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Chair: Salma Zahid



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• (1630)

[*English*]

The Chair (Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre—Don Valley East, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 18 of the Standing Committee on Science and Research.

Pursuant to the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, October 20, the committee is meeting to have a briefing session with the chief science adviser of Canada, Dr. Mona Nemer.

Welcome, Dr. Mona Nemer. Thank you for appearing before the committee.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French.

I'll give a reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

Thank you, Dr. Nemer, for appearing before the committee. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks, and then we will go into a round of questioning by the members of this committee.

Thank you. You can please begin.

[*Translation*]

Mona Nemer (Chief Science Advisor of Canada, Office of the Chief Science Advisor of Canada): Thank you very much,

Good afternoon, Madam Chair and distinguished members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today.

To start, I would like to acknowledge all the members who participated in our “Science Meets Parliament” event last week—it is important that we continue to build greater connections between decision-makers and our scientific community.

[*English*]

Thank you all for taking the time to engage with some of our brightest young scientists, who came from all over Canada to par-

ticipate in this year's edition of Science Meets Parliament. They were thrilled by their experience. It helps them appreciate your important work and learn how their research and expertise can support our parliamentarians and benefit our country.

Over the eight years that I have served in this role, the world has changed in profound ways. Technologically, we're in the midst of a transformation driven by artificial intelligence, quantum computing, genomics and clean energy innovation. Geopolitically, we're witnessing a shifting landscape and a global recognition that science and technology are deeply intertwined with national security and sovereignty. Economically, nations are competing not only for natural resources and markets but also for the talent, data and intellectual capacity that drive innovation and growth.

These changes bring both opportunities and challenges. They demand that we adapt quickly, make evidence-informed decisions and strengthen the systems that allow us to respond effectively. Science is central to that effort. It helps us detect emerging risks, develop new technologies and craft solutions that improve our social and economic resilience, from health and food security to energy and digital sovereignty.

But resilience does not mean isolationism. True resilience comes from connections, from collaboration among countries, sectors and disciplines. Whether we're mapping the Arctic, monitoring oceans or developing AI standards, no nation can do it alone. International collaboration helps us ensure that discovery benefits everyone and reinforces our reputation as a trusted and constructive global partner.

• (1635)

[Translation]

That said, collaboration must be grounded in a strong domestic foundation. If we want to remain at the forefront of innovation, we must have a long-term strategy that allows us to invest in Canada's science enterprise—in people and skills, in infrastructures and in the institutions that turn ideas into sustainable outcomes. That means supporting both fundamental and applied research, enabling interdisciplinary approaches, and ensuring that our data and research are managed responsibly. At the same time, we should safeguard the intellectual property generated through research activities and enhance its translation into innovative products, processes and services.

[English]

My office is ready to double down on our domestic and international efforts that have, over the past year, supported Canada's G7 presidency and global engagement, while providing the best advice to our government for important national issues, such as biodiversity conservation, research data protection, emergency preparedness and the science needed for avian flu management.

Science is one of Canada's greatest strategic assets. It can fuel our economy, enhance our global standing and enable us to meet the challenges of our time with both confidence and compassion.

[Translation]

I look forward to continuing to work with this committee to strengthen Canadian science, to build resilience at home and to ensure that Canada remains a collaborative, trusted voice in global research and innovation.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Nemer.

We will now proceed to our rounds of questioning. We will begin our six-minute rounds with MP Ho.

MP Ho, you will have six minutes. Please go ahead.

Vincent Ho (Richmond Hill South, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Nemer, let's begin with the basics. As chief science adviser, are you the head of a government agency?

Mona Nemer: No, I'm not the head of a government agency.

Vincent Ho: Do you make any regulatory decisions that are going to be implemented by this government?

Mona Nemer: I don't make decisions. I'm an adviser. I provide advice on policies and sometimes on implementations.

Vincent Ho: You don't oversee any operational files at all.

Mona Nemer: I don't.

Vincent Ho: Okay. According to published sources, you earn \$393,000 per year. Is that number correct? Is that in the ballpark?

Mona Nemer: I'm sorry; the number refers to what?

Vincent Ho: Your salary is \$393,000. Is that correct?

Mona Nemer: The bracket of my salary is public information, yes.

Vincent Ho: For that level of compensation, what exactly are Canadian taxpayers paying you to do? I just want to get an understanding of that.

Mona Nemer: I think that's a very good question, sir.

What the Canadian public is paying for is an independent adviser who is functioning in a transparent and trustworthy manner in providing unbiased advice to government and putting it in the public domain. They're funding an office that provides a challenge function for government, and let me tell you that we need more and not less of that.

That office is also supporting Canada's international engagement by making sure our government has the latest information to make decisions—

• (1640)

Vincent Ho: I'm going to intervene here.

According to the staffing directory, your office is made up of 24 employees. Is that number correct, or in the ballpark?

Mona Nemer: Yes, that's about correct.

Vincent Ho: What's the total operating budget of your office, including travel, staff and everything, per year?

Mona Nemer: It's under \$4 million.

Vincent Ho: I don't think your office appears to publish any performance audits. You just said that it doesn't make any kind of mandatory recommendations and does not oversee any federal agency, and you're not a head of an agency. What exactly are your key performance indicators?

Mona Nemer: First of all, let me help you appreciate the position by saying that all peer countries have a chief science adviser, so I guess they must all feel that this is a helpful position for government.

Vincent Ho: What I want to understand is how taxpayers measure your performance specifically, not just the fact that it exists in other countries.

Mona Nemer: I was appointed on what's called good behaviour. I don't get any bonus pay. It was done this way so that I maintain the independence of the office and I don't have to provide the advice that the minister or the prime minister wants to hear and function in a truly unbiased manner.

Vincent Ho: I understand the independence of it.

Let's move on and talk about deliverables and transparency.

In the private sector, for this level of senior executive compensation, people are held to weekly deliverables—action items, active reports, performance metrics. What exactly did you accomplish in the last week?

Mona Nemer: Sir, I guess I have to explain how we function, because we provide advice to the government—

Vincent Ho: Did you provide any advice in the last week or last couple of weeks?

Mona Nemer: Yes, absolutely. I've provided advice in the past week to the Minister of Industry and to the Prime Minister.

Vincent Ho: What did that accomplish?

Mona Nemer: It's not my job to see how well they take up my advice or not. If I were to do that, then I think that it would completely skew the work that I do.

Over the years, I have evidence that my advice and what we do had impact on Canadians. Of course, it was best illustrated during the COVID pandemic, but there are a number of other examples. We've put out a—

Vincent Ho: Thank you. That's okay. I don't want to go back to the pandemic.

It was uncovered that the National Research Council spent \$61,000 on rooftop patio furniture. Are you aware of that?

Mona Nemer: No.

Vincent Ho: Do you feel that \$61,000 for rooftop patio furniture is a good use of taxpayer money?

Mona Nemer: Sir, I am not involved in operations and no one asked me to give advice on these kinds of expenses—

Vincent Ho: You may not make the decision on the patio furniture, but do you think the \$61,000 was a good use of money when that money could be spent on research?

Mona Nemer: I can't quite comment, because I don't know in what context it was. For all I know, it may have been in the context of a field scientific project or—

Vincent Ho: It was definitely not for research. It was for a building that had rooftop patio furniture, and it cost \$61,000.

If you were running your office, would you spend \$61,000 on rooftop patio furniture?

Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.): I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. McKinnon.

Ron McKinnon: I feel this is not within the purview of this witness and her role as a science adviser. I would suggest that we want to keep our questions in relation to her purview.

The Chair: Thank you.

You have two seconds left.

Vincent Ho: I'm just responding to the point of order—

The Chair: He had a point of order. I've taken it. You have two seconds left.

I would request all the members to be respectful to our witness today and ask questions about her mandate and everything.

Thank you.

We will now proceed to MP McKelvie for six minutes. Please go ahead.

● (1645)

Jennifer McKelvie (Ajax, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for joining us today to share more about your portfolio and what it is that you do.

I was wondering if you could speak to some of the engagement activities that you do with the Canadian public. When I was at the L'Oreal awards for women in science last night, someone pointed out to me that you have a youth council. I was wondering if you could share what the youth council does, what their mandate is and why it's so important that we are engaging youth in science here in Canada.

Mona Nemer: Indeed, I do quite a bit of outreach in my position. I think it's really important to have an ongoing dialogue with the community, with the public and certainly with youth.

The youth council is a very important part of the office. We now have the third cohort. They're young Canadians between the ages of 18 and 30 from across the country. They come from different disciplines. Some of them are still studying; others have jobs.

The idea is for them to give us their perspective, the perspective of youth, on the work that we're doing and the advice that we're providing to government. We make them participate in a lot of the work that we're doing, but they also do their own project. Every group decides to do their own project.

