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Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger



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• (1135)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 106 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The committee is meeting today to begin its study of parliamentary protocol related to the incident in the Speaker's gallery on Friday, September 22, 2023.

Care for the interpreters must be taken. The House administration is here, so I'm sure you know very well that the earpiece is a resource and a tool, not a gadget. If you could keep it away from the microphone, that would be great for the ears of the interpreters.

We received an email that was circulated last night with regard to someone who has some experience on this file and who would like to appear. I would ask members if we are good with inviting this individual. We can also discuss this at the end of the meeting. Are we okay with having this individual appear? Are there any concerns? We'll find a suitable spot for them and we can proceed accordingly. The clerk and I can determine that. Thank you.

We will maintain a consolidated speaking list.

Today we have with us Eric Janse, the Clerk of the House of Commons; Michel Bédard, Law Clerk and Parliamentary Council, Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel; Patrick McDonnell, Sergeant-at-Arms and corporate security officer—whom I thank always for his and his team's service—Jeffrey LeBlanc, deputy clerk, procedure; Stéphan Aubé, acting deputy clerk, administration; Jeremy LeBlanc, clerk assistant and director general, International and Interparliamentary Affairs; and Nancy Antil, chief of protocol and events management.

I understand there is one person providing opening comments. That person will have up to 10 minutes for those comments, and then we will start with questions and comments from committee members.

The floor is yours. Welcome to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Mr. Eric Janse (Clerk of the House of Commons): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I realize there's a small army of us appearing before you today. We figured that this was the best way to ensure that we can answer all of the committee's questions.

Thank you for inviting me and my colleagues to appear today in relation to the address to Parliament by His Excellency Volodymyr Zelenskyy, which took place on September 22, 2023. Given what transpired during the event, I certainly recognize the desire of all members to ensure that such an incident never occurs again.

I am here to give the committee a description of the House administration's role in extending invitations to guests during addresses to Parliament and in screening them for physical threats.

From time to time, the House of Commons chamber is the site for a joint address to Parliament by a distinguished visitor, usually a head of state or head of government.

[Translation]

As host, the Speaker takes a pre-eminent role in such events, which are organized in accordance with an established protocol.

[English]

The Chair: We will have to pause because there is no translation.

Okay. We are back on track.

[Translation]

Mr. Eric Janse: Throughout the planning and execution of the address, the parliamentary protocol office ensures that information is shared among partners, coordinates logistical and protocol requirements and ensures that all arrangements follow established parliamentary practice.

[English]

A key aspect of this function involves the coordination of invitations to guests present in the chamber and in the galleries during an address. While members of the House of Commons occupy their desks, additional seats in the centre aisle of the chamber are designated for senators and certain Canadian and foreign dignitaries.

A number of seats that are not occupied by parliamentarians are distributed based on a pre-established guest list, which includes certain groups on the Table of Precedence for Canada, as well as the Prime Minister's Office, the visiting delegation and the Speakers. The remaining seats are allotted to senators and members of the House of Commons.

The formula used for the distribution is developed by the House administration and approved by the Prime Minister's Office and the parties for each address. In recent years, the breakdown of available seats per party and group has reflected the current standings for each in the Senate and the House of Commons.

[*Translation*]

Once the allocation of seats has been approved, each group is invited to submit their lists of intended guests to Parliament's protocol office, which coordinates the sending of the invitations. Each group and party that submits names is responsible for their own guest list. These lists are not shared with other parties or groups and, in keeping with the independence of Parliament, they are not shared with government, either.

[*English*]

I would like to repeat this in English, as it has been the subject of much discussion. Guest lists provided to the protocol office are not shared with other parties or groups and, in keeping with the principle of the independence of Parliament, they are not shared with the government either.

[*Translation*]

As for most events taking place on Parliament Hill, when the parliamentary protocol office receives guest lists, they ensure that the names of the guests are shared with parliamentary security partners, including the parliamentary precinct access team. These teams then verify the names against a security database and assist with the accreditation of the guests.

[*English*]

As with all visitors to parliamentary buildings, guests for an address to Parliament must go through a physical security screening process when they arrive on Parliament Hill. Guests to Parliament are not screened for reputational threats, which in any event would be difficult to achieve in the very short time available for the organization of such ceremonies. In addition, it is worth pointing out that almost all guests are merely spectators and play no formal role in an address to Parliament.

For the address to Parliament that took place on September 22, the names of Mr. Hunka and his son were submitted by the Speaker of the House of Commons and his office to the parliamentary protocol office. The process was the same as for previous addresses and for other groups that can submit the names of guests.

[*Translation*]

On the matter of recognition of guests, there are guidelines and processes that exist surrounding recognitions that occur during sittings of the House. These guidelines are designed to permit the orderly and appropriate recognition of dignitaries in the Speaker's gallery, without unduly interfering with the flow of business on the floor of the House.

While the present recognition guidelines apply when the House is in session, they do not extend to special ceremonies or events taking place in the House of Commons that are not official sittings of the House, such as an address to Parliament by a distinguished visitor.

It is worth noting that the practice of recognizing visitors in the gallery during an address to Parliament is a relatively new one. During recent addresses, the Prime Minister or the distinguished visitor has sometimes taken to doing this during their remarks. That is what Speaker Rota chose to do during the address in September. The House of Commons administration's advice was not sought in relation to the recognition of Mr. Hunka by Speaker Rota during his remarks.

• (1140)

[*English*]

In light of recent events, there is an understandable desire to strengthen procedures associated with the recognition of guests at these high-profile efforts, should this practice continue. Indeed, Speaker Fergus offered in October some suggestions to the House leaders for their feedback about additional steps that might be taken in relation to guests of the Speakers or the Prime Minister.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the House administration's desire to play a role in ensuring that a situation similar to the one that took place in the most recent address to Parliament does not happen again.

With that, I would like to thank you again for having invited me to appear before the committee. My colleagues and I will be happy to answer any questions you might have.

The Chair: Thank you for those opening comments.

We will now enter into six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Calkins.

[*Translation*]

Then we will go to Ms. Fortier and Ms. Gaudreau.

[*English*]

Then it will be Ms. Mathyssen.

I'll just say that in the past I've provided some leniency. We have a lot of new members at PROC now. Would you like me to continue chairing as I've always done? Would you like me to act as chair to end the time? As chair, I do have prerogative, so if witnesses do not have any time to comment, I am able to provide them time to comment.

I will continue doing that, so that's not a question, but should I continue chairing as I have chaired? I'm looking for agreement.

I see some agreement. Excellent. I will continue doing that.

Mr. Calkins, you have six minutes, through the chair.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Janse, my question is about the event. Can you confirm that the visit of President Zelenskyy to Canada, including his address to the House of Commons, was at the invitation of the government and that it was the initiative of the Prime Minister?

Mr. Eric Janse: Addresses to Parliament are indeed initiated by the government, but there's a motion that's actually adopted in both Houses—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Can you tell us who tabled the motion?

Mr. Eric Janse: I would have to look that up—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Was it a minister or a parliamentary secretary or just somebody from the House of Commons?

Mr. Eric Janse: It a unanimous consent motion. We can dig that up while you maybe go to your next question.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Can you confirm that the address by President Zelenskyy was actually not on an official sitting day of the House of Commons?

Mr. Eric Janse: Indeed. The event is held in the House of Commons chamber, but it's not considered a sitting of the House.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: The context was that the House adopted a motion to not have a sitting day in order for the government to host President Zelenskyy, using the House of Commons as the venue. Would that be a fair summation of what happened?

Mr. Eric Janse: I think so.

I've just received information. The motion for the address was moved by the parliamentary secretary to the government House leader and was adopted by unanimous consent.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Okay.

As we know, the Prime Minister also had another event.

I know it doesn't apply to you, but had the government decided to host President Zelenskyy over at the Chateau Laurier in the grand ballroom, none of you would have been involved in that. Is that true?

Mr. Eric Janse: Correct.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: The only reason that the House administration and the Speaker's office are involved is that the government made a choice to host the president, which has happened many times with all previous governments. They made the decision to use the people's House, the House of Commons, to host the event, just so we're absolutely clear.

Mr. Eric Janse: It's a pretty standard parliamentary event—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Yes. It's very standard, very....

Now it comes to this question. Given the fact this has been a standard thing, and it has happened in the 18 years that I've been a member of Parliament.... I've been here with two different Prime Ministers. Each Prime Minister has invited dignitaries—heads of state or heads of government—to address a joint sitting of Parliament, even though it's not an official sitting day. The mace was not on the table, correct?

• (1145)

Mr. Eric Janse: Yes.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: As you've described the process, the House of Commons finds itself in this awkward situation of being the host of the event at the request of the government, and without the capacity or tools to properly vet people. However, the former Speaker, Anthony Rota, actually said in his interview with CTV North Bay that normally lists go to the Prime Minister's Office, where they go through them with a fine-tooth comb, and then the invitation goes out from protocol, which seems to contradict the testimony you gave.

Who is more accurately describing what actually happens, Mr. Janse?

Mr. Eric Janse: It's a fair question, Mr. Calkins. I understand that the committee was hoping to meet with Mr. Rota, so that's certainly a question for him. Certainly, from the House administration side, the Office of Protocol does not share those lists. I don't know if either Mr. Rota or his office shared them, but we certainly didn't.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Okay, and, as you say, the Sergeant-at-Arms is present. The physical security is done. Everybody who comes in goes through that physical security and screening process. You mentioned specifically in your remarks that no one is screened for any potential reputational threat, but to me that seems to be an issue that only the government would have the capacity to do. Would anybody in the House of Commons—anybody in service to the House or an officer of the House—have the ability to even find out that information?

Mr. Eric Janse: Maybe I'll start and Pat can jump in afterward.

I think we would, provided we had sufficient time. I think that's the challenge, especially with this particular event. It was organized in a very, very tight deadline under some very difficult security arrangements.

Ninety-nine point nine per cent of attendees at such events are exactly that: they're attendees. They're not participants and they're not being recognized, so perhaps it raises the question of whether you have to do background checks on everybody who is just a spectator versus somebody who might play a different role.

