



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

PACP • NUMBER 140 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, May 30, 2019

—
Chair

The Honourable Kevin Sorenson

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Thursday, May 30, 2019

• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. This is meeting number 140 of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts for Thursday, May 30, 2019.

I would like to remind colleagues and guests at this committee today that we are being televised, so please, if you wouldn't mind—especially those in the audience as well—could you mute your phones? It would cause less disruption. Thank you.

We're here today in consideration of report 1, “Call Centres”, of the 2019 spring reports of the Auditor General of Canada.

We're pleased this morning to welcome many guests. First of all, from the Office of the Auditor General, we have Mr. Sylvain Ricard, our interim Auditor General of Canada, and Jean Goulet, principal. From the Treasury Board Secretariat, we have Mr. Alex Benay, chief information officer of the Government of Canada. From the Department of Employment and Social Development, we have Graham Flack, deputy minister of employment and social development, and Ms. Leslie MacLean, senior associate deputy minister of employment and social development and chief operating officer for Service Canada.

From the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, we have Ms. Lori MacDonald, acting deputy minister, and Harpreet Kochhar, assistant deputy minister, operations. From the Department of Veterans Affairs, we have General Walter Natynczyk, deputy minister. I'm glad to see that you made it here and your driver got you here safe and sound. We also have Michel Doiron, assistant deputy minister, service delivery. Last, from Shared Services Canada, we have Paul Glover, president, and Raj Thuppal, assistant deputy minister, networks, security and digital services.

We have a number of people to hear from first, but the one we always like hearing from before everyone else is our Auditor General.

Mr. Ricard, please.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard (Interim Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for this opportunity to present the results of our recent audit report on call centres. Joining me today is Jean Goulet, the principal who was responsible for the audit.

In this audit, we looked at the call centres of three departments: Employment and Social Development Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and Veterans Affairs Canada. We also looked at whether the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat included call centres within the Government of Canada's service strategy and whether Shared Services Canada provided support to modernize call centres.

This audit is important because call centres are a key source of government information. This is especially true for people who are visually impaired, have intellectual or physical disabilities, do not have a computer or Internet access or the skills to use these technologies, or live in rural or remote regions and do not have high-speed Internet access or cannot easily get to a government office.

[Translation]

Canadians make millions of calls to the government every year to get the information they need to make time-sensitive, important decisions. For example, they may be calling to ensure that they receive benefits on time or to find out about the status of an application.

Overall, we found that getting through to government call centres took time and persistence. In fact, we found that half of the 16 million Canadians who tried to speak with an agent could not do so. Seven million callers were redirected to an automated system, were told to visit the website, or were disconnected. In addition, more than a million callers gave up waiting and hung up. And callers who did manage to get through to an agent sometimes had to wait up to a half an hour or longer.

[English]

We also found that service decisions were not driven by callers' needs. For example, departments did not offer callers the option of staying on the line or getting called back when an agent became available.

The way in which call centres set service standards was not relevant to Canadians, transparent or consistent. None of the call centres we audited had service standards on clients' likelihood of reaching an agent or on the accuracy of the answers they provided callers, and the call centre for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada did not have a standard on how long callers would have to wait to speak to an agent once they were in the queue. Without service standards, callers cannot know what level of service they can expect from call centres.

• (0850)

[Translation]

And the situation is unlikely to improve in the near future. The government's Clients First Service Strategy does not include call centres, though more than 25% of Canadians use the telephone to connect with the government. In addition, after five years of a call centre modernization project, Shared Services Canada has managed to upgrade only 8 of 221 call centres, and it has no plan for the remaining 213.

We made five recommendations. All organizations have agreed with all of them and have shared their action plans with us.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ricard.

[English]

We'll now move to Mr. Benay, the chief information officer of the Government of Canada, Treasury Board Secretariat.

Mr. Alex Benay (Chief Information Officer of the Government of Canada, Treasury Board Secretariat): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the invitation to appear before your committee. I'll begin with a few brief remarks and I'll be happy to take any questions you may have.

[Translation]

My name is Alex Benay. I'm the Chief Information Officer of Canada at the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat.

I am responsible for providing strategic direction and for the implementation of policies relating to service, information management, information technology, security, privacy and access to information across the federal government.

[English]

The finding in the Auditor General's most recent report identified opportunities where Treasury Board policy direction can be strengthened to better support improvements to call centres. The Auditor General made several recommendations that will help the Government of Canada fulfill its commitment to improve service delivery to Canadians.

Over the past few years, TBS has developed various policy instruments to help departments take a more client-centric approach to the design and delivery of services, including the development and publication of service standards. While we've made progress, we agree that there is still much work to be done.

[Translation]

I'm glad to say that we have already begun this work. Currently, the Treasury Board Secretariat is reviewing existing policy instruments, with the goal of identifying opportunities to strengthen policies to better support improved services through all service delivery channels, including call centres.

[English]

For example, we recently introduced a set of digital standards that will help guide departments and agencies in designing better services for Canadians. One of its key principles is to design and develop services with users in mind and to work with them to understand their needs and the problems we want to solve. While they may be called digital standards, they are, in fact, applicable to all the service delivery channels whether they are offered online, in person or by telephone.

In spring 2018, the government approved targeted amendments to the policy on the management of information technology and the policy on the management of information, setting the foundation for the long-term development of a comprehensive policy on service and digital for the Government of Canada.

[Translation]

This proposed policy will build on the client-centric principles of the current Policy on Service, and provide direction for the design and development of seamless, integrated services that meet the needs and expectations of the Canadian public.

[English]

We're also working on enhancing our existing guidance and tools to support the development and publication of clear and consistent client-centric service standards. Both the proposed new policy and its supporting directive and guidance will incorporate changes to ensure that government services have comprehensive and transparent client-centric standards, related targets and performance information for all service delivery channels in use, including call centres.

[Translation]

The Treasury Board Secretariat will continue to work with federal departments and agencies to ensure service standards for call centres are more consistent, meaningful and transparent to Canadians.

[English]

In closing, I look forward to your committee's report and recommendations on this important issue.

Thank you for your time, and I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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

We'll now move to Mr. Flack, deputy minister of employment and social development.

Welcome.

[Translation]

Mr. Graham Flack (Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Auditor General's report on call centres issued five recommendations, two of which were addressed to our department.

The first one states that we should review how we manage incoming calls to improve access to agents. The recommendation adds that the department should consider practices such as allowing callers to decide if they prefer to wait, use self-service options, or have the call centre call them back.

The second recommendation states that departments should set call centre service standards that are relevant to clients, and that we should consider client feedback in line with TBS Guidelines on Service Standards, as mentioned by Mr. Benay.

The recommendation adds that we should publish call centre service standards and performance results in a transparent and consistent way, and we should verify the results to confirm accuracy.

● (0855)

[English]

I will turn now to the first recommendation. There have been two limiters on our performance.

The first is outdated technology. Our legacy technology was limited in terms of having a hard cap on the number of people who could be put in the queue, which has resulted in callers being sent back to the interactive voice response system at peak times. It also didn't allow us to shift calls between our call centres to manage the load. You could have an individual who would be directed to one call centre, and once they were in that queue the technology did not allow us to shift them to one of our different call centres, which may have had agents available.

On this point, ESDC secured funding in budgets 2017 and 2019, which provided \$27.3 million to migrate ESDC's call centres from this outdated technology to a modernized telephone system. As a result, we are well on our way to addressing the issues and are currently in the middle of migrating the new call centre platform that was procured by Shared Services Canada. The new platform is called the "hosted contact centre solution", and it can provide the modern client-centric services Canadians should expect.

[Translation]

Over the last two years we have worked closely with Mr. Glover and his team at Shared Services Canada on the design, building and testing of the new technology.

We successfully migrated our Employer Contact Centre in October 2018, and we just migrated our Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security call centre on May 11th.

[English]

Two of our three call centres have successfully migrated to the new platform. For the employer contact centre, which was the first, they have had 100% accessibility to agents since early January. This means all callers are now able to access a queue to speak with our call centre agents.

Learning from those lessons, on May 11 we successfully migrated our second major set of call centres, that is, the CPP and OAS call centres. Again, we have near 100% accessibility since that migration has happened. Our employment insurance call centre will be migrated next. Extensive work is under way for this migration, which is planned for the fall of 2019.

The second limiter on our performance was a significant gap between the call demand volume and the funding for agents available to respond to those calls. Budgets 2016 and 2018 provided \$200 million over five years to increase the number of EI call centre agents. As a result, we have seen significant improvements in both our accessibility to agents and our service standard.

In terms of accessibility, to give a sense, in 2015-16—before those recent investments—our accessibility level was 31%. That has risen to 66% in the most recent year, and, as we indicated, after we have successfully migrated the EI centre to the new platform, we expect that to dramatically improve as it has in our other two centres.

In terms of wait-time service standards, in 2015-16, we were at 37% for EI. We are currently, in 2018-19, at 67%, and, as a comparison, for our CPP and OAS standard—and the standard is 80%—we have been tracking at 76% in the most recent year.

These improvements meant that we were able to increase the number of calls answered by agents from 3.4 million to 4.6 million annually. They also allowed us to reduce wait times to speak to an agent from an average of 14 minutes to seven minutes. While these improvements have been significant, and our average wait time is well below the 10-minute standard, we are not yet at our target of 80% of calls being answered within 10 minutes.

With respect to the other Auditor General recommendation impacting our department, ESDC has consulted with clients through multiple surveys to obtain their feedback. Overall, the feedback has been positive, with a majority of clients finding the wait time of under 10 minutes to be reasonable.

