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Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

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• (1530)

[English]

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

We are at meeting number seven of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

Welcome back, Ms. Solloway and Mr. Radford. We have you in for the hour for a briefing and update. We'll start with a five-minute opening statement from you.

The statement as well as other supporting documents have been distributed in both languages to the committee.

We look forward to your testimony today.

Please go ahead.

Harriet Solloway (Commissioner, Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair. I'm grateful for the opportunity to address the committee today.

[Translation]

The Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada is an impartial investigative and quasi-judicial decision-making body. As an agent of Parliament, the office works in the public interest to expose major wrongdoing in the federal public sector.

It investigates disclosures of alleged wrongdoing, such as gross mismanagement and serious breaches of codes of conduct, as well as alleged reprisals suffered by public servants who take the brave step of coming forward.

[English]

At the end of each investigation, often involving 20 or more witnesses, and after careful analysis of the facts and the law, I render a quasi-judicial decision that is subject to judicial review. Investigation reports of 80 pages are not uncommon, and decisions often exceed 30 pages.

This work is accomplished by nine lawyers, who also have other duties including in-house counsel, as well as six investigators and three team leaders. With the support of the legal team, four admissibility analysts provide me with recommendations on questions of admissibility. My decisions on admissibility are also subject to judicial review.

[Translation]

Since 2023, the office has seen a sustained increase in submissions. No plateau is in sight. Small budget increases in 2024 have allowed us to increase output, but our funding falls far short of needs. For example, thus far in 2025, I have rendered approximately 350 admissibility decisions on some 800 allegations, more than the 327 submissions received in all of 2024.

Despite increased productivity, we continue to fall behind as new submissions far exceed the completion rate. Currently, we have nearly 300 active files including approximately 66 investigations into 163 allegations.

In 2024, following investigations, I rendered reasoned decisions on 56 separate allegations.

[English]

For both disclosures of wrongdoing and reprisal complaints, I cannot overstate the importance of providing whistle-blowers, respondents and other parties with reasoned decisions based on thorough investigations, regardless of whether or not there's a finding of wrongdoing. That is at the heart of our *raison d'être* and is critical in maintaining trust in our public institutions. Whistle-blowers must be able to see that their concerns are our concerns and that no stone is left unturned.

With our current level of funding, there is a risk that some allegations may never see the light of day. Consequently, my office is preparing to submit a request for urgently needed support.

[Translation]

As an independent agent of Parliament, I have the duty to highlight to you, members of Parliament, that the current budget process has the potential to place my independence at risk. I appeal for a review of that process.

Public Sector Integrity Commissioner, or PSIC, budget requests are submitted through the President of the Treasury Board and then the Minister of Finance, before submission to the Treasury Board for consideration. This process opens the door to public servants' having significant influence over the timing and substance of what is ultimately presented to the Treasury Board, and then to Parliament. As PSIC has jurisdiction over public servants in these departments, this can create a real or apparent conflict of interest.

To be clear, I am not alleging that any public servant has acted inappropriately, yet the risk and the possible perception are clear.

• (1535)

[English]

Respectfully, it is my view that to protect not only the independence of the office but also the appearance of independence, Parliament itself should determine the office's budget.

The Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act notes that it is “in the public interest to maintain and enhance public confidence in the integrity of public servants”.

The act is one of the many vital checks and balances to enhance public confidence, and delays in investigations not only impact the quality of those investigations but can also have a negative effect on the confidence in the federal public sector.

We owe all Canadians a duty to expose wrongdoing. At the same time, we owe every person who places their trust in us, including those who were themselves accused of wrongdoing, an impartial and timely outcome based on the serious consideration of all the facts.

[Translation]

I thank you for the opportunity to address the committee and welcome any questions that you may have.

[English]

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

We'll now start with Mrs. Block for six minutes, please.

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

Thanks, Ms. Solloway, to you and your colleagues for joining us today to share with our committee the role of your office, your mandate and some of the pressures you find yourself under.

You shared some information in your opening statement today, and the numbers are somewhat alarming in terms of your ability to keep up with the pressure. I think you said in your comments that there is no plateau in sight. The numbers just keep adding up.

With those comments in mind and taking all of that into consideration, do you believe that your office is able to fulfill its mandate?

Harriet Solloway: Yes, but not as efficiently and effectively as I'd like.

As I mentioned in my opening statement, I believe there is a risk that there could come a time when there may be allegations that do not see the light of day.

We are working diligently to make sure that doesn't happen, but, at this point in time, I cannot guarantee that we will be able to get to everything.

We haven't given up yet, and, as I mentioned, we are going to be asking for increased support, but there is a very real risk that we will not be able to deal with all the cases before us.

Kelly Block: Thank you.

I'm taking a look back at your opening comments. Did you provide us with the average length of time it takes you to render a decision on a complaint that's been submitted?

Harriet Solloway: I did not.

I believe that we are currently looking at some cases awaiting a decision on admissibility that are, give or take, a year old. As late as last month, I was looking at 14 months, but I think we might have it down to 12 months now.

If you want a definitive answer, I'd have to get back to you on that.

Kelly Block: Thank you.

You may not be able to answer this question, but what actually happens for that individual who has launched a complaint and is waiting to find out if it's admissible? Do they simply go back to the work they've been doing and wait for a response from your office?

Harriet Solloway: It's important to highlight that there are two tracks.

We have submissions that are disclosures of wrongdoing or information indicating that there might be wrongdoing or alleged wrongdoing; then we have complaints of reprisal against somebody who might have submitted an alleged disclosure.

With respect to the reprisals, under the statute we're required to provide an answer within 15 days, and we do that.

Anybody who alleges that they've been reprised against will receive a response within 15 days as to whether we're going to be investigating it. The time it takes to investigate, however, is a completely different story.

On the disclosure side, it's about letting potential.... There are a number of different implications to that. One is that, if there is something to the disclosure, if it's something that should be investigated, it is allowed to fester for that much longer. If it is the kind of conduct that could be.... For example, in a recent case I had, which is available on our website, there was a person in a very senior capacity who was a serial harasser for a long period of time. That was wrongdoing. If we don't get to something like that, obviously people continue to suffer over a longer period of time.

• (1540)

Kelly Block: The Macdonald-Laurier Institute claims that our laws protect wrongdoers more than whistle-blowers.

Can you comment on that?

Harriet Solloway: I'm not really sure what they mean by that. I would have to ask them what they meant by that.

In order to arrive at a finding of wrongdoing, there has to be evidence on a balance of probabilities. I'm only guessing now, but it may be that some perceive that to be tipping the scales in favour of the respondent in the cases. If we have some information or some indication, but not on a balance of probabilities, I could not, under the law, come to a conclusion that there has been wrongdoing.

It is possible that some people perceive that to be tipping the scales in favour of an alleged wrongdoer. At the same time, principles of natural justice apply and due process applies. The balance of probabilities is the test that I am required to apply.

Kelly Block: Of the 15 recommendations that were tabled by the committee in 2017, how many have been adopted and are currently part of your office now?

Harriet Solloway: I'm going to have to refer that question to Brian Radford, as I was not around in 2017.

Go ahead, Brian.

