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Monday, April 2, 2012

Chair

Mr. Pat Martin

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP)): We will call the meeting to order.

Welcome to the—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat (Pontiac, NDP): Mr. Chair, could I have a moment? I want to inform you and my committee colleagues that I plan to introduce the following motion, so that we can discuss it at the next committee meeting:

> That, given the systemic problem of cost overruns for multiple military procurement contracts, the committee undertake a study on the military procurement process; invite the ministers responsible and several other witnesses to appear as part of this study as soon as possible; and report its findings and recommendations to the House.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): You say you're bringing that to the subcommittee, then? Is that correct...? Okay.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

I'll finish opening the meeting, then, if that doesn't require any attention.

We welcome everyone to the 37th meeting of the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates. We will continue our study on considering the estimates and supply processes.

Today we're very pleased and in fact very honoured to welcome as our guest and witness Robert Marleau, the former Clerk of the House of Commons, who is also the former Privacy Commissioner and former Information Commissioner. I know that he has a long-standing interest in and experience with all matters associated with estimates and supply.

We very much welcome you here, Mr. Marleau. The floor is yours. We will entertain questions after your presentation.

Mr. Robert Marleau (Former Clerk of the House of Commons, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I don't have a formal presentation. I just made a few notes. You have an hour, so I thought I would spare you the Magna Carta evolution of supply. However, if you want, though, I gave some of that testimony to the precursors of this committee in September 1995 and February 1997. I'm sure your very adept researchers can quickly find that evidence, which summarizes the evolution of the business of supply since Confederation.

For today, what I thought I would do is address a couple of the issues or trends that I've seen emerging from the testimony you've already adduced from expert witnesses, academics, and otherwise, and from the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Maybe what I'm now calling a couple of myths need to be demystified, and I also have a proposal for you, a very practical proposal that is doable within the existing Standing Orders. It comes in two parts, one with no money and one with new money. I know that new money is a delicate thing these days, but I believe that it might even be a sound investment.

First of all,

[*Translation*]

the testimony provided by Professor Franks, Mr. Wehner and the Parliamentary Budget Officer basically seem to revolve around the perception that members have insufficient information, that the information they do have is irrelevant and that the members' ability to consider the information submitted to Parliament is limited.

The second point raised is the following. Budgetary estimates are tabled on March 1. Everything is deemed adopted by May 31, at the latest. However, Parliament is adjourned for three weeks during that period, leaving the committee very little time for an expenditure review. That said, analyses have been conducted on the flexibility the executive branch gave itself recently in terms of approving vote transfers.

[*English*]

First let me address the deemed reporting issue. I know that Mr. McCallum recently has written an article in the *Canadian Parliamentary Review* and recommends that the standing order be changed.

The deemed reporting concept in the Standing Orders is one of balance. To simply remove it would throw the whole supply process out of balance, because when it was adopted in 1968 as an interim standing order, and then in the early seventies as a permanent standing order, with it came 25 supply days as a trade-off to the opposition: 25 days where the opposition could set down a motion—some of them of confidence and some of them not—and set the agenda. That was the compensation for having lost those supply days in the committee of the whole.

In return, the government was guaranteed its supply by no later than June 30. That was the trade-off. To now remove that and not reconsider the other I think would throw the whole supply process out of balance.

The other what I'll call a myth—and I don't want to offend anybody at the table, Mr. Chairman—is that the documents you get are not complete or are not enough. Well, I think they are. I think it's plenty. I think the improvements that were made in the eighties, and the progressive tinkering at the margins with the concepts of plans and priorities reports, the departmental performance reports, combined with the tabling of the estimates, if you want, at a high level on March 1....

Those reports, read together—all three parts—are more than enough. I've been on the drafting side of plans and priorities reports and I've had to argue with Treasury Board about program architecture and all that kind of stuff. It is quite detailed, and maybe too detailed in some cases, but I think you have all the information that is required to do a proper study of the estimates.

The other myth is the fact that committees cannot make reports on estimates to the House with substantive recommendations. The PBO referred to a 1979 ruling that changed this. Actually, it wasn't 1979; it was June 18, 1973, and it was by Speaker Lamoureux, who said for the first time on estimates that committees have only inherited the old powers of the Committee of Supply to adopt, negative, or reduce, and therefore a substantive recommendation in a report was out of order, since the Committee of Supply didn't have that power.

However, that ruling is moot now, in my view, because you have Standing Order 108. If you look at Standing Order 108, you'll see that all the expenditure plans of the government, by department, are permanently before the committee, yours and the others. So as for saying that now you cannot make substantive recommendations to the government on matters of expense or supply, you might not be able to do it within a report on the estimates, but you have ample access to make all the recommendations you like. So anyone who is now hanging on to that Speaker's ruling of 1973 I think is dated, if I can put it that way.

Finally, there is the PBO. You will remember this, Mr. Chairman, because you were on that committee when Bill C-2, the Federal Accountability Act, was before committee. I was invited as an expert witness. I wasn't very supportive of the PBO concept. I think I called it “congressional creep” when you have a tendency to want to borrow, out of other political cultures and other constitutional cultures, elements that we think may fit.

I caution you about Australia and New Zealand on that when you hear your witnesses next week, who are my two very good friends, Harry Evans and David McGee. Those are different political cultures. You have a senate that is elected by proportional representation in Australia, and you have a unicameral system in New Zealand, and a very transparent style of government in terms of access to information, cabinet confidences, and all that sort of thing.

The PBO, I argued at the committee, should have an estimates mandate, and the committee agreed. Indeed, the act was amended, and it was given an estimates mandate. I don't think it has done much with it, and I don't think committees have done much in terms of exploiting it.

So there is a bit of a congressional influence there, without the money, without the size, and without the staff. Again, it is in the Library, and in the wrong place, as far as I'm concerned, as I said at the time.

Those are the myths I wanted to put on the table and hopefully give you some insight on my thinking, which is that I don't believe they are impediments to the study of estimates.

● (1535)

If I may, I'll make a proposal. It comes from something I haven't seen in your committee document. It's an article written by two former MPs, Ron Huntington and Claude-André Lachance, back in the early eighties, when this very study was going on and following some 10 to 12 years of experience with the estimates going to all committees. They came up with a couple of concepts about macro-estimates committees, which would be charged with just that. My proposal to you flows from there.

MPs are spenders; they're not savers. You all come here because you have an agenda. Very few of you got elected with the promise that you would reduce the estimates of the government.

It's a challenge for the average MP to get into the estimates, when going in, at the front end, you can't do anything much about them. You can reduce them or you can negative them. So over the last 40 years, MPs have given up. The opening line of the last report, in 2003, from the Alcock committee, was a quote from me, which basically said that I felt that the House had abandoned its constitutional responsibility to review supply. I didn't know they were going to use that as the opening line, but they did.

Here is what I'm proposing. This committee should get a new mandate, an expanded mandate. It should be called something else. It could keep government operations as part of its title, but I think it should be called the appropriations committee. The mandate should be in the Standing Orders, and in the Standing Orders, there should be an instruction to this committee to table in the House, within 60 days of its appointment, a five-year plan of study and review of government appropriations and estimates.

You have to look to the past to make sense of what is being proposed. You can't say that the estimates just evaporate once they're deemed reported. They don't. They're there. They exist, and you have access to them.

The composition of the committee should be made permanent. Now, let's be realistic. There are only 308 MPs. There are too many committees and not enough MPs. There are not enough committee rooms. There are all kinds of issues. There's the block system, whereby you can only meet twice a week and you can't meet out of your.... Those are all impediments that are not necessarily relevant today, but they contribute to it.

The whips are the major problem in committees and have been since the nineties, when the Liberals returned to power. Mr. Mulroney was much more generous with power for committees and their membership. Some of you may remember Don Blenkarn, who was chair of the finance committee for years and years. When they tried to take him out, there was a revolt in the House, and not just by the opposition.

The membership should be made permanent. By that I mean it should be for the duration of a session, and the whips should not be allowed to intervene. The chair should be elected for the duration of the Parliament, as the Deputy Speaker is. The Deputy Speaker is elected for the duration of the Parliament.

The chairs should come from the opposition, as it is, and the vice-chairs should come from the government. The vice-chairs should be appointed for the duration of Parliament as well. That way, over time, if the House switches sides, you have experience in vice-chairs on one side of the House and experience in chairs on the other side of the House, and there could be continuity in the role of that committee.

They should have the usual powers to send papers and persons to report to the House with recommendations, and they should have the power to appoint subcommittees. Each vice-chair could have a subcommittee of his or her own as part of the five-year review plan. That plan would be published and tabled in the House. The bureaucracy would know exactly what's coming down the pipe in terms of macro-studies.

Concurrently, the estimates every year would be referred to the committees for the usual round of the review of supply process.

The statutory instruments committee—some of you may not have discovered this yet—has access to the House for debate every Wednesday at one o'clock. It doesn't happen very often. They have the power to revoke a regulation. The minister shows up, committee of the whole style, and he must explain why he will not revoke that regulation. If he doesn't show up, it's automatically revoked.

● (1540)

So you have an hour that would not interfere with government time. It's there, from 1:00 to 2:00. It's committee time. It's never used. This committee should have access to that hour, and your reports with recommendations should be subject, mano-a-mano with the minister on the floor, committee of the whole style—not 40 bureaucrats, but maybe the deputy minister sitting in front of his minister advising him—as to why the government accepts or doesn't accept the recommendations of a particular study.

There could be a vote. It doesn't have to be confidence, but there could be a vote. And it's deferrable anyway, so there's no surprise to the government. That way, I think, you would revitalize the process, bring MPs back into it in terms of an interest. Bring the minister in on it. Most ministers come to committee on estimates, make a perfunctory statement, and then they turn it over to the accounting officer, deputy minister, and you may never see the minister again.

