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• (1800)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Karina Gould (Burlington, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome back, colleagues. I know it's been quite a bit of time since we last saw each other, but we will continue to meeting number 25 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance.

Pursuant to the order of reference of Wednesday, December 10, 2025, and the motion adopted on Wednesday, December 10, 2025, the committee shall resume consideration of Bill C-15, an act to implement certain provisions of the budget tabled in Parliament on November 4, 2025.

I would like to take a moment to welcome the Minister of Justice, the Honourable Sean Fraser. He is joined by a number of officials. I won't go through and read them all.

With that, Minister, you have five minutes. Thank you.

Hon. Sean Fraser (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada and Minister responsible for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency): Excellent. Thank you, Chair.

[Translation]

Thank you, everyone. I'm pleased to be here to discuss Bill C-15.

[English]

There are a couple of different aspects that are specific to the Department of Justice that I'll draw your attention to in a moment. Suffice it to say, the budget implementation act does the work of giving the effect of law to many of the spending commitments that have now been approved by the House and, indeed, were campaigned on by the current government.

There are two issues that I will draw your attention to, and I'll endeavour to leave a little time on the clock for questions.

The first is certain changes to the allotment of judges within the province of Ontario. Previously, there was a pool of 10 superior court judges allocated, but not yet used, within the particular jurisdiction. The change contemplated by Bill C-15 would repurpose those appointments through extensive conversation with the Superior Court of Justice and Court of Appeal for Ontario, as well as the provincial government. This would see eight of those judges repurposed to serve in a unified family court in Brampton, and the remaining two of the 10 that are already allocated for Ontario given to the Court of Appeal to help keep up with the inner workings of that particular court.

I'll just say a word on unified family courts. Though they are not in every jurisdiction within Canada, jurisdictions that have embraced this strategy have seen positive outcomes in terms of the user experience when those going through difficult family situations require family courts. Having access to one-stop shopping and the expertise those courts provide has been well received on a near unanimous basis.

The second piece in the budget implementation act that I'll draw your attention to is really an administrative change involving the Administrative Tribunals Support Services of Canada. This is an organization that provides administrative support to a range of different federal tribunals. Historically, they've been providing support to two tribunals in the Yukon. The changes contemplated by Bill C-15 would formalize that long-standing relationship, but also create the possibility for additional tribunals within the territories that choose to access these services—if the territorial governments deem it to be in their interest to use the pre-existing body.

Just while I have the floor, because I'm looking around at some of my friends who tend to ask questions about my portfolio more broadly, which I'm happy to deal with, just know that the various criminal reforms that we put in place and have debated in Parliament are taking place within the context of a broader strategy on public safety. This rests on three pillars. The first is indeed stronger criminal laws. You will have seen new laws introduced on bail and sentencing, on combatting hate, on gender-based violence and on protecting kids against exploitation.

In addition to these three bills, there's a range of other public safety bills, but the second pillar of the public safety strategy is really about making investments in the front line. This includes the 1,000 new RCMP officers, 1,000 new border officers and more support for community organizations that support victims and women fleeing violence, for example.

The Chair: Minister, I'm sorry. Could you just slow down a little bit? The interpreters are having a bit of a challenge.

[Translation]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sorry. As usual, I'm talking quite fast.

[English]

Very quickly to I will wrap up, and I will endeavour to speak more slowly throughout.

The final pillar is very important to me.

[*Translation*]

To invest in violence prevention and improve public safety over the long term, we need to invest in affordable housing and health care, including in addiction and mental health care services.

[*English*]

We also need to be taking the long view in terms of how policy supports people by building healthier people, which translates into safer communities, including programs specifically targeting at-risk youth. My own view is that over and above these very specific measures, we also need to recognize the value of investing in public infrastructure—whether that's recreational infrastructure, public transit, cultural infrastructure—to help build communities where people can become healthy and full participants in society.

Madam Chair, I will leave my comments there. I expect there are many questions committee members have, and I'm happy to yield whatever time remains to the floor.

The Chair: Great. Thank you, Minister.

We will now begin with six minutes from Mr. Brock.

Larry Brock (Brantford—Brant South—Six Nations, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon, Minister.

Good afternoon, officials. Thank you for your attendance.

As usual, Minister, thank you for your frankness by slowly opening up that door to a broader discussion on justice issues. I didn't want to turn this into another detailed examination of Bill C-9 and Bill C-16, but there may be some tangential questions that I may be asking you on Bill C-16 issues.

I want to focus on one particular key area. You talked about the broader issue regarding community safety. One of the concerns that I have had for a number of years is the erosion of public trust in the federal institutions that we have here in Ottawa, but more importantly, a lack of trust in our criminal justice system. A lot of victims don't see it as a justice system, but rather a legal system.

One of the issues at play is obviously the Jordan timelines and the consequences that flow, such as the rising number of sex assaults that have been stayed over the last 10 years.

That's a broader area that I wanted you to focus in on, but let's focus in on judicial vacancies, because part of the problem is a lack of resources, whether they be vacancies at the federal level or vacancies with respect to administrative positions at the province. I think it's an opportunity for both the feds and the provinces to work together to ensure we have a responsive, functioning criminal justice system.

On the issue of vacancies, in 2023 we reached a high of 92, meaning that over 10% of federal judges' chairs across Canada sat empty, blocking the justice process across the country. Former justice minister Arif Virani said that he would fill vacancies and keep pushing all the way to get to 100%. To his credit, he did make substantial improvements in that number, in fact dropping it from 92 to

the mid to high teens. However, that was two years ago, and right now we're seeing another rise in judicial vacancies.

Given that every year since the Liberals took office in 2015.... Would you agree with me, sir, that there have been hundreds and hundreds of applications per year for every judicial vacancy right across this country?

• (1805)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Madam Chair, how long do I have to answer? Is there a custom that we reflect the length of the question in the answer? Okay.

I'll try to be brief, but out of respect to your questions, Larry, there are a few different elements I'd like to answer.

First of all, I agree with you that public trust is an issue within the justice system that we need to manage. The different bills we've put forward try to address this specifically, even going so far as looking at the tertiary grounds to deny bail by changing the test, which is specifically on the public confidence in the system, by considering both the number and the seriousness of the offences. You're right to point out trust, particularly for victims of sexual assault, who sometimes need to tell and retell their story to people who may or may not believe them.

