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Chair

The Honourable Shawn Murphy

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I'd like to call the meeting to order.

Bienvenue à tous.

We're going to open in public. I've been told by two members that they have motions to present to the committee.

We'll deal with your motion, Madam Ratansi. On your motion, this will be just to receive notice.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I have a notice of motion and I have it in both official languages. Could I present it to the chair or clerk?

The Chair: You don't have copies?

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: No. Doesn't the distribution take place by the clerk? I have given sufficient notice, so it's more than 48 hours. They can be distributed.

Do you want electronic versions of it, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Colleagues, the notice will be circulated by the clerk. It won't be dealt with today. It will be dealt with, at the earliest, on Tuesday.

Madam Faille, you have an issue.

[Translation]

Ms. Meili Faille (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, BQ): Mr. Chair, I am still waiting for some documents. Normally, departments like Public Works and Government Services send us the documents we ask for quite quickly, especially when they offer them to us of their own accord; quite quickly.

Last week, my colleagues and I discussed a document and the fact that it was written in one language only. So we agreed to take audio cassettes in their original form. But they are taking their time. The committee still has not received the audio cassettes, nor have we received any particular reason.

So I am making a motion that would read as follows: "That the Department of Public Works be required to table the audio cassettes by next Wednesday."

[English]

The Chair: On Wednesday, May 13?

• (1535)

[Translation]

Ms. Meili Faille: Yes.

[English]

The Chair: Okay. Just let me take a minute to explain the situation and the background in more detail.

This has been going on for quite a while now. Madam Faille asked at a hearing that took place some time ago for an audio recording of certain public meetings—or no, for a recording of the consultations, and we've gone back and forth from the department.

Is it the Department of National Defence, Madam Clerk?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Joann Garbig): It's the Department of Public Works.

The Chair: It's Public Works and it's been back and forth. There was an issue as to the expense and time for translating this recording into both official languages. The committee agreed, unanimously, of course, that we would accept them in the language that they were presented in, and everything was proceeding smoothly.

We received word...was it today, Madam Clerk?

The Clerk: Yes.

The Chair: We received word today from the Department of Public Works that they're not going to give it to us because they have privacy concerns. My opinion, for what it's worth, is that this committee can call for any persons or documents and that's not a legitimate reason.

So we have the motion of Madam Faille. We could, with unanimous consent, deal with it today, or we can defer it and deal with it on Tuesday. What's the pleasure of the committee? Does Madam Faille have the unanimous consent of the committee to place her motion before the committee?

Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): I have just one question on the same topic. I have no problem with that; I think that's reasonable. The only question I would have is on the privacy concern. That's your belief, legitimately. I don't know that. If that is what it is, and the Privacy Commissioner would.... Do we need to go down that path? I don't know what is private and what is not. As long as it's legitimate to ask that, I would hate to be put into a position where evidence would come before this committee and would be subject to privacy concerns.

The only way I could think of for this is that perhaps at that particular point, Mr. Chair, we could just go in camera if it were deemed to be problematic, but of course the information would still be accessible to Madam Faille. I don't know. I'm asking for your thoughts on this.

The Chair: Madam Faille.

[Translation]

Ms. Meili Faille: Well, they announced some public meetings, an invitation to companies working in information technology. Five public meetings were held and the recordings could help us to understand how contracts are handled in the information technology sector. None of us were at any of those public meetings. So we really have no information.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thanks, Chair.

That sounds fairly straightforward, and I see no reason why we shouldn't be supportive of Madam Faille's trying to get this document; however, I think Mr. Kramp makes an excellent point. As learned as your opinion is, it's just one member's opinion. If there's a way to do some kind of check—in other words, find out exactly what they are saying specifically—and then make a determination on whether or not....

Mr. Kramp makes a good point. We wouldn't want to just say we don't see any conflict, then go ahead and roar it through, and then find out afterwards that upon advice that we ignored, there was an issue.