The PBO should be the core staff of this committee. The PBO should be moved out of the library into the committees branch, and made a full-fledged officer of the House. Half of his budget—whatever it is today, I have no idea—should be spendable by this committee on studies, and the other half by other committees on estimates, as they apply for it. Take it out of the reach of the Liaison Committee, which has just become a tool for the whip to control where committees are going and how much they're spending, and not just in this government. The previous government did the same thing, going back to the Chrétien days.

The Board of Internal Economy just cut $3.8 million out of committee spending, and that's too bad. It's tragic, particularly that the Gagliano plan in the 1990s cut out $4 million. So it's not just one government here. There's an evolution. There's at least $12 million of missing money in committee spending over the last decade, which could be spent on things like the PBO and committee study of estimates.

This first part is all doable in the Standing Orders. You don't have to ask the government's permission to do this. All you have to do is change it. It takes leadership on the government leader's side, but it's all standing order changes. You don't have to go back and change the bureaucracy's performance, the budget timing.... All of that is doable in the Standing Orders.

If you want to put some new money in it, pay the chairman the same as the deputy speaker. If the chairperson is going to be there for the duration of the Parliament, there's only one way—

● (1545)

The Chair: —I'm looking for a motion to that effect, if anyone would like to do so.

Mr. Robert Marleau: —and pay the vice-chairs the same as a parliamentary secretary, because if you want MPs to invest part of their political career in an accountability exercise, then you're going to have to find a way to compensate that. The members of the committee should be paid the same as committee chairs are currently paid.

I know it's not popular right now to spend money on MPs, or raise their pay, or whatever, but if you're going to give it some credibility, usually there's money attached to credibility. Give the committee a budget outside the committee control—that may mean new money—and increase the PBO funding, but limit its mandate to appropriations and supply.

I know that Mr. Wehner, one of the witnesses here, was quite intrigued with the PBO as a concept. I'm not sure we need a parallel finance department in Parliament. That's all I'm going to say about the role of the PBO, but you do need the long-term help on the estimates. You need to build a cadre of professional researchers who can, over time, put things together for you with a sense of perspective.

I think I'll leave it at that, Mr. Chairman. I've already gone too long.

The Chair: Mr. Marleau, thank you very much for that presentation. There's plenty of food for thought on this.

We will go right into questions, and Alexandre Boulerice has five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Marleau, thank you for your lively and meaningful, yet succinct, presentation. It is based on much experience and knowledge.

You used the term "accountability". I think that's the very foundation of the exercise in which we are currently engaged and of the work we as parliamentarians and legislators must do.

How would you rate the current federal government's transparency and accountability?

Mr. Robert Marleau: Not too long ago, I was the information commissioner. So I am going to refer to the reports I produced at the time, where I did not praise the government's transparency. Of course, being against transparency is like being against motherhood. One cannot disagree with it; there is never enough transparency. If we compare ourselves to other parliaments, globally, we are well behind.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Studies similar to the one we are now conducting have been carried out regarding the expenditure process.

Members are aware of all the pitfalls they will have to avoid so they can do serious work on budgetary estimates and government expenditures.

Two reports—produced in 1998 and in 2003—have largely been ignored. In addition, some comparative statements indicate that the recommendations are not being applied or are undetermined.

Do you think the study we are conducting could be serious? Could it be useful? As things currently stand, will the executive branch really be prepared to give up some of its power in favour of the legislative branch in order to strike more of a balance between the two branches?

● (1550)

Mr. Robert Marleau: I pointed out that the government needs to take on something of a leadership role. The Standing Orders of the House of Commons cannot be amended—in the context I raised—unless the government agrees. The government's responses to the latest two reports you mentioned were poor.

The Treasury Board said that the Standing Orders should be amended but has left it to Parliament to deal with that. That's an easy way to show disagreement, while at the same time washing one's hands of the matter.

What we need is a joint agreement between the opposition and the government leaders. I think the way to sell this initiative is by saying that such a committee could be very good for the government. Parliamentarians' opinion needs to be available over a five-year period, along with in-depth comparative studies. I am talking about a five-year period because the first year of the subsequent Parliament may have to be included.

It's not all negative. That committee wouldn't be going on witch hunts, since other committees can do that every year when examining budgetary estimates. If it's witches we are after, we need not look very far.

The committee would be somewhat based on the public accounts model. In the case of public accounts, the horses are long gone. As soon as we start looking into public accounts, the horses have already gone a long way. It's impossible to influence the course of events. However, I think this committee could, in time—it would not happen overnight—use its recommendations to influence the direction of certain expenditures. Ministers may find those recommendations very useful, if they had the support of their parliamentary colleagues in a directive—in the cabinet—and especially considering the red tape involved.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: How much time do I have left?

[*English*]

The Chair: You have one minute.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: You said that committees need more time to review estimates and that they need help. I think you're right.

When we receive a document, we study it very quickly. We have very few meetings to look into the issue and hear from ministers. One of the witnesses said that, if the main estimates were divided by the number of pages, the expenditures would work out to about $500,000 per page. Yet, we have only a few hours to ask questions. That method is not very reliable.

Mr. Robert Marleau: We're talking about a cycle—the supply cycle. The 1997 report contains a very nice chart, which explains the continuousness of the cycle. I would perhaps make small changes to it, but I will get back to that.

There's no reason why, on June 1, you shouldn't look into the supply, which must be deemed reported in the House by May 31. On June 30, the supply is adopted. Nothing is stopping you from looking into that again on July 2.

The performance reports, for instance, are submitted too late. This year, the reports on plans and priorities will not be submitted until May 7, and I think that's tragic.You should amend the Standing Orders and require the reports on plans and priorities to be submitted at the same time as the March 1 budgetary estimates—simultaneously. That would be logical.

I don't like the idea of the process being discretionary. I think this is the first time those plans are being submitted late.There may be very valid political—or even administrative—reasons involved; I don't know. The performance reports are submitted in late October or early November. The supply must be deemed reported on December 10, which is the last day for the business of supply. You have a month left to review the previous performance. Performance reports —of which I've written many—should be submitted on the first sitting day, in September. Public accounts are closed and, in my opinion, can be submitted on time, on the first sitting day in September.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Marleau.

Thank you, Mr. Boulerice.

Mike Wallace, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Marleau, thank you for coming. Let me follow up on some of your suggestions. I really appreciate your bringing suggestions.

We actually had a brief discussion with some people today about maybe having one super committee that looks at estimates, which is basically what you're advocating. But I want to go back a little bit. I do understand the history of where the "deemed" issue came from, and that it was a trade-off. I understand that.

At least from my perspective, and I think John's, the concept of "deemed" was that committees aren't looking at it at all. If we were going to remove the deemed rule, there would be a requirement to at least spend an hour, two hours, one meeting, looking at it by a certain deadline. We wouldn't be giving up the one side completely. They're still going to get their 25 days. We still expect support, or whatever, then they'll pass it by a certain time.

There's another issue I wouldn't mind a comment on. We had our budget last week. We had mains. We started our fiscal year as of yesterday.

The timing of the budget is not reflected in the mains. Then we have (A)s, and (B)s are usually pretty big, and then we have (C)s. The thought was that what if we have the budget previous...or we move the fiscal year-end to three or four months from now and the mains are not presented until they have had an opportunity to incorporate at least some of what was in the budget, if not all of it.

Do you see an issue with moving the timing, whether the budget is in late fall or stays in the same timeframe as now?

My understanding is that there is no law saying there has to be a budget by a certain time, and maybe we should change that also in terms of a standing order. But we would move that date so that the mains would be more reflective of what is actually in the budget. Then in my view, the plans and priority documents, which I don't think are exactly the same at every department, may be able to reflect more of what is in the budgetary plans for the government.

Would you be able to comment on that?

● (1555)

Mr. Robert Marleau: I can comment on both issues.

On the deemed reported issue, I think it should stay in the Standing Orders. Not for the reasons I said, but you're still under the gun to adopt, reduce, or negative within that period. After that, they're gone from the committee in terms of the capacity to reduce or in fact adopt them.

I think that's a necessary dynamic that is held over from the old committee of supply. As I said, on June 1, under Standing Order 108, you can pick up exactly where you left off on the 31st. The only thing you don't have before you is the capacity to reduce them again. They're gone.

The substantive part of the estimates is done before the committee. In terms of continuing to influence the process—that's why I call it a myth that somehow they evaporate on the 31st of May.

On the second component to your question, the budget cycle, if the committee is considering looking at changing the larger components of budget-making in Canada, chances are your report is going to go the same way that the other two went.

I'm not an advocate of the budget being tabled, and then the mains tabled to reflect the budget. The budget in Westminster models, particularly in Canada, in our culture, is really a policy statement by the government on what it intends to do in the next cycle. The mains that are tabled on the first of March are largely a reflection of the last budget. I've never done an analysis, but I would say that it would be 60% or 70% of the last budget.

The government has the capacity to come back to Parliament—in those three (A)s, (B)s, and (C)s—to alter what it tabled on the first of March against any new initiatives launched in the budget. So that comes before the House again. To me, it's workable.

It might be neat to have nice little rows on a piece of paper that show exactly how everything fits, but I think the reality of running a country is not the reality of running a corporation. Whether it's accrual or cash, those kinds of issues don't matter much to parliamentarians.

Government is there and it is accountable to the House. You're to hold it accountable. It has the spending initiative. To me, we have all of the tools to do it properly. I don't propose that having a budget that is clean to the estimates is desirable. I don't think it's possible either.

● (1600)

Mr. Mike Wallace: Thank you.

I have one little clarification. Your Speaker's ruling, that was from a number of years ago. The way I have been operating is that we can approve, disapprove, or reduce. Are you telling me today that you think that ruling is not in order in that we could be doing other things as a committee? I just didn't understand exactly what you were saying.

Mr. Robert Marleau: When it comes to the estimates themselves, the supply, that's all you can do. What the Speaker ruled was that the committees, at the same time, had the power to report to the House. What they were doing was saying, we approve of these estimates, but we make the following recommendations. They were very neutral recommendations. They used language like, "Had the government considered the advisability of building a second port in St. John's?" It wasn't binding.

