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Monday, November 14, 2005

• (1530)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.)):
Good afternoon.

This is the 59th meeting of the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates. Pursuant to Standing Order 32(5), we are studying the report of the Public Service Commission of Canada for the fiscal year ended March 31, 2005, referred to the committee on Thursday, October 6, 2005, and the funding of officers of Parliament.

It is our pleasure to welcome Ms. Maria Barrados, president of the Public Service Commission of Canada. She has other colleagues with her. I would ask you, Ms. Barrados, to please introduce your colleagues. We would welcome your comments, and I'm sure the members will have some questions for you.

Thank you, and please begin.

Ms. Maria Barrados (President, Public Service Commission of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to appear before your committee.

I'd like to introduce my colleagues. I have with me Anne-Marie Robinson, vice-president, corporate management; Michael Corber, director general, and Mary Clennett, vice-president, audit branch; and Jacques Pelletier, vice-president, services.

I would like to thank the chairman of this committee for arranging last month the advance briefing on the Public Service Commission's annual report, the three audit reports, and the study. Rather than repeat my detailed briefings on each of the three volumes of the annual report, and each of the four additional reports today, I would like to highlight some key issues and table with you additional documentation for the benefit of the committee and the work it is carrying out. I would then like to discuss the PSC's independence, as we approach the full coming into force of the new Public Service Employment Act.

I would like to highlight, first, that of the many thousands of transactions, 35,000 people were hired into the public service, and more than 46,000 internal staffing actions took place, last year. Most were carried out properly.

That being said, I would like to draw your attention to three areas where improvements need to be made. The first is access, particularly with the national area of selection. We agree that progress in expanding access to jobs nationwide has been too slow. That is why we announced at the time we tabled our annual report

that as of April 1, 2006, all Canadians will be able to apply for all officer-level jobs open to the public within the national capital region.

We expect this change to increase the number of postings, using a national area of selection, from 19% to about 32%. In terms of appointments, that means going from 2,300 to 3,800, based on a national area of selection. The supplementary estimates allocate an additional \$6.3 million to the electronic screening tool that will enable us to deliver on our commitment.

[Translation]

The second issue is the federal government's continued reliance on short term hiring as a means of hiring employees permanently into the public service. Approximately 70 per cent of those hired permanently into the public service last year were hired from this pool of temporary employees. This route to permanent employment presents a risk to access, fairness and transparency.

The third area is the government's continuing difficulty in meeting its goal of increasing the participation of visible minorities. While reasonable progress has been made for women, aboriginal people and persons with disabilities, members of visible minorities are significantly under represented.

[English]

I would also like to take this opportunity to highlight the results of our study of personal favouritism. We found that while nearly three out of four federal public servants who responded to the survey we conducted indicated they were treated fairly during recruitment and promotion processes, 16% believed that personal favouritism in staffing occurs in their work unit often, and a further 29% believed it occurs some of the time. We are concerned about this perception.

I am tabling this study of personal favouritism and our three audit reports with you today. As you know, only our annual report is tabled in Parliament under the current Public Service Employment Act. However, with the coming into force of the new PSEA, I will have the authority to make special reports such as these directly to Parliament. This new provision brings the PSC closer to Parliament, strengthening our independence from the executive branch of government.

[*Translation*]

As we discussed the last time I appeared before your committee, as an independent agency reporting to Parliament, we do not take direction from a minister as most departments and agencies do. We monitor and assess how deputy heads exercise the staffing authorities we have delegated to them, and we take action where necessary—such as imposing conditions on their use of delegated authorities or in exceptional cases, withdrawing some or all of the authorities. We also have corrective powers such as the ability to revoke appointments. For example, in our annual report, we detail how after an investigation of allegations of nepotism and favouritism, we revoke five appointments in a regional office in Health Canada.

You also read in our audit of the Commission for Public Complaints against the RCMP that we placed conditions on the delegation of staffing authorities after uncovering an unacceptable pattern of manipulating selection processes to hire pre-selected individuals. We have been building up our audit capacity in order to be able to carry out our responsibilities under the new legislation. Under the act, we will no longer be delegating only internal staffing authorities but also authorities for external recruitment and for higher risk activities such as executive resourcing. An increased audit capacity will assist us in holding deputy heads accountable for how to use these authorities. To do so we have reallocated human and financial resources within the PSC.

• (1535)

[*English*]

This is detailed in our 2004-2005 departmental performance report, which has recently been tabled in the House of Commons. For example, we have consolidated our current sixteen points of service into seven regional locations, based on where the demand for services is highest, and where most of our clients—federal departments and agencies—are located. This consolidation will allow us to both increase the efficiency of our operations and to reallocate resources to other needs.

While our strengthened oversight role increases our independence, I believe it can be even further enhanced. I understand that government is piloting having the parliamentary officers negotiate their budgets with Parliament itself, rather than officials from Treasury Board Secretariat.

As an independent agency reporting to Parliament, and charged with safeguarding the integrity of the staffing system in the federal public service, I am interested in being treated in a similar manner. Under the current funding mechanism, I must negotiate my budget with officials from Treasury Board Secretariat, the department supporting the Treasury Board in its role as the employer, which I must monitor and assess for its use of its staffing authorities without having a minister to advocate for the PSC at the table. This is not ideal.

Mr. Chairman, I would be happy to take the committee's questions. The committee may have a particular interest in how we are moving forward on the national area of selection, the coming into force of the new PSEA, and the strengthening of our independence through parliamentary review of our budget.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Thank you, Ms. Barrados.

I know that since Bill C-25 there's been a lot of activity in your area of responsibility and a number of developments, which I'm sure the members are interested in.

We'll begin the questions with Mr. Poilievre.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Good afternoon, Ms. Barrados and welcome to our committee. I would like to begin by thanking you for the enormous amount of work you are doing on behalf of our citizens.

[*English*]

First of all, I'd like to ask about an issue that's slightly different from the subjects you have raised. It concerns the movement of government departments and government agencies to regions outside the national capital region. I'm looking for your opinion on this overall debate, which has been ongoing for the last several years.

It is my view—and it flows from the research that I've done—that this approach of carving up the public service and moving it to various regions tends to be an inefficient manner of administering governance in this country. If you look to the experience in the United Kingdom, where this was tried in a much smaller geographical space, inefficiencies resulted.

