



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 042

Monday, July 12, 2021

Chair: Mr. Chris Warkentin



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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Chris Warkentin (Grande Prairie—Mackenzie, CPC)): I call to order the 42nd meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. I would like to remind colleagues that today's meeting is webcast and will be available through the House of Commons website. The committee is meeting today because of a request that I and the clerk received from four members of the committee, pursuant to Standing Order 106(4), to discuss a request to undertake a study of members' expenses related to Data Sciences and NGP VAN.

Now, given the ongoing restrictions here in the province of Ontario and in the House of Commons, based on the recommendations of health authorities, I'd like to remind members that there is a two-metre physical distancing requirement. Members must maintain masks when circulating throughout the rooms. Proper hand hygiene is encouraged as well. Hand sanitizer is available here in the room. As chair, I will be enforcing those measures. If you as members have any requests in terms of these requirements, please let me or the clerk know. Thank you for your co-operation.

I see that I have a speaking list starting to develop. Mr. Barrett has indicated he wants to go first, followed by Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Barrett, I will turn to you.

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

The reasons for the 106(4) letter that you referenced, which has us here today, are some concerning revelations that have been reported in the media, specifically The Globe and Mail, that deal with contracts involving Data Sciences, which is a company that was founded by an individual named Tom Pitfield. This individual is a personal lifelong friend of the Prime Minister, who is a member of the Liberal caucus. This individual is also a senior Liberal campaign strategist, and that organization, Data Sciences, has been an integral part, as publicly reported, of the Liberal Party of Canada's electoral campaigns and their voter contact database known as Liberalist. It helps with things like digital engagement for its campaigns.

Furthermore, NGP VAN is a company that the Liberal Party of Canada licenses to run its political database. NGP VAN and Data Sciences are reported by the folks who have been contacted by The Globe and Mail to do the same thing. We've seen the contract between the Liberal members who have signed and NGP VAN, and we know that Data Sciences is being contracted by Liberal members. The rationale once given by the company for the contract with

Data Sciences is that it provides technical support for the services provided by NGP VAN. The problem with this is that the contract that was published in The Globe and Mail details the service-level agreement including technical support for its own software, which raises the question, what is Data Sciences doing for the Liberal members? What are they getting from this contract?

When asked, some members of the Liberal caucus responded—and here I'll refer to a June 21 Globe and Mail article entitled “Liberal MPs’ budgets pay same firms that help run party’s digital campaigns”—as follows. The article reads in part:

Mr. Easter [the member for Malpeque] was unable to explain what Data Sciences did for his office in managing social media.

“I do my own,” he said. “I quite honestly don’t know what [Data Sciences] does,” he added.

Liberal MP John McKay also said he had no idea why money from his office budget was going to Mr. Pitfield’s company.

“I haven't got a clue,” he said. “I can't explain it. I vaguely recall that once a year we write a cheque and it's always been explained that it is within the ethical guidelines, so we all kind of sign up for it and it just goes into some oblivion”.

The concern as it relates to this committee, Chair, is that this places some members of the government—members of the Liberal caucus—in a conflict of interest based on their relationship with Mr. Pitfield. We have individuals who have personal friendships with public office holders. They're then given contracts by those public office holders, and, what's more, those individuals, in this case a minister, are in a position to direct or coordinate other members to retain those services for purposes that the members are unclear about.

Certainly in the context of our fiduciary responsibility to manage the funds that are entrusted to us in the exercise of our role as members of Parliament and to dispense funds from what we know as our MOB, our members' operating budget, it's important that we first of all understand why we're retaining the services of others. I also think it's important for Canadians to understand that signing contracts is not something a member can delegate. Members have to personally sign and authorize those contracts. There needs to be an understanding and certainly a basic awareness of what a contract is for. That's exercising a basic fiduciary responsibility.

• (1105)

When there is all of this context of those personal relationships, of that connection to a political organization, and when in these contracts it's very clear that there's an exclusivity, that the company will only deal with members of one political affiliation, in this case Liberal members, it raises all kinds of questions. The functionality of the software also raises questions about whether there is an ability to engage in very specific voter-related activities.

It's for those reasons that we initiated the call for this meeting. It's very important, when there seems to be an inevitable election coming this summer.... I welcome the Prime Minister's proving the speculators wrong on that, because now is not the time for an election. I think it's important that we understand whether or not taxpayer money from members' budgets has been used to subsidize the political operations of a political party in Canada. It's very important that we know that there's been no misappropriation of that money and that we understand that there have been no conflicts of interest in members' and ministers' exercise of their duties. That's what brings us here today.

With that said, Chair, I would like to move the following motion:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h)(vii), and in light of recent media reports, the committee undertake a study on conflicts of interest relating to taxpayer-funded contracts with Data Sciences Inc; and that the committee do invite Mr. Tom Pitfield to appear and testify before the committee at a time and date of the Chair's choosing and no later than seven days following the adoption of this motion.

Mr. Chair, that motion is available in both official languages in paper format, and it's been provided in electronic format to the clerk, so it's whatever your comfort or members' comfort is with receiving that in paper. Once that's been distributed, I just have a few final comments to make before other members speak to or against the motion.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, can we have some time to study the motion, since it's the first time the committee is seeing it? Can we have 10 minutes?

The Chair: What we'll do is circulate it. I will suspend the meeting until such time as it's been circulated. I'm not sure it will be for a full 10 minutes, but it will allow for members to at least read it before debate. I believe Mr. Barrett had some further comments to make, so it will allow members to read through that as well during that period of time.

We'll now suspend for just a moment....

Mr. Dong.

• (1110)

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): I believe it's the order that once a member moves a motion, he pretty much loses the floor. The floor is ceded to the next speaker.

The Chair: Mr. Barrett did not cede the floor. He did make it clear that he was circulating the motion to allow him to speak to it.

If it's the member's desire, we can continue and not suspend, if that's more helpful for members. I think there's a difference of opinion.

Mr. Han Dong: Is Mr. Barrett officially moving the motion?

The Chair: He's moving the motion, and he's made it clear that he has some comments to make with regard to the motion.

Mr. Han Dong: He has further comments. He isn't done moving the motion. That's part of the moving of the motion process.

Okay. Got it.

The Chair: We will suspend until such time as the motion is circulated.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1110)

(Pause)

• (1110)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

I believe the copies have been circulated.

Mr. Barrett, we will turn to you.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, with respect to the concerns about a conflict of interest, this is something that's been discussed in the last year—certainly the appearance of a conflict of interest—but we need to be, of course, cognizant of actual conflicts of interests as well. Mr. Pitfield's personal relationship and the question that it raises.... As I initially identified, there is that relationship with the Prime Minister, but there's also a relationship with other ministers of the Crown as well—Minister Miller, Minister O'Regan. The connection to the Liberal Party is as close as you could get, because at the time these contracts were initially signed, Mr. Pitfield was married to the then Liberal Party of Canada president. Moreover, the Prime Minister's principal secretary at the time, Mr. Butts, was also a personal friend of Mr. Pitfield.

These close relationships, when awarding a contract.... We talk about the magnitude of the two contracts, but whether it's tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars, we are responsible for ensuring that not only do we spend the money wisely so that we can serve our constituents with those members' office budgets, but that we also make sure that we're not undermining the public's confidence in what we do here and how we got here.

As I mentioned before, in the context of an election, if members of a party are taking the funds from those office budgets to help subsidize the political operations of a political party, which will ultimately be the same banner they run under in the next election, well, that is going to give rise to concern among Canadians about the independence of and the confidence they can have in their elected officials and public institutions. It's that perception, but also that real conflict when we have those close relationships.

There's also the dynamic of when the party whip, as reported in the newspaper, is the one coordinating or directing members to all procure the same service provider. Members aren't given a whole lot of leeway. You know, the party whip has one job, and it's to get people to do what the government wants them to do. The whip assigns committee roles. The whip assigns your seat in the chamber. Certainly, if things aren't going well between you and the party whip, you're not going to find yourself on the front bench or serving as a parliamentary secretary or a committee chair if you're in a party that is first or second in the House.

It's certainly concerning. It creates the perfect storm for conflict when you have those personal relationships with members at the cabinet table and you have a member at the cabinet table directing or coordinating other members to all procure the services of this individual and their company. Then, what is that company actually doing? Is there a benefit for service? Well, that remains unclear. We have two Liberal members saying they have no idea what the services are for, and then we have the response from the Liberal research bureau as to what the company is doing for them, while those very same members have also signed a contract for a company that's providing the identical service, in terms of technical support, as NGP VAN is for them.

That's the crux of the matter here. I do think this is something that we can deal with rather expeditiously. I think we can address this issue. If it's simply miscommunication, or a lack of information, perhaps members today will be able to enlighten us on exactly what this contract does in their office. That might go a long way. It might shorten the length of time we would need to devote to this. Perhaps, if Mr. Pitfield were available, if this motion passes, we could dispense with this matter before the end of the week. I know that folks have travelled to Ottawa. We could get this done over a couple of quick meetings after today.

• (1115)

I think that would go a long way to reassuring Canadians about what's happening in their democratic institutions on the eve of an election.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have a speaking list that has developed here: Mr. Carrie, Mr. Boulerice, and then Mrs. Shanahan.

Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank Mr. Barrett for bringing this up. This really speaks to the fundamental transparency of our electoral system. I was extremely concerned when I read about this in *The Globe and Mail*, especially now as we are wading towards an unnecessary election. Canadians deserve to know where their money is going. It's very clear that Mr. Pitfield is a partisan actor here. He did the work for the Liberal Party in the 2015 and 2019 political campaigns, and my understanding is that he is going to be doing the same thing again. However, he is being paid by Liberal members out of their operating budgets. As Mr. Barrett pointed out, and what

many Canadians don't understand, is that our operating budgets are for our constituents.

In my office we look after seniors, veterans, people who are looking for benefits, and immigration. To have their taxpayer dollars, especially during this pandemic, going for partisan purposes is something that concerns everyone, because it does speak to the fundamental transparency of our system. What's extremely disturbing to me is what appears to be the connection here, in that these are more Liberal insiders. In other words here's Mr. Pitfield, who is one of the Prime Minister's best friends. Let's just talk about this relationship here. He grew up with him. Their fathers were best friends. He went to that illegal vacation with the Prime Minister and his wife, with his wife, who was the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada. Then we find out through the media about these secret agreements, these contracts. Even Liberal MPs don't even know what his company is doing. We have a copy of the contract with the company that is supposed to be doing it, NGP VAN, and we found out that there was a centralized campaign that was steered by the party whip. Mr. Barrett clearly pointed out—and I don't think Canadians realize who the party whip is—that the party whip is the guy who has the whip. He tells you about discipline, about what to do and what not to do, and when he presents a contract to members to sign, as *The Globe and Mail* reported, 97% of Liberal MPs signed that thing.

I just wonder what kind of pressure there would be for me as a member of Parliament if my whip came up and said, "sign this", because our functions here at the House and everything is determined by the whip's office. Whether we're sitting on a certain committee or whether it's in terms of the influence to become a minister or a parliamentary secretary, the pressure on members of Parliament would be enormous. I would just look at which members of Parliament didn't sign this and what they're doing right now. That will be interesting as we investigate this further.

The government has been asked these questions, and it hasn't been forthcoming. The situation we're in right now is one of pre-election. We see the Prime Minister going out and spending taxpayers' money right, left, and centre. As I said, members' operating budgets are for our constituents. This is something that was organized through a minister's office, through the whip directive to other ministers and members of Parliament, and if this is true, Mr. Chair, a conflict of interest has occurred. Liberal ministers having a relationship with a company and forcing contracts to be signed between members of Parliament and a personal friend of the Prime Minister for services that apparently are being covered by another company is an outrageous abuse of our privileges here, Mr. Chair.

• (1120)

This is something on which, as Mr. Barrett says, there may just be a miscommunication. I think Canadians deserve to know where their tax dollars are going, and given the history of this Prime Minister, we need to get to the bottom of it as quickly as possible.

The Chair: Mr. Boulerice.

[*Translation*]

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

Good morning, everyone.

Obviously, we in the NDP were also disturbed when we learned from media reports that almost the entire Liberal caucus had given a portion of its parliamentary funding to a company called Data Sciences, which is in part responsible for running the Liberalist database. Another company, NGP VAN, is also paid by the Liberal Party of Canada to run the database.