In our 2017-18 client experience survey, 82% of respondents said they were either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the overall quality of our services received through ESDC's specialized call centres. Currently the department is in the process of reviewing the preliminary results of the 2018-19 client experience survey, which will continue to track the performance of our specialized call centres and provide us valuable feedback on our performance from a user perspective.

With respect to the issue of verifying of results, we have high confidence in the accuracy of our results, given that the technology we use automatically tracks them. However, after the Auditor General's recommendation, we reviewed the data covered by the OAG, which consisted of more than 7.9 million calls from June 2018 to January 2019, and the review confirmed that our reporting results are extremely accurate, within plus or minus 0.05%.

● (0900)

[Translation]

Going forward, Employment and Social Development Canada, or ESDC, will enhance its publishing of call centre service standards and performance results through more frequent reporting. As well, ESDC will continue to set service standards that are relevant to clients, as encouraged by the Treasury Board Policy on Service.

We would now be happy to answer your questions.

[English]

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

We'll now turn to Ms. MacDonald, the acting deputy minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

Welcome back.

Ms. Lori MacDonald (Acting Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Mr. Chair, thank you for inviting me to address this committee once again.

Canada is an increasingly popular destination for people who want to move to or visit this country. Every year, IRCC interacts with millions of clients including applicants for electronic travel authorizations, visas, permanent residents, asylum, citizenship and passports. Over the last five years, we've seen a significant increase in the number of clients who are seeking support, both on the telephone and by email. In fact, the recent federal budget recognizes growing demand, allocating new funds for increasing the number of IRCC call centre agents.

As demand for our services continues to increase, we recognize the need to transform the way we work so we can serve clients faster and strengthen our immigration system for everyone. While the volume of applicants is growing across our business lines, so too are our clients' expectations of quick, streamlined and electronic services. This means we must communicate with them more clearly and more often and ensure that our processes are clear, efficient and easy for both applicants and our employees.

The Auditor General's report highlights three key concerns we must address: difficulty in reaching call centre agents, lengthy wait times before speaking to an agent, and a need for clear, client-focused service standards upon which to measure performance and results. The findings of this audit also confirm that we must deliver accessible, timely and quality service to ensure that the country remains globally competitive in attracting newcomers. Today I'd like to describe some of the changes we are making.

IRCC employees provide support to clients through three channels: telephone inquiries, email assistance through the online web form, and social media. In addition to these channels, the department is working to provide clients with enhanced self-service options online.

The client support centre plays a significant role in communicating with clients. Last fiscal year, its agents responded to over 1.6 million client inquiries by phone and email, an increase of more than 12% from the previous year.

To improve the call centre and overall client experience, we have taken a number of actions. For economic permanent resident programs, we are piloting a new callback feature to give clients who reach our telephone wait queue the option of having an agent call them back instead of having to wait on hold. We are testing this functionality with this client group before expanding the service to other programs. We have also improved self-service features through our interactive voice response telephone messaging. This makes it easier for callers to obtain general and case status information without having to speak to an agent.

Budget 2019 announced \$42.9 million over two years for IRCC to provide clients with better access to support when they need it. This funding will allow us to hire more call centre agents and expand some local Canadian office hours in 2019, and to expand hours of operations at the client support centre in 2020. As well, IRCC has lowered its email response time, from 31 business days in June 2017 to less than five business days as of March 2019. The additional funding received in budget 2019 will help to further reduce this email response time.

We know that to really address call volumes we need to address the root of the problem. One of the key reasons that people call and utilize ATIP processes is for information on their case status. We also receive many calls from people inquiring about the renewal of their permanent residence cards. We are making progress in reducing processing times in almost all of our permanent residence streams and have recently brought processing times for permanent residence cards down considerably. We anticipate that the progress we are making in these key areas will help reduce call volumes.

IRCC continues to look for new ways to improve the client experience and provide access to information. To provide clients with the information they need and to strengthen online access, the department has taken steps to make it easier for clients to navigate our website and to submit their online applications 24 hours a day.

Promoting self-service online for clients has been a priority. Our online help centre has over 1,100 questions and answers to top inquiries. We assure our web content is easy to use and understand, by writing in plain language at about a grade 8 reading level. We also optimize our web content to ensure it ranks high in search results, making it easier to find information. I think it's important to note as well that, before we launch new tools on our web templates, we do usability testing with people outside our departments and with clients.

● (0905)

Tracking the progress of case information is a high priority for many of our clients. To this end, we are testing new ways to better display case status information, to communicate processing times and to allow clients to track the progress of their applications. Our overall goal is to help clients with simple inquiries to access the information they need online, reduce their need to speak to an agent and, therefore, give agents a greater ability to focus on more complex cases.

IRCC is also working to finalize and publish service standards for its client support centre in our support services to make the department more accountable in its actions.

Before closing, allow me to note our actions to strengthen our ability to address a new and rapidly growing development: the substantial increase of social media inquiries. In 2018, IRCC answered more than 130,000 social media general inquiries, seven times the total of the previous year and something we expect to continue to increase.

To help us manage these increasing volumes on social media, last fall we launched Quaid, a social media chatbot that responds to clients' general questions about immigration and citizenship. Quaid uses artificial intelligence to answer general questions from our clients on Facebook Messenger and continues to learn as it engages with people. Although this project is in its early stages, we expect Quaid will become more sophisticated with time and will improve our ability to interact with our clients.

Providing excellent client service is imperative so that Canada continues to remain globally competitive to attract visitors, students, skilled workers and new Canadians, the people who directly contribute to our overall economic, cultural and social prosperity. We will continue to act on our vision to transform how we interact with clients and provide the best possible support in the long term.

I'm happy to take any questions. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. MacDonald.

We'll now turn to General Natynczyk, the deputy minister for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

General (Retired) Walter Natynczyk (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear today to address ways to improve our services to our veterans.

Our mission at Veterans Affairs is to enable the well-being of our veterans and their families, as well as commemorating the service and the sacrifice of all those who wore the uniform of Canada's armed forces.

[Translation]

As such, we appreciate the attention the Office of the Auditor General has brought to the services that we provide.

[English]

The bottom line up front is that the department accepts all of the recommendations and will develop a comprehensive action plan to implement all of the recommendations as soon as contracting and technology will allow. We appreciate how important it is for veterans to be able to communicate with the department in the ways and means they choose. We provide a broad range of options. They may choose a toll-free telephone service access through our website, through web-based My VAC Account secure messaging, over social media or by visiting in person any one of our 38 offices across the country.

[Translation]

It is gratifying to see the number of veterans, both young and more experienced, connecting with the department through the online services offered on 'My VAC Account'. Through it, veterans can apply online for benefits and services, upload documents to complete

their applications, track the status of their applications, view summaries of their benefits, and connect directly and securely with staff.

•(0910)

[English]

My VAC Account, which is our online web service, provided service for over 91,000 veteran users as of this past April, including serving members and veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces, veterans of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and all of their family members. Monthly traffic is about 160,000 log-ins and continues to grow month over month.

Still, our national contact service network remains an important means for many of our veteran clients to communicate with the department. Our latest results show that 79% of calls are answered by an agent and that the average wait time for our clients is about five minutes. Clearly there is room for improvement, and we are committed to doing so.

[Translation]

Turning to service standards, it should be noted that the department regularly reviews our objectives to understand what we're doing right, and where we need to improve. Our 2017 External Service Standard Review found that our service standards were appropriate. Therefore the tasks at hand are to up our game, focus on improving processes, and reduce turnaround times.

[English]

We agree with the recommendations on service standards in the Auditor General's report and will seek veteran feedback when planning any future changes to service standards. In the near term, we are pursuing an approach to employ post-phone call survey responses to measure veteran satisfaction.

The Auditor General's report found that we did not always consider the needs of our veteran clients when making decisions about call centre services. One specific example is with respect to teletype service. When the department stopped offering a teletypewriter service for the hearing disabled, there was no indication from our records as to the rationale for this cut in service, nor whether there was consultation with veterans. This is not appropriate service.

As such, we are reversing the decision to ensure that all veterans, regardless of their injuries, can access our call services. We are also committed to ensuring that veterans with hearing difficulties can communicate with the national contact centre network.

With this goal in mind, we are extending our teletypewriter services that are currently in place for the veterans who are in crisis but with hearing difficulties to all the types of the calls handled by our call centre. We have identified a teletypewriter solution that seamlessly integrates with our current suite of equipment and will implement it in partnership with Shared Services Canada by the end of March 2020 or sooner, if at all possible.

[Translation]

Going forward, we also commit to considering the input of those we serve when making any plans that will affect veterans.

[English]

Members of the committee, Veterans Affairs Canada's mission is to support the well-being of our veterans. We are committed to improving our performance to be veteran-centric and strive for service excellence.

I thank the Office of the Auditor General for so clearly showing us how we could better serve our veterans and their families. Veterans Affairs Canada has already embarked on addressing all the recommendations in the report.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

We'll now move to the opening statement from Mr. Paul Glover, president of Shared Services Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Paul Glover (President, Shared Services Canada): Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to speak to the committee and answer your questions concerning the Auditor General's report focused on call centres.

[English]

As I'm sure you are aware, Shared Services delivers a wide range of IT services to departments that support the delivery of government programs and services, including call centres.

Since arriving at Shared Services, I've had the pleasure and opportunity to meet with employees from across the country who are doing amazing work delivering those services. Through their hard work, we've been making important progress.

Over the last number of years, we've closed over 200 outdated data centres and opened three new, large, state-of-the-art ones that are more efficient, more reliable and more secure. These modern, enterprise data centres provide our clients with modern IT infrastructure that improves their services and program delivery.

Just last month, Shared Services Canada announced a renewed agreement between us and Microsoft Canada on a new suite of modern digital communication tools for public service. Through this agreement, we will provide over 400,000 federal public servants in over 100 departments with a suite of Office 365 tools that will enable them to deliver timely and citizen-centred services to Canadians.

