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Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, April 17, 2007

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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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●(1535)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee will commence the study of the Auditor General of Canada's February 2007 status report, chapter 6, "The Management of the Social Insurance Number".

I want to welcome our witnesses today.

First we'll hear from the Office of the Auditor General, followed by the Department of Human Resources and Social Development, followed by the Treasury Board. I think you all know how everything works around here, so I don't need to explain microphones or anything else. We'll give you seven or eight minutes for your opening statements and then we'll start with questioning, starting on the opposition side and moving ourselves around the table to the government side.

I want to welcome everyone here once again.

Ms. Fraser, if you'd like to, please start with your opening statement, and thank you for being here today.

Ms. Sheila Fraser (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for inviting us to discuss chapter 6 of our February status report on the management of the social insurance number.

I am accompanied by Nancy Cheng, assistant auditor general, and Nick Swales, the director responsible for this audit.

As you know, the social insurance number is a unique nine-digit number issued to Canadian citizens, permanent residents, and temporary residents working in Canada. It is used to record income, taxes paid, and contribution to government benefit plans, and it is also used in providing access to many government services. Service Canada issues social insurance numbers and maintains the social insurance register, which is the database that contains the basic personal information of people who apply for a social insurance number.

When we met with this committee last June to discuss our previous work on the management of the social insurance number, we indicated we were planning an audit to assess what progress had been made on recommendations from our 2002 audit of the social insurance number. That audit was itself a follow-up on earlier recommendations, so this year's report is our fourth audit on the management of the social insurance number since 1998. I am pleased to be able to discuss the results of our most recent audit with you today.

[*Translation*]

We found that Service Canada had taken action in many areas to address deficiencies we identified in 2002. It has improved the assignment procedure of SINs by strengthening the standards for establishing identity, citizenship and proof of need before issuing a SIN, by adding an expiry date to 900-series SINs, and by redesigning its process for assigning SINs. Service Canada has also improved its approach to SIN investigations. Investigations are now identified more from indicators of risk, and SIN investigators have access to better training and tools.

There is still work to be done in these areas, notably by completing the links necessary for Service Canada to validate birth, death and citizenship information with the provinces and with Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Nonetheless, our assessment has shown progress in these areas since our 2002 audit to be satisfactory.

However, our conclusion overall was that the government has not made satisfactory progress in addressing our 2002 recommendations because two significant concerns that we noted as long ago as 1998 have still not been solved.

[*English*]

Our first concern is that Service Canada still does not have adequate assurance about the quality of information in the social insurance register. It has not determined how accurate, complete, and reliable the data should be and it does not have a systematic means for measuring data quality. We consider this to be an important weakness, particularly since Service Canada is increasingly using the register to identify people accessing its services.

The second problem is that the Treasury Board policy on the use of the social insurance number is not sufficiently clear. The policy has not been updated since it was issued in 1989, even though Treasury Board Secretariat completed a study in 2003 that confirmed the existence of various gaps in its policies and procedures on use of the social insurance number. Our concern is that the lack of clarity leads to inconsistent application of policy requirements, thereby increasing the risk of inappropriate use of the social insurance number.

We did find that Service Canada and Treasury Board Secretariat have made progress in better understanding these problems since 2002, but it is our opinion that the government should have implemented solutions by this time.

[*Translation*]

We are pleased that the Treasury Board Secretariat, Human Resources and Social Development Canada and Service Canada agree with our recommendations and committed to action, in several cases by as early as this past March. The committee members may wish to ask Service Canada whether it has met these goals and whether it and the Treasury Board Secretariat are on target to complete the rest of their actions as planned.

Mr. Chairman that concludes my opening statement. We will be pleased to answer your committee's questions.

Thank you.

● (1540)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Fraser.

We're now going to move to the Department of Human Resources and Social Development. I believe we have Mr. Simeoni.

Are you going to be the one presenting today?

Mr. Peter Simeoni (Assistant Deputy Minister, Integrity Services Branch, Service Canada, Department of Human Resources and Social Development): Yes, I am.

The Chair: Very good, sir. You have seven minutes please.

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Mr. Chair, thank you for the invitation to speak to the committee about the Auditor General's status report on the management of the social insurance number and the ongoing efforts of Service Canada to strengthen the integrity of the SIN and the social insurance register.

I'm joined today by Onno Kremers, director general, Identity Management Services.

[*Translation*]

The SIN is an important element of Service Canada's vision for providing Canadians with seamless service focused on their needs. That is one of the reasons why we commissioned a review by PriceWaterhouseCoopers early last year to assess the progress we have made since the Auditor General's 2002 report. PWC concluded that the actions we were taking had increased the effectiveness and efficiency of processes, and has resulted in improved controls and an increased level of integrity within both the SIN and the SIR.

PWC also identified areas for improvement and we are focusing on those at this time as we address the recommendations of the Auditor General.

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, the first issue I'd like to discuss is the appropriate use of the SIN. The government's ongoing response to this issue is twofold.

First, it involves making sure that government policy on how the SIN should be used by departments is up to date and clear. My colleagues from the Treasury Board Secretariat will speak to this issue.

On a specific matter raised in the audit, I would like to mention that the Treasury Board has authorized the use of the SIN in the youth employment strategy program administered by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

[*Translation*]

The other important aspect of the Government's response is explaining to SIN holders how the SIN should be used so that they can better protect their personal information. Service Canada developed the SIN Code of Practice. The Code provides practical guidance and tools, and is available on our website.

[*English*]

A second key area of SIN management is the issuance process. We have implemented a new process, SIN rapid access, which makes it faster, simpler, and more secure to obtain a SIN. As part of this new approach, our citizen service agents issuing SINs have received mandatory training and certification.

[*Translation*]

In addition, we are accepting only proof of identity documents, such as a birth certificate, in support of a SIN application. We have also introduced expiry dates on SINs issued to temporary residents—the 900-series. This date is linked to their stay in Canada.

[*English*]

One of our goals is to have access to provincial vital events information at the time of SIN application. At present, we have agreements with New Brunswick, Ontario, British Columbia, and recently Alberta. We'll be introducing real-time data validation with Ontario and British Columbia this year. Work is proceeding with the remaining provinces and the territories to conclude similar agreements. We already have real-time access to immigration information for all temporary workers and permanent residents.

We have established a new SIN at birth service within Ontario and in B.C. This service combines three processes into one: registering a birth, applying for a birth certificate, and applying for a social insurance number. This makes it much simpler and less time-consuming for parents of newborns to obtain their child's important documents. It's a good example of Service Canada's vision of a seamless, client-centred service.

A third key area of SIN management is the integrity of the information in the social insurance register. Obviously, Mr. Chair, the improvements I have described in issuing SINs contribute directly to better information integrity through more rigour in the application process. As well, our vital events agreements allow us to obtain timely and accurate birth and death data from the provinces to improve the integrity of information held by the register.

[*Translation*]

As a further safeguard, we also placed dormant flags on SINs that have not been used for five years. Our latest annual dormant run was completed in January.

[*English*]

In addition, we are setting goals for register accuracy and completeness to understand how effective our measures to improve its integrity have been and to identify what further measures are still needed. To do this, we are first determining the current level of accuracy of key data. We will then determine the potential cost to federal programs of any errors, which will allow us to set goals. Once established, we will regularly monitor and report on our progress.

[*Translation*]

Service Canada will also continue to refine its risk-based approach to SIN-related investigations, which often result in corrections to the information in the Register.

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, I would like to take a moment to comment on the number of usable SINs compared to the population that is over 30 years old and resident in Canada.

As you know, there are significant numbers of Canadians who are studying or working or have retired outside the country who have SINs and may not be counted in population estimates. In fact, recent studies estimate that a sizable portion of the Canadian population is actually living abroad. Depending on how long these SIN holders have been away, their SINs may have been flagged as dormant.

Mr. Chair, the important point is that because SIN holders living abroad are not counted in population estimates, the total number of SIN holders will always be greater than the comparable population living in Canada. It is also important to remember that having a SIN does not automatically entitle anyone to program payments. It is just one of many controls. Applicants must also prove that they meet entitlement criteria specific to each program before receiving a payment. For example, to receive employment insurance, you must have separate proof that you have worked in insurable employment, have had your earnings interrupted, and have worked enough hours to qualify. Nonetheless, the SIN is one of our key program controls, and accordingly, its integrity is important. That is why we are taking all the measures I have described to strengthen the SIR. That is why we are seeking vital events agreements, and that is why we put risk flags on inactive SINs. In our view, and as the Auditor General has reported, we are heading in the right direction on this issue.

Mr. Chair, let me conclude by saying that we are pleased that the Auditor General has recognized the significant progress we have made since 2002 in many areas of SIN management. We also acknowledge that there are other areas where we can do better, and we are working hard on them.

Thank you, and we welcome the opportunity to answer any questions the committee may have.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Simeoni. We thank you for your presentation.

We're going to move to the Treasury Board Secretariat, and we have Mr. Alexander and Mr. Lemieux with us.

You have seven minutes, gentlemen.