Part of that story could be judicial vacancies. I think we need to do a better job on the pace than that was taking place if you go back to the timeline you began with. The pace we are now dealing with, as we've reduced that number, is more or less keeping up with the pace that judges are coming in at. The last update I got was that there were 37 at the beginning of this month. We may, on any given day, have half a dozen that could be filled in a batch, and you may have two or three who retire or take their leave from the bench.

In addition to that particular piece, we need to look at other systemic challenges. It's not just filling judicial vacancies, but the timeline that it takes to actually induce evidence in a sexual assault trial: whether there are enough provincial Crowns, where the bulk of these criminal prosecutions—as you would know very well—are going to take place, and whether there are enough resources in the system.

It would be a mistake to identify any one factor as contributing to overall delays. We want to address those, both by taking off the table the systemic delays in the long term by funding the system, putting judges in place, etc., and also by directly attacking the consequences of the Jordan decision by revamping the way the rules operate.

In the time I've been allotted, I'll cut my answer there.

Larry Brock: You're quite correct. Thank you for that response.

As of February 1, there were 37 vacancies at the federal level. Two years ago, in 2024, vacancies were at 39. Have you appointed only two judicial appointments since you were appointed justice minister?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I can assure you that I have appointed significantly more than two.

That's a factor of judges who are stepping down from the bench. Some may retire. One has left to serve in government. There are many reasons that the number can fluctuate from week to week.

Larry Brock: Okay.

I'd like to go back to my earlier question. Would you agree with me that for every given position that's vacant across this country, there are generally hundreds of applicants who make application for those positions, and the judicial advisory committee then pares them down and makes recommendations to you? Can you answer the question that there are generally hundreds of applicants who are making application for vacancies every single year, as there have been since the Liberals took power in 2015?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I wouldn't necessarily agree that there are hundreds for each vacancy that comes up. I don't have the specific number, but only because the number that gets filtered to me is the number of those who have been recommended or highly recommended through the judicial advisory committee process.

Typically speaking, when we're contemplating making one of maybe two or three appointments for vacancies that may be available, we'll be looking at somewhere between four and six, or maybe eight, names that have come through the process. It's not the same number each time. I have not seen hundreds of names, myself.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Brock.

We'll continue with Mr. Fragiskatos for six minutes, please.

Peter Fragiskatos (London Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the minister and officials for being here.

Minister, at the outset you mentioned changes that are being brought into force as a result of the reforms you want to introduce on vacancies in Ontario and with respect to the unified family courts. Could you expand on what exactly will be achieved as a result?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos, for the question.

For those who may not be aware, there is a division of responsibilities within family law where some areas are the responsibility of the federal government and others the provincial government. There are some corresponding elements where superior courts versus provincial courts will hear different aspects of family law disputes, based on which court has the specific jurisdiction. The unified family court has created a single court, regardless of what kind of family law dispute you may be dealing with, where you can arrive and have a single court adjudicate between the parties.

The stories that I heard long before I was in this position, including in my own community, were that it's a game-changer for families who are going through some of the most difficult periods of their lives. When you're dealing with the breakdown of a relationship, potential custody challenges or the division of assets, you're going to the same place to have a range of different elements of your dispute heard rather than breaking it up through different appointments on different days at different locations.

We've seen the somewhat rapid expansion of unified family courts across Canada. I'm yet to find a jurisdiction that has embraced this and has been of the view that it's a mistake. It's quite the contrary. In jurisdictions that have embraced this approach, you see the expansion of these services. The eight judges who are being repurposed for unified family courts would be one example of that expansion—in this case, establishing a new unified family court in Brampton. This would allow individuals who are having their cases heard there to have streamlined access to services in a way that is more centred around the user of the legal system rather than the administrators.

• (1810)

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

Can you speak more about unified family courts in terms of the structure? Most Canadians won't know exactly what that refers to. I know that you've put points on the table here, but can you go into this more? Specifically, can you touch on how this would help kids in broken homes? We know, and the evidence continues to show, that the experience in the court system often exacerbates the challenges faced by kids as a result of the family situations they're a part of.

Hon. Sean Fraser: One thing we have to appreciate, as parliamentarians, even with a perfect suite of policies on a given issue, is that challenging things still happen to people. Sometimes there are economic consequences if a person loses their job. Sometimes it's criminal behaviour, or sometimes it's the breakdown of a family relationship.

When we're dealing with the very difficult experiences that families have, we should be mindful that it's not for the federal government to stop every negative thing from happening that might play out in a romantic relationship or in a family dynamic. Instead, we should recognize the reality that families live through, including the kids at the centre of those broken relationships. We do what we can to offer professional services in a streamlined way to minimize the negative impacts and maximize the quality of life that people get to enjoy.

You can imagine the set of circumstances, particularly for low-income families who might be going through a family breakdown. They may not have access to public transit and can't afford a car. They are told that the provincial court on one side of town is where they need to go for certain appointments, but the superior court on the other side of town is where they need to go for other appointments. This all stems from the same life event of the breakdown of a relationship. The impact that can have on kids can be profound.

These cases are not monolithic in nature. You're going to see that each relationship is very different. Sometimes the missed appointment at a court can have dire consequences for a person's ability, in an extreme set of circumstances, to maintain custody of their children. You don't want a person's ability to afford a bus ticket to a particular courthouse to determine whether they get to see their children. This may be a rather extreme example, but it illustrates the point.

If we do everything we can to simplify the proceedings and the process—not for the lawyers who administer the system or for the judges who hear the cases, though that's good too, but for the actual user of the court system—to the extent that we can streamline that experience and reduce the cost of that experience, we'll be doing a better job at serving the interests of justice.

Peter Fragiskatos: I'll ask you a very general but, I think, important question about an update on bail reform.

You said that you're happy to take questions that are general in nature. That issue is important to all of us, as MPs, and obviously to our constituents.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Despite the political debates around bail that we have in the House of Commons, I actually get the sense, through private and public conversations, that it's a priority for everybody who has been elected in this particular Parliament.

I spent months consulting with law enforcement, with provincial governments, with public interest organizations, with municipalities and with the people who work in and administer the justice system to understand what they think the federal government can and should do. The policies we put forward in the bail and sentencing reform act were not written behind closed doors on Parliament Hill. They were informed directly through the expertise and lived experiences of people who have lived through, worked in and managed the justice system. This includes major efforts to reform the bail system insofar as it impacts violent and repeat offenders and criminal organizations, among other things.

We want to ensure that people have faith that when someone who presents a public safety threat comes before the court, that person will not be released to then reoffend and cause harm to someone, when it could have been prevented.