Pat, do you have something to add?

Mr. Patrick McDonnell (Sergeant-at-Arms and Corporate Security Officer, House of Commons): Yes. I'll just confirm that we have the ability, given the time, to do an open-source check on an individual.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: There's the differentiation of guests as well.

You mentioned that there are people who attend and then there are people who are selected and highlighted and show up in a public address. There was no difference in the treatment of those individuals, according to the current protocol.

Mr. Eric Janse: Correct, because in this case we were not aware that the Speaker was going to recognize somebody in the gallery.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Chair, I'll share my time with Mr. Duncan.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Eric Duncan: I'll wait for another round.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I'll just cede my time, then. Thanks, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

The clock stopped at five minutes and 44 seconds out of six minutes.

Madam Fortier, you have six minutes, through the chair.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

As a new member of the committee, I'm very happy for the opportunity to participate in this study. I've already done a bit of work in preparation.

The first question we need to ask is, why are we here today?

Ms. Gaudreau, I believe you asked the same question last week, so I'm trying to get back in that context.

I've had discussions with various parliamentarians, senators and MPs in order to really understand what happens in the House. That's the question we need to ask ourselves today. The role of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs is to examine what happens in the House, draw conclusions and make recommendations so that certain situations don't arise again.

Today we're hoping to shed light on the events that occurred in the House of Commons last September 22.

I understand that there are protocols and procedures to follow when receiving guests and recognizing their presence in the gallery during normal sittings. Now there are similar protocols for recognizing guests during joint addresses in the House, which is what most of my questions will be about.

Mr. Janse, you mentioned this in your opening remarks. I'd like you to give us an overview of the differences, in terms of protocol, between a normal sitting of the House and a joint address.

I consulted *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*. Chapter 7, page 339, footnote 175 says that there's a protocol, but it isn't specified. The footnote only refers the reader to chapter 9, so I went to chapter 9. At page 423, it's the same thing: They mention a protocol but I'm not seeing any details.

I'd appreciate it if you could explain the difference between the two.

• (1150)

Mr. Eric Janse: I know *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* well, but perhaps not in such fine detail.

Are you talking about protocol for addresses or for recognizing guests in the gallery while the House is sitting?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I'm talking about protocol during joint addresses.

Mr. Eric Janse: Okay.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I've seen detailed procedures relating to normal sittings, but I haven't seen any for joint addresses.

Could you elaborate on the procedure for joint addresses? The fact is that the event that we're discussing today arose during a joint address.

Is the protocol for joint addresses clearly established in terms of invitations as well as recognizing guests in the gallery?

Mr. Eric Janse: I might ask Ms. Anctil to give you a brief description of how that works, since she's better versed in the appropriate protocol or process.

Ms. Nancy Anctil (Chief of Protocol and Events Management, House of Commons): I'll give you a brief explanation.

The difference with joint addresses in the House is that senators are invited to take their place in the House of Commons. The first seats are reserved for parliamentarians.

As for the other guests, our procedures are drawn from what the practice has been in the past. Some people are on the list of precedence, including the chief justice, former prime ministers, former governors general, as well as any guests of our distinguished guest. In the case at issue today, these were guests from the Ukrainian embassy and the Ukrainian delegation.

Then, what needs to be approved by parliamentarians is the way that the remaining seats in the gallery and the floor of the House will be distributed. For several years now, the practice has been for these seats to be allocated proportionally. For instance, if there are 300 empty seats, they will be divided in proportion to the representation in the House of Commons and the Senate. That's how the number of people is determined. So every party in the House and every group in the Senate knows how many people they can invite, and then it's up to them to send us a list.

Hon. Mona Fortier: What happens, specifically, after you've received that list? How do we ascertain that these people meet the required security criteria for admission to the House? Who makes the final decision with regard to who can be present in the chamber?

Ms. Nancy Anctil: As far as which people will be on the list, it's really up to the parties and groups to decide, and each of them has their own way of doing things. Then, the list is sent to the security team, who does the necessary screening to ensure the physical safety of guests.

Hon. Mona Fortier: When the Speaker chooses to recognize a guest, who then makes the decision? Is there an established protocol for such cases?

Ms. Nancy Anctil: If the Speaker wishes to invite people to sit in the gallery, they follow the very same procedure, whether it is in the Senate or the House of Commons.

When it comes to guests being recognized by the Speaker, there isn't really any set procedure. In all the years I've worked here, this kind of thing hasn't happened often.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Given that there doesn't seem to be any established practice, would you recommend establishing such a procedure going forward?

Ms. Nancy Anctil: During normal sittings of the House, the protocol office deals with requests to recognize the presence of certain guests. There's well-established procedure and criteria in place, which helps decision-making. If there was the same procedure for joint addresses, that might make things easier for the Speaker. That said, I'll leave it up to parliamentarians to take the lead on that, since they are the ones who guide us.

Hon. Mona Fortier: So, parliamentarians would give directions about visits or joint addresses. Then, these directions would be determined by the practice that you do.

Ms. Nancy Anctil: I'm not sure I really understand your question.

Hon. Mona Fortier: You said that it is parliamentarians who decide. How do they decide—

I see that my time is up. We can pick this up later.

Thank you.

The Chair: Indeed, you will be able to ask your question again in the next round.

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

If I understand correctly, there's a separate protocol for special ceremonies.

That said, I'd like to know how a former Nazi soldier was able to enter Parliament. Not only was he invited to Parliament by former Speaker Rota, but he was also invited to a separate event in Toronto by the Prime Minister.

Explain to me, Ms. Anctil, how such an individual was able to enter Parliament despite all of the security measures that are in place.

• (1155)

Mr. Eric Janse: I think that's a question for Mr. McDonell.

The names of all of the guests go through the office of the Sergeant-at-Arms and corporate security. Some verifications are made, mainly against databases. Just because someone has a disreputable past doesn't mean they will appear on a list of people who can't enter Parliament. The individual in question has been a Canadian citizen since the 1950s, after all. Maybe that's why he didn't appear on any list.

I don't know if I've properly explained the situation.

Mr. Patrick McDonell: I think so.

[*English*]

I think the gentleman wasn't a physical security risk but a reputational risk. The only way to avoid a reputational risk here is to do a verification of their background.

[*Translation*]

For us, that's the only way to verify such an individual's reputational risk.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I understand all that, but I still don't quite get how it could have happened. I'm no expert on the matter, but I do know that a former Nazi soldier was present at the same time as the President of Ukraine. We should be able to find some basic information, at least.

Not only was this individual invited on Mr. Rota's initiative, but the Prime Minister was aware as well, because he invited this same individual to an event in Toronto. Explain to me how this could have happened. The Prime Minister knew Mr. Rota trusted him. We need to acknowledge how serious this is.

I would like a more detailed explanation.

[*English*]

Mr. Patrick McDonell: In my opinion, if you had 500 guests, you'd have to do the background on 500 guests. We didn't know that this gentleman was being recognized by the Speaker. We do the physical security. We do a database check to see if they're a risk to our parliamentarians or to Parliament itself. The reputational check on 500 people would take weeks, if ever we were mandated to do it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: We have so much to learn from what happened and that's what we plan to do over the next meetings. A special ceremony is no reason to follow a different procedure, especially when the presence of guests is brought to the attention of the House.

Ms. Anctil, I'd like to know what kind of analysis or due diligence was done. I suppose that at some point, you start seeing signals or red flags. What kinds of things were discussed to come to the conclusion that it was enough, that this person wasn't really on the list and that they would pass the security check?

We've already requested information on what happened, but the answers we received were unsatisfactory. Could you tell us more about the discussions that took place on the subject of Mr. Hunka?

Ms. Nancy Anctil: Actually, he was on the list. He got his invitation, just like the other guests. He was on the master list that we sent to security.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Okay.

Let's move on to the next part. There were some delays. Some opposition parties called for the Speaker's resignation, and eventually he did resign. What came up in the discussions?

The Prime Minister acknowledged this grave error, but then we learned that he himself had been aware. What do we do in these circumstances?

Ms. Nancy Anctil: I am not privy to that part of the process at the Prime Minister's Office. So I don't know what they knew or didn't know, nor do I know how these people were invited. It's really a completely separate process. Our guest list and that of the Prime Minister are two completely different things. Consequently, I can't really comment on what the Prime Minister knew or didn't know or at what point he might've known it.

That said, I can tell you that we received Mr. Hunka's name, which came from Mr. Rota's office. The request was processed like all the others from various groups authorized to invite guests to an address to Parliament.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Without pointing fingers at anyone, what I understand is that, in terms of procedure, when you have 48 hours to do background checks on over 500 guests, that's not going to work. So essentially, you failed.

• (1200)

Ms. Nancy Anctil: I wouldn't say that. We didn't know that attention would be drawn to this person's presence. If his presence in the gallery hadn't been recognized, I don't know that anyone would have found out. We don't know the history of the 500 people who were invited.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Okay, I understand.

I'd also like to know what happened afterwards. I was shocked by the whole process that led up to the resignation of Mr. Rota. I'd like to request that all of the communications until the resignation of Mr. Rota, which included several interventions, be sent to the committee. The committee's already requested all of the communications on the subject of Mr. Hunka leading up to the day in question, but I think we should also have all of the communications right up until the resignation of Mr. Rota. I'd like to make that request, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Ms. Mathysen, go ahead for six minutes, through the chair.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses. It's quite a lineup we have here.

I am very grateful that you've taken time out of your busy schedules to be with us today. You are the central core of what we know in terms of security and the goings-on of the House.

I just want to go to some points that other members didn't necessarily get to for clarification.

Mr. McDonell, you talked about watch-lists that you have. Can you define what those are and explain them and what they are?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: Yes. The parliamentary access group receives the list and they enter names, one at a time, into a database. It's quite simple. If a red light appears, there is a doubt, and further investigation is required. If the light is green, access is granted. There are different ways to find oneself on that database.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: What would be reasons for that red light?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: I don't want to get into too much detail.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Just say as much as you can.