Back then, committee reports were debated in routine proceedings. They were also being used as a dilatory tactic. After question period, on Wednesday, it would be committee reports before government orders. We'd start debating a committee report and it would go to the hour of adjournment before it was transferred. The Speaker was concerned that all of a sudden there was a new dilatory tactic that was brought out. That doesn't exist anymore. The Standing Orders have evolved differently. It's very hard to use a committee report for a dilatory purpose.

Plus, if you take the existing hour, it's there, one to two. Nobody loses. The government doesn't lose any time. Only you, as involved parliamentarians, would invest in that time. Likely, it would be members of this committee and it would be short speeches of five minutes, on the floor, committee of the whole style, with questions and answers, and maybe, although not necessarily, a vote. That would be up to the committee report.

All of that stuff around the limits on committees on supply, in terms of what members want to do has evaporated, in my view. You have access that you didn't have before.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mike.

Mathieu Ravignat.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat: I would like to ask you a question about the concentration of power. At our last meeting, one of the witnesses showed that the international trend was to give the legislative branch a bit more leeway and take a bit of leeway away from the executive branch. You talked about how committees are used and how regulations are applied.

Do you feel that has been symptomatic—since, as you say, the Mulroney era—of a concentration of power in the Office of the Prime Minister and other leaders? How do you explain that phenomenon?

Mr. Robert Marleau: Mr. Chair, I think this a topic for a very long and in-depth dissertation.

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat: You have five minutes to develop it.

Mr. Robert Marleau: Yes, I know.

Is this a national trend? I read Mr. Wehner's testimony, according to which Canada is something of an example, with its parliamentary budget officer. The idea is that we should keep things as they are. In the Westminster system, accountability lies with the House, and responsibility lies with the government. The game has been played for 600 years, during which time the opposing sides have been engaged in a tug of war. I don't think that will change. The dynamic within Westminster-based parliaments leads to confrontation.

[*English*]

Her Majesty's loyal opposition....

[*Translation*]

is a constitutional concept. To what extent can the legislative branch take charge and control the executive branch? I am going back to the

[*English*]

“congressional creep”.

[*Translation*]

I did not like a trend that developed in the 1990s, when a number of private members' bills came to a vote. I don't think that MPs are like the U.S. House of Representatives members. Members of Parliament are elected to represent their riding. I think that the power to initiate legislation belongs to the government. The power to consider legislation belongs to the government. The House, for its part, keeps the government accountable before MPs—both on the government side and the opposition side—in terms of its spending.

Should the legislative branch govern the country? No, but since the 1990s, our Standing Orders have provided all kinds of examples of what I call congressional creep. That system is completely different from ours.

[*English*]

Then you have the constitutional calamity of budget-making in Washington.

● (1605)

Don't go there.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat: It is nevertheless somewhat strange that those tools are available to us, but are underused. That's what you're saying.

Mr. Robert Marleau: Once I was no longer the clerk—I actually never would have dared say so while I held that position—I pointed out that, in my opinion, parliamentarians—the House—had abandoned that role. With time, the interest fizzled out. How much interest do MPs have in sitting down and scrutinizing Industry Canada's budget? All they can do is reduce or vote against the appropriations. What's the interest in doing that if they cannot make recommendations?

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat: We were hoping the interest would be to govern this country properly and to ensure good management, but I will move on to the next question.

You made some very interesting comments on the role of the parliamentary budget officer. Do you think that person has enough power? If not, what kind of power should they have?

Mr. Robert Marleau: I don't think that person has any power. They have no authority. According to the newspapers, the officer is complaining that no one gives him access to documents. If he were an officer of the House associated with this committee, he would have all the power. A motion ordering that documents be presented or that a witness appear before a parliamentary committee is still mostly respected. However, the Parliamentary Budget Officer currently has no power.

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat: So the government is appearing to be transparent.

Mr. Robert Marleau: I don't want to attribute motives to it. At the time, when Parliament had Bill C-2 before it and I appeared as a witness, I said that it was at the wrong place and that part of the mandate was missing. If you want Parliament or the House of Commons to have elements that contribute to the government's obligation to be accountable, it is not in the formula that it is....

[*English*]

We can chase F-35s any time; that's glamourous. But having to respond to a committee report asking you to do a specific job and a specific analysis, say over a five-year plan, would be more effective.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mathieu.

Next for the Conservatives we have Peter Braid for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Braid (Kitchener—Waterloo, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Mr. Marleau, for being here this afternoon. It was a very interesting presentation.

I want to circle back to a couple of points you made in your opening presentation. One of your suggestions was that this committee should become an appropriations committee. How would the mandate of the committee change in that case?

Mr. Robert Marleau: The mandate would be binding. The way I would draft the standing order for this five-year study plan, to be tabled in the House in the first 60 days of its appointment, would be a mandatory instruction from the House—"It shall do it"—just like the procedure committee shall review the Standing Orders. In that sense, it has been given a specific accountability mandate way beyond what it has now. It has standing, in a sense, because not many committees have that, and you permanently have the expenditures—past, present, and future—before the committee.

Obviously you can't sit there as members and go through all the estimates line-by-line, but equipped with the proper staff and the plan that you agreed to, I think you could have some impact.

Mr. Peter Braid: Twinned with that you suggested that the mandate of the PBO should change. Could you elaborate on that?

Mr. Robert Marleau: I think the mandate of the PBO should be largely in support of committees on supply. If you're studying whether the age of qualification for the OAS should be reduced or not, you have ample access to experts out there who can come in on contract and work with your witnesses. But there is nobody out there in the private sector—there's only one former clerk alive, and that's me—who understands the supply process and the supply details. So you need a staff that is on it, and that is continuity for you and for the next committee and the one thereafter, much as you have with the library and the researchers.

I'm not saying that the PBO should not have the mandate it has now. I'm saying it hasn't exercised part of its mandate. As far as I know there has not been a lot of work done by the PBO on estimates, and it's been before them and with them from day one. I would move it out of the library. It's kind of a barnacle on the side of the library, and you remember the tussles they had at the very beginning of the creation of the office, where the poor man didn't know who he reported to and what he was supposed to do. It's not a criticism; I'm just saying it's in the wrong place. Put it in the House, in the committee's branch, and make him an officer of the House, and then that office has to conduct itself....

Right now the perception, at least on the outside, is that it is largely an opposition function. Why can't you as government have access to some of this information and direct, through your majority control, certain studies that you want done from time to time? It's not sufficient for government parliamentarians to say you have all the bureaucracy. As parliamentarians sitting in government, you can have influence on your own government, and hold it accountable for some of the things it does. It doesn't have to be negative and it doesn't have to be a confidence issue, and you shouldn't get booted out of caucus because you have a point of view on a particular aspect of spending.

● (1610)

Mr. Peter Braid: Here's my final question. You also spoke about Standing Order 108, and I think you implied that it's really an underutilized standing order at this point in time. Could you elaborate on how Standing Order 108 could be more fully utilized and what its role is?

Mr. Robert Marleau: Standing Order 108 came into being in the late 1980s. I believe it was 1987, following the adoption of the McGrath reforms under Mr. Mulroney. The idea was to give the committees the power to initiate their own studies within their remit, because before that, committees used to have to wait for an order of reference from the House and wait for the estimates. Why did members past—I won't say present, yet—go looking for scandals in the estimates? It's because in the past that was the only way they could get at them. They had to wait for the House to give them an order. Now with Standing Order 108, committees are empowered to begin with whatever kind of study they want, within relevance.

How is it important to the relationship of supply? Up until 1987 when the estimates were deemed reported, as I said before, the perception was that the estimates had evaporated and the issues with them. Wrong. Standing Order 108 continues to give you that access. I have not seen very many committees that have used 108 to pursue a supply study after the estimates have been adopted.

The Chair: Your time is up, Peter. Thank you very much.

We'll go to John McCallum, for the Liberals.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Thank you.

I'm afraid I'm a little bit confused about your proposal and exactly what it would do. You said within 60 days there would be a report on expenditures over a five-year period, I think. Is this a committee that would essentially do estimate reviews and provide proposals on that, or would it be doing separate studies on related issues and reporting on that? What would it do that's different from what happens today?

Mr. Robert Marleau: This new appropriations committee would, within 60 days of it being appointed, file a report to the House with a study plan for the next five years.

Hon. John McCallum: A study plan.

Mr. Robert Marleau: Here's what we are going to do with the appropriations and the estimates for the next five years.

Hon. John McCallum: What would such a plan look like?

Mr. Robert Marleau: It could pick six or seven departments, and for the next five years, the studies would relate from the last set of appropriations to the one being proposed, or to a particular issue flowing from that department—the procurement or whatever. Or another part could be thematic. It could be that it is going to look across the government on procurement, as an example, and report to the House and make recommendations.

Hon. John McCallum: It's in the context of such reports that we would ask questions of the minister in the House.

Mr. Robert Marleau: That's right. If a report were tabled in the House and you chose to concur it in, you would take up that debate between one and two on Wednesdays. The minister would be present and would have to answer to that report.

● (1615)

Hon. John McCallum: Okay. Thank you. That clarifies it in my mind.

You're the only witness I remember who doesn't think it's necessary for the budget to coincide with the estimates in terms of timing. I think I tend to agree with the others, maybe because I'm a politician and I'm more concerned about timing. When we get information in the budget, it tends to render the estimates we're dealing with now obsolete, because the latest information, including the cuts and everything else, is not in the estimates.

You say it's impossible, but many other countries do it. In fact, the OECD person told us we were a rare and bad exception to the rule among most countries. So I guess I don't understand why you say we couldn't do it, and I also don't understand why you don't think it would be good if we could do it.

