this knowledge. Anybody who feels they should have a voice should be included.

If you want to do an analysis, it might be helpful to look at the existing SIRC plan and go to the appendices to see who is consulted. I can also say that the indigenous leadership circle in research has supported a recent policy on citizenship and membership. There was a very robust consultation done on that. If you look in the back of that report, there are some indicators on who could be consulted.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: That's fabulous. Thank you very much.

Dr. Nemer, welcome back to us.

In your testimony this morning and, I think, in a statement to my colleague on the other side, you talked about the impact of science on emergency management—how that exemplifies the vital need for research coordination during peacetime as well as in national emergencies.

Are you able to expand a bit on that and tell us why it's so vital?

Dr. Mona Nemer: That's very important. Nowadays, everybody thinks pandemics are a possibility down the line—hopefully, not during our lifetime. However, right now, as we speak, we have a number of health threats.

I can give you very specific examples.

One of them is mpox. There's a new strain in Africa, and the international community has mobilized.

Here in North America, including in the U.S. and Canada, we have the threat of bird flu, or H5N1. It has now made its way from birds to mammals. In the United States, it's in many herds of cattle and porcine...and in humans. I'll give you an example of what my office has done recently: We are bringing in the various departments that have to deal with this—Agriculture, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Health Canada, the Public Health Agency, Environment Canada and Parks Canada. These are all places where there is H5N1. We want the granting councils to have a road map for identifying gaps and needs. We are trying to get a coordinated approach to this.

Those are very concrete examples.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: I think you just answered my next question.

Why is it important for us to maintain or even enhance the linkages between health research and Health Canada under the capstone? How do we do this?

Dr. Mona Nemer: That's another example.

I think there are many ways. As I suggested, knowledge mobilization needs to not just be an afterthought in our programs. It needs to be embedded in there. There need to be pathways and processes by which research is provided back to governments and communities. It's extremely important.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: Why would it be valuable to make consultations ongoing in the community as we proceed through the implementation of capstone?

● (1730)

Dr. Mona Nemer: I would say that having ongoing research and science dialogue in the country is good. I think it's very important

to maintain relevance and to explain everywhere what research is about.

When I speak about research and science, by the way, I include indigenous knowledge, and I have great respect for indigenous research. I think we need to encourage it.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: Thank you very much.

I know it's an ongoing learning process. I know that we on this committee have learned quite a bit over the last three years.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll turn to MP Blanchette-Joncas for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dr. Nemer, in your opening remarks, you painted a clear picture of the good news announced in the last budget. There has been an increase in research funding over the past two years. We knew that the research budget had stagnated.

If the funds from the last budget aren't readily available before the new umbrella organization is set up, what impact could that have on ongoing research projects? I'm thinking in particular of Canada's competitiveness in crucial areas such as health research and artificial intelligence. I could name a number of others.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

Dr. Mona Nemer: I would like to see the promised funds flow as quickly as possible.

That said, if we want to do new things, funds have to be available; otherwise they will be committed quickly, and we'll lack resources. I hope that the process will be quick and that the promised funding will see the light of day for researchers.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I have a fairly broad question for you. As chief scientist, what are your expectations of the government? We're heading towards a fairly major restructuring. An umbrella funding organization requires a lot of planning. As you put it so aptly, we're ready.

What can we expect in the short and medium term?

Dr. Mona Nemer: The budget talks about the creation of an umbrella organization. It also talks about the creation of an advisory council on science and innovation and the development of a national science and innovation strategy. I think that's really very important.

I hope we'll have additional funding at some point. Canada needs to get closer to the OECD average.

We're going to have a road map. It will require strategies that have been well thought out, and the framework organization will be able to implement them. In other words, it's not just one thing, but an important set of things to make it consistent.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: I will ask MP Angus to wrap it up as our final questioner for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Dr. Parent, I want to go back. I'll start at the micro level and pull out. Then you can choose where to step in.

I was speaking to a really brilliant, young indigenous researcher the other day from Treaty No. 9, who expressed her frustration. She was gathering data on indigenous subjects in a non-indigenous environment. She said, on the need to explain what indigenous data and knowledge meant in a non-indigenous world, they said, "You're indigenous; figure it out". These are complex. These are about respect. Again, knowledge is power. She felt that trying to work in an institution that doesn't have the frame made her work very difficult.

I ask you that, given that capstone is going to step in. We don't know the structure. We don't know how the money flows. We don't know how the governance works. We don't know if it's another great idea of bureaucracy that's just going to sit there.

How do we make sure that carved-out space is there to have that indigenous perspective protected? How can that be? Is it possible?

Dr. Amy Parent: I appreciate that you highlighted a tension and one that I can feel today even in our witness testimony with the binaries that get presented between science and indigenous knowledge.

I don't have the answer. I think we really do need to speak with more indigenous peoples in order to understand that. Whether or not we stay within a capstone organization and have our own sort

of distinct governing structure, which we're working towards with the SIRC plan, or if we go into something very distinct and separate as an indigenous research agency, more consultation is needed.

In terms of other concerns and recommendations within that, certainly we do see the need for an appointment of indigenous diverse representation on the advisory council on science and innovation. We also really appreciate being able to have a conversation with Dr. Nemer, hopefully in the not too far future.

Another concern is recognition of the transdisciplinary nature of our knowledge systems themselves and going beyond the disciplines. As you talked about earlier, our knowledge is rooted in land, place and peoples, and seeing that as a pivotal element must continue. I think that's a way for us to begin to break down some of these knowledge hierarchies and these silos that get created.

As you've already alluded to as well, we must ensure that we respect and protect indigenous collective intellectual property rights in all forms. Moving forward, it's also about concerted looking at enhancing indigenous data sovereignty. I think that's an area of growth that we could really work towards.

• (1735)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you to both Dr. Amy Parent and Dr. Mona Nemer for your excellent testimony today. If there's anything else that we didn't get covered that you'd like to submit, you can do so to the clerk. You would be free to do that.

I'm going to suspend now because we're going to move in camera to consider a draft report.

Thank you again for attending.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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