Mr. Jim Alexander (Deputy Chief Information Officer, Treasury Board Secretariat): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

My name is Jim Alexander, and I'm the deputy chief information officer at Treasury Board Secretariat. I'm accompanied today by Donald Lemieux, who is the executive director of the information and privacy policy division.

On behalf of Treasury Board Secretariat, I would like to begin by thanking the committee for this opportunity to discuss the role of Treasury Board Secretariat with regard to the management of the social insurance number.

We were called here today to talk about the recommendations from the Office of the Auditor General and how Treasury Board Secretariat is progressing in addressing them. I trust that all members of the committee have received copies of the deck that we provided to the clerk earlier.

As shown in slide 2 of the presentation, the OAG recommended that Treasury Board Secretariat should update the policy framework governing the use of the social insurance number by March 31, 2008, and ensure that the policy instruments governing the use of the SIN in the federal government close the gaps identified in the 2003 review.

As TBS indicated in the response to the recommendations, TBS is committed to updating and clarifying the policy requirements governing the use of the SIN in the federal government by March 31, 2008.

I'll discuss TBS's commitments in more detail later in the presentation. However, I'd first like to provide a general overview of the accountability structure for the management of the SIN. This will help to position Treasury Board Secretariat's privacy role with respect to the SIN, and then I'll provide an outline of TBS's policy renewal process as it relates to the SIN policy components.

On slide 3, the President of the Treasury Board, as designated minister under the Privacy Act, is responsible for developing and issuing privacy policy, including those components that govern how federal departments collect and use the SIN. The current policy components on the use of the SIN are part of the policy manual and guidelines on privacy and data protection. TBS privacy policies also provide direction and guidance on data matching, processing of privacy requests, and the conduct of privacy impact assessments. It should also be noted that the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada monitors compliance with the Privacy Act, and as such, monitors SIN use by government institutions that are subject to the Privacy Act.

On slide 4, the SIN was conceived as an efficient tool for facilitating the comparing of data. In other words, the SIN was to be used for data-matching purposes within the federal government. The government's privacy policy components on the SIN were intended to ensure that there would be limits on SIN use at the federal level, as it could easily be used as a tool to link personal information held by various government institutions. The policy was intended to mitigate this risk. The policy components do not, nor were they ever intended to, address the reliability of the social insurance number or the integrity of the social insurance register, or the collection and use of the social insurance number in the private sector or in other jurisdictions.

On slide 5, in 2002, TBS, with the assistance of an interdepartmental committee, initiated a government-wide review of SIN and data matching. The review involved approximately 160 government institutions. The objectives of the review were to determine how and why federal institutions were using the SIN, to identify and review all current uses of the SIN by federal institutions, to propose the necessary revisions to data matching and SIN components of the policy, and to provide a final report with recommendations to the President of the Treasury Board. In 2003, a final report was presented to the then Treasury Board president, who instructed TBS officials to proceed with developing a draft revised policy in accordance with those recommendations.

On slide 6, in 2004, TBS needed to address the immediate privacy concerns related to transborder data flows and risks related to the U.S.A. Patriot Act. TBS launched, therefore, a government-wide review, which culminated in the publishing of the *Privacy Matters* report and guidance in 2006. This report outlined the results of the review and presented the government's strategy to address possible privacy risks posed by foreign legislation, namely the U.S.A. Patriot Act. The Privacy Commissioner expressed support for this strategy and the resulting documents that came out as guidance.

Despite being pulled on other priorities, TBS remains very committed to clarifying those policy gaps identified in 2003. For example, the current SIN policy was silent on the use of the SIN for purposes related to statistical research, audit, and evaluation purposes. Also, clarification was needed with respect to use of the SIN in the context of cross-jurisdictional personal information sharing agreements.

●(1550)

TBS intends to clarify what constitutes authorized use of the SIN for any new purpose. As indicated in our response to the Auditor General, we are committed to completing this work by March 2008.

On slide 7, the review and renewal of the SIN components of the TBS privacy policy were subsumed under the broader TBS effort to renew its entire policy suite. The objectives of this policy renewal are to clarify management responsibilities and accountabilities; establish a clear distinction between the duties of deputy heads and those of functional experts; create an integrated and streamlined consolidated policy infrastructure that is coherent across the policies; and establish an organizational structure to ensure that the policies, including the SIN policy requirements, remain current, relevant, and clear as changes happen. As such, it was important to align the SIN and data-matching policy work within the broader context of the TBS policy work.

Slide 8 speaks to the renewal process and timelines. In terms of the revision to the SIN and data-matching policy components, we've already undertaken extensive consultations with other federal institutions through a secretariat-led interdepartmental committee. We've also obtained the views of the Office of the Privacy Commissioner on the proposed revisions to the SIN and data-matching policy components, as well as areas of improvement for the privacy impact assessment policy. As indicated in the TBS response to the OAG, Mr. Chair, the secretariat will ensure that the TBS policy requirements governing the use of the SIN in the federal government are updated and clarified by March 31, 2008, to close those gaps identified in the 2003 secretariat review.

I've also included, for reference in the deck, an annex that lists the legislated uses of the SIN as well as other authorized uses of the SIN in the federal government.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for your attention. I would be pleased to respond to any questions or clarifications.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Alexander.

We're going to start our first round of questioning, which will be seven minutes. I have Ms. Dhalla from the opposition Liberal Party to start with us. Thank you.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.): Thank you very much to all of our presenters. It was extremely informative.

I wanted to just go back to June 2006, when I believe the Auditor General had appeared before the committee and had stated at that time that she found it slightly surprising that a passport wasn't an accepted document to obtain a social insurance number. I know that the presentation that has been done by the department today outlines that they do take some documents in terms of original proof-of-identity documents, such as a birth certificate. I wanted to find out if passports are now being accepted by Service Canada.

Secondly, to follow up on that, how does Service Canada verify the identity of these original documents that are presented to them to obtain the SIN numbers? That's to the department.

● (1555)

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Mr. Chair, let me begin by saying that the passport is not currently one of the documents we use for the purposes of issuing SINs. What we decided several years ago is to go back to foundation documents. You'll recall that in 2002, when the Auditor General looked at the SIN program, she found that there were several dozen different kinds of documents that could be used in the SIN issuance process as proof of identity, including photocopies of those documents that were notarized. The department decided to consolidate, go to the basic documents like the birth certificate and a handful of other documents, and build up from there.

The passport, as we all know, requires a proof of citizenship to be obtained and also includes a picture, which could be useful, and I wouldn't discount our allowing some of our clients in the future to use it if they happen not to have the birth certificate for some reason. But I'd like to point out that an awful lot of the SIN recipients are under 16 years old. So while a SIN could be used, it would almost never be used, given the way we've seen our clientele for SINs develop over time. I'm sure you know why that would be, with registered education saving plans and so on or new immigrants to Canada. Then the Canadian passport isn't the first document they would get. The SIN would probably be first.

But it's something we're always looking at. Part of what we want to do is maintain integrity at the same time as we provide good service to Canadians, and it is true that if you've invested in a passport and lined up to get one, then you ought to be able to use it for perhaps other government services. So it's something we'll take away and we'll look at again.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla: How does Service Canada identify the documents that are given to them for the application of a SIN number?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Onno, would you like to answer that?

Mr. Onno Kremers (Director General, Identity Management Services, Service Canada, Department of Human Resources and Social Development): For Canadians who are born in Canada we use original documents, such as a birth certificate or a citizenship document. For those who are not born in Canada we use immigration documents.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla: The next thing is, if I can get an answer from the department itself, you had mentioned in your speech that you have a SIN code of practice. If you could please elaborate and tell the committee about that, I'd be interested to hear what that is.

Secondly, if it is available, where is it available, and has it been done in different languages?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: It's available on our website. It's been there for a couple of months. It is, we hope, written in user-friendly language. It's a long list of dos and don'ts for SIN holders and employers. It also provides guidance on what happens if you think your SIN has been compromised—say you lost your wallet and you're worried that someone may use your SIN, what to look for—or if you think it actually is happening, how to contact us and what we

might do to help. But we want to keep it evergreen, so as we get feedback on the code of practice from employers and SIN holders, we'll revise it.

We are now considering how we can become a little more proactive in making Canadians know that the code exists. Now you have to find it on our website. Perhaps we should be advertising it a little bit more aggressively, and we're looking at that now.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla: Hopefully you can have it at some of the Service Canada centres. I know many constituents in my riding in Brampton utilize the Service Canada centres. Also, I think reflecting the changing demographic in terms of a multilingual society and having it available in different languages would definitely reach out to some of the immigrant and new Canadian communities.

The last question is for the Auditor General. I believe in February 2003 this particular committee tabled a report in regard to the department's action plan for social insurance numbers. At that time the federal government responded to the report, and they were supposed to be providing both the committee and you with progress reports.

Could you please advise the committee as to the number of progress reports that have been provided by the department? Do you believe HRSDC has respected its commitment in this regard?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: We do make mention of the public reporting and the commitment by the department to provide that information. The department had agreed to the recommendations. I believe there has been one report that was presented, and then after that there was some mention made in the departmental performance reports. But we indicate in our audit that we found the information being provided was inadequate, that there needed to be more fulsome information. The department again agreed with that recommendation and indicated a commitment to improving on that.