So it would be a quick—and I emphasize quick—test on that. I'm comfortable giving the chair that mandate, that we ask him to satisfy himself by checking with someone to find out if that reason should come back to us or not, and if not, then plow ahead, and if it should, then bring it back.

The Chair: After hearing from Mr. Kramp and you, Mr. Christopherson.... That was my advice, based upon advice from the clerk, but on second thought, I think the best thing to do is take Madam Faille's notice of motion. In the meantime, over the next five days we will do further research with the Library of Parliament, and if possible, get whatever argument the Department of Public Works and Government Services has. Then we'll come back on Tuesday to debate and vote on the motion.

Is that okay?

Okay, then, we're going to now suspend this part of the meeting and go in camera.

Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): I'd like to be in the open part.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you.

Last night we received the two draft reports that came forward regarding the committee meetings and hearings of over a year ago, in

fact almost two years ago, in some respects. One is chapter 1 of the 2007 October report of the Auditor General, "Safeguarding Government Information and Assets in Contractin", and the next one is chapter 3 of the 2007 May report of the Auditor General, "Human Resources Management—Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada".

My understanding when I read through it is that the committee studied chapter 1 on February 26, over a year ago, from the October 2007 report, and the audit was substantially completed in August of 2007, so we're moving back quite a ways. The committee studied chapter 3 on April 15, 2008, and that chapter is from the May 2007 report. That audit was substantially completed in 2006.

There's been a fair bit of time lapsed since then. We have those two reports in front of us. I'm wondering, in terms of the best interests of the committee, if there would be consideration of having those departments come in for an hour each at a meeting so those reports can be updated.

I'm looking at our schedule and I see we have a vacancy for June 16. Have them update it for an hour on where they are. It's been over a year, in some cases close to two years, since these reports were done. Then we can add the updated part to it to make, I would think, a more meaningful report, since it's still in the draft position.

I would have a motion to put forward to that. I know it will take consent, and certainly the discussion around it, but it could be brought forward and we could do it on June 16, have it, and then get that report updated so it would be more meaningful.

I just open that up for your consideration.

● (1540)

The Chair: Before we deal with it, I'll explain a little of the background, Mr. Shipley. I'm certainly not disagreeing with your thinking at all. I know what you're saying.

These reports took a lot of time. They have age on them. They're getting yellow, I guess you can say. The background—for members who may have forgotten—is that we did have these five reports. The hearings were held in the previous Parliament. The only two members who would have gone through the hearings would be Mr. Christopherson and myself. The analysts wrote reports and, because of the election, didn't have an opportunity to deliberate on the reports or of course to file the reports in the House of Commons. The opinion of the steering committee, which was approved or sanctioned by this committee, was that instead of losing all the thoughts, the work and the recommendations, we should resurrect the reports. That also involved a motion, which was passed, to introduce and to bring before this committee the evidence of the committee.

Again, there are difficulties, because people didn't hear the demeanour of the witnesses. They weren't here. Even for the ones who were here, with due respect to those people, these events occurred quite some time ago. It does create some difficulties.

That's a little bit of the background on where we are on those two reports. One of the reports actually has gone through this committee, the report dealing with the fees. That's a bit of the background, but I'm at the instruction of the committee on this particular issue.

Mr. Saxton, then Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. Andrew Saxton (North Vancouver, CPC): Mr. Chair, as you rightly pointed out, only two of the eleven current members of this committee have actually heard this testimony. If we have the time, if we can fit it in, I think it would be very helpful for the other nine members of the committee to have an opportunity to have a brief one hour with each witness on each topic, simply to bring us up to date. Maybe there's new information I don't know.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, please.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

We're in some uncharted waters, in that we're trying to resurrect things that the majority of the committee has never seen or heard before. In total frankness, the majority of the committee could have made a really good argument to not deal with it because they weren't there. It probably would have held, and all that work would be lost.

I've been very appreciative of the fact that especially the government members—and members of the previous government—were willing to allow us to take a run at this. I'm a little concerned about going to another hearing as a way to resolve this, because it does set a precedent. I'm willing to think about this and listen as we go along, but I offer up as a thought, what if the majority of the committee—hopefully everyone—agreed to allow the government members a two-page update that they could attach?

