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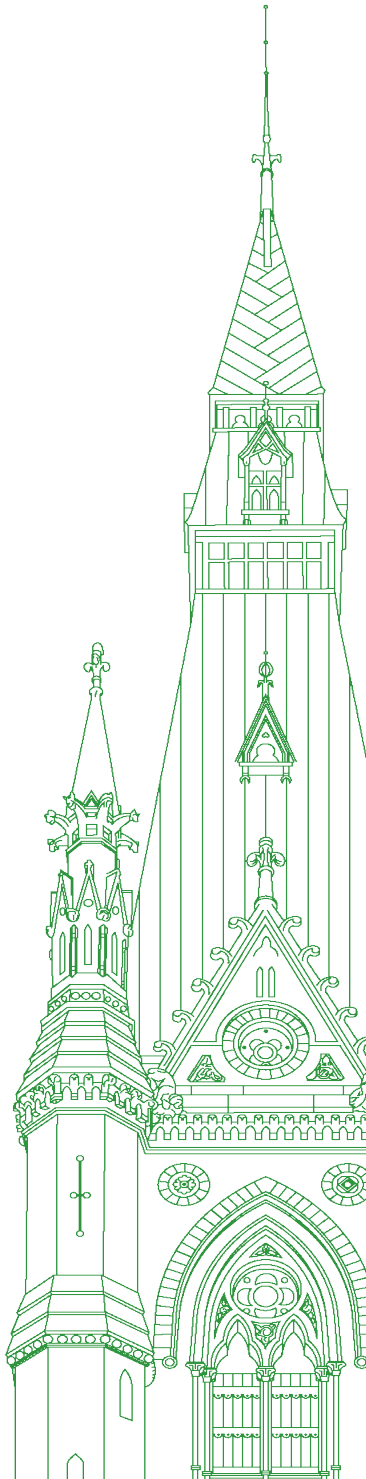

Chair: Salma Zahid

Standing Committee on Science and Research

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● (1610)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 40 of the Standing Committee on Science and Research. We are meeting today to have a second briefing session with the chief science adviser.

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

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. I would like to remind the witness that committee members may ask questions in either French or English. If you need interpretation, please take a moment now to prepare your earpiece and select your listening channel in advance, in order to take full advantage of the time allotted for questions and answers. As a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

With that, I would like to welcome our witness for today: Dr. Mona Nemer, chief science adviser of Canada, Office of the Chief Science Advisor of Canada.

Dr. Nemer, thanks a lot for coming back to the committee. It's good to have you. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks, and then we will go to the rounds of questioning.

Please go ahead. The floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Mona Nemer (Chief Science Advisor of Canada, Office of the Chief Science Advisor of Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good morning, members of the committee.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you about my mandate today.

Before I do so, allow me to acknowledge and congratulate the Right Honourable Louise Arbour on her appointment as Canada's new Governor General. In my view, she embodies intelligence, integrity, principled conduct and public service.

My mandate encompasses many aspects of the interface between science and policy. Ultimately, it rests on four fundamental pillars: providing scientific advice to support public policy, advancing excellence in research, strengthening public trust and engagement in science and promoting Canada's scientific leadership and international collaboration. These interconnected responsibilities underscore the vital role that science plays in advancing our national priorities.

Indeed, research and innovation support development in the sectors of clean energy, cutting-edge technologies and advanced manufacturing, while strengthening public health, food security and Arctic sovereignty.

Evidence-based policy can help the government address complex challenges more effectively and ensure that Canada remains prosperous and competitive in a rapidly changing global economy.

● (1615)

[*English*]

The work of my office reflects this evolving landscape. In recent weeks, I have provided the government with advice on two critical issues requiring long-term scientific planning by Canada. One is the need for a nuclear fusion strategy to prepare our country for this possible revolution in energy technology. The other is the need for a natural capital accounting framework to better measure and protect the natural systems that sustain our economy and society.

This same forward-looking approach has guided our efforts to strengthen the science and research ecosystem in Canada. Among other initiatives, we have recently proposed a national data governance framework and updated the federal research integrity policy to help ensure that Canada's scientific enterprise remains well positioned in the context of artificial intelligence's growing impact on science and innovation.

[*Translation*]

At the same time, strengthening Canada's research capacity also means ensuring that it is inclusive and accessible. That is why my office has been closely involved in efforts to ensure the vitality of science in French. Supporting the creation and dissemination of scientific information in French reflects the importance of Canada's linguistic diversity in the field of science and strengthens Canada's role within the global francophonie.

[*English*]

Looking ahead, we are also examining how science can support safe and responsible research in the rapidly changing Canadian north. Our current work on Arctic research safety aims to better protect researchers and northern communities, while supporting effective scientific work in one of the world's most demanding environments.

Taken together, these initiatives illustrate a broader reality. Science is no longer peripheral to public policy. It is increasingly central to it. At a time when countries around the world are confronting rapid technological change, growing complexity and declining trust in institutions, maintaining strong scientific advisory capacity is essential for social resilience and the vitality of our institutions and our democracy.

Your recommendation in 2022 that the government make the position of chief science adviser permanent by enshrining its mandate in an act of Parliament recognizes that independent science advice is a crucial component of the long-term capacity governments need to address national and global challenges.

I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure science remains a source of insight, innovation and public benefit for Canadians.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Nemer.

Now we will start our rounds of questioning. We will begin our first round of questioning of six minutes with MP Baldinelli.

MP Baldinelli, please go ahead.

Tony Baldinelli (Niagara Falls—Niagara-on-the-Lake, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Dr. Nemer, and thank you for always agreeing to appear when we ask. It is so good to see you again.

Quickly, in your remarks, you talked about part of the mandate and said that your role is to provide "science advice to advance public policy". Last week, the government came forward with its AI strategy. In your capacity as the chief science adviser, did you participate in the federal government's consultations on the recently released AI strategy?

Mona Nemer: I have participated in the consultations, meaning that the minister and his office have consulted with me, through different channels, of course. We had some pretty substantive conversations around what needed to happen.

I'd like to also mention that my youth council prepared a report on the views from the next generation in terms of AI and human-centric AI, which we forwarded to the minister's attention. I'm happy to say that a number of their recommendations are actually in the strategy.

Tony Baldinelli: Thank you.

Thank you for sending us a letter on June 2 with regard to my question on whether or not your office had been consulted with regard to the closure of the agricultural research centres across this country.

In your written response on June 2, you talked about how "Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada did not consult me on the outcome of any of their research centres" and their closures.

You then said, "Had I been consulted, I would have recommended following best practices and scientific evidence to answer questions of scientific excellence and relevance.... This is usually best done through an arm's-length expert group."

You mentioned that your "office has the expertise and the convening power to provide...scientific assessments" and that you "have done it in the past on matters related to major scientific infrastructure in Canada". You also mentioned this: "My team and I stand ready to provide advice on research and science, be it related to infrastructure or talent."

Are you disappointed at all that the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada did not seek your advice?

● (1620)

Mona Nemer: It's always nice to be consulted. There is no obligation to be consulted. I have at heart to better science in Canada and to strengthen science advice. If there is an opportunity to contribute, we always stand ready to do so.

Tony Baldinelli: Madam Nemer, of the proposed 665 layoffs at the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 364 are from the science branch alone, meaning that 54.7% of the workforce reduction targets science. Does it concern you that a government department targeted its science branch for over half of its proposed job layoffs and neglected to consult you?

Mona Nemer: Matters of human resources are complex. Maybe I'll just step back for a second and perhaps remind the committee that we put out a report on the science workforce a year and a half ago or so. In that report, we noticed that the average age of the science workforce was actually far higher than the average age of the non-science public service, which meant that there would be massive retirements that could happen, and that there was a bit of a preoccupation to ensure that—

Tony Baldinelli: These are permanent layoffs. These aren't reductions by way of attrition through retirement. For example, by the end of the 2029-30 fiscal year, the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada expects to cut a total of $154.7 million across the entire department. The science branch alone is taking a $115.4-million hit, so science is bearing roughly 75% of the total financial cuts to the department.

What is your takeaway, knowing that over 75% of the spending cuts at that department came at the expense of science and research?

Mona Nemer: I'm not going to lie. I will tell you that I'm always disappointed when I see that we are reducing the science workforce in the country, whether it's within the Government of Canada, in the private sector or in institutions.

That being said, we need to look at the entirety of the research sector which is an extremely important sector for the Canadian economy. We have to ensure that what we need to get done is getting done.

Things evolve with time. Perhaps some of the research that was being done within the government department is now being done in the same way, a different way, or a better way in universities, colleges and the private sector. We need to be analyzing and evaluating what happens in the entire country.

I'm hoping that as we put in place a council for science, technology and innovation, we develop an S&T strategy that will be able to answer these kinds of questions.