Mr. Patrick McDonell: A simple one would be having previously created a disturbance here. That would be one way.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Okay. Would that be only here or with other police forces or other levels of jurisdiction?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: It would involve a threat to parliamentarians and a threat to Parliament itself, if that has come to our attention—

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: It would be specifically Parliament.

Mr. Patrick McDonell: It would be Parliament and parliamentarians here and in the community.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Okay.

That's a combination of what we experience at the local level through the RCMP and that sort of thing as well.

Mr. Patrick McDonell: We exchange information with the RCMP—

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Okay.

Mr. Patrick McDonell: —and 91 police forces.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Okay. That happens for all the guests on the lists you receive from each party, which are sent through the protocol office. You do that for each of them, but that's physical risk that you're talking about.

Mr. Patrick McDonell: Yes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: A thorough assessment of reputational risk has to be done by the parties themselves. You don't have any part in that.

Mr. Patrick McDonell: If I were mandated to do it, I'd have the resources to do an open-source verification.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Would that be different from the physical search you're talking about with the red light and green light?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: Yes. It would be a reputational. It would be an open-source intelligence search.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: What would that look like? That's if you're able to talk about it.

Mr. Patrick McDonell: I have analysts who do that sort of thing and focus mostly on dangers and threats toward members of Parliament. We don't do it currently. If mandated, it would be a question of resources and being mandated by the Board of Internal Economy to do so.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Would that individual party have to ask for it, or would protocol ask for it? Who would ask for it?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: It would be the board.

Mr. Eric Janse: I think it would depend on how things are set up.

To date, reputational verifications have not been part of what we have been asked to do, either the protocol office or the security office. When there are events like an address to Parliament, if that was the desire, then, as Pat alluded to, resource requirements would have to be addressed. Time requirements would have to be addressed. To date, we have always expected that the parties would do some kind of background checks before submitting the names to us.

Again, I have permission from Speaker Fergus to share a little bit of what he shared with the House leaders. One recommendation would be that rather than doing reputational risks on all the guests, all 500, we would do reputational verifications only on anybody who might be recognized in the gallery by any of the individuals addressing Parliament.

• (1205)

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: That's a recommendation that you would suggest for here as well, as part of our report.

Mr. Eric Janse: It could be something that the committee might want to consider.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Okay.

It was also mentioned, I think, by Ms. Anctil that the event was rushed. Did that play a part in the ability to not do that thorough search? Is that typical for these sorts of events?

I know that a lot of work goes into them. It's a huge production. Was this one being specifically rushed part of the consideration of that reputational risk assessment and what was being asked?

Ms. Nancy Anctil: It was indeed very rushed. The timeline was very, very tight. However, it is not the mandate of the protocol office to do those reputational threats for all the guests who are invited.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Then you too would recommend that it either stay with the parties or that it be only those recognized.

Ms. Nancy Anctil: It would be addressed whoever had responsibility for it.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Yes. The fact that the Speaker didn't give any sort of notice that there would be a recognition is part of the problem of even that further recommendation.

Mr. Eric Janse: To that very point, again, something Speaker Fergus has suggested to the parties is that if one of the intervenors in an address to Parliament—the guest, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the House, the Speaker of the Senate—intends on recognizing somebody in the gallery, then that name and that information is shared with all the parties and all the groups so that everybody can undertake their own background checks, if they wish, before sharing with their group or their caucus whether or not this person should be applauded.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Okay.

Madam Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You have 11 seconds.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Then I'll ask other questions later. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now enter into our second round. Mr. Duncan will have five minutes, followed by Mr. Gerretsen for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Then we'll move on to Ms. Gaudreau and Ms. Mathysen, who will each have two and a half minutes.

After that, if there's any time left, I'll give the Conservatives and the Liberals a few minutes, otherwise the meeting will end.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Duncan.

Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

Mr. McDonell, I want to pick up on the open-source check again and get some clarification on what would normally be done.

You mentioned an open-source check being done pertaining to physical security or threats to members, and not so much for background. You said that normally that would have been done.

In this rushed time frame, what were you not able to do in the vetting of the guests? Were you able to go through each guest for those threats? Would you normally have done more? What more would you normally have done in the time frame?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: Through you, Madam Chair, I must have misspoken, because normally we don't do reputational checks on any guests.

Mr. Eric Duncan: But you had all the opportunity that... It was a rushed time frame. Were you able to do your open-source check in the time frame you were provided?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: No. No open-source checks are ever done on any of the invitees for a joint address.

Mr. Eric Duncan: I want to go back to comments the former Speaker made to CTV Northern Ontario about a "fine-tooth comb". The former Speaker said, "Normally, it goes to the Prime Minister's Office and they go through it with a fine-tooth comb, and then the invitation goes out from protocol."

I'm trying to figure it out. The former Speaker is saying there is a "fine-tooth comb" process here, and I'm still struggling to understand. In this case, he's saying the Prime Minister's Office had the list.

You alluded to this before, Mr. Janse.

I'm a bit curious about the document production we received over the course of the last couple of months or so. If the Prime Minister's Office was not given a complete list of invitees, how is it possible that on September 20 there was a text message exchange between a parliamentary protocol coordinator and the Prime Minister's outreach adviser about a certain individual who was invited, who was on a Conservative guest list? They were inquiring why they had been invited and saying it wasn't on their list.

How did they know? I'm a bit confused about how they would know a Conservative guest was invited if they didn't have the list.

• (1210)

Ms. Nancy Anctil: I can add something.

Quite often, there are guests who appear on more than one list, and that's what we do. Often there are guests on the Conservative list as well as the Liberal or NDP list. We advise when somebody is on more than one list.

Mr. Eric Duncan: My point is this: If it wasn't on the Prime Minister's Office's list, according to them in terms of what happened here, how would they know a member was on it? They said it wasn't on their list, but they were aware of somebody else. It seems to me a little suspicious. The former Speaker said it goes to the Prime Minister's Office and there's "a fine-tooth comb". We have a text message exchange that says it wasn't on their list, but they knew an individual had been invited on somebody else's list.

It makes me wonder why the Prime Minister's Office was aware of that, if the claim was that they didn't have the list and didn't do anything.

Ms. Nancy Anctil: I would need to look at the text you're referring to in order to know exactly what name they're talking about.

However, I can assure you the list was not shared with the Prime Minister's Office. It's been the practice since I've been the chief of protocol. For the last six years, we have not shared the list with the Prime Minister's Office for addresses to Parliament.

Mr. Eric Duncan: Your office or the staff you work with had not shared it. Am I correct?

Ms. Nancy Anctil: Yes.

Mr. Eric Duncan: Another question I have is this: The documents we received say that on September 21, the following day—one day before the event—an email from the Sergeant-at-Arms' office went to Jason Ritchie regarding arranging parking for Mr. Hunka. It states he was "an honoured guest"—not just a guest, but an "honoured guest".

What makes a guest honoured in the circumstance here?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: It's probably because the Speaker requested a parking spot from my staff, so my staff added the word "honoured" as a descriptor. It's nothing more than that.

Mr. Eric Duncan: How many honoured guests were there, numbers-wise?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: That's the only one I'm aware of, in terms of asking for parking.

Mr. Eric Duncan: I'll go to that point where you get into this process of honoured guests and having that list.

There seems to be a disconnect. You have the former Speaker himself saying a list of guests is provided. You have honoured guests and all of that. The Prime Minister's Office is aware of certain individuals who weren't on their list. It may not have been, in your case, a member directly, but there is some way that the Prime Minister's Office had a list outside of their own and were questioning why someone received an invite they shouldn't have.

I find it a little questionable. I will leave it at that, because I have about two seconds left on time.

The Chair: Yes, you do. Thank you, Mr. Duncan.

Mr. Gerretsen, go ahead for five minutes, through the chair.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to go back, Mr. McDonell, to the discussion about open-source checks.

You're saying you don't typically do open-source vetting processes. Am I correct? I've heard you say that a couple times. You didn't do them that day and you typically don't do them.

Mr. Patrick McDonell: Never.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You never do them. Okay.

Mr. Janse, you talked about the possibility of doing a check for reputational risk in the future. You might make that as a suggestion.

Would that be for the Speaker's office? Correct me if I'm wrong. It looks like you—

Mr. Eric Janse: No, obviously it wouldn't be for all 500 guests.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Right.

Mr. Eric Janse: That would be way too time-consuming and would require way too many resources. The suggestion would be to check anybody who would be recognized by any of the participants.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: It would be anyone who would be recognized to have a reputational risk.

Mr. Eric Janse: Those individuals would be checked.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Is that where Mr. McDonell's open-source assessment comes in?

Mr. Eric Janse: Yes.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: In an open-source assessment, you said that you have analysts who could help to do that work. They'd look into it. Do you think they would have discovered this risk had they done that on this particular individual?

Mr. Patrick McDonell: Yes.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You do. Okay.

You definitely don't do the check for reputational risk; you're saying that this is a suggestion in the future for people who might be recognized. Is that correct, Mr. Janse? That is something that does not exist.

Mr. Eric Janse: That's correct.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: In the exchange with Mr. Calkins in the beginning, when Mr. Calkins was asking about this being in a different room, essentially, because Parliament is not sitting, he said that you didn't have the proper tools to do the vetting. Then you responded and said that yes, that was correct.

I don't understand what you meant there, because it sounds like you didn't already have the tools and that even if you did, we certainly don't use them.

• (1215)

Mr. Eric Janse: Perhaps I misspoke.

Tools are one thing. As the Sergeant-at-Arms has indicated, we have the tools. I think the issue would be more about the time that it would take if you wanted to do that for all 500 guests, which is why a suggestion is to maybe limit it just to a few, to those who have more than just a spectator role.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: When an event like this does go on in the room, even though it's not an official sitting, you still have access to the tools that you would normally have access to, with time constraints considered as well, correct?

Mr. Eric Janse: Yes.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: That's all I have, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Romanado is next.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you so much for being here today.

Mr. Janse, you mentioned that normally an attendee has no role during a special joint address of Parliament and that recognition of someone in the gallery does not normally occur.