I get the sense that I am coming up on time, so I'll cut my answer there. Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

• (1815)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Garon, you have the floor for six minutes.

Jean-Denis Garon (Mirabel, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister Fraser, welcome to the committee.

I would also like to welcome all the other witnesses.

Today, we're looking at the federal budget. I must say that I'm interested in a number of aspects of it.

When we look at the situation, we realize that everyone wants to fight crime and ensure safety, for example. You talked about various measures, such as the government strategy, to make our streets safer.

Correct me if I'm wrong—I'm not a lawyer—but the administration of justice is a shared jurisdiction. For example, in Quebec, Quebec taxpayers cover a significant portion of the costs associated with the administration of justice. I believe that my colleague, Rhéal Fortin, the Bloc Québécois justice critic, has already proposed the idea of a transfer to the provinces, along the lines of the Canada social transfer. This would help the provinces cover certain costs, for example when we tighten legislation in order to incarcerate more people. This requires judges, clerks, crown attorneys and so on.

Since Ottawa writes the Criminal Code and the provinces pay for its enforcement, there should be a transfer to that effect. What do you think of this idea, in general?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Indeed, the administration of justice involves provincial jurisdiction. As you know, the federal government is responsible for amending the Criminal Code. In my opinion, when a province asks me to change legislation in order to improve public safety, the province understands that it's responsible for making the system work. When we work together, we have the opportunity to determine appropriate changes to the legislation. However, the province is responsible for investing in making the system work.

Jean-Denis Garon: You're basically saying that, if the provinces make requests and we change the Criminal Code because of a consensus in the country, the funding must be shared and we don't need a transfer to cover this. Can you comment quickly?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It isn't automatic. In the case of shared priorities, it's possible to have funding for data collection or for the costs associated with Superior Court judges and their responsibilities, for example. It isn't fair to the provinces. However, if the provinces have concerns and they request changes to federal government legislation, I think that it's reasonable for them to take part in conversations about costs as well—

Jean-Denis Garon: I must manage my time a bit, so I'm not interrupting out of rudeness. I understand that you don't quite agree.

I would like to talk about the vote that took place on today's opposition day. First, I want to thank you and all my colleagues for your vote to request an apology for the Mirabel expropriations. It's long overdue. I think that the people in my constituency will be grateful.

This brings us to the Alto project. The budget implementation bill suspends sections 8, 9, 10 and 11 of the Expropriation Act for this specific project. I think that we all understand that the goal is to speed up the project. I think that this will happen. It will also mean that the expropriation process for the Alto project will result in the loss of certain rights for expropriated residents, including the interim right to be heard by a commissioner.

I asked the Minister of Transport the following. If expropriation legislation in Canada is so detrimental to projects, why not change the Expropriation Act for all projects across the board, instead of just for Alto, so that everyone is equal before the law? The Minister of Transport told me verbatim that this wouldn't make sense.

Why does the government consider that suspending sections 8, 9, 10 and 11 of the Expropriation Act wouldn't make sense for all projects in Canada, but that it would make sense for the Alto project?

I'm trying to understand the logic. I thought that the Minister of Justice would be a good candidate to explain it to me.

• (1820)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sorry, but this question should be addressed to the Minister of Transport. You asked him this question in a committee, so I accept the Minister of Transport's response.

Jean-Denis Garon: Are you referring to his response that this wouldn't make any sense?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sorry, but could you repeat that?

Jean-Denis Garon: I'm basically saying that people are losing their rights. For example, any Canadian citizen who receives a notice of expropriation has the right to be heard by the commissioner, except for the people affected by the Alto project.

The Minister of Transport, a lawyer just like you, told us that it doesn't make sense to suspend these sections for projects across Canada. However, this is being done for the Alto project.

I'm trying to understand why something that doesn't make sense from coast to coast to coast makes sense for the Alto project.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: First, I accept the Minister of Transport's explanation. I want to be mindful of the fact that this is a file that's outside of my portfolio and that I didn't come here intending to discuss today.

If you look at the mission of the government, not just on Alto but more broadly on some of the major projects, we've made a decision to have expedited processes to get things built that are in the national interest and that are major projects of a scale that we have not been able to build quickly in Canada for a significant period of time. We want to make sure that we do things as fairly as possible and that we behave reasonably through this process. However, we won't accept that we don't get to accomplish big things. We want to build this country, grow the economy and take on big projects that meet the moment Canada is living through at this moment in our history.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Garon.

[English]

We continue now with Mr. Lawton for five minutes.

Andrew Lawton (Elgin—St. Thomas—London South, CPC): Thank you, Minister.

Bill C-15 gives federal cabinet ministers licence to exempt individuals or corporations from, basically, any federal law, except for the Criminal Code, for up to six years. Is that a power you want?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't agree with your characterization. Were you asking whether I want to exempt people from the Criminal Code?

Andrew Lawton: No. Do you want the power, as a minister, that Bill C-15 gives to all ministers to exempt individuals or corporations from federal laws, excepting the Criminal Code?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Are you talking about the regulatory sandbox? Okay. I think regulatory sandboxes are a good idea and will allow Canada to catch up with most of the industrialized world, to ensure that we have the ability to keep pace with changes to technologies and to ensure that our industries don't fall behind in Canada.

What I see is not a blanket ability to say that some of the laws don't apply to some people. For a time-limited purpose, for a specific reason, we might be able to test a new technology that doesn't comply with existing laws because the laws were written at a time when the technology didn't exist. In circumstances such as those, it creates an opportunity for the innovation economy to create good-paying jobs in Canada by having new tech tested out, outside of the rubric that was imagined before the technology existed, so that we can actually bring new ideas and technology into the Canadian economy. The fact that this was rolled out in many industrialized nations, I think, is a sign that it's not the dire circumstance its critics would believe it to be.

Andrew Lawton: Why not narrow in scope that authority? Instead, it's every federal statute, regulation and cabinet minister. It would give you the right to exempt someone from a statute under your file, even if it has nothing to do with innovation, technology and AI.

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's an interesting question. My own sense is that there are some protections baked into the bill. Again, it's outside of my own portfolio area, but I'll do my best to answer your question.

Andrew Lawton: It applies to all cabinet ministers. That's why I'm asking you.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure. The fact that it has to be done in public, that it's for a limited period of time and that it has to be for an explicit purpose....

Oh, I'm talking too fast. I apologize, Madam Chair.

These facts give me some faith that there is public oversight of how those authorities will be used.