● (1600)

Ms. Ruby Dhalla: Thank you.

The Chair: We're going to move now to Mr. Lessard, for seven minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to thank our witnesses for the information they have provided us. It is most helpful. I'm increasingly surprised at the extent to which the social insurance number was used.

My first question is to the officials. Last June, I believe, you appeared before the committee and you told us that you had given an independent audit firm the task of looking into the integrity of the social insurance number, among other things. I believe you went to PriceWaterhouseCoopers and that you are pleased with the effectiveness of the measures implemented and confirmed by the company.

However, you touched very briefly and very superficially on the areas that require improvement. Could you tell us very specifically what PriceWaterhouseCoopers found, and tell us whether they were the same points that the Auditor General had already raised? What are the issues? If not, how can we distinguish between the two sets of issues identified?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Mr. Chair, we commissioned the work by Pricewaterhouse because the nature of SIN management in the SIR is one of continuous improvement. Knowing that the Auditor General had planned a follow-up audit, knowing it would be reported in February 2007, and knowing as well that we've been working very hard on improving the SIN, we wanted to know if there were things we could do before the Auditor General reported, to continue to make progress in the areas identified in 2002, and then fold in the recommendations of the Auditor General with the ongoing work that we'd already started from Pricewaterhouse. We'll probably do something like that again, going forward, rather than waiting for the next follow-up audit, getting an independent view of whether or not we're on the right track with this program.

We asked Pricewaterhouse to look at the areas of recommendation that the Auditor General had worked on in 2002. The report itself is available on our website in detail, but I'd be happy to table the comparison of the OAG recommendations and the Pricewaterhouse findings. What you'll see are very similar conclusions, not surprisingly. Pricewaterhouse told us what the Auditor General was going to say in February. There were areas where progress had been satisfactory, but they also made recommendations for further improvement in those areas, and we're working on those; and there were areas that weren't quite as good, and the Auditor General has observed them as well. We'd already started the work to move the yardsticks when the Auditor General reported.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: I do not want to be impolite, but I also don't want all the time taken up with the description of the procedure you followed. My question was quite clear: Were there any specific points mentioned by PriceWaterhouseCoopers that the Auditor General had not pointed out? From what I understand of your answer, the Auditor General and the PWC report said the same thing, and if I want to know more, I can go to your website. I will therefore move on to another point.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Simeoni: You don't want me to respond?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: I don't want to be too harsh, but my question was clear: Was there anything in the PriceWaterhouseCoopers' report that the Auditor General had not told us about? As I understand it, the Auditor General had already told us what PWC revealed.

My other question is about dormant SINs. I would like to know whether some of them are still being used, and if so, whether we can determine how extensive this practice is.

● (1605)

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Mr. Chair, that's one of the questions that we are currently working on. We're looking at those programs that use the SIN for administrative purposes and want to see to what extent their current clientele of recipients have dormant flags associated with the SIR and the SIN.

Our expectation is that will be extremely low. For example, in a program like EI, you cannot receive EI if there is a dormant flag on the SIN. Other programs don't work exactly the same way, so we want to look hard at whether or not some of their clients have gone dormant or were dormant when the benefit was paid. We don't currently have information on that, but I expect the next time I'm invited to speak to the committee about that, I would be happy to make a presentation on the results of that work.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I would like to add, Mr. Chairman, that we said in our audit that as of June 30, 2006, slightly over 2.1 million SINs had been identified as dormant. This does give managers some indication, if they wish to use it.

The problem is that we subsequently noticed a lack of consistency between the application of various programs and the way this indication was dealt with. Some people did a little more work, but others did not take this fact into account. Procedures in this regard should be strengthened, because they must be clearer and much stricter before an account identified as dormant can be reused.

Mr. Yves Lessard: You're quite right. Of course, there was some improvement between 2002 and 2006. The number was reduced almost by half.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Yes.

Mr. Yves Lessard: I think it went from five million—

Ms. Sheila Fraser: To about two million.

Mr. Yves Lessard: I certainly agree with you. What surprises me is that we still cannot determine how dormant SINs are used and whether they are being used appropriately or not. We are quite concerned that people may be abusing them or using them inappropriately. Do we have any information on this?

The question is to either the Auditor General or to Mr. Simeoni.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: To my knowledge, there aren't any numbers. I think that Mr. Simeoni confirmed this.

[*English*]

The Chair: If you want to respond, please give a quick response, because we're out of time.

Mr. Peter Simeoni: The nature of a dormant file means it hasn't had any activity at all in government programs in the past five years. We know they're not being used. Some additional files may go dormant in the future, but they're not showing up in CRA and they're not showing up in EI. They're not making contributions and they're not receiving CPP. It's the nature of the dormancy. They're not being used to access government benefits.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: One of the suggestions that has been made to you over the years is to have a sort of key to prevent the use of dormant numbers. In other words, people wanting to reactivate their social insurance numbers would have to prove their identity again to the department.

Has that been done?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Simeoni: It's precisely what would happen if I left the country for more than five years, I came back, and I applied for some kind of federal benefit. There would be a dormant flag on my file because I didn't file with CRA or have any contact with Canada at all in that time. When I came back, I'd have to prove that I was me. I would have to go through the same validation process at that time for a dormant flag at Service Canada.

The Chair: This is what happens when I give Mr. Lessard an additional question.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I know. I really don't want to prolong this, but the audit clearly showed there were programs that did not follow up on a dormant flag.

For example, if a card was to be reused, old age security and the Canada student loans program do not have that kind of rigorous follow-up. It's fine and well that the accounts will be indicated as dormant if they haven't been used for five years. But if they are then to be reactivated, there should be a really rigorous process to make sure it is a valid reactivation.

●(1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to Mr. Martin and the NDP.

Sir, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Thank you.

I'm not going to chase the security angle of this, because I think it's been covered. I want to understand how what you found might in some significant way impede the delivery of service to citizens.

For example, in the last year or so, through conversation and in listening to people who come into my office, I've discovered there are senior retirees, literally hundreds of thousands of them, who aren't accessing the programs they're qualified to receive. It seems to me there has to be a better way of informing those folks that there's a program and they don't have to live in poverty. They could access it, they paid into it, and they should automatically be getting it.

If we decided as a government to move to a system where we in fact began to be proactive on the CPP, OAS, GIS, etc., would the problems you've discovered with the SIN process and the program support that, or would there be a problem in doing it?

I have a further question on this. I'm wracking my brain to understand why we didn't move to this previously. I think they do it in Quebec. In Quebec they actually contact people to make sure they're getting what they need.

Maybe they're not doing it because they don't have the confidence in the SIN number that they should have—and by "they", I mean government—to actually move to begin to deliver that kind of program across the country.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I refer the committee to an audit we did on the old age security program, which was tabled in November 2006. In fact, we looked at the whole question of how proactive the government had been in informing senior citizens and citizens in general about the benefits they could receive. We noted in that audit that in the last two or three years the government had put much more attention into that and been much more proactive. We noted that there had been quite a bit of improvement.

I think one recommendation we made was that they still weren't tracking very well the potential numbers of people who could be receiving the benefits and looking at how well their outreach activities were working. But there had been improvement in the last few years.

We also noticed that they used the Canada Revenue Agency database, for example, for the guaranteed income supplement, which is an error. I think there were a lot of questions raised about people who needed it not applying for it and receiving it. But I don't believe that would necessarily resolve the issues with the social insurance number and the register.

Before 1976 the process around applications and receiving a number were not as rigorous, and certainly not as rigorous as they are today. In fact, many people have told me they received a new social insurance number every time they had a summer job. So people could have more than one social insurance number—duplicates—that they received over time. It's a question of cleaning up the register.

The links to vital statistics in the provinces will also give better information to be able to take out numbers for people who are deceased. Then there's the whole question of people who have emigrated from the country whose numbers may still be in the register.

So it's a question of actually improving the quality of the information in there and maintaining it over time. I don't think it would really resolve the issue. Obviously some files might become active if people haven't applied for benefits to which they are entitled. They would have to reactivate their numbers.

Mr. Tony Martin: I had a meeting in Sault Ste. Marie just this past week, and about 75 people showed up because they were concerned that they weren't receiving the benefits to which they were entitled. In fact, we found a couple in that bunch.

When you did the review I think there were over 300,000. We still have over 100,000 who are not getting their GIS, according to Stats Canada and the information we have at our disposal.

I'm particularly concerned about families who come into my office after the death of their parents and discover, in trying to tie up the estates, that they actually qualified for Canada Pension or OAS. They had never received it and lived in some pretty desperate poverty. In some instances, they had actually gone in to see if they qualified and were told they didn't.

Would that have anything to do with some of the inadequacies or shortcomings of the SIN system we have in place? Why aren't we able to track these people and identify more quickly whether they are or aren't qualified? Why do we have so many people out there who qualify for some things but are told they don't? At the end of the day we have families weeping over the conditions in which some of these folks had to live before they died—living in poverty because they didn't get what they had coming to them.

