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Chair: The Honourable Wayne Easter



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• (1805)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 46 of the Standing Committee on Finance. We're meeting at the request of four members of the committee pursuant to Standing Order 106(4).

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference and the proceedings are being televised and will be made available via the House of Commons website.

This meeting was requested by four members of the committee to discuss the testimony and logistics of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his chief of staff Katie Telford's appearance, and to address the production of communications.

I'm not sure which of the four is proceeding to make the argument.

I see Mr. Poilievre waving.

Mr. Poilievre, the floor is yours.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Before I begin, I'd like to briefly note that we could have settled this at the last meeting, but you shut that meeting down in violation of the rules. There was no vote. To adjourn a meeting, the chair needs to have a vote of the majority of members of the committee and you had no such majority. Those rules are clearly laid out in the Standing Orders, which read that the committee chair cannot adjourn a meeting without the consent of the majority of the members. That's in *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, Second Edition.

The Chair: Just to—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I still have the floor, to my knowledge.

The Chair: Yes you do, but just to make a point, Mr. Poilievre, it's my understanding that when we reach the adjournment time, we need unanimous consent—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: No.

The Chair: —of the membership to continue. We'll ask the clerk to give us some advice on that at some point.

The floor is yours.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you very much. The reason for today's meeting is to prepare the ground rules for tomorrow's hearings, and the motion that I want to put forward reads:

That the Prime Minister appear for no less than three hours alone as a witness, on his own panel, and that Katie Telford appear for no less than two hours, alone as a witness, on her own panel, provided that the two appear separately.

The Chair: Are you finished?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I moved my motion. I just want to make sure that you've registered the motion and I'd like to be on the speaking list to address my motion.

The Chair: All right. You're on the speaking list. Go ahead.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Chair, there are obviously a lot of questions surrounding this controversy. The Prime Minister's family has received over \$500,000 from the WE group, almost all of it since he became Prime Minister. He has admitted that he should have recused himself, an omission that will almost certainly be accompanied by a conviction by the Ethics Commissioner. The same group received a contribution agreement worth \$543 million, of which \$43 million was to go to the organization's expenses. The obvious conflicts related to this matter have led to the entire thing being cancelled.

This is a case where a half a million dollars went from WE to the Prime Minister's family, and then half a billion dollars was going to go from the Prime Minister's government back to WE. There are myriad meetings, conversations and discussions and exchanges that led to the creation of this bizarre program, and we need to know who met who whom and what deliberations occurred that led to the decision.

The organization in question is now coming under scrutiny for extremely unusual developments in its Kenya office. The Prime Minister needs to indicate what he knows about those developments. We also have learned that the organization is linked, through its principals, to a myriad of numbered companies, for-profit enterprises, foundations and real estate holding entities, all of which are involved in a series of strange relationships with the principal entity. Finally, we've learned that the contribution agreement was directed not to the principal charity but to a real estate holding foundation, a shell entity, that was created for the purpose of nothing more than holding real estate.

These are extremely complicated issues, Chair, and we can't simply slough them aside with 10 minutes of questioning by each party. Most parties under the current plan that you've created without consultation would get less than 10 minutes to ask questions, and that does not include the time the Prime Minister has to answer them. Furthermore, yesterday you displayed that you are going to interfere with members' ability to keep the witnesses focused on the questions asked and that you're going to allow witnesses to basically give rambling speeches unrelated to the questions asked, which will further burn down the clock and prevent the Prime Minister from providing any answers.

I will conclude by saying that if the Prime Minister doesn't answer the questions, then he's going to be called again. This time it would probably be through a vote of the House of Commons, and it would probably mean that he would end up before another committee with an objective chair, who would preside over the meeting without jumping in to rescue the witness. It's in the Prime Minister's interest to just come and give fulsome and complete testimony now rather than trying to come in and put on a dramatic performance and hide behind a favourable Chair and sneak out the back door before anyone gets answers. Do it once, do it right, because if you don't you'll be back doing it again.

Thank you.

• (1810)

The Chair: Are you done?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes.

The Chair: I would just point out that I will not get into an argument over my chairing, other than to say that the rules of questioning were laid out at the initial meeting of the Standing Committee on Finance. There's six minutes for the first four members in the first round; five minutes for the next four in the next round; two and a half minutes in the next round for the Bloc and the NDP. If you want to go back to look at the rules, and go back to look at the record, you'll find that you usually get more than six minutes. In fact I'm very kind to you.

I have Mr. Julian next, but I see a number of hands are up.

We'll go to Mr. Julian, Mr. Sorbara, Ms. Dzerowicz, Mr. Fortin and then Ms. May.

Mr. Julian please.

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will try to be brief because I know that we want to get to a vote in this meeting.

First off, the four hours yesterday only really hit the tip of the iceberg in terms of the questions being asked. I can tell you I literally had another dozen questions I wasn't able to bring forward. It makes sense then to have the Prime Minister available for a number of hours so that these questions can get answered. I was dismayed by the evasiveness of our witnesses yesterday. I think a number of times they could have just answered honestly, and they chose not to. It's unfortunate because I think in that respect they're doing a disservice when we're trying to get to the bottom of this controversy and scandal.

Therefore, I support the idea of three hours for the Prime Minister and two hours for Ms. Telford. That makes sense. It won't by any means exhaust the questions that my colleague Mr. Angus and I have, but we'll get a start at asking the most important questions with that.