Tony Baldinelli: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now proceed to MP Deschênes-Thériault for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Nemer, thank you for your remarks.

A report by the External Advisory Panel on the Creation and Dissemination of Scientific Information in French was recently published. I would like to discuss the specific recommendations set forth in this report.

How do you envision the implementation of these recommendations—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting.

There is no interpretation, so we just need to check.

● (1625)

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Will we pause the clock?

The Chair: Yes.

Please go ahead now.

[*Translation*]

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you.

As I was saying, the External Advisory Panel on the Creation and Dissemination of Scientific Information in French recently published its report. I'd like to discuss the report's recommendations.

How do you envision the implementation of these recommendations? In your opinion, what role could your office play in carrying them out?

Mona Nemer: First, I would like to commend the advisory panel for its work. It is doing a remarkable job. There is a great deal of substance to its recommendations. This is an issue where concrete action must truly begin, and where we must be able to assess the progress achieved. That is critically important.

On the one hand, there is obviously the vitality of French in scientific institutions as well as the dissemination of science. On the other hand, as a country where French is one of the two official languages, we have a leadership role to play on the global stage.

I think it would be a good idea to have a group, a secretariat, or individuals responsible for this matter. We need to be able to rely on certain people, call upon them, and report back. Personally, I've said that my office would of course be very happy to contribute. In fact, Minister Joly is very invested in this issue. She's already raised it with me and asked for my help. So we are currently in the midst of discussions to determine where to begin.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: I'm glad to hear that you welcome the recommendation to create a secretariat. I think it will be an important starting point for future developments.

Let's move on to another topic.

Part of your mandate also involves promoting positive dialogue between federal researchers and those in academia, both in Canada and internationally. I would like to discuss that with you.

Can you explain to the committee why science diplomacy is important on the international stage? What concrete benefits does your international work in science diplomacy bring to our country?

Mona Nemer: Indeed, science diplomacy is regaining a great deal of interest around the world. Given the current geopolitical situation, I think there is a growing recognition that science remains a bridge between countries and cultures.

Beyond the diplomatic aspect, there is also the issue of international scientific collaboration and the sharing of major research infrastructure, for example. It is therefore quite important to be in the room when decisions are made.

Actually, I recently came across a Statistics Canada report whose findings will allow me to answer your question about the importance of international relationships. The report indicates that over 10% of our research funding comes from abroad. That represents two-thirds of the federal government's contribution to research and development investments in the country. This is by no means insignificant. It is truly quite important.

There is one funding program in particular that we may not have discussed enough in Canada, even though we greatly benefit from it: Horizon Europe. This is, of course, the European Union's framework program—of which Canada has been an associated member for the past two years. Over the past two years, researchers, whether at universities or in the private sector—I want to emphasize that—have already secured over 60 million euros. So, more than $100 million have flowed into the country from the European Union thanks to these science diplomacy efforts.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: I will continue to discuss the issue of science diplomacy and the connections we can build.

I would like to hear your thoughts on opportunities for Canada to play an even more significant leadership role in science diplomacy. For example, in the context of Canada's bid to host the 2028 Francophonie Summit, what opportunities could we seize between now and then to play a greater role in science diplomacy, particularly within the international francophone community?

● (1630)

Mona Nemer: There are many things we can do. Culture, education, science and the economy are at the heart of the francophonie members' interests. Furthermore, many developing countries in Africa and elsewhere are eager for our scientific collaboration, whether for training talent or for participating in global efforts in technology and science.

So, I believe we could assert ourselves even more and play an even greater role thanks to all our strengths in science and technology.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: I see I have about fifteen seconds left. Is there anything else you'd like to add about science diplomacy that you haven't already mentioned?

Mona Nemer: Canada is already doing a great deal. We are welcomed. We have a very good reputation. All I hear from the international community is that people will welcome us even more if we're willing to do more.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to MP Blanchette-Joncas for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Nemer, it is a pleasure to welcome you back to the committee.

I have carefully read the article you co-authored with Quebec's chief scientist, which states that science is under pressure. It is a call to action. In it, you refer to the U.S. government's budget cuts. There are budget cuts—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. We'll have to start from the beginning. There is no interpretation, again.

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Oh, that's good.

[*English*]

The Chair: Can you please say a sentence before we start?

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Here is a concrete example of how French is a stumbling block in Canada's Parliament.

[*English*]

The Chair: Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Start from the beginning.

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Ms. Nemer, I carefully read the article you co-authored with Quebec's chief scientist, Rémi Quirion, in which you state that science is under pressure. In it, you issue a call to action about the cuts made by the U.S. administration to investments in science and research.

I'd like to talk about what's happening here in Canada. After all, we're not immune to this.

Here's a concrete example. Were you or your office consulted regarding the proposed amendment to the Pest Control Products Act in the context of Bill C-30?

Mona Nemer: No.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: All right.

I'd like your opinion on this amendment, since you're the chief science adviser. According to what experts and researchers are telling us, this is the biggest step backward since the creation of the Pest Control Products Act—or its adoption in 2002. I'm trying to explore with you how—for economic reasons—we can now be reintroducing pesticides that were previously banned in the name of science.

Mona Nemer: I'll answer based on what I know—since I wasn't consulted on this matter, I'm not familiar with all the nuances and details. I saw what was in the news, so I did a little research.

I'd begin by saying that many researchers are now advocating the “One Health” approach to take into account everything involving the environment, animals and humans. Ultimately, it's all interconnected. So when we look at certain products, we have to consider the bigger picture.

Of course, changes can sometimes be made because we know a little more about a product and have formed a more negative opinion of it due to its toxicity, but occasionally, we also find that, over time, a given product actually can be used under certain circumstances.

The fact remains that I am a scientific adviser, not a legislative adviser. So I really want to make my point here very clear.

I believe that what's important in all of this is not to lose the public's trust. There still needs to be clarity. If changes are made, the reasons must be clearly stated.

Emergency measures are also being discussed. In my case, I'm familiar with emergency measures—such as the approval of some medications. It's important that these measures be structured so that, ultimately, there is a verifiable and applicable scientific basis for them.

● (1635)

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Let me take you back to a bad movie that you—and we—recently watched. In November 2025, you appeared before this committee, and we discussed Bill C-5—which is now law—regarding projects of national interest or major projects. The government granted itself the right—just as it did under Bill C-30—to assume new powers to circumvent the law.

I mentioned pesticides as an example. At the time, this applied to all laws except the Criminal Code, for a period of three years. I consider this a worrying shift. If, according to scientific findings, it was harmful in the past, it remains harmful today.

I'd like to hear your opinion on that. Some decisions are heavily criticized. Even science, as you said, is controversial—if not attacked and called into question. Generally speaking, do you think economic interests should take precedence over scientific assessments?

Mona Nemer: I will respond by pointing out that economics is also a science. So, when we talk about scientific advice, that also includes verifiable economic and societal impacts.

I think that, in all of this, there's a legislative aspect about which I really can't comment—namely, how governments change legislation and what they can and cannot do.

What I'm saying is that science can help us achieve our goals of building a prosperous Canada while maintaining public trust, but this balance is fragile. So it's very important to be clear about the evidence and the science we use when making decisions, regardless of their nature.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: All right.

You said that, as part of your mandate, your role is to strengthen public trust in science. I'd like to hear your opinion on the government's latest strategy, specifically the one on artificial intelligence.

We, the parliamentary members of the committee, were unable to determine who participated in what is supposedly the broadest public consultation in the government's history—the artificial intelligence strategy. We asked questions, but the government refused to provide us with documents, claiming that translating them would be too expensive. Now, it is impossible to know who participated in the consultation and who actually influenced the government's decisions regarding this strategy.

Does this seem consistent with the government's own stated goal of strengthening public trust, when it is impossible to verify the identity or representativeness of participants in a strategic consultation?

Mona Nemer: I haven't followed every aspect of this issue, but I thought the names of those who participated in the consultation were made public.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: No, some information is missing, including the content of the consultations.

I'm just trying to understand how you see this, from your perspective.

Mona Nemer: There may be privacy considerations. I'm not sure. It depends on what we ask people and what we promise them.

[*English*]

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

We will now proceed to MP Ho for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

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

Dr. Nemer, in your opening statement, you advocated for the importance of independence and impartiality in the Office of the Chief Science Advisor.

Is the role of the chief science adviser to defend science from politics, or is it to help activist political ideology redefine science?

Mona Nemer: Objectively speaking, it's not to defend activists or to defend or criticize government decisions. It is to provide independent, unbiased scientific information and science advice.

Vincent Ho: Free from political interference....

Do you believe Canada's research system should be governed by excellence targets, or by demographic targets and identity markers?

Mona Nemer: I think Canada's science ecosystem has always been governed by excellence.

● (1640)

Vincent Ho: Wow.