● (1615)

Ms. Sheila Fraser: The social insurance number and the register in and of themselves do not give people access to programs. They have to apply. For the government, the social insurance number has essentially always been treated as a file identifier for government programs. So you have to make an application for old age security. The guaranteed income supplement is generally triggered by an application. So you have to apply for these programs.

I think the challenge for the government is to communicate and make those programs known to people so they make those applications.

Mr. Tony Martin: What I'm saying, too, is that there are people who do apply and who do go in to check this out. It seems to me, in my own circumstances, that the one thread that follows me through my working life is my SIN, until I get CPP or whatever. If you want to go back and check up on me, I give you my SIN and then you have my history.

There are people who are actually applying for CPP and some of these other things and are being told, in some instances, that they don't qualify, when in fact they do.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I'm afraid I really can't answer. I don't know. Perhaps somebody from the government can answer those questions.

The Chair: We'll have to wait until next time. Mr. Martin can pick that theme up again when we get to his next round.

Ms. Yelich, I believe, is going to share time with Mr. Brown.

Go ahead, for seven minutes.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC): I'll pick up on that for a minute. I guess the Treasury Board has given us the use of the SIN, and you can't access any of these programs at all unless you have a social insurance number, whether it be some of the northern programs, rural native housing, social assistance, or tax case appeal. You can't, unless you have a SIN, and I understand that. I guess what you're suggesting, Mr. Martin, is that what we have to do is give everybody a SIN.

I just want to ask the department something. The Auditor General expressed some concern about the number of excess SINs, and the department has made some significant progress, I believe. In your opinion, do you feel there is still a serious problem?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: The Auditor General, in all the reports done by her office on the social insurance number, has done a comparison, as I mentioned in my opening statement, of the population resident in Canada over a certain age and the number of SINs that are held. As I pointed out, not surprisingly there are more SIN holders than there are Canadian citizens in the country, because an awful lot of Canadians, we've discovered, and studies tell us, are expatriate and living abroad. And they would have left with their social insurance numbers.

I wouldn't propose to the speak for the Auditor General, but I think the theme of those reports was whether the government has considered what this might mean: Have you looked at the risks it poses? Are you trying to work away at the excess?

I think that's prompted a lot of good action. As was mentioned earlier, there were five million excess SINs, in the language of the Auditor General, a huge portion of which were dormant, in 2002. That number has come down considerably. The number in the report was 2.9 million, 2.1 million of which were flagged as dormant, leaving a difference of roughly 100,000 SINs. We think that is probably explained as people who are simply not in the country right now and haven't been gone for more than five years, so have not yet been flagged as dormant. They will be if they stay away longer, or they'll return and start showing up again.

Through the vital events agreements, through the deactivation of more than a million 900-series SINs, and because of the questions posed by the Auditor General on the excess, we've managed to clean and do some really good work in improving the integrity of the SIR. It's one of those things where the two numbers will never match, and our job is to continue to find ways to improve that integrity.

I think we've taken the big steps. The steps that will come in the future will be smaller steps, and they might be hard steps, so we have to keep working away at that.

● (1620)

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Before I pass it on to Patrick.... The numbers were high. Can you actually say that there are that many out of the country? Do you have some supporting data?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Yes, Mr. Chair, we've been looking into this, prompted by the Auditor General, and there are two studies that have come to our attention.

The first was done roughly a year ago by the OECD, and it estimated that the number of Canadians living outside Canada—Canadians born in Canada who are living outside Canada in an OECD country—was roughly 1.5 million people, but that is only in OECD countries. There were concerns about the methodology, which the authors were only too happy to express, but it was an estimate.

A more recent piece of work by the Asia Pacific Foundation tells us that their estimate, based on Statistics Canada information, is something like 2.8 million people living outside Canada. So it tells us that an awful lot of Canadians are currently not in the country. They may come back, they may not.

We need to think about the risks that poses for our social programs and the risks it poses for the integrity of the SIR and take action in the way the Auditor General has described. We need to be consistent in how we deal with the dormant flag. It needs to work in all programs like it does in EI, and if it doesn't, then we have to have some control that mitigates that same risk.

Mr. Patrick Brown (Barrie, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The department now uses a dormant flag on inactive SINs, but Ms. Fraser has expressed some concern about this process. Can you please briefly explain the dormant flag policy, and also how it can potentially help in reducing social insurance fraud?

On that note, does the department track patterns with social insurance fraud, and what have we learned from tracking those patterns that can help alleviate it in the future?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Beginning with your second question, we do look at SIN-related fraud. An awful lot of it tends to be related to employment insurance. It's individuals who are on claim and are able to obtain, one way or another, an alternative identity through a social insurance number. And then they're able to work while on claim as someone else, either a fictitious identity or they borrowed someone else's. So they're collecting EI and they're working at the same time, and probably not remitting tax on their job. We investigate quite a few cases like that.

The risk profile for SIN fraud is one that's based on our business intelligence. We update it all the time. If we see individuals, for example, who come into our offices and they have a recently issued birth certificate from any of the provinces, and it's recently issued and they're more than 20, right away we want to send them to one of our investigators to have a chat, because that seems odd. It's hard to get to be 20 years old and not have received a birth certificate already.

If you haven't worked, if you haven't applied for a SIN and you're over 20...there are a number of risk flags that we're constantly working with, and we provide that information to our staff in the field.

At the same time, we're constantly updating our training. I mentioned a certification program for staff on the identification of fraudulent documents, so that someone can't come in and obtain a SIN fraudulently using a false birth certificate.

Mr. Patrick Brown: The Auditor General also reported that the department needs to do a better job of reporting to Parliament on social-insurance-related activities. What is the department doing to act upon that?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Well, we've reported, I'd go so far as to say inconsistently, since 2002 in various reports to Parliament—the RPP and the DPR—about things like reaching vital events agreements and the various activities we'd undertaken, but the Auditor General is pushing us to become more results based. And we agree. We need to become more results based. We need to set targets, and we need to achieve them. And the principal area we need to do that in is the social insurance register.

So the next step for us is to set the goals for the integrity of the SIR, and then start to report to Parliament on how close—hopefully we'll have exceeded them. If we haven't, then we'll need to report on where we're at and what we're doing to meet those goals.

So that would be the next results-based move we could make, when it comes to reporting on performance.

●(1625)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Fraser, you have a quick comment.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Can I just make one point of clarification? We looked at the recommendation from the committee, and it was the committee that asked for that information. It wasn't the Auditor General.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much.

That concludes our first round. We're now going to move into our second round, where questions and answers will be five minutes.

We're going to start back on the opposition side with Mr. Savage. You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses today.

I want to just talk a bit more about the register. In the Auditor General's report, in February, she says in the preamble:

> While the Department has continued its efforts to improve the Social Insurance Register...its progress is unsatisfactory. It has set no goals for the accuracy, completeness, and reliability of the data, and its measurement of data quality has been unsystematic and limited in scope.

And it goes on to say, among other things, in more detail:

> ...Service Canada currently has no goals for data accuracy, completeness, and reliability, and we consider the lack of systematic and comprehensive measurement of the Register's data quality a significant risk....

And you highlight this weakness again today.

Mr. Simeoni, I think in your presentation you referred to the register, indicating:

> ...we are setting goals for Register accuracy and completeness to understand how effective our measures.... To do this, we are first determining the current level of accuracy of key data. We will then determine the potential cost....

I would like to ask the Auditor General if she has anything further on that, but then I'd like to ask Mr. Simeoni to give us a schedule on how this is. In terms of setting goals, that seems pretty basic, in the sense that we can't go where we need to go if we don't know exactly where we are.

So I'd just like some more detail on those two things, if the Auditor General has anything else to add on that. If not, then I would go directly to Mr. Simeoni.

Ms. Sheila Fraser: I have nothing to add.

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Mr. Chair, a small digression.

I mentioned earlier that we have not set goals, that we need to set goals, and that we're working on setting goals. But the department chose, over the past four years, to fix the process by which SINs were issued to make sure all future SINs after 2002 had it; we were sure of their integrity. So that was a management decision.

We think we're doing all the right things to maintain and improve the integrity of the SIR, including pursuing those vital events agreements. As far as setting goals goes, it would be tempting—and we've looked at other jurisdictions like the United States, for example, the social security administration—to pick a number like 99%, or 99.5%, and even then on a database as large as the SIR, you would be talking about an awful lot of inaccurate fields, even at 0.5%.

But we need to understand first what an error really means. Does it matter that for my birthday, say, the numbers are transposed in the SIR if no federal government program operates on day but rather month and year, for example? We need to understand better how the information is used, what a critical error is, and a far less critical error, and then set our goals for accuracy based on that. We are in the midst of that study right now, and we will have goals set by this fall.

Mr. Michael Savage: There will be goals set in terms of what, specifically?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Key fields of the social insurance register—identify them and decide how accurate they need to be.