I'd also like to reference two other things, Mr. Chair. First off, I normally find you very fair, and I've certainly worked with you for a number of years. Yesterday, I found that you intervened quite often to reinforce points that were not valid. I'll give just one example. The issue of the shell foundation is a fact and not in dispute, and the evasive response by the witnesses was not something the Chair should have been repeating. I shouldn't be into an argument with you, Mr. Chair, because the facts are quite clear and the witnesses were quite frankly wrong. I would appreciate your not repeating wrong answers that are not factually correct. I think your role is very important: you just have to govern us, and the key aspect of making sure there is a rough time allocation is important. As we've seen in the House with the COVID-19 committee, it is absolutely essential.

My final point is that you're right about the rotation in the first, second, and third rounds, but we then go back to the first round. That means that in a first round at about two and a half hours into the meeting, each of the opposition parties and the government party have a right to a six-minute round, and that was simply neglected. If we're going with a three-hour format tomorrow, when we get back to the first round, it should again be six minutes for the Conservatives, Liberals, the Bloc, and the NDP. I hope we stick to that. I didn't want to interrupt the proceedings with a point of order and a dispute, because we were already not getting all of the questions answered that we needed answers to. However, that is the rotation when we go beyond the two-hour framework, and I hope we will stick to that tomorrow.

That's it for the moment. Thank you.

• (1815)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

There is no problem with a point of order. We can always ask the clerk on those matters.

I'll go to Mr. Fortin and then Mr. Sorbara.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I support Mr. Poilievre's motion.

Yesterday, I was somewhat frustrated due to my computer problems, which meant that I could not properly engage in discussions with the witnesses.

Our meeting was supposed to last four hours. I imagined that I might find myself in a situation the next day where the Prime Minister would only have one hour, and I might have computer issues for five minutes during my speaking time.

I believe that giving three hours to Mr. Trudeau and two hours to Ms. Telford is the least we can do. It is a unique and complex situation. To my knowledge, we have never seen a Prime Minister and his Minister of Finance under investigation by the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner. For this Prime Minister, it is the third time in recent years.

Let me be clear about the WE Charity situation. I am not here to put WE Charity or Mr. Trudeau's family on trial. Clearly, Mr. Trudeau has put himself in an unacceptable situation. He recognizes that and has even apologized for it. The same goes for Mr. Morneau. The situation deserves careful consideration by Parliament. Such is the principle of democracy. It is our job as members of Parliament and we need these hours to meet with Mr. Trudeau and Ms. Telford.

Having said that, I was not here when the rules on each party's speaking time were made. I understand that the Bloc Québécois' time was modelled on the NDP's. As you know, though, we have 32 members, whereas the NDP has only around 20. I do not know the exact number. I would like to have the same amount of time as the Liberals and the Conservatives for the second round of questions. It would allow me to speak more effectively and less rapidly.

When we have only five minutes per hour to speak, it is quite difficult to be cool, calm, and collected, because we try to go fast. Yesterday, Mr. Poilievre was criticized for being a little short with the witnesses. I must admit that, even though we are not from the same party, I understood, because I had the same feeling. When witnesses spoke for two or three minutes after a 30-second question, I got the impression that they were encroaching on the precious minutes I had available to ask my questions.

I will sum up by saying three things. First, I will support Mr. Poilievre's motion. Second, if there is a mechanism by which the Bloc Québécois could be given the same amount of time as the Liberals and Conservatives, it would be desirable and fair.

Third, I would like to see us adopt procedures, a way of operating, that would ensure that if, for example, a question is asked in 20 or 30 seconds, the witness would have to answer it within the same timeframe, similar to what we did with the Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic in the House. For witnesses who take longer to respond, a mechanism would have to be put in place so that members could get their precious minutes back and avoid losing two, three or four minutes because witnesses are going on and on with longwinded answers.

• (1820)

[English]

The Chair: I will go to Mr. Sorbara, who is on next.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara (Vaughan—Woodbridge, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you for your chairmanship of the finance committee.

This is my second term as a parliamentarian, and I was honoured to sit on the finance committee for the entire first session of Parliament when I was elected with you, and it was a learning experience. I can state with full conviction that you treated all members of all parties with dignity and with respect. I learned a lot from you and I continue to do so.

Thank you.

The Chair: Let's get to the motion at hand.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: I wanted to put that out there because I didn't want to leave any misconceptions for other members of the 338 of us who have the privilege of sitting in the House of Commons that anything is nonetheless not...

Thank you, Mr. Poilievre, for your hard work, your entrepreneurship and so forth and your motion today with regard to the amount of time for testimony this week by the Prime Minister of Canada and his chief of staff. In your comments you started by stating a number of things, and I think we need to chat about them. We need to clarify and make sure where we're at this evening, all of us gathered together here, me in the beautiful riding of Vaughan—Woodbridge, and all of us spread out coast to coast to coast in this beautiful country we live in.

First off, we heard yesterday four hours of testimony from the Kielburger brothers, and I was paying attention very closely, and I think, probably for the last hour and a half, there was much repetition in the questioning by many of our members, especially on the opposition side. I didn't see and learn much new in the last hour and a half.

There were many intriguing questions that I thought brought many things to light. I think we need to touch upon those issues in this time we have allotted this evening, because it's very important that we don't do that again. We had four hours of testimony where opposition members, where government members, asked tough questions, I would say, and received a lot of information.

