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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1300)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, colleagues. Welcome to the 151st meeting of the foreign affairs and international development committee. I particularly want to thank members who have come from across the country to be here for this session today.

Today's meeting is to consider a request, under Standing Order 106(4), made by four members of the committee.

I understand, MP Alleslev, that you're going to introduce and speak to that motion.

Please take the floor.

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you very much.

As you know, the Conservatives have called this emergency committee meeting because of reports that the Prime Minister has used the power of his office to attempt to muzzle private citizens and respected former career diplomats David Mulroney and Guy Saint-Jacques. These are serious allegations that merit an investigation, and of course it's our hope that this committee will agree to and support our request today.

As Mr. Mulroney said in some of the public statements that he's made, discouraging private citizens with expertise in foreign relations from speaking freely is fundamentally an undemocratic idea. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister has shown a clear pattern of silencing those who would speak out against him. We're concerned that Canadians no longer have confidence in the Prime Minister when he says that he did not direct these civil servants to try to silence his critics.

We saw the Prime Minister attempt to defend himself with the same language that he used during the SNC-Lavalin scandal and various other affairs, such as the Vice-Admiral Norman affair and a trip to India, and we obviously do not necessarily believe that. As Canadians know, Trudeau's early denials in the SNC-Lavalin scandal have turned out to be false, and now we're wondering what the case is with this affair.

It is clear that the Prime Minister has shown a pattern of behaviour of attempting to silence anyone who would challenge or criticize the government's approach to anything. The foreign affairs committee today must find in favour of our motion to be able to get to the bottom of this. Anything less would be a cover-up.

We would like to move the following motion:

That, the Committee invite the following witnesses to appear:

- a. Minister of Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland;
- b. Paul Thoppil, Assistant Deputy Minister for Asia-Pacific, Global Affairs Canada;
- c. David Mulroney, as an individual;
- d. Guy Saint-Jacques, as an individual;
- e. Any other individual that the Committee deems relevant

that pursuant to Section 10(3) of the Parliament of Canada Act, the witnesses are to be sworn in;

that each witness appear individually on a panel, for no less than one hour; and that all witnesses appear no later than August 15, 2019.

Now, Mr. Chair, I'd like to speak to the motion.

The Chair: Please continue, Ms. Alleslev.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Excellent.

There are three main reasons why we feel this motion must be supported. First and foremost, this is about preserving free speech in a democracy, and about the non-partisan nature of our federal public service. Second, it's also about the rapidly deteriorating relations with China and what the government's policy actually is on China. Third, and almost as important, it's about the checks and balances of the institution of this government and the balance that a House of Commons standing committee puts forward in holding the government to account.

What do I mean when I say “free speech”? Clearly, we are in a democracy and, therefore, people who have expertise based on the history of their careers and the experience they have gained over their careers can inform citizens on government behaviour. Whether it was an academic career, a financial management career, an industry career or the public service is irrelevant. They have gained experience, and once they are private citizens, they have the opportunity to inform the public.

We cannot have a Prime Minister's Office, or the Prime Minister himself, for whatever reason, looking to prevent anyone in this country from having the opportunity to speak freely to an issue and to inform citizens on that issue. A democracy is only as good as the information that citizens have. We know from the media reports that part of the conversation is that the PMO directed not to speak out against the government because this is an election year.

Even more so in an election year do we need to have the opportunity to have experts speak out, so that when citizens go to the polls, they have valid and informed information so that they can make a decision on whether or not the current government is the right government to lead them, going forward.

China, and our relationship with China, is one of the most important or significant issues facing the nation at the moment, with two people who are imprisoned in China—wrongfully, in Canada's opinion—and the serious economic impact of our exports of soy, pork and other grains being prevented from getting into China. This is a significant diplomatic and economic relationship and we need to know what experts think of the government's approach before we go to the polls.

We absolutely need to understand whether or not this Prime Minister has continued a pattern of behaviour of attempting to silence those who are experts or private citizens from being able to provide informed opinions, upon which Canadians, in a democracy, can make informed decisions about the shape and direction of their nation, and of course, the expertise of the government.

Secondly, we're looking at the partisan nature of the public service. If, in fact, the Prime Minister's Office is attempting to take non-partisan public officials and arm-wrestle them into behaving in a way that is partisan, if in fact that's what happened when they were asking the assistant deputy minister, Mr. Thoppil, to call these former diplomats and tell them that it's an election year and that they need to check in with the government on the government's policy, then the very fabric of Canada's democracy is at risk.