The same inefficiencies were found when the Government of Canada moved the veterans affairs department to Prince Edward Island. According to the Auditor General in a 1996 report, that move had significant adverse effects, including a large loss of corporate memory. Fewer than 15% of the people on staff made the move to Charlottetown, and few of those stayed in their old functions.

Additionally, the national capital region, as you are aware, is best suited to provide public servants to the Government of Canada, because the people in this region have quite naturally developed a specialty in public service. It has been the number one job creator in the region for many years. As such, there are synergies with having the jobs close to where the political leadership is found.

I'd like to ask your opinion on the overall efficiency of keeping public service jobs in the national capital region, as compared to carving up the public service, breaking it, and dispersing it across the country.

• (1540)

[Translation]

Ms. Maria Barrados: Thank you very much for your comments regarding the PSC's work.

[English]

I really have no comment on how government decides to organize itself and how government decides to locate its functions. In our own case, I can say that we have had to take a look at where all our activities were located, and we have concluded that we have to consolidate our sixteen points of service into seven. That was done because we are there to serve government departments and agencies. We made that move, but it was basically in response to the people we are trying to serve.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You just mentioned consolidation. Whenever you're doing consolidation of any kind in any organization, you are moving people from one function to another or merging a series of functions into one. That is most efficiently carried out when everyone is in the same place. For example, if you have two different agencies and you want to consolidate their mandates, and one is in Vancouver and one is in Halifax, you cannot easily do that. So your use of the word "consolidation" gives us yet another example of why it is more efficient for us to have the preponderance of public service work done in the nation's capital.

There's also evidence that training and recruitment is very difficult if you move these public service jobs out of the national capital region, for obvious reasons. Oftentimes, training is done in a centralized location, and it cannot be easily accessed by someone who lives off in a small village or in a place far from where that training is provided. Recruitment is also more difficult, because the region to which you move a government department may not have the human resources available so that the qualified individuals can be found. These are all things to take into consideration with respect to the overall management of our public service.

Finally, it goes without saying that the political nature of these relocations does not go unnoticed. We know the industry minister, for example, said his electoral hide would be toast if he did not bring the tourism commission out to British Columbia. He admitted that it was a political decision and not an economic one that caused four jobs to be relocated.

So on behalf of taxpayers everywhere, not just in the national capital region, I urge you to incorporate into your overall thinking the necessity of keeping our public service largely managed in the place closest to where the decisions are made. Of course, that's the national capital region.

I'd like to move on to—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Mr. Poilievre, there's only one minute left in your time slot, so would you like her to answer?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, why don't you go ahead, and if you have any more responses to that I'd like to hear them.

Ms. Maria Barrados: I think that, quite apart from getting into the discussion of how government decides to organize itself, currently we have, depending how you count, about two-thirds of the public service outside of Ottawa. Only one-third of it is in Ottawa. Ottawa tends to have more of the senior or executive jobs

than you have out in the regions, but the larger part of the public service is outside. Our organization, the Public Service Commission, has to be in a position to provide services for those people who are out there, and we have set ourselves up so we can maximize both that regional input and the needs of the government in terms of our recruitment and assessment activities, plus our oversight of what is going on.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): We're going to move on to Madam Thibault, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Ms. Barrados, for appearing before this committee with your colleagues.

I'm quite concerned about one point you raised in your statement—and I'm sure others are too—and that is your point about favouritism for certain people. You said yourself you are concerned about this. You state that at the time your survey was conducted and according to the process that was used, 16 per cent of civil servants believed that favouritism occurred. Furthermore, 29 per cent of those surveyed believed it occurred some of the time. That is a total of 45 per cent of public servants in the public service. And that doesn't even include other crown corporations.

Would I be correct in saying that 45 per cent of these people are concerned or are under the impression that there is, there was, or there continues to be favouritism?

• (1545)

Ms. Maria Barrados: Thank you for your question.

These figures relate to the public service, in other words those corporations and departments that are subject to the Public Service Commission Act.

We didn't add up the two numbers. It's very difficult to determine whether they represent the similar level or not. These numbers, which are nonetheless high, relate to work units. If those questions had been put in other areas, then the numbers would have been higher. Sometimes there can be one particular case in question and all those surveyed are answering on the basis of that case.

Ms. Louise Thibault: You would however perhaps agree with me in saying that from an ethical viewpoint, one case of favouritism is one case too many.

You raise this in point 21 in your report. How will you and your partners within the departments meet your goals? Practically speaking, what are you going to do to change this perception and, in the end, change certain practices? The people who have voiced these concerns are not dreaming them up. This phenomenon is based on something, the proof being that you are concerned about it.

Ms. Maria Barrados: That is an excellent question but it is also a very difficult one to answer. Under the new legislation, we are not in a position to change the system and the approach. We have invested considerably in the training process. We now have a new staffing framework. Furthermore, there are ongoing discussions everywhere. That is an opportunity to describe the values and the approach that are indicated. We are talking about a proactive approach.

Furthermore, it is our intention to undertake more monitoring, to step up our auditing and to be in a position to deal with complaints much more rapidly.

Ms. Louise Thibault: I put my next question to you in all good faith. I sincerely do not know the answer. Are you able to impose penalties? For example, if you have proof that a manager or someone in charge of staffing has used methods that favour one person over another, are you in a position to revoke their appointment, even if that person may have been in their position for 12 or 15 years?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Yes. We already did this in the case of five positions at Health Canada. These were cases of favouritism and nepotism.

Ms. Louise Thibault: On another matter, you mentioned that the role of the public service changed. You are taking an approach that focuses on monitoring an investigation.

First, are you able to transfer responsibilities within your own staff, such that civil servants will be playing a role that is quite different for the one they may have played in the past?

Second, do you have the necessary financial resources? In your report, you stated that you are not an officer of Parliament in the same way that the others are. In theory, I in no way doubt your independence. However, as you states so clearly in page 6 of your statement, the body that funds you, in this case the Treasury Board, is one of the bodies that you monitor and investigate. I think it's a good thing that it is, but I would like to know if you are able to obtain financial resources.

• (1550)

Ms. Maria Barrados: Do I have sufficient human resources and the necessary capacity within our organization? Two processes are currently happening. Several people are about to retire and I face the significant challenge of their succession. This is giving me the opportunity to find staff and train people for other responsibilities. When I started this process two years ago, I had three or four auditors. I now have approximately 25. It is taking time but it is happening.