We know, for example, that Mr. Poilievre just stated that \$500 million was going to be transferred from the government to WE. No, \$500 million was going to go to hardworking student volunteers across our country. Up to 100,000 kids would have received monies for volunteering to do great deeds across this country. The WE organization, as was indicated yesterday, quite clearly in the contribution agreement that I have here with me and that I have read closely, was only going to be reimbursed for the eligible expenditures that it would have incurred. We need to understand that, because first we had an indication it was \$900 million or \$1 billion. We had a lot of words from opposition members that were factually inaccurate, and then you had a lot of words tonight by Mr. Poilievre when he spoke about his motion about \$500 million and this shell company and that shell company, and I'm just scratching my head because those, to me, are very inflammatory comments, statements that are incorrect.

The WE organization had signed a contribution agreement. They have connections with 18,000 schools across North America, an organization that was looked upon by our public servants, who have done a phenomenal job in the last four months.... We need to step back and think about where we are in a point of time of Canada's history and the history of the world with the COVID-19 pandemic. This was one measure amongst many, including the Canada emergency response benefit, CEWS, to help students.

That's what we were doing; we were helping students, and we continue to help students, Chair, through the Canada student grants to help them with graduating, part of the \$9 billion package, and this was one portion of it.

There was one comment made during the testimony about what we described as lapsed funding, and I make this analogy of lapsed funding.... You know in the private sector, I used to go to what were called "investor days", when a company would come in.... I covered sectors, the mid-stream sectors, and if I can speak to Mr. Cooper's world in Alberta, the downstream ones. I covered all of the energy companies, including pipelines, who present on an investor day and give us a set of numbers and forecasts, much like a budget. Then they would come back and produce quarterly filings, which I would follow and look at from a bond perspective as a bond analyst, as someone who worked in the financial markets. I really very much enjoyed myself, learned it and brought those skill sets here to where I am now.

• (1825)

It's similar to this contribution agreement where we've allotted \$500 million that would then go to up to 100,000 students across Canada, youth across Canada, for volunteering. It was in the Kielburgers' testimony yesterday, in which they indicated that this was the allotment and how much was going to be spent, which might have been up to that amount or might have been less. The opposition has consistently mischaracterized this contribution agreement as being bigger than it really was. It was for a maximum of \$543 million. The difference was just allocated and not committed, which is, of course, common practice within government.

I would anticipate and expect that a seasoned member of Parliament who has sat in cabinet, a member of Parliament whom I would actually like to quote because it applies to the issue at hand in terms of the contribution agreement.... I quote from my learned friend because I consider myself friends with all members of all parties and have relationships with all members of all parties, and we chat and we're here to represent our constituents and do the good work that Canadians expect us to do. That's why they're sent there and that's why they give us that privilege.

I would like to quote the member as follows:

Thank you very much for your question.

I think we need to put the issue of lapsed funding into its proper context. It is the regular practice of governments to spend underneath the budget that Parliament authorizes for them, and there's a good 800-year-old reason for that, which is that departments are not meant to spend what Parliament has not approved, and it's unwise to spend right up to the limit for fear of going over it. It is good, prudent financial management to come in under budget and to leave a buffer between that which you have approved and that which we spend.

That was my learned friend Mr. Poilievre, whom I respect greatly. I think we really need to clarify the details in the contribution

agreement in terms of where we are. The total value of the Canada student service grant was \$912 million when the program was announced by the Prime Minister, the Right Hon. Justin Trudeau, on April 27. A comprehensive table lays that out and all federal emergency spending estimates that it's still assigned that number to the CSSG program on July 28.

If we look at the details, \$543 million was the federal funding allocated to the CCSG accord contribution agreement signed by WE Charity and my good friend Minister Bardish Chagger. That is the amount we were dealing with. No more, no less, and the expenses were done on a graduated scale. The program would have been adopted, would be run, and as you increase the number of youth signed up to participate in the programming and to benefit from the experience—and let's not forget the organizations that would have been benefiting....

We know that to date the majority of the 30,000 plus students who had indicated they were interested in taking part in this program and working in their communities came from indigenous, racialized communities across Canada.

Mr. Chair, I grew up in northern British Columbia, in Prince Rupert, B.C., and I have always been a very big advocate, proponent, of nation-to-nation building and relationships with our indigenous communities. So it was great to hear that an overwhelming majority of youth who had signed up for the Canada student service grant were from that nation, that community. To see this CCSG being derailed, this program being derailed, due to political purposes, a program that I thought had much value, was honestly very disappointing.

If we look at the details, up to the \$500 million was the total federal maximum funding allotted for students who would be eligible to receive up to \$5,000 paid in increments of \$1,000 for every 100 hours volunteered. The maximum funding for eligible expenses, or expenditures if I can use that detail, would be \$43.53 million for the WE organization that was selected and signed a contribution agreement with our wonderful public servants to fulfill this task.

• (1830)

Now, do I believe that they could have fulfilled this task? Yes, absolutely. Do I believe that there is value in a program? Yes, absolutely.

When you think of the expenses, it was broken down. In the contribution agreement, the details are there. There was \$19.—

Mr. Peter Julian: Point of order.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Yes, MP Julian.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Peter; I was muted.

On the point of order, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes. Mr. Sorbara obviously doesn't want the committee to vote on this, but he is not speaking to the motion at all. As a result of that, I question the relevance.