The Chair: I'm going to have to interrupt because that is the end of our time. Perhaps we can get to that answer in the next round, or perhaps you can provide that to us in writing.

We will now go over to Ms. Rochefort for six minutes, please.

Pauline Rochefort (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Madam Solloway and Mr. Radford.

I would like to ask a few questions.

In your letter, you say that it is your view that to protect the independence of the office, it should come to Parliament for the budget.

In relation to that, I noted that they list online all of the offices of the ombudsman. Your office is included. The Integrity Commissioner is included. I think there are about 15 different ones—the Canada Post ombudsman, the National Capital Commission ombudsman, the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner and so on. You are included in that list of what they say are similar organizations within the public service. That's how they positioned it.

How would you define the differences between the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner and the other ombudsman offices that are listed on the public sector website?

Harriet Solloway: I'm not aware of that website. I'm happy to address the differences between ombuds and what we do.

There is an exception to this, but mostly speaking, it is not our role to mediate disputes or look for a mutually agreeable solution when we're dealing with disclosures. I'll talk about reprisals in a moment because it's a bit different.

In terms of disclosures, they are disclosures of wrongdoing. People are coming forward saying that they have evidence and there's enough to say that there is something untoward going on. We investigate that with a view to getting to a point where we can have accountability for that wrongdoing, if indeed there is wrongdoing. The discloser is not personally involved in the disclosure, even if they might be one of the persons in the event, depending on what the nature of the disclosure is.

On the reprisal side, we have a mechanism whereby we can offer conciliation to the parties, but we actually don't do that. We typically get the services of an objective conciliator, who takes it off-line, and we see whether they can reach an agreement.

For the most part, there's a fundamental difference. They want to see issues resolved between parties. Our mandate is to find wrongdoing if it exists and to ensure that there is accountability. It's a very different mandate.

I'm not sure if I've explained it very well. Brian can do a much better job from a legal standpoint, for sure.

• (1545)

Pauline Rochefort: That's an excellent description.

At the same time, the ombudsman offices look at services of government that are provided by public servants. Public servants would say that for them, it is important that there be some impartiality in terms of budgets.

Would that be a fair statement?

Harriet Solloway: I would have to look at the specific mandates of the organizations.

I would add one other thing. It's not even that we look at wrongdoing. In terms of the definition of wrongdoing under the act, it's critical to understand that it's the type of wrongdoing that is of an order of magnitude that could shake public confidence in the public sector. It is not every wrongdoing that somebody could perpetrate; it is a wrongdoing that has so much import.... Those are the types of things that we investigate, as opposed to individuals' issues, which typically ombudspersons do.

Pauline Rochefort: My next question is in the area of funding and the budget.

I come from the world of the municipal sector. I understand it's not quite the same, but there are some similarities from the perspective that we know that there have been quite a few complaints in Ontario at an integrity commissioner level.

The CBC had an excellent interview late last fall in which they said that, due to "a lack of provincial oversight and standardized processes, taxpayers can be footing 'excessive billing'" overall with respect to integrity commissioner complaints and files that are being investigated. In fact, they describe Ontario's local ethics watchdog system as "a cash cow in [the] Wild West," because of the need for reform in that particular environment.

For me, it's about trying to understand what's reasonable at a federal level when we talk in terms of budget. I was just trying to compare. For example, I tried to compare it with provincial integrity commissioners, but they're difficult to find. I found, for example, that the City of Toronto has an integrity commissioner. You have a budget of \$6 million, which will increase to almost \$8 million, for 419 files. For example, in that same year of comparison, 2023-24, their budget was about \$800,000 for 280 direct inquiries.

I'm just trying to understand. I know these are somewhat apples and oranges—I understand that—but how do we get to what is a reasonable budget? That, for me, is the concern of a budget coming to a parliament versus within a treasury board, where they would have standards to compare and evaluate.

What would be your comment with respect to that?

Harriet Solloway: It's apples to oranges. The mandates are completely different. It is not because we have the word "integrity" in our titles that there is in any way a parallel or—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Solloway, but we've reached our six minutes.

Perhaps you could provide a more fulsome response in writing, or perhaps the next time we go to the Liberal side.

Pauline Rochefort: Yes, of course.

Thank you.

The Chair: We'll now go to Ms. Gaudreau, please, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you for those details, Ms. Solloway.

What is the collateral damage of not having the necessary resources to do your work effectively and meet expectations?

Harriet Solloway: Without sufficient resources, there is a risk that some allegations may never be investigated. Some investigations might take so long that those involved, whether it's the person who brought forward the complaint, the whistle-blower or the person accused of wrongdoing, find themselves in a difficult position. Being accused of something and waiting for the situation to be resolved is not easy.

I'll give you an example. We investigated a case in which contaminated water had leaked into the ground at the Matsqui Institution. The report is on our website, if you're interested. When it takes too long to resolve cases like this, the delays can end up causing more harm.

Each case has its own consequences, but the biggest challenge when you lack resources is convincing the public that there's enough oversight of federal institutions to make sure everything's in order. I think it can undermine the public's confidence in public institutions.

• (1550)

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Your last comment says a lot.

If I remember correctly, 14 recommendations were made in 2017. Could you tell us which ones were implemented?

Harriet Solloway: I will ask Mr. Radford to answer.

Brian Radford (Acting Deputy Commissioner and General Counsel, Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner): Ms. Gaudreau, I just want to clarify something.

Are you referring to Commissioner Friday's 16 recommendations?

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's correct.

Brian Radford: Those recommendations were made during the legislative review—

[*English*]

The Chair: If I could interrupt, I think they're the recommendations from this committee, from way back—

Brian Radford: As a result of the legislative review.... Okay.

The Chair: —and not specifically Mr. Friday's.

[*Translation*]

Brian Radford: The committee made recommendations regarding legislative changes. They were communicated to the government, but neither the government nor the Treasury Board Secretariat implemented them. The act has not changed since 2017.

Some recommendations were aimed at improving efficiency and were more administrative in nature, and most were aimed at internal disclosure systems, so the departmental senior officers in each organization. The Treasury Board Secretariat implemented some measures so that internal processes were similar from one department to another, for example. The mandate of the commissioner's office is not to review internal systems, because we are a fully independent body.

To answer your question, the government did not implement the committee's recommendations, which were communicated to Parliament through a report.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: If I understand correctly, we put in a lot of effort to make solid recommendations, and while they are communicated in a democratic way, the organization still needs to have the will, funding and respect to follow through on them.

We're talking about the disclosure of wrongdoing here, and it makes me think of the consequences for the whistle-blowers. Since a response to serious allegations can take two weeks, are the whistle-blowers in some sort of buffer zone? Do they face reprisals? How does the process work?

Harriet Solloway: I'm not sure I understand your question.

You're asking what happens to whistle-blowers once they've come to us to make a disclosure. Is that correct?

• (1555)

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's correct.

Harriet Solloway: To begin with, we don't tell anyone, so if the whistle-blower doesn't say anything to anyone, no one will know that they have made a disclosure of wrongdoing. As a result, if no one knows there's been a disclosure, the whistle-blower is protected.

There are cases, though, where, for one reason or another, right or wrong, people think they know who made the disclosure. We've seen cases where someone wrongly accused of making a disclosure was a victim of reprisals.