The new cohort has not determined yet what they're going to do. They've just started. The previous one did a very interesting report on the youth perspective on AI and the future. The ones before that did a very nice science technology strategy from a youth perspective.

Jennifer McKelvie: One thing that surprised me was that the French embassy has a science attaché. I had a conversation with him. Part of his role is to promote the science that's happening in France.

I'm wondering if you could speak to some of the international collaborations that we have and why it is so important that we continue to reach out and work with the world.

Mona Nemer: It's absolutely essential that we continue to work with the world. The good news is that the world wants to work with us. They've always wanted to, and I think that with the geopolitics that are taking place, it's fair to say that this interest has escalated.

By the way, we don't have science attachés in most of our embassies. It would be quite helpful and useful to have them, because of the evident role of science and technology everywhere, including in trade and in diplomacy. I find myself actually making up a little for the absence of this kind of expertise in our embassies outside Canada.

I'll give you an example of a very useful engagement that we did with the European Union before the pandemic. It resulted in Canada being an associate member of the horizon Europe program. This means that Canadian researchers and SMEs have access to funds from the European Union, which are in the tens of billions of dollars. That's very important. It gives us access to unique facilities and research infrastructure that we wouldn't have access to otherwise. It's some of the impact that we have.

Another thing is that we talk about AI, for example, and AI standards internationally. We need to have that kind of engagement from the research to the innovation side to make sure that Canada's views and Canada's preferred options are also on the table internationally when these standards are being discussed.

Those are just a couple of examples.

Jennifer McKelvie: One of the components of our budget was attraction of international talent. How do you see your role fitting into that? What should we be looking for as we bring top minds to Canada? Are there gaps that we might want to fill? What are your thoughts on that process?

- (1650)

Mona Nemer: First of all, I was thrilled to see that this item was in the budget. I was asked for advice on the science ecosystem back in the spring. I think that because of the geopolitics around us, taking advantage of the opportunities presenting themselves to Canada is the right thing to do, especially at a time when we want to reinvigorate our innovation system, our advanced manufacturing, etc., in addition to the other industries that we have.

I'm certainly looking forward to welcoming some great minds, perhaps some Canadians that are now abroad, whether they're in the United States or elsewhere. Of course, they will contribute to the training of young researchers and to perhaps closer collaborations with industry—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Dr. Nemer. Could you quickly wind up in 10 or 15 seconds?

Mona Nemer: I can wrap up.

I'm looking forward to it.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Nemer. We have to keep track of the time.

I will now proceed to MP Blanchette-Joncas for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas (Rimouski—La Matapédia, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I welcome the Chief Science Advisor and thank her for being with us.

Ms. Nemer, in 2023, you published a report titled “The Federal Scientific Workforce: An overview” in which you acknowledge that the government does not have a database on its own scientific community, particularly with regard to training, expertise and the nature of positions. How can people trust a system that does not know its own scientific capacity?

Mona Nemer: I believe I mentioned in the report that the government is made up of many institutions. The representatives of a department know most of the scientists who work there, but none know all the scientists across the entire government. In terms of succession planning and to ensure we have the skills we need in government and in the country, we felt it was important to establish a stronger framework to know who we are working with.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: That same report states that, since 1994, all federal reports have called for these gaps to be addressed. Thirty years later, nothing has changed. I'm trying to understand how this system can be credible when its own recommendations have been ignored for three decades.

Mona Nemer: All I can say is that I hope times will change and that people will appreciate the importance of data much more. Digitization and the advent of artificial intelligence algorithms may allow us to perform the task in a much simpler way.

The problem is not that there's no data, but that the current data systems do not communicate with each other.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Yes.

Speaking of data that doesn't communicate, I'm referring to 30 years of inaction to address the gaps. In your report, you state that there are no data on the skills, experience or career paths of federal scientists. It's a bit like a state that wants to govern without a rudder. How can the government claim to govern national science with such blindness?

Mona Nemer: It's a miracle.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you. I think you're taking the words right out of my mouth.

In your report, you also mention equity indicators or projects submitted in French. With respect to the indicator concerning science in French, that same report confirms that there is no indicator to measure the equity of evaluations for projects submitted in French.

Madam Chief Science Advisor, can you guarantee that, without this data, no Quebec researcher is at a disadvantage?

Mona Nemer: I cannot say that they are disadvantaged or advantaged. I work with numbers and evidence-based data. One thing is certain: we need to have data and follow up on it. It's an issue that my office is currently considering, namely how it can help.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Let's discuss the points you raised. In particular, you recommend incorporating the linguistic dimension into the collection of data for science policies.

In your opinion, why has no recommendation been implemented by the government?

• (1655)

Mona Nemer: I have to tell you that this is a question for the officials responsible.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I ask them, but they don't really answer me.

Mona Nemer: As you say, my report is very clear. There is history behind it. Indeed, action is needed.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you.

I'll continue with the linguistic angle. The new Official Languages Act requires real bilingualism in federal institutions. In your opinion, how can the government fulfill this obligation if it doesn't collect any data on language in its scientific activities?

Mona Nemer: I believe a directive was recently sent to all assistant deputy ministers of science to ensure that the measures related to the bilingualism of executives and scientists are being implemented.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Okay. For your part, have you recommended that the government measure all this?

Mona Nemer: It's clear that the scientific community must know what's happening and that it must have data on the topic.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you.

According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the OECD, and findings from the Council of Canadian Academies, Canada is one of the only G7 countries whose intensity of research and development spending has decreased over the past 20 years. Your report also notes that public and private investments remain well below the OECD average and that the country is experiencing a decline in its innovation ecosystem.

Under these conditions, in your opinion, how can the federal government reduce the budgets of granting agencies while claiming that Canada will become a global leader in innovation?

Mona Nemer: I think we need to have a clear strategy for science, technology and innovation that outlines the country's goals and implements clear commitments, not only in terms of funding but also priorities, outcomes and so on. Next, we need to have significant funding that aligns with that strategy so we can move forward in a coordinated manner and not constantly be the under-achievers of the G7. In my humble opinion, we should at least be in line with the OECD average.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up for MP Blanchette-Joncas.

We will now proceed to MP Mahal for our second round of five minutes.

MP Mahal, please go ahead.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal (Edmonton Southeast, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dr. Nemer, thanks for taking the time to come to this committee.

At the outset, I want to clarify that in regard to Madam Chair's comments that we need to maintain respect and we need to maintain decorum, indeed, we need to maintain decorum, but we also need to make sure that we ask the questions that Canadians want us to ask. That's why they have chosen to bring us here. This also speaks about accountability.

When I make that comment, I mean that—

The Chair: Any key questions can be asked, but I want us to maintain decorum.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Indeed, yes.

The stake is higher. The total Canadian taxpayer money that is being given to your office is \$4.5 million. That includes your salary of over \$300,000. Obviously, there could be questions that you might not like, but I would still ask them. I will stay as polite as possible. I just want to lay that out in advance.

You mentioned in your testimony that you have been consulted by the PM's office for the budget in November. Is that correct?

Mona Nemer: Yes.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: There have been many changes related to SR and ED. Did you have any input on those changes, yes or no?

Mona Nemer: On SR and ED, no, I did not.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Have you personally met Prime Minister Mark Carney since the election?

Mona Nemer: I've been in the same room, but I haven't had a sit-down meeting with him. I've engaged extensively with his office, including with his chief of staff.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Okay.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but your job is to provide advice and consult with the Prime Minister. Is the Prime Minister not interested in science? Is he not interested in sitting with you, yes or no?

Mona Nemer: I don't think he's not interested in science. I think that the Speech from the Throne and the budget reflect this.

Does he need to speak with me—

• (1700)

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: In your own testimony just now, you said that he has not met with you so far, and it's been eight months now. Is that correct?

Mona Nemer: Yes, and what I'm saying is that he doesn't need to meet with me to show that he's interested in science or to relay a request to me.

He's a busy person. He can have—

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Have you met with any of the cabinet ministers since the election?

Mona Nemer: Yes, I have, absolutely, on a regular basis.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: How about Evan Solomon?

Mona Nemer: Yes.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Okay. How about Mélanie Joly? Have you met with her?

Mona Nemer: Yes, I have, several times.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Have there been any incidents or times when your assessments or reports were delayed, edited or vetted by the government, based on differences of opinions?

Mona Nemer: I want to make sure I understand the question.

Do you mean whether the government has—

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Have there been times when you presented reports that were not taken in completely as they were in your presentation, or they were edited or rejected completely?