We're putting a renewed focus on strengthening our IT infrastructure to ensure that it is secure and reliable and that it responds to the needs of Canadians. These initiatives will help improve the services we provide to departments, including the topic we're here to discuss today.

We acknowledge, as the Auditor General reported, that Shared Services is responsible for providing and maintaining the IT infrastructure, including the call centres for all 221 federal departments. This includes call centres internal to government and those that service the public.

Through the hosted contact call centre project, we are making critical citizen-facing call centres more flexible and accessible. We are currently migrating eight contact call centres that make up nearly 50% of all the calls the Government of Canada receives. Seven out of these eight contact call centres have been successfully migrated, and we're continuing to work with the departments to ensure that the service is working for them and for the people who call them.

Turning to the Auditor General's report, we accept the recommendation in the report, and I am pleased to say that we are already hard at work on the items noted in the report. Allow me to provide a few updates.

We agree with the Auditor General's recommendation that Shared Services Canada should consult with the Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada to ensure that our call centre modernization initiative is in line with the secretariat's government-wide approach to services. Supported by a third party assessment of the hosted contact call centre solution, we determined that not all of the 221 call centres require a full-featured, high-availability system that can handle sensitive information. In short, different call centres have different requirements. That is why we've revised our strategy, from implementing a single solution that will address all contact call centre requirements to one that ensures a best-fit solution in terms of cost and requirements.

The assessment concluded that the hosted contact call centre solution would meet the requirements for the government's most complex contact centres. The Canada Revenue Agency and the Employment and Social Development Canada call centres were chosen to migrate first, as they are the most complex public-facing contact centres and the systems most urgently in need of attention.

To ensure that moving forward we have a clear understanding of the requirements for the remaining call centres, we are working with our partners to provide information such as call volume as well as the security profile of the information they are exchanging with Canadians. This is an important part of our next steps, to help us understand which systems will be right for which call centres and to ensure we provision the appropriate technology. We expect to have all of this data collected by the end of June.

At the same time, we are assessing options to modernize centres that are running on older technologies or with contracts that are expiring in the next few months. The updated plan will take into consideration contract end dates, end-of-life technology and departmental readiness to ensure that migrations are prioritized appropriately and executed successfully.

We are working with federal organizations to support existing services while modern solutions are being implemented. We are also working with departments to update their inventory for the remaining contact call centres and their requirements to identify the most cost-effective solutions for modernization. We are well on track to deliver this strategy by next month.

By the fall, our goal is to have established a prioritized list of contact call centres to be modernized based on the factors I have explained today such as the age of the centres, the number of outages, the call volumes and the sensitivity of the information they deal with.

Our goal is to provide technology supporting improved customer response, improved experiences and more reliability, including for those with accessibility requirements.

• (0915)

This concludes my opening statement.

[*Translation*]

I would now be happy to take questions from the members of the committee.

Thank you.

[*English*]

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

We're going to move into questions very quickly.

I would remind our guests and our committee that we are going to have about 55 minutes of questioning. We have some other business at the tail end of this meeting that we must address.

Without further ado, we'll move to Mr. Arseneault.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Arseneault, you have the floor for five minutes.

• (0920)

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Mr. Chair, you are strict. It's as though I were sitting in front of the biggest and most appetizing buffet on the planet and I only have five minutes to choose what I want to eat!

I will begin with the representatives of the Auditor General's Office.

Mr. Ricard, we see each other often and I always ask you one question. This time, right off the top, I will ask you whether, before preparing this report, you did any prior comparative studies.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: No, not in connection with this audit.

Mr. René Arseneault: Whenever I ask you that, the answer is no, and I understand that.

I'm going to make an analogy. Let's say one of my children got a mark of 70% on his report card. I would not be all that satisfied, but if, two months after having punished him—and don't worry, I don't do that—I learned that the class average was 60%, I would have another perspective.

Would there be a way, for future reports, of making comparisons with similar countries, without allocating considerable human or financial resources to this? Would that be possible?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Sometimes we make such comparisons, but not always. The benchmark is the service standard established by the government. In this case, many sectors do not have a service standard.

Mr. René Arseneault: I understand, but the government's standard may not lend itself to comparisons.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Yes, absolutely, but that would be another verification that would have to be done. That's not what we checked.

Mr. René Arseneault: All right.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I take note of what you just mentioned.

Mr. René Arseneault: I'm planting a seed in the garden. I like to know how things are going elsewhere to see if we really are all that late and careless.

According to the Auditor General's report, Veterans Affairs Canada is the champion for call centres. Again, the criticism was made that we should have a standard that may not be higher, but that compares to... In fact, I'm not sure what we're up against. Five minutes to answer the calls, I think that's great in 2019.

According to the figures provided in the tables in your report, I understand that 32% of callers hang up in 30 seconds. I wonder what advice these people could give us or the consultation we could conduct to determine the standard that should apply to veterans' calls, for example.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Again, I understand the point you're making. It can always be useful to have points of comparison. In this case, for us, the point of comparison was the service standard, and there was none. There is a Treasury Board requirement that this is essential to be able to manage the service being provided and to be transparent to callers, so that they know what they can expect.

Mr. René Arseneault: All right, but I think that, as Canadians, we are in a void. When we compare ourselves, most of the time, we console ourselves. Anyway, that's a criticism I'm making in passing.

I only have five minutes and that's too little.

Ms. MacDonald, according to the Auditor General's report, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada continues to be the department that is lagging a little behind and whose service seems the least efficient and most frustrating for people. We are talking about a 30-minute wait time. It may seem like a long time, but if someone has to take their car to get to a service centre, if there is one in their area, it takes more than 30 minutes, of course.

How did we get here? Before you answer me, I will draw a parallel with paragraph 1.37 of the auditor's report. It appears that the accumulation of delays is due to the budget cuts made by the previous government in 2012. Is this really the case? Explain to me how delays are accumulating at such an alarming rate.

[English]

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Over the past seven years there has been a number of factors that have impacted our call rate at the call centre. Certainly, there were cuts in 2012. There was reorganization. There were significant issues from a technology perspective, and on top of that, we had dramatically increasing volume rates. As programs change, the volume of calls and answer rates go up. Introducing new programs into the system, on top of the volume of clients coming into the country, has an impact on our call rate.

As a result of that, we've tried to break that down and deconstruct it in terms of what issues are most impacting us, what people are calling about and how we manage the volume beyond just answering the phone. This is why we've gone to things like email responses, telephone inquiries, call-back options, as well as looking at how we can use social media to respond to people's general inquiries.

One thing we found is that people are using the call centre to ask questions of a very general nature. That's required us to turn to our website to try to improve that, so that we can have a positive impact on the volume of our calls, and reduce that. Then we can introduce new technology, as indicated in my opening comments, around using artificial intelligence to serve clients in a better way.

We're trying to move from just a telephone call to a multi-pronged approach that serves clients to meet their needs, regardless of the kind of information that they're looking for, in a way that has a positive impact on the volume of calls.

● (0925)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. MacDonald, and thank you, we're at nearly six minutes.

We'll now move to Mr. Davidson, please.

Mr. Scot Davidson (York—Simcoe, CPC): Good morning, everyone. I guess we'll cut right into it.

Looking at this report, it's incredibly disappointing to me, and I think we have to point that out. It shows that the government has failed to help eight million Canadians, and that's a huge number. These Canadians had questions about services like EI, CPP and OAS. It's unacceptable that it takes, on average, looking at this, 32 minutes to reach an agent at these departments. Many Canadians have been hung up on or they've been provided with inaccurate information.

I'm a new member of Parliament, and I hear from constituents all the time. These departments.... We serve the people of Canada, and this is probably one of the most frustrating and upsetting things for Canadians, that they don't get hold of government departments to receive the services they require and, quite frankly, are entitled to.

I have a few questions that I want to talk about.

To the Department of Employment and Social Development Canada, it appears to me, reading the report, pages 10 to 12—I just want to get a handle on that—that you've rejected calls by the Auditor General to track those who hang up before the 10-minute standard wait time has passed. Is that true?

Ms. Leslie MacLean (Senior Associate Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating

Officer for Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): We track a number of indicators and have very few that we report publicly—the service standards themselves.

On this observation from the Auditor General, we had not been tracking callers who hung up on us, as an external reporting tool. We always tracked it internally to see what's going on with our calls, because we monitor them very closely on a day-to-day basis. However, based on this observation, we're now going to start tracking—and have done so, as of April 2019—those callers who hang up after the 10-minute service standard has expired. That will be part of our public reporting going forward.

Mr. Scot Davidson: You've adopted the industry standards set out by the Office of the Auditor General.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: We're always using best practices across a range of sectors. We set up a call improvement strategy with help from the private sector, so we're constantly testing what we measure, how we measure and how we report it.

Mr. Scot Davidson: As well, I think Canadians are concerned about having confidence in our information technology sharing. The Auditor General points out to us that departments aren't talking. We have technology gaps.

Alex Benay, you're now the chief information officer of the Government of Canada. Is that correct?

Mr. Alex Benay: Yes.

Mr. Scot Davidson: When were you appointed to that position?

Mr. Alex Benay: I believe it was April 2017.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Do you have a mandate yourself, your department? What is your mandate?

Mr. Alex Benay: We provide administrative policy guidance, including technology policy guidance, to departments, and increasingly provide architectural recommendations and direction as well, which is perhaps a level below policy, including things such as privacy, technology, cybersecurity and others.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Will you or Shared Services Canada be responsible for modernizing the remaining 213 call centres?