In terms of the financial aspect, we have begun a process of budget review and reallocation, especially considering that the new legislation is leading to changes and responsibilities. For now, with the exception of our computer projects, I need more support. This was put to the Treasury Board. I have enough resources to accomplish what I am currently doing. However, I am required to do this reallocation process and to train staff. Within two years I will know whether those funds are sufficient or not. It's not a question of requesting additional funds but rather one of reviewing the way in which the PSC's budget is assessed.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Do I have any time left?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): No, thank you.

Mr. Boshcoff, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Merci.

I'm also speaking in my role as chair of the Subcommittee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, so you are in a singular position to be able to influence a new era of sensitivity toward people with disabilities.

Recently the CNIB presented a report indicating the huge amount of unemployment for people who are blind and visually impaired, and that is just one component of the disabled community.

You mentioned the disabled, particularly along with other groups, and I wonder if you feel that the understanding of the need to hire persons with disabilities is being accommodated in an active or passive role.

Ms. Maria Barrados: I have included numbers in the report that do a representation of the workforce availability and the numbers that are in the public service. For people who are disabled the numbers are about right, so the representation in the public service is about what workforce availability is.

But you also asked whether there's enough active support for people with disabilities. I've been to a number of meetings of public servants with disabilities, and they make a strong case that much more can be done to accommodate them. In our processes, particularly on the testing and assessment side, we have turned a great deal of our effort to accommodating people with disabilities so they can be fairly judged for opportunities for advancement or appointments in the public service.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: In terms of the standards we have for equipping people, when you make your submissions is it understood that if you have someone who's deaf or hard of hearing and they need an assisted device it is a normal part of the budgeting process? Do you and the people who work throughout the Public Service of Canada understand that those things are not what we would call luxury items, and should be viewed as essential components or office supplies, if you will?

Ms. Maria Barrados: I'll ask Jacques Pelletier to provide a bit of a comment on this. But the work we're doing at the psychology assessment centre lays out to people what their obligations are. So it's not a luxury.

Jacques, do you want to just provide some more information on that?

Mr. Jacques Pelletier (Vice-President, Services Branch, Public Service Commission of Canada): Yes. I would say two things. Related to our outside clientele, Canadian citizens can contact us. We're fully equipped with those devices, so they can contact us and apply for any federal jobs across the country with those devices.

On how the departments are equipped for their internal staffing, I would not be able to give you a very specific idea about each department. But as the president said, at the psychology centre we developed tools and documents for the departments on how they should be equipped, how they should run interviews, how they should evaluate, and how to accommodate people with disabilities. I must say that those documents were very popular last year and were in great demand.

• (1555)

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Mr. Pelletier, when people are being hired, have the people in your human resources department undergone sensitivity and awareness training on that?

Mr. Jacques Pelletier: From my own past experience, because I used to work in departments, they must have specific training.

Ms. Maria Barrados: People have recourse powers through both the Public Service Commission and the Human Rights Commission.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Regionalism was mentioned earlier, and the fact that we are a great nation that requires services. I believe those services should be provided in many offices throughout the country in communities large and small. Currently in many communities there are underutilized physical plants—offices that are operating at only partial capacity, charging much lower rents than what you would find in metropolitan areas, often with free parking and those types of advantages in lifestyle and quality of life.

Has the public service changed their requirement that you must live in certain areas to apply for jobs?

Ms. Maria Barrados: We are in the process of changing those requirements. I have had many complaints from members of Parliament and members of the public about the restrictions on geographic area of residence in the ability to apply for a job. So we have changed the policy, effective April 1, 2006. We already had no limits on executive jobs, but now all officer-level jobs in the national capital area will be open to anyone in the country—any Canadian citizen, including those abroad.

We intend to do a lot of evaluation as we go along. We are also going to be doing some pilots, because next it's going to go out to the regions as well. So it will not only open up jobs in Ottawa, but it will open up the jobs a year later in the regions. That will then be followed by opening up all the jobs.

We're being incremental about this because it is essential that we have the electronic tools available to managers to do this, and on April 1 they will be in place. Second, it is essential that we have the new act that supports this.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: The electronic era, as you mentioned, should not preclude any part of the country from being accessible, or preclude people from being able to work or communicate more efficiently than they ever have before. Consequently, many of the reasons, in terms of travel or distance, seem to have been neutralized.

Do you feel there is a mentality that understands that we are a vast country where people choose to work in different areas?

Ms. Maria Barrados: My comment about the electronics is that it's our way to manage volumes, because one of the things we don't want to do in changing policy is make hiring even longer and more

inefficient. We want to make sure we can handle things quickly and give managers the tools they need to move along.

With this change will obviously come some requirement for people to think a little differently about how they screen their candidates. They're going to have to use the people they have—two-thirds of the public service is outside of Ottawa—they're going to have to use those resources, and they're going to have to use other electronic means to do screening of people. We have to work at this, and we're doing that.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Thank you, Mr. Boshcoff.

We're going to move to Mr. Lunn now, please.

Mr. Gary Lunn (Saanich—Gulf Islands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming, Madam Barrados. I appreciate all the work you do. I really want to focus my question on whether it's the real or the perceived notion about the independence of the public service. As you and I both know, the vast majority—and who knows what the number is—by and large are professional civil servants who do a very good job regardless of the government in power. But we often get complaints from the public out there that this is not what they believe to be happening, and it frustrates them to no end.

I'll give you an example, and that's the former Privacy Commissioner right at the top of the public service, Mr. Radwanski. Of course, he had part of his income tax owing relieved by the government or Revenue Canada in a decision that has been obviously made by a civil servant, yet other people weren't afforded that same type of treatment.

I guess where I'm going with this is that I want your opinion on the officers of Parliament, like the Chief Electoral Officer, you, the Privacy Commissioner, the Ethics Commissioner. As you know, right now these officers of Parliament are political appointments by the Prime Minister. What would your opinion be if these appointments had to be confirmed by a secret vote in Parliament, meaning that all parliamentarians had to put this as a secret vote? Do you think that might help us to ensure the absolute neutrality and impartiality of the very top of the civil service?

• (1600)

Ms. Maria Barrados: You have a number of elements in your question, so I'll try quickly to deal with them, and perhaps you can focus me if I'm not doing it.

In terms of how the officers of Parliament are appointed, the appointment process is different for the different officers of Parliament. I was appointed only after there was a vote in both houses, so for my appointment to go through, I had to have a vote in the House of Commons and I had to have a vote in the Senate.