When I look at chapter 9 of Bosc and Gagnon, I see that they do have, in figure 9.1, a list of all of the special addresses from 1940 until 2017 of special speakers in the House.

Would you know if there was ever somebody recognized in the gallery during one of these addresses? Is this the first time that someone was recognized by the Speaker during a joint address by the Speaker?

Mr. Eric Janse: That's a very good question, Ms. Romanado.

It's a fairly recent development. I'm trying to think.... The first time it happened was at the Biden address.

Jeffrey, do you want to jump in?

Mr. Jeffrey LeBlanc (Deputy Clerk, Procedure, House of Commons): I don't remember it being done before the Biden address, but there were definitely people recognized in the gallery during the Biden address. That was in March of last year.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Was this someone recognized by the Speaker officially?

Mr. Jeffrey LeBlanc: I don't believe it was by the Speaker. I believe it was by the Prime Minister. I'm testing my memory, but I believe it was by the Prime Minister.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Then there's a difference between the Prime Minister in his address recognizing people in the gallery or in the crowd and so on and so forth. What we're referring to is the Speaker independently recognizing someone in the Speaker's gallery, in the reserved section. In this case, he had eight seats allocated to him, based on the information provided on the list of precedence.

Would you say that, going forward, anybody.... I don't know about you, but when I'm asked if I would like to bring a guest, I make sure that whoever I put forward on a list to attend a special address or a joint address at Parliament is somebody who would be worthy of attending such an event. I would assume that it's my due diligence as the inviter to the invitee to verify that this person is, in good faith, able to come into the chamber. Would you say that is correct?

Mr. Eric Janse: That was always our assumption to date: that the parties did their own vetting and that we would just be responsible for physical security vetting.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair.

What we experienced was a disaster, everyone's well aware of that.

You told me earlier that you didn't know that the Speaker was going to draw attention to Mr. Hunka. What that tells me is that it was his mistake, not yours. You also said that you didn't have enough time to do background checks through open-source verification. Essentially, you bear no responsibility for what happened, since it was on Mr. Rota's initiative. That's what you're saying.

But the Prime Minister also invited Mr. Hunka, a former Nazi, to a ceremony in Ontario. In that particular case, the blame lies with the Prime Minister, wouldn't you say? Actually, I think that's essentially what you said. By inviting Mr. Hunka, the Prime Minister did the same thing as Mr. Rota. It was a deliberate choice.

In this whole affair, wasn't Mr. Rota simply asked to fall on his sword in order to save the Prime Minister? I'd like to know what happened there, because it's so ridiculous. Who can answer me?

Mr. Eric Janse: The House administration had no involvement whatsoever in the event that was held in Toronto. Unfortunately, I have no idea how those guest lists were compiled. We were only responsible for the event that occurred on Parliament Hill.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: If I understand correctly, the Prime Minister's Office has a verification process in place. When someone raises the alarm and says we should check on this, does the Prime Minister's Office communicate with the Speaker's office? Is there any sharing of information?

• (1220)

Ms. Nancy Anctil: I couldn't tell you what kinds of communications there are between these two offices.

What I do know is that there's some communication between Parliament's protocol office and the Prime Minister's Office when these events come up. That said, the Prime Minister's Office never shared with us its guest list for the event in Toronto. That was really an entirely separate thing. We weren't at all aware what kind of guests there would be, nor of the possibility that some guests might appear on more than one guest list. Only when the Speakers of both Houses are invited are we involved in any way. Then we notify their respective offices. That said, we're not at all involved in the process related to the other guests.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Okay.

Earlier, I made an official request to obtain all of the relevant information that might help us understand what happened between the day of the event in question and the day of Mr. Rota's resignation. I'm not only talking about the exchanges pertaining to Mr. Hunka, but also about those between the Prime Minister's Office and the office of the Speaker in relation to Mr. Rota's potential resignation. The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs would like to have that information.

Thank you.

The Chair: I just want to say that there's already been a motion to that effect and that we've received the documents. The only documents we haven't received are the Bloc Québécois's. From what I understand, they've been received, but they're still in the process of

being translated, since they need to be submitted in both official languages.

So the committee has already requested all the documents, and from what I understand, we've received them, so I don't believe the member's request for documents to be timely. If the members would like to discuss the issue further, however, I would allow it.

In my opinion, since we've received the documents, I think it's time to move on to questions so that we can find a way to move forward and ensure that something like this never happens again.

[*English*]

I will leave it there, because it's the second reference to documents, but I do understand that we have had a motion passed. I understand that we have received documents, so I want to make sure all members are there.

Mr. Berthold, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My colleague made a legitimate request. If House administration staff agrees to forward those documents to the committee, I think we won't need to go any further.

[*English*]

The Chair: That's fair, but I think we have already requested them and we have already received them, so I believe they have done that work for us.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: No, these are different documents.

[*English*]

The Chair: Once again, I'm going to get us through this meeting. I'm putting on record what we do know and what we don't know, but members can always determine that.

Ms. Mathysen, go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: I would like a final clarification on what Ms. Gaudreau was talking about.

Ms. Anctil, when it was discussed, I think you said that each of the parties submitted a list. Those were separate from protocol. You said the Speaker then separated those, or he technically, as a member of the Liberal Party, had a list of the people, although he wasn't seen that way when he was the Speaker, so he had a separate list entirely.

When Mr. Hunka was invited to the PMO's event in Toronto, it would have to have been Mr. Rota sending that list separately as a member, or as the Speaker, to the PMO for that function, in a separate email, in a separate view.

Ms. Nancy Anctil: I do not know how the Prime Minister's Office obtained Mr. Hunka's name. I could not let you know. I know it was not through us.

You are correct in saying he has a separate list. The Speaker of the House of Commons and the Speaker of the Senate each have a number of guests they invite, so they have separate lists.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: In the small amount of time I have left, you mentioned previously that the role of the protocol office is firewalled.

Could you explain that a bit further? Can you expand on that for me?

Ms. Nancy Anctil: I'm not sure exactly what you mean by "firewalled".

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: I'm sorry. That was the wording of the translation, so maybe it didn't come through, but it said that your role within the office of protocol is firewalled to protect, I guess, that division, that separation of lists and everything—

Ms. Nancy Anctil: Yes. We collate the lists together, but they're not—

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Could you expand on the importance of that and why you'd want to preserve it? Does it maybe need to change?

Ms. Nancy Anctil: It really is for each party to feel free to be able to invite whomever they want. It is their own prerogative to put people on the guest list. It's the same thing for the Prime Minister's Office, and for the Speaker as well.

• (1225)

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Okay.

For that reputational risk assessment, we were talking about parties potentially sharing lists. Would that interfere with the firewalling? In terms of the separation of lists or reputational risk assessment, how would that sharing interfere?

Ms. Nancy Anctil: I think what Mr. Janse was referring to was more for a small number of people who would be, for example, seated in the Speaker's gallery. They would be the people who would have more of an active role or be recognized.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Not those—

Ms. Nancy Anctil: The small groups would not be part of those 500 guests.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you.

We'll end this off with two minutes to Mr. Cooper.

[*Translation*]

Then we'll move on to Mr. Lauzon, who will also have two minutes.

Mr. Cooper, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Madame Anctil, I want to press you a little bit on the sharing of lists. You stated that the protocol office receives lists of invitees, but those lists are not shared.

I accept that, but I would press you insofar as we have, in the limited documents that have been produced to this committee, a

text message on September 20 from the Prime Minister's outreach adviser to the parliamentary protocol coordinator with respect to an invitee on the Conservative list, stating, "Received an invite and she shouldn't have. She's not on my list. She shouldn't have been invited. She's not on my list."

It would seem to me, based upon that text, that the Prime Minister's Office did have names that were not on the Prime Minister's list.

Ms. Nancy Anctil: My team sent you the screenshot of the message you're referring to. I've been told that this was the only message sent. There was no list attached to it. My thinking is that it could be that it's a person who has knowledge of people in the Prime Minister's Office and had mentioned that she might have been invited to the event, because I—

Mr. Michael Cooper: It's certainly interesting and raises questions, and that's for sure, but I'll press on. I have one minute left.

We heard that this was a very rushed event. How many days did you have to prepare? What would be the normal time frame, for example, for President Biden's visit to Parliament Hill?

Ms. Nancy Anctil: I would say that the last three addresses were done in a rushed time, every single one of them. That seems to have been the norm since the end of the pandemic.

The Chair: Excellent.

By "rushed", are you're talking about days, weeks...?

Ms. Nancy Anctil: I'm talking about weeks without an "s". One week or one week and a half is the type of preparation time we have.

The Chair: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lauzon, you have two minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Could Mr. Janse explain to us once again, in greater detail, why reputational risk isn't assessed and to what extent inviting a person posing such a risk could make our government vulnerable?

Mr. Eric Janse: To this day, assessing reputational risk isn't part of our mandate when we organize events such as an address to Parliament. The protocol team and the Sergeant-at-Arms's team are more concerned with physical rather than reputational risk.

If we were ever mandated to do this kind of verification, we'd have to evaluate how much time and resources that would require. Our understanding has always been that it was incumbent on the party or group submitting these lists to us to do these background checks beforehand.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Okay. I've learned a lot about procedure thanks to you. We're here to find out what really happened, too. For the record, I'd like to do a little recap, and you can tell me if I have it right.

So, the Speaker of the House of Commons invited a person who obtained Canadian citizenship in the 1950s. The Speaker submitted his guest list to you, and you then forwarded it to security for verification and analysis, as per established protocol. And yet nothing could have led us to believe that this man's presence in the gallery could have posed a threat to our government. Your mandate didn't extend any further than that. The lists aren't released.

The event then unfolded, and what was meant to happen, happened. We recognized the presence in the gallery of a person posing a reputational risk.

Could we somehow use this opportunity to improve the security protocol so that, in the future, on top of the usual security checks, it also includes a reputational risk assessment, in the interest of protecting our government?

• (1230)

Mr. Eric Janse: As was already mentioned, one thing we could do is a reputational risk assessment of a guest when it is known ahead of time that one of the participants will draw attention to their presence in the gallery.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

With that, I will say thank you so much for your time.