Mr. Chair, it's a very simple matter. If Mr. Sorbara doesn't believe that the Prime Minister could answer questions for three hours, he should put that forward. He should speak to the motion.

The Chair: Yes, we'll go to relevance, Mr. Sorbara. Could you stay close to the topic at hand?

Go ahead.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: With pleasure, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your intervention, MP Julian. I find your comments to always be insightful and judicious. Thank you for that.

My concern about three hours is along the lines.... We heard testimony yesterday, and we heard questioning yesterday. We heard every question. We even touched upon the issue of mental health and how an individual's mother was dragged through the mud yesterday. To be blunt, that was, to me, quite sickening. To be blunt, I was disappointed in that.

For the opposition, Mr. Poilievre, to state that he wants to bring the Prime Minister in for three hours instead of the allotted hour, I was wondering where we were going with that. I have been thinking about the testimony we heard yesterday and some of the questions that were asked, and frankly, as I said, in the last two hours of those four hours of testimony, I didn't hear any original questions from the opposition members. That was disappointing.

Even with regard to the structure of the WE Charity, which is under review and they are doing their own self-analysis and we know that.... We know that they were provided with advice by in-house lawyers or other representatives in order to structure themselves to run this program for liability purposes, and we know that is a very common practice for organizations, yet some of us ignored or wanted to close our ears to understanding that.

I am going to let WE and the Kielburgers speak for themselves—and they have for four hours, and can continue to do so. However, at the same time, I want to make sure that if we are going to bring in any witness for four hours or three hours or an hour, the time will be spent wisely, that diligent questions will be asked...and not the ones I want, because I may not agree with my opposition members or my government members on the questions I want to hear. I may want to hear other questions. For me, it's important to know that they're relevant—and we've spoken to the motion of relevance, Chair—that when the Prime Minister arrives on Thursday and answers questions on this relationship....

Because this is only one program from a plethora of programs we have brought forward as a government that are benefiting Canadians.

• (1835)

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Mr. Chair, I will stop there.

I'll yield the floor to my honourable colleague, MP Dzerowicz. I think she is next on the list.

The Chair: I do have Ms. Dzerowicz next on the list, but I would prefer it if we could rotate between parties.

Is it okay for me to allow Ms. May in, and then Ms. Dzerowicz?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay, Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): I'm going to limit my comment to the matter of the procedure taken by a chair of a committee in a minority Parliament.

As a non-member of this committee, I'm extremely grateful to the latitude from you, Mr. Chair, but I recognize that all of my other colleagues, including Mr. Poilievre, whom I'm going to agree with and then upgrade in just a moment, are incredibly kind. I appreciate it.

I certainly can't lecture you, Mr. Chair, as I think you've been trying throughout this to be extremely balanced. However, I agree with Mr. Poilievre and Mr. Julian that you were having some difficulty yesterday in keeping partisanship out of this, and that's rare for you.

I want to remind Mr. Poilievre that way back in 2007, when he was parliamentary secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, his party put forward a handbook for committee chairs. It dealt with the difficult circumstances that a minority party in government faces in trying to control committee proceedings. It was a handbook that led Leon Benoit, then chair of the international trade committee, to adjourn a proceeding—and Peter Julian may remember this—and storm out of the room. He threw his pen down and said, "Adjourned", leaving the majority of the members, who had just voted to proceed, in something of a quandary. The handbook was full of tricks like that.

I would ask my Conservative colleagues to bear in mind their own history, and I would ask all of us to be as non-partisan as possible, because the country is still in a pandemic.

I said I was going to limit myself, but I don't believe that we got great, helpful, forthcoming information from the witnesses yesterday. I appreciate Mr. Poilievre's efforts and Mr. Julian's efforts to get more information out. Canadians do want to get to the bottom of this, but I really hope that all members on all sides, regardless of partisanship, including the chair, can be way above the normal level of fairness, and that the gutter approach of the minority Parliament in 2007 is never approached again.

The Chair: We'll now go to Ms. Dzerowicz, followed by Mr. Fragiskatos, unless there's a member of another party.

Ms. Dzerowicz.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Chair, thank you so much.

I do not support this motion.

For me, it's an absolute honour to have our Prime Minister come before our committee. It is unprecedented that a prime minister comes before a committee, so if we are able to have him for one hour, I think that is sufficient.

I also think that if we have our chief of staff, Katie Telford, for one hour, it's an honour to have her with us tomorrow. I do not support this motion.

In fact, Mr. Chair, I keep rereading the official motion that we adopted—I believe it was at the beginning of July—and I believe we have done a great job. I think we've reached the conclusion of what we were asked to do in that motion.

To remind everyone, there were two key parts of that motion. It was to conduct a study in examining how much the government spent in awarding the \$912-million, sole-source contract to WE Charity. That was the first part. The second part was how the outsourcing of the Canada student service grant to WE Charity proceeded as far as it did.

On the first part, we heard numerous times that there was no money that was misspent. Indeed, none was spent; no money was wasted. For any of the admin dollars they received, WE Charity is sending it all back. They've also indicated to us that WE Charity was not, in any way, to have profited from the Canada student service grant.

