



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 111

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Chair: Mr. Kelly McCauley



Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

• (1630)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

Before we start, I require unanimous consent from the committee to continue, because we have the bells ringing.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Wonderful.

We'll start. This is a very quick welcome to meeting 111 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(c), the committee is meeting to commence consideration of the supplementary estimates (C), 2023-24. We have votes 1c and 5c under PSPC, vote 1c under the PCO, vote 1c under Shared Services and votes 1c, 15c, 20c and 30c under the TBS.

Keep your earphones away from the microphones. It causes feedback and potential injury.

We are very short on time.

We're going to turn things over immediately for an opening statement from the minister. I think we'll probably just have one opening round of about four minutes before we lose the minister.

Minister Duclos, welcome back. Please, go ahead, sir.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (Minister of Public Services and Procurement): Just to be certain, when do we expect the vote to start?

The Chair: We have about 20 minutes. We'll have your opening statement and probably about four minutes for each party.

Go ahead, sir.

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As you know, we are gathered on the traditional, unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people.

As Minister of Public Services and Procurement Canada, or PSPC, and Shared Services Canada, or SSC, I thank everyone for giving me the opportunity to present our requests within the framework of the 2023-2024 Supplementary Estimates (C).

To summarize, PSPC is asking for a net increase of \$263 million for its expenditures budget, while SSC is asking for \$53 million.

Allow me to position some of these requests within the context of our priorities.

First of all, modernizing procurement includes simplifying our processes and improving access to public contracts for SMEs and suppliers from historically under-represented groups, namely indigenous peoples.

A second priority is to invest in quality care for Canadians, resolve pay issues for public servants and move forward with the Next Generation Human Resources and Pay System.

A third priority involves supporting our government's response to the housing crisis. To do so, we are accelerating the conversion of surplus federal properties into affordable and accessible housing. This year alone, through agreements with developers, the Canada Lands Company will enable the construction of more than 2,800 housing units. Furthermore, over the next five years, the Company plans to build over 26,000 new homes on its properties, at least 20% of which will be affordable housing units.

Of course, our fourth priority is to continue working in close collaboration with several key partners to implement the Canadian government's new Canadian Dental Care Plan. To date, over 1.5 million seniors have become eligible for the plan, and oral health care providers have started signing up.

Allow me to briefly update you on the work done by PSPC officials to answer questions about the Canadian government's procurement processes.

First, I want to say that we are very proud and grateful for all the work accomplished by public servants, who worked diligently to protect Canadians' health during the pandemic. Whether it be by ensuring the supply of vaccines, rapid tests or personal protective equipment, the work of these public servants and all Canadians helped save thousands of lives and protect thousands of jobs.

I want to reassure the committee that the findings of improper behaviour, including fraud, are unacceptable.

• (1635)

[English]

In November 2023, PSPC suspended all delegated authorities for professional services-based task authorizations in order to implement additional controls to strengthen IT procurement and the management of contracts.

That same month, PSPC suspended all GC Strategies contracts with the Canada Border Services Agency. Since that time, I can confirm that every active contract with that company has been terminated across the government and that the company is ineligible for any new contracts.

Following further investigations, both PSPC and Shared Services Canada have also recently suspended Dalian and the Dalian-Coradix joint venture from current and future contracts.

We also have to have more tools that can protect our supply chains from bad actors and respond to evolving threats. That is why, earlier today, I announced the establishment of the office of supplier integrity and compliance. That new office will enable PSPC to better respond to misconduct and wrongdoing and further safeguard the integrity of federal procurement.

I also provided an update on investigations by PSPC that uncovered several fraudulent schemes undertaken by subcontractors working on federal professional services contracts between 2018 and 2022. The department has revoked or suspended the security statuses of these subcontractors and is taking steps to recover illegitimate amounts billed to the government. These cases have also been referred to the RCMP.

In closing, Mr. Chair, all of this work is part of the reinforced efforts of PSPC and all other departments to keep strengthening federal procurement and hold bad actors accountable for wrongdoing.

[Translation]

I would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have about 13 minutes left, so we'll start with five minutes and then five minutes. We'll suspend for the vote and come back with five minutes and then five minutes for the opening.

Go ahead, Mrs. Block, please.

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

Thank you to our witnesses and the minister for joining us today.

Earlier today, Bill Curry reported that “An internal review of federal contracting has found that nearly \$5 million in fraudulent billing by three private subcontractors”. You, of course, confirmed this, and you held a press conference earlier today where you announced that “three information technology subcontractors fraudulently billed on contract work across a number of separate federal departments, agencies and Crown corporations”. The total of these illegitimate payments is, as I've said, almost \$5 million.

Your officials mentioned that five to 10 more cases are being looked into. Can you tell me how much money is involved in these additional cases?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I'm very pleased to note that you did both follow the story this morning in the newspaper and quote, importantly, the press release that I gave with the President of the Treasury Board, Anita Anand.

Three things we announced briefly. First, the—

Mrs. Kelly Block: Excuse me, Minister. As you noted, I followed the press conference. What I'd like to know is how much money is involved in these additional cases. Do you know, yes or no, and if you do, how much is it?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I'll cut that into two pieces.

First, there is the announcement this morning, the \$5 million that, as you will have understood, is under investigation by the RCMP. All appropriate attempts will be made to recover those dollars.

Second is the fact that, as you also mentioned, there are other cases under investigation. When more is known, appropriate measures will be taken.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much for that.

Are these investigations expanding to any of the companies involved in the ArriveCAN scam?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: These are separate cases. The reason we are able to talk about them today is that since 2018 and, more importantly, since the pandemic, a large number of procurement contracts are now electronic. We have invested significantly in electronic procurement, so we're able to use data analytics and the considerable amount of data that has been accumulated to proceed to the identification of these cases and to eventually prosecute them in court.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you.

What does your department define as “fraudulent payments”? For example, were subcontractors paid for work they didn't do?

• (1640)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: These cases are different from the ones you have in mind, different from the ArriveCAN cases on which you have spent considerable time over the last few weeks. These are separate cases, and as you would understand and as would be appropriate, we can't talk about them in public since that would undermine the important RCMP efforts that are currently under way.

Mrs. Kelly Block: You can't identify the companies, but can you identify which departments are involved with these contractors and the fraudulent payments?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: There are many of them. I think it's a bit more than 30 of them, and all of them are co-operating, as they should be doing, with PSPC to find out what went wrong and how we can prosecute those cases and recover the dollars that were fraudulently provided to them.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Are the public servants who were involved with these contractors and these payments being investigated at all?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The information that I have... Again, we need to be very careful, because we wouldn't expect and we wouldn't want politicians to become involved in RCMP investigations, so that information remains far from political interference. We have high-level information that suggests that there's no wrongdoing on the part of public servants at the moment as we're speaking, but that is obviously under investigation as well.

Mrs. Kelly Block: What about the public service? Are there any individuals in the bureaucracy, in the departments, who may have been working with these contractors being investigated?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: As we just said, everything is obviously under scrutiny, but as we speak now, the RCMP is investigating outside subcontractors that have fraudulently billed the federal government.

Mrs. Kelly Block: You said earlier today that there is no evidence that the fraudulent payments were a result of mismanagement. I guess I would then ask if you are aware of whether these subcontractors provided proof of work, or did departments simply pay without seeing that proof?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: As we just said—

The Chair: I'm sorry. I'm going to have to intervene, because we're very short on time. That is our time. Perhaps we can get back to it in the next round, or in writing.

We'll have Mr. Bains for five minutes.

Mr. Parm Bains (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for taking the time to join us today, and, of course, thanks to all of your department officials.

My question is regarding the construction industry and how it plays an essential role in Canada's economy, employing nearly 1.5 million people. As you know, the region I'm from—Richmond, British Columbia, and the greater Vancouver region—has a large segment of this construction industry.

In December of last year, PSPC introduced the Federal Prompt Payment for Construction Work Act. Can you briefly explain the importance of prompt payment for the industry and how this legislation will achieve that? I hear from a lot of construction industry associations on this matter. It's very important to them.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Parm, for bringing to this committee the important voices of your constituents.

It's obviously the case that many middle-class families in your riding will benefit or have benefited from the important activities of the construction industry. We need them and their workers to do all the right things they're currently doing in B.C. and in your riding.