My response to you, Mr. Lawton, is that this is exactly the kind of thing committees such as this should dig into. To the extent that there are recommendations through witness testimony that the department or minister hears about or that members of the committee find to be compelling.... This is the forum where we put ideas on the table that can be adjusted through the parliamentary process. I'm a huge believer in the value of Parliament.

If this committee collectively thinks it can add value by better creating a regime around regulatory sandboxes, that's an appropriate function for parliamentarians to play.

Andrew Lawton: You mentioned to Mr. Fragiskatos the importance of bail reform to most parliamentarians elected, and I am grateful that your party has come around to this. Let me ask you, though, about priorities.

There was a case I came across this morning from Durham, where six men were charged with trying to buy sex from children. They were released on an undertaking. It was another one of those cases that most Canadians would look at and say, "Why are these people not behind bars?" We moved very quickly—when we were finally able to do it on the justice committee—to push Bill C-14 forward. Right now, we are still facing a question we asked your colleagues there.

Why can we not prioritize Bill C-16, which deals with intimate partner violence? Why has, at every stage, Bill C-9 been more of a priority than these issues, on which—by your own admission—there is far more consensus, such as bail and sentencing reform?

• (1825)

Hon. Sean Fraser: The answer as to why one bill is put forward as a priority depends on what point in the cycle you're referring to.

The reason we introduced the combatting hate act—the first of three major crime bills going through the House right now—is that it was ready earliest. It is a far simpler bill in terms of what it seeks to do, compared with sweeping reforms on bail and sentencing, on gender-based violence or on protecting kids online and in the real world. Early in the fall sitting of Parliament, we moved forward most quickly with that particular bill.

Andrew Lawton: Simplicity does not mean it's unanimously supported. Why not move on issues where there is consensus and a far greater need when you have all parties ready and willing to do that?

Hon. Sean Fraser: We don't only do things in government that have unanimous support. We do the things we campaigned on and that Canadians voted for, including the combatting hate act. Bail and sentencing reform is also very important. We were able to accelerate that.

Andrew Lawton: I have five seconds left, Minister.

I'd stipulate that you did not campaign on removing long-standing religious speech protections from the Criminal Code.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Through consultation with concerned parties, we landed on a version of the bill that we think best serves their interests, and we continue those conversations today.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Lawton.

We will continue now with Mr. MacDonald for five minutes.

Kent MacDonald (Cardigan, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister and officials.

Minister Fraser, you and I have spoken several times about sextortion since I was elected. I want to go over what Bill C-16 says.

We see that pillar two of Bill C-16 proposes significant amendments to strengthen Canada's response to child sexual exploitation both online and off-line. It would restore the mandatory minimum penalties and introduce new penalties related to sextortion and a new offence for recruiting youth under 18 into criminal activity. It would also strengthen the mandatory reporting and data preservation obligations of online service providers. Together, these measures, hopefully, would combat the evolving tactics of these bad actors.

Can you outline in more detail how Bill C-16 would prevent child exploitation, particularly in the digital environments we spoke about?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Before I get to the specifics of your question on Bill C-16, I just want to drive this point home. It would be an enormous mistake for everyone of us sitting around this table to think that any one criminal law, or even the criminal law generally, is going to in and of itself solve the absolute scourge that is sexual exploitation and the abuse of children in the real world or in a digital environment.

We also need to put forward systemic solutions, including giving law enforcement the tools they need to crack down on this kind of behaviour, including for example the lawful access regime included in the strong borders act and the long-term investments that are going to help build healthier people.

We also need to send a very strong signal that there will be no tolerance for this kind of horrific exploitation of kids, which often has fatal consequences. If you have the chance to sit down with a parent who has lost a child who ended their life after being the subject of this kind of abuse, you can only begin to understand the impact these kinds of horrific crimes are having on families. We also need to realize that the criminal law has the potential not just to publicly denounce this kind of behaviour, but also to incarcerate people who pose a public safety threat.

I'll draw your attention to a number of different elements in Bill C-16 regarding the specific question you've asked.

One is expanding crimes that involve the distribution of child sexual exploitation and abuse material to also include the threatened distribution of that material. We know through lessons that have been learned—again, sometimes through fatal consequences—that the impact of the threatened distribution of these kinds of images can lead to extraordinary consequences, in addition to the abuse of the material itself.

We also are expanding the definition of child luring to capture sextortion more explicitly. We're changing the law to ensure that people who take part in child sex tourism, Canadian citizens or permanent residents who may commit a crime abroad, will have to face consequences at home through the extraterritorial application of Canada's Criminal Code in those circumstances.

There are additional measures. You mentioned mandatory reporting for example. We've also made changes around invitation to sexual touching towards a minor. We are changing the defences and how they operate regarding a mistaken belief in age to make sure that if you're going to argue that, you actually took reasonable steps to ascertain a person's age to ensure that you weren't going to be engaging in criminal behaviour of a sexual nature involving a minor.

There are a number of other measures tied up in the bill that I think are important, but these are going to have a positive impact. We also need to look at the long-term investments both on the front line to support the cops who are going to bust up the rings that are responsible for the distribution of this horrific material or crimes committed against kids, and those long-term investments that are going to help build healthier people and healthier communities, which will help contribute to a safer country overall.

• (1830)

Kent MacDonald: Earlier I spoke to the CRTC representative who was here and I asked him if they have a role to play. Can you speak to that? What is the role of the CRTC to make these platform providers accountable?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's an excellent question and there are a number of different ministers who are engaged in the conversation around how we hold accountable the different actors in the system. For my part, my formal responsibilities as the Minister of Justice are engaged when we look at the Criminal Code reforms—not just the regulation of content that may be put online. This includes some of the measures that we have put in place. Mandatory reporting may be directly on point for what you have asked. We've also made changes to the criminalization of the use of AI deepfakes, for example.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Sean Fraser: There is more to say, but perhaps that's for a subsequent question.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacDonald.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Garon, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Jean-Denis Garon: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister Fraser, I would like to get back to the issue of regulatory sandboxes.

My colleague talked about this. We're told that we could technically exempt an organization or a company from any legislation, except for the Criminal Code, when the objective involves innovation. I understand the concept of a regulatory sandbox. However, the definition in Bill C-15 is quite broad.

Let me give you an example. Recently, at the start of the session, Parliament decided to protect the supply management system in its entirety. If a company wanted to innovate in order to process certain types of milk protein differently, for example, we could open a loophole in supply management for a few years to allow for innovation. We understand that innovation would be involved. However, this would affect legislation that covers a highly sensitive issue, particularly for dairy producers in Quebec and Ontario.