I see the chair's kind of worried about that.

I'm recognizing the element of disconnect and how easy it would be to start playing politics with it if they wanted to. I appreciate that the members haven't, but we need some way of acknowledging that it has been a fair bit of time. Normally, we don't let that much time go by. I don't want to go to another hearing. I'm a little concerned about that setting a precedent, but I'm wondering, Chair and colleagues, if there's room to allow some kind of an addendum report. Assuming that we get through the report without any big problems, as we have before, then the quid pro quo for the rest of us, if you will, is to allow something in there—you can put in what you want in terms of update. We'd get two pages, and you can update all you want.

I'm saying that predicated.... I don't want to make it a total quid pro quo, but that becomes easier for us to do if we get through the report and we all agree with the report—assuming it's not too partisan or inflammatory. That kind of give-and-take would be good. If we can get through the report and give life back to a lot of work that has been done by some current and some former parliamentarians, that would be great.

To accommodate that, I'm prepared to allow some wiggle room. If there's another idea, Chair, I'm open to it. The idea of a hearing, however, makes me a little nervous, because that does set a precedent that will come up again and again when we want to re-hear something and sometimes we agree and sometimes we don't. It depends on the nature of what we're dealing with.

Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, just to clarify, what you're saying is that under the Standing Orders it would have to come in the form

of a supplementary opinion. That's very clear in the Standing Orders. That would have to be at the consent of this committee. It would follow the signature of the chair. It's no more than one page? It's up to the committee to decide, but that would have to be decided—

Mr. David Christopherson: Can we avoid a minority report? That has a certain political connotation to it. That's why I was thinking of an addendum or an update.

The Chair: I don't think the Standing Orders would allow anything else. And it's not even called minority; it's called a supplementary or dissent.

Ms. Crombie.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I think this is a really slippery slope. I think it sets a very bad precedent and is completely revisionist as well. New information and whatever light it sheds is completely irrelevant. These audits were done. They were a snapshot of a certain period of time and what was occurring in those departments in that period of time.

To introduce new information now is completely irrelevant. We don't allow it now when we have current audits and we talk about what the government agenda is and what the new policies are. We don't allow those to be inserted into reports for the very same reason. It's irrelevant to what was captured by the Auditor General at the time.

As well, the committee has time and money invested in these reports. We have to act on the reports as they stand. I would not be willing to entertain a new hearing, a new report, or a new anything, frankly. I don't think that's the purpose of what we're here to do.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Ratansi.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: I think I echo what Ms. Crombie has said, because if we look at it, committees change in every Parliament. In the changing nature of a committee, if we go down this route with new members, because they're not familiar with it and because a report was in the past Parliament, where do we stop? Where do we start and where do we stop?

While I appreciate there is progress being made, I am trying to figure out how we balance. I am willing to listen to how you want it balanced, but an audit, as has been pointed out, is an historical picture. The audit is done after the fact. After the fact, in 2007, when the audit was done, these were the facts. If you wish to put in a supplementary report to say what progress was made since then, I'll have to hear the pros and cons, and whether we would set a precedent, and how it might lead to other committees following this. I don't want to open a Pandora's box if we don't have to, unless it is absolutely critical—unless you found the report to be too damning. I didn't.

• (1550)

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Oh, it was very damning.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Well, it's security of information. Departments do new things. When you put an addendum to the report, then that addendum to the report will have to be audited to say that this is the truth or not. It really creates something I'm not comfortable with. As an accountant, I say I believe in facts. If the facts are there, then I'll follow through on it.

The Chair: Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Thank you, Chair.

Here are just some personal thoughts. I don't care how damning the report is. If it's really damning, then what it is, it is. My concern is the relevance of the report. How beneficial is the report? How helpful will the report be to the government, whichever that may be, to be able to address concerns? Are those concerns still relevant? Are those concerns accurate?