When it comes to university funding and the appointment of prestigious research chair positions, if a university has a world-class candidate but that candidate does not help the institution meet the Liberals' top-down DEI requirements—such as the race quotas that the National Research Council applies to research chairs—is it acceptable for federal rules to pressure the university to pass over that candidate and threaten to withdraw federal funding if the university doesn't comply with this Liberal top-down policy?

Mona Nemer: I served as the vice-president of research at the University of Ottawa for 11 years. As such, I was in charge of the Canada research chairs at the University of Ottawa.

I would like to assure you that we have never faced a situation where hiring excellence and inclusion were in conflict. There are a lot of talented people who—

Vincent Ho: When you were at the University of Ottawa, it was before you were appointed chief science adviser in 2017, and before the Liberals implemented race quotas on diversity in—

John-Paul Danko (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): I have a point of order, Chair.

Vincent Ho: Stop the clock, please.

The Chair: Yes, MP Danko.

John-Paul Danko: I don't know what the member is referring to, in terms of so-called race quotas.

The Chair: I'm sorry. That's debate.

John-Paul Danko: This is out of the context of the study.

The Chair: It's debate. It's not a point of order.

MP Ho.

John-Paul Danko: It's crazy, is what it is.

The Chair: I request that members be.... MP Ho has the time to—

John-Paul Danko: It's also offensive.

Vincent Ho: Is the clock still running right now?

The Chair: No. We have stopped the clock.

Vincent Ho: They're just heckling me at this point. Come on.

The Chair: MP Ho, I'm telling members.

MP Ho has the floor. I would request that all members speak one at a time.

MP Ho.

Vincent Ho: Dr. Nemer, when you hire an employee in the Office of the Chief Science Advisor, does race ever play a factor?

Mona Nemer: Excellence, need and integration into the team were the most important things.

Vincent Ho: Okay.

Before you became chief science adviser, you were a molecular geneticist by training. Is that right?

Mona Nemer: Yes.

Vincent Ho: Therefore, you know a thing or two about X and Y chromosomes.

I want to ask you what the definition of "woman" is.

John-Paul Danko: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Yes, go ahead on a point of order, MP Danko.

John-Paul Danko: It is Pride Month. I understand that Standing Order 18 prohibits personal attacks, insults and offensive language.

Vincent Ho: How is that a point of order?

John-Paul Danko: Where this question is going is highly offensive.

The Chair: MP Danko, this is getting into debate.

John-Paul Danko: I ask the member to withdraw his comments.

The Chair: MP Danko, it is getting into debate when—

John-Paul Danko: Asking "What is a man or woman?" is highly offensive.

The Chair: I will deal with this.

MP Ho, I request that you be respectful of everybody.

Please go ahead.

Vincent Ho: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll resume.

The census asks the question, "What is your gender?" or, "What is your sex?", so I want to understand what your view is on this to—

Taleeb Noormohamed (Vancouver Granville, Lib.): I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: MP Noormohamed, go ahead.

Taleeb Noormohamed: The witness is here in her capacity as the chief science adviser. Her opinion on any matter, as an individual, is actually not relevant to her mandate. I would be interested to see if Mr. Ho could reframe the question, if he so wishes, to be within her mandate as the chief science adviser.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Noormohamed.

MP Ho—

Vincent Ho: In these grant applications, it always asks—

The Chair: —just one second. I hope you will frame your questions around the purpose of this study today. Thank you.

MP Ho, go ahead.

Vincent Ho: I'm getting to that. I just want to hear the answer.

Mona Nemer: Madam Chair, if—

Vincent Ho: I'm going to ask this because the NRC president, last week—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. We have stopped the clock. She's trying to answer your question, so let her answer.

Vincent Ho: How much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have one minute and 47 seconds.

Vincent Ho: All right.

Mona Nemer: Genetically speaking, we define female in the animal kingdom as someone with two X chromosomes.

Vincent Ho: I ask this because we had the NRC president here at this committee last week, and he seemed to think the definition of a woman is just a check mark in a box. I wanted to get some clarity on that. Thank you for that.

You attended an event back in February about the success of women in STEM. It's important that we know what the definition of a woman is because we're celebrating the achievements of women in STEM.

Your mandate as chief science adviser claims to make sure that scientists are "able to speak freely about their work".

If a federally funded scientist or researcher publicly opposed federal Liberal DEI top-down policies, would you support their right to speak freely and continue to advocate for funding of their research?

● (1645)

Mona Nemer: I'm a little lost about the exact question. We put forward the science integrity policy. I think both employer and employee agree that the employee can speak freely about their research, so that's—

Vincent Ho: What if they publicly said they opposed the DEI quotas and the DEI requirements? Would you defend their right to speak freely on this matter? It goes into granting research positions and research funding.

Mona Nemer: Madam Chair, I think my difficulty in answering the question is because part of it actually has to do with policy. It's not a science thing; it's a matter of policy.

The Chair: Yes.

Mona Nemer: I don't weigh in on those things.

The Chair: I understand that.

Vincent Ho: What do you weigh in on, then?

The Chair: The time is up for MP Ho.

We will now proceed to MP Noormohamed.

Go ahead, MP Noormohamed.

Taleeb Noormohamed: Thank you so much.

Thank you for being here, Dr. Nemer. It's a pleasure to see you again. I'm sorry that you have to endure some of the absurdities of this committee, but it's good to have you again.

Vincent Ho: I have a point of order.

Taleeb Noormohamed: It's my time.

The Chair: Go ahead, MP Ho.

Vincent Ho: I don't think that personal attacks.... You said you don't like any personal attacks.

The Chair: This is debate.

MP Noormohamed, you have the floor. Please, go ahead.

Taleeb Noormohamed: Thank you.

While I didn't reference anyone in particular, if the shoe fits, as they say....

I'd like to begin by asking you a few questions quickly, sort of rapid-fire.

There was this conversation about demographic targets. In your experience, in your current or past roles, have you ever heard of somebody hired as a scientist who did a lesser job because they were a person of colour or a woman?

Mona Nemer: There is absolutely no evidence, whether it's based on gender or race, that some individuals are not doing as well. Everybody is hired according to merit first.

Taleeb Noormohamed: We put $1.7 billion to recruit 1,000 of the top researchers in the world to come to Canada. Is it your view that the criteria currently in place will allow Canada to attract the best and the brightest in the world, regardless of issues...as they seem to be put across?

Vincent Ho: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, MP Ho.

Vincent Ho: That question is out of order. It's about her mandate, not policy. You're asking her a question about policy set by the government.

The Chair: This is a debate.

Taleeb Noormohamed: I would like my time back.

The Chair: I would request all the members to be respectful of each other's time, and make sure that the person who has the floor can continue.

MP Noormohamed, go ahead.

Taleeb Noormohamed: The question was this. We put $1.7 billion on the table to hire the top researchers. Do you see any issues with the criteria that are currently in place to help us attract the best and the brightest scientists in the world?

Mona Nemer: The program and the criteria are explicit. We want to attract the best and brightest people. Judging from my conversations with the universities, we seem to be succeeding very well. I'm eager for all of us to get those results. It's going to be transformative for the country.

Taleeb Noormohamed: You and I both, and certainly those of us who believe in science, also feel that way.

You will recall the 2013 muzzling of scientists under the Harper government.

How long did it take scientists and government to recover from that?

Vincent Ho: I have a point of order.

The Chair: MP Ho has a point of order.

Vincent Ho: She was not appointed chief science adviser in 2013. How will she be able to speak to that matter? The office wasn't even—

The Chair: You're getting into debate. It is his time. He can ask questions.

MP Noormohamed, please go ahead.

Mona Nemer: I'm sorry, I'm unable to put a precise number. As a scientist, I strive for precision, but in this case, I'm unable to provide you with an answer.

One of the first mandates that I had was to ensure that we had the science integrity policy, so that scientists could speak about their research.

Taleeb Noormohamed: That's perfect. That sounds great.

Obviously, one of the things that we had seen in previous governments was a cut to science and research.

What does that do in terms of the recruitment of talent when there is a concern that the stable funding will not be available? How important is it to have the stable funding that we've articulated now?

Mona Nemer: This is a very important question, but it has nothing to do with the government in place, because all governments have provided money, cut money and all this. To answer your question, I want to emphasize how important it is to have stable funding, because you just can't start a research project and then cut it and then start it again. We cannot send contradictory messages to the world that we want to have the best talent, but at the same time not be consequential with our other actions.

● (1650)

Taleeb Noormohamed: That's perfect.

You're a scientist. You're the chief science adviser of this country. You have helped to run research at a university. What are the damaging—and I shouldn't say damaging, because I don't want to prejudice the answer—implications when politicians start to question science and start to question the credibility of science for political gain?