Mr. Robert Marleau: I'm not an international expert on budget-making, but I'll restate what I said. I believe the budget is a policy statement by the government on what it intends to do. It's not a binding legal piece of paper put on the table that the estimates have to match. There are things in the budget at the present time that change

I'll give you, as an example, MacEachen's first budget in 1981. It proposed capital gains on the transfer of farm sales within a family. That didn't happen. As the groundswell worked its way through Parliament, and whatever, a large part of that budget was never implemented.

So I see it as a policy statement. The Auditor General may see it as a bookkeeping operation. You have five days of debate on the budget, and it's about policy. You move amendments. You don't amend line 44 of the budget; you move an amendment that will impact on that policy and it may be confidence.

Those experts from the OECD may not understand the Westminster model and how supply is crafted. The crown will ask for your agreement before it takes your cows to feed its soldiers—it's that basic. How many cows it takes and how many soldiers it feeds may vary according to whether we're at war or not. That's a policy statement.

Hon. John McCallum: I may be wrong—

The Chair: You have one minute.

Hon. John McCallum: —but I seem to remember that Australia and New Zealand do it coincidentally, and I think they are Westminster. I guess I don't disagree with you that the budget is a policy statement, but it's also a policy statement that contains measures.

When you want to review the expenditures of the government over the coming year, you want to have the most up-to-date information in conducting that review. I guess we'd be willing to take the risk that certain elements of the budget might not pass, as in the days of MacEachen some 30-plus years ago—so I guess I'd disagree.

Mr. Robert Marleau: We can agree to disagree, Mr. McCallum. I don't have a fundamental mental block. I just don't see what it adds to the parliamentary supply process to have a budget that mirrors the estimates, or vice-versa.

I know how the cycle works in the bureaucracy. I don't imagine that the Treasury Board ministers—and you've been there—have gone through every element of that $250 billion with a fine-tooth comb. The most powerful bureaucrat in the country is the Treasury Board analyst—the young man or young woman who's interacting with the government departments or parts thereof and saying, “I don't think we can put this before ministers.” They're the ones who have more influence than parliamentarians right now.

So in the context of a budget that should mirror spending, it has to do it by the supplementary (C)s at the end of the year. There's a dynamic that flows through Parliament with supplementary (A)s, (B) s, and (C)s, which flows from the budget—and some of it is not even in the budget. So what do you do as a government if you want to do something and you didn't put it in the budget?

Mr. Mike Wallace: You don't do it.

Mr. Robert Marleau: It may be necessary to do it.

I don't see what it adds to your role as an MP. It may make the Auditor General more comfortable, because he can read a bottom line that matches another bottom line.

● (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, John.

I've been letting the time go a little bit because the exchanges have been very interesting.

Now we have Jacques Gourde.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Marleau, thank you for joining us today. Your testimony is beneficial. You said earlier that the committee could perhaps improve or change its mandate, so that it may conduct studies that are a bit more thorough. You also mentioned the limited amount of time we have during this time of the year.

Are you suggesting that we spend more time in committee? In other words, are you suggesting that we to hold meeting during periods when we would normally be in our ridings? You know that our time is limited. Of course, regardless of the type of study we are carrying out, if we want it to be more thorough, we need more time. But more time would mean more frequent meetings.

Would the committee really have a more macroeconomic mandate? How much time do you think would be required?

Mr. Robert Marleau: As you say, the committee would have a macroeconomic mandate. It could give its work as much scope as it wants or, in some cases, conduct a more thorough study. I was talking about considerations like government purchases. There are only 308 MPs. If we leave out parliamentary secretaries, chair occupants, party leaders, whips, and so on, who's left to sit on the committees? If we divide the number of MPs by the number of existing committees, you are basically overworked, and not in a good way. The positions of associate member and supernumerary were created over the past few years for a reason. Those people are now on your lists. This committee is a large exception. However, in other committees, we never see the same faces from one meeting to the next, in part because of that. Members have many duties, and committees are often negatively affected.

I suggest that people sit on this committee for a whole session. The whip would not use you on other committees. This would be your committees.

Why is the deputy speaker of the House paid more? Because he has no choice; he has to sit every day. Would any of you be prepared to do that for free? You probably wouldn't, since you have other duties as members. That job requires experts, but those members would become experts in macroeconomics, the supply, finances, and so on.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: So, Mr. Marleau, to reach that objective, we would probably have to sit on a single committee. However, as you said, given the number of available members and the number of committees, we have the option of maintaining the status quo or reorganizing all the committees. When all is said and done, we may have to reduce the number of committees.

Mr. Robert Marleau: This is not the first time I appear and say that there are too many committees. Some of them—which I will not name—exist only owing to political perception. You know as well as I do that those committees have a title, but that their existence is an attempt to please a specific group of society.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Senate committees often study the same issues we do. Therefore, the work is being duplicated. If some committees were both parliamentary and senatorial, would the same objectives be reached?

Mr. Robert Marleau: Since Canada is a two-chamber country with an unelected Senate, I would say that the Senate doesn't have the same spirit of accountability. Things are different in Australia, for instance, where the Senate is an elected body. Proportionality prevails. The majority is never overly marked in the Senate. As a result, compromises, discussions and outcomes are not the same as they are here.

We have a committee that works really well and is never mentioned. I'm talking about the Standing Joint Committee for the Scrutiny of Regulations. That committee, which brings the two houses together, studies regulations. It has the authority to recommend the revocation of regulations and can debate in the House on Wednesdays, between 1 p.m and 2 p.m.

Why doesn't that committee ever use that one-hour period? Because, when the brilliant staff of the Library of Parliament—who provide the committee with support—telephone department people to tell them that certain regulations are problematic and that the committee is planning to revoke them, most of the time, those regulations are amended or revoked by said department. That's the kind of influence the committee has. The fact that the committee can make a minister appear on the floor for an hour and explain why a given colorant is on the list when it shouldn't be, for instance, is sufficiently threatening.

In my opinion, that's the kind of mandate this committee should adopt. That mandate could eventually enable the committee—through recommendations—to influence the financial behaviour of the public service and the government.

● (1625)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Jacques. I'm afraid your time has expired.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're getting close to....

We have Mr. Marleau with us only until 4:30, unfortunately. We've concluded one complete round. We have enough time for one more questioner.

Mr. Blanchette, you have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Blanchette (Louis-Hébert, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Mr. Marleau.

Most people have a pessimistic view of the work we do in committee. We tried some things in 1998 and other things in 2003. However, you seem to be saying that we're not playing in our sandbox properly. A professor told us that Westminster-inspired parliamentary systems were falling behind within the OECD. You seem to disagree. I would like to know, generally speaking, what part of our British parliamentary systems makes it difficult for us to restructure our procedures and to modernize them, to some extent.

Mr. Robert Marleau: I really like what you said about not playing in your sandbox properly. I think that sort of sums up my presentation. Of course, this is not a recent problem. It is not the first time I appear before such a committee and say so.

Let's talk about British parliamentary systems. If we take the Westminster Palace in London as an example, one of the considerations that plays in favour of that Parliament's members is the fact that their mandate is longer than in Canada. When I retired, the average length of a Canadian MP's mandate was about four years. In London, their mandate is from 16 to 18 years. That's the standard.

In addition, their house has from 650 to 700 members. Not everyone can sit on a committee. Some members, if they are part of the government, decide to never be part of the cabinet. They don't want to be part of the cabinet. The dynamic is different. In Canada, unfortunately, there is so much partisanship that the system has become appalling, not only since this government has been in power, but also dating back to previous governments. I think that's the poison, if you will, of the parliamentary process.

In the 1970s, when committees used to have the same powers as you do in terms of the supply, the government and the opposition would compromise much more. In addition, there was much less partisanship and interference by whips.

Mr. Denis Blanchette: If you don't mind me saying so, your suggestions would be very nice in an ideal world. However, in the partisan parliament we have today, they could also lead to disaster.

Mr. Robert Marleau: If the committee's mandate, the appointments and the chairmanship were permanent, you would be sitting at the same table for three or four years. A sort of camaraderie would develop around the table that is currently impossible. You would have to work together for three years. You could not be as partisan, no more than, for instance, two or three House committees with less partisanship, such as the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs and the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, to name only two.

However, with a permanent mandate, a five-year plan, a vision and a goal in mind, I don't think you would be engaged the same kind of partisan politics.

Mr. Denis Blanchette: Most people are predicting that what we are currently doing will result in failure. If I asked you what our winning conditions would be so that the committee could do something to change our ways, what would you say?

● (1630)

Mr. Robert Marleau: First, a unanimous committee report would be strong. A government initiative would be needed to implement the recommendations. The government's response to the last report was, to use an English expression

[*English*]

"mealy-mouthed".

[*Translation*]

Winning conditions are characterized by a government that wants parliamentary participation in accountability to be active and to produce something for parliamentarians as well. Furthermore, it is once again a matter of individuals. The membership of a committee becomes important if you get to that part.

I have been following this file for 40 years. The first major change came about in 1970 because the government wanted it. The second change was made in 1987 because the government wanted it. The response will be the same as it was regarding the last two reports if the government is not willing. Therefore, you need to use winning conditions to ask for the government's support in order to make your role in the business of supply more relevant.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Denis. I'm afraid that concludes your time.

Mr. Marleau, I want to thank you very much for your very helpful, very interesting, and very frank briefing.

I have one point of clarification that the clerk has pointed out. You said a number of times that you think committee members should be appointed for the entire session. Did you mean for the entire Parliament or parliamentary session?

Mr. Robert Marleau: I was referring to the parliamentary session. By parliamentary session, I mean that period between the call letters and the prorogation, but without whip interference.

The Chair: I see.

Mr. Robert Marleau: As parliamentarians, there are various levels of seniority and expertise. You may want to get on with part of your life doing something else than appropriations for a full five years. There would be a chance for some membership rotation in those windows, but the chair should be there for the full five years, as should the vice-chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Marleau.

We found it very interesting. We may even wish to call you back as we go further in our study.