The lines have been blurred; this is a grey area. People are rightly asking questions. Is the Liberal Party of Canada spending parliamentary funds on a database that it uses for partisan purposes? It is entirely appropriate for us to ask that question, especially since Data Sciences is owned by Thomas Pitfield, a personal friend of the Prime Minister. It feels as though the record got stuck at the same spot and history is repeating itself: the Liberals are helping friends of the Liberal Party and making no bones about reportedly using taxpayer money to do so.

Questions have to be asked. The facts have to come out. No stone should be left unturned in getting to the truth.

We agree that Mr. Pitfield should appear as a witness. We need to hear from him. We have questions for him. However, we don't want this to turn into a free-for-all or some flagrantly partisan spectacle. In light of the unanswered questions before us, we think two hours with Mr. Pitfield would probably be long enough to ask the necessary questions, and obtain the clarity and information to either reassure Canadians or worry them even more.

We are amenable to the motion that was put forward by the member and is currently before the committee, but we would like it to specify that the committee will hold only one meeting on the subject. With only one witness, two hours should be plenty of time for the committee to examine the issue. We are not interested in spending all summer on this. It would be a misuse of taxpayer money to drag this out doggedly if the issue could be dealt with in two hours.

We are in favour of holding one meeting with Mr. Pitfield as the witness.

• (1125)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll turn to Mrs. Shanahan.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Usually, it's quite nice to see everyone in person, but to be honest, I don't sense much enthusiasm in the room today, and I wonder why. In the past, we have seen Mr. Barrett muster up a lot more passion for other issues. Perhaps the reason is that there is nothing to this issue, so it can hardly arouse any passion.

I do, however, want to take this opportunity to answer a basic question. What does Data Sciences do? Allow me to explain.

I, for one, know that the firm provides my office with technical support. Mr. Gourde, Ms. Gaudreau and Mr. Boulerville will probably understand when I say that finding IT support in French is real-

ly tough, especially for English-based software. Data Sciences provides that service. It is a Canadian company that hires bilingual employees with the skills to provide us with the service we need.

I went over the monthly invoices, and they look like any other invoices for technical support: \$200 here, \$149 there. The company provides a valuable service for my French-speaking constituents and staff. That is what the company does. An American company can't provide services in French. As for the company's anglophone services, the fact that it's Canadian makes it that much better.

Those of us on this side are wondering what the point of all this is, but at the end of the day, we know full well why we are here. We know exactly why the members across the way don't want to let the summer go by without summoning us to Ottawa. Suddenly, it's no longer time to talk election, even though they have repeatedly voted against the government. In their minds, it's time for the fake scandal of the summer, as I like to call it, and they are doing their darndest to stir one up.

I feel really sorry for everyone out there who hung around Mr. Trudeau in the schoolyard when they were children. I imagine that, right now, someone is compiling a list of all the Prime Minister's friends from school. "Found one; let's investigate. Here's one who owns a business; let's check it out."

We've seen it all before on this committee, haven't we? Luckily, we were meeting virtually then, not in person. People with the slightest hint of a connection to anyone in the Liberal Party were called as witnesses. They were hauled before the committee so members could pick holes in their story. They were regular folks. I'm sure everyone recalls the appearance of Martin Perlmutter, one of the owners of Speakers' Spotlight. I found it uncomfortable to listen to the questions asked of him and others. He was simply doing his job—hiring people to give talks—but he had the misfortune of doing business with someone connected to the Prime Minister. That was all it took to unleash the name-calling. It was all over social media.

Mr. Chair, I'm still waiting for certain members of the committee to apologize, for that matter. Luckily, the chair apologized at the time, but I'm still waiting for their apologies.

I won't get into all that, though, because I would have a whole lot more to say on the subject.

• (1130)

I was glad, however, to see the media report on political parties' collection and use of data. That is already an important issue here, in Parliament, but it does not fall within this committee's purview. Matters pertaining to the activities of political parties are normally dealt with by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs or the Board of Internal Economy.

This committee deals instead with public office holders, in other words, those who hold the position of minister or top public servants. It is not the committee's job to investigate what goes on in this person's or that person's office. I'm looking at you, Mr. Gourde, but it could just as easily be my, your or Ms. Lattanzio's office. That is not the committee's job.

In a moment, I'm going to ask the clerk to recap the committee's mandate for us. It's been a long time since we've all reviewed it together. I know that you, Mr. Boulerice, have experience and know exactly what I mean. Every committee has a specific mandate and purpose. This committee examines matters pertaining to four commissioners, the Ethics Commissioner, the Privacy Commissioner, the Commissioner of Lobbying and I forget the fourth one. Can anyone help me out?

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): The Information Commissioner.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That's it, the Information Commissioner. In fact, we had plans to study access to information issues. We wanted to do more work in that area.

That said, the news articles before us mention more than just the Liberal members and poor Mr. Pitfield, who has the misfortune of being Justin Trudeau's friend. The Conservatives are also mentioned. According to the reports, the Conservatives have their own system. If I understand correctly, it isn't paid for by the House, but the purpose is to reach out to citizens who are not necessarily donors or voters. It's combined. I'd like to know more about the system; I think it's very interesting.

I'll tell you something, Mr. Barrett. Ten years ago, I donated \$50 to the Conservative Party. That was in Jim Flaherty's day.

• (1135)

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Barrett: More, more, more!

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That's the truth. Jim Flaherty was working on financial literacy. Do you know that I still receive emails from certain members sent from their Assistant 1 accounts? I made a donation to the party, but I receive emails from constituency offices. Interesting, isn't it? Perhaps we should look into that. I think it's very important.

Let's get back to the information before us relating to the Liberal Party. We've had contracts with these two companies for years. The company with the odd name—what is it again? Here it is. It's called NGP VAN. That company provides the software. It's a long-standing contract. It's the same company we deal with for the Liberalist database, but there's what they call a firewall between the two systems. All the big IT companies have that because of all their differ-

ent clients. If another party ever wanted to do business with the company, it could have the opportunity.

Nevertheless, we've seen all the attempts by the member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes—what a lovely name for a riding, by the way. He and his party are going out of their way to find the name of every single business person who is a Liberal. It's actually not a crime to be a Liberal. We all have our political allegiances in life. We want people to engage in civic life. We want people to be politically active. That's what democracy is all about. According to Mr. Barrett, however, it is unacceptable to own a business and do business with our party. Clearly, this is yet another witch hunt. They have found nothing. Isn't that right? The Ethics Commissioner released his report, but the findings probably weren't what the opposition members were hoping for.

As I said earlier, I'd really appreciate having the clerk talk about the mandate of this committee and that of the Board of Internal Economy. It may not cover everything, but I have a snippet here.

This is what the Standing Orders say about this committee's mandate:

- (h) Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics shall include, among other matters:
- (i) the review of and report on the effectiveness, management and operation, together with the operational and expenditure plans relating to the Information Commissioner;
 - (ii) the review of and report on the effectiveness, management and operation, together with the operational and expenditure plans relating to the Privacy Commissioner;
 - (iii) the review of and report on the effectiveness, management and operation, together with the operational and expenditure plans relating to the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner;
 - (iv) the review of and report on the effectiveness, management and operation, together with the operational and expenditure plans relating to the Commissioner of Lobbying;
 - (v) the review of and report on reports of the Privacy Commissioner, the Information Commissioner, the Commissioner of Lobbying and the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner with respect to his or her responsibilities under the Parliament of Canada Act relating to public office holders and on reports tabled pursuant to the Access to Information Act and the Privacy Act, which shall be severally deemed permanently referred to the committee immediately after they are laid upon the table;

That brings me to Standing Order 108(3)(h)(vi):

- (vi) in cooperation with other committees, the review of and report on any federal legislation, regulation or standing order which impacts upon the access to information or privacy of Canadians or the ethical standards of public office holders;
- (vii) the proposing, promoting, monitoring and assessing of initiatives which relate to access to information and privacy across all sectors of Canadian society and to ethical standards relating to public office holders;

and any other matter which the House shall from time to time refer to the standing committee.

• (1140)

It's clear, then, that the committee's mandate relates only to the work of those four commissioners or a special project, such as the one on the security of personal information or the one on new technologies, which we tried to undertake and hope to have a chance to complete. Nevertheless, the parliamentary institution that deals with issues of a more political and partisan nature, and matters relating to the expenditures of members is the Board of Internal Economy.

We have all seen cases where members misused their funding and had to go before the Board of Internal Economy to defend themselves. They faced fines or restrictions as a result of their actions.

As we all know, the Board of Internal Economy is made up of members from every recognized party. That is one of the principles of Parliament: members are to settle issues related to the activities of other members.

Here we all are, meeting today. I'm not sure what things are like in your neck of the woods, but we are probably all trying to enjoy a bit of downtime with our families. In my province, things are good and we are able to go out. I've even participated in a few activities put on by not-for-profit organizations. Businesses have been able to hire students. Things are good, and we are able to serve our constituents. That is the whole point of using any software to manage constituency work. For instance, these systems help us identify where farmers who need to be consulted are. Right now, I'm consulting with stakeholders and organizations that work with people with disabilities. It's really important to have access to systems like these, which help us do our job. I hope no one here is going to dismiss the importance of having access to service in French as well. I hope everyone understands just how important it is to have this type of technical support available in both official languages.

It's hard to stop once you get going, but I will leave it there. Now I'll switch to English to explain what I'd like to do.

[English]

I will now move the following amendment:

Whereas section 52.6 of the Parliament of Canada Act states that, in relation to the BOIE, “the Board has the exclusive authority to determine whether any previous, current or proposed use by a member of the House of Commons of any funds, goods, services or premises made available to that member for the carrying out of parliamentary functions is or was proper, given the discharge of the parliamentary functions of members of the House of Commons, including whether any such use is or was proper having regard to the intent and purpose of the by-laws made under subsection 52.5(1)”, I move that the motion be amended by adding, after the word “That”, the following:

the issue of contracts related to Data Sciences be referred to the BOIE. That the issue of the CIMS system which facilitates partisan election related actions to be taken from constituency offices and parliament hill offices to determine if they are in compliance with the rules set out by the Board also be referred to the BOIE.

• (1145)

[Translation]

I have it in English only. Can I send it to you?

[English]

The Chair: Mrs. Shanahan, if you have that sent over to the clerk so that it can be circulated, I will review it then.

Members, we will suspend for a couple of minutes until such point as....

Monsieur Boulerice, you have a point of order.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I do, indeed, have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Liberals' amendment is in English only. Is there a French version? If not, it is out of order, in my view.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Usually, we have it translated, but this time, I have only the English version. My apologies.

If you give us a bit of time, we can have the amendment in French. I should say that it's largely based on the wording from our package.

[English]

Should we work on it, and...?

The Chair: It would be helpful if you would supply it to the clerk in both official languages.

[Translation]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Great.

[English]

The Chair: That makes it much faster, in our experience.

We'll suspend until such time as it has been distributed in both official languages.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1145)

(Pause)

• (1200)

The Chair: We'll call the meeting back to order.

The amendment has been circulated. It would insert the text sent by Ms. Shanahan between the words “That” and “pursuant”. Based on the amendment, it would add to the motion proposed by Mr. Barrett. That is the amendment.

As the chair, I'm in a little bit of a conflicted position in that I don't know that it's out of order for us to do this, but I do know that that is not done: Committees don't tell other committees, and don't have the power to tell other committees, what to do. So we are restricted. This amendment, based on the way it has been proposed, would simply be an addition to the motion and the instruction that Mr. Barrett's motion would provide. It would effectively make simultaneous or concurrent investigations by two separate committee, if in fact BOIE took up the recommendation. We aren't able to instruct other committees what to do.

I do have a speaking order on this. We have Mr. Barrett, Ms. Lattanzio, Mr. Fergus, Mr. Carrie and Madame Gaudreau.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I'm sorry, but my amendment would remove everything afterwards. It is a request that it be moved that—

The Chair: That wasn't what was submitted.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Okay.

The Chair: Would you like to withdraw your amendment?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: No.

The Chair: Okay.

We will debate the amendment as it has been proposed.

Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon (Gatineau, Lib.): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, could you just read the amendment, then, and the motion as it would be amended?

The Chair: I believe you all had it sent to you. Effectively, Ms. Shanahan's amendment would be inserted, as it prescribes, after the word "That" of Mr. Barrett's motion. Ms. Shanahan's amendment would be inserted there as per her instructions.

Mr. Barrett.

• (1205)

Mr. Michael Barrett: This is on the same point of order, Chair, before you recognize me in the speaking order.