The other thing—and this is part of the awarding of the \$912 million and the sole-source contract—is that it was not a sole-source contract. It's a complete fabrication and misinformation. It was a contribution agreement. It was a contribution agreement, because it was the best vehicle for us to be able to get this very important student program out the door as soon as possible. It had a lot of key deliverables and a lot of accountability.

The contribution agreement should not be seen by any Canadian as being a fast way of throwing money out the door without any oversight at all. That was not at all the case, and we heard that very clearly from Ian Shugart, the Clerk of the Privy Council. We heard that also from Rachel Wernick, who is the senior assistant deputy minister at the skills and employment branch. On that first part, the \$912-million, sole-source contract, we have heard those elements time and time again.

The last thing I'd mention that keeps being thrown around—and I think my colleague Mr. Sorbara also spoke to this—is that it's a \$1-billion contract that was given to WE Charity. That's not at all the case. We heard, and we have evidence in our hands that has been formally submitted, and also under oath confirmed by the Kielburgers yesterday, that it's really a \$543-million contribution agreement. Up to \$500 million would actually go to students, depending on how many students participated in the program, and up to \$43.5 million to WE, again only to cover the costs of delivering this program.

I want to say that time and time again we have satisfied that first part of the original motion we passed at the beginning of July.

In terms of the second part, how the outsourcing of the Canada student service grant to WE Charity proceeded as far as it did, the implication behind this motion was that it was the Prime Minister

or one of our other ministers who somehow directed the public service to select WE Charity.

With all of the testimony that has come before us—and again, it included, under oath, the Kielburgers yesterday—we have heard zero evidence that this is the case. We have heard from the Clerk of the Privy Council, Ian Shugart. We have heard from—

• (1840)

Mr. Peter Julian: Point of order.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: —Rachel Wernick, who is the senior assistant deputy minister.

Mr. Peter Julian: Point of order.

The Chair: Sorry, Peter, I was muted. I was yelling at you to make your point of order. My apologies.

Mr. Peter Julian: You don't need to yell at me, Mr. Chair; a whisper is fine.

I question Ms. Dzerowicz's relevance on this.

Again, we have a motion that we're discussing. I think this is an important one. It's very timely. It's for tomorrow. We've seen the case advocated for the three hours, and I gather that.... It is true that Liberal members were repeating themselves, but I think they need to be better prepared tomorrow.

As far as opposition members are concerned, we did not get our questions out in four hours. If we could speak to the motion, that's the relevance that I think is important, so that we can get to the vote on this.

The Chair: Mr. Julian, I think you're going beyond the point of order a little as well, but that's fine; I understand. Partly tied into this, I would think, is the original motion on what we are meeting on, is it not? I guess that's what I'm having a little difficulty with, as chair, on relevance, because the original motion passed on July 6. This ties into that, as an extension of that motion. Maybe I'm wrong; I'm certainly willing to be corrected.

I'll go back to Ms. Dzerowicz and ask her to stay on topic, if she can—she'd better—and then I'll go to Mr. Fortin and Mr. Fragiskatos.

• (1845)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I want to confirm that this meeting cannot be ended without a majority vote of the committee. Your clerk has confirmed that with my office, and I have a written memo from my staff who spoke to your clerk. We had a very strange episode the last time we held one of these planning meetings, where you suddenly demanded unanimous consent for the meeting to go on and when one Liberal decided that she didn't want the meeting to happen you slammed your gavel and flipped the switch on Zoom and the lights went out. I want to make sure that we don't suddenly pass some imaginary threshold whereby all of a sudden a single Liberal MP has the power to shut down the meeting, because that would again be contrary to the rules.

The Chair: I'm still trying to determine that rule, Mr. Poilievre. I know any time when bells ring we need unanimous consent, but I have been communicating with the clerk and we do have an additional problem today: I didn't realize the meeting is scheduled from six o'clock to seven o'clock and we are operating....

Maybe I could ask the clerk to explain the conversation we had over email while this meeting is going on. Could you, Mr. Clerk? Relative to...we are in a different.... With Zoom meetings, the times are organized by the whips and the times are fairly specific. Mr. Clerk, if you could give us your opinion on this, we'll go from there. I don't tend to adjourn a meeting on the basis of one objection from a member...because we're uncertain on that at the moment, I'll give you that.

I see Mr. McLeod's hand up.

Mr. Clerk, go ahead.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Leif-Erik Aune): Thank you.

I took note of Mr. Poilievre's points, and I think the distinction here is that the proceedings in the virtual meeting environment, particularly Zoom, require an additional and quite extensive amount of technical support that has come up long after the rules, which Mr. Poilievre pointed to, were established. Of course, all members who have experienced committee proceedings before the pandemic know that the usual practice is for the chair to perceive general agreement around the table when it's time to adjourn a meeting, and that usually occurs at the anticipated scheduled hour of adjournment.

Ordinarily, committees should continue sitting if the members wish to, but the proceedings under a Zoom environment, the virtual meeting environment, are different. As a result, the House has organized, particularly through the offices of all the whips, to set a schedule for committees to meet, to ensure that each committee has the necessary interpretation and multimedia support to provide the service in this new virtual environment. To ensure that those services are available, the whips have agreed to a strict, set schedule when committees can meet, and if committees wish to continue meeting virtually outside of those times, they should request and obtain approval from the whips so that administrative support can be made available. It's not to contest Mr. Poilievre's point that the committee has a right to meet, procedurally, but from a technical and an administrative perspective, the whips have agreed to collaboration to make sure that committees can meet and receive the services they've come to expect.