I don't need to go back in history and rewrite history. I just want to be able to make recommendations from this committee that make sense, that are going to address a problem should it exist, and then offer solutions for the future. I'm suggesting, and I think very strongly, that we cannot afford to lose the institutional testimony that was in these reports. A lot of work went in, and I really do believe that should be there. However, my concern is are the conclusions, as an example, still relevant? Have there been modifications? Some of this dates back to 2006, not six months ago.

Are they still relevant today? I certainly wouldn't have a clue if they are or if they aren't, and I certainly wouldn't want to sign off on a report if it is not relevant. Now, we're not talking about going back one, two, three, or six months. We're talking about two or two and a half years, when the Auditor General reported on this. I think somehow, some way.... I don't know the vehicle, and I don't want to get into a precedent of opening up, but could we even ask the department? We could say, "There are the conclusions of an interim report. Can you give us an update?"

There's no sense in our making a recommendation if it's already completed. I don't know. I wouldn't have a clue. So somehow and some way.... If it is an addendum letter, I don't know, but I don't want to lose the institutional depth of the report itself, and I certainly as a committee don't want to make a recommendation that is out of whack and not relevant to the circumstance of today.

How do we move around that, Chair?

The Chair: We could put a paragraph in the report acknowledging that the audit was completed—and we'll give the specific date—by February 2007, and that the testimony of the committee was heard in March 2008. We could say that the committee is cognizant of the fact that there could have been many changes and developments since then, but we will deal with them as we heard them from the record. Then, as we do in most reports, we could call for progress reports and progress action plans. It's a difficult issue.

Of course, one other option is to forget the whole thing and not do them at all. You could just acknowledge and point out that you are operating under a disadvantage, and move on. But to get into a situation where you're looking for future developments.... Even with the audits we do now....

On Tuesday we're going to get six reports from the Auditor General. Under the process, that work would have probably been

done last year anyway. Then they go to the department with a draft report and it's finessed. Then they have it translated and tabled in Parliament. So there will probably be a five- or six-month lag in the ones we get on Tuesday.

But in this case there is certainly a difficulty. I know what you're all saying. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't. It's a tough issue.

Mr. Shipley.

● (1555)

Mr. Bev Shipley: I'm not looking for another hearing, and I don't think anyone here is. You mentioned that the reports are five or six months old, and we understand the process. We have one that's two years and five months old, and one that is almost two years old.

Whether it's through a supplementary, or whatever, I'm fine. I'm not asking for a full hearing. But in fairness to the committee members and where we are, most of these issues happened prior to 2006. So this audit is not about us.

For the committee's benefit, and for the committee to be thorough and move ahead, I'm not looking for a full hearing on it. I wouldn't mind just being able to know where we've gone in the last two and a half years. If there's something we can put into this report that will be either damning or non-damning, that's not my issue; it's that this committee be a lot more fulsome in the information we're going to be signing off on. I think that's only fair to the committee, the Auditor General, and these departments—for the good and the bad.

I'm not very happy about signing something that's two and a half years old without having some updates to know what has actually happened. We're trying to get that evaluation.

The Chair: I had a discussion with the analyst. One thought he had—and I kind of like it myself—is to write the deputy minister of the department and ask for a report on the future developments from that audit. We could include them in your deliberations. But to have a hearing you need the auditor, because they always conflict with each other.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I'm just asking for an update, not a hearing.

An hon. member: We want a timeframe. We don't want this done next year.

The Chair: Mr. Saxton.

Mr. Bev Shipley: We have an opening on the 16th to do it. We could be prepared and come back.

The Chair: If you're going to do it, you could write the deputy minister and give him or her four weeks, or some specific deadline. If they don't respond within the four weeks, they obviously don't want to respond and you can proceed without the response. If they respond, you take it into consideration.

Mr. Saxton.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Mr. Chair, I think the proposal you just made is a workable one.

I think Mrs. Crombie made a very good point when she said these reports are a snapshot in time from a long time ago, and even though these reports are two or two and a half years old, they are probably the result of work that was done over three years ago. So I would say that one would have to question their relevancy due to the length of time that's passed since then, and we need some sort of an update. So perhaps what you just proposed is a position that would help us update these reports.