Mona Nemer: As I said, I don't keep track of what they have or have not taken from my recommendations, but I can say that by and large, they've listened to my advice and they've taken part of it as appropriate.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Do you think it would make more sense if they would also provide feedback that your advice is good and that they are going to implement it and listen to it, given that the stakes are so high that \$4.5 million of taxpayer money is being spent every year in your office?

Mona Nemer: Madam Chair, the line of questioning is—

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Yes or no?

Mona Nemer: I can't really address this.

I was hired to do a job and I'm doing the job and I've been renewed twice. The last time I accepted to be renewed, the Liberal Party was 20 points behind. I'm not being partisan here. I'm doing my job.

I want to answer properly, but I find it very hard to answer this line of questioning.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would request the members to be respectful of our witness and to have questions in regard to the work that she is expected to do and the work she has done as the chief science adviser.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Thank you for the instruction, Madam Chair.

I personally believe that the line of questioning is not disrespectful. These are the genuine questions which Canadians elected us here to ask, especially given that the stakes are higher. There's \$4.5 million of taxpayer money being given to one office every year, and we need accountability. Yes, people may not like it, but we have to ask about it.

I can move on from that question. Have there been instances when you have been pressured by the government to bury or delay your reports or your advice?

Mona Nemer: No.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: In the past, this committee has also heard about many science issues, such as antimicrobial resistance and issues related to commercialization of IPs, just to name a couple.

Have you done any work regarding AMR or its commercialization?

Mona Nemer: I have not done work on AMR, but I'm assisting the government on the whole biomanufacturing file, because AMR is about resilience, about having new drugs and about health.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up.

I gave you that extra one minute that was lost.

We will now proceed to MP Bardeesy for five minutes.

Karim Bardeesy (Taiaiko'n—Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Dr. Nemer, for joining us today.

I want to pick up on the questioning by Ms. McKelvie, but first I want to ask a few questions about trust and mistrust in science. I think it's an issue you would probably see from a variety of perspectives.

What are the trends you're seeing in the broader population around trust or skepticism in science and the scientific enterprise? What advice do you have for government on how policy-makers should respond?

Mona Nemer: Trust in science is of course decreasing. Fortunately, it's not decreasing as fast in Canada as in other places, but we're not shielded. This is where we need to make sure that we're transparent and that we actually bring the maximum number of people into the understanding of science and of policy as well.

I don't think that lecturing the public is actually useful. My advice has been that we need to create opportunities for people to engage with science, with data.

My office put out a report on the sky Canada project on the observation of unidentified flying, or aerial, phenomena. Some people were surprised that we're dealing with this, but it was foremost to make sure that we gain public trust and that people don't think the government is hiding something, etc.

In government, I have assured a science integrity policy that all government departments with scientists have implemented to make sure that the science is done in a responsible manner and that scientists can speak publicly about the work.

There isn't just one thing to do; there are a number of things. I take trust in science and in institutions very seriously, because when people start distrusting one thing, they generally distrust everything.

• (1705)

Karim Bardeesy: You mentioned a decline in a lot of western countries, but it's not as much in Canada. What are the specific elements that are most concerning in the decline in trust that you are seeing? Is there a specific set of issues, a specific set of platforms where people are becoming misinformed or maybe a subject area that's more subject to mistrust or misinformation?

Mona Nemer: I think it's all of the above.

Of course, we've talked a lot on the health side about the vaccine, for example, and about disinformation, but there are numerous others. We can say the same about climate change or about forest fires, which some people think were set on purpose.

The experts tell us that once people start distrusting government or science, it's the same for everything. They don't distrust information only on vaccines or only on climate. It's very important to be proactive and to be engaging all the time in dialogue with the public, putting out the science information that the public can then judge.

Karim Bardeesy: Thank you.

I want to switch to an issue that you responded to in answer to one of Dr. McKelvie's questions around science diplomacy, specifically on horizon Europe. Can you explain what's involved in Canada acceding to horizon Europe, and what kinds of specific benefits you think Canadian science can obtain as a result of that accession?

Mona Nemer: Horizon Europe is a program of the European Commission for the European Union. It's essentially for the European countries. Canada was the second or third country after the U.K., which is no longer in the European Union, and New Zealand to access the status of associate member.

It's not only about accessing funds, although this is very important, or networks of people working in science and innovation, because this is open also for the private sector. It's also about sitting around the table and weighing in on international priorities that will be acted upon for the next 10 years. In many ways, it gave Canada a seat at the table with the European Union.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to MP Blanchette-Joncas for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Nemer, do you believe that the budget cuts of around 2% announced in the 2025 budget, which affect the granting councils, will strengthen research in Canada?

Mona Nemer: In an ideal world, there would be no budget cuts. However, the government made decisions. The granting councils have been spared, as their budget cuts amount to only 2% instead of 15%. This is a gain. From an administrative standpoint, it's easier

to manage budget cuts of around 2% and ensure that it doesn't affect the programs.

• (1710)

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: You seemed to be pleased with the government's announcement to invest \$1.7 billion over five years to recruit talent from abroad.

From what I've observed in the ecosystem, graduate scholarships, which had not been indexed for 20 years, were indexed in the 2024 budget. However, they're still 40% lower than the actual cost of living. From what I hear, people in the scientific ecosystem are not happy.

As an example, let me give you an image. It's like not giving water to a plant. How can it bloom? How can it grow? Then, we think there are better plants in other countries and we go look for them there. We bring them here and tell them to acclimate to our environment. I fear that those plants will not survive. They'll simply die and will not be useful. They will not strengthen the scientific research and innovation ecosystem in Canada. Do you think I'm reading it clearly?

Mona Nemer: Seeing the glass as half empty is one way of looking at things. I prefer to see it as half full by saying that it's an important first step in a difficult fiscal situation.

I reiterate that it's important to have a long-term game plan for research and innovation in the country.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Why not take care of the potential talent already here? Why think that the grass is always greener on the other side? That's the cry from the heart that I'm currently hearing from researchers in Quebec and Canada.

Mona Nemer: All I can say is that we are opportunistic. It's not a bad thing, but we need to ensure that the system in place is fair. Young researchers and those who are established must stay here. You can count on us.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up.

We will now proceed to MP Baldinelli for five minutes.

Tony Baldinelli (Niagara Falls—Niagara-on-the-Lake, CPC): Thank you, Dr. Nemer, for being here this afternoon.

I was pleased to take part in the Science Meets Parliament event. I had the pleasure of sitting down with Professor Lawrence Goodridge from the University of Guelph. It was an excellent meeting.

On September 26, the Minister of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Innovation announced the launch of an AI strategy task force including a 30-day national sprint that will help shape Canada's approach to AI.

Were you asked to be part of that task force?

Mona Nemer: The task force is for stakeholders outside of government. Once their feedback is assembled, then I'll be consulted.

I'm in discussions with Minister Solomon's people because I represent Canada on an international AI committee, so I'm in the file.

Tony Baldinelli: You've spoken to the minister on AI right now as part of this whole project and developing the strategy.

Mona Nemer: Well, the strategy is in development. I was speaking about the importance of having a strategy.

Tony Baldinelli: I'll go to your comments. Again, you talk about how "collaboration must be grounded in a strong domestic foundation. If we want to remain at the forefront of innovation, we must have a long-term strategy that allows us to invest in Canada's science enterprise".

You were speaking to an audience in Kyoto, Japan, in October 2025. When you were speaking to them about AI, you said, "If we are serious about maximizing the benefits, we cannot afford to treat trust in AI as an afterthought."

I was just looking at these comments together, and three points I took were to invest in Canada, to have a strong domestic foundation and that trust cannot be an afterthought.

In December 2024, the government announced that it was giving Cohere \$240 million as part of the Canadian sovereign AI compute strategy. They signed the MOU in August 2025. One of the first decisions that they took was to hire an American company, CoreWeave.

I want to see if I can get your comments on that. Do you think that's very Canadian and very sovereign?

Mona Nemer: My view is that we need to strengthen the Canadian research and commercialization ecosystem. We need to use our own people as much as possible. It may not be always possible; I don't know.

When it comes to AI, we need to have a framework that maintains trust without affecting innovation. That, in a nutshell, is my view on AI.

• (1715)

Tony Baldinelli: Near the end of your opening remarks, you say, "Science is one of Canada's greatest strategic assets."

On November 18, 2025, the Council of Canadian Academies released a report titled "The State of Science, Technology, and Innovation in Canada 2025". One of its key findings noted, "The performance of Canada's business and government sectors continues to decline relative to other countries when it comes to science, technology, and innovation."

Why is the government sector underperforming when we consider that this government has spent so much money in recent budgets since the pandemic?

Mona Nemer: I agree with the assessment from the CCA, and I wish I was surprised by it. Other countries are investing more. They've recognized that research, science and technology are the future, and they're putting more effort into it.