The Chair: I'm recognizing you on a point of order, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: The amendment seems to deviate from the scope of the original motion. It seems to me that by referring it to another committee and including other elements that are not included in the original motion and that are not part of members' disclosures because they are not paid for by members' office budgets, we've really gone off track here from the original motion.

I'm not sure, Chair, if you can give us a definitive ruling, but if you're ruling this motion in order, because based on that, I question whether or not it's within the scope of the original motion.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I understand what my colleague just said, but in terms of the interventions that have been made here this morning, the original motion of my colleague speaks to "in light of recent media reports". Well, media reports, if we base ourselves on the various articles of The Globe and Mail, have discussed not just the ones that are pertinent to what my colleague is putting into his motion. We've spoken about the CIMS and Populus and about other data that have been used by all of the various parties. I think on that point, the amendment of my colleague Ms. Shanahan is very much on point.

Mr. Barrett, you make reference to "in light of recent media reports" on this issue. The issue, if I'm understanding you correctly, is with regard to using constituency data for political purposes. The participants this morning have referred to these media reports. I think that's why you came up with this motion.

In all fairness, Mr. Chair, I think the amendment is very pertinent.

The Chair: I'm recognizing Mr. Carrie on the same point of order.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Yes. I wanted to speak to this point of order, Mr. Chair. What I'm concerned about is that we've seen this tactic before by the Liberals. They like to talk out an issue that they really don't want to address. I'm concerned because the amendment is, in my viewpoint, ridiculous. To be sending....

She mentioned CIMS in her statement. My colleague mentioned taxpayer dollars versus partisan dollars. It seems the Liberals have no idea about the difference between them. The CIMS is not using taxpayer dollars. The original motion that we're talking about is about the Liberal Party using members' operating budget dollars, taxpayer dollars, to fund partisan activities. That's what we're talking about. The scope of her amendment is entirely beyond the scope of anything we would be doing here. I would submit that even the Board of Internal Economy wouldn't be looking at it, because they look after members' operating budgets. They don't look after partisan activities at all.

Mr. Chair, I think we're going to end up talking this out because the Liberals just don't want to deal with this—again—and I'm worried about a cover-up.

The Chair: On the point of order, gentlemen, I will go to Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

On the point of order raised by my colleague Dr. Carrie, I would just like to make sure that we understand, that everyone understands, that CIMS is paid for by the party to be used for partisan purposes. The real issue is that CIMS is also being used by constituency and Hill staff, who are paid with taxpayer dollars. Therefore, who pays for the actual database is not relevant. It's that the staff, paid by taxpayer dollars, are doing partisan work by using that partisan database from their offices or from their equipment, which is also paid for by taxpayer dollars.

Mr. Chair, that's the reason. I'm just clarifying that for Dr. Carrie.

• (1210)

The Chair: Okay.

It seems that we've gotten into a point of debate. I believe the point of order was Ms. Shanahan's originally. She was making a point of order with regard to whether her text would be inserted or whether it would replace existing text. I have ruled that, based on how she submitted it, it would be inserted between the words "That" and "pursuant". This would be an addition.

It is not common—it is something that actually is impossible—for one committee to tell another committee what to do, but I am going to allow this amendment to be voted on by the committee members to determine. Whether or not they appreciate our instruction, if in fact it passes, that's up to them. I think it would probably be best to move to a vote on the amendment, if the committee would allow for that. Then we can get on with debate on either the amended motion or the original motion.

We'll move to a vote, unless members want to....

We still have a speaking list. Okay. We'll go back to a speaking list on the amendment.

I'm getting different signals here. Some don't want to go back to the speakers—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I have a point of order.

[*English*]

The Chair: We can go to a vote or we can have—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Before you call the vote, could you please tell us again what we are voting on, so we know exactly what's what.

[*English*]

The Chair: The debate right now is on the amendment. It's just on the amendment. It's not on the motion but on the amendment from Ms. Shanahan.

If members want to speak to that, I do have a list of members.

Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks very much, Chair.

Let me go back to some of the remarks Ms. Shanahan made. She called this a fake scandal. I wonder where we've heard before the Liberals say that the story in *The Globe and Mail* is false. Well, of course we know that this came directly from Prime Minister Trudeau when they laid out the case that ultimately saw him found guilty, for a second time, of breaking ethics laws. That's the commentary we get from the Liberals when they say that they don't believe the story, that they don't believe *The Globe and Mail* reporting. It's as close to calling it fake news as we might get, but they call it a fake scandal. Well, that's certainly their purview.

I mean, I wonder if Mr. Easter, who's quoted in that original article, is getting real bang for his buck with that French-language translation service, if he's really digging deep with that. I wonder if all of the dozens and dozens and dozens and dozens of Liberal members are availing themselves of that. We have seen before that the Liberals will procure the services of a company that is completely unable to fulfill their obligations in the service of French-speaking Canadians. We saw that with the WE scandal. They said there was only one company in the world that could deliver the CSSG for them, and it was this WE group, but they were going to need—

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: I have a point of order.

The Chair: I'm recognizing a point of order.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Is this on a point of order? Are we—

The Chair: No, we're on the speaking list. We're on the debate—

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: It's on the amendment.

The Chair: It's on the amendment.

Go ahead, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Well, I'm glad that we have Mr. MacKinnon joining our show already in progress. Welcome to the committee, Mr. MacKinnon.

Yes, you may not have had the opportunity to hear all of the outrageous claims that were made by your colleagues on why the WE organization was selected to deliver a program that it couldn't possibly deliver on, which was why the government had to sub out French language services if it were to deliver the CSSG in Quebec. We have a real pattern here. The Liberals say, "Yes, we have this great service provider, but they can only do half the job. They can't serve French language constituents, so we're going to pay somebody else to deliver on that service as well."

Ms. Shanahan also talked about the committee's ability to handle this matter. The Standing Orders are very clear in subparagraph 108(3)(h)(vii):

the proposing, promoting, monitoring and assessing of initiatives which relate to access to information and privacy across all sectors of Canadian society and to ethical standards relating to public office holders;

Therefore, this study is quite clearly within the mandate of our committee. I'm sure they'd like to talk about lots of other things, such as what Conservatives do, so if we're going to talk about what we do in our offices, I'm glad that we brought it up. I'm happy to tell the members of the committee that in my office we use a program called CivicTrack. We don't use any other software.

I'd be very interested to hear about their data management practices. You've heard mine. You can see that disclosure and you can talk to my staff. In fact, some are here. If we wanted to get this under way today, I'd be happy to have my staff talk to the committee about how we exercise our function and how we are appropriately stewarding taxpayer dollars.

I have a lot of questions about what's happening on the other side of the table. That's why it's so important that we hear from Mr. Pitfield. This amendment that we have from the Liberals is a red herring. They want us to chase this amendment and run out the clock.

We're here to deal with something. We can deal with it very quickly. I would be very happy to support an amendment to the main motion that, as Mr. Boulерice suggested, would see us meet for two hours. Once we've dispensed with this, I'd be pleased to deal with that idea. If the intention is that members want to add all of the parties' data management software and all the independent service providers they use and give the Board of Internal Economy lots of work to do over the summer, I guess it would be up to BOIE if it wanted to take up the task, but let's talk about what this committee can do. This committee, today, can decide to deal with this issue.

I think it's very serious when we have a potential conflict of interest and we have a minister of the Crown directing other members on how to spend their office budgets. Those members have no idea how it works. Let's not fall for any parlour tricks today. Let's instead focus on what we're here to discuss, and that's taxpayer dollars being spent on a contract that's very problematic for the Liberals. Let's deal with that.

Once we've dealt with the amendment that's on the floor, Mr. Chair, I'd be pleased to move an amendment to the motion in support of Mr. Boulérice's suggestion that we deal with this issue expeditiously, potentially even concluding it this week.

• (1215)

The Chair: I'm going to continue down the speaking list. If members don't want to speak to the amendment but would like to speak to something else, just indicate that you no longer desire to speak to it.

Madame Lattanzio, you have the floor.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Formally, I'd like to say hello to my colleagues, whom I haven't seen in person in a while. It feels good to see each and every one of you here today.

I'm not exactly sure why we're here, Mr. Chair. For the past few weeks since the House has—

The Chair: Madame Lattanzio, we are speaking to the amendment. We are discussing the—

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Yes, I'm going to get to it. I'm speaking to the amendment.

The Chair: It's to the amendment. Okay. Very good.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you.

I'm not sure why we are here today, and I'm going to get to the amendment. I think most of us are busy in our constituency offices, meeting our constituents and doing our work. Having sat on this committee, albeit as a new member, I've seen what has transpired in the last year and the witch hunts that have been brought about time and time again. We are essentially using taxpayers' dollars to go on these witch hunts, but even beyond that, we have mandated this committee to conduct investigations that are concurrent with those of other committees. Talk about a waste of time and talk about a waste of taxpayers' money.

We've seen these attempts time and time again from the member from Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes

while the government has been focused on delivering the vaccine and helping Canadians recover from this pandemic. However, we are here today. We have met solely in service of the Conservative ambitions many times over the course of the past year, but what clearly makes this time different from the last is the clear-cut fact that this committee doesn't even have the jurisdiction to investigate what Mr. Barrett is bringing forward.

He spoke a few minutes ago, and I heard him, when he quoted our committee mandate in access to information, privacy and ethics, which is subparagraph 108(3)(h)(vii), I believe. I'm going to read it again for the benefit of our members here today. It says:

the proposing, promoting, monitoring and assessing of initiatives which relate to access to information and privacy across all sectors of Canadian society and to ethical standards relating to public office holders

In his motion, he wants to have Mr. Pitfield present here. Mr. Pitfield is not a public office holder, so it has become quite clear what road we are embarking on: This is basically not to fulfill the mandate of this committee but to go yet again on another witch hunt.

Our committees are neither investigative nor judicial bodies. You cannot simply call this committee together and propose on a whim to undertake a political witch hunt because it happens to be a politically self-serving issue of the day. This place is governed by the rules and statutes that were constituted when this place first began sitting as the Parliament of Canada and established the long-running traditions by which we operate today.

The amendment proposed by my colleague—and I won't read it, because she has—is, I think, the appropriate forum for this issue, if there is an issue. Again, the motion states quite clearly, almost makes an allegation, that there is a conflict of interest. It makes that allegation without even having any basis for it. I think the amendment would allow the committee to be able to investigate and do its work, and look at not just the Liberal database but also the CIMS. If we are to be transparent—and in the words of my colleague Dr. Carrie, we need to be transparent—then let's be transparent and let's do it with the other software being used.

Anyone reading this section proposed by my colleague can clearly deduce that the Board of Internal Economy retains complete discretion to determine how members use parliamentary resources. There is no mention here of any other parliamentary committee in that section. In fact, it has long been an accepted fact that the board can handle these types of matters.

I'm a little confused, Mr. Chair, as to why my colleague and his colleagues seem to think that we have the jurisdiction to even investigate this matter. The Board of Internal Economy itself, as we know, is composed of members of all recognized parties, and it is they who set out the rules and regulations by which we conduct ourselves. As to how members discharge the public funds they are entrusted with, the board has compiled the Members' Allowances and Services Manual, which lays out very clearly how we are to conduct ourselves as members in regard to our budgets, and how organizations like our research bureau, the whips' offices and the House leaders' offices should also conduct business with public funds.

• (1220)

The rules and guidelines laid out in the members' services manual are very clear about how we should conduct ourselves in expending public funds. I believe that each and every member in the House, and indeed around this table, strives to ensure that they follow the rules as laid out in the said manual.

When disputes have arisen in the past about the use of funds within our budget, these matters were taken up by the BOIE and handled accordingly. I think we have to ask ourselves, "What is different about this situation, such that we should diverge from past precedence in how these matters are handled?"

The truth is that nothing is different—nothing but the political opportunity that is present for the opposition.

I think we can all agree that we are here today in service to the constituents who elected us to represent them. It is a humbling job—especially when you are first elected, as I am—to know that you are responsible for advancing the best interests of your community in making decisions that will affect your family, friends and neighbours. As members of Parliament, we are required to help anyone in our community, no matter their political affiliation, whether they voted for us or not. Our service to our communities is to blind ourselves to partisan interests, and it should be so.

In our duties as members of Parliament, we are often required to help our constituents access the many resources of the federal government and to triage the issues that arise out of that assistance. I think we can all agree that with roughly, more or less, 70,000 constituents in each of our respective ridings at a minimum, keeping orderly track of casework and requests for assistance is essential to completing our work as members.