It's an administrative and a technical explanation—

• (1850)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, we're working—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, we're working on your previous point of order and getting an explanation from the clerk. If you don't mind, we'll let him finish his explanation and then we'll go to your new point of order.

The Clerk: Thank you, sir.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It sounds like that's done now.

The Chair: Are you done? Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I just confirmed with the whip's office that our whip has not consented to this meeting being an hour. The clerk's concern being dispensed with, we're back to the normal rules, which require a majority vote before the meeting is shut down. I thank him for advising us about other meetings, for which whips have maybe agreed to an hour-long engagement, but I can confirm that our whip's office did no such thing in this case. We are here as long as it takes to get votes on the motions, or until the majority of committee members vote to adjourn the meeting.

The Chair: I will ask others to consult with their whips on that.

The other difficulty here, Mr. Poilievre—and then I'll go to Mr. McLeod on this point of order—is that regardless of where the whips are at the moment, if this was agreed to from an administrative point of view, we have a problem with those who manage interpretation, Zoom technicalities, etc. That's the only thing I see. I'm willing to continue, as long as we're not imposing on the public service in an area that we should not be.

Mr. McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to make a few comments on the point of order that Mr. Poilievre raised.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I haven't finished.

The Chair: I know you haven't, but a point of order takes precedence over your remarks. I hate to tell you that.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: It's okay. I didn't realize it was a point of order that Mr. McLeod was raising.

The Chair: It is.

Go ahead, Mr. McLeod, on the point of order.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I'll be quick.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: No, don't be quick.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I just want to add to the discussion on the standard practice that Mr. Poilievre referred to regarding committee rules.

Mr. Chair, you are the longest-serving member of this committee. I think I've probably been here the longest on the Liberal side, and Mr. Poilievre was appointed the same day I was. We have a bit of history going back to the last government, and I remember quite clearly that our committee wrapped up on the hour, on the minute that it was scheduled to, and many times because Mr. Poilievre had to leave to go to another commitment.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. McLeod, but I don't believe this is on the point of order. The information has been noted.

Mr. Michael McLeod: It's historical practice.

The Chair: I think it's more a point of information. Thank you.

We will have to figure out what we do at seven o'clock. I'm not sure if you have assistance there or not, Mr. Clerk, because the whips of the other parties will have to be consulted so we can find out where we're at here. If there was an agreement that the meeting end at seven o'clock, that's what it will have to be. If we can get around it, we will continue.

In the meantime, I'll go to Ms. Dzerowicz, then to Mr. Fortin and Mr. Fragiskatos.

Go ahead, Ms. Dzerowicz.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the points of order that were made, but it's exactly as you had interpreted.

The reason I was speaking to the original finance motion was that it's all relevant, to me. There's a motion on the table right now to have the Prime Minister come to speak for three hours and have Ms. Telford speak for two hours. My argument for why I'm against it is that the Prime Minister coming to our committee at all is an honour and is unprecedented, and for him to come for an hour I think is sufficient. I also think having the chief of staff to our Prime Minister, to our government, come for an hour is sufficient.

The other argument I'm making is that we, in my opinion, have heard testimony that has largely, if not completely, satisfied what we were meant to study in the original motion that was passed on July 6.

I will reiterate, though, that to me it is important for us to have these types of studies. It is important for there to be oversight and accountability. It is important for us to ensure that if issues arise, there are meetings for testimony so we can ask the important questions and ask the hard questions. I think that is what we've done for the last few meetings.

As I think my colleague Mr. Sorbara mentioned, we heard the Conservatives yesterday repeating questions multiple times. To be honest, the other thing I heard quite a bit yesterday was fishing for information. It was as though they kept on asking for more and more information in the hopes that if they collected information, somehow there would be something they could use to make this issue look worse than it really is.

To me, this WE issue has descended into something that is beyond the original intention of this—

• (1855)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Pierre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The clerk's story sort of changed here. The other day, when you shut down the meeting early, the claim was that it was because you didn't have unanimous consent to go on. Now the clerk is claiming there is some kind of an agreement that this meeting go for only an hour.

I just got off the phone with a senior staff member in the whip's office. He claims this was an agreement by the whip. I have again confirmed, for a second time, that there was—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): A point of order, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: —no agreement whatsoever that this meeting be limited to an hour. So the clerk has inaccurate information, and that cannot be used as a justification to shut down this meeting.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, I'll let Mr. Fragiskatos in on this point of order, and then—

Mr. Peter Julian: Point of order.

The Chair: You too, Mr. Julian? Okay.

Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Are we really going to descend to a level where we're questioning the objectivity of public servants? The clerk was quite clear in his reasoning. For Mr. Poilievre, who is a seasoned parliamentarian, to now go after the clerk and question his judgment is beyond disappointing. It's something I have not seen, even from him, after five years of being an MP myself.

I am extremely puzzled by that. It just should not happen at a committee.

The Chair: Mr. Julian, I'll go to your point, but we are in a dilemma here—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: No, we're not.

The Chair: No, no, we are.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It's pretty simple.

The Chair: No, it's not—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Keep working.

The Chair: It's not—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Do your job.

The Chair: Will you stop interrupting for a minute, please? Could you do that, Pierre, just for a minute?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Get yourself under control.