Therefore, it's possible that, if someone thinks someone else made a disclosure—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Solloway, but we're past our time again. I have to interrupt.

Colleagues, I ask everyone to keep an eye on your clocks to allow extended time because we have Ms. Solloway with us for only an hour today.

Mr. Patzer, please go ahead for five minutes.

Jeremy Patzer (Swift Current—Grasslands—Kindersley, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here today.

At the start of the meeting, I went to your website and noticed there was an info block. I was talking to some other folks, and they ran into the same thing as well. I have a screenshot of it, and it says, “The Office is receiving an unprecedented number of disclosures of wrongdoing, reprisal complaints and general inquiries. As a result of increased submissions, delays in the analysis and investigation of files are expected.”

In the numbers you presented to this committee, it's kind of shocking, and I would say alarming, how sharp of a climb there is in cases. Do you have any reason for that?

Harriet Solloway: Everyone is asking me that, and I have no way of knowing. I have no reason to believe it's because there's more wrongdoing. There is no data that would suggest that. I can't disprove that either, but there's no data that would suggest that.

In my career, I've seen the start-up of many new organizations, particularly those that render a service to the public. It takes a while for people who might access that service to even realize it's there and then, once they do, to have enough trust in it to bring it forward.

My best guess, because I have no way of verifying it, is that I do believe the office was established in 2007, and I think, at a certain point in time, there was a critical mass period when people knew enough about it to start using it, and that gave rise to more and more.

That is my belief, but I have no evidence or proof to say that. If you're asking what I think, that's what I think.

Jeremy Patzer: Are you concerned that there may be a culture that's been instilled that has enabled some of this? Part of it, too, is that it takes so long to get an answer or that there are so many cases. Do you think that people maybe feel like they're not going to get to it anyway, so they can just do whatever they want, and what's anyone going to do about it? Are you worried that there might be a culture of that developing or brewing?

Harriet Solloway: I'm worried that it could develop. Again, I don't have evidence that it's brewing. It would not be an illogical consequence of the situation.

Jeremy Patzer: Wow.

When you look at the stats, prior to 2021, everybody was working in offices. We have a lot of the public service now working from home.

Do you think there is a correlation between people not being in an environment where they are with people who might be abusive or committing serious wrongdoings? As you said, that is the nature of it. Now that people are working from home, do they now feel safe to make complaints? Do you think there's a correlation to that?

Harriet Solloway: Again, I don't have evidence, but if you're asking me for my feeling on it, I wouldn't say so. People could be reprisal against whether they're working from home or in the office. People can be subject to wrongdoings whether they're at home or in the office.

I don't think so, but I don't have evidence to back that up. If you're asking me my view, that's what I think.

Jeremy Patzer: There's an article from 2022, which states:

The Government Accountability Project announced that Canada's whistleblower protections are among the weakest in the world, tied with Lebanon and Norway. The project was especially critical of the fact that only eight retaliation cases have been heard by the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Tribunal, despite PSDPA having come into force 17 years ago.

There are lots of other quotes about the functionality here.

Why are we viewed as having some of the weakest protections in the world?

• (1600)

Harriet Solloway: I'm not trying to be evasive. I think you probably have to ask the authors of that. I'm not sure.

Again, my sense is that they're looking at a legislative framework. Having worked internationally a lot, I know that it really is hard to compare jurisdictions. I do know that there was a task force that was struck around two years ago to look at the PSDPA because of some of the articles such as the one that you're citing. There was a recognition that I think improvements are required.

I am keen to know what the outcome of that task force is. To the extent that there are weaknesses in the act—and there are weaknesses in the act. I'm not pretending otherwise; that's my personal view—I'm looking forward to seeing that report to see what proposals are being made.

The Chair: Ms. Sudds, go ahead, please.

Hon. Jenna Sudds (Kanata, Lib.): Thank you very much for being here and, more importantly, for the work you are both doing.

I'll build on that last comment around the advisory task force. Can you explain from your perspective what the mandate that has been put forward for the task force is?

Harriet Solloway: When I started in my position about two years ago, shortly thereafter, I appeared at the task force. Other than the fact that they're looking at the PSDPA, I have no inside information at all regarding specifically what they're looking at.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: My understanding is that it does include the task of reviewing past recommendations of this committee as part of their work, which I think is really an important piece as we move forward.

From your perspective, what kinds of improvements or changes would you like to see them reviewing and being incorporated in the review of the PSDPA?

Harriet Solloway: I do know that my predecessor did make submissions prior to his departure. There are, I think, a number of areas that could be looked at. I'm always hesitant. There are policy reasons for a lot of things, and there are many things at play. One thing that is an impediment to our investigations—and that may be by design but, nevertheless, is an impediment—is the fact that if evidence exists outside the federal public service, I'm not allowed to look at it. I'm not allowed to even ask somebody for it. It's not even a question of my powers to compel not applying to people. It's that I'm not even allowed to ask.

If, for example, there's an issue that involves anybody from the outside, it's tricky. It's sort of in conflict with other provisions because the act does allow somebody from outside the public service to provide me with information about wrongdoing that I can use to launch an investigation. I can't launch the investigation unless I can talk to that person. I've interpreted the act to mean that I can go back to at least the person who has provided me with the information to try to get more, but my hands are tied in several investigations because I just cannot go outside. That's one example.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Thank you.

Maybe I'll switch gears slightly to some of your opening comments around the extent of the caseload and the work that you are doing and your current request for urgent funding. Can you provide details as to what you are asking for and maybe, as well, what outcomes that funding would enable you to achieve?

• (1605)

Harriet Solloway: We're working on that because we have, with some of the funding that we got, developed the data analytics capacity. I'm heavily reliant on data to be able answer that question fully.

What I can tell you is that in our last ask I believe I asked for \$9 million, and I had all of the justifications for that. Just in response also to Madam Rochefort, I'll note that all of the justifications for it and the explanations for it are contained in my budget ask. We only got \$1 million. I know that, at a minimum, we still need what I originally asked for because I didn't ask for anything that I didn't need. It's a combination of things, primarily personnel but also, of course, anything related to personnel, like space. Space is a big issue because it costs money to rent space, to have space or to fit up space. That money is in short supply in the system. We're looking at that now. For example, we were able to hire some people based on the funding that we got. Now we're in a bit of an accommodation crisis. PSPC is working with us on that, but there is a real question as to where we're going to get the money to fit up office space that we can operate in.

It's a combination of personnel and everything that enables those personnel to actually work.

Does that answer the question?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: It does answer the question.

Oh, that's time.

Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Gaudreau, you have two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I am shocked to hear that you have a \$9-million shortfall. Based on the numbers you gave us—you mentioned 800 allegations—you don't have the capacity to do your job, which means some cases are investigated, while others are still at the allegation stage.

What is the positive impact of your role as Public Sector Integrity Commissioner?

Harriet Solloway: The Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act is clear: it is essential that the public trust the public sector.

There must be a body like the commissioner's office to investigate serious cases of misconduct. Otherwise, there's no oversight. I don't believe a public sector can be credible without such a body.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I have another question.

Considering the resources you have, on a scale from 1 to 10, how do you think your work is perceived?

Harriet Solloway: Well, that depends on the person you're asking.