Mr. Gary Lunn: Just let me reinterpret it. Would you support it if that vote were a secret ballot, as opposed to...? As you know, what happens quite often in Parliament is that the whips tell us how to vote. The government in power can go through the votes, but there are whipped votes, and if they really want to make something happen, they make it happen, whereas we elect the Speaker by secret ballot.

I think it's critically important that for the officers of Parliament, including you—meaning no disrespect to you at all, because I think you're doing a great job—that their neutrality is perceived and that it's real.

I'm not suggesting yours, but I do believe that for a few of the other officers of Parliament, there are probably some cases that can be made about their biases or independence. By having them elected by secret vote, don't you think that would be a lot fairer way to ensure that it's neutral?

Ms. Maria Barrados: I don't think I'm in a position to tell Parliament how to do its job. I just know that when I went through my review process, I studied hard for that. It was serious. I had come before this committee, but I had just done two or three rounds of estimates, so this committee took a decision without me being here and made a recommendation to the House. It was based on the recommendation of the committee that the House acted. The Senate gave me quite a grilling, and they even put it on TV.

I think it's up to Parliament to decide how they want to conduct those further, but I felt in my case it was a real challenge, and in my case it's in my legislation. It's not the case for all of them. For example, probably the one we think of as most independent is the Auditor General, but it's not required for the Auditor General.

Mr. Gary Lunn: Exactly, and again I think she's doing a great job, but there are other ones who have raised concerns.

Would you object to having any of these officers of Parliament confirmed by secret vote in Parliament?

Ms. Maria Barrados: I can't speak for the others. Would I personally object? No. I feel I could stand whatever test you put to me, because you can also dismiss me. You're the only ones. The Prime Minister can't dismiss me, but you can.

Mr. Gary Lunn: Parliament, right. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Mr. Preston, there are two and a half minutes.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Madam Barrados, it's great to have you here again today, and I echo my colleagues' thoughts about the job that you've been doing.

In the opening statements you mentioned that it's been a busy year, that we've had 35,000 new people hired into this federal workforce. Is that a big year, or is this a fairly average year, or are we increasing the size of our workforce?

• (1605)

Ms. Maria Barrados: It's actually declining. The number of people who have come in is fewer than the previous year, and the workforce has actually stabilized.

Mr. Joe Preston: So we have fewer people coming in than last year and the attrition matched the entrants. Is that what you're—

Ms. Maria Barrados: It's about stable.

Mr. Joe Preston: Some of my colleagues talked about the national area of selection, and you say we're on an incremental launch to it. When we're done, will someone from anywhere in Canada be able to apply for any job in the public service regionally and in Ottawa?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Yes, by December 2007, if all our evaluations are showing us that we're not making things more inefficient or more difficult to come into the public service....

Mr. Joe Preston: So you're going to test yourself along the way to make sure it's working.

Ms. Maria Barrados: Absolutely.

Mr. Joe Preston: Will someone simply send in a résumé and hope for an interview and then travel at their own expense here to Ottawa to be interviewed?

Ms. Maria Barrados: As part of the electronic support to people—and I should have mentioned this in answer to a previous question—we're going to be making sure that all the electronic links are in with Service Canada, so as Service Canada expands its areas of contact to 300 and some, you will be able to access the public service information—

Mr. Joe Preston: So I could go for an interview in Regina with someone here. Is that what you're suggesting?

Ms. Maria Barrados: I didn't quite say “interview”. We're talking about the application. The system that we have allows people to build up their résumé and to build up the application, so it will walk you through that application process.

We know from some of the tests we've done that we will increase the volume—a large volume of people will be applying—and we will use the electronic screening to reduce the number of people we screen down to. It will be the individual manager's decision as to how much support they give—in other words, whether they're paying for people to travel or not. And that's the current policy, actually.

Some places provide support, other places don't. I think for many positions there will be an obligation on people to try to make sure they use the regional infrastructure that's there to do these interviews.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Thank you, Ms. Barrados.

Just for the edification of anybody who is watching this, I have been a member of this committee since its inception and am well familiar with your work as the Assistant Auditor General and then as the acting President of the Public Service Commission. The members were well familiar with your work, your ethic, and your background, and you had unanimous support of this committee for your appointment and for your recommendation for the appointment of the President of the Public Service Commission, not on the basis of what we thought you might say but on the basis of your performance—and that's exactly how it happened.

Mr. Scarpaleggia.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Welcome, Ms. Barrados.

I'm very interested in this study of personal favouritism in staffing. Beyond the flagrant cases, how does one prove personal favouritism?

Ms. Maria Barrados: That's a very good question, because what we have in this study are perceptions. They are perceptions. And to say that this amount of perception actually translates itself into actual facts of personal favouritism, you can't do that and it would be improper. The reason it worries us is that it's an indication of the lack of confidence many public servants have in it.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: If I could just stop you there, I understand that.

If you go to the private sector, people are screened on the basis of criteria, sometimes not as formal as in the public sector. I suppose it's very important that they be a little more formalized and rigorous in the public sector to avoid personal favouritism, but in the private sector you look at somebody's résumé, which may have been referred to you by someone you know in the industry, and you say, well, this person is highly qualified and I'll meet them. You sit down with them and get a good sense of what their abilities are, and then something happens: it clicks. The manager says, "I can work with this person; we're going to have a good working relationship." That's it, and they hire the person, usually on a probationary period, and it works.

But in the public service, where everything seems to be designed—and perhaps rightfully so, I don't know—the human element seems to be eliminated. That person has to go through a battery of tests. It takes nine months to even come close to getting a job in the public sector. Quite frankly, I'm worried for young people who want to serve their country; they're completely discouraged. The people who have come to see me have said, "Yes, I've applied for a job—one of the very few jobs that pops up for young people—but quite frankly, I gave up after the first two weeks, because the paper work was going to bury me." Anyway, I don't necessarily want to get into that aspect of it.

The other perception I would like to address, which is also my perception, to some extent, is that when somebody is hired and they don't turn out to be competent, they're just shuffled around the system. I'll read you a quote from a constituent who wrote to me recently. I can't divulge the person's name because I don't have their prior approval. They said, "Can we take it that the incompetent will be dismissed, or will 'alternative' work be found for them as an additional burden on the government?"

I'm not trying to be negative, but that's a perception out there. What do I tell people who write to me with that opinion?

• (1610)

Ms. Maria Barrados: Well, I can give it a try.