All parties here freely admit that we maintain constituent management systems to help us track requests for assistance from constituents and to ensure that we are able to provide all necessary assistance and follow up afterwards to ensure that casework has been handled to the constituents' satisfaction. A constituent management database is there to help us organize case files and track the progress of constituency issues or constituents' issues to ensure that they are followed up and completed properly. It is not out of the ordinary, nor is it inappropriate. It is an expected part of our job as parliamentarians. It is not out of the ordinary for parties to operate their constituent management databases on software similar to their electoral databases. Frankly, it makes sense. Members and staff are already familiar with electoral databases. Basing constituent management databases on the same user experience enables members

and staff to quickly access and operate a user-friendly and familiar system.

The important distinction here is the presence of a complete firewall between these databases to ensure that the information collected in an official capacity is not mixed with partisan databases. That's what's important here. Our caucus maintains the highest standards in this regard, as has been noted, and we work with the contractors who manage our databases to ensure that there is no crossover between the two.

We are not the only party that operates this way. Both the NDP and the Conservatives do the same. The NDP openly admitted this on July 9 of last week in a *Globe and Mail* article that quoted a member who also sits on this committee. It's been a well-known fact for well over 15 years now that the Conservatives' CIMS database operates in a similar capacity as well.

• (1225)

I'd like to quote the member as cited in *The Globe and Mail*: "I am not sure they are using it in a way that would actually contravene rules. It would have to be established that they are turning constituency data over for political purposes. Every political party has a data wing and a constituency wing." The member from the NDP also said his party also uses the database provider Populus for political and campaign work, and a different version from the same company for constituency casework. "There is a pretty clear firewall" between the two services, he said.

I find it very disingenuous that all of a sudden the Conservative members of this committee have decided that there is something inappropriate or nefarious with members' tracing casework with constituency and constituents, especially when they do it themselves. Ms. Shanahan has given you an example of how she's been contacted time and time again from an A1 account after a donation that she made many moons ago. Therefore, the question arises as to who's doing what and who's using what database.

I think, Mr. Chair, in the words of my colleague Mr. Carrie this morning, let's be transparent. Let's examine everything, but this committee does not have the mandate to do so. I think it's appropriate that it be sent to BOIE. Thank you.

• (1230)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Ferguson.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Ferguson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to start by thanking the member from Montreal for her well-reasoned comments. She made some excellent points.

Certainly, in this day and age, every party on Parliament Hill uses databases so members can manage the work of their constituency and Hill offices, and that's perfectly fine. Having access to such tools means we can serve people effectively. These systems help us track who has contacted us and why, whether it's the first or fifth time we've been in contact, and if the issues are connected. It's perfectly normal.

It's also perfectly normal for every party to use a database for partisan purposes, such as to remember who they have interacted with and in relation to what.

However, there can be no mixing of the data from the two systems. The databases must not communicate with one another. They are required to operate as stand-alone systems—hence, the firewall, which as everyone knows, works without a hitch.

I saw what the NDP member from northern Ontario had to say on the subject. He agreed, saying his party makes sure the two databases operate independently of one another. Our party does pretty much the exact same thing.

This is an issue I'm quite familiar with. In a past life, long before I became a member of Parliament, I was the national director of the Liberal Party of Canada. I was the one who did the research and signed the contract with NGP VAN. I'm very proud of our work on that file. We really brought the Liberal Party into the modern age. Prior to that, all we had were paper-based lists; it was a bit makeshift. We made a decision to enter the 21st century by adopting a highly flexible IT system. Not only does it offer a considerable degree of flexibility, but it also has an excellent track record for ensuring a separation between certain data.

It would be preposterous to have a system without a firewall. If that were the case, the company's reputation would be ruined and no one would do business with it. Use of the system isn't limited to Canada; it's a well-honed system that has long been used in the United States. Personally, I think it's the best system out there, but I imagine the Conservatives would say their system is better than ours.

Mr. Barrett, you mentioned CivicTrack or Softchoice.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'm the only one who uses it.

Mr. Greg Fergus: It's only you. I see.

I imagine the Conservative Party of Canada is proud of CIMS, its system, and the NDP is surely proud of its system, Populus. I commend both parties.

What worries me, as Ms. Lattanzio and Mrs. Shanahan have already pointed out, is that this smells of a witch hunt.

Mr. Barrett is acting like he's being entirely reasonable by saying he would support holding just one two-hour meeting with witnesses, but we've heard that line numerous times over the past 15 months. Every time someone appears, they mention another name, and suddenly the committee has to probe further, even if it's not at all relevant. We have to invite someone else, and so it goes.

Forgive me, then, if I'm a bit hesitant to go along with this.

• (1235)

[*English*]

I've been down that rabbit hole before.

[*Translation*]

Even if you think I'm wrong, Mr. Chair, I know I stand on solid footing when it comes to the role of this committee versus that of the Board of Internal Economy. I won't repeat what my fellow members have already said, since they did a good job of articulating this committee's responsibilities. They also pointed out that another committee is entrusted with examining the spending and activities—past and current—of members and their constituency offices, and that committee is the Board of Internal Economy.

No expense considered to be invalid is authorized without the board's approval. Occasionally, people can make mistakes, and the consequences can be quite serious. The Board of Internal Economy has been known to make some very weighty decisions to reassure Canadians that the spending of parliamentarians, specifically, members of the House of Commons, complies with the rules.

The Parliament of Canada Act is crystal clear about the exclusive authority of the Board of Internal Economy. Subsection 52.6(1) says and I quote:

52.6 (1) The Board has the exclusive authority to determine whether any previous, current or proposed use by a member of the House of Commons of any funds, goods, services or premises made available to that member for the carrying out of parliamentary functions is or was proper, given the discharge of the parliamentary functions of members of the House of Commons, including whether any such use is or was proper having regard to the intent and purpose of the by-laws made under subsection 52.5(1).

That is the body that should be examining this issue.

Mrs. Shanahan's amendment shows that we are prepared to support Mr. Barrett's motion, which, according to him, was prompted by a media report. That is why he feels we should examine the issue. Actually, Mr. Barrett is signalling that it was four news articles. Thank you for correcting me.

I believe the four articles—well, three of them, at least—refer to the systems used by the Liberals, the Conservatives and the NDP. Unfortunately, though, Mr. Barrett's motion pertains solely to one party. Mrs. Shanahan made the point that we should broaden the motion to cover not only what the Liberal members are doing, but also what the members of the official opposition are doing. The issues raised in the news reports are actually of great interest to Canadians.

I hope my fellow members will allow these issues to be referred to the Board of Internal Economy, which, as a committee of the House, could look into everything and report its findings to all members.

I think that's the best way forward. That is why the amendment was moved and why I, personally, will support it.

If we stick to the motion as moved, we will fall into the same trap that we unfortunately fell into before. Mr. Chair, I know you came a long way to be at this meeting in person, and I certainly appreciate the efforts of every committee member to attend this meeting. No one wants to waste time, but we have to tell it like it is. We have to set the record straight, and that's why I feel so strongly about doing things the right way. That means referring the matter to the committee responsible for examining the previous, current and proposed expenditures incurred by members and their offices. The committee with that responsibility is the Board of Internal Economy.

I can well imagine what would happen if we did not support the amendment and the motion was adopted unamended. I can hear it now. I would bet any amount of money that, as soon as the witness mentioned someone's name, members would probably want to invite that person to appear before the committee. It would be a name here, a name there; we would have to keep inviting people and so on. I've seen this show before, and honestly, the reviews weren't good.

It's time to move on. We should be smart about how we use our time and energy—what we focus our efforts on. I think the committee members should really support the amendment and refer this matter to the proper authority.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1245)

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I want to thank colleagues again for coming together to address this extremely important matter, which seems to be getting convoluted again by the Liberals.

Mr. Chair, if we can be very clear here, this is about allegations that a minister of the Crown was directing a contract involving taxpayers' funds to advance the interests of the Liberal Party of Canada and the minister's partisan interests. That's what this is about.

I think everybody around here understands the Board of Internal Economy and what it does, but maybe people listening in don't. The Board of Internal Economy has no jurisdiction to rule on a minister on a conflict of interest. Frankly, it works on consensus building. We know that if the Liberals get their way here, they would just shut it down there, just as they're trying to shut down this committee today.

This is very straightforward, Mr. Chair. As Mr. Barrett said, he is very open to Mr. Boulrice's very reasonable time frame—one meeting, two hours. That doesn't seem to be out of the ordinary. What really bothers me is that we hear the Liberal members saying, "Oh, well, if we hear something that is suspicious here, the opposition is going to want to call another witness", or this or that. Of course, Mr. Chair. That's our job. That's why Canadians have us here.

We are going into an election campaign. The Liberals are going out this summer. We know they don't want to be here; they want to

be out there. They want to be handing out money here, handing out money there, with just big smiles everywhere. They don't want to be talking about corruption and ethical issues again, and a Prime Minister being with Mr. Pitfield, for heaven's sake, who was on that illegal vacation he took. They don't want to talk about that. They don't want Canadians to even be thinking about it.

Mr. Chair, I don't want to talk too long here. I opened up and I explained what this is about. I think I explained what the Liberals are trying to do again, which is to filibuster to keep this issue from getting out. Frankly, the more they push back, the more I'm concerned. I think we do have to make sure that Canadians understand that it's about a conflict of interest by a minister. When these questions are being asked, it's our job as opposition MPs to be very reasonable. We're not asking people to spend the entire summer here, but just two hours to get to some very simple answers. If it's going to be open and transparent, those answers will come quite quickly.

I think, Mr. Chair, we have about 10 minutes left. I think the meeting's going to be talked out. That's all I have to say.

The Chair: Mr. Dong is next.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you very much, Chair.

I don't want to spend a lot of time talking. I think Mr. Barrett spoke about eight to 10 minutes, so if you give me a signal at the eight-minute mark, I'll wrap up. I don't want to speak more than the opposition members.

Chair, I've been listening respectfully and carefully to all members of this committee today. I thought what Ms. Shanahan said in her opening remarks, before she moved a motion, was very important: It was about the mandate of this committee. If we are talking about questioning the integrity of MPs as they perform jobs in their capacity as public elected members, we're not talking about just a few members; we're talking about the entire Liberal caucus. I think we should look at the process. What's the code of conduct? That falls under the scope of the Board of Internal Economy. Determining whether or not the members obey these codes of conduct, I think, is its job.

I understand that you said committees don't have the mandate or don't have the power to tell another committee what it needs to do. Simply put, I'm sure there are Conservative members on the Board of Internal Economy. They can, according to the result of today's debate, move a motion over there to start an investigation. I think that's much better than having a debate here. We are making a lot of assumptions that members are using public dollars, taxpayers' dollars, to somehow do partisan stuff.

What is within the scope of this committee is privacy. That could be expanded to the privacy of our constituents. I think that needs to be looked at.

I have heard members from the Conservative Party say that they don't use public dollars to somehow fund this kind of system. I'm very interested in knowing how these systems are being paid for and how constituents' information is being used. I know from Ms. Lattanzio on this side that there's a very effective firewall being built around individuals' data, around what's being accessed from the MPs' offices in terms of their constituents' information. Privacy is very important, and I've made that very clear to the staff in my office.

Speaking of wasting taxpayers' dollars, I want to remind the committee and the public watching that I've been here at this committee since day one of the 43rd Parliament, and to my recollection we've completed only two studies: those on WE Charity and Pornhub. It's a public taxpayer-funded fishing expedition. Our WE Charity study and investigation was parallel to an investigation done by an officer of the House. The Integrity Commissioner did an investigation.

As well, I want to point out that this meeting was not scheduled. It's not a regular meeting. It's a special meeting that's been called. We see all the support staff, all the wonderful translators and the clerk here. That's all on taxpayers' dollars. I have to question the efficiency of our committee.

Mr. Barrett, in his debate on the amendment, mentioned that he's quite happy to be in front of the committee and to talk about the practices of his office. I applaud his transparency and, quite honestly, bravery. Sitting in front of a committee and disclosing information, which we all know is to the public, is not an easy thing to do.

I have to point out some quick research.

• (1250)

The company he mentioned, CivicTrack, which he uses, is a software provider that is owned by Momentum BPO Inc. Its president is Matt Yeatman, who has donated \$12,556 to various Conservative EDAs and campaigns between 2008 and 2019.