As you pointed out, there's great news on that. The Federal Prompt Payment for Construction Work Act now in place is making sure that it takes fewer than 28 calendar days for construction companies to be paid upon sending their invoice. This is remarkable, because it's above the existing norm. That was a 30-day rule, which was already achieved in 90% of the cases. Now it's going to be, in all cases, in 28 days or less. That also incites and even demands

that subcontractors will be paid rapidly following payments to contractors. Subcontractors need to be paid no more than seven days after they invoice the contractors, and the sub-subcontractors get the same treatment by a subcontractor.

It's all part of a series of positive actions that support the construction industry. They get paid faster for the important work they do, which reduces all sorts of uncertainty and costs. It makes them able to pay their workers more rapidly, so it makes things a lot easier for them.

We know reducing the cost of constructing homes, in particular in your riding, is absolutely essential to address the housing crisis in Canada.

● (1645)

Mr. Parm Bains: Thank you for that.

To follow up on that, what impact will this have on federal infrastructure projects?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Well, that's another great point you're making. Obviously, as we just said, constructing new homes in your riding is essential for middle-class families and many other families.

It's also very important for the federal government to partner appropriately with the construction industry across Canada. We need their support to maintain, renovate and construct buildings for the federal government. They will be a lot more willing and able to work with the federal government if they know they will be paid on time. The subcontractors will also be more willing to work with contractors if they know as well that they will be paid on time by the contractors.

Mr. Parm Bains: I'll go to a shorter question. Hopefully, you can answer.

Can you speak about the controls in place to ensure there's no political interference in the selection of companies bidding for contracts?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: This is so important, and it's so good to point to.

There shouldn't be. We don't want it to be the case that there is political interference in the choice of which company is awarded a contract. That's why accountability requires ministers and their offices to detach themselves from political interference in contractual arrangements, including the choice of contractors at the federal government level. We expect that to be the case.

That's also the case at PSPC and elsewhere in the federal government.

Mr. Parm Bains: Thank you.

The Chair: Great.

Colleagues, we have about three minutes left, so I will suspend. We will be back right after the vote. Customarily, it's five minutes when the vote is announced, so we will be starting after that.

Minister, are you staying in the room and voting virtually?

Mr. Majid Jowhari (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Chair, could we ask for UC to vote from here, and then once everybody has voted, we'll continue the questioning?

The Chair: If that works.... Oh, I can't, because of Larry.

Mr. Larry Brock (Brantford—Brant, CPC): I can't. I'm sorry.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): No. That's fair.

The Chair: One of the apps is not working, so we will suspend.

We have three minutes until it starts, and then it's 10 minutes.

If it's fine with everyone, once everyone has voted, we will start up again, because we have the minister only until 5:30. Does that work for everyone?

Yes. Perfect. We'll do that.

• (1645) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1655)

The Chair: We are back. Thank you for the countdown. I appreciate everyone's patience and understanding as we work around this.

We are now with Mrs. Vignola, please, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Duclos, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being with us today.

Mr. Duclos, the Department of Public Works and Government Services is asking for nearly \$800,000 to fund a cybersecurity certification program for defence contractors. It's a horizontal line item from the 2023 federal budget.

I am wondering about this. Is cybersecurity not already in place? Why was this not already planned? Does it need improvement? Is there danger here?

Why do we suddenly need to increase funding for cybersecurity, particularly in the area of defence?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you. That is a good question.

In fact, this is not a sudden need, but an additional need. Obviously, many cybersecurity mechanisms and investments already exist, including at the Department of National Defence. We must take into account what's happening throughout the world when we consider the dematerialization of information and trade, or even threats we're seeing in many countries. I don't need to provide more details, because I think everyone knows what I am talking about. In this context, investing more into cybersecurity, including at the Department of National Defence, is necessary.

These are therefore investments in addition to existing investments.

• (1700)

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

Looking at vote 1c, these are operating expenditures. Am I to understand it's for additional human resources?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: You've sprung a pop quiz on me. I used to have all of the different vote numbers memorized.

Can someone quickly tell me what vote 1c corresponds to?

Mr. Wojo Zielonka (Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Financial Officer, Finance Branch, Department of Public Works and Government Services): Yes. It's mainly for human resources.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

Furthermore, I see that Shared Services Canada is requesting a transfer of \$810,895 for operating expenditures and \$689,105 in capital expenditures for the Canada Border Services Agency's Assessment and Revenue Management project. This project made some headlines recently, due to the small number of tests conducted and the brief testing period.

Can you assure me that the Canada Border Services Agency's Assessment and Revenue Management project will not be another example like Phoenix, with a system launching in spite of a too-short testing period and inconclusive results?

Can we be sure that the investments we make into this application won't undermine overall trade or tax collection at the border?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I will say two things.

First of all, the objective you just described is indeed the most important objective. We must do better than what is already in place, again in a context of automating and digitizing processes and data.

Secondly, when it comes to the more technical aspect of transferring \$810,895 and \$689,105, if you like, we can explain exactly why those amounts were requested. It's for the purposes of budgetary rigour and integrity. It's to maintain the way we generally work when the margins are modest between budgets—we are indeed talking about rather modest amounts—and adjustments need to be made.

Mr. Zielonka may want to add something.

Ms. Arianne Reza (Deputy Minister, Department of Public Works and Government Services): I think that falls more under Shared Services Canada.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Ah, sorry. It's Shared Services—

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Excuse me for interrupting you for a few seconds, but I want to make sure I understand correctly.

The project will be deployed in May, if I understood correctly. What I am hearing is that, after the investments were done, in spite of the very short testing period and somewhat conclusive tests, the project will be deployed anyway, regardless of what happens. I don't want us to end up in another situation like with Phoenix.

Can you assure me this will not open the door to fraud at the border?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That's an important question. I will ask Mr. Jones to talk about the transfer and budgetary readjustments, on the one hand, and the way we plan to implement everything over the next few months, on the other hand.

Mr. Scott Jones (President, Shared Services Canada): Thank you.

It is important to note that Shared Services Canada's role is to provide network and cloud connection services to the Canada Border Services Agency, but it is not responsible for creating the application. We already implemented all the required services for the Border Services Agency—

[English]

The Chair: Thanks.

I'm afraid, Mr. Jones, that is our time. Perhaps you can give a more extended response to the committee in writing.

Mr. Bachrach, please go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, Canadians have been rightly shocked and horrified as the details of the botched ArriveCAN procurement have been made public.

One aspect that I think seems particularly egregious to people is the charging of commissions by contractors who do very little work, if any.

I thought this was illustrated best by some communication that came out through the investigation by Botler, the IT company from Montreal. They describe a phone call with the principal of GC Strategies in which he talks about CBSA essentially rolling out this particular IT product to the rest of the government's departments and that a 15% commission would be charged by his company, something that he laughed at, and he said that the higher pricing would "suck for Canada".

Do you agree that charging those kinds of commissions sucks for Canada?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Let me answer that great question in three different ways.

First—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Be brief, because I only have five minutes.

• (1705)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The first piece is that in normal circumstances, you would want those services to be provided by the public service. There are hundreds of thousands of public servants who work very hard and invest their talents and energy every day to make a difference for Canada. You'd want that expertise and those efforts of the public service to be used.

The second thing is if that's not the case and there is no ability to do that. In a complex world, which is becoming more complex every day, there are instances in which it's not possible for the public service to answer all of those needs, or it might be that it's too urgent to do so. There would be too little time to do that, as was the case during COVID-19.

The third piece, I would say, is that when staff augmentation or contracting is needed for Canadians' safety and health to be protected, as was the case with COVID-19, that has to be done following the rules. These rules were very clear during COVID-19. Unfortunately, they were not followed by all public servants.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Correct me if I'm wrong, Minister, but there's no rule against charging a commission and doing absolutely no work for that commission. You're a company and you're going to get a government contract; you subcontract that work to someone else and charge 15%. The Canadian public gets very little value for that 15%.

Tell me if there's a rule in the Government of Canada that prevents that from happening.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: There are two important points that you mentioned.

The first is the process and the second is the value.

The process has to be open, fair and transparent. It's part of this team's job to make sure that this is the case in all contracts, including in emergency contracts, as was the case during COVID-19.

The second piece is value for money.

Value for money is to be assessed by what we call "client departments". In this case it was CBSA. CBSA had to decide whether it thought it was value for money to invest in that particular contract in the context of the COVID-19 emergency. They thought the emergency, the speed and the complexity of the work they faced deserved a contract of that sort.

There were rules that had to be followed. They knew these rules. The rules were clearly stated. Unfortunately, some of them—yes, a small number of them—didn't follow those rules, and you know the outcomes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I didn't hear an answer to the question. The question was very simple: Does the Government of Canada have a rule against charging commissions and not doing any work for the commission?