Mona Nemer: We don't have to go very far to answer your question. We just need to look at what's happening in some of the most developed countries around the world when ideology doesn't go well with science. I think science and politics should remain separate. Of course, science needs science policy and politics can use science, but I don't think that overriding scientific evaluations is the right thing to do.

Taleeb Noormohamed: I want to thank you for being here. You should rest assured that, on this side, we will always support science and scientists.

While the clip factory opposite will do what it does, we're going to keep working hard to ensure that scientists and the top researchers can come to this country and feel that they are safe and secure to do the important research they need to do.

Thank you.

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

Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Nemer, were you or other members of your team consulted before the closure of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's only laboratory in Quebec that specializes in the analysis of marine biotoxins?

Mona Nemer: No.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I see.

Were you or your office consulted before the government designated or expedited projects of national interest?

Mona Nemer: No. Are some of them expedited?

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Yes. We could talk about the Contrecœur project, the Species at Risk Act and the copper redhorse, among others. We could make a list.

We asked ourselves the same question last November. I was hoping the government had listened to reason and consulted you, but you're confirming that there were no discussions with the government on those projects.

Mona Nemer: No, there weren't.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: There were none. That's fine.

I'd like to go over the government's artificial intelligence strategy with you.

Currently, members of Parliament and the public have no real way of knowing who participated in the public consultation to define the artificial intelligence strategy. How can public trust truly be strengthened if we lack the necessary information to understand what influenced the government's decisions or strategies?

Mona Nemer: I'm sorry, but I find it difficult to answer that question.

I would still like to highlight a few aspects of the strategy that are quite important and on which everyone probably agrees. For example, I think we all agree that improving AI literacy is very important.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Since my speaking time is very limited, let me come back to the question: Does a transparent public consultation process build public trust? That's all I'm asking.

Mona Nemer: Again, I'm not privy to the details of that consultation.

If I understand correctly, thousands of people participated in it. We have to acknowledge that consultations did take place.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Okay.

[*English*]

The Chair: I would request that members be quiet. The person who has the floor has the right to speak. I would request no crosstalk, please.

MP Blanchette-Joncas, you have 15 seconds.

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm just letting you know that I'll be yielding my speaking time.

● (1655)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to MP Mahal for five minutes.

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

Thank you, Dr. Nemer. It's good to see you again.

When you attended this committee in November of last year, you may recall that I asked whether you had met the Prime Minister since the election. Your answer was that, no, you had not. I would like to know if that has changed and how many times you have met with the Prime Minister since April 2025.

Mona Nemer: I have met many members of the Prime Minister's Office, including his chief of staff and several of his cabinet ministers on regular interactions with his office and many ministers' offices. I look forward to meeting the Prime Minister in the coming weeks.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: That means you have not met with the Prime Minister since the election, correct?

Mona Nemer: Not yet.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Thank you.

Dr. Nemer, this is very concerning to me. At a time when Canada recognizes how science is funded within the government, don't you think it's important that you advise the Prime Minister one-on-one?

Mona Nemer: I am in very regular contact with Minister Joly, the ISED minister. As you know, there are many important science, industry and innovation files that I have been engaged on with her.

I feel that I am providing the advice that is needed for the government. Even if I haven't been in a one-on-one conversation with the Prime Minister, it hasn't stopped me from doing my job.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Indeed, it doesn't, and I appreciate that you have that kind of mentality when it comes to serving Canadians.

Part of your mandate is that you are also an adviser to the Prime Minister. You are meeting with the ministers, which I understand, but again, you have confirmed that you have not met with the Prime Minister yet.

Let's move on to my next question. Were you consulted at all on the sweeping cuts to science and research mandated across most departments within the government since the last budget?

Mona Nemer: No.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: How do you feel about those cuts when you were not consulted?

Mona Nemer: It's hard to feel when you don't know.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: As a scientist, when you hear that the funding is cut in the budget, do you feel sad, though?

Mona Nemer: Madam Chair, my mandate is to make recommendations to strengthen science in the country. This is very important, but it doesn't necessarily always mean more money, and it doesn't mean that if a budget was cut that this is affecting science quality. I think that any business—

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Dr. Nemer, I think you just confirmed in one of the last answers to a question that giving funds, then cutting back and then restarting is not good for the science and the research and the country.

Mona Nemer: Zigzag funding is not good for science.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Don't you think that, on these kinds of things, on the one hand the government says that it is pro-science and that the Conservatives are against science, yet at the same time it is arbitrarily cutting the funding?

Mona Nemer: Perhaps I'll re-emphasize that science—including the science budgets and the science workforce—is across the country, within government labs, at universities, at colleges and in the private sector. I think the important thing is to have a holistic view of the entire system. At times, things evolve. At times, the best research is being carried out in industry. At times, it's within government. At other times, it's at universities. What's important is to make sure that important science and research are being carried out somewhere in the country and that they're available.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: I think that you and I both agree that continuous funding for the right cause, to make sure that the right science and research are given back to the country, is important.

Mona Nemer: I cannot disagree on the importance of stable science budgets.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Thank you.

● (1700)

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: I'll cede my time, then.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to MP Nathan for five minutes.

Please go ahead. The floor is yours.

Juanita Nathan (Pickering—Brooklin, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dr. Nemer, I would like to ask you some science questions.

I had the opportunity to visit the Toronto Zoo last month, and I was impressed by the zoo's leadership in conservation cryobanking and its potential to contribute to biodiversity, preservation, scientific innovation and economic growth in Canada. Conservation cryobanking has been described as an important tool for preserving the genetic diversity of endangered species and for supporting future conservation restoration efforts.

From a scientific perspective, how important is it for Canada to invest in and expand cryobanking capacity, and what role could the national centres of excellence play in protecting biodiversity and advancing Canadian research and innovation?

Mona Nemer: This is a very important question because it speaks to science solutions for biodiversity loss and for protecting species at risk, and also to the importance of these unique platforms across the country.

Cryopreservation is extremely important for all of the reasons you have mentioned. It's also important when researchers generate genetically modified organisms that can be used for further research, for pharmacologic testing, etc. We can keep them at low cost and then basically unfreeze them when we need them and reconstitute the species.

I think this is something that the Canada Foundation for Innovation, which funds such platforms, is precisely looking at—to have these enabling platforms across the country—and I think that's a good example of something like that.

Juanita Nathan: I'll just follow up on that.

Given Canada's leadership opportunities in biotechnology and conservation science, do you believe that investing in cryobanking infrastructure today would help secure an environmental and scientific future? Can you give a couple of examples of that?

Mona Nemer: As I said, in addition to biodiversity loss, being able to reintroduce species in the right environment.... You can imagine that, when you do cryopreservation, you can preserve pathogens and viruses, and you can use this to develop new antibiotics and new antivirals. You can have animal models where you can do challenge functions, where you can study chronic and acute diseases. There are multiple applications that are for bettering health and also for stimulating the economy in specific life sciences areas.

Juanita Nathan: Thank you for that.

I want to ask you about scientific excellence existing in communities across Canada, both small communities and large urban settings.

From major research-intensive universities to smaller institutions serving in rural, northern and regional communities, ensuring that talent can thrive regardless of geography remains an important challenge. How can Canada strengthen opportunities for researchers and innovators outside major urban centres and ensure that scientific and economic benefits are felt in communities across the country?

Mona Nemer: That is an excellent question. I have the opportunity to visit many institutions in rural areas outside large centres, and I see first-hand how important they are for the economic development and the societal benefit in their areas. That's a superb example of where research and development can thrive and where co-development—doing precisely developed research that is important for the community—is important. It allows young people to participate in research endeavours without having to leave their hometown, etc.

Again, it's a perfect example of how research can be beneficial on many fronts, including the socio-economic one.

● (1705)

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up.

We'll now go to MP DeRidder for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Kelly DeRidder (Kitchener Centre, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for coming today.

You mentioned in your opening speech that you were giving advice on rapid technological change and focusing on digital sovereignty. We've been long recognized as a leader in AI and digital innovation research, but I hear concerns and I see that we lag in commercialization.

From a scientific and innovation standpoint, what barriers continue to prevent Canadian discoveries from becoming Canadian companies and Canadian jobs?

Mona Nemer: Thank you for the question. If you see me smile, it's because that's the million-dollar question that successive governments have struggled with.

We have many programs in the country that support innovation, and we have others that support research, and often I think the issue is that the two don't connect. We have pipes, but we don't have connectors.

Of course, it's in the best interest of the country that we are able to commercialize in Canada and grow companies in Canada. Minister Joly asked me just last week to work on providing her recommendations for concrete ways that we can accelerate commercialization. I'll probably be able to give you a better answer in a few months.

Kelly DeRidder: Did you consult the government at all on the commercialization aspect at that point before they came out with the AI strategy?

Mona Nemer: I consulted with the government and with Minister Solomon on the missions and on where best to start in terms of adoption and commercialization, because they often go hand in hand.