Many of our staffing processes now take too long. We know that. We don't want it to take that long; we want it to be more efficient. We don't want to make it burdensome, so we're using automation and trying to guide people through, so it won't be that burden we have now. The current piece of legislation is very demanding on how you treat every person. The new piece of legislation that kicks in

December 2005 will offer more flexibility. So some of that heavy, heavy burden will not be there, and we want to make sure managers don't continue to do it that way.

Having said that, in the public sector and the public service, public servants are required by the legislation to provide access, fairness, and transparency. To make sure those things are followed, they have tribunals and recourse processes there, including the Public Service Commission and eventually a formal tribunal. There is the legislative or statutory wish that we have a process that is fair, accessible, and transparent—and which is seen to be so. That means you have more paper and process than you would have in the private sector.

My experience with people in the private sector is that they make some mistakes in hiring, and we make some mistakes in hiring in the public sector. Once we have put people through a lot of process, our wish is to try to get the maximum return on it. It's sometimes in the eyes of the beholder. You can dismiss people; you can revoke positions.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Do you have a specific timeline in which you can do that?

Ms. Maria Barrados: It depends how somebody was hired.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: But on average, a mid-level manager position, for example?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Well, I think it depends whether they're from inside or outside. Much of the hiring is from inside.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: So if they're from inside it's harder to demote them or to...?

Ms. Maria Barrados: It depends what was done wrong. If you don't meet your language requirement after the appointed time, you have to be moved to another job.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: But again, with all due respect, it depends on what you've done wrong. In the private sector, it doesn't necessarily work that way. It's hard to point out that you've done this wrong; sometimes a person just isn't fitting in, and it's not working, and you can't quantify that. To some degree, you have to give them a chance, which is fair and right, but it seems that the way the public sector hiring process is set up, it's almost impossible to objectively prove that a person isn't working out.

Are the Canadians I speak to correct in saying that, once somebody is hired, they're going to kick around the system one way or the other for life until they get their pension?

Ms. Maria Barrados: I don't think so. There's a greater requirement for due process in the public sector than there is in the private sector, and that's because of the statutes and all the recourse provisions we've built in.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: But are people dismissed?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Yes, they are.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: And they are required to leave the public service?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Yes, they are.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Thank you kindly.

We're going to round two now, with five-minute question slots.

We'll start with Mr. Preston.

Mr. Joe Preston: Thank you very much.

I'll carry on somewhat from where we just were, where in your opening comments you talked about the report on favouritism. I'm not certain that when you had answered my colleague here, we came out knowing what we are doing about it. I know we think we've discovered a possible problem, but what are we doing about it? What action steps are being taken?

•(1615)

Ms. Maria Barrados: It's a good question.

What we have is a situation where we have a new piece of legislation, and that new piece of legislation gives us the opportunity to reinforce those values that are in the new legislation as to what is expected. What we have done is, we have a new appointment framework, we have new delegation instruments, we have done training of all HR people on all these instruments and on what's expected, and we're doing training of managers, so there is a big effort now in telling people what is expected and how it is to be done. Then we're following it up with tighter monitoring and with recourse mechanisms.

Mr. Joe Preston: So you'll resurvey at some point to determine whether these steps have worked?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Yes, we will.

Mr. Joe Preston: I'll refer then to the next piece I had written down, and that was on the swing from temporary positions into permanent positions as a way, perhaps, to avoid what my colleague opposite was talking about, the length of time it takes to get into the public service. Is this the back door? Is this the easy way in, to take on a temporary position and from it gain a permanent position?

It seems to be, by the numbers you're talking about, the way to do it. If so, is that the wrong way? Are we avoiding the interview process by doing it that way, or are we actually getting better people because we've tried them out for a little while in temporary positions before we take them on permanently?

Ms. Maria Barrados: It is the wrong way. Every organization has a requirement for part-time and for casual people. I'm not saying there shouldn't be any casual or part-time people; you need some of those people to function. But it's the wrong way for someone to enter permanently into the public service, and that's because with the people you hire as short-term and the people you hire as casuals, you don't go through the process and you don't provide the access you do if you're going through a larger process.

For me it is a way that is very limiting in that it reinforces the selectivity, where you get people more like yourself, and limits broader access from the outside. I think it is definitely the wrong way—

Mr. Joe Preston: So do we just stop turning temporary workers into permanent workers?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Well, there has to be a certain fairness. You have some obligations once you get people, but I think we have to stop hiring people for that purpose. Remember, if you have a permanent job, you're not going to move house and you're not going to give up your permanent job for a temporary job.

The problem we have is that the mindset has to change—

Mr. Joe Preston: Oh, you will if you think it's a way to avert the nine-month wait for a permanent job. If you think it's a quicker way in, you may just do that.

Ms. Maria Barrados: That's if you're guaranteed a way in, but I'm not at all sure you get the same kind of interest from people if you are doing something short-term and you're asking people with permanent jobs to give up those permanent jobs to go in short-term.

The real issue is that we do have inventories of people who have been tested and are ready to be hired on very short notice but there's a reluctance to use these larger inventories. A lot of managers want to do it themselves in their own way. Now, to speed it up, that's not the way to do it; to provide broader access, it's not the way to do it; and to get the kind of representative public service we want, that's not the way to do it.

Mr. Joe Preston: That also goes back to my original question on the national area of selection and how to broaden that, how to make that an easier piece. You said there currently is a policy in place where it's up to the individual managers, but the policy currently in place is they can only hire people from a certain postal code.

Quite frankly, there could be large additional costs because of having to bring people in for interviews, whereas I'm suggesting using electronic means for those interviews in order to deal with the geographic nature of our country. People may be applying from a long way away and they may be very qualified, but we won't know if we don't interview them.

Ms. Maria Barrados: The current policy is that all executive levels and the levels underneath the executives have to be staffed from the national area of selection. Then it is up to the managers to decide what their area of selection will be, and the Public Service Commission says it has to be big enough for them to get a reasonable pool. We're saying no, we're not going to do that any more; it's going to be national.

I agree that we have to be as creative as we can in using selection tools to be inclusive.

•(1620)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Thank you.

Monsieur Simard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Simard (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Barrados, you say at the end of your statement:

While our strengthened oversight role increases our independence, I believe it can be even further enhanced. I understand that the government is piloting having the "parliamentary officers" negotiate their budgets with Parliament itself rather than officials from Treasury Board Secretariat. [...] Under the current funding mechanism, I must negotiate my budget with officials from TBS.