Mr. Alex Benay: We would work with our colleagues at Shared Services Canada to set the strategy—the architecture—as well as work with client departments that, as you heard, have different needs, depending on the different call centres. We would work on service standards, which is something they were actively doing in the refresh of our new digital policy, and then make sure that our colleagues at Shared Services Canada get the support they need to implement the directive.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Have we set the strategy? We've looked at only eight call centres being updated in four years. We have another 213 remaining.

• (0930)

Mr. Alex Benay: As President Glover mentioned, we are in the middle of revising each of the remaining call centres, and I believe—not to put words in Paul's statement—that by the end of June, we'll be in a position to assess the remaining call centres and the strategies for each of them.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Do you have a timeline for that?

Mr. Alex Benay: Paul.

Mr. Paul Glover: To respond to the member's question, it will be Shared Services that is responsible for the provisioning of that infrastructure and working with the vendor community and departments to make sure that we provide solutions in line with the needs of those departments.

As I said, we started with those that were the most complex and represented almost 50% of the total call volume. We're very confident, given that we've tackled the most complex, and almost half of the total government's call volume, that we can now scale at speed, having learned these important lessons, the remainder of the departments. We're working with them to make sure they don't get a system that is bigger and more complex than they need, or more expensive because it has security they don't need.

We'll be able now, having done the most complicated, to tailor solutions and move quickly to all of the remaining centres. We're working with them to get an inventory of their requirements and will layer on top of that the systems they have, contracts and end-of-life technology. By the fall, we'll have a plan for all of the remaining call centres.

The Chair: For the timeline, the fall was the last thing he mentioned.

All right. Mr. Christopherson, please.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair, and thanks to all of you for being here.

If it wasn't already noted, I think this is our last public hearing that we're holding. Was it noted?

The Chair: It was not noted.

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, I'm noting it because it particularly matters to me. It's the last one I'll do in my whole life.

There are an awful lot of bureaucrats who are saying, "Yes!"

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Christopherson: However, it's unfortunate. I would have preferred to end on a positive note. That's not possible with this one.

I agree with my colleague in terms of the amount of time available. It's really hard to know where to focus in.

Look, the late Michael Ferguson's mantra was, "Do service well." This is the opposite. This is doing service lousy. To me, this report highlights the importance of audit reports and having these things come forward. That's why it's such a disgrace that the current government is not providing the Auditor General's office with the money it needs to follow the audit plan it has for next year, including a study on cybersecurity.

As you know, Chair, I will be using every opportunity to underscore that insulting, disgusting decision by the government, and it's nothing less than that. That's what autocrats do. They hide. That's what this government is doing. I can only hope that before this Parliament rises we can get them to change their minds.

I want to give a compliment to the deputy of Veterans Affairs. I want to say, sir, that one of the things I enjoyed when I was a solicitor general was to work with police in a very similar culture, and that is that things tend to be straight up front. There's not a lot of BS. There's not a lot of fog. There's not a lot of uncertainty—it's this, this or this, or it isn't.

I really liked that you came in and said.... There were a couple of compliments in here, but you were good enough to mention this, and I'm asking other deputies to pay attention, because there is something to be learned here. In your presentation you said:

When the department stopped offering a teletypewriter service for the hearing disabled, there was no indication from our records as to the rationale for this cut in service, nor whether there was consultation with veterans. This is not appropriate service.

That's what I like to hear from a deputy minister. Roll in here, and when something has failed, say so. It goes a long way.

Then he goes on to say, "As such, we are reversing this decision". I'd like the government to get into the habit of that and reverse their decision in terms of funding the Auditor General.

That's the way the deputies should be coming in here, and this is what has frustrated me. For Shared Services, I have to tell you, the stuff we hear in terms of the justification for nonsense is just mind-boggling.

Again, I would give one example from Immigration and Refugees. The deputy this morning said, "Providing excellent client service is imperative". What they should have said was, "Providing excellent client service is imperative and we failed." That's what they should have said.

On page 8 of the report, paragraph 1.28 states:

We found that call centres were not focused on the needs of their clients when making decisions about call centre services and how they set service standards.

I'm going to run out of time quickly, and I know that. I'll just wait for the gavel to drop.

I'm glad to see that Treasury Board is saying that they're going to change their existing policy instruments, because at the end of the day, when we want to change behaviour, it's based on both the individual behaviour of employees and the policies that are being followed. If the policies aren't on there at that level, then we can't very well expect the departments to consider it a priority when the guiding Treasury Board Secretariat is not saying so. I am very pleased.

Again, these are some of the benefits that come out of the public accounts that really don't get registered as a dollar, but these things change behaviour and they change focus.

I have one question. It's not the most profound one I could ask, but it's the one that jumped out at me, I must say.

• (0935)

On page 15, at paragraph 1.60 about good old Shared Services Canada, the report says, "However, in order for departments and agencies to use these features"—new features for the phoning—"Shared Services Canada had to upgrade its existing information technology infrastructure—a task it overlooked during planning." How can that be? How could something so important be overlooked during planning? It speaks to competency. It speaks to where senior management is not doing the job that they should.

The Chair: We will get an answer from Shared Services, if they would like to answer that question.

Mr. Paul Glover: Absolutely, Mr. Chair, thank you for the opportunity.

In looking at 221 call centres, I think it was assumed at the beginning that a call centre is a call centre and that the technology would be consistent and the same. However, as we moved through this experience, we realized that we needed to be more precise, to roll out technologies that were appropriate to the call centres and to better take into account the existing technology. That is how we learned the lessons necessary to be able to move and scale quickly.

One of the things we tried to do in de-scoping this project, to start with just those eight, was to learn those lessons so as not to disrupt service to all 221 call centres concurrently. This means making sure that we take a prudent approach, manage the risk, learn the lessons and scale up.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Glover.

We'll now move to Mr. Arya, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Chandra Arya (Nepean, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Since this is the last public hearing, I would like to place on the record my sincere appreciation of Mr. David Christopherson for his long, long years of service, especially on this public accounts committee. We have had differences of opinion on several issues on several occasions but I do recognize the great work you have done in this public accounts committee—the most important committee.

General Natynczyk, I have to say that the services from Veterans Affairs Canada have improved tremendously during the last three and a half years. I have in Nepean a veterans advisory committee.

One of the committee members is Ted Bransfield, who has personally assisted 387 members, to be exact, since they submitted their claims. He too is of the opinion that the service has improved.

From the cuts that your department had faced to this position, I think it's only because of a kind of frank acceptance. Whenever there was a shortcoming, I have seen that you don't hesitate to accept it and take remedial measures.

Ms. MacDonald, I am tempted today to talk on a slightly different subject. The CBC reported today that the lawsuits related to parental reunification have been settled and those people who went to the court have been given the option of applying—whereas hundreds of my constituents didn't get the same opportunity.

However, we are on a different subject so I can't deal with that.

Coming back, Mr. Flack, you mentioned that you had done the client experience survey, which found that 82% of the respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied. One of the previous Auditor General's reports on CRA call centres noted that the Auditor General conducted a study that found 36% of the answers provided by the agents were wrong.

Did your survey do that?

• (0940)

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I'm happy to speak to that.

I'll separate your question about quality from your question about client experience.

We monitor the quality and accuracy of our agents' answers on a regular basis. We have an ongoing program of sampling. Every one of our—

Mr. Chandra Arya: What percentage of answers have you found to be incorrect?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I think about 86% of the answers were found to be correct.

Mr. Chandra Arya: Fourteen per cent of the answers were incorrect. That's still a big number, especially because, as a citizen, when I call, I take whatever the agent says as the gospel truth and I do or don't take action based on what I've been told.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I agree.

Mr. Chandra Arya: With my limited time, I would like to go to the Shared Services Canada.

Mr. Glover, I had interactions with you when you were the president of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, but Shared Services Canada is a different kind of animal.

As a member of Parliament in the national capital region, I hear from a lot of people working in government departments. One of the things I've heard about Shared Services is that it's so big and so complex. We are seeing that here, you know. Only eight of the 222 call centres have been done. This has been going on for years.

It's too big and too complex. One of the things I've heard is that your department is facing a problem with respect to human resources, that you are unable to find qualified technical personnel based on the rigid language requirements. Is that a fact?

Mr. Paul Glover: I would start by saying the government's IT infrastructure is absolutely large and complex because of the very diverse nature of the services the departments provide, from the Department of National Defence to Veterans Affairs to the RCMP to highly operational border security guards. We support a large, complex ecosystem. We're working very hard to simplify and make that more robust and reliable moving forward.

With respect to attracting personnel, we have been able to attract more personnel. The budget has provided room for us to grow. We have been successfully attracting talent.

There is, frankly, going to be a very competitive marketplace for new technologies, like cloud computing, where Shared Services, just like any other large corporation, will be competing for limited highly skilled resources. We're making sure that we're able to do that. We're positioned well, working with business partners to ensure we have the technology to support that large, complex ecosystem.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Arya and Mr. Glover.

We'll now move on and welcome Mr. Blaney to our committee.
[Translation]

Hon. Steven Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for having me at this committee.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank you, since this may also be one of your last committee meetings as a politician. We have had the opportunity to serve the public together.

I am happy to be here this morning.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. Christopherson, keep your passion, we need this. I hope that the newcomers who will follow you will have the same passion. This morning, you expressed your indignation to us and, basically, we are here to reflect it. I must say I share it too.

Mr. Ricard, you tell us that it is very difficult to reach the government by phone. You tell us that it's like a funnel, people hang up, calls are transferred to automated systems: it's a real obstacle course.

Finally, as my colleague said, the system does not seem to be designed to meet the needs. We know this because it is our offices that people ultimately call when they cannot reach a government agency. That is what is happening. Fortunately, sometimes we call and obtain a little service.