In Canada, we have the added problem that the private sector is not investing sufficiently in research and development. I believe that you're doing a study on this, and I certainly look forward to it. It's extremely important because we can't count only on government to be supporting research and development in the country. We need the private sector as well.

Tony Baldinelli: The council has put forward this report. However, are you, in your capacity as science adviser, also making reports like this, providing advice to the government with regard to what it should be doing in AI and in other areas of science research in Canada?

Mona Nemer: Yes, absolutely I am, in both general and specific areas.

I believe your colleague wanted to ask about IP and didn't get a chance. Rest assured that my office actually, as we speak, is looking into the management of intellectual property in Canada, inside and outside of government. We have many programs, and they often have overlapping objectives, but they leave gaps as well. What we need is a review of the entire pipeline.

The Chair: Thank you.

The time is up for MP Baldinelli.

We will now proceed to MP Chatel for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Sophie Chatel (Pontiac—Kitigan Zibi, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Thank you for inviting me to this committee. I'm new, it's my first day as a substitute for a colleague.

Welcome, Ms. Nemer.

Our farmers have an extraordinary reputation and produce the best food in the world. They're facing increasingly frequent extreme weather events and new pests, so they know better than anyone the importance of innovation, science and technology to increase their production and tackle these challenges.

Your mandate is to ensure that government decisions take into account the best scientific data. How does your office ensure that the great research in agriculture and agri-food is not conducted in silos and is integrated into environmental policies to address the challenges of climate change? Can you reassure our farmers that innovation and science inform the government's decisions?

Mona Nemer: Agriculture is something that's close to my heart. I believe I was the first person in a significant research position within the government to engage with the deans of the faculties of agriculture and the innovation cluster in agriculture and agri-food in Saskatchewan.

Indeed, we currently have a golden opportunity to show that climate and agricultural concerns can go hand in hand. Agriculture is often seen as inimical to the environment. However, many beautiful things are happening in agriculture, as you said.

There should be better coordination to study all this. Every time I create a road map for science, I have to bring together departments. For example, for the H5N1 virus, I had to bring together 10 departments. Everyone has their role, so we need someone to bring everyone to the table to ensure that we're all on the same page and that we don't leave any gaps, as that's the flaw of working in isolation. My office is therefore a unifying element to ensure that there's no such duplication within the government.

• (1720)

Sophie Chatel: That's extraordinary. I'm sure that entrepreneurs and farmers will be happy to hear that.

I often hear comments about silos within the government and in the research world. If I understand correctly, your office is able to bring together universities, researchers and innovators in our sectors and across different departments. Is that correct?

Mona Nemer: My independent role is to bring people together. I'm not trying to favour one department over another. I work to achieve what's best for the country.

Sophie Chatel: That's excellent.

Given everything that's happening in the United States and how the American administration treats its scientists, it's clear that many of them want to come to Canada, a country where the government supports science in all its decisions. Indeed, we believe that the best decisions are those based on science.

Do you see that enthusiasm? Can your office do something to accommodate these scientists?

Mona Nemer: Scientists are welcomed in universities, colleges and industries. I'm a scientist myself. Last fall, I started receiving calls not only from Canadians in the United States, but also from my colleagues in other countries, telling me that their nationals in major positions in the United States would like to come to Canada. If they can't bring them home, they tell me to welcome them.

Sophie Chatel: Do you have a specific initiative to attract or seek out more of this talent?

Mona Nemer: What's happening—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up, MP Chatel.

We will have to proceed to our next round with MP Holman for five minutes.

Kurt Holman (London—Fanshawe, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Dr. Nemer, for coming in today as a witness.

First of all, I am the member of Parliament for London—Fanshawe, home of Fanshawe College, a great post-secondary educational institution. That leads to my first question.

In London, Fanshawe College leads impactful industry-driven research, the kind that directly benefits local employers and workers, yet college institutions constantly say federal programs are geared toward universities. What advice have you given to the government about redirecting or balancing funding to strengthen applied research capacity in college institutions, and why was that advice not translated into a more equitable national research strategy?

Mona Nemer: That is an excellent question.

Let me assure you that I'm extremely sensitive to technology, to technologist graduates. If we want to reinvigorate our manufacturing sector, our industrial sector, we're going to need a lot of technologists.

I visited over the summer—I do this, I visit institutions—some colleges. They have amazing applied research which they're training their students on, and I think it's the right thing. As we update, if you want, our ways of doing things and to meet our objectives, I think that the colleges have a very important role to play. We should consequently have more attention on the skills training that they provide and the programs that they have. Most of the time, they are more agile than universities.

• (1725)

Kurt Holman: Thank you, Doctor.

I have a question about potential systemic disadvantages within federal funding systems. I want to refer to the role of DEI requirements in research applications.

Current federal DEI requirements are intended to promote equity and inclusion, but smaller regional institutions may face challenges in fully meeting these criteria. Has your office assessed whether these requirements could unintentionally exclude high-quality research proposals, and what steps have you recommended to ensure that merit and innovation remain central in funding decisions?

Mona Nemer: That is a complex question.

It's complex because I think that the principle of inclusion and diversity is one that we all cherish and uphold and it's a richness for the country. I think that the objectives of the programs need to be clear. It's context dependent. Once the objectives are clearly stated and actually accepted, I think it's how you go about the criteria and what you apply and when.

It's not that I don't want to answer your question, but I fear I don't have the specifics. I guess it's not a one-size-fits-all. We have to make sure that in colleges and small institutions we want to have people, students and professors from diverse horizons. If an institution determines that they need to diversify, then so be it, and they need to have the proper criteria and approaches, but you can't do something that is wall to wall.

Kurt Holman: May I ask, Doctor, about a what-if scenario? If your office has identified a risk that DEI criteria could inadvertently disadvantage certain institutions, have you formally advised government to adjust these requirements?

Mona Nemer: Maybe I'll just say that I don't know who you mean by government, but, for example, the granting councils are the ones who determine these things. I don't believe that it comes from higher up other than perhaps the principle of it. We have these conversations about ensuring that there is diversity but that we're respectful also of everyone who wants to contribute. Probably your question would be better directed to them, I'm sorry to say. Again, it's not a one-size-fits-all.

Kurt Holman: Okay.

Again, thank you for answering the questions.

The Chair: The time is up. Thank you.

We will now proceed to MP McKinnon for five minutes.

Ron McKinnon: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Doctor, for being here today. I appreciate your testimony.

In prehistoric times, I was a computer programmer. In even more prehistoric times, I studied physics and math. I'm very interested in quantum computing, although I can't say I understand it.

I wonder if you could advise us on or give us a snapshot of the state of the art in quantum computing. If the government is participating in that space, how are they doing it?

Mona Nemer: I appreciate that you're not asking me to give you a lecture on quantum physics right now, because I'm a chemist and a biologist. However, I do appreciate quantum.

I'll just say that Canada is one of the top five countries when it comes to quantum. It's a real strength. Different parts of the world recognize this. We have industries as well that are in quantum. I think it's really important that we continue to enable research and innovation but also scale up our quantum industry so that we don't have to import the technology a few years down the line. The quantum revolution is now and the technology is here. It is going to revolutionize many things, from drug discovery to space observation.

I don't know if I answered your question, but I feel very strongly about quantum in Canada.

Ron McKinnon: I'm also interested in what the government is doing in terms of advancing the research and development—

• (1730)

Mona Nemer: The government has a quantum strategy, and invested in it last year. It covers many facets, from research to talent development to innovation. It even has an international piece for collaboration.

I don't like to give my advice to government publicly, but given that I have already given this advice, I can say that my advice is that we need to double down on quantum. Just because it's a strength, it's not the time to withdraw, but rather to double down.

Ron McKinnon: Do we as government participate directly in this kind of R and D, or do we mainly fund other kinds of...?

Mona Nemer: We fund academic researchers, with some support for industry, but there is also some work being done within government departments, for example, at National Research Council Canada and the Department of National Defence, among others.

Ron McKinnon: Okay.

You mentioned some of the areas where this could produce some big breakthroughs. You mentioned medicines and so forth. This leads me to conjecture on such things as cold fusion. Are we doing anything in that area, irrespective of quantum computing?

Mona Nemer: I have provided advice to government on nuclear fusion. I think nuclear fusion may be where quantum was 10 or 20 years ago. We're getting really close.

Nuclear fusion could provide answers to many of our energy needs, especially when we talk about data centres, AI, quantum and so on. We are actually one of the countries that have the basis for more research and more innovation in the area of nuclear fusion. We even have a private sector company in this area, which is quite rare. Of course, we have resources as well, such as heavy deuterium, which other countries would love to have.