We're talking about the evidence before the committees of Parliament showing that it can be 15% or 30%, and there can be several layers. You can get to a point where the Government of Canada is contracting something out and only half of the actual monetary value is going toward doing the actual work.

The Canadian public should be horrified that this is happening. The Auditor General very clearly said in her report that your government overpaid for the ArriveCAN app. I'm not sensing any sort of contrition or embarrassment or a sense that this is wrong. I asked you if you agree that it sucks for Canada, and you didn't answer.

Does it suck for Canada that we're wasting money on these apps and contracts for companies that do little or no work?

I think it does.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: This answer does indeed come from the Auditor General, who said very clearly that there wasn't enough value for money in the work that was done by GC Strategies. She said that many weeks ago, and she's correct. She pointed out that had that job been done within the federal public service, it would have cost about 50% less.

Whether that would have been possible—

The Chair: I'm sorry. That is our time. Minister, I have to cut you off.

We're going to go on to the next round. We're doing four minutes, four minutes, two minutes, two minutes and then four minutes in order to get the minister out by 5:30.

Go ahead, Mrs. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you.

To give you a heads-up, Chair, I'm going to take the first couple of minutes and then pass it over to my colleague Mr. Genuis.

Bill Curry reported that "Officials said the three subcontractors are not connected to the ArriveCan app for international travellers." They are different from GC Strategies.

Can you please confirm that for me?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Can you expand on what you would like me to answer?

Mrs. Kelly Block: Can you confirm that the three subcontractors are not connected to the ArriveCAN application?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Do you mean the three subcontractors we spoke of earlier in the case this morning? Yes, that is the information we have.

Again, it's information that is not complete, because no one would like to know in this room that a minister is meddling with RCMP investigations. The information we have is that this is the case.

• (1710)

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you.

We've also learned from Bill Curry and you that there are even more cases being looked into.

Under your government, \$21 billion has been paid to external consultants. How many of them are fraudsters and how much money have they been paid?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The good news is that you are asking this question today. We had a press conference just a moment ago, during which we pointed to the fact that electronic procurement ac-

tivities over the last years have been accelerated. The good outcome of that is that we're now able to find out about those fraudulent activities. They have probably been going on for decades, but we couldn't do anything about them because there was no ability to collect, gather and analyze data.

The good news is that we have data analytics in 2024. We have the ability to share electronic data, and we're able to do a lot more.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Minister, the good news is that it was Conservatives who introduced a motion here in this committee and in the House to have this investigated, and your caucus voted against it.

Thanks.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Obviously, we are all very pleased that all MPs contribute to the work of this committee.

Mrs. Kelly Block: That wasn't the question.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: This, however, comes from a 2018 budget investment—

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Minister, thanks. It's my time now.

I'd like to ask you a very specific question. When were you first briefed on the issues and challenges with ArriveCAN?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I was aware of it for a number of years. That's the first thing.

The second thing is that I was briefed very quickly after my coming into office.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Do you have a date for us?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: It was probably some time around the end of August or early September.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

Did you provide any direction at that time?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: No, I didn't provide any direction.

I obviously asked the officials to follow the work that was forthcoming, which was going to be produced by the Auditor General and the procurement ombud. We knew we needed to wait for their reports before we could take any action.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: You didn't direct for any changes to be made at that time.

What's frustrating to me, Minister, and I think to many Canadians, is that even today, you continue to use the impersonal, passive voice to describe events that happened at the department you're supposed to be running.

I quipped at an earlier meeting that in your role, you could be replaced with a potted plant. I would seriously like to understand—

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.): Excuse me, Chair.

On a point of order, I think we expect a certain level of decorum here.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I completely stand by that comment. It's not unparliamentary. You tried to do it last time and you were overruled.

The Chair: You may continue, Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

Sincerely, Minister, I would like to understand this. If you didn't feel it was appropriate for you to take action or you weren't willing to take action when you were briefed on this metastasizing procurement scandal, what role do you see yourself having in procurement as the minister responsible for procurement?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: It's a great job. You know—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: It sounds like it's a great job.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: For me, as a government, you're part of the exercise when you use your judgment and your critical input. This is supportive of thousands and hundreds of thousands of jobs across Canada—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: But what do you do, Minister? What is it that you do here?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The Government of Canada is the biggest procurer of goods and services in the country—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: You, personally, as minister—what do you do?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: —and builds communities and helps provide good jobs for hundreds of thousands of Canadians. This is an important job—

The Chair: I'm sorry, gentlemen. I have to interrupt. That is our time. You're eating into Mr. Kusmierczyk's time—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: What do you do?

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, please. Your time is up.

Minister Duclos, our time is up. It's Mr. Kusmierczyk's time now.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you, Chair.

I want to allow you, Minister, to respond to that question.

Can you please tell us a bit about the approximate number of contracts that PSPC handles in a given year?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The number is about 400,000 contracts or amended contracts every year. It's a big exercise. More importantly, it's something extremely important for Canadians and communities. When it comes to supporting the standard of living for middle-class families, creating opportunities for everyone to succeed, creating cleaner and safer environments, goods and services....

Service Canada is working currently on the dental insurance plan. It is already helping about 1.5 million seniors, who will get access, very soon, to the dental care they need to live healthily. On this particular example, we obviously worked with Health Canada and Service Canada. It's a feature of the type of good that the Government of Canada can do for Canadians. It requires all sorts of departments to do that, including PSPC.

• (1715)

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I'm glad you raised the issue of the Canada dental benefit.

The last time you were here in front of the committee, you talked about the anticipated rollout. I like to call you “the minister of smiles” because you're helping to deliver the Canada dental benefit to millions of Canadians who would otherwise not have access to dental care. They would not have access if the Conservatives were in government, because we all know they voted against the Canada dental benefit.

Can you talk a bit about the dental benefit and update us in terms of where we are at this point?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I have three different things.

First, nowadays, about a third of Canadians, many of them with middle or lower incomes, don't go to a dentist, hygienist or denturist because they don't have private insurance and their income is modest. They need to pay for rent, food and transportation, so they don't go to a dentist. They know it's not good for them. They have pain in their mouth and they know that the infection that can develop can impact their cardiovascular health and gastrointestinal health. It can lead to a greater risk of diabetes. They don't go to a dentist, and they know it's not ideal.

The second thing is that because of this new Canadian dental care plan, many of them—middle-income and lower-income Canadians in particular—will now have access, sometimes for the first time in their life, to dental care insurance. They will be able to get treatments, such as a cleaning, an exam or an X-ray. If they need a filling, they'll have one. They can replace their dentures, especially if it's been years since they've been able to replace their dentures. All of that is good for their own health. It's also good for their ability to participate in life, to feel good, to work and to prosper.

Finally, it's good for our health care system as well. When you prevent these people from having to go to the emergency department or a surgery room under general anaesthesia because they were not able to have preventive dental care in the first place, that's good, because our health care system is already overburdened. Health care workers are stressed. We don't want that to happen. The best way for that not to happen is to put into place the new Canadian dental care plan.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Can you tell us, Minister, how many seniors have already been enrolled in the program? By the end of this year, how many Canadians will be enrolled in the Canadian dental care plan?

The Chair: You're going to have to get back to us in writing, unless you wish to stay past 5:30—

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): I think it's “minister of trials”, not “smiles”.

The Chair: Colleagues, please. Perhaps that finishes this round.

Mrs. Vignola, you have two minutes. I have to cut everyone off in order to get our time in.

Colleagues, please show some respect for Mrs. Vignola. It is her time.

Go ahead, Mrs. Vignola.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Duclos, does Shared Services Canada know who is responsible for the development, implementation and testing of the Canada Border Services Agency, or CBSA, Assessment and Revenue Management system, known as CARM?

Does Public Services and Procurement Canada, or PSPC, have oversight, so as to prevent another Phoenix or ArriveCAN from happening?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Shared Services Canada has two responsibilities. The first is to provide essential services for this kind of digital infrastructure and technology. In fact, that's true for a host of other services provided by other departments. Shared Services Canada is there to provide platforms and essential services. The second is that Shared Services Canada can also provide its technological expertise. However, in some instances, that's not necessary. It's up to the department to determine whether that is desirable.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Does PSPC have oversight of the awarding of contracts for the development, implementation and testing of the CARM system? Will it be similar to ArriveCAN, where, even though PSPC said that that wasn't how things were done, that was how things were ultimately done? Is that where this is headed?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: There are two parts: contracts and work.