In my opinion, the problem seems to me to be a leadership problem. There are many call centres, but everyone works somewhat in isolation.

This is my first question. What do you think of the comments that were made this morning?

I would also like to hear from you about the feedback you have received as a result of the initiatives that are being taken. Some of them are very interesting.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Thank you for the question.

I will start by talking about the action plans that have been submitted to us by organizations.

For the most part, I will also be able to respond to the opening comments. Acceptance of a problem, as mentioned earlier, is a large part of the solution. The potential solutions we see in the action plans are encouraging.

However, an action plan is just a plan. As long as it is not implemented, it does not solve any problems.

● (0945)

Hon. Steven Blaney: Yes.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: My message is that this is encouraging, but until the problems are resolved, the situation is no better than before.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you.

One of the things I was pleased to hear about is the initiative that Veterans Affairs Canada is going to put in place, a teletypewriter for the hearing impaired. I congratulate you on that, General Natynczyk.

There is also the electronic cabinet initiative. As a former minister, I can tell you that the quantity of documents we need is astounding. The computerization of documents is therefore a great initiative.

I also liked what you said, Mr. Flack.

You mentioned the accessibility rate for agents. I would like to hear more from you on this subject. Ultimately, when someone calls the government, they want a result.

Could you tell us a little bit about it? You have in fact made some interesting improvements.

Then, if I have time left, I would like to come back to the issue of leadership. This morning, it really seems to me that both Treasury Board and Shared Services Canada are a two-headed monster. In order for there to be leadership, a concrete vision, the message I am sending you this morning is that you must work together. As we have seen, there are many call centres that are not necessarily coordinated. Standards are the issue here.

Can you tell us about your agent accessibility rate?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I am going to start, and if Mr. Flack has something to add, I will give him the floor.

I would just like to talk about the progress we have made in terms of accessibility to our call centres for employment insurance, for example. Thanks to the investments Mr. Flack mentioned, we were able to increase our accessibility rate from 36% in 2015-2016 very quickly, and reached 65% in the past year.

This is therefore a fairly significant improvement curve, because we have been able, thanks to the investments, to add hundreds of new agents to better respond to Canadians' calls. I would add that the Auditor General did not consider the systems we have in place for self-service, a system where people do not need to talk to an agent.

Hon. Steven Blaney: I see.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: With regard to our call centres, for example for employment insurance, 65% of the people who called us were able to use self-service without even having to talk to anyone. In this case, the accessibility rate is 100%.

Hon. Steven Blaney: I see.

Mr. Graham Flack: Technology has made quite a difference. Under the old system, the number of people who could be online at the same time was limited. With the new systems—two out of three have been implemented—the participation rate is 100% to date. This includes a major system for pension funds. Since its implementation on May 11, it has been possible to contact an agent in 100% of cases.

There is another important difference. We have call centres across the country. The old system did not allow us, when someone was on the line, to forward a call from Newfoundland to Toronto if there was an opportunity to do so. This will allow us to make better use of our resources. This is a huge difference. With respect to employment insurance, it is expected that the system will be implemented in the fall.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blaney.

Madame Mendès is next, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I hope that our last meeting will be public, because it is on this occasion that we will honour you. I would like to thank you and Mr. Christopherson, as vice-chair. It has been a pleasure working with both of you. I learned a lot from Mr. Christopherson.

You have led our committee with great skill.

[*English*]

Clearly, I'm going to necessarily disagree with Mr. Christopherson. I don't think we are trying to hide anything as a government. In this instance, I will speak as a member of the government party.

I think the questions of the estimates and the credits, we will discuss it a little later on, but it's not trying to hide anything, it's trying to manage. We will get back to it.

[*Translation*]

With regard to the issue before us, in order to solve important problems, people wanted to ensure that a certain part of the public, who were not prepared for online services, would still adopt this approach, by eliminating the telephone option. I am not only talking about the government, but also about society as a whole, whether it is banks or store services. We forgot that many people still need the telephone. I find that outrageous.

● (0950)

[*English*]

In terms of this idea that you could ship everybody to services online suddenly and that you would shut down your call centres, and you don't need people to call you because it's online, not everybody goes online. This mentality or this philosophy, or whatever you want to call it, which has, unfortunately, infected all of our society because it's at all levels, private and public, is.... What we see now is that government has an even bigger responsibility of ensuring that citizens are able to reach it, but we tried too quickly to put everything online without preparing the population for it. There is an

enormous mass of citizens who will never use online services and who will always need a phone call.

I would like all of you, if at all possible, to give me your feeling on that when you look at the service-centric mission you have given yourselves after this report.

[*Translation*]

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the question, Mrs. Mendès.

We have noticed one thing about our veterans.

[*English*]

They go from 18 years old to 100 years old, and we know across all of them that the call centres are the number one method that they would like to use to contact us, but we also know there's a lot of 100-year-olds who love their iPads. They send us emails all the time.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: I salute you and I do salute your department for what you have done.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: But we do know that even now that personal touch, whether it is giving us a phone call or visiting any one of our offices, is still very important to our veterans.

Mr. Paul Glover: I think that we have absolutely seen that shift you've talked about in society, but I would like to assure the members of the committee that Shared Services, on behalf of the government in supplying technologies and platforms, wants to make sure there are multiple channels that function so that those who want to work online on an app or on an iPad can do that, those who want to pick up the phone can do that and those who want to walk into service centres can do that and have a modern, effective experience. We are definitely looking at all of the different channels that Canadians want to interact with the government on to make sure that there are tools that are modern and allow the departments to be able to function.

Part of the frustration that we're hearing is that the tools were old. They were end of life and they were kind of working with one hand tied behind their backs because we didn't have modern platforms that allowed them to reroute calls to where agents were available to track information. Part of what we have to do is to move more quickly to deploy these technologies but also not to think that it's one-size-fits-all and that we can do all 221 call centres at the same time.

The Chair: Your time is almost up, and I want Ms. MacLean and Mr. Benay to be able to answer this as well. I think they were trying to get in.

Ms. MacLean.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: We've been focusing very much at Service Canada on the client as the centre of how we change our services. For example, in 2016 we did a study of the service quality for the EI program and realized that as many as 30% of our clients fell into a category we call e-vulnerable because of where they live in the country, literacy, language or other barriers. We continue to offer all our channels and our goal is to make sure the service that people get is excellent in them and allows them to choose how and when they would like to be served.

We're also very aware that the quality and the clarity of the material we have online is a huge driver of people to the telephone and to our in-person centres. We had about nine million in-person visits at Service Canada last year, so we have a real imperative to make our information clear and client oriented.

Mr. Alex Benay: Other countries have moved to digital-only service delivery. We are not those countries and we appreciate that. I think the Treasury Board policies that we're putting out, if all goes well in June, our new revised policies on services and digital, will take into account the fact that we do not want to leave anyone behind. It is about creating the best service opportunity for every Canadian. We are looking at an omni-channel service approach moving forward, which means multiple service channels. We will be guided by the digital standards that effectively could be service standards as well, so we do have some clear direction on that.

• (0955)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you for that last comment, Mr. Benay.

Mr. Davidson.

Mr. Scot Davidson: I'll just finish off my line of questioning.

I just want to let all the witnesses know that I kind of speak for rural Canada, and I always keep in my head that many of my constituents don't have Internet service, believe it or not. People rely on the phone to reach out to the government and it's still very important. There's an infrastructure gap in rural Canada.

Mr. Benay, I'm just wondering if you're familiar with the Auditor General's report on building and implementing the Phoenix pay system.

Mr. Alex Benay: Yes, I am familiar with it.

Mr. Scot Davidson: This is where we're having, I'll say, this technology gap in confidence. You know that an independent review of this information technology project to determine readiness was not complied with as per Treasury Board guidance on independence.

Mr. Alex Benay: Correct.

So what are we doing?

Mr. Scot Davidson: Yes, exactly.

Be quick, please, because I have a couple of other questions.

Mr. Alex Benay: We've implemented new policy instruments. For example, in April 2018 we introduced mandatory concept cases for the department so they would engage with Treasury Board Secretariat early so that we could help in the design of technological solutions and also project guidance to ensure that the right governance is in place. There was also a new directive on IT issued four months ago that forces departments to come to an enterprise-wide architecture review board to look at solutions and look at governance. These are all steps that happen before anything goes to Treasury Board for approval. We've really tried to move the engagement needle forward with departments to ensure that we can apply lessons learned from the Phoenix situation as an example.

Mr. Scot Davidson: All right, because we're really trying to have confidence.

What position did you hold before being appointed chief information officer?

Mr. Alex Benay: I was in charge of our national science and technology museums in the capital region, and I spent five years in various positions with Open Text, which is Canada's largest software company, including deploying technology in governments around the world.

Mr. Scot Davidson: I always turn to our Auditor General. Are you aware of the Auditor General's report on the national Museum of Science and Technology?

Mr. Alex Benay: Yes.

Mr. Scot Davidson: I'm going to quote. The Auditor General "found weaknesses in how the Corporation monitored compliance with laws, regulations, and policies, and in how it managed known corporate risks". Furthermore, "the Corporation had not followed all of its own conservation requirements, putting the integrity of the collection at further risk". The Auditor General concluded, "The weaknesses that we found in the Corporation's collection development, conservation, and accessibility amounted to a significant deficiency because the collection of artifacts and materials was the Corporation's fundamental asset for achieving its mandate".

I think this is where Canadians are lacking confidence that you are going to achieve your mandate, and we just want reassurance on that.

Mr. Alex Benay: I'm happy that you bring the point up, and it's a great question. I'm happy to also report that we delivered a brand new science and technology museum under budget and ahead of schedule during that same tenure, and that the government funded a new collection service centre that was not present during that particular audit. That is being delivered as we speak, with artifacts being transferred to that new facility as we speak, so that issue was being addressed.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Okay, so we can hope that—

Mr. David Christopherson: Everything's okay now.