According to the public record, another software company that he uses, which is online in his expenditure report, is called Softchoice. It is owned by Vince De Palma, who has made multiple \$1,000 contributions as donations to the Conservative Party. I think there is merit to the amendment, in that if we're going to make assumptions that a lot of members don't know the rules and their integrity is being questioned, we should open up the questioning so we can improve the process, although, as I've said before, I don't believe that this falls under the mandate of this committee.

That leads to my final point. When I read the original motion, I found that it wasn't typical. Usually I'll see in a motion that we will refer the matter to the House and require a response from the government or require a response from, in this case, the Board of Internal Economy or whatever. We have to have some recommendation in the study; otherwise, what's the point of the study? I have not seen that, which leads me to question the timing of this proposed study.

Repeatedly the Conservative members have talked about being on the eve of an election. I haven't heard that the writ has dropped.

What I know is that a motion was passed in the House by all members that we don't want an election until it's safe.

I haven't heard that call. They want to deal with this expeditiously. Do you know what that means to me? They want to pull a fast one. They want to pull a fast one against the Liberal members, on the eve of an election—

• (1255)

Mr. Colin Carrie: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Han Dong: —to gain a partisan advantage. That's what they're doing here.

The Chair: On a point of order, go ahead, Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Mr. Chair, from a parliamentary language standpoint, “to pull a fast one”.... I think everybody around the table here knows that the Liberals want to refer this matter to the Board of Internal Economy because there are five Liberal members over there. There is the chair. All have paid Pitfield taxpayers' dollars for these services.

The Chair: We are getting into debate, but—

Mr. Colin Carrie: I find that unparliamentary. We're just doing our job.

The Chair: —I encourage Mr. Dong to maintain parliamentary language during his debate.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Chair.

As I said, I haven't seen the signal, so I probably haven't hit the eight-minute mark. I'll wrap up soon.

The Chair: I'm not signalling.

Mr. Han Dong: You know the time. Okay. Thank you, Chair. I appreciate the break.

You know what? That was my final point. What I see here today is the Conservatives trying to create something out of nothing, again on the taxpayers' back. I just want to remind everybody that every minute we spend here is quite a privilege to me, but at the same time I'm very mindful of the supportive work that is required for this committee.

With that, I'll cede the floor. I hear that the Conservative member, Mr. Barrett, is willing to support the amendment and say that we're transparent, that we're clean. I'd be happy to—

Mr. Michael Barrett: No, I don't support the amendment.

Mr. Han Dong: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were willing to testify in front of the committee and therefore willing to support the amendment.

Mr. Michael Barrett: No.

Mr. Han Dong: You see how sometimes—

The Chair: Okay, colleagues, just direct your comments through the chair.

Mr. Dong, were you finished or...?

Mr. Han Dong: I'm about to wrap up.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Han Dong: You can see how assumptions can sometimes be misinterpreted. I interpreted it, certainly, as Mr. Barrett being willing to support the amendment.

To all my opposition colleagues, I hope you would consider supporting the amendment. If indeed at this committee we're doing a service to Canadians to make sure that members are performing according to standards, why don't we open it up to all? Why are we focusing only on Liberal members?

I take great offence. In the WE Charity study, you can say that you targeted the Prime Minister, his family, private companies and civil servants. Now with this motion, I think the original intent is to target Liberal MPs—incumbents, in your words—on the eve of an election.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Boulerice is next.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Mr. Chair, despite the Liberal members' claims that they want the committee to use its time wisely and that they don't want to talk and talk, it's obvious that they continue to go on and on. We are almost out of time, Mr. Chair.

I think Mrs. Shanahan's amendment has merit in that I agree with the substance and overall intent. The Board of Internal Economy can be an effective mechanism, but it can also be a black hole. If you get too close, it sucks you in and you're never to be seen from again.

Mainly, I think the amendment is premature. I want to come back to the spirit of the original motion. Let's hear from the witnesses, ask questions and do some checking. Then, if the matter needs to be referred to the Board of Internal Economy, we can make that informed decision.

Mr. Fergus said some compelling things earlier. He said that the databases had to be stand-alone systems, that they did not communicate with one another. Unfortunately, we have to take his word for it now, so let's bring the people who have the information before the committee, let's look into the situation and let's do our job. If it turns out we need to involve the Board of Internal Economy, we can do so at that point.

Although I agree with the substance of the amendment, I feel to adopt it now would be to get ahead of ourselves.

• (1300)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Shanahan, you have the floor again.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Did Madame Gaudreau have her...?

The Chair: Had you—

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: [Inaudible—Editor] I'm waiting.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Ms. Gaudreau can have the floor, but I would like to go after her.

[English]

The Chair: Oh, pardon me.

Please go ahead, Madame Gaudreau.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Mr. Chair, it's one o'clock. What happens next? Do we keep going a bit longer? I have some motions. I don't need 12 or 22 minutes. I can be extremely quick about it, but I have some comments afterwards.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

I'm not sensing that anybody wants to end the meeting yet. I mean, there may be a desire to end it after a certain number of things, but there seems to be an inclination to continue to grow the speaking list. I have the obligation to allow for members to continue to speak until they no longer want to speak.

I have Mrs. Shanahan and Mr. MacKinnon on the speaking list, and Madame Gaudreau, and Mr. Fergus apparently wants to get back on the list.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: I just want to flag that the interpretation isn't working for Ms. Gaudreau. Perhaps you can—

[English]

The Chair: Pardon me?

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: [Inaudible—Editor]

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry. I can't hear you.

Go ahead, Mr. Fergus, on a point of order.

Mr. Greg Fergus: On a point of order, I'd just note that Madame Gaudreau said that she wasn't receiving translation. Perhaps you could repeat yourself so that she can understand what you just said.

[Translation]

The Chair: All right. My apologies.

[English]

Let's hope that we can get the translation going. Right now I have a growing speaking list. Members are indicating that they continue to want to speak. My obligation is to allow for members to speak. I don't know when we'll be done. I think it will be left to members' discretion as to when they want to allow for the votes to happen. When nobody wants to speak, then we'll move to adjournment.

I currently have Mrs. Shanahan and Mr. MacKinnon on the list. Madame Gaudreau is on the list as the third speaker, unless Madame Shanahan was saying that she'd prefer that Madame Gaudreau go first.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: No, I'll say a few words.

The Chair: Very good. We'll continue with the speaking list.

Go ahead, Mrs. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you very much, Chair. This is very able quarterbacking with the group we have before us.

We are missing one person here, so in the spirit of invoking the ethics committee in all its glory and so on, I want to quote Mr. Angus, who was interviewed for that Globe and Mail article. I think it will bring a little bit more *raison d'être* to why we think it's appropriate for this matter to be transferred to the Board of Internal Economy.

Mr. Angus said, when he was asked, that he's not convinced the Liberals are abusing spending rules, which is nice to hear from Mr. Angus, and went on to say, "I am not sure they are using it in a way that would actually contravene rules. It would have to be established that they are turning constituency data over for political purposes. Every political party has a data wing and a constituency wing."

I think that is the key: the fact that the data itself, as we have learned in other studies, is an important resource. Not only is it an issue whether we use a House device or premises or Hill staff or constituency staff; the fact that the data that is collected in the course of our day-to-day constituency work can be used and turned over to the political party in question for use for election purposes is of deep concern, I think, to any member of this Parliament.

That is why I think Mr. Angus, in his always very insightful way, gets to the heart of the issue. It is that on the one hand, there is the constituency work that we do day to day, the very important contact work and policy work and casework. We all know what we and our staff do every day. That needs to be managed. We each have between 70,000 and 120,000 constituents. I don't know about you, but even though I'm more of a paper person, I need software to handle that work. It's certainly well within the budget of any member to have software, and it makes sense not to have each single member ordering software, because that's expensive. No, you order one software package that works for all members of a group, which in our parliamentary system are caucus groups. That's what we have access to. I'm certainly happy with the service that's provided.

It's a completely different thing when we're talking about election purposes, voter ID purposes, donor purposes and so on. That is precious data, personal data, and we know we deal with people's most personal data when we're talking about immigration files, passports, Revenue Canada and the myriad things we deal with in the course of our constituent duties. That is important, but it should not—never, ever—be mixed with election-purpose data, which is what we do when we're on a campaign, when we're identifying our supporters and we're going out to meet them.

That is the case with our software. We're not so sure it's the case with the privately paid-for software used by the Conservative Party, which is run by Conservative donors with individual links with members and members of the leader's staff.

We have a lot more we can say about that, but in the interest of time I will leave it there and yield the floor to Mr. MacKinnon, I believe.

Thank you.

• (1305)

The Chair: Before we go to Mr. MacKinnon, we've been going for a couple of hours now. We'll take a seven-minute break to allow the staff a break and then we will call the meeting back to order.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1305)

(Pause)

• (1315)

The Chair: We're going to call this meeting back to order.

We have Mr. MacKinnon next on the list. Go ahead, Mr. MacKinnon.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As the honourable member Mr. Barrett mentioned, I am indeed new to the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. Unfortunately, the committee is preceded by its reputation, thanks to some of the comments made by members across the way before I joined the committee.

I want to piggyback on what my fellow member Mrs. Shanahan said. She spoke about what the committee's responsibilities were and which body had the authority to examine this issue if need be.

The matter clearly falls under the authority of the Board of Internal Economy. For the benefit of my fellow members, I would like to cite the bylaws.

The Parliament of Canada Act refers to the "exclusive authority" of the Board of Internal Economy, at subsection 52.6(1). I repeat, "exclusive authority".

52.6 (1) The Board has the exclusive authority to determine whether any previous, current or proposed use by a member of the House of Commons of any funds, goods, services or premises made available to that member for the carrying out of parliamentary functions is or was proper, given the discharge of the parliamentary functions of members of the House of Commons, including whether any such use is or was proper having regard to the intent and purpose of the by-laws made under subsection 52.5(1).

Obviously, what we have here is an exercise in extreme partisanship and politicking. The member is trying to circumvent the committee's tradition, to say nothing of the best traditions of the House and this institution. Unfortunately, we are dealing with a Conservative opposition hell-bent on disparaging those involved in the public life of their country.

I want to repeat what my fellow members said about our use of the software in question. Formally, unequivocally and in writing, a clear separation exists between our use of software to carry out constituency work and our use of software to perform partisan work, in other words, activities in support of the Liberal Party of Canada.

[English]

I did note with interest the very insightful intervention of my friend Mr. Dong, who pointed out that the Conservative Party and Conservative members utilize software that is probably very similar, software furnished by an enterprise.

This is not to minimize their involvement in public life. Supporting public institutions is a good thing, which makes me wonder why Mr. Barrett continues to engage in these activities. Donors of tens of thousands of dollars provide the very software that Mr. Barrett alluded to, that he confirmed and revealed to this committee that he uses in the course of his daily activities. That software is provided by a company called Momentum, whose CEO has made tens of thousands of dollars of contributions to the Conservative Party of Canada and its various entities.

• (1320)

The president of another provider that is confirmed in Mr. Barrett's proactive disclosure, Softchoice, has been a donor to the Conservative Party of Canada on several occasions, including for the Lisa Raitt leadership campaign. That too has been, I think, pretty easily tracked down.

To take it to its logical extension, Mr. Chair, in this Parliament Mr. Barrett, it must be said, has dug a lot of dry holes. He's like the Death Valley well driller. There has been a lot of activity, Mr. Chair, a lot of moving around, without much being dug up there.

As an ethics critic, I think he has been shown to be—

Mr. Michael Barrett: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm recognizing, on a point of order, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, I was just wondering if finding Liberal finance minister Bill Morneau guilty of breaking ethics laws was one of those dry wells Mr. MacKinnon was talking about. I just wasn't sure.

The Chair: I think that's a point of debate, but there will be opportunities, I think, for that.

Mr. MacKinnon, we are speaking to the amendment.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: I think Mr. Barrett has shown himself to be pretty sensitive. I understand that he—having worked so hard and being governed by such personal animus towards this government, its leader and many of its members—would be frustrated that after two years his efforts have yielded so little, but I digress, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Michael Barrett: On another point of order, Chair—

The Chair: Go ahead on a point of order, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'm wondering if Mr. MacKinnon could quantify how many findings of guilt by the Ethics Commissioner, under the act and the code, would be substantive enough for him as the opposition ethics critic, or if one is okay, or...