In the case of AI, for example, and its application in health, I have to say that my office had already worked with allies, the French and the Italians, to develop some collaborative work precisely around this, because there are huge opportunities both economically and in terms of health access.

Kelly DeRidder: Thank you.

It's a bit concerning to me to hear that you gave your advice on the AI strategy but it hasn't been talked about or implemented into the strategy, and now a new minister is coming and asking for that same advice. I think it needed to be a part of the "AI for all" strategy that the minister just came out with.

Kitchener Centre has been long recognized as Canada's innovation capital with our research, our start-ups and our innovators. From your perspective, how can our government do better to ensure that regions like this are better included in development and commercialization in Canada?

Mona Nemer: The area is superb; it's like Silicon Valley north. It has enviable activities.

I think it comes down to having an entire ecosystem that is supportive of start-ups and supportive of growing companies and growing talent in Canada. I'm hopeful that we'll get there. We need to.

Kelly DeRidder: Thank you.

Are there areas where federal policy could do more to prevent the brain drain that we're seeing in Canada today and to keep our entrepreneurs and talent in Canada?

Mona Nemer: On the talent in the STEM area, for example, many of them go to industry. Some are entrepreneurs and some go to university. The vast majority are actually not at university.

If we want to keep our talent, we need to have strong industrial bases and strong industrial development to manufacture things here and sell them to the world.

● (1710)

Kelly DeRidder: Thank you very much.

The last question is going to be more asking for your opinion.

It's disheartening for me to hear as well that the Prime Minister's Office hasn't reached out to you to talk directly about your priorities with science. It fits what I'm seeing with the funds being cut, agricultural research being cut and the termination of the lunar rover mission.

In your opinion, would you have rather seen—

The Chair: The time is up for Ms. DeRidder. You can come back—

Kelly DeRidder: Can I just finish the question?

The Chair: The time is up. We'll be continuing for an hour, so you can come back to it.

With that, we will go to MP Eyolfson.

Please go ahead. You have five minutes.

Doug Eyolfson (Winnipeg West, Lib.): Thank you so much for coming, Dr. Nemer.

In your brief, you talked about dealing with scientific disinformation.

I'm a physician. I've been a physician since 1993. I worked in an ICU during the pandemic. I saw more preventable deaths than I thought possible.

According to data from the Canadian Public Health Association, vaccine hesitancy accounted for approximately 2,800 deaths in Canada. We know that scientific disinformation actually does cost human lives. We're seeing infants dying of measles now because of our shocking rate of increase in cases due to, again, misinformation about vaccines and other scientific misinformation.

How would your organization deal with this? How do we navigate getting people to trust actual scientific information?

Mona Nemer: This is a complex and very important issue that we're struggling with collectively, not only in Canada but across the world, and it's costing us a lot.

I'll start by saying that it's going to have to be a whole-of-society effort. It is not the responsibility of one group but not another, etc. I think that trust in science and government is extremely important to our democratic values.

In regard to what I have been doing, we have a group. International science advisers were quite concerned about this issue, and we've started looking at ways we can tackle this.

Australia just put out an interesting study about what motivates people to listen to this information, and so on. You wouldn't be surprised if I told you that there is a lot of neuroscience, psychology and communication in there.

I think we need to pay attention to why people are influenced and how they are influenced and make sure that we can empower people to have critical minds and ask questions about information sources, etc.

Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

I know there are different approaches, depending on who your audience is and where you're directing this. For members of the general public, it's a matter of increasing the trust in science.

One of the big challenges we see as well is those who willingly promote misinformation in science. South of our border, there is a very highly placed person in the health administration telling people that Tylenol in pregnancy causes autism, and he has been very influential in damaging people's trust in science and vaccinations.

How do we deal with these people who are knowingly and actively promoting, whether it's for financial gain or a political objective, this disinformation that is decreasing trust in science?

Mona Nemer: With respect to some of the examples you gave about Tylenol and pregnancy, I would just say that people who are not qualified to give medical advice should not give medical advice. We need to make sure that the population knows the credentials of those giving advice. That's one thing.

Going back to what you said about the community and adjusting the approach depending on who we're talking to, I think we need to broaden our work to have leaders who are respected in their communities be part of the conversation. It's critically important. The data shows that people who distrust vaccines, for example, distrust other things that government and other institutions do or say as well. It's something that needs to be dealt with seriously and rigorously.

● (1715)

Doug Eyolfson: Thank you very much.

The Chair: With that, we will now proceed to MP Blanchette-Joncas for two and a half minutes.

MP Blanchette-Joncas, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Madam Chief Science Advisor, you participated in the Standing Committee on Science and Research in the context of an important topic we were discussing here: the dissemination of knowledge in French. The government has asked an independent committee, which includes researchers, to explore various potential solutions to improve the dissemination of knowledge—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. There is some echo. Can the interpreters please look into that?

You'll have your two and a half minutes. Please go ahead from the start.

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Can you hear me well, Madam Chair? Can I speak French without a problem?

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, I can hear you.

[*Translation*]

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Okay, thank you very much.

Ms. Nemer, you've previously told the committee that you recognize that science in French is essential to the dissemination of knowledge. I would like to know your opinion on the most recent report that the government commissioned regarding potential solutions for improving science in French.

I understand that you've had discussions with government officials. What do you think are the priority courses of action to be implemented very soon?

Mona Nemer: When you call them priorities, I imagine you're referring to the steps we can take to start seeing results. I think there are many things that need to be done.

When the government provides grants or funding, there are conditions attached. I think it would be a good start if all agencies that receive research funding were asked to report on the number of francophones who have applied for and received grants. I plan to ask Statistics Canada to provide me with the number of theses that have been submitted in French and the number of francophones in certain fields.

In other words, we have to start by gathering data. Once we have data, we can take meaningful action.

That doesn't prevent us, in the meantime, from helping the Association canadienne-française pour l'avancement des sciences, for example, to continue promoting the role of French.

We also need to be able to use French translations. For scientific texts, that isn't being done very well yet. So that could be a research project in and of itself.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I want to revisit an idea you proposed to us at the time—namely, to establish an office for science in French to monitor and coordinate efforts and measure progress.

Would you still agree that this office should be attached to the office of the chief science adviser of Canada?

Mona Nemer: That's one possibility. If the government asked me to take on that responsibility, I would be more than happy to do so.

Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up.

With that, we will proceed to MP Baldinelli for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Tony Baldinelli: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Dr. Nemer.

I'm going to follow up on my colleague's line of questioning earlier. Unfortunately, she didn't get her question in. She mentioned the disappointment that it was for all of us to learn that you have not met with the Prime Minister. I mean, those kinds of meetings are important. They're signals. This makes it appear that science is a low priority, you know, which fits with the theme and the trend we've seen recently.

For example, with the agricultural research centres, 75% of the total financial cuts to the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food come at the expense of the science and research branch. In March, just after your last appearance, $20 million was cut from the strategic science fund. Again in March, the Canadian Space Agency announced cuts to the lunar rover mission.

These are sad signals, if I can be quite honest. They point to science becoming a low priority for the government. In your comments, you talked about “zigzag funding” not being good for science. I want to give you a chance to respond to that and to express your feelings with respect to some of those cuts. What does this say about the government's commitment to science and scientific research?

● (1720)

Mona Nemer: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to perhaps express views based on data, because I don't think my feelings are really important in this situation.

I would start by saying that, from where I sit, I don't see at all a disinterest in science and research. I think the commitment for $1.7 billion to attract talent is quite telling. It's a significant amount of funding—

Tony Baldinelli: It's still less than the $21 billion they spend on outside consultants. Wouldn't it have been better that this government take direction to cut $21 billion on outside consultants and put that into the agricultural research centres and put it back into public funding for our university streams, for example?

I mean, my God, we have a recent report from Monday, June 1, that talks about the Center for World University Rankings. Out of 38 universities in Canada, 37 dropped. Only one stayed the same.

Taleeb Noormohamed: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

Tony Baldinelli: We're seeing—

The Chair: On a point of order, I have MP Noormohamed.

Tony Baldinelli: Stop the clock.

The Chair: Yes.

Taleeb Noormohamed: Is this within the scope of the chief science adviser?

Tony Baldinelli: I'm just asking with regard to science.

The Chair: We're getting into debate.

Thank you, MP Noormohamed.

Thank you, MP Baldinelli.

Tony Baldinelli: Are you not concerned? Those precious dollars that we do spend are needed not only at our departments, but also at the U15 and all the universities. In fact, I have the number one research college in all of Canada. At the college and CEGEP levels, they got maybe $500 million of the over $10 billion to go for that, for core research funding. Wouldn't it have been better if the government...?