I'd like to begin by asking you who those parliamentary officers are. Second, I think you are raising the alert. You have to defend your budgets but you have no minister nor parliamentary officer. In your news release on October 6, you state that in order to be able to carry out your new mandate,

[...] there is also a need for additional skilled professionals and for cultural change in the human resources community, as well as for information system support and training.

Do you have the resources required to implement your nice new legislation? Could you explain why getting budgets is such a challenge for you and could you also explain the parliamentary officers system?

Your money comes from the same people you monitor. That can put you in a very difficult situation. Furthermore, you may be constantly underfunded, which will then prevent you from performing successfully, for lack of an appropriate budget.

Ms. Maria Barrados: Thank you for your questions. You have raised several issues and therefore I will ask Anne-Marie Robinson to help me with the budget-related part.

You ask first what a parliamentary officer is. There is considerable debate on that matter. We have received report from two parliamentary committees on the exact definition of "parliamentary officer". There is currently no clear definition.

Almost all reports refer to five officers: the auditor general, the privacy, information and official languages commissioners and the chief electoral officer.

The PSC is a unique group. We are the only ones in our category and we have more authority than the other officers. We can conduct investigations, we can undertake audits like the Office of the Auditor General, but we also have the authority to take corrective measures. Because of that, we are in a category of our own.

The documents often refer to five parliamentary officers but two others are also often mentioned. Clearly we meet the criteria defining parliamentary officers, even more so since my appointment and the passage of the new legislation that allows us to report to Parliament.

I am suggesting that we be on the same footing as the others with respect to budgets, but I don't think it changes much to simply state that the PSC is like the other parliamentary officers.

Mr. Christian Simard: And long-term funding, like the Auditor General Office...

Ms. Maria Barrados: In terms of funding, it would be preferable to be treated in a similar manner.

Mr. Christian Simard: And you aren't currently?

Ms. Maria Barrados: No. However, as you stated, our lack of an advocate is the worst problem. We have to comply with the Treasury Board's budget process and that of the ministers making the decisions, but there is no minister representing the PSC. That is the biggest difference.

I think it would be clearly preferable to deal directly with Parliament. That would give us an opportunity to debate and discuss a budget, and if issues arise out of that, then I can explain our situation and members of Parliament can decide. We are truly a statutory body.

• (1625)

Mr. Christian Simard: And you lack funding.

Ms. Maria Barrados: I didn't say that we lack any funding. We only require funding for our information systems. We are part of the Treasury Board's process, which is currently at the stage of budget assessment, review and reallocation. I cannot say at this point in time that we lack any funding. That is why it is an ideal time to begin dealing with Parliament.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Thank you.

We'll move down to Madam Marleau, please.

Hon. Diane Marleau (Sudbury, Lib.): I want to thank you for taking some steps toward opening up the public service to people from different parts of the country. Frankly, though, until you can open up the first-level intake, you will not be able to change the challenges that you have with visible minorities and all of the other people who should be able to work in the public service, and basically to have a public service that's representative of what Canada really is. I realize a lot of the full-time- obs come from the short-term hiring that occurs. That's normal and natural, because you actually know the people, and you don't hire them if they're no good, and you keep them if they're good.

At some point, will you be able to open up these contract positions across the country? It's going to be difficult for you to do this, but I think you're going to have to find a way of doing it so that you can get that broad-spectrum representation. Otherwise, you're going to keep on with the challenges you have now. That's the key.

If 70% of full-time jobs come from the short-term contracts, then you have to get people from all over the place doing those short-term contracts. That's not an easy thing to do for you, but I think the people would move to Ottawa or move wherever to get the jobs. I can tell you that right now a lot of people in my riding feel they're not able to apply for these entry-level positions even though they're quite capable.

Ms. Maria Barrados: I think 70% of the permanent hiring coming from the temporary workforce is too high. I think you will always have some casuals and some part-timers who will become permanent, but we know from the demographics in the public service that we have to shift from the model of having grown our people, from getting people in at the bottom and growing them up. We know that what's going to happen is that we're going to have to be bringing them in at different levels. Frankly, I don't think this model of trying on a term basis is the way to do it.

There are some other issues that managers will tell you are at play. One of them is that they don't have the permanent budgets. If they don't have permanent budgets, they're not going to hire permanently. You're seeing some senior jobs coming in as term and you're saying, well, what's going on here? It's because they don't have the budgets.

I really strongly believe we should keep part-time and casual as part-time and casual, and that's what it is. We should just do better at getting our indeterminate workforce—

Hon. Diane Marleau: My question is, can you open up the process for part-time and casual to areas beyond where the majority of the jobs are, so that if you live wherever, outside of Ottawa or outside of Toronto, you can apply for those jobs? It is a way to be known and to get that full-time job if you're good, but it means that most people who don't live in those regions don't have access to them.

So that's what I'm asking. Do you think that at some point you'll be able to include this in that open process that would happen across the country? But you're right, there always will be some, and it's a necessary fact.

Ms. Maria Barrados: I understand what your concern is. I'm reluctant to make any commitment other than that we will obviously look at this. We have to fully implement national area of selection for the permanent workforce first.

Hon. Diane Marleau: But you see, the complaints that I get are about those contract jobs. Some people would like to have these jobs, but they can't apply because of the postal code problem. A lot of people are prepared to work contract, and they just want to have access to those jobs.

• (1630)

Ms. Maria Barrados: We're applying it to everything over six months, right?

Hon. Diane Marleau: Everything over six months will be open across the country?

Ms. Maria Barrados: By December 2007.

Hon. Diane Marleau: We'll have to keep a close watch on it.

Ms. Maria Barrados: Yes, to see if people start being six months less a day and then another six months less a day.

Hon. Diane Marleau: That's right.

Ms. Maria Barrados: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Thank you, Madam Marleau.

We're going to move to Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: As we discussed before, Madam Barrados, my constituents believe very strongly that hiring in the public service should be based exclusively on merit and that merit should never be surrendered at the expense of excessive bureaucratic language testing. I have noted, as have you, the high failure rate among anglophones taking the French examination, and I've discussed this problem with a whole assortment of experts. I've had francophone professors tell me that the examination process is unnecessarily stringent. I've had other francophone professors tell me that the training process is inadequate, and I've had other public service experts tell us that the problem is with the high number of positions that are designated bilingual imperative.

There are one of three problems that can explain the high failure rate, therefore, among anglophones who take this examination: one is the testing; two, the training; or three, the designation of jobs as bilingual imperative. You've acknowledged that there is a problem, but which of the three do you identify as the problem?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Thank you for the question.