The Chair: I believe that's debate.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

The Chair: Mr. MacKinnon, we'll ask you to direct your comments through the chair in speaking to Ms. Shanahan's amendment.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Mr. Chair, I don't know what has occurred to engender such extreme sensitivity on the part of the member. Mr. Brown—

Mr. Michael Barrett: That would be serial law-breaking by Liberals.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Mr. Brown, his predecessor, engaged in no such activity, I would note. Mr. Barrett is, of course—as we all are—free to exercise his prerogatives as a member of Parliament.

Here we are today. Here we are in a committee room on Parliament Hill, meeting on something that I've just pretty clearly outlined is not within the competence or the scope of this committee's lines of inquiry. It's something that, again, has been established pretty clearly as being outside the parameters of what Mr. Barrett should be preoccupied with.

It's also very clearly, Mr. Chair, something that every party does in service of the members of Parliament that it has in Parliament by supplying technologies that equip us, help us and train us to serve our constituents in the most efficient and best manner possible.

As a result, Mr. Chair, I am perplexed as to why there's this mass mobilization of MPs, on an emergency basis, back to Ottawa during the month of July to explore yet another of Mr. Barrett's fantasies driven by his personal animus toward the Prime Minister and toward members of this government. I don't understand that, Mr. Chair. It is not becoming. It does not befit the honourable members of the House of Commons or of this committee to act in such ways.

However, if Mr. Barrett wishes to pursue this line of inquiry, then I think it only fair that we pursue the line of inquiry to its logical conclusion and examine those Conservative donors, who are clearly very wealthy Conservative donors, as shown by their tens of thousands of dollars of contributions to the party. It's only fair that we examine links between them, the software they provide and the possible population of Conservative Party databases.

Madam Shanahan described her experience in trying at all costs to extricate herself from this web, this data trap she's been in for the last 10 years. I think it might befit this committee, in its line of inquiry, to inquire as to how that could possibly occur. It may befit this committee, in its line of inquiry, to ask the leader of Mr. Barrett's party about contracts using parliamentary funds that are let to members of his leadership campaign team, those people who volunteered, presumably, or maybe were compensated, to work on Mr. O'Toole's leadership campaign and now find themselves to be contractors to the Office of the Leader of the Opposition or the Conservative Resource Group, which of course are both entities that are funded with the tax dollars of hard-working Canadians. It may behoove us to look into those ties and those connections, because some of those people provide software consulting services or IT consulting services or the like.

As you know, Mr. Chair, these things get a little fuzzy. As far as we can tell, some people who were engaged in partisan software management—maybe for Mr. O'Toole's leadership campaign, maybe for the Conservative Party of Canada—are now providing IT and database and other consulting services to a public entity, which is the Office of the Leader of the Opposition or the Conservative Research Group. That, of course, may also warrant the prolonged gaze of the members of this committee if we are to be logical and consistent in applying the very rigorous tests that Mr. Barrett has laid out for the members of this committee.

• (1325)

Mr. Chair, I think it's important that we remember all of these facts. It's important we remember that what we're really doing here is indulging Mr. Barrett's personal animus and hatred for the Prime Minister, as well as that of the Conservative Party. We're calling back members of Parliament from all over the country to indulge that—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, on a point of order, I would say that Mr. MacKinnon is invoking some highly inflammatory language with respect to his assumption about how I feel about another member of the House. While I couldn't agree less on matters of policy with Mr. Trudeau, the Right Honourable Prime Minister, I have never, in this committee, demonstrated anything other than a respectful tone, though members opposite may not like the questions that I have asked.

It does a disservice to all members of this committee and to Mr. MacKinnon himself to use such inflammatory language. He is certainly entitled to his opinion, but I don't believe that type of language with respect to a characterization of how one member perceives another member is appropriate in this venue.

The Chair: I'd encourage Mr. MacKinnon to work in a way that not only reflects our respect for one another but also addresses the issue at hand. Mr. Barrett was not involved, I don't think, in the drafting of Ms. Shanahan's amendment. That is currently what's up for debate.

Mr. MacKinnon, I'd suggest and ask that you move to debate with regard to the amendment.

• (1330)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Clearly, I am happy to keep debating the amendment by my esteemed colleague Mrs. Shanahan.

She gave the committee a very constructive way forward—the only way forward, really—refer the matter to the Board of Internal Economy. If Mr. Barrett likes, I could reread the mandate of the Board of Internal Economy for his benefit. The matter before us today is without a doubt under the exclusive authority of the Board of Internal Economy.

Let me assure the Conservative members who are following Mr. Barrett's lead and helping him carry out his personal agenda: all contracts entered into by Liberal members or by the Liberal Research Bureau are duly approved, in accordance with the rules of the House of Commons and Parliament of Canada. Those contracts are performed in the context Mrs. Shanahan described; in other

words, there is a complete and utter separation between the system data we use to carry out constituency work and the data contained in any other system, regardless of who designed it.

I want to conclude by saying that we disapprove of this witch hunt. We disapprove of today's meeting, which was apparently called to fulfill the personal wishes and agenda of Mr. Barrett and his fellow Conservative members. I encourage the members of the other parties not to join Mr. Barrett on his periodic escapades to dig up dirt. He has been trying to do precisely that since the beginning of this Parliament. It reflects poorly on all parliamentarians and on the House of Commons, I might add. Mr. Barrett's relentlessness is not flattering to the institutions of Parliament. I would say that has repeatedly been verified by various commissioners, who are officers of Parliament.

On that note, Mr. Chair, I will yield the floor.

I urge the committee members to support my fellow member's amendment. My hope is that we can put an end to the Conservative Party's latest antics to dig up dirt.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Gaudreau is next.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Do you have anyone else on the speaking list after me, Mr. Chair?

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, there is one.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: All right, then.

[*English*]

The Chair: Madam Shanahan is on the list again.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: It is now 1:35 p.m. The meeting has been going on since 11 a.m. this morning. I'm just taking the time to get myself set up, since this is my first speech.

Just like you, we have activities in our ridings. The people who are listening to us today have the opportunity to see us in person and see that we are hard at work in Ottawa. Yes, we are working. I should give them a bit of background about what is going on, however.

Under Standing Order 106(4), we can sign a written request to call a meeting when, unfortunately, we are unable to obtain certain answers on a given issue. As indicated in the wording of the request, the reason why I supported my Conservative colleagues in making this request is that, unfortunately, I could not get the answers to my questions.

During the last parliamentary session, I was constantly amazed at how much room was left for different interpretations. In life, I have always been told to get to the bottom of things to make sure whether what is being said is true or false.

In the last hour and a half, according to what has been put on the table—and this is a perception, I want to emphasize that—there seemed to be nothing wrong, nothing to worry about. We told ourselves from the outset that everything was perfect, that this meeting would be so uncomplicated, for once, that we could take the time left to us to work in our ridings and meet the people we have only seen virtually all year. Personally, I found that reassuring. I thought it would be a simple meeting, since the colleagues opposite had absolutely nothing to worry about. I thought it would be a two-hour meeting to shed some light on the subject of the written request made under Standing Order 106(4).

We were asked what was the point of doing this at this time, between two parliamentary sessions. In fact, the work is still going on. The House of Commons is actually open. I'm very happy that we can see each other in person, that feels good. I was told that I was dancing behind the screen. What we're experiencing right now is a bit like what I have experienced. I was introduced to this along with all of you. For hours and hours, we have heard speeches that often ran counter to the proposals before the committee, just to kill time. We keep hearing people saying we don't want to waste time, but we are wasting time. They say they want to get to the bottom of this, but they don't want to allow us the opportunity to ask questions.

In fact, what we should be asking is why things are so complicated today. Anyone who has nothing to hide or fear should be willing to go ahead and get to the bottom of things. Sadly, someone made a speech saying that they felt threatened. That's a defence mechanism. I will say to the people who are listening to us that this is perfectly normal, this is what happens in committee.

However, here is what it's like in real life. It's summertime. We are not sure what's coming up. According to my schedule, I will be back with you on September 20, in person. That will be very exciting. In the meantime, I don't want to repeat what we did last summer. I am convinced that none of you want to do that.

Some people feel that if you open the door once, you'll have to open it the next time too. The proof is in the pudding: We have already opened the door, based on an item we had. There were no worries, everything was perfect, we were going to meet the following week. There may be other proposals; it depends on what people want to do.

Trust and transparency issues fall under the purview of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. We are an oversight committee. Every committee has its strength. Ours is very considerable, and equally important.

It is easy to say that we are trying to look for dirt and dig where there is nothing to dig up. Beyond all that, we are demonstrating something to people. Essentially, technically, the results shouldn't be a big surprise. We simply saw, and I will reiterate, that 95% of the Liberal MPs paid \$30,000 to Data Sciences and the Liberal Party paid \$1 million to NGP VAN. Accordingly, we want to ask the founder of Data Sciences some questions. If things look good, this will be over; if they don't, then something else will happen. People need to know what's going on.

• (1335)

People say time is precious. I'm sure some of my colleagues have meetings scheduled in their ridings in an hour. I myself have one at 5 p.m. People want to see us. They also want to see that we're not wasting our time. Well, we have just shown them that we did waste our time. At this point, I think that by 2 p.m. we will have finished hearing from everyone who wanted to speak. We are ready. Everyone has spoken. We all know how the vote will turn out. Let's vote on the amendment. Soon, when we feel comfortable and we are in agreement, we can vote on the motion.

Why should we do this? I think that the clerk has the right to enjoy her summer, too. We can do our work and our planning efficiently and effectively.

You know where I stand. We still agree on the basic wording. The work will resume on September 20. There will be requests then, but we will be able to stay focused.

Thank you.

• (1340)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Shanahan, I have you on the speaking list, followed by Mr. Fergus. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wasn't planning to speak, but I will. There is a reason why we are meeting today. Obviously, we did not request this meeting. We are here to explain why our committee is not the right place to consider this issue. The committee does not have a mandate to investigate conflict of interest. Other people have already looked into that and into other cases. That work is done by the commissioners, that's their job. When the individuals involved are members of Parliament, it is Parliament's Board of Internal Economy that looks into everything.

That is why I proposed the amendment. Everyone here must recognize the reason why it is the Board of Internal Economy that deals with these matters. Members of all parties sit on the board, and things are done in a confidential manner. From what I have heard, since these meetings are not held in public, the exchanges between members of the various political parties and the MPs involved can be very frank and honest.

We still have the same goal, which is to ensure that our democracy remains based on political parties and groups. We are not in small villages where everyone can represent themselves, far from it. Citizens rely on political parties to represent them. As we know full well, in our system we do not vote for a prime minister but for MPs, each of whom represents a political party. In most cases, voters hope that the leader of the political party of the candidate they voted for will become Prime Minister. I also understand that sometimes the leader makes it very clear that they don't want to take power, but I think they have an interest elsewhere. I do not want to veer too far off topic, but as we know, the leader of the Bloc Québécois was previously involved in politics in Quebec. It is certainly very interesting to make a career in another level of government to then come back to Quebec and perhaps even lead the province. Why not? It's because we are in the public eye, right?

The parliamentary resources that we all use are very important. If they are being used for smear campaigns here and there—and I'm talking about all parties in general—the public needs to know that. Every MP has more than one office and hires three, four or five people to work there. Some may have as many as ten staffers, some working part-time. It is important for people to know what these staffers do. Constituents would not want to find out that employees are being hired for purposes other than the work being done in the riding with respect to federal policy and federal cases. People need to understand exactly what work is being done with their tax dollars.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: On a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: I'm recognizing Madame Gaudreau on a point of order.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: What my colleague is saying is very interesting, but I'm trying to see how it is linked to the amendment we are debating. Maybe she can explain to me what the link is or actually arrive at her conclusion, because I'm having trouble following her.

[English]

The Chair: Yes, I appreciate it. I think that's a point of order with regard to relevance.

I was going to just encourage members.... I know there's been a fair bit of debate that's been outside the scope of the amendment. Members have now had the floor multiple times. If members have run out of things to say on the amendment, I would suggest that we go to a vote. Then members could speak to the motion, as amended or not. That might be the more appropriate time to continue with these ongoing debates.

• (1345)

[Translation]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Actually, I have something else to say about the amendment.

[English]

Just to bring the point home—

The Chair: Is it on the amendment?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan:—on the amendment, the Board of Internal Economy is the place to discuss all of this use of Hill resources and parties have a great interest that it be done in the Board of Internal Economy, but you know what? We could do it in public.

[Translation]

Honestly, I have some very interesting things before me that could well be looked at. I hope that Robert Fife is listening, because he might find some interesting things here. We can certainly make them all public.