The Chair: Mr. Julian, your point of order, please.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I've just confirmed with the NDP whip's office; there is no agreement on limiting a committee meeting like this one. So that's at least two parties that say there is no agreement around that. In fact, the whip's office has said, very clearly, that if the committee believes it should be extending its time, it's free to do so.

The Chair: Okay.

Perhaps I can speak on this point of order...

Mr. Fortin, come in. Then I want to make a point.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I just checked with our party whip's office. I was told that no agreement has ever been made to limit the length of time and that, on the contrary, committee meetings have frequently lasted longer than scheduled. Our only caveat is that interpretation must be provided until the end of the meeting.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Three.

The Chair: Yes, and that's what we needed to clear up. I had a message come in here earlier that the agreement with various services was that it be 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. We have to make sure that they can go beyond 7 p.m.

Would it be okay if we suspend for five minutes while we clear this up and make sure we have translation services, multimedia services, and the services of the Library of Parliament? I'll ask each party to clear it up with their whips and report back. I've heard from three. I haven't heard from the Liberals.

Mr. Sorbara.

● (1900)

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Can we get clarification from the clerk, please, on the procedural manner for committees—in this extremely extraordinary period of time that is happening in our country, when we are meeting virtually—in terms of what the virtual sitting times, if I can use those words, are for committees to meet?

The Chair: I don't want to put the clerk on the spot. I don't know if you can answer that, Mr. Clerk.

What I would like to do is suspend for five minutes and make sure we're all on the same wavelength. I would ask, with apologies to translators and multiservice people, if they could stay with us, at least for the moment, while we sort this out.

It is now exactly seven o'clock—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Point of order.

The Chair: —eastern time.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, we'll go to that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Point of order.

The Chair: That would mean we'd reconvene at 7:05 p.m.

Yes, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, this explanation makes absolutely no sense. Of course, we have meetings that go often well beyond midnight, with translation, with technical support, with technical tools on Parliament Hill that are far more complicated than Zoom.

I'm not exactly sure what technical expertise you say expires after seven o'clock, Mr. Clerk, because the average Canadian is using Zoom well into the late hours of the night. We know that our translators have often worked right through, from midnight through to the early morning hours—

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: —so there is no technical reason we cannot continue to meet. If this meeting is shut down, it will be because the Liberals, in their minority, are shutting down meetings to avoid having motions voted on.

The Chair: I am not looking at shutting down the meeting, Mr. Poilievre. If you could maybe prevent that accusation, it would be decent.

I am going to suspend the meeting for five minutes while we sort this out so that at least I'm comfortable with us continuing as long as we have to. I will suspend now to 7:06 eastern time.

The meeting is suspended.

● (1900)

(Pause)

● (1915)

The Chair: My apologies for the longer-than-necessary suspension, but we had a good chat.

Ms. Dzerowicz, you have the floor. Then we have Mr. Fragiskatos, and we will hopefully be able to go to a vote after that.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I will wrap up. My main point was that I think it's unprecedented to have our Prime Minister come to committee at all. I think an hour is sufficient, and I also think an hour is sufficient with the chief of staff. I believe we have had enough witnesses; that has fulfilled the original mandate of the motion that was passed on July 6.

I'll say one more thing. We are still in a pandemic. To be honest, I believe the last four months were easy; I think the tough ones are yet to come. We have a lot of work ahead of us to restart and rebuild the economy, and to do so under so much uncertainty. There is so much great work that this committee could be doing in terms of looking at some of the tough decisions we need to make ahead, around our economy, around the sectors that desperately need support, around a green recovery, around looking at things like a universal basic income. There is so much more work that we could be putting our energy into. Maybe it's the idealist in me, but I just want, for one moment in time, for us to drop the partisan games and step up to be the government that the Canadian population needs at this time. Let's come together and bring our best ideas and our best energy to figuring out how we could chart a course past this unprecedented pandemic and how we could build a country that is more resilient, more equitable, more just and more prosperous.

That's where I'd like us to focus our attention: not the fishing expedition that's happening right now and not the theatrics, but our moving on to dealing with what is absolutely top of mind for Canadians today.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dzerowicz.

I'm not sure who is up, Mr. Fragiskatos or Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm glad to go, Mr. Chair. If my colleague Mr. Fraser wants to follow, that's no problem.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, the floor is yours.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: First of all, you're a modest man. You were attacked earlier. I have worked with you on this committee for two years now. I was first elected in 2015; you've been a mentor to new members of Parliament, and I still count myself as a new member of Parliament. I know you will not quote this, Mr. Chair, but I will quote from Maclean's magazine, just yesterday, and I hope Mr. Poilievre, who has suddenly disappeared, no surprise, is listening to this.

Maclean's said the following about yesterday's meeting. Under the heading "A Parliamentary committee is an infuriating forum for parsing questions of fact", it goes on to say, "If it weren't for the grace, chairmanship skills and occasional shouting of Liberal MP Wayne Easter, the committee hearing could at times have turned into a brawling disaster." I think they're being a bit unfair to you, Chair, because you didn't really shout and you had to keep things in order.

• (1920)

The Chair: Could we get back to the question we're on?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm glad to focus on the main question, but when members of the committee have tried to attack the chair and the objectivity of the chair, not to mention what was said earlier about our clerk by Mr. Poilievre, which I'm still stunned by...or maybe I'm not stunned by it; anyway, I'll leave that aside.