I understand the concept of a regulatory sandbox. I understand that it's governed by legislation and that a procedure must be followed. As Minister of Justice, don't you think that suspending all legislation, apart from the Criminal Code, is still quite a broad approach? Shouldn't your government be open to some amendments in order to include certain exceptions other than the Criminal Code, for example the supply management issue, which worries me a great deal?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: In my view, it's always a good idea to be open to amendments through the parliamentary process. That doesn't mean we accept every one that comes up, but we should be open to them. However, those should be grounded in principle and not in politics.

I was satisfied with certain protections that exist in the bill beyond the exemptions, as you've explained, that apply to the Criminal Code, notably that there's a period of time for which it applies, the need to have an intended purpose and the fact that you do it in public.

[*Translation*]

Jean-Denis Garon: Let me clarify my question. I think that it ties in with your comments.

You're comfortable with the wording as it stands today, which provides for the suspension of all legislation except for the Criminal Code. Didn't you think that, as a matter of principle and not partisan politics, you would be uncomfortable with the idea of interfering with certain legislation?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I have a difficult time identifying, with precision, different acts off the top of my head because innovation, by its very nature, is coming up with ideas that we've not had yet.

The Chair: I apologize, Minister, but we're out of time for this round.

We will continue with Mr. Hallan, for five minutes.

• (1835)

Jasraj Hallan (Calgary East, CPC): Thanks, Chair.

Minister, I want to continue down that road of questioning, and the one that Mr. Lawton pursued as well, about this specific provision. Your government is once again asking for sweeping powers for any minister or the Prime Minister to exempt any entity or company from any law or regulation in Canada with the exception of the Criminal Code. Just give a yes or no: Does this include the Conflict of Interest Act?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I have a hard time seeing how that would apply in an innovation context.

Jasraj Hallan: It's a simple question, though.

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's not as simple as you make it out to be. If there's a circumstance you're trying to get at, maybe you could provide clarity or—

Jasraj Hallan: The provision itself says:

exempt an entity from the application of
(a) a provision of an Act of Parliament

Is the Conflict of Interest Act not an act of Parliament?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm trying now to think of the manner in which a person would be exempted from—

Jasraj Hallan: It's a straight yes or no: Could the Conflict of Interest Act be exempted by a minister of the Crown under this new provision?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I've not dug into this specific issue, but you're dealing with an area that applies uniquely to people who benefit from parliamentary privilege who would be exempt from certain kinds of acts. It's just a more complicated question the minute you start thinking about it than you give it credit for.

Jasraj Hallan: I think it's pretty clear from here that a company could be exempt from the Conflict of Interest Act if the Prime Minister or a minister were to deem it so.

Hon. Sean Fraser: In what innovation context? This is not even to disagree but just to understand your question.

Jasraj Hallan: Let's put it into an example then. Let's say a company like Brookfield, which obviously has conflicts with the Prime Minister, is going to be getting a contract, or a minister is looking into whether to approve a contract for it or not. Could it be exempted from the Conflict of Interest Act by a minister after this is passed?

Hon. Sean Fraser: The way you've described it, I'm not certain that's how it would operate. On balance, though, if there are things that you think need to be corrected or that could be improved for the integrity of the act to be strengthened, this is a great forum to make amendments. However, let's not lose sight of the forest for the trees, because we're going to lose out from an economic point of view when all our competitor economies are playing in this space and we choose not to.

Jasraj Hallan: I get it, but you have to understand why we are bringing these concerns forward. It's been reported even in the Toronto Star. Many Canadians are very concerned about this because these are sweeping powers you're giving.

I'll give you another example because it's concerning that you don't know whether that would fall under the Conflict of Interest Act or not, and you should. I would imagine you would. You're the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. In one way, you're also legal counsel for cabinet.

Here's another example: If a minister has a conflict with, let's say, a Chinese state-owned company that is also looking to get approval for a research grant or other approval in Canada, would it also be exempt from the Conflict of Interest Act with this provision?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I find it uniquely unhelpful to assess in the hypothetical the range of the possible different things that could come out, without the specific facts.

Jasraj Hallan: These are things that could happen after this provision is passed—is that correct? That's why I'm putting these examples in front of you.

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's just that I—

Jasraj Hallan: It's concerning that you're not answering any of these questions.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Well, I'm seeking to. You may not like my answer, but I'm seeking to engage, in good faith, in this conversation right now. If you think there is a way you can protect the integrity in terms of the manner in which these authorities would be used—

Jasraj Hallan: Should that not have been thought of before this was put in the BIA? All of these things that have been—

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think the protections that were put in the BIA do protect against the harm you're concerned with—

Jasraj Hallan: Especially after we know about all of the conflicts and—

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Hallan, if you'd like me to answer the question, I'm trying, but it's hard to do it when you speak over me.

On the protections that were included in the bill, they do exist. There are time limits. You have to specify the purpose. It has to be done in public. Those are very real protections. The place where I'm struggling with your question....

I'm sorry. What's that?

Jasraj Hallan: None of those provisions include the Conflict of Interest Act.

Hon. Sean Fraser: The challenge I'm envisioning with how a person would use it in the context of the Conflict of Interest Act is what's—

Jasraj Hallan: The only person who could use it is a minister or a prime minister—is that correct?

Hon. Sean Fraser: The authorities contemplated are certainly for members of cabinet, yes.

Jasraj Hallan: Exactly. It would apply to someone like you. If a company like Brookfield, which obviously has conflicts with the Prime Minister, were to apply for a grant, they could be granted a conflict of interest under this provision. Is that correct?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I wouldn't scope out.... There are better protections, in my mind, to prevent conflicts, and we all comply with them. We all have certain ethical requirements as a result of the code.

Jasraj Hallan: This is outside of that. You're asking for these powers. This isn't something that's currently here right now. That's why we're concerned. That's why I'm asking you these questions.

• (1840)

Hon. Sean Fraser: If you do have—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Minister. We're going to have to leave it there.

Thank you, Mr. Hallan.

We'll continue with Mr. Sawatzky now for five minutes.

Jake Sawatzky (New Westminster—Burnaby—Maillardville, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to all of you for coming.

Minister, I appreciate the work you've been doing. I know it's very welcome, particularly when we're talking about the bail and sentencing reform act in a bipartisan sense.