The Chair: Mrs. Crombie.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I'm still fundamentally opposed to this, for a couple of reasons. There is an historical context here that needs to be captured, and it needs to be on the record and it needs to be in the institutional memory.

If for no other reason, there will likely be a follow-up audit done in about two and a half years, and there needs to be a basis for comparison to see if the recommendations have been implemented, if the action plan has been implemented, and what changes there have been.

That's the proper place for it, to do a follow-up audit in the next two or two and a half years. But this has to stand, because this is an historical record, and it has to be put on the historical record.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair.

It's a good debate, a good discussion.

Mrs. Crombie continues to make good points, which is what I would say to my friend Mr. Saxton and others. I have to say that of the options put in front of us, I like the one about the paragraph the best. Even though I was open to the idea, I thought the comments about the historical snapshot are very well taken. Those are good, strong points.

The only thing that's unique about this, really, is not so much the length of time. I thought about it after I made the comments. That Place Victoria thing practically became a department unto itself in terms of our work on it forever. So it is not really the time that's the issue per se; it's actually the fact that the committee is dealing with something where the majority weren't even here to hear it in the first place. To me, that's what provides some room to do something by exception—hopefully without prejudice—without setting us up for future problems.

Again, I come back to Mrs. Crombie's points. I think she is making excellent points, and I don't think they're partisan. I think if you stand back and look at those arguments, they serve the committee well in terms of the work we're doing.

So I have to say that so far I'm leaning back to the chair's original suggestion to have a good healthy paragraph acknowledging that some time has gone by, and making the point that the majority haven't heard this and therefore that we're acknowledging—or whatever way we want to word it.... I like that suggestion the most. It allows us to provide something, but it doesn't take us away from our usual way of doing things and we haven't set a precedent that we can't always keep in proper context.

• (1600)

The Chair: Mr. Saxton.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Yes, I like the idea of the paragraph as well, in addition to the letter the chair has recommended. I think we should ask for both of them.

Mr. David Christopherson: How would that work, Chair? When we received the letter, would we incorporate it into the document or add it, or what would we do?

The Chair: No, no. We could consider any of the facts in the letter, not statements of intention. We've all seen these letters.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's why I am asking you, because that's a whole thing unto itself.

The Chair: But if there were a factual statement that we did do this, that we did pass legislation, we could include that in our report.

Mr. David Christopherson: So the paragraph we were talking about would be morphed into that and capture that information?

The Chair: I think we should include the paragraph anyway, just to inform the reading public that this report is a little different from the normal report. Let's acknowledge that these facts, this audit.... Of course we all have to bear in mind that the audit will never change; that's part of the institution now. The audit was tabled in 2007 or 2008. Of course that's separating out the audit itself, whereas the actual audit work was probably done in 2006-2007.

So we are in uncharted waters. I'm at the will of the committee.

Ms. Ratansi.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: I think we need to figure out what is the purpose of our committee.

The committee's purpose is to review what the Auditor General says at a point in time, and that's the snapshot of things. If things have changed, the Auditor General can do another audit on that fact.

An hon. member: Exactly.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: It's been two years. If this was a problematic area—and it appears that the safeguarding of government information is problematic—then she can do another audit.

I like the idea of inserting a paragraph saying that this was the situation when the audit took place, but I do not want any subjective input in this report stating what work has been done, because I have no idea and there's been no audit since. So let's stick to the facts. I am open to the paragraph you want to put in, but I'm not open to anything else.

The Chair: Ms. Crombie.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I'm going to reiterate what Ms. Ratansi has just said. My feeling is that new information, up-to-date information, is irrelevant because there's an historical context that exists. It was an audit, and an audit is a snapshot in time. So whatever action has or has not been taken by the department, we'll have to wait for the next audit, which will likely come in the next two or two and a half years. This report will serve as the basis for comparison to show what the circumstances were at the time, two and a half years ago, when the first audit was taken. It will be the baseline, and any new information will be captured in a follow-up audit.