Mr. Robert Marleau: Oh my.

The Chair: It's very helpful. Thank you for being here.

Mr. Robert Marleau: I'll do whatever I can, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for listening to me. I apologize for being a little winded on some of the answers.

The Chair: Not at all. They were very helpful and useful. Thank you.

We're going to suspend while we change up our witnesses.

● (1630)

(Pause)

● (1635)

The Chair: We will reconvene our meeting, the 37th meeting of the government operations committee on the study of estimates and supply.

Now we're very pleased to welcome a former colleague and former chair of the public accounts committee, the chief executive officer of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption, and someone who is well-known to all of us and has a great wealth of experience on this subject, Mr. John Williams.

You're very welcome here, John. You have the floor for as long as you see fit, and then we'll open it up to questions.

Mr. John Williams (Chief Executive Officer, Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My congratulations to you. It's nice that we've worked together in public accounts, and it's nice to see you sitting there as chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. John Williams: Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the invitation to appear before the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates today to present on the estimates process by which Parliament reviews the estimates, or funds, requested by the government.

It is an honour for me to be here. This is the nation's House, where the nation's business is transacted, and it is a pleasure to be invited to appear before you.

In a democracy, the people have every right to expect that their taxes are used in a manner that is acceptable to the people. The House of Commons has the responsibility to represent the wishes and desires of the people and to ensure, by way of approval of the estimates, that government spending is prudent and in the best interests of the people. Since nothing happens without spending, it makes the approval of the business of supply the most important role of the House of Commons.

Control of the public purse by Parliament has its origins in the Magna Carta signed by King John in 1215, when the king agreed to accept the "common counsel of our realm" when levying and assessing an aid or a scutage—scutage being what we call taxes today. Parliament has had control of the public purse down through the ages, and it's still very much at the core of our democratic government.

Today, Standing Order 80 clearly indicates that the House of Commons still retains that authority by stating: "All aids and supplies granted to the Sovereign by the Parliament of Canada are the sole gift of the House of Commons".

That puts it in perspective, Mr. Chairman. The government has no money except that which is given by the House of Commons.

For the fiscal year ended March 31, 2011, according to the financial statements audited by the Auditor General, the government spent $270.5 billion dollars, granted by the House of Commons by way of approval of supply.

That volume of spending poses a quandary for the members of Parliament. Given that amount and the complexity of proposed spending by the government, how are members supposed to be able to scrutinize it properly? If you want to look at the detail, the mountain of paper would be so big that you would not know where to start. If you want a manageable amount of paper, the overview contains so little detail that there are no apparent questions to ask.

In addition to that, of course, the government considers the estimates to be a matter of confidence. What backbencher wants to carry the responsibility of triggering an election?

It doesn't stop there. Let us suppose that a parliamentary committee recommended a reduction in the estimates. First, it can only be debated and voted on a supply day. Should it pass and the estimates be reduced, the government could consider it a loss of confidence and trigger an election.

However, even without a supply day vote, a reduction recommended by a committee would cause the President of the Treasury Board to introduce a motion to restore or reinstate the original amount if the proposed reduction was not acceptable to the government. The vote on the motion to restore or reinstate the government's request for funds is a vote on an opposed item, and the adoption of this motion overrides the committee's recommended reduction, which means nothing will happen.

In June 1995, the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs created a subcommittee on the business of supply, and I was privileged to sit on that committee. The report, of which I believe you all have copies, is I think the best and most comprehensive report on the business of supply in Canada in modern times.

I would like, Mr. Chairman, to acknowledge Mr. Brian O'Neal of the Library of Parliament, who was the principal researcher for the subcommittee and whose great work contributed immensely to the quality of the report.

In addition to placing the business of supply in an historical perspective, the recommendations of the report can be broken down into six areas: one, the creation of an estimates committee with overarching authority on the business of supply; two, the confidence convention and the business of supply; three, granting committees the capacity to reallocate up to 5% within the department under review; four, long-term cyclical reviews of statutory spending, which we call program spending; five, review of crown corporations that do not report through a minister; and six, a review of tax expenditures and loan guarantees.

The subcommittee, Mr. Chairman, reported back to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs with this report, which was adopted by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs in late 1996 or early 1997. The report was subsequently tabled in the House of Commons, but the House was dissolved for an election in April 1997 and the report died on the order paper. I was unable to have it resurrected by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs in the subsequent Parliament, therefore I tabled a private member's motion to adopt the report.

● (1640)

The private member's motion was adopted by the House, but since the subcommittee report had not been tabled in that Parliament, the motion was advisory rather than an order of the House, and no action was taken.

However, if you look at Standing Order 108(3)(c), you will see that the first recommendation of the subcommittee—that there be an estimates committee—has already taken place. That is why you are here today sitting as the government operations and estimates committee.

I believe it was in 2002 when I became aware there were to be changes to the committee mandates. I therefore lobbied for the creation of the estimates committee with a mandate according to the subcommittee report, and here you are.

If you study the mandate of the estimates committee in Standing Order 108(3)(c), you will see that it is virtually identical to recommendations of the subcommittee, so that part of the work has been done. As far as I am aware, however, the estimates committee has yet to make full use of the mandate in the Standing Orders to pick up on the business of supply or examine government spending that is outside the estimates. I believe that approximately 30% of total government spending is voted on through the estimates. The rest is statutory expenditures authorized as program spending in legislation by the House of Commons.

With the new mandate, the estimates committee can now look and examine spending right across government. You will find in the subcommittee report—recommendations 35 to 39—a proposal for the estimates committee to examine statutory spending on a cyclical basis using the concept of program evaluation. All government programs should be evaluated at least once every ten years to: one, articulate the public policy objectives of the statutory program; two, decide whether or not these objectives are being met; three, whether or not the program is being effectively managed; and four, whether there are alternative means of meeting the same policy objectives.

These points are virtually identical to a private member's bill that I had on the order paper for a number of years, which never made it to the House for debate. The point is that the estimates committee now has the authority under Standing Order 108(3)(c)(x) to examine statutory expenditures. To do so, it can ask the House to request that the government conduct program evaluations as outlined above to assist the committee in its work.

The estimates committee can also look at loan guarantees and tax expenditures that do not show up anywhere in the financial statements, and crown corporations that do not report to any other committee. These can represent huge sums of money and important public policy; therefore, the House needs some way to scrutinize them. That is the role of the estimates committee. The Public Service Commission, which is independent of government and therefore cannot report to the House through a minister, now reports directly to the House and is referred to the estimates committee.

The big item is the consideration of the estimates by Parliament. The most important function of Parliament—control of the public purse—is not even given a perfunctory examination. Many members of Parliament don't understand the process, and therefore stay with more politically rewarding agendas. The big problems are how do you understand this mountain of paper; and if you did understand the paperwork and wanted to make a change, the Standing Orders and the confidence convention prevent you from doing so. Based on the premise that there is no gain for the pain, the estimates are left untouched and a mystery to many. Supply days are for political football with never a mention of supply.

When I arrived here in 1993, the last supply day in June used to be a full-day debate on the estimates, but even that was changed so that the debate on the estimates does not start until 6:30 p.m. and finishes at 10 o'clock. That's $270.5 billion dollars fully considered in three and a half hours. Pretty soon the House will be examining the estimates at the rate of $100 billion per hour, which really is a sad reflection on the state of our democracy.

If you read the report carefully, you will find that the subcommittee suggests a methodology by which House of Commons committees can recommend a reallocation of up to 5% within a department, and even reductions in the estimates without triggering the confidence convention. The report sets out a clear timetable for consideration of the estimates by the committees, and if a House committee recommends a change or a reduction, they must give their reasons for doing so. In response, the President of the Treasury Board can either accept or reject the committee's proposals.

● (1645)

If the Treasury Board accepts the committee's proposals, a modified royal recommendation can be tabled. However, if the committee recommendation is rejected, reasons must be given. This should lead to a reasoned debate in the House when the estimates are debated. It would be nice, of course, Mr. Chairman, if the Standing Orders were changed to allow more than three and a half hours of debate in the House.

Regardless of the issue, if you change the motivators, you will change the results. Supply days have become political, because MPs cannot change the endgame. If you allowed a process whereby estimates could be reduced, then I would hope that MPs would take the estimates more seriously and would hold a number of serious meetings on the issue with senior department officials.

Now, Mr. Chair, if I can change the topic slightly, I will talk about the plans and priorities documents themselves.

I sat on a committee that revamped the old part III documents into the plans and priorities documents, which presented the proposed spending for the coming year within future projections going out three years. This was something new.

The committee also recommended the introduction of departmental performance reports, tabled by the government in the fall. These two documents, plans and priorities in the spring, which are forward-looking, and the departmental performance reports, the DPRs, in the fall, which report past experience, should present the information in a similar manner, the plans and priorities having three years going forward and the DPRs having three years of historical information.

Unfortunately, Mr. Chairman, I saw these DPRs being what I called self-serving fluff, without real substance. I therefore wanted two DPRs selected at random each year for audit by the Auditor General. This way, we would know if the DPRs were really telling the story within the departments.

The Auditor General tabled a report in Parliament in 2007, I believe, explaining the methodology by which DPRs could be audited. Since I have been gone for a few years, I am not sure if the Auditor General has, in fact, audited some of these DPRs.

Mr. Chairman, the government operations and estimates committee has a wide-ranging mandate, and I hope this committee will utilize that mandate fully to make the examination of the estimates by Parliament a meaningful exercise.

It is why Parliament came into being, and control of the public purse remains its most important function.

I thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Williams. We asked you here as a witness exactly because of your deep and long experience with the subject. I am well aware that you were the co-author, I believe, of the reports with Catterall.

Mr. John Williams: That's correct.

The Chair: We're certainly using that as a starting point. Rest assured that the recommendations from 1995—although they didn't really get in until the 1998 study—and the 2003 study both formed the basis of where we're going with this project.

We're quite sincere about having firm, legitimate recommendations that will be, I hope, adopted.