Mr. Michael Savage: It seems to me it's a very basic piece of the puzzle: first of all, identifying what matters, and then identifying how you're going to get to the targets you set. I don't know what the targets should be, but I assume you guys should know that, and then determining the potential cost to federal programs of any errors, etc., and monitoring and reporting. Is that something we as a committee can ask for up-to-date information on—how that process is going—so we can see how the progress is being monitored? That would be something I'd be interested in.

How much time do I have, Chair?

● (1630)

The Chair: One minute.

Mr. Michael Savage: I will just ask one question.

Mr. Simeoni mentioned placing dormant flags on SINs that have not been used for five years. I'm interested in this: how many Canadians who are living in the country would go five years without using a SIN for something? How would you do that? Is it possible to go five years living in Canada without using your SIN?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: I'll ask Mr. Kremers to comment on this.

My guess would be it's unusual, except in the case of all the SINs we're now providing to children, who may receive them at five years of age. Parents buy the education grant for some time, discontinue it; five, six years pass, and they become dormant. Then they enter the workforce and they have the issue of dealing with a dormant SIN, which is something they can deal with if they provide us with a birth certificate.

Mr. Michael Savage: But are the SINs of children under a certain age not identified separately from everybody else's?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: We can do that, but dormant is dormant, and we think there is a risk associated with all dormant—

Mr. Michael Savage: It seems to me you would expect children wouldn't use their SIN number, but you would expect adults to.

The Chair: That's all the time we have, Mr. Savage.

We're going to move now to our next questioner.

Mr. Lessard, five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Chairman, you know as well as I do that members of Parliament find it very difficult to read everything we need to be able to keep abreast of issues. Of course, we try to be disciplined and read the Auditor General's report, because it governs us and our conduct and lets us know whether things are functioning properly.

When you came before the committee last year, you said that you were doing an audit of something that I thought the Auditor General had already audited. I thought that the firm was probably going to audit something else. As you said earlier, PriceWaterhouseCoopers audited, I believe, two aspects that the Auditor General had already noted: what progress had been made and whether the steps taken were adequate.

Chapter 6 of this year's Auditor General's report contains a table with the AG's recommendations and the progress made in each area. It was good to see that progress had been achieved in some areas, but some of the other areas were also audited by PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Why was an outside firm asked to audit the same things as the Auditor General, and even the results were the same? That is why I am trying to understand.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Mr. Chair, I gather I wasn't clear in my previous answer. There were two reasons. One was the difference in reporting. The Auditor General would be reporting in February. Pricewaterhouse had results for us in August of last year. That gave us a six-month headstart on dealing with significant issues we had to work on.

I also said in my previous answer on this that this is something I plan on doing again, not necessarily with Pricewaterhouse, but have someone come in and take a look at our progress and our action plan and provide us with an alternative view. We're the ones who are in the social insurance number business, and we benefit a lot from bringing experts in to help us understand how we're doing. I really don't see the issue in having Pricewaterhouse give us a view of what it is we needed to do and keep working on and have the Auditor General come in later on and confirm similar findings.

We also consulted with the Office of the Auditor General on the design of the work itself. They looked at the terms of reference, and we had hoped that they would factor that into their report.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: You have just given me an additional piece of information that I did not have, which is that you are also looking for guidance on how to do things now. From what you are saying, if I look at the PWC's report, that is where I should find something that is new. That helps. It gives us something to go on.

Moreover, the Auditor General's report was very specific, given the work that had been done in the department. She suggested setting objectives to ensure that social insurance Registry was reliable, complete and accurate. The department had not yet used those criteria in its objectives.

What progress have you made in that area? What is being done right now? Are there timeframes? If so, what are they?

● (1635)

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Mr. Chair, I'll repeat part of the answer I gave to one of the other members. We are right in the midst of the study that is going to identify what fields in the social insurance register are the key ones for the purposes of program administration and what level of error is significant, and then we'll need to estimate where the SIR is at itself and set some goals for doing that. We hope to be able to report what those goals are by this fall and where we stand in relation to them.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Very well. What are the new measures?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Simeoni: I'm sorry, I don't follow the question.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: There is also the matter of what is being done to correct the situation. You have answered this twice already. You said that we will have results by this fall. Is that right?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Yes, we'll have the goals and our current performance in relation to those goals. Where we have not met our own goals we'll need to talk about what corrective measures we would take to close that gap to improve the integrity of the SIR, and some timetable for doing that. I would imagine it wouldn't be a very long timetable.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's all the time we have.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Chairman, I would simply like to make a comment that does not need an answer. I have the impression that things are right where they were last year. I just wanted to bring that up for your consideration.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lessard.

It must be reassuring to Madame Fraser that Pricewaterhouse came up with the same results and same actions that she did.

We're going to move to Mr. Martin for five minutes, please.

Mr. Tony Martin: I'm going to continue on the same track, because I have a real concern about this.

I wonder if you looked at the issue of SIN numbers and how they actually work in terms of programs that need to be delivered out there to people. Ms. Yelich a few minutes ago said that maybe we need to give everybody a SIN number. Maybe in fact we do somehow, because a lot of the people I talk to and hear about who in fact haven't accessed some of the entitlements they had a right to are seniors, they are women, and many of them have never worked. If they didn't work they probably didn't get a SIN number. If they didn't have a SIN number, then they have no history, no track record, nothing to indicate that maybe they did qualify for something. Could that be a problem? Is this something that could be fixed?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Obviously that was not an issue we looked at in this audit. The only area in which we would look at this would be if we were looking at a particular program, for example, old age security. We would look at how well the government communicates the availability of the program. Again in that audit, we indicated there had been progress, but there is still room for improvement.

But we would look at it specifically program by program. I don't know that government itself has done anything more on social security numbers in general.

Mr. Tony Martin: I'd be interested in knowing if in fact the SIN number is sort of the thumbprint for all of us. There are literally thousands of people out there who have worked at home, looked after their children, and brought up their family. Because of this, they have not registered. How do we keep track of them? Is there any effort being made to put something in place that would keep track of them, so they don't fall through the cracks and end up living lives of desperate poverty in some instances?

● (1640)

Mr. Onno Kremers: If there's a specific program that is geared towards people in need, and that program needs authorization to use a social insurance number, then there's a process in place for that program to obtain one, either by applying through the existing Treasury Board policy or through legislation from a particular department.

That's the way you'd become an authorized social insurance holder, and that's why we have somewhere in the neighbourhood of 26 authorized users within the federal government.

So if there are specific programs that need to track, as you say, people in need with the social insurance number, that's the way they would obtain it.

Mr. Tony Martin: CPP is one of those, from what I understand from reading this report. So how do we connect the people who qualify for at least some part of this? CPP, OAS, and GIS are different programs, I suppose you were going to say.

So how do we get the people who don't register for CPP in the first instance by working and then don't get what they're entitled to in terms of OAS and GIS?

Mr. Onno Kremers: Within Canada, it's fairly rare that a person doesn't have a social insurance number, because you need it for taxes and to get your first job. You need it for a variety of purposes. It's very rare to find a large tranche of the population that doesn't have social insurance numbers. Certainly it's not a trend that we have witnessed.

Mr. Tony Martin: Okay. There's been some research done in this, and some material has been written. My experience—and I guess that of others who try to serve their constituents—is that seniors particularly aren't accessing the programs they're entitled to, and many live in desperate poverty because of this.

Could I say to you, Auditor General, that this is something you might want to look into, in order to see why we're failing so many of our citizens with these good programs? In fact, if they were accessed, they have provided sufficient income for literally thousands of Canadian citizens. But there are still hundreds of thousands of them who don't get it because they're not somehow plugged into the system.

Could we check to see why we're failing these numbers of people who so desperately need this help?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: We can certainly consider it. We did look at it when we audited the old age security program to see what efforts the department was making.

One of the difficulties is that it requires someone to make an application. So how do you ensure that people are aware of the programs, and then how do you get them to make the application? This is part of the problem. I'm not sure that we can cover that. We can only look at the efforts that the departments are making to communicate this information to the population.

Mr. Tony Martin: Obviously you did a review and the department responded. We still have over 100,000 people who aren't getting what they deserve. Could you do another review?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: As it is our matter of course to do follow-up audits, we can certainly look to see when that one would be scheduled, what follow-up we've done, and what they have done specifically in that area.

Mr. Tony Martin: Because there's something wrong here.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

We're going to move to the last questioner of this round, Mr. Chong, sir, for five minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have four questions for Mr. Simeoni.

You noted in your remarks that the Government of Canada has concluded agreements with New Brunswick, Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta for provincial vital events information. I note as well that in the Auditor General's report she states that a review done in late 2004 said that up to 18 months would be required to implement this streamlined process for collecting information of

vital events. We're now over that period of time—almost two years over.

Can you tell us when we're going to have the rest of the six provinces sign on with these agreements? Do you have any idea as to the timeframe? Are we looking at six months, 12 months, or years?