I can't speak on training, because the Public Service Commission is no longer responsible for training, so that's really a question to put to the school, the Canada school. And I can't speak on the designations of the jobs either, because that is the job of the employer. Where the Public Service Commission comes in is on the testing; so I can talk about the testing, but I can't say which is the worst or the least because I can't really speak for those others.

The important thing to remember, though, is we have a piece of legislation called the Official Languages Act, and the Official Languages Act requires that federal public servants be able to provide service in French or to provide supervision in French or English, both languages. So there's this bilingual capacity that's legislated. Part of the qualification for a job, part of the definition of merit, is in fact your ability to meet the requirements of the language, so it is an essential element to merit.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: But you've acknowledged a problem in the system in the past. Are you now saying there isn't a problem?

Ms. Maria Barrados: No, I'm just trying to say that this is part of merit and this is part of the issue.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I agree with you. My philosophy on official languages is that the government ought to serve the customer in the official language of their choice, and that every francophone has the right to receive all government services in the French language. But you have acknowledged in the past that there is a problem with the proficiency exams that is limiting the ability of qualified employees to obtain job opportunities. You have acknowledged it yourself. I'm wondering, are you now saying that there is no longer a problem, or can you be more specific in explaining the problem? Which is it?

Ms. Maria Barrados: The problem I've agreed we have a problem with is when we looked at the trends in terms of the success and passing, particularly in the anglophones' oral in French, we had a dramatic drop in the success rate. That did indicate to me a problem. And we had undertaken a lot of work to try to understand what was going on, and try to do what we could to improve the processes of actually testing, because for many adults who haven't been to school for a long time and haven't taken a test for a long time, that process is daunting.

• (1635)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You were going to produce a report on this problem, were you not?

Ms. Maria Barrados: I have it in the annual report, and there are a couple of things.... We have done a lot on the test itself.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So you've changed the test, so far?

Ms. Maria Barrados: We've changed a lot about how the test is done, in terms of explaining to people what the testing process is, giving them more opportunity to be tested in the area of their responsibility within their department, and we have seen an improvement—

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: In numbers?

Ms. Maria Barrados: In numbers—not big, but it's now headed in the right direction.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): I'm sorry, the time is up.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you.

I'd just say thank you for having begun to address this problem. I think it's important. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Thank you very much.

Maybe you could slip in your answer when Mr. Godbout carries on with questions right now. Use a little of his time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Godbout (Ottawa—Orléans, Lib.): Welcome, Ms. Barrados, and welcome to the officials from your office.

The Public Service Modernization Act has a December 2005 deadline. That is how your timeline was established and you have a rather ambitious work plan. Are you where you hope to be? December is coming quickly.

I have another question. How would you describe the current climate within the public service, given the major changes that have been proposed and that are of some concern to several of my constituents? I would like you to tell me—very quickly because I have other questions—what your professional opinion on that matter is, an opinion that I have a good deal of respect for.

Ms. Maria Barrados: Fine.

Mr. Marc Godbout: It's not a simple matter to answer.

Ms. Maria Barrados: You asked if we are ready. We have undergone an assessment on an almost monthly basis, along with our colleagues from the Public Service Human Resources Management Agency of Canada and together we are monitoring the situation. I feel that we are ready in terms of the key elements but there is still a lot to do. We see that we will have to do more within the next two months in terms of training, especially for managers, in order to reach the same level of basic training.

We've trained human resources specialists. We have a framework and we are currently making all our delegations official. We have defined a monitoring approach. We have also updated all our information systems and required all the necessary information. So we have covered the essential points. However, we still have to make changes to the staffing process and the amount of work involved is enormous. Under the new legislation, we can continue to operate the way we currently do and therefore there will not be a significant change.

Your second question was on the current climate within the public service. It is a difficult climate because civil servants are facing several concurrent changes in management, financial, auditing and human resources sectors. It's difficult for the civil servants but those are the requirements. I am convinced that they will succeed if we give them the opportunity to learn what is required.

[*English*]

Mr. Marc Godbout: We could pursue that for a while, but I'll limit myself on that question.

Are you going to lift the restriction for all positions, lift the restriction of the national capital area? I supported you on that. Am I to understand that these restrictions will also be lifted for the people of Ottawa who would like to apply in other areas of the country?

● (1640)

Ms. Maria Barrados: Yes, they will be, but we're doing Ottawa first, and then people in other parts of the country, so the other two-thirds. The reason we're doing Ottawa first is we wanted a sizeable number where we could see how the process worked. Frankly, the most complaints have come about the Ottawa jobs.

We will also be initiating some pilots in the regions to start that flow fairly early in 2006. So it won't be just people from other parts of the country applying to Ottawa jobs. They will also give opportunities the other way around.

Mr. Marc Godbout: I understand there's a situation that in some instances it's 60 days you can be on a term employment. I understand you're looking at all of that. Are these positions going to be contractual positions forever? Are they going to be made permanent, and so on and so forth? I get lots of complaints about that. People who have been on contract for years and years would aspire to a permanent job.

Ms. Maria Barrados: There has been a change of policy by the Treasury Board; after three years of being a term employee, you are automatically made indeterminate. That has been part of the phenomenon in which we've seen this big shift, but I don't know of any other initiatives.

From my point of view, term should be term and permanent should be permanent. We have to do a far better job of bringing people in permanently.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Thank you.

Next is Madame Thibault, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Barrados, on the matter of official languages, you have just told my colleagues that the areas of jurisdiction fall under various institutions. Allow me to say how unfortunate I think this situation is.

As my colleague stated, Canadians have the right to be served in the language of their choice, regardless of their region. I would add that civil servants also have the right to work in the language of their choice and that we have to make sure that they can do so.

Over the past several years, there has been order in council after order in council. I know that this is not your responsibility but it is unfortunate that starting at the very top of the public service hierarchy, certain people have been allowed to be exempted. The rules have been bent by questioning whether people in certain positions had to be bilingual and at what time they had to become so. The result is that for years some people have not met the language requirements of their position.

People hired temporarily or on a casual basis have to meet those requirements. However, there are all kinds of exemptions for people appointed to permanent positions, for a very long period of time. I wanted to point out how unfortunate I think this situation is.