We're going to go right to questions, then.

We have Alexandre Boulerice for the NDP.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Williams, thank you for your knowledgeable presentation. We are hearing from some outstanding witnesses today.

I also appreciated this overview of the signing of the Magna Carta, which led to the creation of parliamentarism. That's also a reminder that Parliament was created to do what we are no longer able to do today. I'm talking about the auditing of expenditures. My questions for you will be very similar to the ones I put to previous witnesses.

Since you represent an international organization, I will take advantage of your knowledge to ask you this. Can we find comfort in comparing ourselves to others, or is Canada cutting a sorry figure, on the international stage, when it comes to parliamentarians' capacity to audit and control the federal government's expenditures?

● (1650)

[*English*]

Mr. John Williams: I have two things in response, Mr. Chair.

As you know, Canada is a beacon for the world, and long may it continue to be a beacon for the world as far as democracy is concerned. Also, in many ways, when you look closely, it's perhaps not as vibrant and robust a year as it should be.

Parliament has the authority. Have no doubt that Parliament is the supreme institution of the land, if you want it to be that way. Therefore, there is nothing outside your capacity if you, collectively, as a Parliament, decide to do this.

You have the power, collectively, if you use it.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: It makes me think of somebody saying not to let anybody tell you that you can't do that—I like the spirit.

[*Translation*]

There is some skepticism—if not pessimism—when it comes to the outcome of the study we are currently conducting. It is an important study, but it is not the first of its kind. You are familiar with the 1998 study—the recommendations that came to nothing—and the 2003 study, which does not appear to have changed the system.

We are under the impression that, even if we came to a unanimous agreement—which happens sometimes, but not very often—if the executive branch is not willing to change things and wants to maintain control.... When something is shrouded in much mystery, parliamentarians have little power and, in the end, the government has practically all the weapons on its side. Even if we agreed and produced a nice unanimous report, if the Office of the Prime Minister blocked....

What do you think is needed to really bring about some positive changes?

[*English*]

Mr. John Williams: I would like to see the estimates committee, first of all, collectively study the mandate you now have in the Standing Orders under 108(3)(c), which is wide-ranging and virtually limitless. You can look at everything the government spends. You do not really need a change in the Standing Orders.

Then don't get caught up in this confidence convention. Program spending is now within your mandate.

Mr. Marleau, the previous witness, said to set out a five-year plan. The business of supply report said not a five-year plan but decide if you're going to look at any specific program of spending the government does. Then you can ask through the House that an evaluation be done by the experts. The Parliamentary Budget Office has now appeared on the scene since this report was written.

There is a discipline called program evaluation that can give you a report of something of this magnitude on a particular program, asking four questions. One, what is the mission this program is designed to achieve within the country? Two, is it performing and fulfilling that mandate? Three, it is doing it efficiently and well? Four, is there a better way to do the same things? These are simple, fundamental questions that are long ranging in their application and do not invoke confidence. If you can get the professionals, the program evaluators, to give you a report of this magnitude on a program, you as a Parliament can now become engaged and make recommendations to the government that it would listen to going forward. Therefore, you can be very effective, in my opinion, if you act as a collegial committee moving forward in examining pieces of government spending in detail.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: You've got about 30 seconds, if you like.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: As we have some time, I would like you to talk about problems caused by the very long and somewhat absurd cycle of spending authorization.

Owing to that cycle, when we study the main estimates, we cannot compare that document with anything, since supplementary estimates (A), (B) and (C) have not been published yet, and there is also no connection with the budget document—the budget—put forward by the Minister of Finance. We study the main estimates, but we cannot compare that document with anything else. It's a bit like comparing apples and oranges. It is a difficult process.

● (1655)

[*English*]

Mr. John Williams: Don't get caught up with the budget. I agree with Mr. Marleau. It's a separate document, a policy document.

But the plans and priorities now give you three years going on, so that you get this year's proposed spending in context. I made mention in my statement that the departmental performance reports, which are the historical reporting against the budget with three years of historical information, should be comparable to the plans and priorities—one saying where they were going and the other one saying if they actually went where they said they were going. I called these departmental performance reports self-serving fluff, which is why the Office of the Auditor General developed a methodology for auditing them to ensure it gives Parliament the information it needs.

So you have six years of forward and retrospective numbers. This gives you the capacity to make the analysis in order to ensure the programs are effective. Coupled with program evaluation, I think it can be done if you work collegially as a committee.

The Chair: Thank you, Alexandre.

Next is Kelly Block for the Conservatives.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank you for being with us today, Mr. Williams. I've appreciated your presentation as well as the presentation just before you. I know you were here for part of it.

You were a member of Parliament for 15 years, and you served as the chair of the public accounts committee as well as being—I think you mentioned—a member of the subcommittee on the business of supply of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

I want to pick up on one of the last statements you made in response to my colleague's question. You said, “if you work collegially as a committee”. Recently we heard from a former member of Parliament, Joe Jordan, that the estimates process is a terrible partisan mechanism for trying to embarrass the government, especially when ministers come to committee to present their estimates.

Throughout this study we've come to understand that we're in a partisan environment. You yourself said there's no gain for the pain when it comes to doing the work we need to do.

How do we change that culture?

Mr. John Williams: I think you change the culture by changing the focus of the committee. Change the focus of the committee to evaluating programs, rather than looking at the estimates that have to go through the House by June—confidence applies, the government is standing absolutely firm, you beat your head, and nothing moves. If you change that to looking at programs and the efficiency and effectiveness of those programs going on for three or five years, it's not that dissimilar to what Mr. Marleau was talking about with the five-year plan.

As an example I'll use something that's in the debate right now—the retirement age and the qualification for OAS that will come in over a number of years. There is no confidence attached to having an opinion on something that will be introduced down the road. So you can have your say on that and any other program you desire to comment on, given the fact that you have the program evaluators giving you the technical details.

It's all political today because you have no details, so you take political swipes at the minister, who takes a political swipe back, and nothing changes. But if you are discussing intellectually some detail of a program that's maybe not as well focused as it could be or should be, or not as well managed as it could be, you have something intelligent to contribute.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Okay. Thank you.

I don't know if you were here at the very beginning of Mr. Marleau's testimony, but he shared with us that he wanted to start by debunking some myths. If we agree with his suggestion that we do have enough information, that it is relevant to the work we do as parliamentarians, and that the timing of the introduction of the mains and the budget isn't an issue—and you've suggested we have a wide-ranging mandate—what are some of the first one or two steps we can take as a committee?

Out of the report that was tabled when you were on the subcommittee, this committee was formed. So what are the one or two first steps we could take as a committee?

Mr. John Williams: I would say step back from this hard political position on the estimates of this year and decide, as a committee, that you're going to review some programs over the next three to five years—not that dissimilar to what Mr. Marleau was saying.

You'll find that this report, which was tabled in 1997, talked about program evaluation. What is a program designed to do for society anyway? Is it doing what it's supposed to do? Is it doing it effectively and being well managed? Is there a better way to achieve the same results?

When you have the answers to those four questions, those answers become a reasoned, intellectual examination of programs that are ongoing. I'm sure the government would welcome that, because we are in a period of fiscal austerity, and trying to ensure that government is focused and well managed. They would surely welcome a report from Parliament saying that some programs can be adjusted, or maybe even eliminated, improved, expanded, or whatever. Your opinion matters.

● (1700)

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you.

The Chair: You only had about 10 seconds left anyway, Kelly, so thank you.

Denis Blanchette, you have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Blanchette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank Mr. Williams. I am pleased to meet one of the spiritual fathers of this committee. It is a pleasure.

You may be able to shed some light on certain issues. Most of your recommendations have not been adopted. That includes the recommendations contained in the 2003 study. I am convinced that, if you have been faithfully following all our work, you are under the impression that we have been repeating ourselves, as if something was not understood.

What do you think we can do to avoid a repetition of what happened in 1998 and 2003, and to ensure that this work truly helps change or improve things?

[*English*]

Mr. John Williams: I would start, Mr. Chairman, by having an in camera meeting of the members to look at your standing order mandate.

It is broad. It is wide-ranging. It covers all parts of government. You need to decide how you're going to examine government spending beyond just the estimates that are tabled at the beginning of March, which have to be voted on and confidence is attached.

You should move away from there. Don't leave it behind, but don't make it your primary focus. Consider how the estimates committee could look at government spending, loan guarantees, tax expenditures. By virtue of the fact that tax expenditures are deducted from people's income tax means there's no revenue, no expenditure, no program. There's nothing. There's nothing that comes before Parliament on tax expenditures that gives you information. Yet, they can be huge public policies—RRSP contributions being one of the major tax deductions and tax expenditures that doesn't show up anywhere.

These are the things you can look at, and then you can table a report in the House asking the government to provide evaluations of this magnitude that give you detailed managerial information on how this program is doing, and then go forward from there. This is where I think you can make the greatest impact and influence government spending down the road.

Now if you take a look at the 52 recommendations, program evaluation is a big one. Reallocation within a department of up to 5% gives you the potential tool to say, “not there, but there”, without invoking confidence that the government would agree.

That's provided you put forth reasonable rational reasons for your proposal. The government would then have to respond. It would have to accept or not accept, and provide its reasons for doing so. That allows a reasoned and intelligent debate in the House.

When you have that kind of attitude, it reduces the partisanship and makes it much more meaningful. You represent the wishes of your constituents rather than just throwing political barbs across the table, and therefore they have more confidence in the work you do.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Blanchette: Like the previous witness, you are talking about reducing partisanship. In fact, we have been breaking all kinds of records in that area. Before I was elected, I was told that parliamentarism was based on people's ability to agree, but it is now more about people's inability to agree.

I want to talk about something else—the tools available to us. If we had all the details we needed, they would amount to something huge. However, I wonder what kind of balance there could be between the details and the big picture. The previous witness said that the parliamentary budget officer is basically a tool that could help us in our work. What do you think?