When it comes to contracts, PSPC obviously has a role and a responsibility to assume. It must ensure that procedures are followed and validate the work being done by the other department involved. Sometimes, PSPC must play the devil's advocate. That's what the contractual part is about.

As far as the operational side is concerned, that's up to the departments involved, of course. PSPC is not equipped to handle operations for each of the other departments.

• (1720)

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

Very quickly—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm afraid that is our two minutes.

Mr. Bachrach, go ahead, please.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, in 1994, the then Liberal government placed a moratorium on the closure of rural post offices. The minister at the time said, "As long as this Government is in power, no rural post office will be closed." Is that moratorium still in place?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: It is.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Okay. The Canadian Postmasters and Postal Assistants Association has shared with me that since the

moratorium was put in place, we've lost 380 post offices across the country, many of them rural post offices.

How is it possible that there's a moratorium on the closure of post offices, and yet we've lost 380 post offices?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I'll mention a couple of things.

First, as you just said, the moratorium is still in place. Second, Canada Post is an independent Crown corporation, so it's at arms length of political interference. It would be inappropriate if the minister—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: This is specific to the mandate that the government sets. This doesn't have to do with Canada Post. This has to do with whether Canada Post is following the mandate that the government has set for them.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Third, it's the responsibility of Canada Post to follow that mandate. Fourth, we do know, and we do hear from Canada Post, that there are some circumstances—it could be the death of a particular worker, it could be a disease, it could be a fire, it could be other things—that make circumstances difficult. Through engagement with the community, there are avenues and solutions that are being put in place to make sure that the post is delivered despite the challenges that the community is experiencing.

Through that—although, as you said, it's a moratorium—it has to be applied in a manner that is best supportive of the needs of the particular community.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Here's what's actually happening, in my experience. There are Canada Post post offices, with unionized Canada Post staff, and when, say, there's a fire or a death or another reason that this model is no longer possible, Canada Post pushes to privatize those locations and contract out those services. Once those services are contracted out, there is no obligation to consult the community when you go from a privatized post office to a mailbox on the side of the road. We've seen that trend across the country, in violation of the mandate that your government set.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Brock, please, for four minutes.

Mr. Larry Brock: Minister Duclos, GC Strategies, the notorious fraudster two-person so-called consulting company, working out of their basement, received close to \$20 million in taxpayer money during the ArriveCAN scam scandal. We know that 635 other consulting companies, middlemen, have engaged directly with the Government of Canada for procurement purposes.

Have you done an examination, sir, of those 635, to know how many are situated like GC Strategies, with two people, three people or four people working out of their homes?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: There are two different things here.

First, these audits occur all the time. There are auditing teams and offices in many departments, including, obviously, within PSPC, to check whether there are frauds or inappropriate information or information not being stored, shared or used. This is the type of work that is done every day by many departments.

The second thing, as you saw today, is that there are instances in which we do find fraud. If there is fraud, then there is action taken, and there are consequences for those who try to defraud Canadians.

Mr. Larry Brock: But Minister, there isn't immediate action. This government is notorious for being reactionary as opposed to taking proactive steps to weed out the fraud.

Why did it take the Auditor General to release her report, the procurement ombudsman to release his report and, according to your statements, a few tips to the government for you to create yet another level of bureaucracy to do exactly what you've been mandated to do?

Your ministry is mandated to weed out the fraud as it's happening. Why did we have to wait upwards of six years to identify this one company, which goes back to 2018? Why did it take six years to identify these fraudulent billing practices?

• (1725)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Let me come back to that in a moment.

First, the announcement this morning would show that we have more and more tools to detect fraud and to seek the consequences that come with fraud.

Second, you spoke to the Auditor General's and the ombudsman's reports. Those reports came in January. In November, the contracts with GC Strategies were suspended, which was several months before that.

Mr. Larry Brock: It was after a complaint was received by the CBSA, not because of any due diligence by you, sir, or any due diligence by any other of your ministerial colleagues or any due diligence by the CBSA ministry itself. It happened as a result of a complaint, so that's another example of a reactionary move.

You talk about processes, but the process is not working, sir, so what confidence should Canadians have with this new level of bureaucracy moving forward to actively weed out bad actors? This is taxpayer money that you were mandated, sir, to preserve and to safeguard. There has been nothing but example after example of complete fraudulent misuse.

What assurances can you give Canadians, Minister?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: First, on evidence or action, whenever there is evidence, there needs to be action, and you've seen this in the last few months. There was evidence produced, and there was immediate action. In many cases, that action doesn't require waiting for more evidence.

Second, you saw the announcement this morning. This is not additional bureaucracy. The office of supplier integrity and compliance is going to be provided with lots of preventive tools—

The Chair: Minister, I'm sorry; I have to cut you off in order to get you out on time.

Mr. Sousa is up next. Maybe you can finish your answer under Mr. Sousa's time, but I am trying to get you out the door on time.

Mr. Sousa, go ahead, please.

Mr. Charles Sousa: Minister and your team, thank you very much for being here, and I appreciate a lot of the work you have been doing.

I recognize that the modernization of pay transactions, the defence procurement that you've been heavily involved with over the course of the year that you've been part of, the national shipbuilding strategy, the Canada Lands Company for affordable housing and other enablements are great initiatives that you've put forward, as are the national capital assets that need to be confronted, and, of course, more importantly, you've identified issues of modernization and renewal.

I get it. I know that major cuts by the former government didn't help in terms of some of the issues that are prevalent today. When you have card-carrying Conservatives double-dipping in procurement, as they have been and as was found out yesterday, we have to take measures to correct those.

Minister, I commend what you and your team have been doing. I want to give you the opportunity now to discuss some of the methods of detection, the investments being made, the modernization around procurement and the office of supplier integrity and compliance measures, which you have identified, and what it is that we're doing going forward.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Charles.

Let me start with housing. A few weeks ago, we announced that Canada Lands Company will be creating almost 3,000 new houses, new homes, in the next year, and 26,000 in the next five years. Out of these 26,000 new homes in the next five years, 20% will be affordable homes. Roughly speaking, then, about 5,200 affordable homes will be built by Canada Lands Company in the next five years.

That compares with a total of 1,100 affordable homes in the last 25 years built by Canada Lands Company. You can see how effective Canada Lands Company and other organizations within the federal government can be when we give them the power, the tools, the incentives and the mandate to do good things for Canadians.

Let me speak to the announcement this morning again. This is good news. We're in 2024. We have data analytic abilities that we didn't have just a few years ago. When COVID-19 started, a very small proportion of contracts went through electronic procurement. Now about 98% of contracts go through electronic procurement. This is obviously very good for the efficiency and the equity of the procurement process. People have more access to information. It increases competition and gives better outcomes at a lower cost for Canadians. This is all very, very good, but it's also good because in 2024 it provides the government with an ability that wasn't there just a few years ago to detect fraud.

Those things don't happen by chance. You need to invest in those things. That's why, just a few months before the pandemic started, we decided in 2018 to invest in electronic procurement, in a type of tool that we will now be able to use with the office of supplier integrity and compliance, as we announced this morning.

These things are possible, but they don't happen automatically. You need to invest in them and then to make use of them, as we'll be able to do in the next months and years.

We spoke earlier to the three cases that we've already been able to detect and pursue, but then there will be more. Not only will there be more, but there will also be the signal to possible fraudsters who might want to commit fraud in 2024 that they should be very, very prudent. We have the tools now to detect and monitor their activities that didn't exist just a few months ago.

• (1730)

The Chair: Thank you very much. That is our time.

We will suspend briefly to change everything over.

Apparently we'll have bells in about six to 10 minutes on closure on Bill C-29. I will seek unanimous consent right now that we will continue as we did before and vote virtually as we did before.

Mr. Larry Brock: I can't do unanimous consent. I will be subbed in by Garnett Genuis.

The Chair: That's fine. Okay. Wonderful.

Minister, thank you very much for joining us.

We are suspended.

• (1730)

(Pause)

• (1735)

The Chair: Thank you, everyone. We are back.

Welcome back, Minister Anand, for...like, the 30th time to OGGO under various departments. We'll have bells, but hopefully we'll get through the opening statement.

Just quickly, everyone, depending on how much time we lose for the bells, we might adjust the minutes in the second round to four, four, two, two, four and four again.

Minister, the floor is yours. Please go ahead.

[Translation]

Hon. Anita Anand (President of the Treasury Board): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that the lands on which we are gathered are part of the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe peoples.