Mr. Alex Benay: Not everything is okay—

Mr. Scot Davidson: We can hope that the call centres will be updated very rapidly, then.

Mr. Alex Benay: No, I think that has nothing to do with the question on the science and technology museum and efficiency of how we're going to deliver. I'm happy to answer questions on anything that we've done with regard to technology oversight in the last two years, which has been to actively move the needle forward to change our policies.

Our IT policy had not been updated in 14 years. We were able to do that. Our security policy had not been updated in eight years. We were able to finish that. We're now moving towards a digital policy that will continue to augment the oversight and technology delivery.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Okay. We're good to go.

Mr. David Christopherson: Everything's fine, no problem.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davidson.

I think what Mr. Davidson was driving at was that part of the technology at the museum was a data issue, the data of the conservation, if I understood the question correctly. Now you're responsible for the systems here and all the data and Phoenix. Just so we have confidence that lessons are learned, that in moving forward we're going to be able to go.... This committee, that's what we do. We try to make sure that we can have confidence in the public service and that they have the right people in the right places to deliver systems.

Our time is actually up on this, but we'll go to Mr. Glover and then we'll be coming back to Ms. Yip.

Go ahead, Mr. Glover.

●(1000)

Mr. Paul Glover: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

With respect to the requirement for independent third party review on this project, the committee can have confidence that it was done. We did receive it and we did act on it. That was what changed from trying to do all 221 at once to scale: Start with those that need it the most, the most complex, and learn the lessons.

We did follow the recommendation and it did influence how we have behaved and it has improved our execution.

The Chair: Thank you.

I think all of us rural ones, and probably urban ones as well, anyone that has public servants and knows the Phoenix system, when we hear that there are 300 and some call centres, or 200, whatever the numbers are, and only eight out of all of them got the.... There are some similarities between that and Phoenix.

Ms. Yip.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): My question is directed to Ms. MacDonald.

It's good to see that the email responses have dropped from 31 days to five days. It is wonderful to see some improvement there.

Your call centre is very important to many Canadians inquiring about their immigration cases. I think it's very important to provide callbacks and not have dropped calls and long wait times. There is a new economic permanent resident program in which you are piloting the new callback feature. What is the progress on this?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you. I'll respond to that.

As you mentioned, we have reduced the email response time to five days. Actually, we're working towards bringing it down further to three days. I must say there are other channels that we are also utilizing so that we can get better service quality for our clients. We call them "clients" because these are not necessarily Canadians, but also permanent residents, students, those seeking work permits and others.

In terms of our callback functionality, which is one of a kind, that we have started in the permanent resident economic line, what we did was this. Instead of having people wait online, we have given them the option that we can call them back in approximately the same amount of time as they would have to wait online. If it is 23 or 24 minutes, we call them back precisely in that time. We've also done a quality control survey on that and the quality control tells us 96% of those who received the callback are very satisfied with the quality in terms of reaching back. They have time to have their questions formulated. They do it once. There are no repeat calls from that.

We are following that and expanding that from the permanent resident economic line to also the family class. It is going to move forward and we are hoping that not only does it allow the clients to have a positive client experience, but also that we are able to provide the right kind of tailored information to our clients.

Ms. Jean Yip: What is the timeline for expanding the program if this pilot program is successful?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: As we speak we have rolled out the two parts. As we move forward, this pilot is going to expand and keep on, as mentioned earlier by different deputies. We learn the lessons when we roll it out. We make some tweaks and we continue to roll it out.

Over the major lines of business, specifically permanent residency, we should be looking to the end of summer to roll out all of the features for that. Then slowly, we will add the temporary residency, citizenship and others, because we have huge business lines to which we want to give equally important service.

Ms. Jean Yip: Would that be by the end of this year for everybody else?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: As we said, we are actually phasing it in, in such a way that we do it right, so right now we have a plan for the permanent resident line of business. We will continue to add. This might take us until the end of the year just to roll it out. Then we will continue to inform the public as we roll out more of those programs.

Ms. Jean Yip: You mentioned customized service. Will you be using the online chat services where you do it one on one?

●(1005)

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: This is an important piece that we have already introduced, but it hasn't been taken up by the clients for multiple reasons. To customize somebody's data or update what they are looking for, in terms of information on a PR card or citizenship application and so on, we have a "my account" where they can log in and actually get that information.

When they call us, we try to go into the system, get all the information and also provide them with an indication as to where their application process is. That's more of a customization in terms of giving them actual information. That can be done by online channels too, and it's the choice of the client whether to go online and do that or to call us. Either way, we try to customize it accordingly. To do so, we also do a lot of user acceptability testing. We have a usability space through which we interact with clients and get that information so that we can make our programs more robust.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Yip, and thank you, sir.

We'll now go back to Mr. Christopherson, please.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you very much, Chair.

I will take an opportunity. It's the last moment of the last hearing, and I also want to give my appreciation and thanks.

Mr. Chair, Madam Mendès and I... Mr. Arya, have you been here right from the beginning?

Mr. Chandra Arya: Yes.

Mr. David Christopherson: I thought so. Those are the four musketeers.

When we got here, as you'll recall, absolutely nobody had any experience doing public accounts except lonely me, and one of the biggest things about this committee, Chair...and I want to speak to you directly and include Madam Mendès as the lead for the government. The toughest thing to accept in this committee is that we have to completely change what we normally do when we walk through that door. This is a different universe. We're not sitting here as Liberals, Conservatives and New Democrats. We're sitting here as parliamentarians providing oversight, regardless of the party that's in power, and it's a non-partisan effort. That's easy to say and really hard to do.

Chair, I can't thank you enough for the leadership. I've been in your role and I did the same job for four years. It's not an easy job. I had the advantage of already having been on the committee for at least a decade. You came in cold and you've done an outstanding job. I've had a chance to travel with you and Madam Mendès internationally. We've all learned and brought back best practices from around the world, and I just want to say what an honour it has been to serve with all of you, Mr. Arya and everyone here now, but from the beginning, the four of us. This has been the most productive public accounts committee I've had the honour of sitting on, and I thank you all for that.

I have one question for the secretariat.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, as long as you keep talking like that I won't cut you off.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Christopherson: That's good. I'll just weave in my message and keep saying how wonderful you are, because you understand how bad it is that the government's not giving the Auditor General enough money to do his job. That's why I'm so pleased to see.... No, I won't do that.

I thank you, Chair.

Secretary, what troubled me, on page 16, 1.62 stood out. "We found that the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat developed a government-wide service strategy in 2017: the Government of Canada Clients First Service Strategy." That sounds great. "The strategy prioritized providing services online but did not include call centres or mention the government-wide modernization of call centres, despite the fact that they continue to be an important way for clients to get information."

That number is 25%, a quarter of all Canadians use that. How on earth did you get to the point where you were planning contact for services for Canadians, and never gave a thought to the phone? Twenty-five per cent of Canadians.... Given the fact that Michael Ferguson's mantra was, again, "Do service well", don't measure how well you move paper or a message from one desk to another. Measure the outcome for citizens and how they are, or are not, receiving the services they're entitled to.

How could something this obvious—a quarter of all Canadians—be overlooked in this grand strategy?

Mr. Alex Benay: When the service strategy was issued in 2017, it was supposed to be channel agnostic. Since then we looked at the recommendations from the Auditor General and will integrate phones into the next series and issues of our June release for the digital policy and all the policy instruments that will come with it, and we will become very specific on various service channels.

• (1010)

Mr. David Christopherson: I hear that, but my question was, how did it happen?

Mr. Alex Benay: The thinking at the time was that an agnostic service strategy was a better approach.

Mr. David Christopherson: What do you mean by agnostic service strategy?

Mr. Alex Benay: Not necessarily targeting one particular service channel. It could be mail. It could be in person. It could be digital. The thinking at the time was that an agnostic approach was good. At this point we've seen all the recommendations from the OAG and we'll move to make every service channel clear.

Mr. David Christopherson: People are paid good money to be planners. The whole idea is that they're supposed to think these things through. I understand if it was a small percentage, but a quarter of all Canadians? That's really disheartening. It's further disheartening that you don't seem to be able to acknowledge when anything is wrong. All you want to do is talk about how wonderful things are. I've told deputies before, don't come in here and be defensive. Do what the Auditor General did and approach the criticism that way. If it's wrong, say so, admit it, acknowledge you failed, and then say what you're going to do about it.

Don't spin. That's our job.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We'll now move to Mr. Chen, please.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here.

I want to echo the comments made earlier by some of my colleagues, and to thank and acknowledge Mr. Christopherson for his contributions. He will leave an incredible void of knowledge and experience on this committee, and I know he will be missed.

I am not feeling well today, but I did manage to make it to committee, and I'm not feeling much better reading some of this in the report. Paragraph 1.13 from the Auditor General, the call centres "sent millions of calls back to the automated system or told callers to go to the website or to call back later". If any of us as elected officials did that to our constituents, we'd all be out of a job. We really would. It's unacceptable. Imagine constituents calling our offices and we have an automated message telling them to check out a website or to call back later. Then they call back and they're put on a wait-list. That is unacceptable.

Paragraph 1.48, "At the end of our audit, five years after the federal government began to modernize the technology for all of its 221 call centres, the initiative was rolling out to only 8." Really? I was on a travel website and a box kept appearing on my screen saying they had a live agent who could help me. In the world out there, people are being proactive, making sure there is good customer service and that people can get correct information and talk to somebody, whether it's on a website or on the phone.

Here we are talking about a call centre, which I do agree for a lot of Canadians is still the most accessible way, yet we can't even get the technology up to speed.