You've had a lot of exchanges. Obviously, there's a desire to receive information so that this committee can do its work. If there are insights or information that you can provide, the committee would appreciate it. Please do so through the clerk.

Also, as you had exchanges in questions and answers, if something comes to mind that makes you wish you had added some information, it would be a great opportunity for you to provide our committee with that information. If you provide it to the clerk, we'll make sure it gets circulated. I'm sure you'll be thinking about this for days to come, and something might come to light where you think, "Maybe I'll share this." We would appreciate that information.

Mrs. Romanado is next.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Mr. Janse mentioned that he had circulated his opening remarks to the interpreters. If there is any way that we can get a copy, that would be great.

Thank you.

The Chair: Yes. In future, we would love to receive them as well when the interpreters do. However, yes, we'll make sure that we get a copy of those notes through the clerk and circulate them.

I wish you all a great day. Thank you for your time and attention.

We will be starting our next panel in the next two minutes, at 12:35, with the House leader, Steven MacKinnon.

Thank you so much. Have a good day.

• (1230)

(Pause)

• (1235)

The Chair: We return to the second hour of procedure and House affairs meeting number 106.

We have with us the Honourable Steven MacKinnon, leader of the government in the House of Commons.

Minister MacKinnon, you will have up to 10 minutes for your opening comments. Please feel free to not use all of those 10 minutes, but if you would like to, you have 10 minutes. At 10 minutes, you will hear a beep, and I will respectfully cut you off. Hopefully, we don't get to that.

We're really grateful that you so quickly turned around your invitation to come. We know that's not easy to do, but it does mean a lot to all the members at the procedure and House affairs committee. Thank you.

Welcome.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would also like to thank all of my parliamentary colleagues for their invitation.

I'm here today to talk about what happened in Parliament in September, when the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, made his address.

It was a historic day for us all. His speech was an opportunity for us to reaffirm our unwavering support for Ukraine. Let's be clear: Back then, Ukraine was fighting for sovereignty in the face of Russia's illegal incursion into its territory, and it is still doing so now. Ukraine's war against Putin's Russia is a turning point for us. If Ukraine falls, we will all suffer. So we all have the duty, as Canadian parliamentarians, to set partisanship aside, do what's right and show a united front in supporting the Ukrainian people.

Unfortunately, President Zelenskyy's speech was tainted by a shameful incident that aggrieved a great many Canadians, especially those of Jewish and eastern European origin. A man was invited to sit in the gallery and was recognized by the Speaker as a hero. He was applauded by each and every member in the House, on all sides. It really is a horrible moment for our Parliament and for every member of the House. We weren't aware of this man's past in the Second World War. Still, we were called to pay tribute to him, in the presence of President Zelenskyy.

[*English*]

Chair, your committee is examining how this unfortunate incident happened. Let me review the chronology of what occurred in the days that followed President Zelenskyy's address.

The address in the House chamber occurred on a Friday. Over the weekend, details about the individual's involvement in the Second World War emerged. On the Sunday evening, Speaker Rota issued a statement he wrote. I quote:

On Friday, September 22, in my remarks following the address of the President of Ukraine, I recognized an individual in the gallery.

I have subsequently become aware of more information which causes me to regret my decision to do so.

I wish to make clear that no one, including fellow parliamentarians and the Ukraine delegation, was aware of my intention or of my remarks before I delivered them.

This initiative was entirely my own, the individual in question being from my riding and having been brought to my attention.

I particularly want to extend my deepest apologies to Jewish communities in Canada and around the world.

I accept full responsibility for my actions.

That was the explanation from the Speaker. It was concise, and he made it clear that he alone was behind the decision to invite the individual to the House.

The next morning, on Monday, the Speaker rose in the chamber and delivered a similar statement to members of Parliament. He said:

I wish to apologize to the House. I am deeply sorry that I have offended many with my gesture and remarks.

Notwithstanding his clear statement and his apology, there were questions raised by the opposition over whether the government was involved in the invitation to the House. The Speaker intervened in the proceedings and said clearly:

I just want to make it clear that it was my decision and my decision alone. This was a constituent who wanted to be here, and I recognized him. It was my decision, and I apologize profusely. I cannot tell members how regretful it is, which may not be good enough for some of you, and for that I apologize.

Chair, as you will recall, despite Speaker's Rota's explanation and apology, members expressed significant concerns about his actions in this regard. The next day, on Tuesday, September 26, he rose in the House to announce his resignation as Speaker. He reiterated his profound regret for his error. He said that it had caused pain to individuals and communities, including the Jewish community in Canada and around the world. Speaker Rota said:

I accept full responsibility for my actions.

Again, his words were clear and definitive.

Several months later, his explanation had not changed. In a letter he wrote to this committee on January 30, he wrote:

I reiterate that the decision to invite the person was mine, as was the decision to recognize him in my remarks.

• (1240)

[*Translation*]

In short, it's important to underscore the facts surrounding what happened in September.

The former Speaker clearly said that he alone was responsible for having invited this person to the House and to have decided to pay tribute to him in his speech. It was on his own initiative, and no other parliamentarians were involved.

The government played no role in this matter. Indeed, it was not aware that this person was going to be introduced in the House.

The former Speaker invited his own guests for the speech. He and his office chose them.

When the government learned about this horrible incident that had occurred in the House, the Prime Minister acknowledged just how painful the incident had been for Canadians and for communities affected by the Holocaust. The Prime Minister made a public statement about it outside of the House and also discussed it with members in the House. He noted that the Speaker, Mr. Rota, had sent the invitation, had underscored the presence of this individual in the House and had assumed full responsibility for it. The Prime Minister said that no members of the House of Commons had been aware of this person's background.

The Prime Minister put it as follows:

... on behalf of everyone in the House, I would like to present unreserved apologies for what took place on Friday and for the position that President Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian delegation were put in. For all of us who were present to have unknowingly recognized this individual was a terrible mistake and a violation of the memory of those who suffered grievously at the hands of the Nazi regime.

[*English*]

There is another point, Madam Chair, about which I would like to offer some brief remarks.

I'm here to work co-operatively, of course, with all of my colleagues to discuss what occurred in the House last September. However, I expect some of the committee members might plan to ask questions about another separate event that also occurred during that week.

When President Zelenskyy visited Canada, there was a community event in Toronto for him, with over 1,000 people invited. Hundreds of Canadians were invited upon the recommendation of community groups. The name of the individual we are discussing in these proceedings was submitted by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress. Ultimately, the person did not attend the event. It is important to emphasize that these two events—the evening gathering in Toronto and the address on the floor of the House in Ottawa—were two entirely separate events.

The final point to remember, Madam Chair, is that after this unfortunate incident occurred, our government left no doubt about where Canada stands in its unwavering support for Ukraine. The Prime Minister said that our country stands alongside Ukraine in its fight against Vladimir Putin's brutality, lies and violence. He paid tribute to the sacrifices of Ukrainians as they fight for their democracy, freedom, their language and culture, and for peace.

The Prime Minister also publicly anticipated that this incident would be politicized and turned into false propaganda by Russia to weaken Ukraine. Not surprisingly, Putin himself continued with those efforts in recent days in an interview in Russia with far-right American conservative pundit Tucker Carlson. However, the facts speak otherwise. Canadians won't be fooled by this irresponsible and mischievous propaganda. Canada and Ukraine are allies. Our resolve to support Ukraine at this crucial time is no less strong now than it was then.

These are the facts of what happened last September. The Speaker at the time made a mistake, for which he was solely responsible. He accepted that responsibility and stepped down. However, we cannot and will not allow this to define our relationship with Ukraine. The people of Ukraine are our friends. At this time of peril in their history, they need our friendship. We will not let them down.

I would be happy to take your questions.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you for those comments, and thank you for providing a minute and a half back to me.

We will enter into six-minute rounds through the chair. We are calling on colleagues to have respectful dialogue. I will obviously provide some leniency. If there are people speaking over people, I will do what I do and remind you that we don't do that.

Six minutes will go to Mr. Cooper, followed by six minutes to Mr. Gerretsen.

[*Translation*]

I am now giving the floor to Ms. Gaudreau and then Ms. Mathysen, for six minutes.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Minister MacKinnon, when the former SS soldier was invited to and recognized in Parliament during the address by President Zelenskyy, you were the chief government whip. You are now the government House leader. We have since learned that three days before the address of the President of Ukraine, Justin Trudeau sent an invitation to this very same SS soldier to his exclusive reception in Toronto with none other than the president of Ukraine, President Zelenskyy.

Therefore, on behalf of Justin Trudeau's government, will you apologize for what ought to be a significant embarrassment on the part of the government—inviting an SS soldier to this exclusive reception?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Chair, we're clearly talking about the incident that occurred in the House of Commons and the impacts of it. That's what the study is about. I understand there might be some questions that stray just partially outside of the line, but now we're into a line of questioning that has absolutely nothing to do with our study.

Is the entire line of questioning going to be outside the scope of what we're studying? If so, why don't we do a separate study on the issue that Mr. Cooper is referring to?

The Chair: What I will say is that I think we all know the purpose of the procedure and House affairs committee here. We also know, based on comments that were provided, that there is leniency as to how questions can unfold and where they can go.

I think that when some doors for lines of questioning are open, there will be a grey area. I think the minister is capable of answering such concerns and questions, and if he's not, your point is noted, Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I have another point of order when you're done.

The Chair: I would really appreciate if we could get to the end of this meeting, so I am going to say, with some leniency, that the comment and concern could be permissible.

Mr. Gerretsen, go ahead.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: That's fair, but again, on a point of order, we're here to ask witnesses—as we did very respectfully in the first panel—for information in order to provide content for our report. Mr. Cooper is not only entertaining discussion outside of the scope of the work; he's literally asking the witness now for something that has nothing to do with the actual report. He's asking him to apologize for something that has nothing to do with the report.

I just want to understand whether we're going to be spending the next hour in this manner or if we're going to actually be trying to contribute to the report.