● (1645)

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Mr. Chair, I would love to be able to say that we'll have the rest signed up in the next 12 months, but it is a matter of federal-provincial negotiations. It's incumbent on Service Canada and HRSDC to sell the merits of the vital events agreements to the provincial governments that have not yet signed up with us. We have to show them that this is a win-win for the citizens of their provinces and the citizens of Canada generally.

We're hoping, and in fact it's one of my goals, to sign at least three more agreements in the coming year. If we can do better than that, it would be great. That would leave three more to go in the year after that.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

My second question has to do with the accuracy of information in the register. You've talked about the process by which you're going to ensure greater accuracy in the register, but do you have any timeframes with respect to that in terms of full implementation so that we do have processes and systems in place to ensure greater accuracy?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Not knowing at this point where the problems lie exactly, we know overall that the integrity is quite high, because it doesn't tend to come up as an issue at all in program administration. But that doesn't mean that the SIR is fully accurate, by any means, and I don't mean to imply that. It would be difficult for me to say it will take us six months or 12 months to fix the problems that we're about to uncover. I don't know the magnitude of them, and I don't really know what the solutions are, except to say that if I can sign three or four more provinces in vital events agreements and get the birth and death data that come with them and the rest in the coming year, then a lot of our SIR integrity issues would automatically be solved.

So I say at the outside, if we can achieve those vital events agreements, we're two years away from having a database that has as much integrity as we can possibly have.

Hon. Michael Chong: My third question concerns the idea of flags on dormant SIN numbers.

I think I heard correctly earlier in the testimony in front of this committee, Mr. Chair, that while numbers may be flagged as dormant, it doesn't necessarily mean that the various programs that use the number actually pay attention to that dormant flag. Maybe you can tell this committee, through you, Mr. Chair, what actions, what steps, you're taking to liaise with other departments and programs to ensure that the dormant flag actually means something.

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Fortunately, and maybe unfortunately, these programs identified by the Auditor General are within HRSDC, which is what Service Canada is part of. They're our departmental colleagues, and we're working with them now to look at the results of the audit and to try to understand what problem this might be causing for their program administration. It's their view, and I think it's reflected in the audit report, that they understand the risk and they have mitigating controls. But I think the Auditor General is asking us to look very hard at whether or not we're managing the risk well, and that's what we're doing right now; we're studying the use of the dormant flags in these programs.

Hon. Michael Chong: My last question is a very short one. Has the department considered or looked into the use of smart cards as a way of replacing the existing SIN cards?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: I'll ask my colleagues from Treasury Board Secretariat to help me out on this answer, but as you know, the SIN is not a piece of identification in that sense, so it need not have biometrics or any other special measure on it.

Mr. Jim Alexander: I don't think I really have too much to add to that. The use of smart cards, where they would be used, and whether that would add anything to the integrity of individual programs are things that individual programs across the federal government are looking at. I think my colleagues from the department have sort of identified their approach for addressing program integrity issues and the integrity of the social insurance register.

Thank you.

● (1650)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chong.

We're now going to move to our last round. We have Mr. Merasty for five minutes, please.

Mr. Gary Merasty (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I have a couple of quick, to the point questions. Is there any certain segment of the population that is underrepresented in the uptake or applications of SINs in the country—new Canadians or people in remote locations or aboriginal people in particular—and if there is, why is that?

I know you referenced some foundation documents, and coincidentally I had a question. This is a status Indian card, and I don't know if they're accepted or not. I was asked that question by an applicant. Getting photo ID in some of our remote communities, even for voting purposes, is next to impossible when they're isolated.

Have any of those barriers been identified, and have any efforts been made to overcome them somehow?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: We, too, worry that they are under-represented. The SIN is a vital document. I wouldn't say that it is as a piece of identification, but it is, as we all know, difficult to function in Canadian society if you don't have one. So we do worry that there are segments of the population that we're not reaching, and you've identified two of them, including people living in remote communities. Service Canada is undertaking to reach them either through the web or through our community visits, because you may know that we take ourselves on the road; we don't just stay in our Service Canada offices in the major cities.

We're also looking at SINs at landings to get at the new immigrant population—it's not implemented yet, but we're working on it—so that when someone arrives in Canada, they arrive with a SIN that's tied to the immigration process, and their identity is validated through the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, to get at a potentially underrepresented part of the population who may arrive here and who we then have trouble reaching. There may be language difficulties, although we're looking at multilingual services, so we're working on it. We're trying to identify these segments and do what we can to reach them, and that's consistent with the Service Canada vision.

Mr. Gary Merasty: This question may be for the Auditor General as well. I don't know if this has ever been looked at or examined. Do you actually know if there are underrepresented populations? I know you just gave an answer, but do we actually know if there's underrepresentation in any particular segment?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: That is not an issue that we looked at in this audit, and I don't know if the department would have that information or not. I'm sorry.

Mr. Gary Merasty: Okay.

Mr. Simeoni.

Mr. Peter Simeoni: I think for us, because we are contemplating the SIN at landing service in major airports, we're concerned enough that there is an underrepresented group in the population, and we want to make sure they have a social insurance number as soon as they arrive in Canada. Without having specific data on how long people may have been here without one and the problems they may encounter in getting one once they're here, we just think it would be a far better service to provide it to them as part of the package of things they receive, a bundle of services, if you like, that they receive before they even arrive in Canada, from us and other departments.

Mr. Gary Merasty: Do you know if they take the—

Mr. Peter Simeoni: I'll ask my colleague to respond.

Mr. Onno Kremers: Your question was whether we take the status Indian card?

Mr. Gary Merasty: Right.

Mr. Onno Kremers: Yes, we do. If you're a registered Indian and you want to have the status indicated on your SIN record, you'd have to submit something called a Certificate of Indian Status to us. So, yes, that is quite possible. We annotate your records accordingly.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Merasty.

I will now move to Mr. Lake.

You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Mill Woods—Beaumont, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I see that this meeting is televised today. I'm sure it's going to be a sure ratings winner for CPAC.

My first question is in regard to the SIR. I'm just curious, what information is in the SIR? Obviously a person's name and address are, but what other information is in this registry?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: It would be all the information collected during the SIN application process, so it's the information provided by the applicant to us.

Onno, you may be more familiar with the actual fields, beyond the obvious ones.

Mr. Onno Kremers: There are somewhere in the neighbourhood of about 30 fields, but the key fields have to do with the name of the individual, their birth date, their place of birth, and their nationality. I think those are the key fields.

Mr. Mike Lake: It has place of birth. So the address isn't a field?

● (1655)

Mr. Onno Kremers: Their address is not an element within the social insurance register per se. It is something that is collected by individual programs. When you apply for a program like employment insurance, then the address would come into play.

Mr. Mike Lake: Right.

In terms of the updating of information, I guess you could hypothetically have two Bob Smiths born in Toronto on the same day, or whatever the case is. There's no other unique identifier. Is there a system for...?

I'm thinking about the provinces. This is the largest unique identifier system or database in the country. Are there similar systems? What would be the next biggest system that you could use to compare information with your system to find out whether there are inconsistencies in the data?

Mr. Onno Kremers: We have a very active program with the Canada Revenue Agency. In that program, we cross-check our respective data. CRA takes our data and uses the social insurance number in the tax process, and we take the information with respect to employment and other factors and we use it to check the social insurance number.

Mr. Mike Lake: I was thinking about the privacy laws, and I just had a question on.... Is there a possibility that certain privacy laws might actually work counter to the overall privacy interests of Canadians in this case? By way of an example, I'm thinking about whether or not there may be walls set up between government departments and things like that in order to protect privacy. It may be possible that sometimes those walls would block information that might point to social insurance number abuse, in a sense, if organizations were able to share that information.

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Mr. Chair, clearly we operate within the framework of laws passed by Parliament and take them as a given. There are strict controls over the sharing of information, and privacy is one of the paramount concerns. The challenge for us as public servants is to try to achieve program integrity and service goals at the same time that we respect the privacy of Canadians. For us, it's a question of figuring out the right way of doing that without necessarily breaking down the walls between the programs.

We need a different frame, so to speak, for how we approach services to Canadians. We achieve integrity goals, save money for taxpayers, provide services Canadians need, and respect privacy all at the same time. It's not easy, but that's what we have to do.

Mr. Mike Lake: The Auditor General had expressed two main concerns in her opening statement. One of those was that Service Canada "has not determined how accurate, complete, and reliable the data should be, and it does not have a systematic means for measuring data quality".

In your statement, you talked about some of the things you're doing. You said, "We will then determine the potential cost to federal programs of any errors", and you have some measurement things in there. What's your timeline? When are you planning to be finished the work to that end?

Mr. Peter Simeoni: We expect to be able to report our goals and our status in terms of those goals this fall.

Mr. Mike Lake: To the Auditor General, just in terms of what you've heard today—and I know this doesn't constitute an audit by any means—how satisfied are you with what you've heard today in terms of some of the progress?

Ms. Sheila Fraser: We recognized in the audit that the department had made progress on several issues. There are certainly firm commitments that have now been made for next March, both on the question of data quality and on the question of the policy itself. As this committee can probably imagine, we will be following up to see that those commitments are actually kept.