Mr. Benay mentioned earlier that the IT policy in the department had not been changed for 14 years. I find that incredible. Can you share some of the changes that were made to the policy?

Mr. Alex Benay: Yes, certainly.

We introduced the concept for new technology introduction, for example, with cloud technologies and other things that were directed. We were able to actually move to more service conversations in our policy instruments—that we do not do technology for technology's sake.

I think the lesson we've learned from that failure is the fact that at Treasury Board Secretariat we need to be able to be in a position to

renew our policies much faster, especially in a space such as technology, for example, which, as we all know, moves very rapidly. Now what we're starting to do, for example, is that many of our directives have six-month refresh cycles, which we're starting to introduce, to make sure we do not get back into a similar position where we have not necessarily kept up with the times on our policy directions to departments.

Mr. Shaun Chen: I'm very happy to hear that. The road is moving ahead with technology, be it private sector or other institutions, and their success really depends on it. The success of companies depends on their ability to adapt to change in the information world in which we exist, so I'm happy to hear that some progress is being made.

I do have another question for Ms. MacDonald regarding the web content that is written in plain language at a grade 8 level. I know from my constituency that a lot of folks who are trying to access services and understand programs within IRCC are potentially newer immigrants, those who may not have the grade 8 reading level. Can you speak to the rationale for that level? Also, how did that decision get made?

• (1015)

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Thank you very much for the question.

One of the things we do is client satisfaction surveys. We do user ability testing with people outside our department and with our clients. We have a centre they come to. We gather information from overseas—our VACs, our international offices overseas—and what we do is collectively look at what issues are being raised and what kinds of things are pain points that are coming up.

One of the issues that has been identified to us is the issue of being able to communicate in the language of their choice. What we have looked at is how we actually create a system that meets the greatest needs of people in terms of being able to use a language.

In our call centre, we use both French and English, and we've built into our system the capacity to use interpreters for people who don't have capacity in those two languages. We took the information from the feedback that was received to determine what the right level is for using that plain language on our Internet. Consistently, it has been in that zone of that grade 8 plain language area, but at the same time, we continue to get feedback from our clients to finesse that as we update our programs.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chen.

I have one more speaker.

Mr. Sarai, please, you have five minutes.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Thank you. I have a lot of questions, but first I want to commend Mr. Christopherson for his wisdom, experience and mentorship—

Mr. René Arseneault: His wisdom? Are you sure?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Yes, I think he has some deep down. He has been very helpful. I'm probably the newest member on this committee, except for Mr. Davidson, and Mr. Christopherson has been a mentor to all of us, I think, in terms of seeing the appropriate questions and how quickly he can zest up and put all you guys to task every single week, especially for the Auditor General.

Thank you for your service. I know that you'll make your community proud and that you have made your community proud.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: My question is for you, Mr. Ricard. What were the objectives of the audit?

Service standards are definitely a very important thing, because the first person they come to—or probably one of the first they come to besides the offices of the various ministries—is their local MP. They tell us that they were calling and were not attended to, and that the call was dropped after five minutes or 10 minutes or they left, and it was horrible. We hear this time and time again.

It's also, by the reverse token, a very difficult standard. What is an appropriate standard? Is one minute too long? Is 120 seconds too long? Is 30 seconds too long? Are there options people have other than just holding on? What brought you to do this audit? What are the service standards that you look to in terms of perhaps other industrial standards in North America?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: If I were to summarize the audit objective, it was in line with.... All the time, we're trying in audits to make sure that we have an impact in terms of the ultimate outcome, which is service to Canadians.

On this one, with 25% or 26% of Canadians wanting or needing to use the phone to reach out to government, we felt it was very important for us to do that audit. As was mentioned before, there are other channels that were not covered by this audit—the web, the automated system. We focused on that 25%, who may be in rural regions or with some disabilities. We felt it was very important for us to do this audit to ultimately have an impact and make a difference.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Did you notice the amount of effort—or lack of effort, perhaps—being made to enable call centres to officially call back? Is there a push to have people go to alternate channels rather than call centres?

You notice that about banks these days. You notice it in other industries. When paying your phone bill, if you have any questions, there's a real push to go online. In some cases, if you go to CRA, for example, it's almost impossible to find a phone number to contact them. It will lead you in almost every direction to not get a phone call or a phone number. It wants you to do everything digitally online.

Is that the case you found in these various departments, that there's a push to not call but to use alternate means—email, fax or go online—to access your own account?

• (1020)

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I don't believe we can speak to that. We didn't audit the intent, if there was an intent behind that to reduce the service on the phone because it would be covered through other channels. We have not audited that.

As I said earlier, when you realize that 25% of Canadians need the phone to access government for various—and very valid—reasons, and you start an audit like this one, trying to make a difference, you see how transparent or clear the service standards are so that individuals who call know what to expect in terms of service level.

You need to have service standards in place. That's one of the recommendations we made: Have standards in place so that Canadians know what to expect, and management and government know how and where to improve. That's a very important part of the audit. It's about service standards, again, from the perspective of clarity for Canadians on what to expect. Service level is not for us to determine. Whatever it is, as determined by government and by management, is fine. We're just auditing against that requirement.

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

I want to thank all of our guests. It's a big table for a good reason. We have many here today and I think you've all given us more clarity on how you are going to address the challenges you have.

I think all members have made it abundantly clear that, as members of Parliament, we hear about this. We want to pass on to you that our expectation, as a public accounts committee, is that Canadians, taxpayers and people in need of government services can get them on a fair timeline and can get some kind of assurance that when they pick up the phone or go online, somebody is listening or is going to respond quickly. Thank you.

We have your action plan. Even though we're coming into an election—and a number of you have heard that this may be the last public meeting—be certain that the new public accounts committee that will begin next fall will pick up on where we've left off on studies such as this. It will be just as important for them to make sure we've seen some accomplishments and some of those goals met.

We're going to suspend. We're going to ask the crowd if they could leave fairly quickly. We have more business we have to do in the next now only 20 minutes.

We're suspended.

• (1020)

(Pause)

• (1025)

The Chair: Committee, we'll call this meeting back to order. I'll remind you that we are still public.

We are here to discuss the estimates and the remainder of the estimates. Before we do that, I have one little piece for information, as everybody's been saying their congratulations to everyone. Dillan here, one of our researchers, and our analyst, has been appointed as visiting research director for the Canadian Audit and Accountability Foundation.

Voices: Hear, hear!

The Chair: He will help other Canadian public accounts committees, and Vietnam and Rwanda, for example, develop capacity within their committees. It doesn't mean he's leaving us, which is the good news. I just think the good work that he has done here, as well as that of all our researchers, is being noted and being used across the country.

Thank you, Dillan.

Mr. Dillan Theckedath (Committee Researcher): Thank you.

The Chair: Also, we were given notice of motion at our last meeting and I'll go back to Mr. Christopherson who gave us the notice of motion and he can now decide to move it or not.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

Yes, I wish to exercise my right to move my motion. I move:

That the committee condemns the underfunding of the Office of the Auditor General; that the committee recommend that funding to the OAG be increased by \$10.8 million annually; and, that the committee report this recommendation to the House.

The \$10.8 million is the money they asked for. Now this doesn't necessarily affect the estimates process. It's a standalone motion that we're sending to the government. Some were wondering why this was in order since we can't increase on estimates. That's a separate process. We're not doing that. This is a standalone motion.

If I might, Chair, with your indulgence, I will say about Dillan that you will know that the Canadian Audit and Accountability Foundation is our prime resource consultant on how to professionally do our job and how to constantly up our game. You will know that in the last while I've joined the board of directors of the CAAF, and in part the idea of having Dillan come in was a recognition when we were doing some international work, particularly in Rwanda earlier in the year, that one of the key aspects of making committees work—this is the benefit of international travel when you get a chance to see how others do it—is the analyst.

If you think about the role the analysts play and what we do, they're that magic elixir that allows this to actually work because we have such trust in their professionalism. There was a recognition that when we're helping countries like Rwanda...and CAAF has a long-term commitment with Rwanda and I'll likely be going back there myself and possibly to Vietnam also to work with their public accounts.

Now CAAF has the ability through Dillan to not only provide expert advice and training to the Office of the Auditor General staff and auditors, and then also public accounts members like us, but also to reach out to the analysts and train them on the importance of the job they have. It's a real coup for us. I think it says a lot about the calibre of the people who are hired here on the Hill. I just can't say enough about Dillan and the work he does. I know he's going to help us do a better job internationally.

Now I will go to my motion.

The Chair: Quickly, because I have quite a speakers list on it. We have a set period of time here and hopefully we'll get through it.

Mr. David Christopherson: "Hopefully" is a good word; you never know.

This is a very serious issue. I want to go straight to the key thing, to something that public accounts members, in my humble opinion, should be asking themselves. Exactly what the heck are you going to do in the next Parliament? Right now, under the current funding plan, when we get a chapter like this, it's part of a report. Within that report, which is done twice a year, we have anywhere from eight to 13 chapters. Today was one. This committee has been very efficient

and effective at hearings. I've been in other parliaments where we didn't do a fraction of the work, and that was deliberate. It was deliberate by the government members of the day to slow down the work of this committee and prevent accountability.

Right now, as I read the plans, the Auditor General has one planned performance audit for the fall 2019 report—one—and in 2020 there are three. Meanwhile, one of the areas the Auditor General wanted to look at was protecting Canada's north. Now that won't happen. Every single member of Parliament who represents a northern riding should be going out of their minds that there will be no accountability on the service government provides to their constituents. It won't happen. As important as that is, guess what other area will not be looked at next year: cybersecurity.