The Chair: I hope Mr. Cooper will now want to respond.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Madam Chair, it absolutely is pertinent. This is a Prime Minister who claimed he knew nothing about this individual. We now learn that he sent an invitation to the very same SS soldier three days before the address of the President of Ukraine.

I asked the government House leader a very simple question—whether he would apologize on behalf of the government. I hope the answer would be “yes”.

The Chair: There's good news: As members of this committee, we get to ask questions. We do not get to predetermine what the answers are, but I'm sure the minister looks forward to answering it.

I am going to ask that we remember why we are here. Given why we are here, I would like us to continue having a respectful exchange. I would like us to come to the conclusion of this meeting as quickly as possible so that I can start looking forward to Thursday's meeting.

With that, I'm going to restart the clock. You're not starting from the top, but your time of one minute for your question remains.

I'm going to give the floor to Minister MacKinnon.

I'm confident there will be no more interruptions. I'm also confident that Minister MacKinnon will be brief in his response so that Mr. Cooper can continue with his line of questioning.

Minister MacKinnon, go ahead.

• (1250)

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: What I said in my remarks was that the Prime Minister offered his apology outside of the House upon learning of the error that had been made by the Speaker. He spoke to our visitors, I think, through the forum that was offered to him.

Indeed, we've acknowledged that this was a terribly embarrassing incident for Canada. I think that stands for itself.

Mr. Michael Cooper: The Prime Minister acknowledged the invitation to this former SS soldier only after he had been caught and after it was reported by the media several months after the fact. Why did the Prime Minister hide this fact from Canadians?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I'm not sure I accept the premise of the question that he hid anything.

Mr. Michael Cooper: The premise of the question is very simple. There's a list of invitees of the Prime Minister. That comes from his office. It included this former SS soldier. He has said that he knew nothing about this individual; he had no knowledge or involvement, nothing whatsoever. Now we have learned through the media that in fact his office, three days before, had sent an invitation to this individual.

Again, why did the Prime Minister withhold from Canadians this material fact about his office's involvement with this former SS soldier?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: As I think you acknowledged, Mr. Cooper, that I was the chief government whip. I'm here to discuss what I understand to have been the process that led to and ensued from the events in Parliament that day.

The fact is that an error was committed. The Speaker acknowledged that error, took responsibility for that error and paid, arguably, a very high price for that error. We were all embarrassed by it. I think I speak for all parliamentarians in expressing our embarrassment for that event. The Prime Minister himself expressed his regrets and his apologies to President Zelenskyy.

Mr. Michael Cooper: He expressed his apologies in respect of his invitation to a former SS officer after he got caught.

Speaking of the former Speaker, yes, the Prime Minister threw the former Speaker under the bus. The Prime Minister said the Speaker did the right thing by resigning, since he had invited and recognized a former SS soldier. Why do we have one standard for the former Speaker, whom the Prime Minister threw under the bus, and a different standard for the Prime Minister who invited this very same former SS soldier to an exclusive reception, where, had he attended, he could have very easily accessed—or been within feet of—President Zelenskyy?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: The former Speaker stood in his place and acknowledged the presence of a person whose background no one was aware of that day. I was there that day. I assume you were there that day. The history of this gentleman was unknown to us all. The fact that he would be recognized was unknown to us all. The Speaker took his own initiative to invite this person to the speech, which was a decision made by the Speaker and solely by the Speaker.

That's what I can comment on here. I think the appropriate apologies, starting with the former Speaker and continuing with the

Prime Minister and others, have been made. I think sometimes, Mr. Cooper, when things—

Mr. Michael Cooper: It's very—

The Chair: I'm going to interrupt both of you fine gentlemen with 53 seconds remaining. I've provided a lot of leniency.

I would remind us all that we are at the procedure and House affairs committee. As somebody who lives about an hour away from Toronto, I feel like we receive a lot of attention. I would like us to resituate ourselves to the House of Commons in the nation's capital so that this committee can do its work.

I do believe that I've demonstrated a lot of leniency, and I would like us to get back to the study and the work that we're here to do within your last 53 seconds, Mr. Cooper.

• (1255)

Mr. Michael Cooper: The Prime Minister threw the former Speaker under the bus. He took no responsibility. He covered up the fact that his office sent an invitation to this former SS soldier, so through you, Madam Chair, to Mr. MacKinnon, I'll ask the question I posed at the start of my round: Will you apologize on behalf of the government for this outrageous invite?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I reject the premise of your question, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You stand by the invitation.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: What I said in my initial—

Mr. Michael Cooper: You have no shame.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Oh, my heavens.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Chair, the rules of the House of Commons on what happens in our chamber extend to committees. To suggest that a member is not honourable by saying "You have no shame" is certainly out of order in our chamber and therefore would certainly be out of order in this room.

I would kindly request that Mr. Cooper withdraw that comment and apologize to the witness.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I withdraw....

Are you not embarrassed that you won't give an unequivocal apology on the part of the government?

The Chair: I really do believe in the work this committee does. I really take my role seriously as the chair of this committee, believe it or not. I think that you all take turns at trying to compromise that work that I do, and it makes it very awkward and very difficult. I will let you know that I do not appreciate it.

Can we continue to carry ourselves with the regard that I know we can? We are, by default, honourable members. We don't even have to prove it; we just get that title. Let's just be that title for the dozens of people who are watching.

I do think Mr. Cooper recognized that and retracted those comments. We'll leave it at that.

The last 17 seconds will be yours for a response, Minister MacKinnon, and I will be moving on to Mr. Gerretsen.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I said what I can say and understand to be the case about the incident to which you refer. Suffice it to say, Mr. Cooper, that I fully put to you that the Government of Canada has expressed its extreme regret for the error that the former Speaker made.

The Chair: Mr. Gerretsen, you have the floor.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I guess the precedent has been set by Mr. Cooper, but out of curiosity, Mr. MacKinnon, have you ever given a TV interview with there being in the background a flag with a swastika drawn on it?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Not to my knowledge.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Unfortunately, that can't be said for all members who sit at this table.

Mr. Luc Berthold: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Berthold.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Only a few moments ago, Mr. Gerretsen tried to lecture us on the importance of sticking to the topic of today's committee meeting. I just want to remind him that he himself should comply with his recommendation.

[*English*]

The Chair: As we refer to an interview that the former Speaker had, which has now come up, I'm going to have to provide the same leniency.

While there's a certain greyness for asking questions, I always say that if we focused on the study and the work of this procedure and House affairs committee, it would be a lot easier for all of us. However, now that we are referring to interviews that people are having with the media—and it sounds like that's what Mr. Gerretsen is doing—I hope he's going to demonstrate relevance to get us back to the study, and I'm sure Mr. Gerretsen will offer me that courtesy.

The floor goes to you.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I certainly tried to bring us to relevance during Mr. Cooper's comments. However, I was unsuccessful, and he has now set a precedent.

In any event, you concluded your comments, Mr. MacKinnon, by saying that the government stands unequivocally with Ukraine. Is that true?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Absolutely. The government—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Can you say the same thing for all 338 members of Parliament?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: If one were weighing international impacts, I would say that the decision by certain parliamentarians to not support the renewed Canada-Ukraine free trade arrangements

has certainly echoed around the world with allies far more than this incident ever did.

Ukrainians in Canada and Ukrainians in Ukraine have reason to doubt there there is unanimity in the Canadian Parliament with respect to support for Ukraine and for repelling Russian aggression.

It is an illegal war, I remind all members, and resisting it is a moral cause. It is a just cause and it is one that deserves our support by default.

● (1300)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I couldn't agree more.

The reality of the situation, Madam Chair, is that I only wish the Conservative Party of Canada could have given as much attention to Ukraine, generally speaking, as it's chosen to give to this particular issue, because it's trying to use an unfortunate situation to exploit political gain.

The reality, Madam Chair, is that we know Conservatives have continually and routinely shown themselves to not support Ukraine. As a matter of fact, just during this event that occurred in the House of Commons—I'm not even sure if you're aware of this, Mr. MacKinnon; you can tell me if you are or if you aren't—the Leader of the Opposition never issued a single social media post about President Zelenskyy appearing in Parliament—not before, not after. He did not show any degree or level of support whatsoever.

Were you aware of that?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I think that was noted by several unbiased commentators. I was sitting in close proximity to Mr. Zelenskyy and the Leader of the Opposition and I couldn't help but note the tepid applause that was offered that day.

I know that it was an inspiring day for parliamentarians from all sides of the House. I left the House of Commons that day extremely inspired and proud of my country for what it's doing and what it continues to do to support our Ukrainian friends and allies.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Were you surprised, Mr. MacKinnon, when the leader of the official opposition didn't even bother to issue a single tweet saying “thank you” to a president who travelled across the globe and whose country is currently at war against a dictator who has no regard for democracy whatsoever? Were you as equally surprised as I was—and am—that he chose not to issue a single statement on it, yet the moment this issue arose, he used every single opportunity to exploit it, as Conservatives continue to do today, for political advantage?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I was very surprised. I recall thinking to myself that this may be a precursor or a sign of what we're observing around the world in some conservative parties, which is that support for Ukraine and the moral cause it represents is flagging among Conservatives, and that this was a cause for concern. I think that was confirmed, as we all now know, later during the debate on the free trade arrangements, when we saw Conservatives break from a Canadian consensus with respect to economic support, military support and diplomatic support for Ukraine.

That is something I think we should all remain concerned about.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you, Mr. MacKinnon.

I believe that wraps up my time, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Do you want it to wrap up? There's a minute left.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I'll turn the last minute over to Mrs. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Minister MacKinnon, for being here.

In the previous panel, the clerk mentioned that currently, procedurally, the list of categories to recognize individuals in the Speaker's gallery does not actually apply to a joint address. We went through the list of joint addresses to Parliament, which date back to 1940. There have been instances of people in the audience being referenced in a speech but not actually being formally recognized by the Speaker.

Given the fact that you are the government House leader, sit on the Board of Internal Economy, and speak with the other leaders of the opposition, do you think that this is something we should be putting into practice? It's not part of the Standing Orders, but do you recommend, going forward, that this could be a recommendation for us as part of procedure and practice?