You can bet that she'll do a follow-up audit on these departments because of the number of problems she encountered. And as you rightly mentioned, it's been two and a half years, and audits are now occurring every five years, so it will be two to two and a half years before another one is done.

•(1605)

The Chair: Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Thank you.

If this were just as Ms. Ratansi said, just a matter of reporting on the testimony, I would agree with you 100%. But there is a secondary responsibility that we have, and that's called making recommendations. And if those recommendations are out of touch with the reality of today and/or the relative currency, I'm not going to sign a report whose recommendations I don't know make sense today.

Why would I make a recommendation to a department when I know unequivocally that recommendation either has been dealt with or the department's response is absolutely wrong?

This is why I say, put the report in, in the state it is in, and I can agree with that. Let's not separate the history. The history is there, and it should be there, but that's also why we need that paragraph, and/or whatever, to be able to demonstrate. If there is a modification or change that should be in there, then for goodness sake.... In real life, would I recommend something if I knew that it had already been dealt with? I wouldn't.

The Chair: Mr. Saxton.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Mr. Chair, nine of us were not there. We did not hear the hearings, were not privy to this. To follow up on what Mr. Kramp said, how can we possibly make recommendations on something we were not party to, if we were not present at the time?

The Chair: Okay. We're going back to the same people here. I'm going to bring it to an end.

Madam Faille or Mr. Desnoyers.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desnoyers (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): I agree with the idea of a paragraph. As for the recommendations, they are mostly about evaluations and follow-up. I am assuming that the departments should eventually provide them. Perhaps they already have started to take steps along those lines. I do not know how all these departments work; I am just a new kid.

I looked at the transcript of the previous meetings. Meili Faille was there at the time, and so was Mr. Christopherson. I noticed that

the questions on the recommendations dealt with several of these aspects. It seems to me that we are making life complicated for ourselves. The important thing is that any follow-up must address the situation at the time and not how things are now. The recommendation, which the analysts wrote, I imagine, applied to that point in time. It was a kind of snapshot of the situation. Whatever the case, I completely agree with the idea of the paragraph.

[English]

The Chair: I'm proposing to bring this to a conclusion, colleagues, and we're going to come back. We probably won't be dealing with this report today.

There are three things on the table.

I take it that regardless of what we do, everyone agrees with putting a paragraph in to relate to historical significance.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: On the issue of a dissenting or supplementary report, the way the Standing Orders read is that those reports can be appended to the main report of the committee after the signature of the chair. They're not part of the actual report of the committee. It has to be approved by the committee, whether or not they allow the appended report, and the committee then determines the length of this report. In most cases, in this committee before, it's been one or two pages, but that's entirely up to the committee. The committee doesn't have any say as to the content once it allows a supplemental report. It's allowed and it's just appended in both official languages. So I would recommend that we deal with that at the time when the report is done, unless you want to have a blanket motion that you allow anybody to—but that's getting a little ridiculous, I think.

On the issue of getting a letter from the deputy minister—and this would be a fact-based letter from the deputy minister—to be considered when we consider the report, let me get the consent of the committee.

Yes?

•(1610)

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Sorry, I have a point of clarification.

Would the letter be in response to updates they've made or to the recommendations they've implemented from the current report, the changes they've made in the department based on the original audit?

The Chair: The letter would be a response to the letter to the deputy minister, asking him or her to provide the committee with any facts that have taken place since the auditor's report was issued, whether it's legislation, adoption of policy—in this case, Public Works, the hiring of people. It would be fact-based developments that could be considered by the committee. We don't want glossy statements of intention or principle, or we're going to do this, or we're going to do that. It would have to be fact-based.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Mr. Chairman, I would argue that it would only consider the actionable items recommended by the Auditor General.