Generally, when an organization renders decisions on cases like the ones we are entrusted with, half the people are satisfied, and the other half are not. Sometimes, even when someone gets the decision they were hoping for, since it took one or two years to get there, they are dissatisfied, because the decision came too late. There's always a risk that someone won't be satisfied with our work.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Cobena, welcome back to OGGO. The time is yours.

Sandra Cobena (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Solloway, I'm reading through your opening remarks about the sustained increase in submissions. While we don't know what's driving that, the submissions of wrongdoing have more than doubled since 2020, but the staffing has not kept pace due to limited resources.

Could you speak to how large the current backlog is? I think you mentioned it was a year, or 12 months to 14 months, in terms of the timing, but could you speak to the number of cases and what service standard targets are realistic under the present funding?

• (1610)

Harriet Solloway: I'll give you an example. For investigations, from the time the investigation is launched until the end, our service standard had typically been 80% of the time to be able to complete the investigation within a year. We're not meeting that now. There's no way we can meet that now. I would have to get those statistics for you, which are readily available but I just don't have them with me, to tell you how often we're meeting it now, but we're not. Now we have 66 pending investigations, and I have six investigators and three team leaders.

It doesn't really work this way, but even if an average investigator could complete four to five cases a year, if we do the math, we understand that we have now a years-long backlog in terms of completing some of these investigations, with more being added to the pile weekly. I'm not sure if that answers your question.

Sandra Cobena: Partially. Maybe you can submit some of the statistics to the committee, if that's possible.

When I look at the 66 investigations, for instance, that may be in the backlog, is it safe to assume some are more serious than others? Are you prioritizing some over others, or is it first in, first out?

Harriet Solloway: It's a combination of both. We will not investigate anything that is not a big deal, so they're all big deals, to be clear.

In terms of prioritizing, it's not necessarily strictly first in, first out. A lot has to do with which investigators have capacity and what they are more specialized in. It's about managing everything all at once, so I don't have a strict rule of first in, first out, and in fact, it's not the case. Even in admissibility, I'm trying to work from both ends, so some people are receiving very timely responses and some people aren't, and I'm hoping we'll meet somewhere in the middle.

We have gained efficiencies. On the admissibility analysis side, I would have to go to the statistics, but I believe we completed more this year than we received in all of last year, but because our numbers are rising so rapidly, we're still falling behind. Yes, on submissions received, thus far in 2025 we've received 444 and we've completed 395 analyses, and all of last year, we received 419. We will certainly complete more this year than all of the ones we got in last year combined, but we're still going to fall behind, plus we have older cases that are still there.

Brian, do you want to add anything?

Brian Radford: Our rate of efficiency has increased every year. Last year, of the 419 files received, we completed 342, and as the commissioner indicated, this year we've completed 395 so far.

We're trying new ways to address cases as quickly as possible, and as the commissioner indicated, we're not just addressing old files in the backlog; we are addressing, on a weekly basis, new files that come in and at the same time the older files so that we can tackle as many as possible, as quickly as possible.

Sandra Cobena: Very—

The Chair: Be very brief.

Sandra Cobena: —briefly, could you give a quick status update on the task force that was founded in 2022?

Harriet Solloway: I don't know. My understanding, through the grapevine only, is that they've completed their report, but more than that, I couldn't tell you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm sorry, Mr. Gasparro, but before you start, I'm going to mention that we do have a requirement at this committee that any documents or any responses promised are required within 21 working days, and they are to be sent to the clerk.

Mr. Gasparro, the time is yours. Please go ahead, sir.

• (1615)

Vince Gasparro (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Thank you.

As I said to other witnesses, I want to thank you for your public service. Like one of my colleagues, I also have some experience at the municipal level dealing with integrity commissioners. Both of your CVs are quite impressive.

Can you explain what protections are currently in place for public servants who report wrongdoing?

Harriet Solloway: That's a very good question. Thank you for it.

Vince Gasparro: It doesn't happen often, but it does happen.

Harriet Solloway: It's a really good question.

We've struggled with that notion of protection. The fact of the matter is that, *en amont*, as they would say in French, there's not a lot we can do.

The way we protect is by keeping the information that we get confidential, but of course when you're talking about due process and people being given the right to respond in a fair way to allegations against them, there may be some aspects that, in order to give that person the full right of defence, have to be disclosed. I can say that we protect by not divulging anything that we have to, unless we have to, and until we have to.

We also have the reprisal regime, but again it's *ex post facto*. It launches once somebody is already alleging that they've suffered a reprisal. I guess one hopes that there's a deterrent effect, because those measures are there. It does exist as a deterrence but, *per se*, I have no jurisdiction to, for example, pull somebody out of a difficult situation and give them something alternate to do, or whatever. I have no powers to do that. Any protections come in the form of deterrents, because there is the complaint regime, and also in keeping things confidential.

I'm going to ask Brian if he wants to add anything to that.

Brian Radford: No, your answer is complete.

Harriet Solloway: I think it is a really good question, and probably an area that the task force, I'm assuming, might have looked at. It will be interesting to see what they say.

Vince Gasparro: Do you think those protections are well communicated within the public service? Are people within the public service aware that there are some levels of safeguards and protection for them, if they launch a complaint or raise an issue?

Harriet Solloway: Even before my arrival, the office had worked very hard for years at raising awareness, and I do believe that a lot of the reason for the surge that we're seeing now is that there's more awareness. Again, I have no data, and it might be time to try to acquire some, but my suspicion is that there are many people who don't understand or know about the possibility out there.

There are other what we call internal mechanisms inside many departments where there's a senior officer in charge of disclosures. There are also ombudspersons, as raised before, and we hope that internally in departments, they are raising awareness amongst their staff as well. It's a shared responsibility to try to get the word out that this is the case.

Vince Gasparro: Thank you.

I have no further questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gasparro.

We'll go to Mrs. Block for five minutes, please.

Kelly Block: Thank you, Chair.

Your office has been investigating complaints of reprisals of two former witnesses who came forward during our ArriveCAN study, who testified at this committee. Without giving us any details, because I'm sure you cannot do that, do you finally have a timeline for this investigation that you can give us?

• (1620)

Harriet Solloway: The reason I can't answer is that I can't give you an answer on that without disclosing anything about specific cases. I'm going to refer to Brian, who will say what we could say or say that we can't.

Brian Radford: At this point, we don't have a timeline for the completion of the investigations that you are referring to. All reprisal investigations require the submission of preliminary investigation reports for people involved, and it takes time to consider their submissions.

It would not be prudent for us to comment further on that particular investigation.

Kelly Block: When did your investigations begin?

Brian Radford: I don't have the dates of when those investigations began. However, like all reprisal complaints, the admissibility analysis would have been completed within 15 days from the receipt of the form. Within 15 days the commissioner would have decided to investigate some or all of the allegations. That would bring us back to, I would imagine, about a year ago, but I'm not sure of the date of the commencement.

Kelly Block: Okay, thank you.

Again, it's been noted by my colleagues that, on your website, you note that you are receiving an unprecedented number of disclosures of wrongdoing. Although some details may not be public because of ongoing investigations, can you say which departments appear to have the highest number of reports of wrongdoing?

Harriet Solloway: No.