I want to start by maybe touching on the intersection between mental health and substance use issues and the criminal justice system. Ultimately, we want to make sure that people aren't committing crimes in the first place, but if they do, we also want to make sure that they are getting treatment and rehabilitation. Could you speak to how these fields intersect?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes. There are leading experts who have spent their lives and careers understanding with specificity the answer to your question. I hope to do them justice with a cursory overview.

It doesn't take a giant leap of logic to understand that a person who is unwell is not able to do many things the way that everyone else in society does, particularly when a person is being driven by addiction, where they have a fundamental challenge with how their brain may be operating. They often are more closely interconnected—not always but particularly with addiction—with people who are involved in the trafficking of narcotics.

If we actually go upstream a level to say, let's not always just target the end-user but let's realize that you can bust criminal organizations and you can provide treatment to people so they are less likely to fall victim to addiction or are better able to manage their symptoms, you're going to see over time a positive outcome when it comes to the rate of violent crime that takes place in your communities.

The same logic, for what it's worth, would apply to investments in affordable and supportive housing. It's hard to expect people to meet the same social standards we expect of one another if they don't have a roof over their heads and food on their table.

Jake Sawatzky: Absolutely.

How does the intersection between the federal government and the provincial municipalities play out here?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It depends province to province. Long story short, as you'll well know, provinces have primary responsibility for the delivery of health care, as well as housing policy, although much of that falls to municipalities now. Just because they're technically someone else's responsibility doesn't mean that we don't want to be a good partner in that regard.

With the creation of Build Canada Homes, for example, we've now put a billion dollars on the table for supportive housing, but we've not seen every province come up with their share of the cash to actually provide the services that are necessary for a supportive housing project to function properly. We're not interested in just putting up buildings for the sake of having structures in our communities. To have the best positive outcome, we want real homes and we want services that meet people's needs.

Jake Sawatzky: Absolutely. Thank you very much.

Coming back to the bail and sentencing reform act, there have been changes to how extortion is handled.

In my community in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, there are a lot of issues right now with extortion. How will the bail and sentencing reform act help here?

Hon. Sean Fraser: There are few specific things that touch on extortion when it comes to the bail and sentencing reform act.

Keep in mind that now there are extremely serious penalties for extortion, but over and above the penalties that exist today, which can carry the maximum of life imprisonment, we're also changing the rules around violent extortion when it comes to bail, to make it harder for a person to be released when charged with offences that touch on violent extortion. In addition, we're seeing real challenges where extortion is combined with arson in different parts of the country and are going to be directing the courts to consider consecutive sentences in those circumstances.

The job is not done with those changes. We desperately need to empower law enforcement to bust up extortion rings by giving them the powers around a lawful access regime, which is the subject of a separate bill, the strong borders act, which I would encourage all of us to support as well.

Jake Sawatzky: Thank you very much.

For anyone out there who hasn't heard the term “consecutive sentencing”, could you explain it?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes. Generally speaking, there are many offences for which you might be charged and receive a two-year penalty for a particular offence and then a separate penalty that may come with a sentence of three years. In many instances, courts will allow the two-year sentence to be served concurrently, during the same time that the three-year sentence is operating, so the total is three years.

We're changing the rule for certain kinds of offences, so you'd see them layered on top of one another, unlike in the scenario I just explained, and you would have a total penalty of five years as opposed to three years.

• (1845)

The Chair: That's great. Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Sawatzky.

We will now continue with Mr. Brock for five minutes.

Larry Brock: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, circling back to the issue of judicial vacancies, Ontario—the busiest jurisdiction for legal matters in Canada—currently has 15 vacancies of the 37. I'm aware that there are 17 judicial advisory committees throughout Canada. Two years ago, the CBA, the Canadian Bar Association, issued a statement highlighting the crisis in our legal system due to unfilled vacancies. It also addressed filling vacancies on those advisory committees that screen and recommend candidates for office.

At the end of 2023, there were six vacancies. Can you tell me whether those vacancies have been filled? What's the current situation of unfilled vacancies on those committees?

Hon. Sean Fraser: You're asking about just the JACs, not court vacancies.

Larry Brock: That's correct.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll defer to the officials, who may have the current information. I don't have it in front of me. What I don't have today, we can provide in writing.

Toby Hoffmann (Director and General Counsel, Judicial Affairs Section, Department of Justice): We'd be happy to provide that, Mr. Brock.

There are vacancies, but one of the issues is quorum. While there may be vacancies on a committee, they can still do their work and still do their business. There were a few situations in the past where—as I think you were trying to say, Mr. Brock—some JACs were down, but as I recall, they were staffed up quite quickly. Quorum is an issue as well.

Larry Brock: Are you going to give me some details on which province has the vacancies?

Toby Hoffmann: Yes. I actually looked at them today, Mr. Brock, but I can't remember them off the top of my head.

Larry Brock: That's fair enough.

Minister, your department represents the largest law firm in Canada. The Association of Justice Counsel, which represents 3,500 federal lawyers and prosecutors—perhaps some of the officials I'm seeing right here could be part of that association—was

very concerned about deep spending cuts announced in budget 2025. It claims it risks “undermining the very systems Canadians depend on to uphold fairness, accountability, and public safety.” Its view is, “when you cut justice, you cut the rule of law.” It notes that early retirement incentive programs have been offered for senior counsel, which “risks accelerating the loss of experienced counsel at a time when mentorship and training capacity are already stretched.”

Why did your department cancel the LP-01 training initiative for new lawyers?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll give you a framing answer. If the officials would like to layer on about the specific training position you mentioned, I'd invite them to.

There's one nuance where the Department of Justice is impacted differently from many other departments by the expenditure review. Our program funding would be treated the same as every other department's, and I think we owe it to Canadians to focus on what's working—to do less of what's not working and more of what is. Every department will have that to a degree.

The challenge with what you described as us being the largest law firm—which, I think is accurate—is that we operate on a model much like a law firm, where the billing that comes in is actually covered by expenses that are budgeted for in other departments. It's not as though a target of a 15% reduction in spending would impact legal services the same, because that's demand-driven. It's based on requests made from clients, rather than a standing budget that the Department of Justice would have to go and axe.

I expect that the position you have referred to would not necessarily fall into the same category as expenditure reviews more generally.

Larry Brock: Under your government's comprehensive expenditure review, the DOJ was expected to reduce spending by 15% over three years. That's the same target for all departments, despite growing court backlogs, heavier caseloads and an increasing complexity of legal work.

The government had an election commitment, which it claims is unfulfilled, to increase funding for the Public Prosecution Service of Canada. Can you weigh in on that, please?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll adopt portions of my previous answer.