In Canada we have a non-partisan public service for the very reason that it spans across different governments. If they are asked, or directed by the PMO, whether or not they were specifically directed or whether the PMO merely intimated that direction, everyone in the public service knows that the Prime Minister's Office and the use of the term "Prime Minister's Office" are not to be taken lightly. They are, in many respects, a not-so-veiled threat that your behaviour needs to be a certain way. It's a very difficult position for a public servant to be in when the Prime Minister's Office calls and asks them to do something.

● (1305)

We as a committee have a responsibility to determine whether or not the Prime Minister's Office actually directly phoned a public servant and asked them to behave in an inappropriate way, in a partisan way, when doing so is totally and completely outside of that individual's responsibility to do so and goes against everything in the nature of our government.

Furthermore, we need to understand whether or not that supposed Prime Minister's Office individual did it with the knowledge of the Prime Minister, because the buck stops with the Prime Minister. We also need to know if it went to the Clerk of the Privy Council, or if in fact it completely skipped him, which also would be inappropriate. From free speech to not muzzling people to ensuring that we have non-partisan public servants and whether there is any way the Prime Minister's Office is asking public servants to behave in a partisan way—these are serious allegations that we need to get to the bottom of.

Additionally, we need to talk about Canada's policy on China. Clearly the government's policy up to this point has been weak and has not achieved what we need it to achieve. When supposedly these private citizens—the former diplomats Mr. Mulroney and Mr. Saint-Jacques—were told that they needed to check in with the government on their policy so that they can speak with a single

voice, well, perhaps the opposition and all parliamentarians and Canadians should have and be afforded the same opportunity to hear what the government's policy is. We at this committee need to hear from the foreign affairs minister exactly what Canada's China policy is. If this senior associate deputy minister is able to tell two private citizens that they need to check in on the China policy of the country, then I think that all Canadians have as much responsibility to have that information as well. That is the role of a committee, to ensure that information gets to the citizens of the country.

Last, but by no means least, we have a responsibility, as the legislative branch, to do these kinds of investigations. There are only about 30 members of Parliament who are in cabinet, and in our country, in our democracy, they form the executive branch of our government. The other 300 or so, in addition to those cabinet ministers, form the legislative branch. House of Commons standing committees and all members of Parliament in the legislative branch have a responsibility to represent not only the citizens in their respective ridings but also citizens across this country to ensure that we hold the government to account. We're here to understand what the government's doing. We're here to challenge the government. We're here to represent all Canadians in holding the government to account and influencing the government's direction.

If that's not the role of members of Parliament, if the role, specifically of Liberal members of Parliament, is simply to do whatever the government says, then what is the role of members of Parliament and how is that undermining the very fabric and foundation of our democracy?

We saw quite clearly that the Prime Minister and senior people, both elected and unelected...because, of course, one big challenge of the Prime Minister's Office is that they have an incredible amount of authority and are able to dictate all kinds of things, but with far fewer checks and balances by not being elected officials.

● (1310)

If we saw, as we did with the SNC-Lavalin scandal and certainly with the Admiral Norman affair, the undermining and erosion of the independence of the judicial branch and how members of Parliament, specifically Liberal members of Parliament on the justice committee, were shutting down any kind of inquiry and open and transparent democratic investigation into the behaviours of the government, it affects not only one of the key pillars, the independence of the judicial branch, but also the checks and balances and the independence of the legislative branch.

Therefore, I am calling on all members of Parliament today at this committee to assume their responsibility to the citizens of the nation, to the office they hold and to their responsibilities as members of Parliament to hold government to account and ensure not only that the policies and the practices are correct, but also that the institution of government and the Parliament itself remain intact. We must vote in favour of this motion because there is far too much at stake, from free speech to the jeopardizing of a non-partisan public service, to not knowing what the government's China policy is and, therefore, not being able to hear from those who would agree with whatever it is and those who may disagree, and to ensure that we preserve and protect the very structure of our foundation of the independence of the executive, the legislative and, of course, the judicial branches and the role and accountability of a House of Commons standing committee to investigate when the Prime Minister is potentially overstepping his role and responsibility with a pattern of behaviour to muzzle anyone who would criticize, putting partisan goals ahead of the responsibility and the structure of the nation and, of course, covering up what's really going on and hiding the truth from Canadians.