Now, Mr. Arya and others were kind enough to mention my longevity on this committee. One of the benefits of that is that I was here the last time we got the report on cybersecurity. It scared the living heck out of me and out of everybody who read it. The government responded and said, we get it and we're going to get on top of this thing. The report showed us that we were one of the most vulnerable in the G7. It was really, really worrisome. I know that my memory is not the best, but this goes back at least eight or 10 years, so it's been a decade hence.

We were in a bad place then, so after a decade, in an area as important as cybersecurity, where we had a failing report from the Auditor General, does it not make common sense, does it not seem prudent, that the Auditor General would go back in to see how they're doing and how we fare in the current climate? I think that makes sense. That's exactly what we want an Auditor General to do. We want them to keep an eye on these things and say it's time to go back in there and look at it. That's not going to happen.

It begs the question.... I heard my colleague Madam Mendès, whom I respect enormously, defending the government. I have to tell you, though, that in the absence of some kind of austerity program, which is what happened the last time the Auditor General's budget was reduced, I think in 2011, the government said....

I'm losing my train of thought here. What happened in 2011? Remind me; where am I?

• (1030)

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: They accepted the cuts.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you. I'm thinking three steps ahead and losing my current step.

There was a government-wide austerity program. Much to my chagrin—to tell you the truth—the Auditor General of the day said that they could live with those cuts because they saw themselves as being team players. They recognized that the government got elected with a mandate and that mandate was being carried out. Remember that they don't play politics. They follow the government, whomever the people decide will be that government. At the time, they felt that they could manage within the reduction and—here's the key thing, colleagues—not affect the work they do for Parliament. For us, that work is performance audits. It used to be called value-for-dollar audits.

I was raring for a good fight. Like today, I thought, “You're cutting the Auditor General?” What was I going to do, though? The Auditor General said they could do it. It's a non-partisan committee and if the AG says they can do it, then fair enough. They did it. We were not impacted by it.

This is the first time in Canadian history that the Auditor General has told Parliament that the executive branch is not giving them sufficient money to carry out their audit plan for the year ahead. As my colleague just said, they had to cancel them. Two of them were the ones that I mentioned. This has never happened before.

These are my last days here and I don't have to worry about getting elected. I have to tell you that I'm shocked it's you guys—the Libs. For one thing, it's the antithesis of what you talk about and what you ran on—accountability, transparency and service. A lot of my constituents bought into that argument because it's the kind of thing they want from government.

In the absence of an overall austerity program—which doesn't legitimize it, but at least provides an understandable context—there can only be two motivating reasons that I can think of. One is retaliation because we still have a funding mechanism where the very people the Auditor General audits also decide how much money they get. We just had an e-commerce report that didn't make the government look so good. They're the very people that the Auditor General had to sit down and negotiate with and they're the very people, for the first time in the history of Canada, who have said “no”. They recommended it up through the ministers and it's the ministers at the end of the day.

Don't kid yourself. We've all been around long enough. Staff reports matter. Staff recommendations matter. They got slammed by the Auditor General in that e-commerce report, yet they're the very same people they had to go to, cap in hand, to ask for funding—only this time they said “no”.

It's either retaliation—which would be unacceptable—or the government really is hiding from things like the cybersecurity report because they know what the last report said, and perhaps, I would assume, they know how much has been done or not done. There would also be people in government who would be very aware of what our threat level is, and whether it's improved in the last 10 years.

If you have enough arrogance to believe you're going to be the government when that report comes out, a sharp political move—unacceptable from an ethical point of view—that a good autocrat would act on is to make sure that audit doesn't happen. The thinking

is that the price of taking the heat for not providing adequate funding for the first time in Canadian history is less than the criticism they would get when that report comes out.

● (1035)

I have to say, I'm just perplexed as much as anything. If it was perhaps another party in power that had a different view of accountability and transparency, that might help me understand the context. For the life of me, I can't understand. Well, I haven't yet had a chance to hear from colleagues officially, so I won't speculate until I hear what they have to say on the record on this issue.

This is big. I can remember Tyler and I sitting up at night trying to figure out how we could force the government to give us one particular piece of information that we needed in a key hearing. I would just get myself so wrapped up and concerned that we needed that information.

Parliament is entitled to that information. Parliament needs that information. As I remind people a lot, Parliament is supreme—not the government. Parliament decides who government is. Parliament decides who the prime minister is. Parliament decides when the prime minister and the government get fired.

● (1040)

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: In principle.

Mr. David Christopherson: My colleague says “in principle”, but it is still the case.

When I look at something like this, where never mind a detail of information or a letter or a report that we need to do our job properly on an audit report, rather than that being what's in front of us, the issue is whether the bloody audit's going to be done, this is insane and I don't get the politics of it. That's why I say to the government members—through you, Chair, with respect—that I don't understand the politics of this.

Why on earth, on the doorstep of a federal election, would the Government of Canada pull funding or deny funding for one of the most motherhood departments in all of government?

The department and the person that I call the best friend Canadians have on Parliament Hill is the Auditor General, and in the ramp-up to an election, for the first time in Canadian history, the sitting government decides it's going to cut. That's assuming it's not cut but an increase denied, which has the effect of a cut.

Maybe Gerry Butts' leaving has left you with absolutely nobody with any strategic sense at all. I have to tell you that I was hoping that, once the you-know-what hit the fan, the message would go up through the system and there would be a minister somewhere who said, “Wait a minute, what?” I was a minister and you were a minister, Chair. You can't follow every single moving part, especially if you have a big ministry. You have to rely on your staff and you're approving things at a certain level. Trust me, \$10.8 million, the finance minister of this G7 country almost spills that much in a week.

It's not about the money. It can't be, with \$10.8 million. I think that's the number. That's chump change in terms of the federal budget, but in terms of the importance to Parliament, it's a thousand times greater.

If the politics make no sense—and they don't—there has to be another reason, and that's why I'm looking at this and I'm saying, there are only two that really come to my mind. It's revenge. It's Treasury Board officials—or if I'm wronging them, it's whomever the people are who sit down at the staff level and talk about budgets with our agents of Parliament. I remind colleagues that the OAG are not the executive's employees, not cabinet employees, but Parliament's employees, and this nonsense that we have a funding mechanism that says they have to go back to the very people they audit makes no sense.

The government—and I'll get to this a little later—made a commitment that it was going to provide an alternate mechanism. It hasn't happened. In fact, I didn't even know about this letter, but there was a letter in January of this year that went to the Clerk of the Privy Council, signed by all Parliament's—not the government's—officers, every one of them, basically saying, “You promised you were going to do this. It hasn't happened. We need it to happen quick.” That was January. Crickets!

So retaliation is.... I mean it's hard to believe in this country that something like that would happen, for those of us who know how this system works, but I'm desperately trying to find reasons that would explain to me why the government is doing this, because if we could figure out why they're doing it, then we can work at focusing on that and getting it unravelled. But for the life of me.... So that's one possibility.

• (1045)

The other.... I suppose there are three because there's also the unknown. Both of those could be wrong and there could be some other thing motivating it that I don't know. Fair enough, but when I look at that combatting cybersecurity and I think how important that is.... Think ahead. What if there was a report in a year or two that said we're more vulnerable than we were 10 years ago?

Mr. Chandra Arya: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, it's 10:45. With how much time is left, some of us have other engagements and consent is needed for continuation.

The Chair: All right. That is correct. We have about 45 seconds.

Just so everyone understands, on the moving of a motion, he has unlimited time. Therefore, he can do that.

We do have another committee coming in here. If we're unable to extend this, what I'm going to do is—

Mr. René Arseneault: Okay, that's fine.

Mr. David Christopherson: For the record, I didn't want an extension. I wasn't seeking one.

I'm sorry, Mr. Arya was asking about extending.

Nobody raised the issue. I assumed we'd adjourn at the usual time.

The Chair: On Tuesday, would we then come back and finish this?

Mr. David Christopherson: We would resume.

The Chair: On Tuesday, I think what we would do is the reports first, and then we would come to this, because we want to get—

Mr. David Christopherson: No, I understand that, but procedurally, I have the floor.

I defer to you, as you're the chair, but it seems to me that the next meeting is what we call a continuation of the previous meeting, because I have the floor. Therefore, when we come back, I have the floor, and when I'm done, we can move a vote on the motion and move to other items.

The Chair: Of course, I'm just consulting with the clerk here.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, of course.

The Chair: The clerk tells me that we also have an agenda, and the agenda has called for reports. It's not as though we have invited guests.

I'm in the committee's hands. Would you want to come back to committee business, or would you want to do the reports first and then move to committee business—or not committee business, but the estimates?

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: We do have to finish the estimates and we have a timeline for that, too.

The Chair: Would you like to do that at the beginning?

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: I'd like to ask Mr. Christopherson, in all good faith, what is his expectation? Is it taking another half-hour or another hour? Are we going to be able to deal with the reports? That's the question.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm going to give you as honest an answer as I can at this time.

I'm going to do everything I can to try to keep this issue alive, because my goal before we rise is to get the government to blink, to realize this is wrong and to put the money back. In the absence of that, I'm going to use every tool I have.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: That means we won't have reports to table. That's what it means.

Mr. David Christopherson: I've thought this through. There are three aspects to what we do. There's the audit itself, which is tabled and the public sees it. We hold a public hearing, which is the second big one. The third one is that we do reports.

The first two have been done with all the chapters. The issue I'm dealing with is whether there will even be audits to deal with next time, and I think it's more important—

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Arseneault: Mr. Chair, it is already too late. I have another committee meeting and I have to go.

[*English*]

The Chair: That is correct. Therefore, we are going to adjourn and we will come back next Tuesday.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the *Copyright Act*. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a Committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the *Copyright Act*.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its Committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <http://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.noscommunes.ca>