To understand the impact, you really need to understand that it's not necessarily a cut in the number of lawyers working at the Department of Justice. Those budget line items would come from other departments that engage the department. To the extent that there's more litigation, it wouldn't necessarily result in budget cuts to the Department of Justice. It would be a reflection, instead, of the demand put upon the department from other departments within government.

• (1850)

Larry Brock: The Canadian Superior Courts Judges Association, which represents close to 1,400 federally appointed judges across Canada, has sued the federal government for failing to adequately engage with an independent commissioner's analysis when it rejected the commissioner's recommendations to increase judicial salaries in November.

You, as a government—

The Chair: I apologize, Mr. Brock. That concludes your time.

Larry Brock: Five minutes goes by way too fast, Madam Chair.

The Chair: It does, especially when you're having so much fun.

We will now go to Mr. Fragiskatos for five minutes.

Peter Fragiskatos: Minister, is there anything you wish to clear up or didn't have a chance to put on the record about regulatory sandboxes and the Conflict of Interest Act, which you were engaged in conversation about and would perhaps like to add to?

It's whatever you wish.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Regulatory sandboxes is an area outside of my formal responsibility, but I'll tell you my own views on them.

It's a great opportunity for Canadian industry to compete with other economies around the world that have embraced this new tool as a way to support innovation in high-growth potential companies and to find new solutions to old problems in existing industries. That's really what it is, at the core. We can have a different set of rules while we test out something new, so we don't miss out on the economic opportunities that result.

If there are real considerations around exempting the Criminal Code, ethical concerns or concerns that speak to the integrity of those who have the official authority to deploy the powers contemplated by the budget implementation act, it's very appropriate for this committee and Parliament to express their views, either through amendments or through a study with recommendations to government.

I was satisfied with the protections, when I reviewed them, around the limited scope of the authority, given its temporal nature, the public requirement and the need to specify what the authority is being used for. However, I don't want to suggest that this is a preordained outcome. My colleagues around the cabinet table, I find, are willing to consider amendments. Again, we don't agree with them all.

This is a conversation about whether we're going to ignore a tool that we know exists and has helped countries grow their economies, or figure out how to use that tool in a responsible way. I think we should use the tool in a responsible way.

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

There have been six public safety laws put forward recently by you and the government. I know that Minister Anandasangaree has been part of that as well. You've been working with him.

Where are we at on those laws and the progress? What's been holding this up?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I've found it to be a source of frustration with some recent signs for hope—if I can give you that opener.

The bail and sentencing reform act, after several months of being delayed, is moving along. Hopefully, we can have its expeditious passage through the House and the Senate and change Canada's laws.

I hope a similar fate will apply to Bill C-16, the protecting victims act, though that remains to be seen.

The combatting hate act, because of a policy disagreement, has become the source of a lengthy filibuster that has delayed the proceedings in the justice committee for months and, by implication, delayed the adoption of other pieces of legislation that are now, potentially, finding a path forward. What is most frustrating about this particular piece is that the committee's study is largely done and it only needs to examine certain clauses, which could be dispensed with in a single meeting. My sense is that, if parties have objections, a filibuster is not required. Cast your vote—you're entitled to as members who've been elected by your constituents—and let the majority's will stand.

There are other bills that have been the subject of obstruction and delay—for example, the strong borders act. This is preventing us from giving powers to law enforcement to crack down on extortion, bust child pornography rings and examine packages going into Canadian communities that may contain fentanyl. I hope we can work together to understand from law enforcement the value of these tools, and also to understand this from the communities that are affected and want the law to change in order to offer better protections so that, for example, they can practise the faith of their choice.

However, this newly collaborative first week or two on the bail and sentencing reform act, in particular, has given me some optimism. I think, over the next week or two, we will find out if that spirit of collaboration will continue.

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you.

As my last question, why is lawful access so important?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Lawful access, for those watching at home, would give law enforcement the authority to look at certain digital information, with certain protections around privacy, including oversight by a court, where appropriate. I've actually sat down with and walked through different police headquarters, one of which showed me how they receive information. In this case, it was tied to bad actors who were likely engaged in material that potentially touched on child sex crimes. With the authorities they have today, they can't complete the investigations that would lead to charges and potentially to the prosecution of people they suspect of being involved in very heinous crimes, but for whom they don't yet have the evidentiary basis to formally proceed with charges. Similarly, intercepting the digital cross-border communications of people who are potentially involved in the organization of extortion rings is something these powers could be used for.

In addition to the lawful access piece, I mentioned as well the ability of law enforcement to look at fentanyl that's being mailed into communities.

These are serious powers that we need law enforcement to have.

• (1855)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

That concludes the time for this round.

Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

[Translation]

We'll move on to Mr. Garon to finish the hour. You have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Jean-Denis Garon: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister Fraser, as pointed out by my colleague, Mr. Brock, you and all departments must make budget cuts over the next three years.

Of course, the unions and crown counsel have been in touch with us. They're quite concerned. They informed us that a number of people, particularly in the national litigation sector of the Department of Justice, received letters inviting them to retire or to leave their positions and to take advantage of all kinds of offers. Many federal government lawyers are worried about a loss of expertise. They expressed their concern that this loss of expertise would ultimately lead the federal government to increasingly turn to external players, particularly for specialized mandates.

What are your thoughts on this? Could you send us in writing the number of lawyers from the Department of Justice who will need to leave, as well as their level of experience?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm happy to provide what information we can, but I'll just re-explain the response I gave to Mr. Brock, because there's a unique nuance that impacts the Department of Justice differently from many other departments. Because we have a billing model wherein other departments effectively treat the Department of Justice as their law firm, it's not as though there's a standing budget item within the Department of Justice.

[Translation]

Jean-Denis Garon: I understand.

I won't insist on making you repeat this. However, since other departments must also cut spending, your department could be affected. If possible, I would like you to share your information with us.

I would like to ask you another quick question. I've asked a number of other ministers this question.

Bill C-15 would allow Canada Post to adopt rates without cabinet approval. Yet the legislation provides for an exception in order to protect municipal libraries so that they can send each other books at reduced rates, particularly in the regions of Quebec. Associations for people with disabilities, including people with visual impairments, are telling us that the bill's wording could prevent people in the regions from obtaining books in Braille.

Does this worry you? Also, do you think that it passes the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms test? Have you made this assessment concerning Canada Post's rates?