The motion is to hear from these witnesses, to investigate these serious allegations and to protect and preserve Canada's democracy. I am pleading with the members of this committee to vote in favour of the motion.

Thank you.

• (1315)

The Chair: Thank you, MP Alleslev.

We will now move to MP Caron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Thank you.

All this is necessary because David Mulrone, the former Canadian ambassador to China, received a call, not from a regular employee of Global Affairs Canada, but from the assistant deputy minister for Asia-Pacific at the department. The assistant deputy minister asked him the following:

[*English*]

“In this time of high tension and in an election environment, we all need to be very, very careful.”

[*Translation*]

He said that he made the call at the behest of the Prime Minister's Office. At this time, the PMO and the Prime Minister deny making the request. Someone is lying in this case, and the consequences are quite serious for our parliamentary system.

Is Mr. Mulrone lying? I don't think so.

Did Mr. Thoppil lie when he said that the Prime Minister's Office asked him to contact Mr. Mulrone? In addition, someone else in the Prime Minister's Office reportedly contacted Guy Saint-Jacques, another former Canadian ambassador to China.

I don't think that Mr. Thoppil lied. He had no reason to do so.

As assistant deputy minister, he is experienced enough to distinguish between partisan meddling and a request from the Prime Minister's Office. At this point, I believe that, to get to the bottom of the matter and find out the truth, we must hear from the witnesses named in the motion. Ms. Alleslev provided the rationale for our request. However, I believe that we must determine to what extent, in terms of public comments, the Prime Minister's Office can ask its public service to work with private citizens who have expertise in the matter.

These people have the right to make public comments, and they do so by drawing on their expertise. Asking them to speak carefully and to understand that they and Canada are acting in the best interests of the country by speaking with one voice constitutes an excessive and deliberate violation. If the Prime Minister's Office did indeed contact these former ambassadors, I think that this raises serious issues in terms of how we deal with the relationship between the Prime Minister's Office and the public service and how the Prime Minister's Office deals with private citizens.

To this end, I urge my Liberal colleagues on the committee to call this meeting and the aforementioned witnesses so that we can understand the entire situation and find out who is and who isn't telling the truth in this case. Based on the current information, if I consider the simplest explanation, I'd say that Mr. Mulrone and Mr. Saint-Jacques felt pressured to align their views with the government's perspective.

When he reported that he made the phone call at the behest of the Prime Minister's Office, the assistant deputy minister in question had no reason to lie. If the request did indeed come from the Prime Minister's Office, we must know who made the request and why, and we must ensure that this type of action won't be taken again. Only transparency and a public review by the committee will make this possible.

I urge the Liberal members of the committee to accept and adopt this motion. We want to get to the bottom of the matter, not only for the sake of democracy and freedom of expression, but also to know the full story.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

We'll now have MP Oliphant, please.

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the committee members on both sides for being here and for exercising both their privilege and their responsibility as parliamentarians. It really is a tremendous privilege to be a member of Parliament. It allows us to engage in issues and engage in conversation and engage in matters that are on the minds of Canadians every day. It is also a tremendous responsibility, and we bear that responsibility, I think, because our privilege is so great.

When I received the notice of this meeting and the request that had been made, I welcomed that. It's part of our privilege as members of Parliament that if any four of us request a meeting like this, it is incumbent upon us to give full and due consideration to that request. That's what we are doing, but that also comes with tremendous responsibility. Dispassionately, when I saw the notice of motion, I prepared my remarks, but I'm actually leaving them for a moment because I think that the responsibility we have is far greater than to score political points.

I am very distressed—actually more distressed than I was when I simply read the notice of motion—at the tone, at the idea and at the allegations that are being cast about by members of the opposition. I say that advisedly, because I've been on the opposition side and I've been on the government side and I know what opposition members do, because I have done it myself. But there are times in politics, there are times in public policy, there are times in our Canadian shared life when we let some of that go and we actually think primarily, as the government has been doing since December, about two Canadians who are wrongfully and arbitrarily held in detention in China in conditions that have been horrendous and belittling and that have demanded tremendous courage from both Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. I have talked to their family members, and we've had consular visits, and there should be nothing more on our minds right now than ensuring their safety and considering their well-being.

We have lives in the balance and we also have livelihoods in the balance, and those have to do with farmers and exporters of Canadian goods that are also being arbitrarily detained. That means we put aside trying to gain political points and trying to make specious arguments for the sake of some gain. I am well known for not having always been in favour of things that our government has done, and I have been quite free to vote against our government. There are times, whether you are in opposition or in government, when you rally together and offer constructive, important conversation and ideas to make sure that we are doing the right thing.