It's my sincere hope that it's an area that will get the attention it deserves, because it has huge potential.

Ron McKinnon: Great.

That's my time. Thank you very much.

Mona Nemer: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to MP Blanchette-Joncas for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Nemer, we understand the geopolitical context, but we're especially aware of the scientific context, namely that science is unfortunately threatened, attacked and disparaged. Some colleagues mentioned the United States, but it exists here too, in Canada.

What scares me and what I find dangerous is the attempt to reduce science to an economic or strategic tool, particularly in response to a geopolitical context. For me, science is a public good and a space of rigour and freedom that must never be subordinated to the imperatives of the moment. That's my reading of the actions of the current federal government.

How do you define the importance of science? We hear about territorial and economic sovereignty, but we never hear about scientific sovereignty. I would like to hear your comments on this.

Mona Nemer: Scientific sovereignty is extremely important. It's something that even Europeans are talking about and redoubling their efforts to achieve, among other things in terms of investment.

I fully believe that politics is never a good friend of science and that it's always better to keep them separate. Research is obviously fundamental. Applied research is very important as well. Moreover, you never know what will happen. We used to make fun of people who talked about fusion, quantum physics and even artificial intelligence 50, 40, or even 20 years ago.

We must therefore continue to conduct research and not forget that it's through research and basic science that we train workers from all backgrounds.

That said, throughout the ages, science has also shown that it's a very powerful tool for economic prosperity, as it brings innovations. The two fields are therefore not contradictory, but you're right to say that science should not be seen solely as a tool for economic development.

• (1735)

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: It's about finding balance. In this new government, I see that there's no balance and that it's all or nothing. I understand that there are pressures, but that's not an excuse.

I want to move on to another topic. What would you think if Canada established an independent mechanism, like an audit office, to analyze scientific policies and ensure that the objectives and consequences of those policies are measured? That's what's done in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Australia.

Mona Nemer: That's interesting—

[*English*]

The Chair: The time is up for MP Blanchette-Joncas.

Can you quickly give a response?

[*Translation*]

Mona Nemer: I wanted to say that it's an interesting idea. It would be part of the science ecosystem for public policy that includes a scientific adviser and a scientific audit function.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Madam Chair, I would like to receive a more detailed written response from the Chief Science Advisor.

[*English*]

The Chair: Dr. Nemer, if you could provide a written response to this question, that would be great.

Thank you.

We will proceed to MP Ho for five minutes.

Vincent Ho: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Nemer, when you were appointed as chief science adviser back in 2017, who set your mandate? Was it the Liberal government?

Mona Nemer: The mandate of the position was set by the government.

Vincent Ho: As part of your mandate, you were supposed to prepare an annual report to the prime minister and minister of science on the state of federal government science. Is that correct?

Mona Nemer: Yes.

Vincent Ho: Do you know if the Prime Minister has read that report?

Mona Nemer: It's online.

Vincent Ho: Do you know if the Prime Minister has read that report? You're supposed to give the report to the Prime Minister.

Mona Nemer: I haven't given it in person, but his office has received it.

Vincent Ho: You don't know if he has personally read this report. Is that correct?

Mona Nemer: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Vincent Ho: You don't know. Okay.

I have a copy of the annual report. There seems to be a lot photos of conferences being attended and not a lot of content. You can see one of the pages here. It's all just images.

What is the measurable value of this report for taxpayers? There's a \$4 million to \$5 million budget set aside. One of the key parts of your mandate is to prepare this report.

How do we measure the value of this report that seems like a scrapbook with many images of conferences?

Mona Nemer: With due respect, the report has a lot of content. The fact that we have illustrations doesn't take away from its value and content.

I don't know if you're expecting me to judge my own report. Perhaps you could ask others how they're using it, and whether it's valuable to them.

Vincent Ho: If your office stopped doing the work it did, what exactly would stop working in the government? How would that affect the everyday lives of Canadians?

Mona Nemer: I'm going to give you a couple of examples.

I'll use the example of H5N1. In the report, we provided the science and evidence that we need so we can manage it and actually prevent an epidemic. To do this, I brought together 10 different departments. Some were doing things in isolation from others, while others didn't even feel they needed to be part of this.

Vincent Ho: That's the federal report on viruses and vaccines and all that. Does that not fall under the purview of Health Canada? Why do we need a separate office to justify? They're the ones doing the work. They're the ones with the scientists and doctors.

Mona Nemer: No, it doesn't, because Health Canada's mandate is health. When we're talking about H5N1, we're also talking about animal health, so we're talking about the Department of Agriculture and CFIA. We're talking about the Department of the Environment and Parks Canada. We're talking about DFO.

Vincent Ho: You just listed a bunch of agencies in your response. You listed a dozen agencies. That was your response, so it sounds like those agencies already exist to do the work, and that's probably the objectives of those agencies—CFIA, Health Canada and all that.

How does your office add any value? Is it just another bureaucratic office?

Mona Nemer: We add a lot of value by bringing people together and by bringing in a lot of experts from the outside. You may be very interested to know that people work for us for free, so we've had hundreds of experts from academia and the private sector work on our many—

• (1740)

Vincent Ho: I'm going to continue.

Certainly your office doesn't work for free.

I see you were at a conference in Brazil, according to your annual report. This happened recently. What exactly were you doing there? Who did you meet with? What kind of value did you [*Inaudible—Editor*]?

Mona Nemer: That was the G20. I was representing the minister of science at the science ministerial for the G20.

Vincent Ho: What did you accomplish there?

Mona Nemer: I represented Canada at a global forum that we are a part of.

Vincent Ho: You flew business class, presumably, with some of your staff and took a bunch of photos, but what did you do and who did you meet?

Mona Nemer: Madam Chair, I would like to say that just because we have photos doesn't mean we had 10 people travelling with us. As a matter of fact, on that particular trip, I had no staff with me.

Vincent Ho: Did you travel business class on that trip?

Mona Nemer: When I travel, I travel according to the directives of the Government of Canada.

Vincent Ho: Did you use business class—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up for MP Ho.

We will now proceed to MP McKelvie for five minutes.

Jennifer McKelvie: First, thank you for representing us on the world stage. We greatly appreciate that.

Your background is in molecular biology. I cannot leave without asking a molecular biology question, so I'll ask two.

First, can you speak to how you're interfacing with open science and what we should be doing in that sphere to report on human data of a molecular nature?

Second, are you working in the space of synthetic biology, and do we need to be working towards common guidelines and goals as a country to make sure we're using this technology for good as opposed to more nefarious purposes?

Mona Nemer: I'm a champion of open science. I've championed it in the country and internationally.

Very concretely, I provided a road map for open science in 2020, just before the pandemic. We've gone about it systematically, and that has resulted in the open access repository for all Government of Canada publications. I think that's part of building trust with the public.

We have recently concluded an analysis and put out a report on open data, because research data governance is extremely important both for AI and getting the most out of it. That is a public report now, and we're working with other colleagues in the system to move it forward.

Canada unfortunately was not a leader in open science, and I think the work I did helped us move the needle.

With respect to synthetic biology, I think the renewed interest in biotechnology is due to synthetic biology and CRISPR-Cas, etc.

I'm working with my counterparts in other countries, especially the Five Eyes, to come to harmonized and collective recommendations for our government.

Jennifer McKelvie: Great. I look forward to seeing that. I think that's extremely important right now.

Some of the things we were talking about earlier in this committee were around research excellence and the balance between fundamental discovery and more commercialization and industrial or mission-driven research.

The AI strategy we have is a great example of more mission-driven research. We have clusters across the country. I'm wondering what sort of work your office is doing to monitor the Canadian state of science, and if you have recommendations around where our strengths are so we can showcase Canadian research to the world and dig down on more mission-driven research.

I know MP McKinnon touched on quantum, for example, so I was wondering how you're working in that space to identify the strengths in the Canadian science landscape.

Mona Nemer: A few years back, I actually convened several round tables to see what we needed to do in terms of a renewed AI strategy. In that, I had both the researchers and also the sectors that can potentially adopt. The idea was to find out what gaps actually exist or persist for the adoption and what specific research was still needed in specific sectors. That's work that has actually informed the government strategy on AI that is now being renewed again and, of course, I champion AI internationally when I'm representing the country.

When we talk about mission driven, it doesn't mean that we don't need basic research in it. As a matter of fact, I was in conversations.... I'm in touch with all of the different hubs, the AI institutes. I just visited the one in Edmonton. We still need a lot of AI research to be able to adopt research in other areas, but also for the transparency of AI.

I stay up to date. As I said, I represent Canada on the international committee that just put out an update on the state of the science of AI, yes.

• (1745)

The Chair: You have five seconds.