I think this is the first time you have heard me talk like this, because I'm usually the quiet, unassuming lady who tries to work within the rules and the mandates of the committees. However, in this case, I feel that this exercise exceeds the limits of the committee. Some of the members of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics here seem to think that they can use our committee as a forum to make all kinds of allegations and to summon citizens who are not even part of our political world. They are politically engaged citizens, and they have every right to engage in politics. In fact, we encourage them to do so. On the other hand, there seems to be a perception that this committee serves as a forum or a kind of star chamber, as they have in the United States. I don't think anyone wants to apply that model in Canada.

To put it simply, what could come out of that would be very interesting.

I will close with that. I think we're here precisely to defend parliamentary tradition and procedure and to uphold people's confidence in the political system. The proper place to study this matter is the Board of Internal Economy. If certain members prefer to do this in the public arena, then we will be opening a can of worms, won't we?

With all due respect to my colleagues, I think there are other ways to deal with this issue. That is what concerns us. My amendment outlines the way to do this.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We're turning to Mr. Fergus, the next speaker on the amendment.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, I listened very attentively to my colleagues, especially Madame Gaudreau. I think I might have a way to bring this to an end that would be satisfactory to Mr. Barrett and other members of this committee.

I was wondering if I could ask the chair for his indulgence for two minutes. It's to have a two-minute pause so that I could pursue this idea to see if there's support among all the parties for a way forward.

The Chair: I'm not opposed to that. If there's no opposition, I will suspend the meeting for a period of five minutes. I'll give you an additional three minutes if you're able to come up with a solution.

Mr. Greg Fergus: That's very generous of you.

The Chair: I'll suspend for five minutes. The meeting's suspended.

• (1345) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1355)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

Mr. Fergus, we'll go back to you.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, could we allow the member from the NDP to also return?

[*Translation*]

Oh, I see he's back.

Mr. Chair, we have been debating this issue for quite some time now, and I really want to find a way to move forward and resolve this.

I just scribbled down a possible solution. I don't have it in both languages, but, if I may, I will draft it in our two languages. I would just like to outline the gist of it for you.

I would like to hear what all my colleagues from the other parties think of it. If we had consent here, Mrs. Shanahan could withdraw her amendment. We would then get back to Mr. Barrett's motion, to which we would propose amendments.

I would suggest removing from Mr. Barrett's motion all the words after “media reports” up to—

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. I apologize for interrupting, but we are dealing with the amendment currently. Before we can move another amendment, we have to dispose of the amendment.

There's been a suggestion, I think, to have unanimous consent to withdraw it, if Mrs. Shanahan desires to withdraw it.

Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, I would just like to clarify the reason why we want to withdraw the amendment, to make sure everyone is clear on that.

We want to withdraw the amendment so we can then amend Mr. Barrett's motion. Right now the motion requires that “the committee undertake a study on conflicts of interest relating to taxpayer-funded contracts with Data Sciences Inc; and that the committee do invite Mr. Tom Pitfield to appear”. We want to replace all this wording with other wording that would require the committee to examine how each of the recognized political parties in the House of Commons uses databases in its MP's offices on Parliament Hill and in their ridings, as well as within the party itself. The new wording would also require that the committee invite representatives of each party's research offices to “appear and testify before the committee”. We would keep all the rest of the wording in Mr. Barrett's motion but add that this study would be limited to one committee meeting.

That is then the overall idea. I know that all my colleagues from other parties are consulting or have already consulted their colleagues to see whether they will be supporting this proposal.

Mr. Chair, I think that we have a great opportunity here, if we can reach consensus. We could move on to this proposal right away and, as my colleague, Ms. Gaudreau, said, we could be done by 3 p.m.

• (1400)

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. Again, I need unanimous consent from all members for Mrs. Shanahan to withdraw her amendment.

Is there unanimous consent for Mrs. Shanahan to withdraw her amendment?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. Could we poll the members in the room to find out whether there is unanimous consent to go along with my proposal? After that we could proceed.

If we address this piecemeal, without agreeing on the whole thing, I would not feel too reassured.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. The challenge is that I can allow for debate only on what is before the committee. Now, if committee members want to get assurances from their colleagues, that's fine to do privately.

In terms of the process now, in order for there to be an amendment debated here at the committee, and to have a vote on that, we would require that this amendment be disposed of first, either by a vote or by its being withdrawn.

We could proceed on this in two different ways. We could either move to a vote on Ms. Shanahan's motion, and if it was defeated—or passed, for that matter—then an additional amendment or a sub-amendment could be brought forward.

Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, just to continue along that point—and please forgive me for engaging in a debate with you, which is really not my intent—on at least two occasions at this committee we have conducted a sort of straw poll so that everybody knew what we were getting into. Then, in good faith, we went forward on it. That's all I'm seeking, a straw poll, if you would allow it, Mr. Chair, before we move on to the formal approach, which you are quite correct in requiring from the rest of us.

The Chair: That is specifically why I gave an additional three minutes, so that we could suspend and members could—

Mr. Greg Fergus: I agree. I know that people heard it, but they didn't have a chance to report back as to whether or not they could proceed.

The Chair: I'm hearing that there are members who still want to speak. I am limited by what I've stipulated. I can allow for a vote if there are no additional speakers on Ms. Shanahan's amendment. We can move to a vote and determine the outcome from that, or Ms. Shanahan can withdraw her motion and there can be unanimous consent to do that. I can seek that.

I can proceed in two different ways. We can move to a vote. I think there's a desire to get an indication one way or another, so we'll move to a vote if there's an appetite to do that. I'm getting signals that members would like to find a way forward. The vote is probably the best way to do that so that determinations can then be made on how to proceed.

Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Greg Fergus: While you were talking, I was able to do just a quick little head-nod poll. There doesn't seem to be consent from my colleagues on that. That straw proposal—my effort to bring this to a close—I'm afraid, seems to have failed. I would withdraw even that proposal to try to come to a consensus.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fergus. We do still have some speakers on the list. We have Monsieur Gourde, followed by Ms. Lattanzio.

Monsieur Gourde.

• (1405)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I've been listening to everyone for about three hours. We are dealing with an issue that is worth taking the time to discuss, since it has existed for years. It is a fundamental problem.

I will wait until I know my colleagues are listening, because it's for them that I'm speaking right now. I would like us to be able to have a discussion, because hopefully that might lead to a solution.

When I was first elected in 2006, the Board of Internal Economy and House of Commons services did not provide software to help us manage our constituents' case files in our riding offices. This is a fundamental problem. We still don't have those services today, 15 years later, and that's probably at the root of the problem we're facing now. Firms have designed software at the request of MPs from all parties. Keeping a living register is a real problem when we work with 90,000 citizens in our riding. At first, for a few years, we can keep paper records, but doing research becomes a very tedious job. People often come back to see us, and it is easier to provide adequate services to our constituents when we have software designed for this kind of case management.

It is still difficult to unravel all of this and understand how the same firm can provide a political party with both non-partisan software, as Mrs. Shanahan told us, and software used for partisan purposes. There was much emphasis on the fact that there were firewalls to keep the two databases completely separate. Frankly, I hope so, because we really do owe it to ourselves to keep a wall around the information we collect from our constituents for the purpose of providing them services. Virtually all of that data is useless for a party's partisan activities. Essentially, the information that par-

ties want for their partisan activities are phone numbers they can't find on Canada 411 and email addresses. As for the addresses, Elections Canada gives them to us. The parties are always hunting for email addresses and cellphone numbers. It's a race to see who can get more of them. There's no hiding it here. The key to getting in touch with our constituents is to visit them or call them. The problem is that fewer and fewer Canadians have land lines. Therefore, we all have the same problem. We all want to have their cellphone numbers to get in touch with them. There's nothing secret about this.

However, there is an American company in the picture. Why? There may be an underlying reason no one knows about. I will give you a clue: In Canada there is no phone book listing cellphone numbers, but there is one in the United States that covers all of North America. I'm not sure whether you can connect the dots. It is illegal to have Canadians' cellphone numbers, but the Americans can access the cellphone numbers of all Canadians. That's very odd.

Perhaps someday we can try to find out why we are entitled to have residential phone numbers, but not cellphone numbers. Only 20% of Canadians have solely a land line. Everyone is giving up their land lines for cellphones. One day we won't even be able to do our job as politicians during an election campaign.

We have to stop burying our heads in the sand like ostriches. Right now, in Canada, we have a problem with cellphones. We are trying to find a solution by all legal means possible. There is actually a legal way: If the person wants to provide their cellphone number, we will take it. If there is consent, it's legal. However, 90% of Canadians do not want to give their cellphone number to a political party, so we're not going to get those numbers, unless we engage in barely legal schemes that are costly for the parties.

It is currently illegal for a political party to have a database listing the cellphone numbers of all Canadians, regardless of which party we're talking about.

There is a witch hunt going on and everyone is jumping in on it, when we all have the same problem: We are no longer able to contact our constituents. It's all well and good to go door to door, but if people don't open their doors or don't want to give us their cellphone numbers, we will not be able to call them, since they no longer have residential phone lines.

This is a bit less of a problem in rural areas. In cities, however, the situation is worse. There is a huge number of people who no longer have residential phone lines. You all have cities in your ridings. Do you know how many of your constituents have cell-phones? Between 90% and 95% of citizens have cellphones, while 20% have a residential phone line.

• (1410)

Numbers for residential land lines are available on Canada 411, as are Canadians' names and addresses, so we can obtain them legally.

That brings us back to the idea of software that can be used for partisan purposes. This software should be provided by the Board of Internal Economy as part of the services offered to members of Parliament, and it should be the same for all MPs, regardless of party. That would be the only way we could guarantee independence between a party and its MPs. If members had software provided by the House to manage their constituents' case files, there would certainly be a firewall effective enough to protect the data in the software. If a party asked a company to design a software package to help its MPs manage their constituents' case files, it would surely be tempted to collect, at the same time, the cellphone numbers and email addresses of those people. As for the rest of the information, the parties don't need it or want it. Those are the facts.

We can throw mud at each other all we want. I have grandchildren, and if I help them put on their boots and there is a puddle, they will go play in the water and end up getting all dirty. We are doing exactly what children do when they play in a mud puddle. We will all play in the same puddle and end up getting soiled up to our necks. In the end, we will not be any further ahead or better able to do our jobs. We won't look all that smart to Canadians.

I have some doubts about your proposal to take this directly to the Board of Internal Economy, simply because it will die there. We are not going to fix the problem, we will only delay fixing it, should there be an election. One way or another, there will be an election in two years, let's face it. However, the problem still won't be resolved in two years or in the following four years.

Let's then take the time to talk about it at today's committee meeting. Several members have said that if we want to have software, we need firewalls. I agree with that. From an ethical standpoint, if we want to protect members of Parliament, we need firewalls. However, no software is going to be airtight if it's run by one party, no matter which party. If the five parties have five different software packages, we will be no further ahead.

In my view, if we were to make a recommendation, it would be to conduct a study on this kind of software package and ask that the House provide one to members of Parliament so they could manage their constituents' case records. As for partisan activities, the parties will take care of that themselves. The parties' partisan activities affect us to some extent, but they are not necessarily our responsibility as members of Parliament.

However, the confidentiality of the information contained in the software to manage constituents' cases is certainly our responsibility. We are acting on their behalf. Every time a citizen allows an MP to work on their case and do research on their behalf, regardless of

the department involved, they are giving their consent, their proxy, to the member of Parliament, not the party.

This is why it is often said that, when an MP loses an election, the constituents' case files are all cleared. That's because the proxy was not given to the new MP, after the election. It was given to the sitting MP. The proxy is in the sitting member's name, and because of this, they can be sued at any time. If a constituent is not happy with something that happened and there is a leak of information, that is the MP's responsibility.

That's why each and everyone of us here should be careful. We have duties towards our constituents. We have duties and responsibilities under the law.

We therefore won't find a solution by passing the buck, as we are doing now.

Unfortunately, in 15 years, perhaps the House has not provided us with all the tools we need. That said, much progress has been made on the IT front. In 2006, everything was done on paper. We were just starting to use more IT tools. Now, the House provides us with a lot of IT services, but we never had a software package for managing our constituents' case files. It is hard for the House to create one. It's really complicated. It is easy enough for the House to do administrative management, because that's what they do, but managing constituents' case files is a different story. These systems are developed in MPs' offices. Some members have been lucky enough to work with the same staffers for 10 or 15 years, so they are aware of all the cases and all the situations that may arise.