This government consults. This government engages. On every issue we do those things. On an issue like our current very tense and fragile relationship with China, particularly when lives are hanging in the balance, we consult with everybody. We would open the door. This government—I am speaking as a parliamentary secretary now—would open the door to all opposition parties and independent members to offer constructive, helpful ways to negotiate in a very, very difficult situation. We've been doing that with patience. We've been doing that with firmness. I think our foreign affairs minister has a spine of steel as she engages with all these partners in what is a very complex situation. Part of that is ensuring that our professional public servants are also engaged not only with the government but also with civil society, engaged with everyone who is an opinion leader, to make sure that we have an informed public discussion about key foreign issues.

• (1320)

The issue around China—and there are several issues around China—is no exception. Our very professional foreign service has regular meetings with the key people in government responsible for public policy with respect to China. That obviously engages elected officials from time to time. It obviously engages their staff from time

to time, including the Prime Minister's Office. Those are important conversations that happen inside the government, and then we go outside the government to engage civil society, too, to ensure that we are not speaking with one voice but speaking with an informed voice. That's what this government is committed to doing.

Global Affairs Canada engages with people outside government all the time. They do that to ensure there is an informed discussion—not one voice but an informed discussion.

The public service issued a statement last week and I want to quote it so that it is on record. The media has already paid attention to it. This comes from Global Affairs Canada and I will just add my own comment. This is a very distinguished public servant, continuing in an extremely important position in Toronto. He said:

The call with Mr. Mulroney was made with this intention....

We welcome the views and advice of informed Canadians such as Mr. Mulroney on these complex issues and regret that this message was not clearly communicated. There was no intention, nor was there any instruction from anyone, including the PMO, that Mr. Mulroney clear his public comments with the government.

Let me be very clear. He said there was no instruction from anyone, including the Prime Minister's Office, that Mr. Mulroney clear his public comments with the government. The public service in Canada is an extremely professional and distinguished public service. They've been clear that the current assistant deputy minister was not acting under the direction of anyone when he made these phone calls.

Our government has the utmost respect for these two former ambassadors to China. We would never attempt to limit their right to speak freely. That doesn't mean we won't engage with them to ensure that we have a Canadian constructive discussion about important issues when lives are at stake.

For me, personally, it is absolutely our responsibility to come here to deal with a motion that is in order, and it is our responsibility to ensure that politics do not get in the way of doing the important work of being government. Whether it's the legislative branch or the executive branch, we share that responsibility together and it's given to us and we hold it in an earthen vessel and we do it the best we can. We should not be wasting public resources to drive down avenues that simply will not help save lives and there is no story there.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1325)

The Chair: Thank you.

Next I have MP Wrzesnewskyj, please.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Colleagues, we often have different points of view in our legislature. However, I know that I speak on behalf of all of us when I express our united, heartfelt support for the two Michaels—Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor—and their families. The fortitude they've displayed while unjustly incarcerated in harsh circumstances is a testament to their values and courage.

Colleagues, during our last major study in this committee on the threats to liberal democracy, we repeatedly heard from renowned international experts and academics that Canada is a shining example to the world in its steadfastness and conduct. At a time when populists have attacked the fifth estate—the free media—our Prime Minister, in public meetings in Canada, when tough questions are asked and there's been hostility towards the media from members of the public, has come to the defence of the media's right to ask these tough questions. Yesterday in Vancouver, when the media asked about calls made to former Canadian ambassadors to China, the Prime Minister was clear. He confirmed that the PMO did not direct that these experts be pressured, as has been previously confirmed by our foreign minister Chrystia Freeland.

A hallmark of our government is our strong belief in consultations and speaking with experts. In her opening remarks MP Alleslev spoke repeatedly of muzzling. We had a previous government that often attempted to muzzle experts and scientists, because of its ideologically driven denial of climate change. It was the previous Harper government that not only muzzled experts and scientists, but also attempted to prevent our gathering of data on such important issues as the multicultural nature of our society by cancelling the long-form census, by cancelling our very ability to gather information and for the public to access information.