Mr. Chair, you've been an excellent, objective, a very fair chair in our committee, and an extraordinarily parliamentarian for the better part of more than 25 years, if I'm not mistaken. I'll leave that part there.

Ms. Dzerowicz and Mr. Sorbara touched on these points too, but it needs to be underlined. The Prime Minister coming to a parliamentary committee is quite unprecedented in the history of this country, to say the least. It's interesting to me that when Mr. Poilievre had the opportunity to vote in favour of Mr. Harper coming to testify at a parliamentary committee in response to concerns around the Mike Duffy scandal, he did not vote in favour of that. He voted against that motion.

The Chair: I think we are stretching quite a distance, Mr. Fragiskatos, from the motion.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm just putting those points on the record.

The Chair: Could we go to the motion?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Relating it back to the motion, of course, the motion calls for three hours for the Prime Minister and two hours for the chief of staff. My question is, to what end? The Conservatives have repeated themselves ad nauseam. Yesterday they started off with their questions, but then they kept asking those same sorts of questions. Sometimes these were just mirror images.

The questions kept on coming and there wasn't any difference in them. It was as if the Conservatives had exhausted their list of questions and just wanted to keep throwing mud at the wall as they could. With due respect to Mr. Fraser, he used that quote the other day in the meeting, and I think it's apt. Throwing mud at the wall and seeing what sticks seems to be the strategy of the Conservatives, but to what end? They haven't answered that here.

The Prime Minister of the country is being the Prime Minister of Canada, dealing with the pandemic. He is good enough to come to a committee, and the Conservatives haven't explained why he needs to come here for three hours.

I'll stop there, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Fraser, I believe you want in as the final point, and then we will go to a vote.

Mr. Sean Fraser (Central Nova, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll try not to take too much time. There are a couple of quick points I want to make.

I hope you can hear me. I'm trying to speak a little more quietly. For those who didn't have the benefit of a previous discussion, I've moved around in my house to make sure I can hear my daughter if she wakes up. There are some unique things that arise when you're dealing with Zoom meetings and scheduling concerns.

On the point of the motion, I find it a little bit odd that the Prime Minister is coming to the finance committee, as opposed to the other committees that are studying the same issue, given the nature of the motion we've passed. In any event, he has agreed to come. I think that's terrific. I made the point in our last meeting that I think three hours is a stretch. I think that some will agree and some will disagree with me on that point.

I want to take this opportunity to speak to the previous point of order. Again, I'm not trying to drag this on forever. I did take a different interpretation, not as a result of the Zoom meetings or the technical capacity, but based on the standing orders in Bosc and Gagnon. I found it a little bit odd that we had a disagreement on the way the meeting ended previously. Obviously, Mr. Chair, you were acting on the advice of the clerk at the time.

I looked into it, and I'll give you my thoughts. The standing orders in Bosc and Gagnon, as far as I can tell, don't explicitly rule that a committee meeting needs to continue after the scheduled hour of adjournment because there is debate ongoing.

The closest thing to a defined practice that I could find came from page 1,099 of Bosc and Gagnon, 2017 edition. It says:

A committee meeting may be adjourned by the adoption of a motion to that effect. However, most meetings are adjourned more informally, when the Chair receives the implied consent of members to adjourn. The committee Chair cannot adjourn the meeting without the consent of a majority of the members, unless the Chair decides that a case of disorder or misconduct is so serious as to prevent the committee from continuing its work.

My interpretation of this passage, unless I can be corrected, was that the chair can't, in the middle of a scheduled meeting, announce that the meeting should be adjourned and say, "We're halfway through; it's over", without canvassing the membership first to see if, in fact, they want to adjourn.

This meeting would be a useful example. It was scheduled to end at 7:00. My argument would be that, Wayne, you couldn't have said at 6:30, "Hey, we're done folks, too bad if you disagree", but at the time 7:00 rolled around, it would have been appropriate.

This is my personal interpretation. I'd be interested in what the clerk's finding on it may be. Honestly, my real concern—now that I think I'm managing with my daughter upstairs—is that I don't fall

into this trap again. I don't want to create a scenario where every committee can become an indefinite exercise that we haven't planned for. If that was going to be the case going into a meeting, I think it would be helpful to know that it's possible we could be sitting indefinitely, so we could all plan accordingly.

I said I wouldn't speak too long. I have probably exceeded that expectation I set for myself, so I'll cut it off there. I would be interested in what the chair or the clerk's ruling may be, now or at another time.

Thank you.

• (1925)

The Chair: We will look into that at another time.

I read it similarly to you, Sean, but we'll go to the clerks for further advice on this because there are all kinds of different scenarios. It does say, "unless the Chair decides that a case of disorder or misconduct is so serious as to prevent the committee from continuing its work", and we know that would never happen at this committee, so we should be all right there.

With that, I think we agreed earlier that after these number of speakers we would go to the vote. I would ask the clerk to read the motion again and then go to a recorded vote.

The Clerk: Thank you so much.

Bear with me for just one moment, and I will pull up the text of the motion from Mr. Poilievre.

That the Prime Minister appear for no less than three hours alone as a witness, on his own panel, and that Katie Telford appear for no less than two hours, alone as a witness, on her own panel, provided that the two appear separately.

The Chair: That's the motion. Now we go to a recorded vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Chair: Are we ready to adjourn?

No objections to adjourning?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: No objection, Mr. Chair, thank you very much.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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