Brian.

Brian Radford: We have never reported on the number of disclosures made from a particular department. Now, in a large organization, it's not surprising that we would receive several or even numerous disclosures. We're talking about very large departments of many thousands of people.

So far at least, we've not disclosed the number of disclosures coming from specific departments or regions. There's an element of confidentiality to that. If we do it for some, we may have to do it for others. There are very small organizations in which the chief executive of the organization or the management there would be very surprised to learn that a disclosure, or two or three, was made against them. It could potentially expose whistle-blowers who come to us. When a person comes to us, if something is not investigated, the only person who knows is the discloser. We do not share that information with the department.

There's an important element of confidentiality associated with that information.

Kelly Block: Thank you. I appreciate that answer.

Can you tell us how many whistle-blowers have been reinstated to their jobs after reprisals since the creation of your office? Do you track that?

Brian Radford: First, we are aware of the reprisal complaints that have been made [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] allegations...number of investigations that we have conducted. As you may know, 10 cases were referred to the tribunal. Of those cases, two went the entire way of a hearing and others were resolved by way of mediation.

The settlements are generally confidential between the parties. The parties seek that confidentiality. We offer conciliation during the course of a reprisal investigation. We have completed approximately 26 successful conciliations over the years. From those 26 cases, there are many people who are still employed in the public service. Others retired; others accepted a financial settlement. Those agreements are also kept confidential at the request of the parties.

• (1625)

Kelly Block: Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks.

We have Ms. Khalid, Ms. Gaudreau, Mr. Patzer and Ms. Rochefort.

Ms. Khalid, you have the floor.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today. I am quite new to this, so please pardon my ignorance if I ask you some questions that may not make sense.

What is your interaction with other commissioners who are oversight bodies and transparency agencies across our government?

Harriet Solloway: We meet occasionally, and we share views and exchange what we can with one another.

I know that several of my colleagues have a similar concern over the funding mechanism, for example. Several of my colleagues already have an independent funding mechanism. For example, the Parliamentary Budget Officer gets his budget from Parliament. It's the same for elections and the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner. That's the kind of model the rest of us would like. We do exchange.

Iqra Khalid: Do you think there's an opportunity for all of the commissioners to work together somehow, or should people be operating in individual silos based on what their respective duties are?

Harriet Solloway: I personally think that it never hurts to look at anything that you want to look at, but I do think that our mandates are all very different and require different expertise and different firewalls in terms of confidentiality, some of which are not compatible. For example, in my case, if there is a complaint under the PSDPA against me, it is the Auditor General who would investigate or who would consider those allegations. We have cases with one another.

If you're just asking me offhand, I haven't done an analysis, but I don't see enough of a commonality in our mandates to be able to do that.

Iqra Khalid: Are there cases that multiple commissioners would have to get involved in?

Harriet Solloway: There aren't in our case. I can't speak for the other commissioners, but we are at arm's-length with everybody. I don't go to deputy minister meetings. We're at arm's-length from everybody.

Iqra Khalid: Do you think your office functions as efficiently as you would like it to?

Harriet Solloway: I have never worked anywhere where I didn't think I could gain more efficiencies. For as long as I work and as long as I have a job, I will always be looking for more efficiencies.

Iqra Khalid: On that then, what are your topmost issues that need to be more efficient in your office?

Harriet Solloway: I think we're working on a lot of them.

I can tell you some of the things we've done with some of the funding we did get. Our IT infrastructure had been older than 2007. It predated the office and was on the verge of collapse. In addition to that, it didn't really allow us to have any kind of meaningful data analytics. That's now transformed, and we're in the process of starting to collect data, because we couldn't collect data when data didn't exist. That is a work in progress and something we are committed to working toward more.

We are also looking at the processes and the way we do things. We have discussions a minimum of weekly to see if we can do things better. Quality control is critical. I am issuing quasi-judicial decisions.

I have been asked in the past about the use of AI. It's not an option for my decisions or legal analysis.

We are very open to and are constantly seeking better ways of doing things.

• (1630)

Iqra Khalid: What is the biggest challenge you are facing right now in your office?

The Chair: Give a brief answer, please.

Harriet Solloway: It's staff and space.

Iqra Khalid: Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thanks, Ms. Khalid.

Now we'll go to Ms. Gaudreau, please.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I have only two and a half minutes, so I will give you the opportunity to share any other important information—positive or constructive—to help us with our report, whether it's related to what you're going through or the consequences.

Harriet Solloway: Thank you. I'll take this time to make a suggestion.

Last week, I attended a session with other commissioners at the Library of Parliament to answer questions new MPs might have. If there's sufficient interest, I'm sure the librarian would be open to setting up an information session for those who want to learn more about our mandate or how our office works.

I would say that everyone at the commissioner's office is dedicated to our mandate and wants to do more. I hope you understand that we really need more resources to accomplish everything set out in our mandate.

[*English*]

I really would hope for support. I stand ready.

In response to Madam Rochefort's last question, I will say that I would never ask for money willy-nilly; it would be fully supported by data and a full explanation. It's not about a number. It's about what we need, and that's where we get to a number.

I really do hope that I have that support, and I really do believe that it's an important mandate for the Canadian public.

In every decision I write—and, as I said, some are very lengthy—especially in cases where there's no finding of wrongdoing, I try to explain

[*Translation*]

why we determined that there wasn't any wrongdoing.

[*English*]

It's very important that people understand that it was really looked at and that we were really serious about it. I hope that they can come away feeling that there is a check and balance.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Patzer, please.

Jeremy Patzer: Thank you very much.

How many employees do you have working for you, again?

Harriet Solloway: I think at this point we're at just over 40.

Some people come and go, but we're at about the low forties, 40 or 41, right now.

Jeremy Patzer: Okay.

I do have a bit of a tough question for you.

A couple of years ago, the Centre for Free Expression said:

After approaching PSIC without success, dozens of public servants in desperation have contacted volunteer whistleblowing advocacy groups like the Centre for Free Expression, and we get to hear their stories. Almost without exception, they described treatment by PSIC that's dismissive, obstructive, often humiliating, and always fruitless in the end. PSIC appears to be institutionally hostile towards the people it is supposed to protect, seeming to view them as liars and troublemakers—while they apparently treat the alleged wrongdoers...with deference and consideration.

You're at the top of the chart, so the buck stops with you. I'm curious. When you hear a statement like that, what do you have to say?

Harriet Solloway: I've met with the Centre for Free Expression on a number of occasions. I've been in this job for two years, and as I've just said, I have never worked with a group of people who were more dedicated to the mandate than the group I'm working with now.

I don't know when that statement was made. I do believe that it was prior to my arrival, so I cannot speak to that or on where it came from. However, I can tell you that, in my estimation, we have an excellent team that is dedicated, and each one of them is trying to treat everybody with respect. They really do respect people. They respect the whistle-blowers. They respect the respondents, and they respect the witnesses. That's what I've seen since I've been in the office.

I can't speak to why they said what they said at the time that they said it. All I can do is tell you what I've seen in the office since I've been there. That doesn't mean that we've been perfect. I'm sure we have not been perfect, but we really try to be perfect and try to right wrongs if there are any wrongs.

That's what I'd have to say about that.