Jennifer McKelvie: I'll use them to say thank you for coming, Dr. Nemer.

The Chair: Thank you, MP McKelvie.

Now we will proceed to MP Mahal for five minutes.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Thank you again, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Dr. Nemer.

I have heard from the Liberal members and even you that you are a science advocate and that this is a government that is based on science. I'm going to say that this government, over four or five years, snatched a carbon tax from average Canadians like me and other Canadians. Then they realized it didn't make sense, that it wasn't working out, and they backed down on it. They still continue to have plastic packaging taxes for food and other taxes that are driving up the cost of food and stuff.

My question for you is, because you are a scientist as well, did you have any input on those kinds of strategies that the government made?

Mona Nemer: No.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Have they ever consulted you on those kinds of strategies before making them?

Mona Nemer: No.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: In regard to your appointment, you said that your appointment is a good behaviour appointment. What do you mean by a good behaviour appointment?

Mona Nemer: It means the government can't dismiss me without cause.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: They can?

Mona Nemer: They cannot.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: They cannot dismiss you without cause.

Mona Nemer: Yes.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: What does that mean?

Mona Nemer: That's an HR issue.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Okay. Briefly, you can tell us.

Mona Nemer: When people are appointed to certain positions in government, like deputy ministers and Governor in Council appointees, they're generally appointed at pleasure, which means the government can ask them to leave at any time.

There are a few positions where people are appointed on good behaviour, like the Auditor General and others, where you want to maintain the independence of the office. You appoint them this way so that there is no political interference.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: I see.

If the government were to realize now that this office is not providing us the value that they should get, based on the \$4 million or \$5 million of the expenditures every year that they are spending on your office in particular, they cannot come back on that because they are bound by a contract. Is that correct?

Mona Nemer: No.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: No. Okay.

Let's move on and talk about when you joined the office in 2017. You had a recent trip to Paris and the expenditure was over \$8,000. Did you fly business class on that trip?

Mona Nemer: My travel is according to Government of Canada directives, approved by the deputy minister, and I'm extremely conscious—

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Was it economy or business class, yes or no?

Mona Nemer: It's unimportant. I don't remember.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: You don't remember.

Mona Nemer: No.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: I believe it was business class. Otherwise, it would not have been over \$8,000. Is that correct?

Mona Nemer: Madam Chair, I don't know what to say.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: I understand your hesitation. You're feeling difficulty in answering that question.

Mona Nemer: No, I'm not feeling difficulty, sir.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: It's obvious that \$8,000 is not going to be economy class, so I get that.

Do you believe that kind of expenditure is an appropriate use of taxpayers' money, yes or no?

• (1750)

[Translation]

Sophie Chatel: Madam Chair, I have a point of order.

[English]

The Chair: Yes, Madam Chatel.

[Translation]

Sophie Chatel: I think it would be helpful to present the guide on travel for public servants to the committee. I think it would help answer several questions.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will go back to MP Mahal.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Do you believe that kind of lavish trip of \$8,000 per ticket is a good use of taxpayers' dollars, yes or no?

Mona Nemer: The international engagement is extremely important for—

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: That's not my question, Madam. My question is this: Do you believe that an expenditure like \$8,000 is a fair use of taxpayers' money, yes or no?

Mona Nemer: I cannot answer the question with a yes or no.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Let's move on.

You have billed over \$316,000 in travel during that time. Do you think that was a valid use of taxpayers' money, yes or no?

[Translation]

Sophie Chatel: Madam Chair, I have a point of order.

[English]

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: That was already ruled by the chair.

[Translation]

Sophie Chatel: Witnesses have come here. We need to talk about important topics, including science.

I think the witness answered—

[English]

The Chair: We'll go back to MP Mahal.

[Translation]

Sophie Chatel: Madam Chair, I am raising a point of order.

As you yourself mentioned, we must observe decorum here. The member has asked the same question five times.

[English]

The Chair: This is not a point of order.

An hon. member: [Inaudible—Editor]

The Chair: It's one person at a time. I am speaking.

MP Ho, I request you to please let me speak. It becomes very difficult for the interpreters to do the translation if more than one person is speaking. We should keep decorum in the committee, but this is not a point of order.

We have 30 seconds left with MP Mahal, please.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Madam Chair, I believe my time was eaten up by multiple interruptions by the Liberal members.

The Chair: I stopped the clock, so you have 30 seconds.

Please go ahead.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Okay. I have a quick question.

Since your appointment, you have made over 20 trips to Europe. Do you think that was part of your job, and do you think that justifies taxpayer money that was spent on those trips, based upon the fact your trip to Paris was over \$8,000? Is it yes or no?

Mona Nemer: Madam Chair, travel was part of the job description. In fact, it said that the candidate needed to be willing to travel.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Does it have to be in business class?

The Chair: Our time is up.

Mona Nemer: I'd just like to finish, if you don't mind.

The Chair: Yes, please go ahead.

Mona Nemer: The travel is an easy target, but I'd like to say that my travel is absolutely—

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: [Inaudible—Editor]

The Chair: You asked the question. She is responding. Let her finish, please. I've given her the floor, so let her finish.

Mona Nemer: My travel is consistent with that of my counterparts, in fact, including my counterpart in Quebec, in Canada. I think there is a lot of benefit that comes out of the travel. The point is, it's consistent with the job and it's consistent with that of other international counterparts.

The Chair: Thanks for clarifying.

We will proceed to MP Bardeesy for five minutes.

Karim Bardeesy: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to follow up on that conversation briefly.

Dr. Nemer, we're using the term "science diplomacy" when we're talking about these trips. What is science diplomacy?

Mona Nemer: Science diplomacy can be different things. It can be maintaining the dialogue with countries to advance the interests of our country, and that's certainly part of what I do. It is also enhancing international collaborations, enhancing trade, enhancing innovation. It's also making sure, because science is international, that you have first-hand experience and sight of what else is happening in the world. If Canada wants to upgrade its nuclear reactor or its light source in Saskatchewan, the best thing is to see what's happening in similar installations across the country. That's also science diplomacy. It's people helping each other to advance science, but also science helping to advance the country's interests.

• (1755)

Karim Bardeesy: Thank you.

If Canada had not done science diplomacy, would we have acceded to associate membership of horizon Europe? If we had done no scientific diplomacy whatsoever, would we be in horizon Europe today?

Mona Nemer: Absolutely not.

Karim Bardeesy: I know that horizon Europe is a very large program. In your earlier testimony, you described the general pool of funds that Canadians can get access to. Around what order of magnitude would that be for funds for Canadian researchers?

Mona Nemer: We're talking over \$2 billion, probably, a year.

Karim Bardeesy: It seems like pretty good value for money for science diplomacy to get access to that, and that's just the research funds.

Mona Nemer: Yes. I have to say, modestly, that I played a very important role there. I initiated the discussions and the conversations with the European Union. I used my network from my science days. The rest is history, as they say.

Karim Bardeesy: I think you said earlier, just to be clear, that only three other countries that are not European Union countries are currently associate members of horizon.

Mona Nemer: There is now South Korea as well. That's all.

Karim Bardeesy: Thank you.

I just want to note that you're noting that the broader benefits to science diplomacy include nuclear co-operation and nuclear investment, which is a very international market.

Mona Nemer: Absolutely. Even AI and quantum are international. We can't do it alone. We do need to work with allies and with countries that are strong but that, like us, cannot by themselves compete with the two giants.

Karim Bardeesy: I want to pick up on some of the questions Mr. Baldinelli was asking around the report by the Council of Canadian Academies on the state of science investment and its role in innovation policy. I think we share a concern about the lack of downstream investment that comes from the scientific investments that we do make into commercialization and into economic benefit. Broadly speaking, what policy advice do you have for us in this committee with respect to that issue?

Mona Nemer: It's a very important question.

I think what we suffer from is another case of silos. Research is on one side and commercialization is on another. Industry is on one side and academics is on another. We have valleys of death—not just one, actually, but two—from moving discoveries that are at the university to innovation, because we need to have programs for proof of principles and we need to have support for IP protections and so on.

We need to get more granular in terms of where the leakiness is in the pipeline and have a more holistic and systematic approach to it.

[*Translation*]

Karim Bardeesy: I have one last question that is different from the others. It's about research in French. We know that the government has set a goal to promote French-language research. Do you have an opinion on how to fulfill that promise?

Mona Nemer: Yes, absolutely. I already shared recommendations with this committee last year and I had earlier discussions with Minister Joly.

We are waiting for the report from the external advisory panel on the creation and dissemination of scientific information in French, established by Canadian Heritage. Based on that report, I will see how I can help. My office is already looking into possible solutions.