Our government believes in reaching out, in broad consultations, and not just within Canada but also internationally, especially with our allies in countries that share our liberal democratic values. That's why we've had such great international successes on difficult files, landing free trade agreement after free trade agreement—something the previous government attempted and could not achieve. It just couldn't bring these across the finishing line. Today we're the only G7 country with free trade agreements with every other G7 country. Why? It is because of broad consultations and patient negotiations. We're also a respected member in the Americas on the difficult Venezuelan crisis. I'd like to thank the tremendous consultative work and legal research done by human rights champion Irwin Cotler.

Colleagues, we believe that Canadians will be safer and more prosperous if more of the world shared our values. It's foundational to our foreign policy approach. During this time of geopolitical crisis, when the rules-based international order and the principle of the sanctity of international borders is being fundamentally undermined by Russia's military invasion and annexation of Ukraine's territory, we stand steadfast in our support of Ukraine, lifting the previous government's prohibition on the supply of lethal defensive weapons.

We've not only championed an international rules-based order; we've championed individual rights, the rights of women and girls. We've appointed an ambassador for women, peace and security to champion these rights and to help bring about peace and security in difficult places globally.

Let me conclude by thanking all of the experts who've provided us with invaluable insights on difficult global files, and all of our international allies who've stood with us and spoken out against Beijing's unjust incarceration of our two Canadians.

Chair, we will not be supporting this motion. Thank you.

● (1330)

The Chair: Thank you.

Next is MP Weir, please.

Mr. Erin Weir (Regina—Lewvan, CCF): Mr. Chair, I'd like to begin by thanking you and all members of the committee for enabling me to participate in today's meeting. The reason I want to participate is that China's market has been closed to Canadian canola seed. Notwithstanding the fact that the wheat sheaf continues to be Saskatchewan's provincial symbol, wheat has been surpassed by canola as our most important crop and China has emerged as the most important customer for our canola exports.

My appeal to the committee would be that, to the extent that it decides to undertake a study of Canada-China diplomatic relations, the study not simply focus on the inner workings of our foreign service, but rather try to focus on the practical consequences of that diplomatic relationship for prairie farmers and other Canadians.

Mr. Chair, I think what we need to keep in mind at today's meeting is, first and foremost, the Canadians being held hostage in China, but also the prairie farmers whose livelihoods are being held hostage to this unrelated diplomatic tiff.

Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Weir.

We'll have MP Paul-Hus, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The statement by Mr. Oliphant and Mr. Wrzesnewszkyj shows us that our Liberal colleagues are living in denial and that the Prime Minister is also living in denial. We're in a very bad old film that's starting to get worn out. Let's recall the beginning of the SNC-Lavalin case, when we talked about political involvement in the justice system. From the start, the Prime Minister said that his cabinet had never had any influence. After holding many meetings, the justice and human rights committee uncovered a great deal of information.

Today, we're faced with a new situation. We can all agree that this is a totally different type of situation. However, the situation is cause for concern. As in the other case, the Prime Minister said yesterday that his office had never issued the order, and so on. He's using the exact same words. The situation is different, but the principle and the approach are the same. Denial is the way to go. With the SNC-Lavalin and Jody Wilson-Raybould case, we could see what was happening. Another situation arose where the Prime Minister, who loves to blame others, found a scapegoat in Vice-Admiral Norman.

During the first cabinet discussions, after the 2015 election, the decision was made to cancel the contract for the *Asterix* ship. However, when the information became available, instead of taking responsibility for his intention to cancel the contract, which would harm the Davie shipyard, the Prime Minister found a scapegoat in Vice-Admiral Norman. The vice-admiral paid the price for the whole situation.

Today, the issue involves former ambassadors, career diplomats, professionals who are well aware of the need to be careful. These people know very well that the lives of the two Canadian hostages held in China are at stake. The Prime Minister's Office is telling former ambassadors and career diplomats what to do, while Mr. McCallum has made one mistake after another as ambassador and has caused many issues. He even spoke recently, in an interview with a Chinese media outlet, of the need to be careful because the situation could affect the Liberals' re-election in Canada. On that note, I want to remind you that we sent a letter to the director of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service requesting an audit on this matter.

We're talking about a range of situations involving the Prime Minister and, once again, the committee members who refuse to get to the bottom of the matter. Put yourself in the shoes of the Canadian diplomatic corps. We're here at the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, which ensures that Canada's foreign affairs run smoothly. I'm pleased to be participating in this committee today. Our colleagues make fine statements, introduce the concept of constructive discussions, and so on. However, what happens when we muzzle former ambassadors, professionals who know how things work and who, unlike others, can help Canada resolve the situation?