I'm joined today by members of my department to give an overview of the supplementary estimates (C) 2023-24.

[Translation]

Supplementary estimates (C) total \$13.2 billion. This amount includes a \$4.3-billion increase to planned statutory expenditures. The government is asking Parliament to approve an additional \$8.9 billion in voted appropriations.

In addition to planned spending, these estimates include \$11.9 million in frozen allotments. These are essentially reductions to departmental budgets throughout the year. This year's amount includes \$500 million in departmental spending reductions under the refocusing government spending initiative.

Recent reports on government contracts and actions by some individuals is cause for serious concern. As the Auditor General confirmed, there are rules to ensure healthy procurement and management practices throughout government, but many of them were not respected.

• (1740)

[English]

Mr. Chair, earlier today I announced a series of actions that the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat will take to strengthen our oversight of departmental practices to support effective and streamlined management across government.

These actions include the immediate release of an updated “Manager’s Guide” when procuring professional services to ensure that managers are receiving a clear statement of work and doing due diligence to maintain the integrity of the procurement, including not committing to any payments before those items have been received; embedding certain elements of the manager’s guide within Treasury Board’s mandatory procedures to strengthen the accountability of a manager’s role in procurement; and releasing a new risk and compliance process, which will assess government-wide trends, risks and individual departmental performance, and I will say will also include a horizontal comprehensive audit across government departments. Also, there will be a reviewing of the directive on conflict of interest to ensure that the requirements are clear and effective and to ensure that more oversight, if needed, will occur.

Improvements to the proactive disclosure of government contracts on the open data portal will also be part of this emphasis. We want to make sure that we have transparency in government contracting, and that will include on the portal itself.

[Translation]

Canadians expect their government to invest their money wisely and responsibly. Together with Minister Duclos and his team, we will ensure that the leaders of our public service manage their organizations efficiently and in a manner that maintains public confidence.

[English]

But parliamentary scrutiny and approval of expenditure plans are only part of the equation: Canadians expect us to execute effectively, and maintaining public confidence in democratic institutions must be our priority, especially at this moment in time. We will continue to step up to play that role.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We’ll be able to get everyone’s six minutes in.

We’ll start with Mrs. Kusie, please. Go ahead.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Minister, it would be difficult for me to express a greater level of disappointment than I feel on behalf of Canadians today.

First of all, this year we have a \$40-billion deficit, and, as you know, I hold you personally responsible, as you are the one who signs the cheques, who releases the money from the Government of Canada.

Second, we received the report from the Parliamentary Budget Officer regarding the \$500 million. The two greatest line items, Minister, are lapsed funds and departmental reserves—hardly new savings, hardly a safe place for Canadians, Minister.

Then, Minister, of course we know today that you released these guidelines because apparently your guidelines of October 5, 2023, didn’t work. We also received in the media today the news of \$5 million in the first wave—only the first wave—of fraudulent billing found in contracting. We know what’s been going on with ArriveCAN scam and GC Strategies. We know what’s been going on with Dalian.

I want you to tell Canadians today how many federal employees are also collecting contracts with the federal government. Give me that number, please. How many federal employees are also collecting contracts with the federal government? Do you have that number for me today, please?

Hon. Anita Anand: There is an RCMP investigation relating to the employees, as mentioned by Minister Duclos. In addition, we have a call-out through the comptroller general’s office for a cross-government comprehensive list of items, as requested in your question.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: You don’t know the number. We don’t know the number right now of how many federal employees are double-dipping, who have these jobs with the federal government and are also collecting funds through contracts with the federal government.

Minister, as my next question, can you identify how much of the \$5 million that was announced today in the media by Bill Curry in The Globe and Mail is attributed to the ArriveCAN scam? How much of the \$5 million is involved in the ArriveCAN scandal?

Hon. Anita Anand: Those items, on my understanding, do not fall under my purview, do not relate to the supplier you mentioned.

• (1745)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: You’re responsible for all of the money. You must have an idea.

Hon. Anita Anand: I responded to the question by saying that the items that you mentioned are not related,.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I think Canadians would think that they are related, because it is money going out of the Treasury Board, of which you are the president.

We understand that \$5 million was just the first wave. Can you tell Canadians today how much more they can expect of this? How much more in the second, third, fourth and fifth waves will we see, in addition to this \$5 million that has been fraudulently billed?

Hon. Anita Anand: Actually, the Auditor General pointed out that the rules exist to address any situations of this nature in the public service and that generally speaking, they are followed. However, in the case of ArriveCAN and the CBSA, they were not. That's exactly why Jean-Yves Duclos and I announced today that we are taking measures to ensure that the Public Service adheres to its responsibilities under the directive on conflict of interest, as well as the manager's guide to professional services, which we are updating to ensure that there is value for money for the Canadian taxpayer every single time.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: What's also concerning, Minister, is that if you look at these numbers, they actually predate the pandemic. They go back to 2018. This would actually be major fraud that's been occurring within your government since 2018. Can you confirm that this is even prepandemic? This isn't related to what was necessary in critical times, but goes back to prepandemic times. Can you confirm that, please?

Hon. Anita Anand: I will not dispute what the Auditor General or the PBO are referring to in their respective reports. What I am doing, from a Treasury Board perspective, is taking a proactive approach to ensure that we have the rules in place so that public servants have the necessary oversight and accountability.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I would say that is far more reactive than proactive.

The Department of National Defence—and I will, of course, remind the Canadian public that this was the station you held prior to being in this position—says that there is no rule stopping a federal government employee from having contracts with the government. Now, as the Treasury Board president, can you say that this is the policy of the federal government?

Hon. Anita Anand: Actually, that is absolutely false. Section 7.1 of the directive on conflict of interest—

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Why is it occurring?

Hon. Anita Anand: —says that there are consequences for non-compliance. Anyone employed in the federal government who has not complied with the requirements of the directive on conflict of interest can be terminated, so there's a requirement to disclose conflicts, and if they are not disclosed or if the disclosure is inadequate, they can be fired.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: As the key minister for this portfolio and for overseeing this, have you asked your officials how many employees would possibly be in this position?

Hon. Anita Anand: Of course I am concerned with all federal public servants. We have about 300,000 such public servants, and many of them are unionized. Through my officials, I work closely with all deputy ministers across departments to ensure that there is compliance with the rules. That is the role that Treasury Board will continue to play.

Where there's not, there should be consequences, and that's what we are doing by updating the manager's guide on professional services.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I'll close with Dalian. Dalian was involved in the procurement department, the Treasury Board and the Department of National Defence, three positions that you have held. Were you familiar with Dalian? Were you aware, being re-

sponsible for those three portfolios, that they were completing this type of contracting and double-dipping?

The Chair: I'm afraid I have to cut you off. We are out of time. Perhaps you can answer in the next round, which begins with Ms. Atwin.

Ms. Atwin, please go ahead for six minutes.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and thank you to the officials for being with us today as well.

Perhaps just as a refresher for our committee, can you explain what the role of the Treasury Board is? What is your primary objective, and what can you explain specifically as it pertains to procurement?

Hon. Anita Anand: The Treasury Board president is the chair of the Treasury Board, which, generally speaking, comprises a handful of ministers who review all policy and rules that are being implemented by the federal government and oversees, from an accountability standpoint, the implementation of federal policies that cabinet has adopted. We undertake a risk-based analysis every single time and we ensure that accountability measures are in place.

In addition to that, we make sure that we are greening government. We are ensuring the digital transformation of government. We are also supporting diversity and inclusion in the public service, and I recently announced supports for Black public servants in that respect.

We have a number of initiatives at Treasury Board, but, generally speaking, we are overseeing the prudent expenditure of taxpayer dollars.

● (1750)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Can you explain for the committee what the refocused government spending initiative is, especially as we are doing the buildup to the budget?

Hon. Anita Anand: Unlike previous governments that have not done a refocused government spending initiative, we are actually working to repurpose funds that aren't being effectively utilized and making sure those funds are directed towards government policy. For example, we are moving towards ensuring that we are refocusing \$15.8 billion over five years and \$4.8 billion every year thereafter.

This is something that has not been done in this government. In fact, it is an objective that many advanced economies undertake.

For example, in the supplementary estimates before the holidays, I tabled \$500 million of savings, of which \$350 million was from third party contracts or professional services—money which can be then utilized towards our government's priorities while reducing the spending on outsourcing—and \$150 million from executive travel. That's an example of the type of work we are doing in refocusing government spending.