• (1305)

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I know generally that the House administration and the Speaker's office are continuing to work on guidelines and best practices with respect to joint addresses. I think we also, as members, all live under this rebuke or reminder that we get from time to time to not recognize members in the gallery, that the Speaker is the sole person able to do so. We're going to be working on those guidelines, and I look forward to participating in that work.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Ms. Gaudreau, for six minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair.

We discussed the guest lists. For President Zelenskyy's speech, many who attended were from the who's who of Canadian politics. Then, of course, there was Mr. Hunka.

We spoke about protocol, but I'd also like to discuss the diplomatic aspects of similar events.

How can an incident like this happen? Who, when all is said and done, is responsible? We've been told that the protocol office complied with its commitments and was not required to do an open-source check. That's all very well, but how can a former Nazi soldier in Canada end up in the House in connection with the war in Ukraine?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you very much for the question, Ms. Gaudreau.

At the time, I was the chief government whip, and remained on the outer fringes of everything that happened. My understanding of it is that Speaker Rota submitted a list of guests and they were received without any kind of warning—

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Who should have been informed after he prepared this list himself? Are you saying that he didn't show his list to his team?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I'm talking about his office, rather. My understanding of it is, once again, that the Speaker of the House of Commons is fully entitled to welcome a certain number of guests to special events, like President Zelenskyy's speech.

Once again, while I have no direct knowledge of the matter, I would have naturally assumed that the security services that protect us carried out some security checks. Their role is to determine whether certain men or women constitute a threat to the building or the people in it.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's right. They wouldn't get far.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: So this person went through this part of the security check. However, for background checks, there is no central authority in the government that looks at the political backgrounds of guests, whether of the Bloc Québécois or from—

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: No, but simply doing a Google search could reveal information that might raise a red flag, couldn't it?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I'd like to go back to my answer to Ms. Romanado's question. That's among the things that House administration could decide to review.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Yes, precisely.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: It would decide what can be done.

However, it's not up to the government to check whether invited guests are to be admitted or not.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Are you told when the Speaker of the House submits a list of guests?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Not this time, nor, to my knowledge, was it the case on other occasions. Once again, and I'm saying this with a certain level of detachment, because I was the chief government whip at the time.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's exactly the context in which I'm looking for answers.

I have another question for you.

How would you account for the fact that several days went by between the Prime Minister's description of Mr. Rota's mistake as very serious and when the Speaker acknowledged his error and resigned on September 26? What happened in the interval?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I don't know—

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: When someone admits a mistake, action is taken immediately. In this instance, many factors were percolating in the media and elsewhere. Things happened.

Was there a time during which attempts were made to determine whose fault it was? What were the discussions about?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I don't think it's up to me to judge the series of events that may have led the former Speaker to decide to resign. In any event, he reached the conclusion—I believe it was obvious—that he had lost the confidence of the House. Reaching that conclusion must have been a very painful exercise, so I think we can all have some sympathy for him for having had to go through the process.

• (1310)

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I would suggest that basically, what happened was that Mr. Rota went through the security process but ended up as the scapegoat. The Speaker is not in charge of protocol, diplomacy or institutional security. I therefore believe that what happened was very unfortunate. We need to understand what happened.

We also learned from the media that three days earlier, Mr. Hunka had also been invited by the Prime Minister. I would imagine that there is also protocol to follow in the Prime Minister's Office to ensure that open-source checks are done. I would also suspect that some lights are flashing and that people are saying it's important to be more careful given the context in which we're living.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I disagree with you on that point, Ms. Gaudreau. I also don't think that you would want the Prime Minister's Office to check on all your previous guests. The Speaker of the House has certain privileges, one of which is inviting a number of people to special events, as it should be. Doing open-source background checks—

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: In other words, it was rather perfunctory.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Well, I don't know—

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Insofar as—

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I disagree with the premise of your question. That's because you're not accepting mine, either.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I just can't understand how this situation could come about.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I don't think there's a need for some form of thought police for guests of our democracy.

[English]

The Chair: Okay—

[Translation]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Yes, everything needs to be taken into consideration, but I think Mr. Rota said firmly and clearly that it was a decision he alone had made, and that he was responsible.

The Chair: Thank you very much for this exchange.

[English]

Go ahead, Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister.

A lot of conversations were happening in the earlier panel about the fact that the Speaker's list was entirely independent of the government's list of those invited and so on, and that those actions were independent.

One of the roles of the Speaker, of course, and the importance of that independence, is key: the jurisdiction of the House. Would you agree with that entirely?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Absolutely.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Okay.

In some of the documents our committee received related to the incident, there was correspondence between your office—the House leader's office—and the Speaker's office following the breaking news about the Hunka affair. It seems as though steps were taken by your office to oversee the Speaker's official response and speech.

Considering there is supposed to be a clear independence and a clean boundary, what guidance did your office give the Speaker in the build-up to his resignation and apology speech, and how does that work in terms of the independence you just spoke of?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Was the verb you used “oversee”? If it was, that's not a word I would associate with this.

I think an inquiry was made by the government House leader's office to the Speaker's office to ensure they were aware of and seized with the breaking news that emerged over that weekend.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Okay. However, again, in terms of the back-and-forth, there were communications between each office. You say it was solely over that concern. There was no guidance or oversight provided.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I think there was an urgency expressed and a verification made to ensure they were aware of this issue and taking action in response to it.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Okay.

In those documents that I referred to, as soon as the news about the Hunka affair was revealed, political staff, in those communications, changed from writing emails and sending texts to making phone calls. That would show that there was a potential concern about what was being communicated. That also shows a concern to me in terms of the transparency of the situation for us to be able to do that work in this committee.

What do you think that says in terms of the commitment to those principles of transparency if everything all of a sudden just stopped and everything went to phone calls?

• (1315)

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: What I would say is that I don't think you should assume the worst. I think you should assume that a member of the government House leader's office was concerned about the news story that was emerging and about ensuring that the Speaker's office was going to react to that, and I think the public record speaks to what ensued. I don't think there is that much distance between ensuring that things were going to get done or reacted to that day and when the Speaker put out a statement, the first statement.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: What we've seen from the official opposition, of course, is a belief that way more has happened, that there's way more at play here. Do you believe that ultimately that this lack of transparency fuels that fire?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: If you're asking me to offer a political analysis about why the official opposition acts like it does, my—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: No, not necessarily; it's more in terms of that lack of transparency, though, that seems to have occurred here as a problem overall.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I think the opposition is a little sheepish about their lack of support for Ukraine in the trade deal, and perhaps the tepid welcome that they offered Mr. Zelenskyy that day themselves, and are trying to create a diversion.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Well, I've certainly seen that in my other committees.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Yes, we all have.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Let's just change pace, then.

In terms of the aftermath of this incident, of course this is having a great deal of impact on the Jewish communities in Canada. In meetings that I've had with them in my local area, many communities have been calling for your government's online hate legislation to be brought forward. It was promised to be brought forward within 100 days of your government coming to power. We have not seen that.

I would ask what consideration your government has given to this, considering this incredible incident and the harm that's been done, and considering that groups like the Jewish community have called for your government to come forward with that actual piece of legislation that you've been well overdue on.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you for the question.

I know that on multiple occasions, the fact that the Jewish community had a right to feel especially hurt by this incident was singled out and apologies were offered. I know it continues to be the case that we are horrified by the impact of this incident on the Jewish community and I think we all need to remain humble in the face of that.

With respect to the anti-hate legislation, I would just point you to the minister and the fact that it remains a significant commitment of this government. Beyond that, I won't say much more—

The Chair: Thank you—

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Stay tuned.

The Chair: Thank you.

I will just say that we went further and further from the topic when we talked about legislation. When somebody comes and provides comments and opens up a little bit of the scope, there is some ability for an exchange, but when the person who is appearing has not even opened up that scope, I do think that as members we need to try to stay within the purpose of why we're here.

I'll just give that as a friendly reminder. I did not want to interrupt the exchange. I would just remind everyone as to the purpose of the study and why we're here. If we can try to swim in that pool, it would be really appreciated.

[*Translation*]

I'm now giving the floor to Mr. Berthold for five minutes, after which it will be Mr. Lauzon's turn.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. MacKinnon, are you still claiming that the Prime Minister and his office did not know that the former Nazi Yaroslav Hunka would be in the gallery during the Ukrainian president's address?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Could you repeat the question?

Mr. Luc Berthold: Are you still saying or claiming that the Prime Minister and everyone in his office didn't know that former Nazi Yaroslav Hunka would be in the gallery during the Ukrainian president's address?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I will refer you back once again to the words of former Speaker Rota, who solemnly swore, before and after his resignation, that he was solely responsible and the only person to be aware of it, and that he took full responsibility for it.

• (1320)

Mr. Luc Berthold: So you're saying that to your knowledge, no one in the Prime Minister's office knew that Mr. Hunka would be in the gallery.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Once again, the Speaker could not have been clearer about the fact that he was the only person responsible for having sent the invitation to Mr. Hunka, and for having drawn attention to his presence.

Mr. Luc Berthold: You're just repeating what Mr. Rota said. I'm therefore assuming that you're not answering my question directly.

How do you explain the fact that on September 24, only a few moments following the revelation that Mr. Hunka had been an SS soldier, the Prime Minister's awareness adviser sent a text message to the parliamentary protocol coordinator to ask for the name of his son?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I'm not sure I'm following the logic of what you're saying.

Mr. Luc Berthold: On September 24, only a few moments after we learned that Mr. Hunka was a former Nazi, the Prime Minister's awareness adviser sent a text message to the parliamentary protocol coordinator to ask for the name of his son. Isn't that a strange question from someone who was not aware of Mr. Hunka's presence in the House?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I can't comment on that because I was the chief government whip at the time.

Was that after the Speaker of the House had mentioned that he was in attendance?

Mr. Luc Berthold: It was immediately after it was learned that Mr. Hunka was a former Nazi.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Okay.

I have no idea, in view of everything that happened, why she would have wanted that information.

Mr. Luc Berthold: So it looks obvious—

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I'm not assuming the worst, as you appear to be doing.