● (1705)

[*English*]

Mr. John Williams: I think the PBO, the Parliamentary Budget Officer, can assist committees such as this one immensely. I agree with Mr. Marleau that he should be an officer of Parliament. I also think that making him an officer of Parliament means that he does not get stuck in limbo, wondering what he can or cannot do, or what authority he does or does not have, and becoming his own little soapbox rather than a support mechanism for the committee. That, I think, is important.

The Auditor General supports the public accounts committee. His report is tabled and referred to the committee. You have this close relationship between documentary support by the Auditor General and the committee's capacity to make inquiries of witnesses. The Parliamentary Budget Officer should be doing the same, giving you the report so that you, as the members of Parliament, can ask the important questions. Because the Parliamentary Budget Officer really doesn't have a reporting mechanism right now, he has his own press conferences and speaks in public.

The Auditor General doesn't do that. I would think you should be looking at it along the same lines for the Parliamentary Budget Officer—an officer of Parliament, reporting here, giving his reports to you, and you ask the questions.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Blanchette: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Williams. Thank you, Mr. Blanchette.

If I might just say, when people talk about the good old days when parliamentary committees used to function well, they're usually talking about the public accounts committee as chaired by Mr. Williams. It was the golden Camelot era of how Parliament used to work.

Mr. John Williams: Not Camelot, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Not quite Camelot.

Mr. John Williams: It was partisan then, too.

The Chair: Ron Cannan.

You have five minutes, Ron.

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you Mr. Chair.

Talking about the good old days, it's good to have Mr. Williams back.

Welcome to the committee, and thank you for sharing your wisdom and insight. It's like déjà vu, you look at 1998, 2003, and just go along. You take these reports, and you retire as an MP and travel around the world, rebrand them, and sell them to other countries.

I see you were in Australia, and I was looking through your report, and it mentions the document you produced on parliamentary accountability in Victoria in 2007. Our committee is going to have a former clerk of the Australian Senate by the name of Harry Evans before our committee next Wednesday, and we just wondered if there are any best practices by the Australian provincial or federal government that you think we should consider in this committee.

Mr. John Williams: I'm not an expert on the Australian system, but there is always the need and opportunity for review and evolution. Nobody, no particular Parliament, has it right. Our culture is different. Parliament is partisan, that is why we're here. We're here to debate, and hopefully come to an agreement, and the majority vote is deemed to be an agreement.

We can be vociferous in our opposition, but we come to an agreement without pulling out the guns, and that's a wonderful thing in this country. We don't have to worry about these kinds of things—the ways they resolve it in other countries. As long as we can do that, and do it with an intellectual commitment to serving our constituents.... The partisanship is when you don't have the intellectual support underpinning your debate, and that is why I think it's important for the committee to look at the program evaluation to ensure that you have substance by which you can debate.

Anybody can throw political barbs across the table, and one-liners abound, but they don't do anything. If you really want to make a contribution to the way this government, any government, manages the country, Parliament needs documentary analysis before it to make that informed opinion.

The government governs subject to the approval of Parliament. Parliament does not govern. It holds the government accountable for the way it governs in the Westminster model, and that is why you need to have the information with program X and program Y and ask whether it being done to serve the people well.

When you have that information and ask these questions, and you table your report and say that we as a Parliament report to the government that we feel that you should be changing your focus on this particular program, or that it's not being managed effectively, or that it can be done in a better way, I'm sure the government would welcome that.

● (1710)

Mr. Ron Cannan: Thank you.

Coming back to the 1998 report, and it's 14 years later, and there's the experience you have, and having travelled.... One of the recommendations was for the standing committee to be able to reallocate funds during their consideration of the estimates. I was wondering, do you think that recommendation still holds true today?

Mr. John Williams: Absolutely, for two reasons.

First, Parliament has an opinion. Of course, you're here because you have an opinion. You're here because you represent the opinions of the citizens who elected you. There is no guarantee that the government is all knowing, and has everything right.

You're entitled to express your opinion. If you say, instead of spending all the money over there, why don't you put some of it over here, if that is your opinion and it's reasoned and rational, the government might listen to you.

At the same time, also, by knowing that you have this authority to move money, or to recommend that money be moved—not be spent here but spent there—it gives you the incentive to look at the information knowing that your contribution can count.

If you know that your contribution can't count, if you're just going to get batted away, then, as I say, sometimes if people have no responsibility they act irresponsibly. That feeds the partisanship. But if you have this authority and this capacity, there is no doubt in my mind that you will accept it, and deal with it professionally, and make a contribution to the country.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds or so, Ron.

Mr. Ron Cannan: I have a question to just follow up on what my wise colleague, Mr. Braid, asked Mr. Marleau regarding a special appropriations committee. Maybe you could elaborate your thoughts on having a designated committee.

Mr. John Williams: The appropriations committee and the estimates committee are not that significantly different. You'll see in the 52 recommendations that we talked about the longevity, and improving the longevity, of the estimates committee, trying to build internal expertise among the MPs who sit on the committee. That was not in the same detail as Mr. Marleau gave, but was referenced in these committee recommendations. I fully support the professionalism of committee members by staying on the one committee for a number of years.

I was on the public accounts committee for 15 years, and I enjoyed every minute of it. I think that developing a capacity to understand and make a contribution will only happen if you stick with a committee for some time.

Mr. Ron Cannan: Thank you very much.

The Chair: That's it, Ron. Thank you very much.

For the Liberals, we have John McCallum. You have five minutes, John.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you. Welcome back, Mr. Williams.

I like your section where you talk about evaluating the various programs in a cyclical way. Who would do the evaluations? If the people who run the programs evaluate their own programs, then you might get rather positive fluff—I think that was your expression—coming back at you.

Mr. John Williams: There is—I'm sure they're still there, Mr. McCallum—within the government a division called program evaluation. They are professional program evaluators with a skill in evaluation. These are not just the same people within the department who are running the program to write a report on their own work.

They are, in essence, like internal auditors, but they are evaluators looking forward rather than auditors looking backward. The skill and the expertise reside within the Government of Canada to independently assess the effectiveness of programs. That is why you would table in the House of Commons—because you have no authority as a committee on your own—that the government perform an evaluation of the programs that are of interest to this committee and report back.

Now you would have something that's equivalent to an Auditor General's report. Perhaps there is even a lot more detail that gives you the analysis of the program—how good and how effective it is in serving the interests of why the program was created. That way, with real knowledge, you can make the recommendations, if you have any, as to change or focus.

Hon. John McCallum: Having spent some time in government and on the expenditure review committee, I don't remember this species of person called a neutral program evaluator. I'm not saying you're wrong, but I would have thought that even if you have that person, the committee will get what the government wants it to get.

Why not use the Parliamentary Budget Officer or some other independent body that works for the committee—not for the government—to spearhead this thing, possibly in conjunction with these people you've described? I don't think you want all the determination of the reports to be put into the hands of the people running the program or even of the government.

● (1715)

Mr. John Williams: I agree, Mr. McCallum, and I'll say that when we wrote this report the PBO did not exist. I made my point that I think the Parliamentary Budget Officer should be an officer of Parliament serving this committee, very much like the Auditor General serves the public accounts committee.

Therefore, it would have the staff and the resources to do that program evaluation and also have the access to the documentation too. That would require legislation. The act for the Auditor General gives the Auditor General access to the documentation. The PBO would need that same kind of legislation.

Hon. John McCallum: I think we agree so far. I now come to some of the issues that my NDP colleagues have been raising. Why would the government want this committee to have that information in the first place?

The government would generally prefer to feed us stuff that it wants us to have, not give us a capacity to dig out stuff that they may not want us to have. They're doing expenditure reviews. If they want to get rid of a program or cut it, they can cut it without having some nagging little parliamentary committee telling it what to do and digging up dirty things that they might not want us to know about.

Why would the government want to cooperate with us on this?

Mr. John Williams: You can have government downsizing and government efficiency either as a political process or a managerial process. Every 10 or 15 years, along comes a time when the political hammer comes down and the government says it's going to cut. The Liberals have done it, and the Conservatives have done it. It will happen before that, and it will happen again after this.

Why do we have to wait for the political process rather than having an ongoing managerial process that ensures the programs are done efficiently, effectively, and well?

Hon. John McCallum: Again, we don't disagree. I think it's worth a try, and I'm not holding this Conservative government any more responsible than I would the government of which I was part. I do think governments tend to not want to share information unless they have to.

I think Tony Clement did indicate in his letter a willingness to cooperate with us, so I do think it's worth a try. My only point is that these things have been tried in the past, not always with success. I certainly agree with you that it's worth an effort.

Mr. John Williams: I have two points. First, it's not a case of sharing. Government doesn't share with government; government reports to Parliament. Remember that Parliament is over the government and can demand anything from government that it wants.

Second, when people are held accountable on the small things, it prevents the big things from happening. Therefore, some minor managerial problems within an institution the size of the Government of Canada are not going to bring down the government, but are going to keep it focused in ensuring good service for Canadians.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. Your time is up, John.

We'll go to Bernard Trottier for the Conservatives.

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you, Mr. Williams, for coming in.

I think you and Mr. Marleau have today maybe injected a different way of looking at the problem. We've been very focused the last couple of weeks on this question of a reconciliation between the budget and the estimates, looking at things like the timing of the budget or looking at the fiscal calendar, for example, and making that the focus—and some of the witnesses came in and talked about how they do it in other countries.

I suppose you could say there was this anomalous situation that the budget for the Canadian government isn't approved until about June and the fiscal year has already started, but as you pointed out and Mr. Marleau pointed out, the budget itself is actually more a longer-term policy document. Some of the changes won't even take place until 2013 or 2014, for example. So the need for reconciliation with the main estimates perhaps isn't there.