Or do you not believe that some of the dollars the government is spending on outside consultants would be better placed inside government to advance research? This is not only for universities and colleges, but for departments, and to keep those workers at the Agriculture and Agri-Food department so that we can continue to do the excellent work being performed at those seven centres by those workers, who are going to be losing their jobs.

Mona Nemer: Madam Chair, I just want to reaffirm that I feel strongly about science. I'm a science champion, and I think we need to look at the entirety of the portrait. For example, on the investment that we are providing in security and defence, the Prime Minister has been very clear from the beginning that this includes substantive investments for R and D, including both civilian, of course, and dual use. There will be funds that actually will be going to universities and to industry for this.

Tony Baldinelli: To your point—and thank you for that—you also talked about your agency and providing advice, not only on science research but on science infrastructure as well. Was your office ever consulted with regard to the $200 million that is being spent on the spaceport in Canso, Nova Scotia? Have you seen that site?

Mona Nemer: My office was not consulted. I have not seen the site.

Tony Baldinelli: You won't see much.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mona Nemer: If you're interested, I can give you some scientific notes here. I looked at what was so special about this site versus other sites for satellite launch. It turns out that, because of where we want the satellites to be and the curvature of the earth, this actually is a very good place to directly launch the satellites.

● (1725)

Tony Baldinelli: I'm not questioning you about—

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up.

With that, we will go to MP Rana for five minutes.

MP Rana.

Taleeb Noormohamed: It's a great question.

Aslam Rana (Hamilton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: MP Rana has the floor. I request that all members be quiet, please.

MP Rana.

Aslam Rana: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Dr. Nemer, for your time.

Being an MP from Hamilton, I have some data to share from the city of Hamilton: There is an almost 21-year life expectancy gap among different neighbourhoods, and the sepsis rate is nearly double in certain areas.

Does your office track whether federally funded health research produces measurable improvements in high-poverty communities? If so, what does that evidence show?

Mona Nemer: My office hasn't been charged with following through on an audit function. We do not have an audit function.

However, the minister of ISED, Minister Joly, has asked me to more closely follow the impact of research investments, especially since the $1.7 billion for impact chairs. These are the kinds of things we will start looking at.

Aslam Rana: Thank you.

TD Bank data shows that Canada is losing skilled workers to the U.S. at nearly double pre-pandemic rates.

What specific evidence has your office provided the government on retaining early-career opportunities for researchers, particularly in research-anchored cities like Hamilton?

Mona Nemer: We haven't provided evidence on that because most of the data comes from Statistics Canada. There's no point in duplicating efforts.

I do, however, want to caution people on interpretation of the data. In science, there's always been mobility among countries, and certainly between the U.S. and Canada. People go from Canada to the U.S. to do post-doctoral training, for example. Sometimes they don't come back, but sometimes they come back. U.S. and other citizens come to work here.

We have to be very careful when we analyze brain-drain and brain-gain data. I just wanted to mention that.

Aslam Rana: Canada spends 1.8% of our GDP on research and development, below the OECD average of 2.7%. The U.S. is at 3.3%.

What framework does your office use to assess economic and social returns on that investment, and are those metrics public?

Mona Nemer: I'd like to address the performance of Canada in terms of GDP.

Indeed, we are below the OECD average, and that's something I hope we can rectify, especially with the increased R and D funding for dual-use technologies.

I want to mention that one of the largest problems we have, in terms of investment in R and D, is on the business side. We don't do well there. Canada is one of the very few OECD countries, and certainly G7 countries, whose private sector contributes less than 50% of research investments. That's something we need to do something about.

Aslam Rana: Federally funded research frequently produces intellectual property that is commercialized abroad.

What advice has your office given on ensuring that IP generated here goes to the public?

Mona Nemer: We've given some informal advice, but now the minister has asked me to provide more developed advice, if you like, on the translation of discoveries into innovation. IP, IP policies and IP management are critical.

There are issues that are horizontal to all sectors, but there are also some that are specific to certain sectors. For example, IP management in the health sector for drug development is critical. We need to be clear about that from the time of discovery. Otherwise, we'll never have a chance to commercialize anything. No one will invest the dollars that are needed for something if the IP is not protected.

● (1730)

Aslam Rana: I think my time is up.

Thank you very much.

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

Please go ahead.

Vincent Ho: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Nemer, you talked about hiring based on merit. That's how we achieve excellence in science. I want to draw your attention to a job posting from April 1, 2026, from the department of human biosciences, faculty of science, at Memorial University. It is undertaking an open internal search to recruit and nominate a candidate for an NSERC tier two Canada research chair in computational biochemistry.

It says:

> ...the competition is open to all applicants who are current employees of Memorial University; and identify as members of one or more of the following groups: women and gender-equity seeking groups, racialized individuals, Indigenous Peoples, and persons with disabilities...

How are we attracting the best and the brightest if we're completely excluding an entire group of persons from applying to this job?

Mona Nemer: In responding to the question, I want to clarify that universities have the latitude to use the Canada research chairs according to their own needs and regulations. For example, in this case, you mentioned that it was only open to internal candidates. Some other universities would use it for recruitment.

Vincent Ho: I'm talking about the second criteria, the race criteria.

Mona Nemer: Perhaps it would help—

Vincent Ho: The Canada research chairs program is set by the federal government. It would threaten to withdraw funding if the universities didn't meet certain criteria, such as DEI requirements, race quotas and gender quotas.

How are we attracting the best in this job posting if we're excluding an entire group of persons from applying?

Mona Nemer: If you allow me, I will take a step back for a second, and I think you will appreciate the answer. I want to clarify how these quotas were set. When NSERC determined that, and I stand to be corrected if the granting council changed its policies, at the beginning, the way it was done was to look within the answer fields.

Vincent Ho: Yes, it did change its policies. When you were a professor at the University of Ottawa, the policies weren't like that. The policies were changed recently, and that's what happened.

Mona Nemer: They were made mandatory.

Vincent Ho: I'm going to move on to another question.

In your role as chief science adviser, you mentioned the importance of independence to represent science, scientists and the science workforce. You've been lobbied over 200 times since your appointment as chief science adviser and some of those times were from pharmaceutical companies.

Dr. Nemer, when private for profit big pharmaceutical companies lobby you or your office, do you consider that a routine stakeholder meeting or do you consider it an attempt to influence federal science policy?

Mona Nemer: First of all, we don't have that many pharmaceutical companies in this country. I wish we did. I don't recall being lobbied by them. As part of our efforts to reinvigorate life sciences industries, I have—

Vincent Ho: If you don't remember, I'll jog memory. I know no one's memory is perfect. Back in July 2025, an American pharmaceutical company, Gilead, lobbied you on health, intellectual property, international trade, R and D and economic development.

What exactly did Gilead ask you or your office to do?

Mona Nemer: Actually, I visited Gilead, because we have a *succursale* in Alberta. I went there and visited to see whether its installation is such that they are able to—

Vincent Ho: However, you're not Health Canada. You're not industry. I can see why it would want to lobby Health Canada or the Minister of Industry, but you're supposed to be the independent arbiter of science.

Mona Nemer: Madam Chair, I'm trying to answer.

The Chair: I'm sorry for the interruption.

MP Ho, if you're asking a question, please allow the witness to answer the question.

Thank you.

Go ahead, Dr. Nemer.

Mona Nemer: We have one manufacturing strategy in the country which is part of our health resilience. It's also part of our industrial strategy. The Prime Minister has spoken quite clearly about the importance of life sciences. I went across the country to see the landscape, because I know the field.

● (1735)

Vincent Ho: I have a last question, because it's my time.

When an American pharmaceutical company asks you for changes in some policy—

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Oh, oh! That's tough.

[*English*]

Vincent Ho: —how do you separate genuine scientific evidence from corporate sales pitches? What safeguards exist in your office to prevent that from happening?

Mona Nemer: First of all, we didn't talk policy and we didn't talk IP. We talked about the capacity to be able to respond to a need in the country. Now we have two pandemics going on, and if we're trying to make therapeutics or vaccines in that country, I ought to know what capacities we have so that I know how to advise the government. I can't advise hypothetically about whether we should procure from the outside or produce in Canada.

Vincent Ho: I thought you said you don't set policy.

The Chair: Your time is up, MP Ho.

Now we will proceed to MP Danko for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

John-Paul Danko: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to ask a series of questions on AI and AI adoption in Canada. This has been a fairly significant issue in Hamilton over the past week, where we've seen a fairly significant protest against AI, with people saying that they don't want any AI, no matter what. They're mostly basing those perceptions on predictive AI, large language models, chatbots, image generators and those kinds of things. I totally understand what their hesitations, anxieties and fears are regarding AI.

I want to give you an opportunity to talk about how, in science, research, innovation and business, Canadian organizations and researchers are already using AI. How can we leverage that to really build up Canada's economy for the future?