• (1635)

Jeremy Patzer: Have you ever had to remove an employee because of misconduct toward a whistle-blower?

Harriet Solloway: I have not at all.

We have an intake process whereby I sit at the table with the analyst and a lawyer and we discuss the cases and the submissions that we get. I always see a lot of compassion around the table. I've never even come close to having to intervene.

Jeremy Patzer: Thank you for that.

I know it's a tough question, and I appreciate that you have confidence in the workforce there.

I only have a bit of time left.

Going back to the sheer volume of cases that you are seeing, are you formulating a plan?

You talked a lot about funding, but do you have a plan in place or are you working on a plan to try to shorten these timelines to try to address...? Part of the concerns had to do with timelines previously. That's part of why we hear what we heard in that article from 2022.

Do you have a plan to try to shorten the timelines to get a resolution faster, so they don't have to endure repeated harassment from a superior or a colleague?

Harriet Solloway: There's only so much juice you can squeeze from a lemon. At the same time, every single day we're looking for more efficiencies. Every single day we're looking to see how we can provide a fulsome response in each case as quickly as possible. We are looking at our organization now and I'm considering so many different options about different classifications or different expertise.

Not a day goes by when we're not thinking about that, but there really is only so much juice you can squeeze from an orange.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I think we're done.

Do you mind if I ask a couple of quick questions on the whistleblower file?

I may have missed the answer, and I apologize if I did.

What has been your or your office's involvement with the advisory task force on whistle-blowing?

Harriet Solloway: Shortly after I arrived, they asked to speak to me, so I did, with Brian. That's it. Otherwise, we're not involved.

I think it's a bit late. They've written their report.

The Chair: Have you seen the report?

Harriet Solloway: No. I have no idea.

The Chair: Is it published to you?

Harriet Solloway: No.

The grapevine says they've completed their report—

The Chair: It was due over a year ago.

Harriet Solloway: I have no idea where it is or what's in it.

The Chair: Okay. Maybe it's something we can follow up on internally among ourselves.

Thank you very much for your time. It's nice to see both of you here again.

I am going to excuse both of you as I go on to some quick committee business regarding the budget and the schedule.

Thanks very much. Leave the water behind, please.

Harriet Solloway: Thank you very much. It's always a pleasure.

If there is a need for more information, don't hesitate to reach out.

The Chair: Perfect. Thanks, again.

I'll get to Mr. Patzer in a minute.

The clerk has distributed three budgets that we need quick approval for. As always, these are maximums and we probably will not spend anywhere close to it.

The first one is \$500 for the study of the two PBO reports that we've already done. One was for water only.

Can we get approval for that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The second one is for today with the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner. It's \$500 for the water. I'm sure we'll come in quite a bit below that.

• (1640)

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Mr. Chair, you have to look at me to see if I give you a thumbs-up.

[*English*]

The Chair: Can you say that once more?

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: To get a consensus, you need to look at me to see if I give you a thumbs-up.

There's a delay with the interpretation. Otherwise, we'll just speak French.

[*English*]

The Chair: I usually look for nods or thumbs up for something as simple as the budget.

The other is for the study regarding the consul general in New York, which is \$1,000. Again, we will not come anywhere close to that.

Are we all fine with that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: That's wonderful.

Very quickly, I'm just updating everyone on the back-and-forth between ministers. Minister Lightbound has made himself available on October 23 for the first hour, for Canada Post, which we had requested.

That leaves the second hour. I originally suggested we move back some of the studies because neither the minister nor Canada Post would be available. Now that he is, I figure the second hour will be for witnesses. I had said we'll move the request for witnesses back because I thought we'd do the study later, but now it looks like we'll start it so I'll ask everyone to get witnesses in by next Tuesday for three o'clock.

Some have already been submitted. Just resubmit your list, please, with your priorities.

For the 28th, then, we'll also fill in from that witness list.

The President of the Treasury Board has made himself available for the 30th, at the same time, of course, that Minister Lightbound on PSPC is going to be available. We're going to take the first one who said yes, which was the Treasury Board, so they'll be here on the 30th for about an hour and 20 minutes. That gives us just enough time to get through appropriate rounds.

We've asked Minister Lightbound to find another time for us, and he's agreed to reappear on his mandate. The original request was for the mandate but he's doing Canada Post first. He will get back to us, hopefully in the first week of November, for one hour on his mandate briefing and everything else with us.

That is what I have.

Mr. Patzer.

Jeremy Patzer: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Since we're in committee business, I would like to move a motion, if I may.

I will get my staff to circulate it to the clerk.

You'll get a copy of it so you'll get to see it, but I'll read it here quickly anyway:

Whereas the government recently announced a Defence Investment Agency housed within Public Services and Procurement Canada, which is overseen by the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates; That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee study the creation and planning of the Defence Investment Agency for no fewer than two meetings; that at least one meeting be scheduled no later than October 28th; that the committee invite officials from Public Services and Procurement Canada, the Secretary of State (Defence Procurement), and the CEO of the Defence Investment Agency to appear for two hours; that the committee also invite officials from the Privy Council Office, the Prime Minister's Office, the Treasury Board Secretariat and any department involved with appointments made for the Defence Investment Agency.

That's the motion I would like to move.

I think, given that there's this new defence investment agency, and there's been a gentleman appointed to it, we have called for him as the CEO. I think it would be good to have him come to talk about his vision for defence procurement. We know the government has created this agency as a chance and an opportunity to streamline procurement. I've read several news articles on the next steps and what the next phase is for the government when it comes to procurement versus purchasing versus, also, our defence strategy here in Canada as well.

I do think, for the sake of this new agency, it would be helpful to have the secretary of state and CEO appear. I have a few other names listed here, as well, but I think this is a very friendly motion in line with other typical motions that this committee does by inviting either ministers or government officials to talk about what their mandate is.

Has it been circulated, Chair?

The Chair: Yes.

Jeremy Patzer: Okay, right on.

I would turn it over to the committee to read it. I'm happy to answer any questions on it but I do think this is a pretty simple, straightforward motion.

• (1645)

The Chair: I'll start a speaking order.

I have Ms. Rochefort.

Pauline Rochefort: Simply, I'd like to understand the difference between this motion and the one that our colleague, Madam Gaudreau, made with respect to Canada Post, where she had to give notice.

My impressions were that when Madam Gaudreau brought forward the motion for Canada Post, she had to give us notice. Tonight there's no notice.

I'm uncomfortable with a motion being brought forward like this without having had a chance to read it.

The Chair: We went into committee business to discuss and get the budgets approved.

Pauline Rochefort: Okay.

The Chair: When we're in committee business, people can table motions.

Pauline Rochefort: Then why was she not allowed to bring a motion when she had one a few weeks ago? Was there a difference?

The Chair: I'm not sure what you're referring to, but we're discussing the motion at hand right now.

Pauline Rochefort: I'm just trying to understand how motions—

The Chair: We're in committee business. He's tabled the motion, so we're debating the motion.

I have a speaking order. I have Ms. Khalid.

Iqra Khalid: Thank you, Chair.

I am not able to view the text of the motion. I'm wondering if you can suspend the meeting while you distribute to us paper copies of the motion. I'm not able to access it on my phone at this time.