Canada is having problems with China, but this Prime Minister isn't doing anything to improve the situation. Instead, our experts, who are probably in a better position to resolve the situation than he is, are being muzzled. I'm very disappointed to see that the Liberals refuse to go further and get to the bottom of the matter. I think that this would have been a great opportunity to show Canadians that the government can do things the right way. However, it's the government's decision, and Canadians will suffer the consequences.

Thank you.

•(1335)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Next is MP Barrett, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

We went through quite the panel there, starting with the parliamentary secretary and then moving across, with the parliamentary secretary not wanting to play politics and then a Liberal member wanting to relitigate the 2015 election campaign. If anyone is playing politics, it's these Liberal members, who now want to hide behind the horrible and unlawful detention of the two Michaels, the two Canadians held in China. We should rise above politics at a time like this and come together.

Simply appointing an ambassador was something these Liberals failed to do. They failed to pick up the phone, as we suggested to the Prime Minister very early on, and call the Chinese. Now, at this point, the Chinese won't return our phone calls.

If there is nothing to hide and everything is above board, then wouldn't it stand to reason that there be an investigation? If the Liberal government is such a champion of the media, why, at a press

freedom conference, did all of the accredited media refuse to attend a scrum with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister Freeland? That was because she tried to bar credentialed Canadian media from attending.

We have a Prime Minister who has said that *The Globe and Mail* makes stuff up, that they're lying. We've heard him say that twice now. We have a Prime Minister telling us not to believe Canadian media, and we have that same Prime Minister telling us not to believe the Canadian public service.

We have this release, after the fact—and I hear snickers from one of the Liberal staff over there—but I take it very seriously and I'd encourage your staff to take it seriously as well because—

•(1340)

Mr. Robert Oliphant: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, we know that in the parliamentary rules, it is inappropriate to raise comments about anyone else in the room other than those sitting at this table. I know the member is relatively new, but I would ask the chair to please advise him that it is not an appropriate parliamentary thing to do at a standing committee of the House of Commons.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Oliphant.

MP Barrett, could we contain the observations to people who are actually seated at the table?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Certainly, Mr. Chair. I'd encourage the chair to turn an ear to make sure there isn't any conduct that is out of order in the room.

The Chair: I will do so.

Mr. Michael Barrett: In my tenure, since being elected in December, I have seen the most unbelievable cascade of scandals and cover-ups in my lifetime under this Prime Minister and PMO. There is certainly no snickering about that.

I was noting that the Prime Minister was saying that we not believe the Canadian public service. After the fact we get a denial—a tweet, a press release or what have you—but that's not what was said. We have two independent former career diplomats, ambassadors, telling us that's what happened, that they received a call from the assistant deputy minister who told them that the instructions were from the PMO. Was he lying? Is the Prime Minister saying that the ADM was lying?

This is part of that pattern. We were told that the former attorney general, Jody Wilson-Raybould, was lying. We were told that there was nothing to see, but somehow that ended up with the chief public servant, Michael Wernick, resigning in disgrace, and the Prime Minister's principal secretary resigning in disgrace. Two cabinet ministers resigned and were then kicked out of the Liberal caucus, but the Prime Minister said that the story in *The Globe and Mail* was false.

I will have a hard time believing this Liberal government trusts the media. I think it's very much encouraging the opposite with its undermining of the freedom of the press, undermining free speech by asking former ambassadors to run their comments through the PMO. It's certainly very troubling.

The parliamentary secretary mentioned I was elected recently. Yes, I had a front-row seat at the justice committee for the train wreck that was the SNC-Lavalin scandal. I watched your Liberal colleagues try to slam the door as many times as they could on witnesses: “No, we don't want to hear from the key players in that scandal.”

What we've heard is that this motion on the key players in what is likely another scandal of this Liberal Prime Minister and Liberal government won't be supported. No, we wouldn't want to shine any sunlight on that, certainly.

You'll have to excuse me, MP Oliphant, if I don't—

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Mr. Chair, I'd again ask that you enforce decorum and remind the members that all comments are meant to be directed to you and not directly across the aisle to the other side.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

You can proceed with your comments.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Through you to MP Oliphant, I would like to encourage that we not hear any lessons from a scandal-plagued Liberal, a parliamentary secretary, on a file that has been so badly mismanaged that the hand-picked former Liberal cabinet minister, John McCallum, is an international embarrassment. We have never seen the likes of this before.