What you're suggesting is that we should really look at a different focus for a committee like this one, because ultimately, what's more important than that accounting exercise is the ability of Parliament to scrutinize government spending, and as you point out, hold government to account. What I'm hearing from you is, rather than have this broad but shallow look at the estimates that we tend to use right now, let's take a more narrow and deep look at the estimates and focus on a narrower program, for example, looking at the plans and priorities documents and the departmental performance reports.

Has that ever happened with this committee, where there was a decision to do some deeper, narrower dives, in your experience?

● (1720)

Mr. John Williams: I'm not aware that the committee has done that. That's why I recommended that you have an in camera meeting to take a close look at your mandate, because I think if you haven't read it, you'll find you'll be surprised how wide and deep and broad ranged your mandate is. Therefore, you can go anywhere you want.

That's why you'd want to either beef up the PBO or get the government to do these evaluations and provide you with the information, in order to do the deep analysis of individual programs that are of interest to the committee.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: To Mr. McCallum's point, there could be some reluctance on the part of the government to expose itself in certain ways, and so I guess there's going to be some importance as to which programs you chooses to investigate. But I like your suggestion that if you look at some of the smaller areas of spending, the bigger pictures tend to take care of themselves.

What would be the right mandate for choosing which programs to look at, what to dive into?

Mr. John Williams: I don't know that I'm going to go there, Mr. Chairman.

But you're right that, if you have a new process, everybody stands back and says they don't think it will work. They don't want to go down that road, but after a while it becomes part of the process and it's an ongoing affair.

So here is the opportunity for the government operations and estimates committee to start something new that makes a contribution to the governance of this country, to ensure that people are well served by the taxes they pay and the programs that are delivered to them. You can make a meaningful contribution in this way, and therefore that's why I recommend it rather than the superficial look at a stack of documents this big that represents $270 billion worth of expenditures. There's nothing in there that allows you to ask an intelligent, meaningful question. But if you had the program evaluation, you could do that.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: I just have a quick follow-up.

How many programs, ballpark, would there be, if we're looking at more of a sampling approach to studying the estimates?

Mr. John Williams: I've no idea. I could throw out a guess and say 1,000, but I really have no idea.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: So in a given year a committee like this could look at, in terms of doing a significant material dive into that program, maybe 10 programs, maybe 50; no, probably not 50.

Mr. John Williams: No, you wouldn't look at 50, but if you looked at 10....The other thing, of course, is the randomness. As I say, if you change the motivator, you change the results. This is why I wanted the Auditor General to do these audits on departmental performance reports and to pick two at random every year.

If you're coming up next year and you're going to be reported to Parliament as having written some self-serving fluff—which is what I called them—then you're going to be on the hot seat before the public accounts committee and that's not a great place to be. So you put the effort into writing a good report.

It's the same with the management of the programs. If you think you're going to be sitting right here trying to explain to some parliamentary committee why your program is being poorly and badly managed, you're going to think you'd better do something before you get there. It a motivator. Change the motivators and you might get better results. It's great.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: So in a way it's—

The Chair: Thank you, Bernard. You're well over your five minutes.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Thank you for your input.

The Chair: We have time for one and a half rounds—maybe even two full rounds.

Mathieu Ravignat is next.

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat: Since you are from the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption, I'd like to ask you to talk a little about the relationship between corruption and this committee. Specifically, what major changes would be necessary to ensure that this committee can play a role in avoiding corruption?

Mr. John Williams: I appreciate the question very much. On the concept of avoiding corruption, when you are held accountable you tend to do things right. Here we are in a democracy. We have the media reporting what goes on in committee. We have television, and so on. The public knows what is going on here. If they don't like what's going on here, they have the opportunity to change it at the next election. Or if they like what's going on, they can send you back again.

In dictatorships around the world there is no accountability, and when there is no accountability people steal the cash by the billions of dollars. When they steal the money their people are destitute. When you look around the world and see all the poor people on television who are starving and dying of this, that, and the next thing, it's because of bad governance, not a lack of aid. Why is it bad governance? It's because the people cannot hold their governments accountable.

Nobody has ever voted for poverty. Why is half the world poor, and a billion and a half people destitute? It is because they cannot exercise accountability over their governments, as we do here in Canada. What we're trying to instill around the world is accountable governance.

This committee is about accountability. You look at government spending and approve it or don't approve it. If you can get the House to agree with you not to approve it, then we have an election and fight it out. That's the way we do it in this country. It's called accountability. We let the people ultimately decide.

But in far too many countries around the world that opportunity doesn't exist, and people are left in absolute and total poverty with no capacity to demand services from their governments.

● (1725)

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat: It was interesting when we had a delegation here a few months ago from Kenya. They were setting up a number of committees, and they came to study what our committee does. I'd have to say we had some difficulty explaining to them exactly what we do, and—rightfully so—they had some difficulty understanding what we are about.

Have you heard of this committee and the structure in Canada being served as a model for other countries, and has it been properly exported in that way?

Mr. John Williams: I haven't heard about the estimates committee and the process here within the Parliament of Canada being used elsewhere. We are a strong and prosperous nation because of the fundamental concept of parliamentary committees investigating and reporting on specific issues to the House, and the House having the capacity to hold the government accountable, in full view of the public.

When we look around the world at Kenya and elsewhere, they have very serious problems regarding services to the people, because the people cannot hold the government accountable. If they had an estimates committee that reported to the people that the government was taking the money and going away with it, and corruption was rife....

Talk about Kenya, I believe the last I heard, an MP's salary in Kenya was greater than an MP's salary in Canada. But they have to pay for the funerals of the constituents, and this and that. They run an informal welfare program out of their parliamentary offices.

We don't do that here because we demand accountability. Over there they can shell out or maybe not shell out the money, and if they don't, it's theirs. It's not accountable. It's not transparent. It is unethical, and that is why we are prosperous and they're not.

The Chair: Your time is up, Mathieu.

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat: Thank you.

The Chair: We have a couple of minutes left.

Mike, you wanted to say a few words.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Mr. Williams, thank you very much for coming. It was a very interesting presentation.

If we were going to go the program evaluation route, my concern would be, right along with what Mr. McCallum was saying, that we would be calling witnesses who would say that this program is the greatest thing since sliced bread, and if you change it or reduce it or eliminate it, I'm going to suffer, my family is going to suffer, and our community is going to suffer. On the other side, there's a program in the budget, Katimavik, for example, that will no longer be funded in future years.

Is there a way of taking the politics out of that discussion, so that we are actually talk to a program evaluator who have five or six criteria that they're evaluating against, and we and the media don't use it as political fodder to say that these guys are the worst thing since sliced bread or whatever? Do you have any suggestions in that area?

● (1730)

Mr. John Williams: Yes, your witnesses are going to be the public servants. They're not going to be representatives from society.

I remember when I came down here in 1993, we had a very serious budgetary issue of huge deficits and I was at the finance committee. Every 10 minutes, we'd have a new witness, and every witness said two things: “Cut, but don't cut me” and “Tax, but don't tax me”. Well, who's left? Nobody was left.

The issue is the management of the program. It is not the recipient of the program you want to hear from. So don't bring in the people who say that you can't cut them because they're enjoying this program because of whatever it does for them.

No, you want to ask what public policy this program is designed to address and whether it is doing it well. Hear from the public servants. If you have an opinion from the evaluation team that says that this program spills over and is giving far too many people the benefit compared to what the program was designed to do, then you can make your recommendation.

We have to be very careful. I remember one time I was at a seminar here in the House. The director of statistics from the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador was talking about employment insurance. He said that when they brought in employment insurance in Newfoundland, it created a significant improvement in education in Newfoundland and a significant improvement in health care in Newfoundland. So it wasn't a case of paying employment insurance or not paying employment insurance. It had spillover ramifications.

As public policy people, these are things you have to think about. This is not a private sector corporation that is designed to make money. This is here to serve Canadians in the best way possible. That's why one of the questions in an evaluation is whether there is a better way to do the same thing. Sometimes these benefits that are not obvious come to the fore through evaluation. These are the types of things you, as parliamentarians, need to know so that you can tell the government you agree with a particular program or that you think it should be changed.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Okay, thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mike.

Thank you very much, Mr. Williams. Your presentation was as interesting as we knew it would be, and you are certainly welcome here any time as we wrestle with this subject. We may even have cause to call you back.

I want to thank you for teaching me one new word: scutage. I've learned a new bad word now. If it means taxes, it might sneak its way into my vocabulary.

Mr. John Williams: If I may correct you, Mr. Chairman, that's not a new word. That's an old word.

The Chair: It is a very old word.

Mr. John Williams: In the 1215—

The Chair: I see.

Mr. John Williams: —Magna Carta, that was how they described taxes. It may have been a bad word, too.

The Chair: It is certainly new to me, anyway.

The other thing I was reminded of during the questioning from Denis is that a former colleague of ours, Roy Cullen, wrote a very good book called *The Poverty of Corrupt Nations*. Which came first? Are they corrupt because they're poor, or poor because they're corrupt? It certainly speaks to some of the many issues you deal with very capably.

Mr. John Williams: Mr. Cullen is part of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption. He leads our global task force on anti-money laundering, because he has the expertise.

If you'll allow me an advert, Mr. Chair, tomorrow night, across the hall, in the Railway Room, at six o'clock, I'm having a meeting. I want to get Canadian parliamentarians engaged. Please come and find out how you can carry your knowledge and your expertise to parliamentarians around the world as they wrestle with the same problem you do, which is how to serve the people who have elected us.

The Chair: I would very highly recommend we all get to that meeting.

I've been a member of GOPAC since its founding and feel very strongly about the good work they do.

Thank you so much for being with us, Mr. Williams. We'll see you tomorrow night.

Mr. John Williams: Thank you.

The Chair: I just want to remind everyone we have a planning meeting—

Mr. Mike Wallace: Tomorrow.

The Chair: Tomorrow at 1 p.m., I believe, in La Promenade.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mike Wallace: Yes.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll see you there.

The meeting is adjourned.

Thank you.

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