Karim Bardeesy: All right, thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to MP Blanchette-Joncas for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Madam Advisor, the government has given itself the power to exempt itself from any federal law, except the Criminal Code, to expedite projects of national interest, such as mines, liquefied natural gas, port infrastructure or even energy corridors and pipelines.

Were you consulted to ensure that these projects will still be subject to rigorous and independent scientific assessments?

Mona Nemer: That is a very important question.

I have already approached the head of the Major Projects Office to start a discussion with her to find out how I can help her and how my office can support her. Indeed, science will be important for making us aware of the risks and providing us with options. So, yes, I will participate in the process.

• (1800)

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: For now, have you been consulted, or have you provided scientific recommendations concerning the list of major projects that are already on the table?

Mona Nemer: No.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you.

If the federal government can bypass most laws to expedite its projects, how can we ensure that scientific considerations, particularly with respect to ecosystems and research in Quebec, will not be sacrificed for the sake of quick political decisions?

Mona Nemer: We will still hope that science will be part of it. I have high hopes that many people are still keeping an eye on this, and I will do my duty.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Okay.

In that context, how can science remain a necessary safeguard instead of just becoming an option for the government?

Mona Nemer: I believe that the only way to achieve this is to legislate, right? There must be laws, particularly for the position of scientific adviser, as they have done in Quebec. You are well aware of that. The same is true for the rest of the—

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: You understand what I mean. In fact, a law is being created to provide exemption from laws, particularly to avoid relying on science. A mechanism is being put in place that allows the government to bypass the laws. Isn't scientific independence more likely to be weakened by pursuing that kind of initiative?

Mona Nemer: In any case, I don't know what to say. It's a bit like a nightmare.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you for your transparency and honesty.

[*English*]

The Chair: We will now proceed to MP Holman for five minutes.

Kurt Holman: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Dr. Nemer, for again being a witness for this committee.

I want to discuss barriers preventing Canadian innovation. We've heard for years that Canada excels in research but ranks near the bottom in turning that research into products, companies and jobs. This is not a new problem; it is an unaddressed one. Canada has excellent academic research but a poor track record of commercialization.

Doctor, in your view, what specific federal policies are failing? Why hasn't your office been more forceful in pushing government to remove the barriers preventing Canadian innovations from reaching the market?

Mona Nemer: This is a question that is very dear to my heart. The problem is that we have many programs. We have a number of policies. The objective is good, but I'm not certain that all these policies work together, on the one hand. On the other hand, for as long as I can remember, successive governments of different colours have tried to tackle this. I think that we need transformative thinking on it. I was mentioning that we need to be both holistic and systematic but also granular because, in different sectors, the problem is different. What works for one doesn't work for the other.

The ecosystem in Canada, the industrial ecosystem, is very different from those of other countries that we try to compare ourselves to. I am of the view that we need a science, technology and innovation strategy where we state clearly our objective of invigorating the research but also of enhancing the translation into public good. We need to go about it and see what it is that we have that is useful, what is it that's not working and then change it.

Kurt Holman: I have a follow-up question, Doctor.

On the advice that your office may give, if the federal government continues possibly to ignore that advice on commercialization

bottlenecks, are you prepared to publicly identify which departments or policies are impeding that progress?

Mona Nemer: I'm not saying they're ignoring my advice. Right now we're taking pieces of it, and we will be providing advice. By the way, the advice and reports will be made public. I think that the government is seized with that.

My conversations within the Department of Industry are that they're certainly trying to review all the different programs and trying to get a more harmonized approach to them. We all want to see the impact of the investments. There's no question about it. It's just that we have to accept that we need to do things differently.

• (1805)

Kurt Holman: Thank you for answering that question, Doctor.

As chief science officer, you assess and recommend improvements to scientific infrastructure and the science workforce, including in high-demand fields such as artificial intelligence. Canada faces acute shortages in AI enabling infrastructure such as data centres, grid capacity and compute resources, exacerbating the brain drain talent to the U.S. as highlighted in previous R and D studies.

What is your office recommending Canada do to ensure that we retain our scientific talent?

Mona Nemer: We strongly recommended, and the government has started looking into it, the resilient sovereignty for the data centres, the compute.

We have a long way to go. We're competing with the IBMs and the Googles of the world, but it's important. It's our future that depends on it. We need the industry to work hand in hand with the government as well.

Kurt Holman: Okay.

We'll continue with another AI question, Doctor.

Are there guardrails or conditions on new budget spending around artificial intelligence to ensure that the funds actually have economic benefit to Canada? For example, Huawei received \$100 million in R and D funding after their tech was banned in this country. We need to ensure taxpayer dollars benefit Canada, not China or other competitors. Again, do these funds in the budget actually have economic benefit to Canada?

Mona Nemer: I can answer that when it comes to the research side, all these programs have to undergo Treasury Board submission to be able to spend the money and whatever government guidance ought to be there.

Again, I am personally of the view that we need to invest in our people and in our organizations as much as possible. That's a view I held before even taking this role here.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to MP Chatel for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Sophie Chatel: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Nemer, since we are both passionate about agriculture and agri-food, I will continue on that topic.

I want to tell you that your role is absolutely essential because there are very few sectors as innovative as agriculture. Farmers face constant challenges posed by Mother Nature, who's becoming increasingly unpredictable. To maintain prosperity, they must innovate in soil health and in the creation of new plants that are more resistant to droughts and floods. They need to turn to new technologies. We've talked a lot about artificial intelligence. It's spreading across Canadian farms. We also talk about reducing methane emissions, new technologies and innovative tractors.

I'd like to come back to a topic. In my field, I often hear about innovation in universities, but there's also innovation on farms. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Health Canada and Environment Canada all have research centres. Your mandate is to break down research silos. I'd like to hear you speak a bit more specifically about that. How can your office help break down these silos in the research community?

Mona Nemer: I'll start by saying that we've been recommending for years to adopt the "One Health" approach. COVID-19 and the H5N1 virus have shown us that the health of soils, humans and animals are all interconnected, and that researchers in these fields must work together. So, we're already promoting that approach. Moreover, the agriculture sector is one of the most interdisciplinary sectors, as it encompasses biology, engineering, social sciences and humanities.

So, in my opinion, that explains why this sector may not have received as much funding as it should or could have over the years, as grants are always very disciplinary in nature. When we talk about skilled labour, we don't think of the agriculture and agri-food sector, even though that labour is very important. Moreover, there are shortages in the field. So, universities need to work with governments. The provinces also have an important role to play in this, as do the farmers themselves, to ultimately further promote this sector.

I believe we can still do a lot more. Instead of selling our soy, we can process it here. There are many things we can do better with a little more consistency and more support for the sector.

• (1810)

Sophie Chatel: I'm extremely interested in your recommendations. What would you recommend to the government? What sectors would allow for the maximization of innovations that are taking place across the country, but sometimes in an isolated and disconnected manner? In this respect, I think your observation is the same as that of the producers.

Mona Nemer: It's a large country and it's a sector that's very diverse. I would need to reflect on that a bit more, and I'd be very happy to.

Sophie Chatel: If you have any ideas, I encourage you to share them with the committee. They will be read carefully.

I'll come back to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the OECD, the G20 countries and the importance of Canada. Innovation does not happen in just one country, but in contact with scientists from all over the world. We were talking earlier about your representations abroad. I worked at the OECD and I know how much of an innovation hub it is in several sectors. Could you tell us about your experience and what you're looking for in these international representations?

Mona Nemer: The OECD is an interesting example. I talk a lot with that organization. As a member, Canada could request that the organization conduct studies of interest to it and comparisons with other countries, among other things. Moreover, the OECD has a secretariat for the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence, an initiative on artificial intelligence that started during our last G7 presidency with France. We need to work hand in hand with these institutions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up.

Now we will have five minutes for each party. We will have MP Baldinelli, MP Turnbull, and we will end the panel with MP Blanchette-Joncas.

MP Baldinelli, you have five minutes.

Tony Baldinelli: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Dr. Nemer, for your time here this afternoon, and for your patience and your answers.

I want to go back to the report that was released by the Council of Canadian Academies in November. Within that report, they noted:

Canada faces...a worsening productivity crisis; a shifting and potentially diminished relationship with the United States, our largest trading partner; stubbornly low private sector R&D spending; and lacklustre technology adoption across the economy.

We had spoken earlier. You said there was much in the report that you agreed with, sadly. As the report concluded, it said, "A high-performing STI ecosystem is essential to the well-being of all people in Canada."

Are you concerned about the declining productivity and the living standards of Canadians?

Mona Nemer: Yes, absolutely. We're all affected. I'm concerned that our private sector is not innovative enough or doesn't adopt innovation for the different reasons that were given in the report, some of which we could discuss for a long time, things like it's not applicable to them, etc.