I have only a little time left, Madam, and I would like to talk about the 70 per cent of temporary positions. Please correct me if I'm wrong. A few years ago, temporary employees would normally become permanent employees after five years. Today that period is three years. I imagine there isn't much flexibility and that people can be dismissed after three years only to be hired again one month later for another three-year period. You're saying that we should keep these temporary positions.

I was surprised, if not to say dumbfounded and staggered by your remarks in point 1.15 on planning: "[...] the framework also requires human resources planning to be integrated with business planning." Ms. Barrados, that is shocking. In the financial and business planning of the person reporting to the minister and deputy minister, one would expect to find the number of people in each category required to carry out their mandate.

I imagine that's what you were referring to.

Ms. Maria Barrados: Thank you. Perhaps Michael or Mary will have something to add to the matter of audit results.

We noted, over the course of our audits and reviews, that there were deficiencies in human resources planning. The new definition of merit added an essential element to that planning, and the other requirements for that type of position are clear. It is essential that this be analyzed.

Michael, did you have something to add?

• (1645)

Mr. Michael Corber (Director General, Audit Operations Directorate, Public Service Commission of Canada): We have not undertaken very many audits in the larger departments. In the smaller departments, we noted that there was occasional staffing. They would lose someone, they would need someone to do the work and they would get someone immediately, with no planning.

Ms. Louise Thibault: I'm very surprised. Succession processes and all kinds of programs were created over the past few years.

When did this fail? Are you telling me that this was never implemented, that all of a sudden we're waking up and realizing that those programs were never carried out?

Ms. Maria Barrados: When I was at the Office of the Auditor General, it was obvious that the government had to improve their financial planning process. Most of the departments' spending, especially discretionary spending, goes to human resources. Obviously both should be planned for but that is not the case. There is a budget for salaries, and that's it. The type of person required and the organization's requirements are not specified. If they were, then we would have a better idea of the existing permanent positions and the types of those positions, and that would broaden the selection process.

There are gaps throughout the system. Next year, there will be a section on human resources planning in the budgetary estimates. That is essential in order to improve the system.

Ms. Louise Thibault: I suppose I have no more time?

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Next is Mr. Scarpaleggia, please.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Barrados, I have a quick question of a technical nature.

If a manager has hired through favouritism or has simply been incompetent in a hiring decision, is there a mechanism already in place by which co-workers...? We're sort of at the crossover point with the whistle-blower act. How are you or someone in your organization—in the Public Service Commission—alerted to these situations?

Ms. Maria Barrados: I think the audit we have to report on the industrial security program in Public Works and Government Services Canada is a good example. Here you had employees go to their union and say they had an unacceptable situation in terms of how people were being staffed and that they were being denied opportunities they felt they were entitled to. The deputy minister did an investigation. The union wasn't satisfied. The deputy minister asked us to come in and do an audit and come to conclusions about what exactly happened. We did, and we were very critical.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Does it have to go through the union, necessarily?

Ms. Maria Barrados: No, that was an example. It can go any way.

I have a system of monitoring, which is another one of these audits we did this past round. This was the complaints commission against the RCMP. There was a pattern of hiring that just didn't look right, in terms of how they were hiring people, so we did an audit.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: But can somebody just call up your office?

Ms. Maria Barrados: Absolutely.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: As I say, are we at the crossover point where the whistle-blowers act would come into force, or would it have to be, in the words of the whistle-blowers act, "gross mismanagement"? Where do the two meet?

• (1650)

Ms. Maria Barrados: With the whistle-blowing legislation, I think the expectation is that other organizations with the mandate and the expertise would do the investigation in that particular area. I would expect that with the whistle-blowing—the last I've seen it, and the way it operates now—if there's a complaint that deals with staffing, it tends to get looked at by my organization because we have the corrective powers.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Could it technically be considered wrongdoing under the whistle-blowers act to hire via favouritism, or would it have to go beyond one case? Would there have to be a pattern?

Ms. Maria Barrados: I think the expectation under the whistle-blowing legislation is that it go through the system that is in place under that legislation to deal with wrongdoing.

I can tell you after the previous discussions that any brown envelope coming into my organization is looked at. I've set up a little group of people who will do the inquiries. They've noted some in my annual report. Some of them are not grounded; some of them are.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Mr. Godbout, you had an extra question to take the last minute?

Mr. Marc Godbout: I wasn't finished with staff morale. I think that's very important. I have a large number of civil servants in my riding.

Will the policies that you oversee be in your accountability framework? Would every individual manager be held accountable for the morale within the team he is leading? Are you moving in that direction?

Ms. Maria Barrados: My accountability framework deals with the areas I'm responsible for, and that's meritorious staffing and non-partisanship. The accountabilities I have are with the deputy minister, with the suggestion to deputy ministers that they delegate down the organization. How they do that is up to them.

I should add another thing about morale and all the changes. What we are doing with the piece of legislation is a decentralized model, where fundamentally we're taking a lot of authorities and giving them to the deputy ministers. They are going to be held responsible for how they conduct this. It's very decentralized; it's a system of removing controls, delegating the responsibility, and making accountability work. We're doing the accountability part for Parliament.

Some of the other initiatives are much more centralized. Public servants are questioning how this could be: on the one hand there is decentralizing, and there are other people who are centralizing. I think that's something we have to work out.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): I want to thank you, Madam Barrados, and your colleagues, for the important dialogue we've had here today.

I think it is useful to offer an opportunity to make any closing comments you might wish for the benefit of all, and to tidy up any matters you feel were left unsaid.

Ms. Maria Barrados: Thank you very much for that opportunity, Mr. Chairman.

We are going through an enormous transition, as some of the members have said. The new legislation will come fully into force in December 2005. The end of December will be the date we expect it to come into force. With that, I think the Public Service Commission is on its new path.

I certainly enjoyed this opportunity to come before this committee. It's very important for me to be able to come to committees of Parliament such as this to explain our role and how we exercise that very unique and independent but powerful role we play on behalf of Parliament.

I would hope the committee could give some thought as to how our budgeting process could be closer to parliamentary review.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Thank you very much to you and to your colleagues.

If you don't mind, I'll just do a little house business.

Colleagues, there has been a document circulated to you related to Stornoway Productions. I've had some input from a couple of members. Are members prepared to deal with that item today?

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: There's still quorum, but I think Mr. Poilievre is leaving.

• (1655)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo): Unfortunately, the chair, who brought it to this committee, had other commitments and isn't here today to deal with the issue. Under the circumstances, I think we'll defer that item of committee business for another meeting.

Thank you to all.

We're adjourned.

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