[English]

The Chair: Give a very brief response, please.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think I'll have to follow up.

[Translation]

That's quite a specific question. For my colleagues—

Jean-Denis Garon: If you would like to follow up, you're welcome to do so.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Okay.

[Translation]

Jean-Denis Garon: Excellent.

The Chair: Good.

[English]

Colleagues, thank you very much. That concludes the first hour.

I'd like to thank Minister Fraser and the Department of Justice officials who joined him.

We will briefly suspend while we change over to the next panel.

Thank you, colleagues.

• (1855)

(Pause)

• (1905)

The Chair: Colleagues, we are going to resume the meeting.

I would like to welcome our witnesses. They were actually here for the first hour and have stayed at the table, so thank you very much.

There are no opening remarks, so we will commence with six minutes from Mr. Brock, please.

Larry Brock: Thank you, Chair.

Welcome back, officials. I'm going to circle back on some of the themes that I raised with the minister.

Of the number of you present here today, which members are part of the Association of Justice Counsel? Who among you are part of that association?

Marie-Josée Poirier (Counsel, Judicial Affairs Section, Department of Justice): I am.

Larry Brock: It's just Ms. Poirier and Ms. MacDonald.

Okay. I don't know if this has been resolved at an internal level. I don't think I got proper clarity from the minister.

Of that up to 15% over three years, what is being projected in 2026 by way of cuts to the DOJ, and what types of cuts are we talking about? Are we talking about forced retirement or suggested retirement? Are we looking at other efficiencies? Could you expand on that, please?

Sarah Geh (Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Law and Legislative Services Sector, Department of Justice): Perhaps I could start answering that one.

There aren't going to be any forced retirements. I think the justice department is taking a similar position to many other departments. There were approximately 370 affected letters that were sent out by the Department of Justice.

You may be aware that on the Treasury Board website there is a chart that tracks the different departments and the letters that have gone out, the number of affected employees and the number of reductions that are anticipated from those letters that were sent out.

Of those letters, we are anticipating that 129 positions would be reduced through workforce adjustment.

• (1910)

Larry Brock: What does that mean?

Sarah Geh: That would mean, for example, if there is a work unit of 10, there would be a choice made about how many positions would need to be reduced, so for—

Larry Brock: When you say “reduced”, you're talking about termination. Is that correct?

Sarah Geh: That's correct, or it would be a layoff, and then—

Larry Brock: Would that be with no expectation of rehiring?

Sarah Geh: There would be a process where, of those 10 employees, there would be what's called a selection for retention or layoff. Then the employees who were chosen to be retained would be retained, and the employees who were chosen to be laid off could choose to be put on a priority list if there were other positions elsewhere.

Larry Brock: As I indicated to the minister, the association represents just over 3,500 lawyers and prosecutors. In my view, it is by far the largest legal firm or entity in this country.

I know a pressing issue, predominantly in the 44th Parliament, if you recall what life was like leading up to the decision by Justin Trudeau to prorogue, was that we had a motion of privilege that

went unaddressed by the government for several months because of the exposure of significant scandals that plagued the Justin Trudeau government and the significant use of outside consultants billing taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars.

I'm just curious: Given the size of your law firm, the entity that is the Department of Justice, I understand that from time to time, despite the size, you retain outside counsel. I don't know if that's simply because of a conflict of interest or whether that is your way of attracting the best talent in the private sector to assist you in the course of discharging your duties.

How do you justify to Canadian taxpayers the use of outside legal counsel when, presumably, you are hiring the brightest of the bright when you do your job interviews? I understand you have a mixture of talent from very senior counsel to mid-level and junior experience, so framing that question, how do you justify to the taxpayer the use of outside legal firms?

Sarah Geh: Thank you for your question.

On behalf of the Department of Justice, I want to thank you for the appreciation of the work that the lawyers at justice do.

Under the Department of Justice Act, we are the legal counsel for the government. We are, as you've mentioned, a large legal firm, if you compare it to private firms, so we have an enormous amount of capacity within the department. We are funded in different ways. As the minister said, there are situations, which are not common, where legal agents are hired. It could be for a variety of reasons, including conflict of interest, as you have mentioned.

Larry Brock: I remember what life was like when I worked for a firm. If an individual lawyer had a conflict of interest, the entire firm had a conflict of interest, or the perception of a conflict of interest. Is that the same sort of rationale for why there perhaps may be a conflict of interest amongst the entire 3,500-lawyer firm?

The Chair: Give a very brief response, please.

Sarah Geh: There could be a variety of reasons to hire legal agents. It could be a conflict of interest, as you said. It could be something else—for example, hiring legal agents who need to operate in another country.

Larry Brock: Okay. I'll be circling back in my next round.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brock.

We'll continue with Mr. Fragiskatos for six minutes.

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll be splitting my time with Mr. Leitão.

At the outset of this meeting, we had the Minister of Justice. Minister Fraser talked about unified family courts. It's a structure that I think won't be known to many. Do you have any information on the layout of these across Canada, how many there are and the level of interaction that exists between the federal government and those types of courts?

Toby Hoffmann: Thank you for your question, Mr. Fragiskatos. I will ask Madame Poirier to ring in on this as well. She's an expert in family matters.

The raison d'être of the UFC is to provide, as the minister said, family law services in one place. Those could include matters before a judge regarding the Divorce Act or matters under provincial jurisdiction. It could also include the possibility of other programs that might be provided to families in a provincial court but not in a superior court of justice.

I think you had asked about structure. That's how it all comes together.

I'll ask Madame Poirier to continue.

• (1915)

Marie-Josée Poirier: UFCs are often described as a one-stop shop. The court can hear all family law matters. The structure normally is that it's at the superior court level. The province saves money, because they don't have to appoint and pay the provincial court judges who would normally hear provincial cases. The province then invests that money in family justice services—for example, in mediation or parental education programs.

I don't know if that answers your question.

Peter Fragiskatos: It does. Thank you very much.

Madam Chair, it's been an interesting day, with a number of witnesses testifying. We respect very much the time of the justice officials. I know that they have a lot on their plates as well, as do we with a BIA of 700-plus pages.

I just want to make sure my colleagues are listening. This is an important one, at least for the evening.

With that in mind, Madam Chair, I move that we adjourn the meeting.

The Chair: Do we have agreement to adjourn?

[*Translation*]

Jean-Denis Garon: It has been a long time since I felt wanted like this, Madam Chair. That's okay. We can adjourn the meeting.

[*English*]

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned. Thank you very much for your time.

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