The Chair: Perhaps you can share with one of your members.

Iqra Khalid: I'd prefer to have my own copy, Chair.

The Chair: Okay.

Iqra Khalid: I would like to also suspend the meeting so that I can discuss this with my colleagues. This is a bit of a surprise. I would have loved advance notice.

The Chair: Sure, we could suspend for, say, five minutes.

Iqra Khalid: I would prefer 10, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'll give you five.

Iqra Khalid: We'll see. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: It's not a "We'll see." You don't determine this, Ms. Khalid, and I appreciate your humour with it, but we'll give you five, okay?

We're suspended.

• (1645)

(Pause)

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you for your patience, everyone. We are back.

Ms. Sudds, go ahead.

• (1655)

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I have two points to make.

The first is around your earlier comments about when the minister is coming, if I may. I hadn't had a chance to discuss that. October 23, of course, is great. He can come to kick off that Canada Post study. I believe that both Minister Lightbound and Minister Ali have made themselves available for October 30, and I would—

The Chair: It's for the same hour, though. Normally, we'd get them for one hour and one hour. My understanding is it's for the exact same hour.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: My understanding is that they had agreed to both come and to split the time.

The Chair: It's to split one hour, not two hours.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I was under the impression that it was an hour and a half.

The Chair: No. It was going to be one hour and 20 minutes and another hour and 20 minutes, which would allow us to get most of the rounds in. I would be happy with one hour and one hour, but not one shared hour or a shared one hour and 20 minutes.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: That's at the discretion... My point is it would be better to have him sooner than later. If he's made himself available for October 30, that would be advantageous for all of us to hear from him directly on his mandate, as well as, of course, Minister Ali. That's my first point.

My second point, with respect to the motion, is that it would have been lovely to have advance notice. Obviously, it was translated and ready to go, but regardless, here we are.

I'd like to suggest an amendment to the motion, simply to change the starting date. It has "one meeting to be scheduled no later than October 28". I would suggest that this study not be started until all witnesses from the Canada Post study have been at committee.

The Chair: There is one issue about that. We said that October 23 and October 28 are for Canada Post.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: That's correct.

The Chair: Are you saying after October 28? However, there may be other witnesses after that, so—

Hon. Jenna Sudds: That's correct.

The Chair: —for the study, if we have the estimates, we could end up with one day in February.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: The point is that we had decided to prioritize the Canada Post study, and I don't want to disrupt the flow of witnesses and start this before we have heard from them.

The Chair: We can do it after October 23 and 28.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Are there further witnesses we're expecting?

The Chair: Well, the president of Canada Post, after...has indicated they have 45 days to return a report to the government. That was probably 10 days ago, so there are 35 days for that, and there are also issues around the labour disruption.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Yes. My point is that I don't want to start this study until the completion of the Canada Post study.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Patzer.

Jeremy Patzer: Can I add something? I'm just wondering whether you would accept it if we just said....

I'm sorry, but I recognize that I inadvertently created a jam with the October 28 suggestion. Could we do "at the first opening", or "at the chair's discretion" or something along those lines? To his point about what the timeline could look like with the Canada Post study, we might have some meeting openings in November that we could call these folks to.

I think it's standard practice for this committee to have more than one study on the go, if I'm correct, Chair. We know that schedules can change and move around a bit. There are multiple people on this list, so it might be easy to get two of them to come for a meeting on one day. You might be able to fill some gaps that we have in the schedule, so I would like to give you the flexibility for that rather than, perhaps, force you to have to do it by such-and-such date. Would that be acceptable?

The Chair: Sure.

Jeremy Patzer: I guess I can't amend my own, but maybe....

The Chair: Well, we're discussing the amendment. Why don't we see what Ms. Gaudreau has to say first, and then Ms. Khalid.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Let's go back to basics, Mr. Chair. There are 41 million Canadians living at 17 million different addresses. They want answers. We have an opportunity and a forum—

• (1700)

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm going to interrupt you. We're on the amendment to changing the date for—

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Yes, it is just the preamble.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: This is urgent. We fleshed out the issue, so we need to study it. I'm flexible. If we're short of witnesses

or they're not available, we could postpone to November 15. That's why I think it's important to focus on Canada Post.

I can speak more slowly if it helps, but please do the same when you're speaking in English. I'll repeat more slowly.

We mustn't let what was proposed as a priority fall by the way-side. I am entirely open to having a meeting on this new study in two or three weeks, because it's important. The motion speaks to the establishment of an agency. We have an opportunity to think about the structure of such an agency and discuss it. I think that's important.

We all want wins, but if we allow a little bit of leeway, everyone will get something. We all want our studies to be prioritized, but the announcement regarding the establishment of an agency just came out, so I'm sorry. We didn't know about this a few weeks ago. The news about Canada Post came out on September 25.

I'd like to propose a friendly amendment. We could prioritize the study on Canada Post, unless no witnesses are available. We don't want to waste a meeting. We could add a sentence to say that we give priority to the Canada Post study, but that if no witnesses are available for Thursday's meeting, we'll use the time for the other study. I think that's a winning proposition.

[*English*]

The Chair: Are you actually suggesting a date?

Iqra Khalid: That's exactly what the amendment [*Inaudible—Editor*], Chair.

The Chair: Your amendment is to do it after Canada Post. Canada Post could very well be in January, because we don't know when that's going to actually finish. Is there an ability among the group to pick a date?

Iqra Khalid: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: We have until the end of October already covered. It could be around mid-November or the third week in November or something, just so we can set a date.

Ms. Khalid, go ahead.

Iqra Khalid: Thanks, Chair.

If I may, we have Madam Gaudreau's motion, which I find to be very important, and I think this committee should be giving priority to this issue. I know that a lot of my and my colleagues' constituents have been reaching out about this.

This was a question for you, Chair, and that's why I waited for your attention. I'm just wondering when we will be doing the estimates.

The Chair: I don't know when the government will be tabling them.

Iqra Khalid: Would it be in November?

The Chair: It depends on when the government tables them. I have no control over that. It just depends on when the government tables them, when we actually have them. There has to be nine days before the last supply day, but we could get them earlier.

Iqra Khalid: I don't think it is an issue for us to prioritize Marie-Hélène's motion and the study on Canada Post. I doubt it will be lengthy or time-consuming to the detriment of the motion that the opposition moved today. I think both are possible, but in my opinion, priority should be given to the completion of Ms. Gaudreau's study before we start another one.

Mr. Patzer mentioned that, in the past, we have had multiple studies going on at the same time. I'm sure, as Mr. Patzer is a seasoned politician on the Hill, he would agree that it gets very confusing, and things are not prioritized properly with respect to how reports are done, when they're published and how we are going to move forward.

At this point, I really think it would be best for us to focus on Canada Post and to go through the estimates. However, as we're waiting for the estimates, we could bring in Mr. Patzer's motion. I think it's an absolutely solid study or testimony that we should definitely be hearing. However, I don't think it's fair for us to overtake in any way the importance that Madam Gaudreau has brought to the Canada Post issue. Therefore, I support this amendment wholeheartedly and say that we should not be starting any other study until the Canada Post study is completed or until we hear the testimony, at least.