The Chair: Well, yes, it would be based on the auditor's report. It would be specifically related to the auditor's report. They have the auditor's report and they have the recommendations from the auditor. They had that a year and a half ago.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Mr. Chair, you're seeking consensus here to write a letter to the deputy minister, to respond as to what has taken place since the auditor's report. So it's like his action plan: what have they done to address the issues or concerns raised? Is that what you are planning to get from him?

The Chair: I think that's a fair comment. It would be a letter to the deputy minister identifying the auditor's report that was issued in May of 2007, I'd say, and asking if there are any developments or facts the deputy minister wants to share with the committee before the committee writes and tables its final report. We would allow the deputy four weeks to do that. Then we would take that into consideration.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Would that be included in a supplementary report?

The Chair: No. We would have that in front of us when we do the report.

I'm going to read recommendation 2, which is that the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade include in its annual report on plans and priorities a discussion, and so on. If the deputy says they issued their report last year and had a full discussion on that issue, then we probably wouldn't make that recommendation. That's an example.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I wouldn't agree with that, because it distorts the historical context of the report. That's new information.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Can I make a friendly suggestion? I think I understand where Mr. Kramp is coming from. These are recommendations made on a report in 2007 and life has gone on. Sometimes it doesn't go on, and sometimes the departments don't move. If we had made a recommendation that said Public Works should, by so and so.... Did they ever provide the public accounts committee with the status report that we had asked them for on December 31, 2008? I'm looking at recommendation 2, for example. If they haven't, then when they came before committee, you might have asked them for something like that. If they haven't, what is he going to tell us now?

If the deputy minister says "Yes, we have a status report", then I think you can insert it underneath, as an update, stating that "as of this date, the deputy minister has advised us that he has done this". So you have the recommendation, because it relates to a case in point, but then you have an update under that recommendation, which would allow us.... If that's the way, if we want to progress, I am flexible with it.

• (1615)

The Chair: You want to know whether they provided the public accounts committee with a status report by December 31, 2008. They haven't seen that, so there's no—

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: I know that.

The Chair: I'd be shocked if they did provide us with a report.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: I just picked it out for—

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair.

I have to say that the more I'm thinking about it and the more we're talking about it, the less and less comfortable I am with it. We keep emphasizing the time, and I don't think that's reason enough.

There are plenty of reports—again, at least a couple come to mind—where we actually had further hearings. We had two or three follow-up hearings on Place Victoria, if you recall, one of them linking up somebody by video in Florida, and we were all over the place. But we did our work and things did change.

Some of the recommendations were stale, but if you think about it, in almost all of our recommendations where we want something done or we want a report on something that's been done, we give a deadline for when to give that report. Under the normal course of events, that would be responded to, and then we would deal with it.

The only thing that's unusual here is that the majority of the committee didn't hear the original witnesses. Really, I was just trying to be cooperative, but the more we've talked about this, I'm not sure that allowing this offsets what our problem is. They're unrelated.

I think our Liberal colleagues are making some really good points. They really are. The decision we make shouldn't change the way we do things. I was trying to find something to acknowledge that government members on both sides—because part of this is the Liberals—were willing to go ahead with the report. If you were willing to take the political heat, you probably could have forced it down, and that would be the end of it.

But it almost negates, Chair, all our recommendations. Really, if that's going to be the procedure, then we ought to have a policy statement that for anything stale-dated beyond x period of time, we go through this process where we ask for an update. But if that's not part of our usual procedures, if we're making the exception now for the reason that not everybody heard it as opposed to the reason of the time, the remedy really doesn't solve the problem.

I'm quickly hardening around the idea that the paragraph—and I'm flexible on what that might say—really is the only way we can do this and still remain true to what we do. As for the arguments about a snapshot in time and the historical record, those are all really good arguments, and they're persuading me.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley, and then we'll move on.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I think we need to bring it to an end one way or the other.

My point is with the paragraph...and we do this, Mr. Christopherson, in a number of reports. We say that we want to know now what has happened during six months or a year or whatever, knowing also that there's going to be another audit.