Mona Nemer: I find it quite preoccupying that some of the public don't trust AI, because this is a very important technology. It's like saying that we didn't trust digitalization, computers, biotechnology or, for that matter, nuclear technologies. In fact, this happened in some countries. When the public did not trust new technologies, I think it turned out to be detrimental for the prosperity of that country, at least in the given sector, which is why AI literacy is extremely important. AI education is extremely important.

Yes, there are areas where we need to be very clear about the guardrails so that we use the technology but it's human-centric.

It is a powerful technology that is being regularly used in science and drug development. We talked about health. There have been a lot of clinical trials where we know the toxicity, for example, of certain molecules. We don't need to repeat this if we can have an AI algorithm that is able to predict toxicities or lack thereof. This can greatly accelerate the use of life-saving drugs.

Of course, in terms of apps, there are also so many things that can allow people to have at least a first consultation on many things.

I believe that this is a very important technology, and Canada can be proud of our contributions. We need to accelerate adoption because I think that, the more people use the technology, the more they're going to trust it or know how to use it so that it's trustworthy.

At the same time, I think we need to have a clear policy framework to assure the population regarding bad actors or the bad use of the technology, just like we did with biotechnology.

John-Paul Danko: Thank you.

I want to ask you quickly about the importance of building Canadian sovereign AI infrastructure. This has been a big part of the reason that the federal government developed the AI strategy. It's to make sure that we have control over our own intellectual property and our own copyright and that we can regulate AI systems, as you were talking about. I'll give you a chance to expand on the importance of building sovereign AI capacity in Canada.

● (1740)

Mona Nemer: Sovereign AI capacity is extremely important for the reasons you mentioned. Of course, if we talk about health and other areas where privacy and sovereignty are so important, it's critical.

I'd like to say that, when we talk about sovereign AI, it's not just that the data centres need to be here. It's also that the algorithms need to be developed and performed here. Otherwise, even if the data is physically here, if the algorithms used are not ours, then we won't have sovereignty.

This really is extremely important at a time when countries are elbowing their way into data and technology.

John-Paul Danko: Thank you. That was a very wholesome answer. I think we can see where Canada needs to be a global leader in AI adoption and also use it to benefit our economy for the benefit of Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to MP Gaudreau.

Welcome to the committee. You have two and a half minutes. Please, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

It's a privilege to have you here, Dr. Nemer.

I am here to stand in for my esteemed colleague for a few minutes.

I want to come back to a current issue. We all know what's happening with regard to farmers, the infamous Roundup and Bill C-30.

Basically, my question is about the decision-making process. I quickly looked at your mandate. Is it standard practice to take into account reports, guidelines or advice before making a decision of this magnitude?

Mona Nemer: The answer is yes, we do take scientific advice into consideration, whether it's provided by the chief science adviser or by scientific advisers within departments.

I would like to clarify that the departments have their own scientific advisers. It's not possible for me to provide all the scientific advice. Normally, the government would ask me for scientific advice on complex issues that involve multiple departments or sectors. I just wanted to clarify that.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Have your counterparts, colleagues or subordinates received a request for advice from the minister?

Mona Nemer: To be honest, I didn't have a chance to ask them the question, since it didn't occur to me. I learned about the issue from the news. So it's still fresh for me.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Madam Chair, I think it would be good to receive a written response from the chief science adviser indicating whether consultations were held. That's important for the public. As you know, when I speak, I do so on behalf of concerned citizens.

I have 30 seconds left, and I would like to discuss scientific development in rural areas.

Infrastructure is concentrated in urban centres. I'm thinking, for example, of research chairs. In Quebec and Canada, would it be necessary to establish infrastructure in rural areas in order to maintain the expertise we have?

Mona Nemer: The answer is yes and no. Some infrastructure requires proximity, while other infrastructure does not.

As you know, maintaining infrastructure and keeping it on the cutting edge of technology is expensive. Furthermore, there are—

[*English*]

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

We will now proceed to MP Mahal for five minutes.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Dr. Nemer, as you have heard in the first round, my Liberal colleagues are quick to accuse Conservatives of being anti-science whenever we raise concerns about unsustainable spending. The same Liberal government is cutting billions of dollars from science and research across most government departments. By the government's own standard, would it be fair to say that cutting science funding from government departments is anti-science?

Mona Nemer: I don't think we can make sweeping characterizations of what's happening without having the details of exactly what's happening and why. We all want to make sure that our taxpayers' money is spent properly. Should there be a place where the same kind of research is being conducted better or more efficiently and there is no real need for it to be done where it is being done now within government, then I don't see how we can justify to taxpayers that we're maintaining this sort of duplication.

● (1745)

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Thank you for the clarity. My only concern is that when we Conservatives call for responsible spending, we are labelled as anti-research and anti-science, and when Liberals do it, they have their own justifications.

Moving forward, I want to go to some quotes.

On March 22, The Hill Times said, “ISED cuts $20-million from Strategic Science Fund nearly two years after signing agreements with recipients”.

Was that funding cut done on your advice or was your office consulted by the government?

Mona Nemer: No. I didn't have to be consulted on this. It was part of the department's fiscal exercise. They decided to have the same cut everywhere.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: It was more of their own arbitrary decision rather than discussing with you, as chief science adviser, the implications that these kinds of cuts on funds can have.

This was in Swikblog on March 20: “Canadian Space Agency Cancels Lunar Rover Mission, Major Blow to Canada’s Moon Ambitions”. You also pointed out during a previous answer that those kind of cuts are concerning and should not be done in a “zigzag” fashion, one where the government can choose through their own whims and fancies to cut whenever they want.

What do you think? Is it a major blow to our ambitions in space sovereignty? What is your comment on that?

Mona Nemer: Canada is very strong in astronomy and astrophysics. I certainly hope we are able to take the lead on a very important program that the Space Agency has already started, which is called CASTOR.

With respect to the lunar mission, I understand that the issue is that because it was dependent and it was our contribution to the NASA mission, with that being cut, there was a clear implication in terms of the need for that to continue to happen or not. It could have continued for perhaps—

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: That's especially when the majority of the funds were planned and a lot of time was spent on this project.

Mona Nemer: Again, I'm not in on the details of this, but the issue is that when we're not leading on something, and when our efforts depend on others, it's always an uncomfortable position to be in.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Thank you.

You also pointed out—

The Chair: You have nine seconds.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: I'll cede my time.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Mahal.

Now we will go to MP Deschênes-Thériault for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

We recently launched our strategy to protect nature. We're talking about better accounting for the environment and taking the value of the environment more into account in our decision-making. Examples include the economic impact of access to water in wetlands, carbon capture by trees, pollination and so on.

Your office has already published a report on natural capital accounting in Canada. Could you comment on that?

What lessons can we draw from that? How can this report guide us in implementing our strategy to better protect nature in Canada?

Mona Nemer: Indeed, this was part of our efforts to support the government in achieving the biodiversity targets we had set for ourselves. A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to speak with the secretary of state responsible for nature concerning this very point.

Obviously, right now, data on nature and biodiversity is scattered across various sources. Some is held by the provinces, some by researchers and some is sometimes held by the private sector. So we don't currently have a comprehensive overview that would enable us to determine our baseline when it comes to biodiversity and nature.

We think it would be important to make a considerable effort on the data front to understand where we stand. That would enable us to track our progress if we launch new initiatives. Data is also important for assessing nature's true contribution to our goals, as you mentioned, whether it involves carbon capture, pollinators or other factors.

● (1750)

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: I represent a rural riding, Madawaska—Restigouche. Innovation and research take place in our major centres and universities, but cutting-edge research and applied research also take place on our smaller university and college campuses.

In your opinion, how could the government better capitalize on the research being conducted at smaller university centres in rural areas? These institutions play a vital role in the regions by highlighting the unique challenges of rural life and advancing innovation projects in key sectors of the regional economy.

Mona Nemer: You're absolutely right; colleges play a very important role. When we talk about applied research, we're thinking not only of universities, but also of colleges. In fact, they often collaborate with the private sector, which is very eager to hire their students.

This varies from region to region. In rural areas, of course, the focus is on agriculture, agri-food and water. In other regions, the focus is on other important factors, which aren't necessarily related solely to nature. For example, in Trois-Rivières, they're working on things like electric batteries and hydrogen.

So all of that is extremely important. When it comes to talent, we need variety. Therefore, these colleges play a very important role.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: You're saying that we need a variety of talents. In fact, we may think of the talents of emerging researchers.

In your answers, you mentioned your youth council. Can you tell us a bit more about that? What priorities is the council currently focusing on?

Mona Nemer: We're now in the third cohort of our youth council.

I've already mentioned something about the second cohort, but since it's such a wonderful initiative, I'd like to come back to it. Among other things, the members of the second cohort published a substantial report on artificial intelligence, which includes specific recommendations.