As I said, we are on track to meet our objectives. We have achieved 97% of the targets for the first year of the refocused government spending initiative. It is a way to ensure that we are using taxpayer dollars efficiently and prudently.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Excellent.

Thank you very much for that.

As you mentioned, the supplementary estimates contained many reductions and also some substantial increases.

What are some of the largest expenditures?

Hon. Anita Anand: I will mention that those increases go towards some government priorities with requirements in statute for the use of third party services.

For example, in national defence, there is \$590 million for the Canadian multi-mission aircraft and \$510 million for the strategic transport capability. These are absolute essential requirements for the Department of National Defence. We are continuing to ensure that taxpayer dollars are used effectively toward our strategic priorities and our country's protection.

In indigenous services, which is an issue that I know you have fought hard on—and I thank you for your advocacy—there is \$800 million for child and family services for the Department of Indigenous Services, \$800 million for health services for Jordan's principle, \$260 million for emergency management on reserve and \$55 million for elementary and secondary education on reserve.

I want to stress that our government's priorities—including reconciliation, and including an economy and an environment that respect the sustainability of our future—are top of mind, as is helping our country's most vulnerable, as we do in the Canada child benefit, old age security and \$10-a-day child care.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Excellent. Thank you so much.

My time is quickly going away here.

Mitigating the negative impacts of climate change has become increasingly costly as natural disasters occur more frequently and with increased severity.

What is the Treasury Board doing to help Canada reach its carbon emissions reduction target?

Hon. Anita Anand: As I said to the question about what the Treasury Board does, we are the overseer of taxpayer dollars before a program that has been approved goes out the door.

The work we are doing on environmental sustainability through the power grid, through the EV battery plants and through the carbon rebate are important examples of the work we are doing in this area.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Excellent.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Mrs. Vignola, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Anand, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming today.

Indeed, my first question concerns conflicts of interest or the appearance of conflicts of interest.

Let's suppose a contractor involved in ArriveCAN or the Botler AI pilot project, for example, has a brother working at the Department of National Defence. Would that individual have to disclose to his employer that his brother is a contractor for National Defence?

● (1755)

Hon. Anita Anand: All employees must, when signing their contract, inform their deputy head of any outside employment or activity involving family members, brothers, sisters or parents, that could result in a conflict of interest. That disclosure must be made as soon as possible at the time the contract is signed.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

If, after the contract has been signed, the employee learns that his brother has a contract with his department, should he, even if the contract has already been signed, ensure that his employer is aware of the possible appearance of a conflict of interest?

Hon. Anita Anand: You are correct: all public service employees, no matter what department they work for, must disclose that information. Furthermore, disclosure must be made whenever the question arises, not solely when the contract is signed.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you very much. I encourage you to verify whether that's the case.

I note in supplementary estimates (C) that 129 organizations are asking for new funding. However, if I look at the approved amounts to date compared with actual 2021-22 expenditures, I note that, out of 107 organizations, the total for 2023-24 is higher than for 2021-22. In some cases, it has doubled. However, 22 organizations, most of which are involved in culture, heritage and research, are getting less.

You're asking for \$15 billion in cuts to all departments for the next few years. Why are budget cuts mainly affecting culture, heritage and research?

Hon. Anita Anand: That's not the case. Obviously, all departments need to keep their eyes on the objectives. Last summer, I sent a letter to all ministers and organizations stating that we have to re-focus on our priorities. This will be done in a balanced way. It won't necessarily happen this year, but over the next five years.

[English]

It means that over five years, the amount reduced from each department will be similar.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Currently, if I look at pages 1-6 to 1-10 of supplementary estimates (C), and I compare the last column with the first, it's clear that heritage and culture are affected.

I'm just making a comment here. I hope that things will not continue like that. Some people think that culture, heritage and research aren't important, and yet, they're the foundation of everything.

Hon. Anita Anand: You're quite right.

I'm going to ask Annie Boudreau to jump in here.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: It's okay. I'm merely making a comment to ensure that this will be considered in the future. Thank you very much.

Ms. Annie Boudreau (Assistant Secretary, Expenditure Management Sector, Treasury Board Secretariat): I would simply make a clarification. The figures you mentioned included significant support in 2021-22 for the response to COVID-19. Now, Heritage Canada and other organizations are no longer providing that support. That's why there is such a significant decrease.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Nonetheless, all the others are showing increases despite the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is over. If it were linked to COVID-19, all the organizations should be getting less.

Thank you very much. I will ask the rest of my questions in the next round.

• (1800)

[English]

The Chair: You have one more minute.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Oh, I have one more minute? That's wonderful.

You're responsible for implementing Bill C-13, which deals with official languages. I have a lot of questions about that. Whatever the case may be, the parliamentary secretary imposed on you was the only one who voted against that bill.

Are you comfortable with the government's decision? How does it affect the application of the Official Languages Act and your commitment in that regard? Do you have free rein?

[English]

The Chair: Please give a very short answer.

[Translation]

Hon. Anita Anand: My responsibilities concern the public service. I will implement the act, because I have the responsibility to do so.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Desjarlais, welcome to OGGO. The floor is yours for six minutes, sir.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the President of the Treasury Board for being with us today. It's an important discussion, as I think Canadians across our country are having to deal with the double crisis of affordability. They themselves are having a tough time trying to balance their own books, whether it's for rent, food or trying to make sure they have enough money to make it through difficult times. They're finding challenges in trying to tighten their belts.

Meanwhile, they see here in Ottawa a very different story—one that says companies were able to access our public service and bid on contracts almost continuously since 2008. In this trajectory, the public service has been continuing to lose funding, lose full-time employment and lose resources from our federal government from as early as 2008. That creates a problem that the Auditor General outlined in her report.

My first question to you, Madam Minister, is this: Have you read the Auditor General's recent report on ArriveCAN?

Hon. Anita Anand: Yes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: In that report, it suggests that:

Given the urgency created by the pandemic, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat encouraged government organizations to focus on results while [still] demonstrating due diligence and controls on expenditures. To support this direction, the [secretariat] invoked exceptions so that certain procurements were not subject to the provisions of the trade agreements and the Government Contract Regulations and allowed for the consideration of a non-competitive approach to address urgent needs.

I think this is evidenced as a really important piece that the Auditor General has focused on in her report in direct relation to the fact that the public service is losing funding, and then the vulnerability of the government to outsourced contracts increases.

There's a direct relationship between how you fund the public service and how vulnerable the government is to fraudulent, private, outsourced contracts. It's clear in the CBSA instance, for example, that they were unable to secure the IT technology here in Canada or within the public service. They were forced to outsource a really critical and important piece of an app to these contractors, who had layers upon layers of subcontracts within which we're still discovering the mess that exists today. This extreme loss of funding, this extremely ineffective use of money, was very clear in her report.

Do you agree with me that there is a direct relationship between not properly funding our public service and creating vulnerabilities in procuring the kind of technology or the kinds of skills that are actually needed by the government?

Do you see the relationship there?

Hon. Anita Anand: As you know, in much of our public service a vast majority of public servants are unionized, so we work very closely with the unions in order to ensure that the public service employees have the supports they need. A vast majority are under a collective agreement that has been renegotiated, and we will continue to work with the unions to make sure the public servants have what they need going forward.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Why didn't you consult the unions, then, in relation to your cuts? The president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada was promised that the government would meet with PSAC in relation to any cuts that would affect full-time employment. They've told me that they have not been met with or consulted with—they've been told and demanded.

Hon. Anita Anand: We are not—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: When was the last time you met with the president of the PSAC?

• (1805)

Hon. Anita Anand: Actually, it was just last month.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Did you address the cuts?

Hon. Anita Anand: We spoke about a number of items—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Did you speak about the cuts, though?

Hon. Anita Anand: We are in touch on a regular basis, and I have heard from him today.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Did you address the cuts?

Hon. Anita Anand: We've addressed a number of items, and I won't be disclosing the contents of our private conversation in this meeting.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: It sounds like you don't want to answer the fact that—

Hon. Anita Anand: That's not at all the case—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: It's my time, please.

I haven't even put my question yet. How can you know what I'm asking?

Hon. Anita Anand: Go ahead.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I'd like you listen, because it's important, Ms. Anand.

Hon. Anita Anand: Go ahead.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I really don't feel that you're taking this seriously.

Hon. Anita Anand: I am.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I don't think so, because you're not actually trying to address the issues that are facing our public service.