If they are kept, I think we'll say we are very pleased with the progress that will have been made, because this is an issue that has been around for a very long time. It will be good to see it resolved.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lake. That concludes our third round.

I know that Madame Bonsant wanted to ask a couple of questions.

Make it just a couple of quick questions, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): My question concerns the 2.1 million social insurance numbers on which we placed dormant flags. Do those numbers belong to the 900-series or the regular series? They are regular series numbers.

In many couples where one of the two spouses does not work, no income must be stated on the tax return. Therefore, the number cannot be dormant, it already appears on the tax statement. We must be careful, because there are many fraudulent cases. There are not only cases of fraud concerning employment insurance, but many cases concerning social assistance. Banks, caisses populaires often see clients come in with 7, 8, 10 different cheques bearing the same social insurance number, with different names, but one same address. Those institutions are bound by confidentiality. By dealing directly with the banks, you might be able to detect cases of fraud through social insurance numbers.

Does the government intend to do that?

● (1700)

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Simeoni: Mr. Chair, on the first point, of the 2.1 million that were dormant as of June 2006, none of those would have been 900-series SINs, by the nature of them. All of those now have expiry dates on them, so they simply wouldn't be part of the dormant population.

As far as working with financial institutions is concerned, from time to time we find ourselves doing it when there is a loss of personal information. We learn a lot about their practices in the process. And we provide advice to their customers when bank files and other files go missing.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant: What do you do when funeral homes or hospitals advise you of a death, and also gives you the social insurance number? Do you cancel the number, or do you place a little red flag on it?

[*English*]

Mr. Onno Kremers: We take that information—and that information is particularly important for us to get on a very timely kind of basis—so that we can do two things: one, stop the payment; and two, proactively kick-start any survivor benefits.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant: I'm not talking about what happens to the survivors, I'm talking about the social insurance number of the deceased person. For example, when my mother passed away, her card was withdrawn. What do you do with that number?

[*English*]

Mr. Onno Kremers: The number never gets cancelled in the system, but it is definitely annotated as a number that cannot be used.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant: Then why are there so many cases of fraud where people using the name of a deceased person, manage to get a social insurance number, and the problem recurs? Why don't you cancel the number? There's so much fraud going on, this might be an intelligent way of putting an end to it.

[*English*]

Mr. Onno Kremers: If someone comes forward with that particular number, it would be annotated on our files and we would know it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant: In any case, if the system were truly working well, my dear sir, there wouldn't be any fraud.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Bonsant.

Mr. Martin has asked for just one additional question. Then we're going to suspend for five minutes. There's not a whole lot of committee business today.

So because we have a little bit of time, Mr. Martin, you may have just a quick question. Then we'll wrap up.

Mr. Tony Martin: Just to the Auditor General again, and it's off topic, but since we have you here—I think I did this the last time. You've done a review of passports. It's a real fiasco out there. I don't know if you're watching it or not, but I know that anybody who is trying to manage or run a constituency office is inundated—me, two or three people sometimes, full-time, flat out. This past Easter weekend I had a staffer in for a day and a half trying to find a passport for somebody who was going to Italy who had applied in December and who reapplied in February. They sent out the passport

on the Thursday before Easter; it didn't show up. They were leaving on the Monday. I and one of my staffers and three post offices that were shut for the weekend were looking for this passport. We had the Prime Minister's office, the Foreign Affairs office, and a guy named Bill, who was on duty for the weekend. He was the guy answering all the questions, but he couldn't do anything; he had no power to do anything, no authority. I didn't ask him where he was; maybe he was in India or some place, I'm not quite sure.

It's such a waste of resources. If we could only get this thing fixed....

You had identified some issues, but you were concerned about security. I think in some ways we've allowed security to overwhelm almost everything now to the point where we can't find the flexibility anymore to do what we need to do to service our constituents—real, honest, hard-working, ordinary Canadian citizens who need a passport, who are going away, who have done all the right things but can't get it. There are parts of the country, rural and northern Canada, where we have no passport offices and people are actually driving 12 hours to get there to find out that they can't get a passport anyway because the rules won't allow it. For example, for an emergency passport now, apparently somebody has to have died. I know that wasn't a recommendation you made, but it's an interpretation that is now being put in by some people. We just don't get them. I feel at the very least those of us who live in northern and rural Canada are really being discriminated against.

Have you followed up any further or done anything more on that? I know you said at that point you were.

●(1705)

Ms. Sheila Fraser: Mr. Chair, in the February report we tabled our follow-up of the audit we had done on the passport the previous year because the public accounts committee had asked us to do a follow-up. We normally would have waited a little longer. Our work was essentially completed in August-September, as was this report, which was obviously before all the problems in January-February. We did note in that audit that there was a not bad forecasting system at head office of the passport office, but the individual offices didn't have contingency plans in place for surges in demand. Of course, with the western hemisphere travel initiative, the demand went up suddenly in January. I think a lot of people had speculated that it wasn't going to happen, so waited, and then of course with a lot of travel in Canada in the winter, the demand was enormous. I was told by the department even the printing presses for the passports were running 24 hours a day; they were right up to top volume.

I think there are lessons learned, and we will be going back, because we went in so quickly after the initial audit. We will be going back at some point, and that would certainly be one of the issues we would look at—how well they managed these spikes, because one could expect there will be another one coming with the land border crossings.

We'll have to take a look at how well they manage those fluctuations in volumes in the contingency planning.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I would just thank all the witnesses for being here today. We appreciate your taking time to come and respond to our questions. I'll ask the committee to suspend for five minutes before we come back and deal with committee business.

Thank you once again for being here today.

● (1705)

_____ (Pause) _____

● (1710)

The Chair: I will call the members back to the table so that we can deal with the issues we have at hand. Then we can hopefully dispense and move on to what other members have to do for the rest of the day.

Under new business, we have witnesses coming in on Bill C-303, so we need to look at a budget, which you have in your package, that would give us an opportunity to be able to bring some witnesses in to talk to us. We've set aside some days that we've all agreed upon. I believe it's four days to hear witnesses—to hear the sponsor of the bill, and we have some provinces coming in, and then to hear people for and against the bill.

I would like you to have a look at the budget you have before you. It is something that has been put together by the clerk. What we want to move is that the budget of $23,400 to study Bill C-303 be adopted.

Is there any discussion on that? It's pretty straightforward, something that's been put together as a suggestion by the clerk. Do we have any discussion?

The question is, all in favour, then, of the budget...?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay. That is agreed.

Mr. Martin.

Mr. Tony Martin: Pursuant to Standing Order 97.1, I move that the committee request from the House an extension of 30 sitting days to complete the study of Bill C-303.

The Chair: This is as a result of the fact that we are going to go over the date; I believe it was supposed to be reported back on May 1. This does not mean we'll need the full 30 days. We'll deal with it as we come out from there.

So that's a motion that you move. Is there any discussion on it?

Yes, Ms. Yelich.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I would be in favour of that.

Can we just add a couple of witnesses, then? I have, in my province, people who set up their own day care with government help, and they would like to put their position on record, so I wonder, if we're going to extend it, whether we can extend by a couple of witnesses.

We were a little lax on this end: we were so caught up in employability and Bill C-257 that this slipped by us.

The Chair: That's not a bad.... I know there are witnesses on both sides who would like to come, and we're limiting it to four days. Why don't we deal with the issue, first of all, of the sitting days, which we need to extend for Bill C-303 and as well for Bill C-284? Why don't we deal with that issue first? Then we can entertain adding on another day or so to this.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: But can I make sure that we don't have three days in a row anymore? That's a little brutal. Let's not change from just two days, please.

The Chair: Most definitely. We've left it to two days. You'll even notice that we only had one day this week, to make up for some of the three days we've been sitting.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Either you're getting better or we are.

The Chair: No, trust me.

There's another issue coming up that we need to deal with as well, with regard to Karen Redman's motion, which I want to just touch on before we finish.

The motion we have before us, Mr. Martin, is that pursuant to Standing Order 97.1, the committee requests from the House an extension of 30 sitting days to complete the study of Bill C-303.

If there's no further discussion, I'll call the question.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: There's one last motion that we need to move.

Ms. Dhalla.

● (1715)

Ms. Ruby Dhalla: I move that, pursuant to Standing Order 97.1, the committee request from the House an extension of 30 sitting days to complete the study of Bill C-284.

The Chair: Thank you very much. According to the agenda and the timeframe we've set aside here, that will be, as of right now, towards the end of May—I believe May 29 and May 31.

Mr. Savage.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you, Chair.

Just on this bill, I understand the importance. Bill C-303 is a very important bill and requires sufficient time. Bill C-284 is also very important. I met today with some students, and they asked me the status of it, so I'm glad this came up today.

Will it be the next study we do after Bill C-303?

The Chair: We're going to finish up the employability study and we're going to do Bill C-303 and Bill C-284. That is correct. That is the order we're going to follow.

The other thing I want to suggest, not to cloud the issues here, is about the motion of Ms. Redman that came forward. Mr. Lessard proposed, because of the way the motion was written, that we deal with it in May, which we do not have in our calendar right now.