Through you, Mr. Chair, to Mr. Oliphant, I find it laughable that he says that this is not something that these Liberals are playing politics with. It's exactly what you're doing as you hide behind the two Michaels, hide behind the unlawful detention of these two men, when the Prime Minister couldn't pick up the phone and the Prime Minister wouldn't appoint an ambassador. Then we have his former disgraced ambassador suggesting that perhaps we have foreign actors mix it up, get involved in the election and see if we can't work something out.

We have well-respected former ambassadors who are being told that it would be appreciated if their constructive comments be run through the PMO first, but we're not to believe that. We're only to believe the Prime Minister. We're not to believe The Globe and Mail. We're not to believe these former ambassadors. We're not to believe this public servant, the ADM. We're not to believe people like Vice-Admiral Mark Norman.

When Vice-Admiral Mark Norman had something to say, what did the government do? These Liberals spent tax dollars to silence him with a settlement and a non-disclosure agreement so that we never hear from him. It's just like the partial waiver, the failure to give transparency in the SNC-Lavalin scandal. We'll never hear from the former attorney general, Jody Wilson-Raybould, on the full details of what happened.

It's not surprising but certainly disappointing that we can't rise above politics, Mr. Chair, as the parliamentary secretary would suggest that we do, and get to the bottom of this and give Canadians the confidence that they need to have in their public servants and in their former ambassadors. In the SNC-Lavalin scandal, I remember Liberals on the justice committee saying there were unnamed sources in The Globe and Mail article and asking who could take a

media story seriously if it used unnamed sources. The sources are named in this article.

Frankly, it was troubling then that the Liberals wanted the media to name their sources, but these folks spoke on the record. Mr. Mulroney and Mr. Saint-Jacques spoke on the record. Are we not to take them at their word? The only person that the Liberals want us to take at his word is the Prime Minister. Frankly, Mr. Chair, he has a serious credibility problem.

One of the Liberals on the committee here wanted to talk about muzzled scientists. Early in the 42nd Parliament there was a report tabled, and in that report I believe the number was 1,500 interviews given by government scientists in the 12 months preceding the 2015 election, but what it also said was that, when the Liberals were elected, there were no changes to the rules on media availabilities and media interviews offered by public servants.

It's really unfortunate that they've said that they're not going to support the motion, but I do encourage them to reconsider because Canadians deserve to know.

• (1345)

Canadians and the Conservatives trust the veracity of what has been said. We have confidence in the public service. We think it's time to let a little sunshine in so that we can disinfect the situation. Canadians don't need another scandal. They need the truth, and that's why I'll be voting in favour of the study.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Barrett.

Next is MP Alleslev, please.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Thank you very much. I think this has been a very important conversation for Canadians to hear. It has clearly shown the perspectives of the Liberals on this committee, and I would argue that they are a reflection of the government.

For the statement to be made that our calling this meeting was to score political points, that is actually insulting, among other things. We have absolutely risen above politics in this. It is our job, as members of Parliament, to ensure that we hold the government to account, that we protect freedom of speech, that we protect the non-partisan nature of our public service, that this country's China policy is the absolute best one to address the serious situation we find ourselves in, and that we uphold the foundations and the principles of the institution of Parliament and governance.

To say that these individuals were consulted—the two former diplomats—that they were being asked for their opinion is insulting to them. To say that they are unable, as senior long-serving former public servants, diplomats, to understand the difference between invoking “The PMO has said that we need to look at this”, “We are looking at an upcoming election”, “We need to be speaking with one voice”....

Let's be clear. These public servants know the difference between someone calling them to consult and ask for their opinion on something, and being given pretty much clear direction by invoking the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister's Office and words like "election" and "speak with one voice". Either those two former diplomats are not being honest in what they said or the government is trying to tell you—and the Liberals at this committee—that there's nothing to see here, when in fact it is incredibly egregious that we would have a non-partisan public servant reach out to two former diplomats and try to restrict them from informing Canadians.

We also heard that calling for this investigation is egregious because we are in some way diminishing the severity of two Michaels being wrongfully imprisoned in China or the economic impact of the hardships that the restriction on exports to China is placing on us. In no way are we undermining or detracting from the severity. In fact, by asking for this investigation we are overwhelmingly putting forth the severity of the situation. Clearly, what the government has been doing for the last seven months hasn't worked. The relationship with China is deteriorating. The punishments and the situation are escalating. We need to hear from former diplomats about what some of the possible options might be. What we're doing right now as a country is not working. It's taking us in the wrong direction. At the very least, we need to hear from these experts, now more than ever, to understand exactly how we're going to improve the situation and how we might actually be able to get two Michaels out of Chinese prison.