• (1705)

The Chair: We will go to Mr. Patzer and then Mr. Seeback.

Before we do, though, I will say that the committee did agree to two Canada Post days when we had our subcommittee, and that is what was adopted by the committee, so it does technically meet that obligation, with the intent that there will be more as things come out. We could still honour what the committee said; we could start the one and still have the time available.

Mr. Patzer.

Jeremy Patzer: I think part of the complexity with the Canada Post study has been the postal strike, which has kind of thrown some dates to the side because of the nature of the strike. We just haven't been able to get people. We had the president, and then we didn't have the president. Now we have the president. It has kind of been an on-again, off-again kind of thing.

By prescribing that this has to happen after the Canada Post study really puts it into the breeze here, kind of at a whim.

With regard to the estimates, what I'm reading about the process coming—and you're all on the government side, so maybe you can enlighten us on this—is that there needs to be a standing order change to allow for the budget to become a fall process rather than occur in the spring, right? It sounds like there's going to be a structural change done to allow for that to be the regular practice and not a one-off, so I guess until we get clarity around that, we don't know when the estimates are going to be.

Like the chair said, until the government tells us when it is going to table them, we don't know. However, if there have to be standing

order changes done to allow for a fall budget cycle rather than a spring one, that's really going to muck up timelines here. I think having this study in the barrel here, ready to go....

Of course, we have the two meetings for Canada Post as a priority, but if, because of the strike, for some reason now we all of a sudden can't get some of the witnesses we want, this study then allows us to fill that while still having the Canada Post study, as Ms. Gaudreau said, be the priority. It allows us to fill a day if we need to fill a day.

I would like to get to mine as soon as we can, but I also appreciate that the chair might need the flexibility to be able to make that happen. I'm not trying to overtake the Canada Post study. I'm merely trying to say that because there's some uncertainty around how quickly we can finish it, this would be a good substantive motion that I think everybody around this table would like to be able to ask some questions on. Defence procurement is top of mind for a lot of Canadians, and it's a very key piece, I think, for the government going forward. It's certainly of interest to those of us on the opposition side as well.

The Chair: Mr. Seeback is next, and then we have Ms. Gaudreau and Ms. Sudds.

Kyle Seeback (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm new to the committee. It's my first time here.

When I was vice-chair of the international trade committee, we often had multiple studies going on at the same time. We always gave the chair the discretion to fit things in where it made sense. You might not have any witnesses for the study you're currently working on.

It would seem to me the Liberals are saying that if you don't have witnesses, we will only do Canada Post, and then the committee doesn't meet. That doesn't make sense.

That was a Liberal-chaired committee. We had no problem saying that we trusted the chair to fit in witnesses to deal with multiple priorities.

All studies are a priority. The absolute priority is this Canada Post study. That should be the priority, and the chair should be instructed that it's the priority. The chair should try to get the witnesses on the Canada Post study as a priority. If that does not happen, for a variety of reasons, this committee should not adjourn and not work. The committee should move to something else.

We should all have faith that this will be done properly and fairly, as I did with the vice-chair on the trade committee. We would always agree that the Liberal chair would try to fit everything in where it makes sense. That's how the committee operated very smoothly for a number of years.

That's my advice to this committee. You can say that Canada Post is the priority, and the chair should absolutely make sure that's the first thing on the agenda. If there are witnesses unable to attend or if we can't fill that spot, then we move to another study. That seems to make logical sense to me.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thanks.

That has been the habit here, where sometimes we've actually had, I think, up to eight on the go at one time.

I have Ms. Khalid, Ms. Gaudreau and then Ms. Sudds.

Iqra Khalid: I have no comments, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'd like to come back to the amendment proposed by Ms. Sudds to make sure I understand it correctly.

[*English*]

The Chair: I think the amendment was that they're fine with it but not to do any studies until the final Canada Post....

However, the committee did agree in the subcommittee—and the committee adopted this—that we would start with two. We have committed to the two, and we're fulfilling the two. This does not mean we're only going to do two, but....

Iqra Khalid: Chair, may I interject, please?

The Chair: Yes.

Iqra Khalid: The question is what the actual language of the amendment is that we are looking at right now.

The Chair: Why doesn't Ms. Sudds provide it to us?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: The amendment would strictly be that this study start at the completion of the Canada Post witness testimony.

The Chair: Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think that's what I noted.

Is that clear for you?

Can we vote on the amendment?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] study.

We'll do a recorded vote.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 5; nays 3 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Can we vote on the motion as amended?

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 8; nays 0 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Now we will get to Mrs. Block.

Kelly Block: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I guess great minds think alike, because I too want to take the opportunity to introduce a motion today. I think it's just as timely as the motion that my colleague brought forward earlier.

It is on illegal labour, and it reads as follows:

That, in light of recent reports of illegal foreign labour being used on federally funded infrastructure projects, the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates hold at least two meetings with officials from the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and other government officials, and representatives of the building trades across Canada to examine this issue within the context of federally funded infrastructure projects.

I'll make a few points as to why I believe this is important.

Illegal labour has gutted entry-level opportunities for young Canadians trying to get involved in the trades. Improper labour regulations undermine safety, drive down wages and, ultimately, erode trust in our industry. This isn't just a labour issue; it's a criminal issue. Illegal labour creates a shadow economy that helps criminal networks thrive. When taxpayer-funded projects use illegal labour, Canadian taxpayers are footing the bill. Canadians expect their infrastructure dollars to support Canadian workers, not unregulated illegal labour.

We're seeing a two-tier labour market, one where Canadians follow the rules and another where exploitation is the business model. We're cursed without legal protections. We are vulnerable to abuse and have no recourse when something goes wrong.

Federally funded infrastructure should reflect Canadian values, which are fairness, safety and respect for the rule of law.

Thank you.

• (1715)

The Chair: Are you sending it to the clerk?

Kelly Block: Yes, we will definitely send it to the clerk.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Iqra Khalid: I would ask for your and the clerk's esteemed knowledge and advice on the relevance of this in this committee and whether it is admissible as a motion here.

The Chair: Sure.

Perhaps I could get a copy of it.

Kelly Block: Sure, sorry.

The Chair: You're referring to federally funded projects. Right?

Kelly Block: Yes, contracts.

The Chair: I think it's in order.

Iqra Khalid: Is that your official ruling?

The Chair: Yes.

Iqra Khalid: If I may, it seems to me that we're not talking about the money that is—

The Chair: You're welcome to challenge the ruling if you wish, but it's not a debatable—

Iqra Khalid: In that case, Chair, I do challenge your ruling.

The Chair: Sure.

(Ruling of the chair overturned: nays 5; yeas 3)

The Chair: Unfortunately, it is ruled out of order, Mrs. Block.

Getting back to the issue of the ministers, it was a request by the subcommittee, which was passed and adopted by the committee, that they appear separately. We will go back to the clerk to address them, and at the very next meeting, we'll update you on their availability. It was a request of the committee and the committee did adopt to have them appear separately.

Ms. Gaudreau, so that everyone hears regarding the ministers, it was adopted by the committee to request them separately and not together. I'll send it back to our clerk to follow up with the ministers to express what the will of the committee was as adopted. We'll update everyone at the next meeting.

If there's nothing else, we will adjourn.

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