I would encourage you all to go back to your whips to deal with the fact that Mr. Lessard has made a motion that makes a lot of sense: that we have a chance to look at it in the fall, because we are jammed up.

We also have the fact that we don't want to be sitting any more than two days a week. I know that will be coming up for a vote tomorrow night.

So I would encourage you to talk to the whips. It's not that we're trying to put if off, but we have a calendar that is full right now, and unless you want to start sitting three days a week again, that is an issue.

That was a very good motion, Mr. Lessard, that you put forward.

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Chair, just for clarification, Bill C-284, then, will come when we're finished Bill C-303?

The Chair: That is correct.

Mr. Michael Savage: We'll discuss who we'll have and how many days it will be at a future date.

The Chair: I have it in front of me. The way the schedule works right now is that when we're done with them next week, we're going to start with Bill C-303, then the employability study, and then Bill C-284. That is the way it's going to work, as we decided on the subagenda.

Mr. Michael Savage: The subcommittee will look at how many days to allocate and make a recommendation to us on Bill C-284.

The Chair: Right now we've allocated what was recommended, which was two days. We can certainly add to it in June, as Ms. Yelich was suggesting for Bill C-303. That's not a problem.

We have a motion on the table to extend the sitting days. If I have no further discussion on it, I'll call the vote.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Those are the two motions I wanted to deal with.

To deal with Mr. Savage and Ms. Yelich, would we like to add another day to Bill C-303? Is that what you're suggesting?

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: The deadline to report was later.

The Chair: No, it's been dealt with. You were suggesting earlier that you had additional witnesses. Do we want to add one more day for witnesses, or do you want to try to circumvent that?

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I think we can tack them on.

The Chair: You want to tack them on.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Well, maybe we can play a little bit. Let me think.

The Chair: Okay. You think about it, and we can talk.

We have a subcommittee meeting on Thursday morning, and we can look at it as we move forward.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Would it make any sense to flip Bill C-284 and Bill C-303 and do Bill C-284 first?

The Chair: We already have the witnesses.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Okay. I'm only checking.

The Chair: Mr. Lake, Mr. Savage, and then Mr. Martin.

Mr. Lake.

Mr. Mike Lake: Right now we have four meetings scheduled on Bill C-303.

The Chair: That is correct.

Mr. Mike Lake: Do you have any idea how many witnesses we're talking about?

The Chair: Yes. Right now we have confirmed that five witnesses have been invited to each meeting. It would be standard in terms of what we normally look at.

Mr. Mike Lake: It seems to me it would be best to add a couple of days. I'm sure there will be more witnesses, and we already know of some who will want to take part in this. As we remember from Bill C-257, it got to the point where we had so many witnesses that you didn't have a chance to hear from everybody.

The Chair: I think the other suggestion is that if we don't want to add any more days, we could look at those who don't say they can come and we could slot them in on that basis.

The way it stands right now is that we'll hear from the sponsor on April 24. Once again, next Tuesday, we'll hear from the sponsor. In the afternoon, we'll hear different organizations.

On April 26, which is a week Thursday or a week tomorrow, we'll hear from the legal department and then some of the provincial governments.

On May 1 and 3, we'll hear from those who are for it and those who are against it.

It's the way the meetings have been laid out so far. There have certainly not been five who have committed, and we have invited five for each of those slots. If some people are not able to make it, maybe those who want to be added to the list could be added at that point in time.

● (1720)

Mr. Mike Lake: To verify, at this point, we only have one day for those who are for it and one day for those who are against it?

The Chair: That is correct. The other day we have is for some legal associations, as well as government, and we have a balance of that.

To clarify, we have one day set aside for those who are for it and one day set aside for those who are against it. In addition to that, we have the government and organizations.

Mr. Mike Lake: I think we may need to look at adding at least one more week to the schedule to get another day for and another day against. I think there will be enough witnesses.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: We extended the deadline for reporting.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Martin, did you say you're okay?

Mr. Tony Martin: Yes. We put forward a calendar for the committee a short while ago. We agreed on the calendar at that time, and we thought we could get this work done. We're looking at the summer coming at us in a fairly big hurry, and we want to get this work done.

I personally think this is sufficient time to hear from people, both for and against, and the officials and provinces. We can then move on. By then, I think we'll all know whether we support it or we don't support it, and we will move on.

By extending it, we'll get into the same rigmarole we got into with a few other pieces of business that came before this House, and it doesn't add anything. At the end, it was actually a bit of a disaster, if I remember correctly. It didn't add anything positive or constructive to the debate.

I'm happy with what we have. I'd suggest that we stick with it and try to get the work done in that time period.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have Mr. Savage, followed by Mr. Lessard, and then Ms. Dhalla.

Mr. Michael Savage: My question was along the lines of Mr. Lake's and Mr. Martin's. In terms of the schedule, is it possible that we...? We haven't seen that list of witnesses yet, of who has agreed to come. Can that be circulated to our offices?

The Chair: Most definitely, yes.

Mr. Michael Savage: Have we not reached the deadline for witness submissions?

The Chair: We've reached that deadline. People have been contacted, and, once again, there were more witnesses who wanted to come than we had spaces for, so we made sure that we had both sides balanced, as we normally work in this committee, to those for and those against, and there were also governments that wanted to come. We have coming the Nova Scotia government, the P.E.I. government, the City of Toronto, the Northwest Territories, and Manitoba. We have a wide variety of provinces.

Mr. Michael Savage: I think it's important to hear from Nova Scotia, but I was just asking—

The Chair: I had a feeling you might say that.

Mr. Michael Savage: Even with a Conservative government. The thing I would say is we should have a look at that list of witnesses, and we need to have a drop-dead date this week by which point we would submit any further suggestions of witnesses. I think we should agree today that that would be Thursday or whenever the subcommittee meets. But I'd like to have a look at the list of witnesses to see if there's anybody I might make a case for trying to add.

The Chair: My suggestion is, why don't we have a look at that on Thursday. We'll give them another day or two to confirm and then we can send out the list of witnesses who have confirmed. How does that sound?

I have Mr. Lessard, followed by Ms. Dhalla, and then Mr. Lake.

Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Chairman, we cannot make the same mistake as during consideration of Bill C-257. The committee is not an open bar where anyone can come and testify. We want to grasp the two main schools of thought, and as you said earlier, achieve a balance between the two.

I agree with Mr. Savage, who is suggesting that we consider the issue on Thursday. Let us hope that we can avoid a repeat of the situation which occurred during consideration of Bill C-257. We had already heard from major national organizations, only to have partner organizations appearing before us to repeat what their national organizations had already said.

Once the committee becomes familiar with the respective opinions of the various sectors, we will already have a good grasp of the issue.

On Thursday, I would like confirmation on what had already been decided on, before inviting anyone, and it is particularly pressing because the deadline has passed. The opinion of the provinces is of the utmost importance. If a province wishes to appear but has not had the opportunity to sign up, that is something we may consider. I do not want to give preferential treatment, but rather particular consideration to the overall representations, rather than specific ones.

● (1725)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lessard.

We have Ms. Dhalla, followed by Mr. Lake.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla: I want to echo what Mr. Martin and I believe Mr. Lessard said to a certain extent. We had a schedule that I think was agreed upon by the whole committee, and if there are witnesses who have not been able to attend and there is room within that space, I think we should only make that decision on Thursday to make sure there is fair representation.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have Mr. Lake and Ms. Yelich. I want to let everyone know that we're at about 5:27. We can stay until the bells ring. I don't know when that's going to be.

Fire away, Mr. Lake.

Mr. Mike Lake: Based on how much it gets talked about in the House, I want to say that this is obviously an issue that's really, really important. It's an important issue in each of our ridings. There are strong feelings on all sides and many, many different viewpoints. I know that in my riding it's a very significant issue.

I take a bit of contention with Mr. Lessard's characterization of everybody coming to testify willy-nilly. There are a significant number of parents in this country who unfortunately do not have a large organized lobby funded by the former Liberal government. They may want to testify. They have a viewpoint that needs to be heard. I think it's important that they have their views heard.

This is not a mad rush. We gave many days to Bill C-257. Obviously I'm not looking to have a situation where we sit for as long as we did on Bill C-257; we have other things we need to consider. But this is really important for people on both sides of the issue. It is something that Canadians are very passionate about, and we need to give this a proper hearing.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lake.

I have one final comment from Ms. Yelich.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I took a little offence to those comments as well.

I want to make one comment. We have to have a room in the Centre Block for these meetings. It is pure hell—don't shake your head, please, Ms. Clerk—and it is really difficult.... It's very intense. When we come it's very busy. It's probably the most intense committee that is sitting right now. Can we find something else? You know, it's the proximity—location, location, location.

The Chair: It would give us a chance to try to improve our ratings, right?

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Is there any Senate room? They're not doing anything, are they?

The Chair: That's not on the record, is it?

Having no more discussion, we will meet again on Tuesday. We will see the subcommittee on Thursday morning.

With that, I call the meeting adjourned.