We need to have a big push in terms of productivity. This is where science and technology can help a lot. You need skilled people in these companies to do what needs to be done. You need to keep companies here that are in the innovative space.

• (1815)

Tony Baldinelli: Dr. Nemer, you've held office since 2017. Considering the diminishing results that continue to plague the government, would you suggest the government is listening to the recommendations and views you're putting forward?

Mona Nemer: We've had the productivity issue for a long time. Unfortunately, we don't seem to be able to shake it off. I'm not here to defend one sector or the other, but we have an industrial sector that is extremely risk-averse. They need to innovate. My advice is not always only for government. That's why sometimes I think it's—

Tony Baldinelli: Thank you. I'll just build on that.

In terms of the private sector, last week, when we had hearings here, the Canadian Vehicle Manufacturers' Association was here. They represent the big three automakers. They invested, in 2024, \$898 million in R and D and, in 2023, \$830 million, yet sometimes government bureaucracy stands in the way of what they're trying to accomplish. For example, the government, through the CBSA, has implemented what it calls the CARM system, the CBSA assessment and revenue management system. It implemented the system last year in October. Since that time, it's never worked properly. We're talking about \$500 million that this government has committed to this project, and it has never worked properly. In fact, if you look at the contracts, I don't even think the government owns the technology outright.

We heard this coming from the big three automakers. They were saying that they're having difficulties through that system in just acquiring a temporary import letter to bring in vehicles so that they can do the research on these vehicles and then ship them back to the United States.

Is this something that concerns you? Is this something that you can take some action on, through your office, to make recommendations to the government, saying that the government is putting roadblocks in the way of almost \$1 billion of private sector investment in Canada, and that this needs to be corrected? The government made the mistake by implementing something that never worked properly, and it's standing in the way.... Well, it's helping to drive away private sector investment in Canada.

Mona Nemer: I have nothing to do with it. It sounds like a complex issue with the borders and duties and whatnot.

I'll just say that sometimes academics have also suffered from some of these importation rules for samples and other things. Perhaps I might take a look with the colleagues at border services to see what's going on.

Tony Baldinelli: The government asked its government departments and agencies to see if they could find savings of 15% over three years. Does that impact operations in your office?

Mona Nemer: Yes, it does. We have budget cuts like others.

Tony Baldinelli: Thank you.

Madam Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You have two seconds.

We will now proceed to MP Turnbull for five minutes.

Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Chair, thanks for having me. I'm visiting this committee, but I was on this committee for a while.

Doctor, you visited our committee numerous times while I was on it, and I always appreciated your testimony, your expertise and the critical role that you play as the chief science adviser here in Canada.

We believe in science. We want to see the scientific community, the research ecosystem, grow, prosper, develop, and see wider adoption and uptake of the innovations that often stem from scientific research but that eventually can work their way out into our industries and can contribute to the lives of Canadians and to the standard of living that we all enjoy by improving it.

I want to ask you about the research security framework. Members opposite brought up a comment about Huawei, and I know our government did considerable work when I was parliamentary secretary to industry to implement a national security set of guidelines to ensure that the tri-councils and any applications for federal research dollars have to go through a rigorous approval process.

Could you speak to that very briefly?

Mona Nemer: A few years back, we looked into research security, especially in academic settings and within the government, because the reality is that the industrial sector doesn't need any lessons from us. It knows all about industrial espionage and so on.

As for academic institutions, they didn't have, necessarily, the expertise to do it, so the government has put forward a comprehensive approach, which includes supporting both universities and researchers in terms of training and some resources. It also includes clear indications of which technologies we can or cannot collaborate on and with which institutions. In fact, our policy is one of, probably, the most comprehensive. We've had the Europeans, the Japanese and even the U.K. come to see what we're doing and emulate it.

• (1820)

Ryan Turnbull: Thank you very much for that.

I want to pivot now to talk about the SR and ED program, which is a sort of workhorse for research and development. It offsets the costs for a lot of companies to do research and development and innovate within their companies.

Our government, in budget 2025, has proposed a number of changes to modernize that program. Would you say that those would contribute to the wider uptake of science and research across the ecosystem?

Mona Nemer: I was on the industry strategy committee. All I heard from the private sector was that they appreciated the program, but they wanted it reformed. I think the changes are probably welcomed by the group. That's all I can say.

Ryan Turnbull: This is what we've heard as well, but I wanted to see whether you're hearing the same. Thank you for that.

Typically when we talk about the research ecosystem, there's a lot of focus on universities and the important role they play. I would never diminish that, but there are also other post-secondary institutions across the country, colleges and polytechnics, that also play a very crucial role, especially at this moment in time when we're wanting a greater uptake of applied research and to be ensuring that commercialization is moving forward at a more rapid pace, perhaps, than it has in the past.

Can you speak to the important role that colleges and polytechnics play?

Mona Nemer: They play a very important role. Just because in the past they perhaps didn't do enough research doesn't mean they shouldn't be doing research. If they're training the workers, they had better train them on the latest machinery and the latest technologies, etc. We all have an important stake in the game.

In addition to that, they have shorter programs. We talk about re-skilling and whether scientists are re-skilling them for AI or data science, etc. I think they can play an increasingly important role, and we need to enable them to do that. Again, it's a collective effort of many levels of government.

Ryan Turnbull: I'd like to squeak in one last question, but I'm out of time.

Thank you very much for your time. It's great to see you again.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now end this panel with MP Blanchette-Joncas for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Madam Advisor, as a special envoy of the United Nations, Mark Carney stated that the majority of fossil reserves should remain in the ground to meet climate targets. Since he became Prime Minister of Canada, he has changed his stance and is now supporting new oil and gas infrastructure projects. From a science perspective, is the addition of new hydrocarbon extraction and transportation projects compatible with the climate trajectories recommended by science?

Mona Nemer: Science doesn't tell us exactly what to do, does it? When there's a goal, however, it helps us find options.

I believe that the climate issue is extremely important and is becoming even more so. However, I believe that the energy transition needs to be better developed and better adopted. For example, I don't think that we can achieve a whole network of electric cars overnight, since we don't even have a charging network. We need to be coherent, but we also need to be determined to set a clear path, know what we are trying to achieve and understand the steps involved.

• (1825)

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: What I understand from science, according to my readings, is that the exploitation of hydrocarbons contributes to the production of greenhouse gases, which causes climate change. Is that correct?

Mona Nemer: Certainly, the increase in carbon is causing climate change.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: If we pump more oil, particularly from the oil sands in the west, and transport it by pipeline for export purposes, since it's not intended for consumption in Canada, is it accurate to say that such extraction will emit more greenhouse gases, which will lead to more climate change?

Mona Nemer: What science tells us is that oil extraction emits greenhouse gases.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Okay.

You talked about energy transition. Science also tells us to transform our modes of transportation by using more renewable energy. Is the exploitation of hydrocarbons going in that direction?

Mona Nemer: Science tells us that hydrocarbons are not a form of renewable energy.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Okay. Can you guide us on the types of energy that should be recommended to the government or the public to achieve the energy transition?

Mona Nemer: Your question is a bit complex, but certain types of transition energies may be more favourable, such as liquefied natural gas. There are options, but it depends on the energies we have available.

In an ideal world, we want not only to have energy sovereignty so we're not forced to depend on others, but we also want to be able to export energy, preferably renewable energy. That said, the way governments go about it goes beyond science.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I understand.

According to the information I have, Canada produces just over 4 million barrels of oil per day, most of which is sent to the United States. As you know, Canada doesn't even have the refineries needed to process the heavy bitumen from the oil sands. What's the point, then? I'm trying to understand this from an economic, even scientific, perspective.

From an economic standpoint, we know that this production helps to enrich already wealthy companies, such as oil and gas companies. They swear by this production, which allows them to earn even more money to enrich the shareholders and then rake in profits. This includes companies like Brookfield, which are extremely close to the Prime Minister, but also large national projects.

So, I'm trying to refocus us on science. How can we say that the national interest projects being sold to us are good if they don't even pass the test of environmental and scientific assessments? It's good for the wallet, but it's not good for the planet. I haven't seen any planets for sale on Amazon or Marketplace. Do you have any observations to make on this from a scientific point of view?

Mona Nemer: From a scientific standpoint, we must certainly assess the risks and impacts of large projects. We need to calculate the risks in relation to the benefits. There are also ways to mitigate the negative effects of any project. I hope science will be used

wisely in this context, because it's clear that we want to be able to undertake major projects for the good of Canada. For my part, I'm absolutely committed to the high-speed train project between Quebec City and Toronto.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: It still has to make it to Rimouski.

Mona Nemer: It will go through Trois-Rivières.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Nemer for appearing before the committee and providing her testimony.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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