I agree with Mrs. Crombie, and I'm not asking that we change the recommendations. Those are historical. I never did suggest that. I'm just suggesting an addendum, taking the report and putting in an addendum to it, to give an update for all of us. Sure, we haven't been here.

I don't know when we've had reports that were two and a half years old. I think if we can add an addendum, a fact statement of what has changed—based on those recommendations, not changing them. Then just put that addendum to the report and we can have that discussion on it.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley, I'm going to interject. What the analysts, through me, proposed was not to attach any letter from the deputy minister. It was to get the letter from the deputy minister, and if there was anything relevant in the letter from the deputy minister that we might want to include to give the report context, or to say that we're pleased that since the auditor's report the government has passed legislation or has enacted policy....

But I would never want to—and again it's entirely up to the committee—just staple a report from a deputy minister.

Mr. Bev Shipley: [*Inaudible—ed*]

The Chair: I think we're saying the same thing.

• (1620)

Mr. Daryl Kramp: It's a tenable position.

The Chair: But we'd never attach a letter from the deputy minister to the public accounts.

Mr. Bev Shipley: However that works, in terms of taking the response that comes—

The Chair: I'm going to put it to a vote. I think we've had enough discussion. I just want direction from the committee as to whether or not the committee—

Do you have a point of clarification or an argument?

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I'm not arguing, but I think we have to agree on what we're doing.

You can't update an audit that was done three years ago with recent information. There's an historical context that is the premise of all that. To go back three years later.... Well, of course the entire world has changed in three years. They haven't responded to any of the recommendations because they haven't even gotten them yet.

It's completely revisionist. We have to take the document as it was. It's a snapshot in time based on a period of three years ago. Lots has changed since then. We'll end up rewriting the entire report.

This report has to stand. It's based on an audit. It's based on findings of the Office of the Auditor General two and a half to three years ago. Those were the findings. Those were the recommendations at the time. Anything new will have to be dealt with in a new audit.

The Chair: Very briefly, Mr. Saxton.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: I just want to say that I think Mr. Christopherson makes a good point when he says perhaps the main issue is that the majority of us were not here at the time. We did not hear the hearings and the testimonies. Therefore, there is an information gap for those of us who were not present at the time.

What we're looking for is to fill that information gap. We feel this letter you suggested could help to fill that information gap for those of us who were not present at that time.

The Chair: Very briefly, Mrs. Crombie, 30 seconds.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Mr. Saxton, you have to trust the integrity of the committee. You have to trust your predecessors, your colleagues who sat on this committee prior to you, to have done the best job they could have done. I trust my predecessors who reviewed this report, who sat and cross-examined the witnesses.

It is the public accounts committee. We have to accept their findings. All we're going to do is correct typos, as far as I'm concerned.

The Chair: Okay, I'm going to seek the attention of the committee.

The proposal is that the clerk, under the direction of the committee, write to each deputy minister to ask the deputy minister to provide us, within four weeks, with any facts—and you can underline the word “facts”—that have transpired since the tabling of the auditor's report that may be relevant before the public accounts committee concludes its report.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: What are we proposing to do with the fax that arrived, then?

The Chair: Well, you have it in front of you and you may want to consider it in your report.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: So that's flexible. We're not making any decision on what we will do with that letter.

The Chair: Oh, no. You can throw it in the garbage.

In my experience, the letter from the deputy minister.... They might make these grand statements that they intend to do this, and so on. Considering sometimes the speed of it, they'll be lucky to get it back in the four weeks.

I want to bring this to a conclusion.

All in favour of that concept?

This is turning out the way I feared. I was hoping it wouldn't.

All against that concept?

A voice: It's tied, five and five.

The Chair: I've consulted with the clerk, and it's my judgment that we're probably better off writing the letter. It will be very specific as to facts that have transpired with respect only to the contents of the respective audit reports. I don't see it being that earth-shattering. Those will be taken into consideration when the committee deliberates and finalizes the report, and those deputies will be given four weeks to respond.

Okay, let's move on, colleagues. We will go back in camera, first of all.

This meeting is suspended.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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