I asked you a clear question. Did you address the cuts with the Public Service Alliance of Canada? It was something that was publicly promised at the time of a national strike.

Hon. Anita Anand: I will ask Francis Trudel, the head of the office of the chief human resources officer, to address that question, as he is touch with the unions on a daily basis.

Go ahead, Francis.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Sure. Any information would be very helpful.

Mr. Francis Trudel (Associate Chief Human Resources Officer, Treasury Board Secretariat): Thank you for the question.

Engagement with unions is certainly part of the collective bargaining process. It is an ongoing exchange we have with our union partners at multiple governance forums, including what we call the NJC process, the National Joint Council, where all that—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Have members spoken about the impact to our public service by way of these cuts? Canadians know that when you cut the public service, you're going to be cutting services to Canadians.

This isn't something that should be secret. These are public dollars. This isn't personal money; this is public money for public services that Canadians pay taxes for. They deserve to know their taxes are being spent effectively and that the minister responsible for the Treasury Board takes cuts to our services in Canada seriously.

Hon. Anita Anand: The PBO confirmed that we are not materially reducing services to Canadians with our refocused government spending initiative. We are saving money that can be redirected towards our government's priorities. With things like outsourcing executive travel, the intention is not to reduce the size of the public service or cut services to Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: We know the—

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

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Colleagues, we are going to suspend. Hopefully, like last time, we can all agree to vote. Once we've all voted, we'll come right back. We'll give everyone about 30 seconds of notice before we restart.

We are suspended.

• (1805) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1810)

The Chair: Thank you, everyone. We are back.

We will start with Mrs. Kusie for four minutes.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much.

Minister, I'm going back to what is essentially a second announcement today.

The first announcement of managerial guidelines seems to have proven ineffective in the first six months. Frankly, I don't think more guidelines are what are required. It is about ensuring public servants are complying with them. I think that's far more important than creating new levels of bureaucracy and red tape.

To go back to the \$5-million first wave that was announced today in *The Globe and Mail* by Bill Curry, the government has identified 635 IT middlemen that do no work. In fact, the PBO has launched an entire investigation into this.

How much has your government paid to IT middlemen?

Hon. Anita Anand: You referenced the announcement at lunch. The role of the Treasury Board president is to ensure that we have the rules, the policies and the guidelines in place. The Auditor General stated that our rules were sufficient, and I'm taking this opportunity to even enhance them. We know that there's an RCMP investigation related to the CBSA, and we will look to follow those recommendations, but I'm taking this proactive measure of updating the guidelines in advance.

With regard to your question, that information has already been provided to the committee, and I look forward to—

• (1815)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: How much is it? What's the number, Minister?

Hon. Anita Anand: —continuing to ensure that we provide whatever information in addition that you need.

I will ask Annie to provide any further information relating to that.

In terms of the one supplier, however, I can confirm there were 103 contracts with GC Strategies from 2011 to 2024.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: We have, of course, GC Strategies and Dalian, which, of course, given your previous roles as procurement minister and Minister of Defence—and now you're President of the Treasury Board—I hope you were aware of. You didn't verify that you were in my first round of questioning, but I hope that you were.

There was \$28 million for, essentially, four employees.

How many of these 635 companies have fewer than two employees? Can you tell Canadians, please?

Hon. Anita Anand: Actually, we're undertaking a horizontal audit, as I announced at lunch, and we will be able to provide that information.

I will say that the individual at DND who is at the heart of your question was employed at DND after I left as minister.

PSPC is also reviewing its supply arrangement, and I will ask Ms. Samantha Tattersall if she can comment further.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: No, that's fine.

I'll move on to my final question, Minister, which I think is very important for Canadians.

Previous to you, the minister of procurement and his deputy minister were here discussing the very important issue of conflict of interest.

Your spouse is a director of LifeLabs, which received a \$66.3-million contract on June 23, 2020, as well as a \$1.9-million contract on August 20 of the same year.

The deputy minister of procurement said that five employees were fired, were released, for not indicating their conflict of interest, yet apparently you did not indicate a conflict of interest to the Ethics Commissioner.

Do you believe that you should be held to the same standard as these five employees who were fired?

The Chair: I apologize. We are out of time.

However, next up is Mr. Jowhari. I'm sure he will allow time to answer that if he chooses.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, welcome.

Minister, can you explain to the committee what services fall under the professional and special services categories?

Hon. Anita Anand: I'm actually going to take a moment to respond to the honourable member's false allegations that she is touting on social media and in committee.

I have complied with the conflict of interest guidelines. I have ensured that I've complied in terms of disclosure and screens, and I would caution the honourable member against making false allegations before she has the actual facts. If she would like to make a further inquiry with the conflict of interest commissioner, I invite her to do so. They have confirmed that I have complied. I signed no contracts, recused myself from every single meeting, and voluntarily recused myself from others in order to ensure that the screens remained in place. My deputy minister and chief of staff re-enforced the screens and ensured that I was recused.

I find it highly, highly questionable that a member of Parliament would make false allegations against another member of Parliament without checking her facts.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Minister.

I can assure you that the member that you talked about was actually standing at the back of the room and listening to you.

I'll quickly go back along the same line.

Minister, did you actually.... You're now focusing on the comment that Mrs. Kusie made. She's also made the allegation—at least the way I processed it—that you're responsible for signing all of these cheques that the government is spending.

As a minister responsible for many portfolios, have you signed any cheques that had anything to do with ArriveCAN or any other application or project?

Hon. Anita Anand: Again, I have not. I was not involved in any way with the ArriveCAN contracts. Those contracts did not come to me as minister.

Once again, I find it highly questionable that members of the opposition would be making allegations without actually checking the facts. We are in an age of misinformation and disinformation, and it is incumbent upon us, from a legal and a moral standpoint, to ensure that before we make allegations, we actually have the facts at our fingertips.

Once again, I'm glad you've asked that question. I did not sign any of those contracts. I did comply with the conflict of interest screens and disclosure obligations, and I will continue to do so.

• (1820)

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Minister, but I don't think that should be any surprise to Canadians. I think the Leader of the Opposition gets up during question period every day and makes false allegations and misleads Canadians about many aspects. This is something that is not new to those of us sitting in this committee, because we see it on a daily basis in the House of Commons in front of many Canadians.

I have only about 30 seconds. Can you talk about the main estimates that you just recently published? How much have voted-on expenditures changed in this year's main estimates?

The Chair: I'm afraid you have only about 15 seconds.

Hon. Anita Anand: That's all I need.

Voted-on expenditures are down \$6.6 billion, or 3.3%, from the 2023-24 main estimates.

The Chair: Thanks.

Mrs. Vignola, you have two minutes. Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I want to come back to the application of the Official Languages Act.

At present, many contracts require the use of English, and some are kind enough to state that it's possible that those hired might need to use French.

Why is French not mandatory across the board? Why is French never mandatory and English never the language that might need to be used? English is always mandatory and French, when mentioned, is always optional.

Hon. Anita Anand: That's an extremely important question today, the International Day of La Francophonie. I wish you a happy International Day of La Francophonie.

Departments must ensure that they comply with the Official Languages Act. It's an obligation, and I take it very seriously. I'd like to continue to work on part VII of the act. I could add more if you wish.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

A few weeks ago, an individual was hired by the Canadian Coast Guard to handle Quebec-related files. However, that individual speaks only English. It's clear that it's becoming increasingly difficult for Canadian Coast Guard employees and captains working along the St. Lawrence River to work in French. They get their orders in English. However, we're talking about the St. Lawrence River, and the safety of river users and the general public.

Going forward, could you please ensure that, whatever the department, senior officials will be bilingual and bilingualism will not apply solely to francophones?

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: I apologize. In order to get you out at a decent time, Minister, we have to follow our timelines. We are past the time. Perhaps you can respond in writing to Mrs. Vignola.

Mr. Desjarlais, you have two minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll now turn to a troubling concern about reports of significant cuts to Indigenous Services Canada and Crown-Indigenous Relations in the amount of approximately \$417 million.

The Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs said just recently, "It is [simply] unacceptable and irresponsible for the Ministers to cut funding when First Nations are already in a constant state of emergency." It's clear that some of this, of course, stems from lawsuits the government has lost. It's troubling in some ways, considering that this is a matter of both legality and morality, things you just cited, Madam Minister, as being important aspects of how we govern our country. It's important that first nations, Métis and Inuit also receive the same level of respect and dignity that the services they rely on also enjoy.

Can you please tell us in this committee where the \$417 million will be cut?