Two members of the new cohort attended a very important conference on innovation this past weekend. They were very articulate and very well informed. I think it gives us confidence in the future when we see that young people are committed to contributing to the country's growth.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Can you tell me, in 15 seconds, how the young people who are members of this council are selected?

Mona Nemer: It's a very rigorous selection process. We issue a call for applications in which interested individuals submit their résumé and, most importantly, explain why they want to be part of our youth council, what they hope to gain from it and how it would help them in their future. The people selected are scientists from all walks of life and from across the country.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Today, because of the votes, we started the meeting late. We started at 4:12, and now we are at 5:55. We have done four rounds. Would members like to go ahead with the fifth round, or would you like to end the meeting here?

What is the will of the committee?

An hon. member: End the meeting now.

An hon. member: Have one more round.

Kelly DeRidder: I'd like to get my last round in before we end.

Vincent Ho: I have more questions, too.

The Chair: There is no consensus.

● (1755)

Kelly DeRidder: Isn't there still one more in this round?

The Chair: We will do one more round.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Madam Chair, does that mean I'll have two and a half minutes?

[*English*]

The Chair: You will have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Okay, thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll go to MP DeRidder for five minutes. There will be five minutes for the Liberals, and we'll end it with two and a half minutes for the Bloc.

MP DeRidder, please go ahead.

Kelly DeRidder: You mentioned in the very beginning that you had a youth council that sent a report to the minister on the future of AI. Is that report public?

Mona Nemer: Yes, the report is public. It's on our website.

Kelly DeRidder: I'll be sure to look at it because I want to read through it myself.

Thank you.

You also mentioned that we don't have a lot of pharmaceutical companies in Canada, and you'd love to see more. I think really great examples for ensuring that we retain our IP in Canada do come out of the pharmaceutical world. For example, penicillin and Ozempic were both Canadian inventions, but we didn't retain the IP and didn't see the economic impact.

I appreciate my colleagues' questions, as well, about Canadians being unsure of AI and what the future holds. IP retention, in the future, is a very critical component to ensure that we see the economic impact of AI and digital innovation moving forward.

Do you see a strong strategy and plan, right now, from the scientific standpoint, to ensure that our universities and researchers are educating our entrepreneurs and developers on the importance of IP retention for Canadian economic impact?

Mona Nemer: Thank you. This is a very important question.

Again, we cannot generalize because researchers in certain sectors are more aware of the possibility of actually securing IP, what it takes to protect it and so on. I think that we can do more.

Also, we have to realize that securing IP is costly. We don't just need the patent, the licence agreement and so on. There needs to be some push, as well, to be able to get money out of it.

Kelly DeRidder: I agree that it's costly to secure IP, but I think the societal impact.... For example, our economy being in a recession now is an indicator of how it's more costly to not retain our IP in Canada, especially in this technological era coming up.

One thing I didn't see in the AI strategy is any sort of measurable indicator for whether or not the strategy is working in the future.

What indicators do you think Canadians can look for, over the next couple of years, to determine whether our AI strategy is achieving what it set out to do?

Mona Nemer: I'm a big fan of indicators and of being able to evaluate whether things are working or, when they're not, to see how to do something else.

The AI strategy has many dimensions, so indicators are going to have to be used according to these dimensions. For example, if we think about increasing AI literacy, it's easy to measure where we are now, and to see what tools we're going to deploy, how many people we have reached and whether people's views on AI have changed. When it comes to AI and health, we're going to have to see what we're able to achieve in terms of accelerating access to health as well as regulatory reform and reviews of drugs.

It depends on each sector, but we absolutely need to have indicators.

Kelly DeRidder: I agree completely. I would like to have seen at least a piece of that in this strategy—any sort of measurable KPI, as it's called in industry. We'll see what the future holds.

In your view, what level of transparency should Canadians expect when AI systems are used in federal decision-making or public service delivery? I ask because you mentioned the importance of keeping things human-centric, and I agree with that. In your assessment, how important is this?

Mona Nemer: I believe it's essential that people know when AI has been used to manage their file, for example—whether it's in a number of services or decisions concerning them. It's absolutely essential because, otherwise, we might get into a backlash that will set us back in terms of adopting the technology.

● (1800)

Kelly DeRidder: I'll use my last 20 seconds to thank you for your time today.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to MP Noormohamed for five minutes.

Taleeb Noormohamed: Thank you so much.

It's nice to be able to ask you a few more questions.

I want to go back to the conversation we were having about previous cuts and the challenges those have posed. Programs like the polar environment atmospheric research lab and the Experimental Lakes Area had their funding cut by the previous Conservative government.

What has the restoration of these long-term programs meant for Canada's ability to track and respond to climate change?

Vincent Ho: I have a point of order.

Kelly DeRidder: It was 12 years ago.

The Chair: Yes, MP Ho.

Vincent Ho: This is about the mandate of the chief science adviser. She was appointed in 2017. She can't comment on things that happened before that.

The Chair: This is debate.

MP Noormohamed, please continue.

Mona Nemer: I'd just like to say that I really look forward to the day when science policy is not a wedge issue or a political issue in the country. It's in all of our best interest to have continuity in our programs, and to value our researchers and institutions.

Taleeb Noormohamed: I'm so pleased you said that, and I'd like to spend a bit of time on it.

You've been in this role now for a little while. Before that, as we know, you led research at a major university.

Can you speak to the existential threat to scientists and science in the face of misinformation and what I would call “armchair quarterbacking” on social media? What does that mean for research, researchers and, perhaps more importantly, public acceptance of scientific fact?

Mona Nemer: It's a very important question, and we can take many examples. Right now, what's happening with the new Ebola outbreak, for example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo is that things are going much worse because of disinformation, because people are refusing treatment. They're refusing to identify themselves or to isolate themselves. These things have real impact on not just the people but on the entire community. The disinformation is very significant.

The loss of trust in science is also very detrimental. Right now, I'm happy to see that trust in scientists is still high. It's taken a beating in certain places around the world, but it's still high. It's our physicians, for example, and so on. If members of the public lose trust in scientists, and they already don't have much trust in other actors in society, then we're.... I don't know. It's going to be a bit chaotic.

Taleeb Noormohamed: I want to double-click a bit on this now, and then I want to layer on the misinformation around equity of hiring. As you rightly pointed out, there is no difference in quality when Canadians are well represented in research. You've made it very clear that there's never been a degradation in the quality of the research, the quality of the academics or academia and what the outcomes of that research are.

What is the added impact, positive or negative, when people believe that somehow science is being degraded or the quality of the work is being done more poorly, when we look to expand the number of folks in the research realm?

Mona Nemer: Questioning science has to be done thoughtfully. Scientists question themselves and question science, but contributing to the distrust in science is counterproductive for all of us. That's really important.

On the other hand, I want to say that diversity in science is very helpful, because people want to look and see people like them who are in science, not people who don't look like them. Whether they are people whose colour is different or people whose gender is different is important. I can tell you about the number of people who come to me to tell me how important it is for them, whether they're immigrants or whether they're women, to see someone like me, an immigrant and a woman, doing this kind of job. I think that's very important for communities.

● (1805)

Taleeb Noormohamed: Just to be clear, it's without any impact on the quality of the research.

The Chair: The time is up. We will now end this panel with MP Gaudreau for two and a half minutes.

Please, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

I'll come back to how we can maintain respect, information, science and all that.

I would also like to congratulate you on your role. I'm glad to see people talking about how important it is. I can tell you that at times, as a woman, as a young person and as a francophone, I, too, go through a lot, so I understand you.

I don't know if you've seen this, but last week, the deputy minister of Quebec's ministère de la Cybersécurité et du Numérique—Mr. Le Bouyonnec, not to mention any names—appeared before a parliamentary committee. He mentioned that he was very concerned about Quebeckers' health data because of the CLOUD Act, given that, scientifically speaking, the data doesn't migrate to a secure government cloud for 18 or 24 months.

Now we're talking about geopolitics. We are patting ourselves on the back and saying that, in Canada, we're well organized and have safeguards in place, even though 85% of the products we use are American.

Can you set the record straight? Are we truly protected, or is there an urgent need to stop saying that and do what needs to be done?

Mona Nemer: I would say that there is an urgent need to do what needs to be done to ensure that we have control of our data. We have actually produced a major report on data because, until now, it has been somewhat of a blind spot in all strategies related to digital technology and artificial intelligence. As long as our data doesn't belong to us, does not remain with us and is not used with algorithms developed here, we'll remain vulnerable.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Absolutely.

With that said, Madam Chair, I hope we all understand very clearly that the time to act is now. In a context where we want to build Canada and foster trade among the provinces, there is innovation and science, whether in Quebec or even in Toronto. So the government must act very quickly.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

On behalf of all the members, I would really like to thank Dr. Nemer for coming to the committee.

Thank you for all the work you are doing in your capacity as the chief science adviser.

Is the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.