For this committee to make comments around the fact that we're not taking this seriously, that we're diminishing the severity of it by asking for an investigation because two former diplomats who might be able to give us some important information about how we can extricate ourselves or improve this situation with China are not allowed to speak, and that this Prime Minister, because his plan is the only plan, therefore needs to muzzle any critics of it, is in itself, frankly, undermining the severity of this situation.

• (1350)

Lastly, the Liberals on this committee would have us believe there's nothing to see here. I think my two colleagues on this side have made it very clear that from the SNC-Lavalin scandal, from the Norman affair, from all of the times we have found this government saying there is nothing to see here and no undue behaviour, these denials have all been blatantly false. This government, this Prime Minister, these unelected officials in the Prime Minister's Office have engaged in a pattern of behaviour that has silenced and attempted to muzzle any form of criticism and public debate, the very foundation of anything in a democracy.

If there is in fact nothing to see here, then an open and transparent public investigation to hear from all of those people who were involved would only be of benefit, and in the process, we might actually learn even more so that the government can make an even more informed decision about its China policy, whatever that might be.

I am obviously pleading with all of the members of the committee to re-evaluate their position, rise to the responsibility of the office they hold as members of Parliament, put the country first, put two Michaels who are wrongfully imprisoned in China first and vote in

favour of this investigation, rather than allowing themselves to compromise the country in favour of their party.

Thank you.

• (1355)

The Chair: Thank you.

Next is MP Caron, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: Thank you.

The role of a committee, when it isn't undertaking a study to further examine a given situation, is to ensure that the government remains accountable. In my eight and a half years as a member of Parliament, I've sat on various committees. I've noticed that some committees have forgotten this fundamental rule, particularly when it comes to the government, whether we're talking about the Conservatives in 2011 and 2015 or the Liberals now.

Based on the Liberals' comments that I've heard, since the Prime Minister's Office issued an official letter denying that the assistant deputy minister was instructed to contact the two former diplomats, we should simply accept the situation and not look any further, given that the Prime Minister's Office is obviously telling the truth. By sending us this letter, the Prime Minister's Office is saying that either these former diplomats—and we're not talking about just one, but two former diplomats who described the same situation—are lying or exaggerating the seriousness of the situation, or that the assistant deputy minister lied to the two former diplomats when he told them that he was calling on behalf or at the behest of the Prime Minister's Office.

In any case, the situation is serious. Either a senior government official, at the behest of the Prime Minister's Office, contacted former diplomats to tell them that they should perhaps tone down their comments and align their statements because it would be more prudent to do so from an electoral standpoint, or these people claimed that this occurred, which would also be an issue. I'm trying to understand why the government members aren't more willing, on behalf of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, to conduct a more in-depth study of this highly problematic situation. Are we simply going to say that a letter of intent from the Prime Minister's Office states that this wasn't really the goal, that there were misinterpretations and that we, as a committee, will refuse to conduct a more in-depth study of the situation? That doesn't make any sense.

I think that the government members must understand their role in this committee. This isn't the House of Commons, and we have the right to be called by our last names because, in theory, we don't represent any constituencies or political parties. We must finally realize that we're working for the citizens of this country. We have a duty, as the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, to study an ethically problematic situation that has been reported in the media and for which we don't currently have a satisfactory solution.

Given all these factors, the government members of this committee should take their responsibilities seriously and agree to hear from these people in order to get to the bottom of the matter. I'm not suggesting that these people have been intimidated. However, I would say that they've at least been subjected to undue pressure from the Prime Minister's Office. If this has indeed occurred, the Prime Minister's Office must understand that the situation is unacceptable. It's not enough to say that people on the other side didn't really understand the goal.

I want to say one last time that the government members must understand the situation and their role in the committee, which is to ensure that their government remains accountable. If they fail to do so, we won't have any power to ensure accountability on our side.

Thank you.

●(1400)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Caron.

[*English*]

At this point we are going to call the question.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: I'd like a recorded vote.

The Chair: We'll do a recorded vote.

(Motion negated: nays 5; yeas 4)

The Chair: At this point, because we have some housekeeping to do, I'm going to suspend and we're going to go in camera so that we can deal with the budgets, as discussed previously.

We shall suspend.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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