• (1825)

Hon. Anita Anand: I want to confirm that, as described in their departmental plans, both Indigenous Services Canada and CIRNAC will have reallocations from internal services and operational efficiencies, travel efficiencies and streamlining professional services towards resolving claims and agreements, but not in terms of the services that you described in your question.

Furthermore, we took a special view of both ISC and CIRNAC during that process to allow both ministries time to engage in consultation, as required under truth and reconciliation. We take that very seriously, so there was a carve-out for both of those ministries in order for them to—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I'm sorry, Minister. I have one more question.

In relation to Jordan's principle, which is the largest concern that many have, including the Indian residential school survivors fund, these two funds in particular have been quoted as seeing a reduction in spending. This is a concern—

The Chair: Mr. Desjarlais, could you get to your question, please?

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: —first nations, Métis and Inuit have across the country.

Could you please provide in writing to this committee detailed information as to the cuts to programs, services and grants?

Hon. Anita Anand: We'll get that in writing.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We have Mr. Genuis, please, for four minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Chair. We'll be doing a bit of splitting over here.

Minister, you were the Public Services and Procurement minister when this whole ArriveCAN scam journey started. Can you help us with this key question: Who made the decision to choose GC Strategies?

Hon. Anita Anand: That decision did not occur at Treasury Board. From reading the Auditor General's report, I understand that it came at CBSA.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, you were the minister of PSPC at the time. Did you have any eyes on who made that decision?

The problem we have with this issue is that there's this grave corruption scandal, yet everybody's saying that somebody else is responsible, and nobody's taking responsibility. Can you help us shed any light on that?

Hon. Anita Anand: I can answer the question truthfully. I did not have eyes on any of the matters relating to the application or that supplier.

My mandate during the pandemic was procuring vaccines. We were the most vaccinated country in the world by July 2021—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thanks, Minister. That's not the question—

Hon. Anita Anand: —and I worked very hard on that file.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: —but thank you for your response.

As we try to get to the bottom of what happened, Minister, do you think there is a role or should be a role or has been a role of ministerial decision-making in setting any guidelines that would prevent what happened with the ArriveCAN scandal?

We continuously hear that ministers have nothing to do with these decisions. That's the line we hear from you and from other ministers. It leaves me wondering what ministers are doing here, other than receiving briefings about process.

Hon. Anita Anand: The role of Treasury Board is to ensure that we have guidelines in place and rules in place, like the directive on conflict of interest and like the announcement I made today to increase oversight by the professional services.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: The rules weren't followed, and then your department did nothing.

I'm going to now hand the time over to Mr. Brock.

Mr. Larry Brock: I have one question, Minister.

Two middleman companies, GC Strategies and Dalian combined, received \$27 million in taxpayer dollars on the ArriveCAN scam app. The combined ownership of both companies is four people in two companies.

Do you agree with the majority of Canadians that there is a serious problem in this country with government contracting?

Hon. Anita Anand: I agree with the Auditor General's report that stated that there was a serious problem with the contracting undertaken by CBSA for this application, and we are prepared to follow the recommendations of the RCMP when they are forthcoming. In advance of that, I have made an announcement to make sure that we are increasing oversight under our guide for managers and professional services.

Mr. Larry Brock: I'll cede my time to my colleague, Ms. Kusie.

• (1830)

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: As Receiver General for Canada, the Minister of Public Services and Procurement is responsible for overseeing all the funds coming in and going out of government accounts. What is at the bottom of every single cheque that comes out from the Government of Canada? It's the signature of the Receiver General for Canada, the Minister for Procurement.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sousa, you have about 13 seconds before we have to dismiss the minister. You have four minutes, sir.

Mr. Charles Sousa: Do you want me to proceed? Okay. I'd like to share two minutes of my time with the vice-chair, Mr. Jowhari.

Minister, thank you for being here, and I appreciate you and your team and the amount of work that you do on clamping down on fraud and enhancing accountability.

I know that some members opposite have been going on about double-dippers. Of course, one of them was a card-carrying Conservative member, and he was out there doing what he was doing.

We recognized major cuts as part of the problem as we proceeded forward. Members of this very committee voted against funding the Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying—

Mr. Larry Brock: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: I'm sorry. I'll pause your time, Mr. Sousa.

Mr. Larry Brock: Mr. Sousa is deliberately spreading misinformation with the evidence that was heard yesterday.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: It's dangerous misinformation.

The Chair: This is not.... Okay. I appreciate it.

Mr. Sousa, continue.

Mr. Charles Sousa: Misinformation is something they know all too well, Mr. Chair.

Furthermore, they voted against the Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying and the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner. The funding of these officers of Parliament is extremely important. They hold the government to account and ensure trust in our institutions. Certainly, the Office of the Auditor General is a prime example.

Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, Pierre Poilievre, when he was the minister responsible for safeguarding our democracy, did not ensure that these officers of Parliament were funded adequately.

Can you explain to this committee your thoughts on how we ensure adequate funding for these institutions, and what next steps are being taken for accountability measures and to ensure adherence to the issues at hand?

Hon. Anita Anand: I'm sorry.

Mr. Chair, there's a lot going on in the room. I didn't quite catch the question. If I can, I'll ask the member to restate the question.

Mr. Charles Sousa: I'll repeat the question, Minister.

You're doing extensive work. You're taking initiatives going forward, recognizing some of the shortcomings that have occurred and recognizing some of the shortcomings of the previous government.

What are the steps being taken? Can you reaffirm the announcement you made today?

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you for that question.

The first thing we're doing is taking a comprehensive look across government. Many departments will be examined by the comptroller general. We will be doing a horizontal audit. From there, we will also be enhancing the manager's guide on profession-

al services, and we will be looking at the directive on conflicts of interest.

The new guide for managers on professional services is being issued today, so we are taking proactive steps after the Auditor General's report.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This question goes directly to the clerk of the committee.

As we are talking about ArriveCAN, I would like to get confirmation from the clerk of the committee about all of the documents Mr. Kristian Firth, who is the CEO for GC Strategies has provided to the committee. Has he provided all the documents he was supposed to provide to the committee through you?

The Chair: You can't ask questions of the clerk. You can ask me to ask the clerk.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Okay, Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: My understanding is that Mr. Firth has sent forth two sets of answers, but did not answer completely everything that was asked of him.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Is the clerk of that position as well?

The Chair: You can go ahead and respond, sir.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Thomas Bigelow): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Through you, Chair, as you stated, sir, the committee has received two correspondences from Mr. Firth. The last was distributed to members on Monday morning. I believe the correspondence that was circulated in both official languages stated remaining answers. Therefore, at this point, I don't expect anything further from Mr. Firth.

I would leave it to the committee to assess whether or not the questions have all been addressed in those responses. I would not ascertain the analysis myself.

The Chair: Is there something specific you were looking for?

Mr. Majid Jowhari: We know, as it relates to ArriveCAN, that there were a number of questions raised, and I wanted to make sure that all those questions were responded to in those two responses. I realize that one went beyond the nine a.m. deadline.

● (1835)

The Chair: It's a yes and a no. We didn't get everything in time. The stuff we asked him to please respond to in writing is different from answering all of the questions asked of him at the meeting.

It's two-pronged. Questions were asked at the meeting that he refused to respond to. He was also asked to provide the response to some questions in writing, and it appears those were responded to, if that's what you're asking about.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: All the items he was requested to provide in writing, he has provided.

The Chair: From what I can tell, and I think from what.... I don't want to speak for you, but what I think the clerk has....

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Yes. I want to make sure that the clerk...

The Chair: I don't think we're looking for anything else, apart from what we asked for written responses to.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Can the clerk kindly...?

The Clerk: Sure. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would say that based on analysis done alongside the analysts, it appears that the majority, and perhaps all of the questions that were asked of the witness to provide responses to in writing, were addressed. Again, I would hesitate to give you 100% clarity on that.

That said, as the chair acknowledged, there were questions directed to Mr. Firth by the chair on behalf of the committee, and those questions, based on an analysis of the information, don't seem to be part of that series of answers provided.

Again, I leave it to the committee and to the chair to assess whether or not they are satisfied with the responses.

The Chair: Do you have anything else for the minister?

Minister, thank you for joining us.

Officials, thanks for joining us. It's always a pleasure to have you at OGGO.

If there's nothing else, we will dismiss. Thanks for sticking around for the extra four minutes.

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, I just want to thank you personally for chairing many meetings that I have appeared at over the years. I appreciate it. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We are adjourned.

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