Mr. Luc Berthold: I'm not assuming the worst; I'm simply wondering. It was an odd question from the Prime Minister's Office, which was supposedly unaware of Mr. Hunka's presence. Then suddenly, it was learned that his son was there and it became essential to identify him. That's rather surprising.

Mr. MacKinnon, you were the chief government whip when—

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Then I'm sure you'll agree that was when she might have first learned the facts.

If you would like me to speculate, I would say that it's reasonable to believe, given what she had just learned, that she wanted more clarification on what had happened.

Mr. Luc Berthold: No, it appears that...Well, I can see that you're not aware of the situation and don't know the answer. However that may be, I can tell you that it's nevertheless rather surprising for the Prime Minister's Office to have responded so quickly, and that the first response was to ask about Mr. Hunka's son's name.

Secondly, given that you were the chief government whip, I wanted to ask you who provided the parliamentary protocol office with the list of government guests. Was it the whip, the government leader in the House of Commons, the member for Winnipeg North? Who was it?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: You will no doubt recall that the advance notice to all parliamentarians was very short. I believe it was on the Tuesday or Wednesday of that week, and the event was held on Friday.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Yes, but who provided the list? Someone has to have sent the House of Commons guest list.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: As a former whip, I feel very frustrated about not being able to answer the numerous questions from my colleagues—

Mr. Luc Berthold: You're not answering my question.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: —and that's because—

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. MacKinnon, I'm asking you who provided the list.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I'm trying to answer your question, Mr. Berthold.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Can you simply tell me who it was? Give me a name.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: From one standpoint, the government is responsible for inviting dignitaries and diplomats from other countries.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. MacKinnon—

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: A number of seats are allocated—

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. MacKinnon, I'm asking you a very simple question and I'd like a simple answer.

[English]

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I have a point of order.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Who supplied the list? Why can't you tell me who—

[English]

The Chair: There's a point of order.

Go ahead, Mrs. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I know that the member opposite appreciates immensely the work of the translators, and when people are speaking over each other, the translators cannot do the important work that they do, so I ask that the member allow the minister to finish his question and then pose his.

[Translation]

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: I will take that as a reminder to remind everyone to make sure one person is speaking at a time so that we can know what's being said in both official languages.

Go ahead, Minister MacKinnon.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I was answering the question.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Yes.

Who supplied the guest list?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I was the whip at the time. I don't know who provided the list. However, I can tell you that the government has approximately 170 seats—

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you, you've answered my question. Even though you were the whip, you don't know who supplied the guest list. You don't want to be held accountable for that list.

You will no doubt agree with me that the event was organized by the Prime Minister's Office. The member for Winnipeg North requested the permission of the House to hold this event. Are you in agreement on that?

• (1325)

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: What are you saying he requested?

Mr. Luc Berthold: He requested House permission for the Prime Minister to receive President Zelenskyy.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Yes, that's right.

Mr. Luc Berthold: So—

I'm afraid I've run out of speaking time.

[English]

The Chair: Excellent. The time is up. The time has come to an end. It was a very exciting five minutes and 30 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Lauzon, please go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for being here, Mr. MacKinnon. It's always a pleasure to see you.

You've explained the situation very well. You even quoted what the Speaker of the House said with respect to his intentions and his answers.

Thank you again for reminding us of our firm support for Ukraine.

I believe the message to be learned today is that a solution needs to be found to prevent any similar situations from ever occurring in the House of Commons.

I'd like to begin by talking about the role of whip that you held at the time of this incident.

As we know, the government has to follow a process with respect to protocol. This has been clearly explained by the many witnesses we heard from earlier.

At what point did you have to intervene directly in the protocol process surrounding a joint address? Earlier, you were about to give an answer, saying that you had wanted to please your colleagues by offering them seats, but that the number of seats was limited.

Tell me about your role and what limits there are in this joint address process, by which I mean having senators in attendance.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you very much for the question.

I'll be happy to discuss this with you, Mr. Lauzon.

I can confirm that there are very few seats in the House of Commons gallery. Some seats for guests are made available by the official opposition, the Bloc Québécois and the New Democratic Party. Some may even be made available by independent members and the Green Party, but I'm not sure about that.

I've always been told that for an event like Mr. Zelenskyy's address, the allocation of seats for the government was generally prorated on the basis of the number of seats held by members in the House of Commons. Once again, I presume this is still the case. The allocation of seats for government guests naturally includes diplomats and a number of other people who are required to attend because of their role or official duties, which limits the number of seats for other guests.

Our Liberal colleagues have often told me that a typical opposition MP was more likely to be able to invite someone to attend these events than a government MP because of the limited number of seats available to all the parties.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Concretely, your role was limited to that.

Let's discuss this notorious list, which all the previous witnesses were talking about. The list was supposedly supplied by the Speaker of the House, and then passed on to the security team for verification.

Did you have a role to play there? Were you given the list so that you could comment on it or work with the protocol team?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I never saw any such list. I don't think that's how it works.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: In that case, can you tell me whether you played a role in submitting the guest list. The list, which you didn't see, was submitted in compliance with a security protocol. In any event, you had a role to play in terms of security. Did you or your team of deputy whips skip any of the steps in the security protocol for this list?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: No, I didn't play a role in that.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Mr. MacKinnon, we deplore the whole situation that we went through in the House of Commons. It's something parliamentarians should never experience in their political career. When you get up in the morning, you hope not to have to go through anything like that. It's hard to take pride in our country when things like that happen, and we're not proud about what's going on in the world today, as you pointed out so clearly.

However, some people want to take advantage of the situation, and that's lamentable. Some comments about our government's poor handling of communications are being heard from as far away as Vladimir Putin, in Russia.

When an incident like this is used for political purposes, what are the potential international impacts?

• (1330)

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I would say that there was a much greater impact when one party in the House of Commons refused to approve or support free trade agreements with Ukraine. That's how I see the situation. It casts doubt on Canada's full and unanimous support of Ukraine.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Gaudreau, it's over to you now for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'd like to get back to that infamous guest list.

My political party's whip was well aware of the list.

My understanding is that the list came from the Prime Minister's Office. You may not have seen it, but there was such a list. Wasn't it the Prime Minister's Office that prepared the guest list?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I don't know who prepared the list. My understanding, and I believe this has been confirmed by the testimony here today, is that it happened outside of all that. The whips, including Ms. DeBellefeuille, are not involved.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: If it wasn't the Prime Minister's office, where did it come from?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: If I'm not mistaken, the protocol office handles submissions or lists.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Do the protocol office representatives speak to the representatives of the Speaker's office or the Prime Minister's Office?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: You'll have an opportunity to ask the protocol office officials directly.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: On the other hand, there something I don't know—

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: You can tell me what they have to say.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I have only two minutes of speaking time left.

As I was explaining earlier, when you're at fault, you should accept responsibility and resign. That's not what happened. There was a gap from September 22 to September 26. I wasn't there, but I would have liked to have been there to hear what was said.

You were there, along with the government House leader. What happened? what was said? Was there an attempt to save the Speaker?

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: I think that what happened in private is exactly what happened in public, Ms. Gaudreau.

I'd like to, if you wish, take this opportunity to say a few words about Mr. Rota. Although he acknowledged his error and accepted full responsibility, I'd like to say to the committee that Mr. Rota is an honourable man. He served his country and his fellow citizens well. I think that we are currently being overly harsh in blaming someone who made a human error, and who definitely paid the price dearly. Mr. Rota will have to live with this for a long time.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's why we're here.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Indeed. But, don't you find that we're being a little fierce?

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I have a lot of respect for Mr. Rota. I know him. He's an honourable man and has demonstrated exemplary impartiality. We're here because there's something fishy going on. There's something we can't quite understand. There are too many factors, and we won't be able to clarify the situation in a single meeting.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Your view that is that Mr. Rota is an honourable man. He provided explanations repeatedly, and he has reiterated his position.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: The Prime Minister's Office knew about it.

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: Ms. Gaudreau, if you believe that he's honourable, then you would agree with me that there's nothing fishy going on. What we got were public apologies for his mistake. He made a mistake and he was sorry. Attacking him and making him relive the incident is unworthy of us.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: It's not my intent to attack Mr. Rota. I have a lot of respect for him, and I believe it's important to shed light on the situation. I personally get the impression that Mr. Rota is a victim and that he was made the scapegoat.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Mathyssen is next.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: I would like to say that according to your rules, Madam Chair, this was in fact mentioned in the witness's initial statement, so I'm on course here.

In the aftermath of this incident, Vladimir Putin sat down in Moscow with Tucker Carlson, as you mentioned. He referenced this incident as part of his rationale for invading Ukraine. We are now seeing the weaponization of this incident by Putin in this coming forward of right-wing followers. Of course, we understand the dangers of this and these claims being circulated here in Canada.

What are the steps that your government is taking to respond to bad faith actors like Tucker Carlson and those who are truly promoting and giving that platform to Russian propaganda?

• (1335)

Hon. Steven MacKinnon: There's no question that there exists in the west—and by “the west”, I mean western countries broadly—a strain of conservatism that is pro-Putin and pro-Russia. It puts support for Ukraine in question, and it supports and disseminates conspiracy theories about Ukraine. It repeats propaganda statements made by, among others, the President of Russia. I would submit that Mr. Carlson is certainly in that category. In fact, he has expressed direct support for Russia in this conflict, which is quite incredible.

This also exists in Canada. What we have to do is stand up every day for the people of Ukraine and for our support of Ukraine to dissipate all of these conspiracy theories and plots that are described to us sometimes on the Internet and that sometimes lead us down some very dark, deep, rabbit holes. We'll continue to be doing that.

One thing that will not stop is the government of Canada's support, and I hope the support of your party and that of the Bloc Québécois. By that I mean Canada's uniform support, economic support, diplomatic support and military support for the people and the armed forces of Ukraine.

The Chair: Sadly, that brings our time to an end. It has been most invigorating, as always.

Minister, we thank you for your time and attention and for being here with us today.

Colleagues, thank you for your fruitful conversation and discourse.

We'll see you Thursday. The meeting is adjourned.

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