I'll give you some examples. Simply removing the names of people who have died from the constituent list is quite a task. There are ways to do it faster now, but I used to have a staffer who worked 12 hours a week just to do that. We then found a way to do it in 15 minutes, thanks to computers. Managing the Christmas card program used to take two months in 2006, whereas today we can do it in about two hours.

• (1415)

Good software programs exist today to do this kind of work. The tools have improved over time. The House of Commons is not the one who designed these software programs. It was independent firms at the request of some MPs who wanted to save their employees time. When someone spends two months of their time at work on Christmas cards and figuring out who to send them to, it is hard on morale. Sometimes people will choose to leave their job the next year rather than having to do all that work again. There is no denying that it is not an interesting task.

To manage our employees in the long term, we need to give them tools to make their work enjoyable. It is our responsibility if we want to keep good employees for a long time. When we have good employees, we can provide better services to our constituents. If a member has high employee turnover at their office and changes employees every year, then they need to keep starting over. I am thinking about training staff. It takes one to two years to properly train a person who will be dedicated to their work, who will be familiar with all the programs and who will be aware of situations. The work gets done much more quickly when the person is familiar with the tasks they need to do and they can then better help people. An employee can resolve up to 90% of cases in one day when they are not too complicated. More complicated cases take more time. It gets easier with experience.

To keep good employees, we need to give them tools. In that regard, we can all work together to find solutions or we can be partisan and play political games to see who can undermine each other the most until the next election. Essentially, I am an MP to help the people in my riding. To help them and give them good service, I need to provide my employees with tools, tools of our own. I am happy to tell you about them, but at a certain point it comes down to experience.

The important issue here is maintaining corporate memory—

[*English*]

The Chair: Monsieur Gourde, in terms of the debate, we are on the amendment. I know that you have ventured out a fair bit, but I want to bring you back to the amendment. We have other members on the speakers list as well.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: That is why I am asking Mrs. Shanahan to agree to withdraw her amendment so that we can expand on that idea a little more.

If we hand this issue over to the Board of Internal Economy and do like we are doing today, nobody here will be any further ahead. The media will be reporting that things are not going well. In my opinion that is false partisanship, and I find that really sad.

There is a problem. Either we close our eyes and continue to play political games or we do a little digging to figure out what is acceptable and what is not when it comes to partisan activities. If we find things that are unacceptable, let's submit them to the House of Commons and have the House provide us with the tools we need.

Why did you have to pay \$30,000 for a software program? If every member paid \$30,000 for that software, it would cost approximately \$3 million or \$4 million and we cannot even benefit from it. Can we benefit from your software? I do not know. Maybe it is better than the systems we have.

We should not have to design these systems ourselves. However, we are being forced to do so because no one wanted to design that kind of software for MPs. No one had the guts to do so. Perhaps we will be told that no one asked for it either.

There is an ethical side to this issue because we really need to determine the tools that will be used for partisan purposes, for which the parties are responsible, and the tools that will make it

possible to protect the confidentiality of data, for which MPs are responsible. These are issues that fall under our committee's purview. We are talking about the confidentiality of personal information in these software programs. We are the ones signing off on the procurement. It is our responsibility. It is your responsibility. It is the responsibility of the 338 MPs. We need to resolve this problem.

I don't know whether Mrs. Shanahan wants to withdraw her amendment.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That is why we have the Board of Internal Economy to consider these issues.

[*English*]

The Chair: I hate to interrupt the conversation that's happening here, but we have one additional member on the speakers list before we go to a vote.

Madame Lattanzio.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I found Mr. Gourde's speech very interesting.

I wish you had spoken earlier because you clearly explained that this problem that we are discussing today, if there is one, does not seem to be coming from just one party.

All my colleague's amendment is asking is to bring in an entity that will help us to see whether there is a problem not only with regard to the facts presented in your colleague's request but also with regard to the system your party uses. When I say you, I am not talking about you personally. I am talking about CIMS.

The amendment is twofold. First, it asks that the issue be referred to the Board of Internal Economy, which has the mandate necessary to conduct such a study. Second, the amendment asks that we put our cards on the table by allowing other systems to be examined too.

If you are looking for a solution, this one is fair, equitable and transparent.

• (1420)

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Why not examine the issue here? Do you think it wouldn't be fair, equitable and transparent?

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: We need to look at the wording of the mandate of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. I quoted it earlier, but I would like to read the standing order that talks about the committee's mandate and powers again. I want to take the time to read it for my colleague. The last time I read it in response to my colleague, Mr. Barrett.

Here is what Standing Order 108(3)(h)(vii) says:

(vii) the proposing, promoting, monitoring and assessing of initiatives which relate to access to information and privacy across all sectors of Canadian society and to ethical standards relating to public office holders;

You can therefore see what we are talking about, Mr. Gourde.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: As I told you, it falls within our mandate. According to what the standing order says, this falls under our mandate.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Your colleague is asking that Mr. Pitfield appear before the committee, but he is not a public office holder. That is what we are trying to tell you very clearly.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Yes, but he is a service provider.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: I will continue my speech, if I may, Mr. Gourde.

I heard other people say that one meeting would be enough to resolve everything. That seems to be the sticking point. People think that we will be able to ask the witness questions, study the issue and clear everything up in just one meeting.

Members of this committee are experienced. We know full well that this will take more than one meeting. The request does not even ask us to report our findings to the House of Commons, since it is not sitting.

I am therefore having a really hard time understanding my colleagues at the table who are asking the committee to bring in a single witness in order to get answers. They are saying that, if that person has nothing to hide, then we will be able to quickly deal with the issue. If the other parties have nothing to hide either, then why do they not want us to assess the software programs they are using? Why will they not agree to expand the scope of this study so that everyone is transparent? That is what my colleague's amendment is trying to do, to expand the scope of this study.

Some committee members are telling us that they do not agree with the amendment and that they want to stick with the original motion. For what it is worth, the motion talks about a study that seems very broad at first glance. It does not indicate that the study will be limited to a single meeting where we hear from the witness in question. What is more, the motion seems to allege that there is already a conflict of interest when that is not what we have before us. Some members want to bring in the witness so that they can go on a fishing expedition, as my colleague, Mr. Sorbara so clearly pointed out. They are at it again. It is like a second version of the WE Charity investigation.

All my colleagues are saying that they want to focus on the work they need to do for their constituents and on issues affecting Canadians. Unfortunately, we were summoned, almost urgently, to a meeting in the middle of July about something that has no basis. Obviously, some members want to investigate to see whether there is something to find. What is more, they want to limit the debate. That goes against the principle of transparency that Mr. Carrie was talking about this morning. These members do not want us to look into and study the other software programs. They want to limit the study to this particular software.

You are going to tell me that there is no political motivation behind this and that this is not a witch hunt. I am—

Mr. Jacques Gourde: You did not understand what I said.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: I want to understand what you are saying, all of you.

• (1425)

[*English*]

Unfortunately, though, the spirit of the motion speaks for itself.

The Chair: I will remind colleagues that we are speaking to the amendment. I know there was a desire to move to a vote on the amendment, but I now have Mrs. Shanahan on the list again. As well, I have Mr. Dong on the list again.

We'll hear from Mrs. Shanahan first, and then Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: Actually, mine is a point of order.

The Chair: Oh, then I recognize the point of order.

Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

When we originally heard about today's meeting, it was supposed to be from 11 to 1. That's why I am not prepared. I didn't bring lunch, and I don't think any lunch was prepared. I was wondering if we could take a lunch break for half an hour.

The Chair: Well, I'm the eternal optimist. I'm hopeful that we're very close to lunch for all of us. That means we get to the end of this discussion, we go to a vote, and then we vote on the main motion. If there's a desire by members to then adjourn the meeting, we'll adjourn the meeting and allow every member to go for lunch. That's the effort I'm going to make right now. I'm going to commit to you that I will do everything in my power to get you to lunch as soon as possible.

We'll hear from Mrs. Shanahan, and then I'm hopeful that we'll go to a vote.

Mr. Han Dong: On a point of order, I have more to say too. You could canvass the room and see if we agree to a short lunch break.

The Chair: We'll hear from Mrs. Shanahan. Then we'll hear from Mr. Dong and go to a vote. Then we'll deal with the main motion.

Mrs. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Chair.

I understand the desire of my colleague. I think we all thought we were going to get there.

[*Translation*]

I do want to say that I found Mr. Gourde's intervention very interesting. He was direct and honest about how things worked. This may be news to Canadians.

Some members have said that they want to find solutions. That is exactly what the Board of Internal Economy is designed to do. The issue at hand here has to do with how House resources are used, so it makes complete sense for the discussion we are having today to be brought to the Board of Internal Economy. They're the ones who are in a position to make decisions. Unless there is anyone here from the whips' offices, the Board of Internal Economy is best suited to handle this. The board has representatives from each party, and it is able to have open and honest discussions about the challenges we are all facing and then find a solution.

I don't see how this has anything to do with Mr. Pitfield. Mr. Pitfield's only mistake was to be Justin Trudeau's childhood friend. Does that preclude him from living his life, starting a business, working or even supporting the Liberal Party?

That's why I wondered earlier if people were just compiling a list of anyone who has been friends with the Prime Minister. If that is the goal here, then the same should be done for the leaders of all of the parties. You can see where this is going. This is, quite simply, the very definition of partisanship, and a study is not useful under these circumstances.

We've seen it, Mr. Gourde. Be honest with me, because I'm being honest with you. The committee was fishing for something when it called in witnesses. There was no other reason. These were public servants, young employees and ordinary business owners. Some of the witnesses were apparently business owners who had donated to the Conservative Party but made the mistake of working with a former Liberal member of Parliament who was now running a company that manufactures ventilators to combat COVID-19.

Where does it all end? Will we have to send all of our volunteers to testify in committee? Will I have to send all of the ladies who make calls for me? I imagine that you also have volunteers. Is every single one of these people going to be questioned about what everything they do? As you and Ms. Lattanzio have pointed out, I don't think Canadians are interested in seeing everything we do.

It is important to support efforts in politics. I know that people don't like election campaigns, but they're part of the democratic process. During an election campaign, we need to talk with voters to share our plan and persuade them to support our position.

We're going to be campaigning soon. You have more experience with this than I do, although I've been through a couple elections. There are highs and lows. When things are going well, it's great and we are happy. It's a different story when things aren't going well. At the end of the day, once the campaigning is over and the candidate has been elected, whether we're talking about a federal member of Parliament, a member of the National Assembly or a mayor, the individual has a duty to work for the people.

You're probably right in saying that the House should equip members for campaigning. This is a necessary discussion, but the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics is not going to be creating such a tool.

This is about House resources—

• (1430)

Mr. Jacques Gourde: If you're setting the parameters—

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan:—it's up to the Board of Internal Economy and our leaders. That's clear. It's not up to our committee.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: No, we're the ones who handle these issues.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: No, it's not up to us.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Privacy is one of our responsibilities.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I completely disagree.

Right now, we're talking about the amendment.

My colleague, Mr. Fergus, made an interesting proposal. Canadians would like to know how parties operate. They're curious. We're all happy to see that COVID-19 is getting relatively better. We're no longer looking at a one-dose summer; we're looking at a two-dose one. It would be wonderful to turn the page and move on to something else. That said, I did find Mr. Fergus's proposal interesting. He unfortunately had to leave the meeting, but he proposed that we give Canadians an opportunity to see how political parties operate.

Conflicts and misunderstandings can certainly often arise, especially when it comes to determining the role of a member of Parliament and of a political party. I've seen it. Before I was elected, my riding was represented by a New Democrat. Before him, my riding was represented by a member of the Bloc Québécois, who served two or three terms. During the first weeks and months after my election, in 2015 and 2016, I met with constituents and then—

[*English*]

The Chair: Mrs. Shanahan, I'll remind you again that we are speaking to the amendment. I know there's temptation to go on to other subjects, but we are speaking to the amendment. Your colleague, Mr. Dong, would like an opportunity to speak, and then we're hoping to get to a vote because I know that Mr. Dong would like to get out for lunch.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That is true. That is very true.

[*Translation*]

I just want to say that some people thought that they had to be a New Democrat to talk to the former NDP MP in their riding, that they had to be Bloc supporters to speak to the former Bloc Québécois MP or that they had to be Liberal to talk to me. That's not at all the case. Members of Parliament are there for everyone.

[English]

I'm going to switch to English now because this is the information we have, and this is the kind of thing that's a bit like the sausage-making of legislation or the sausage-making of politics. Apparently, someone referred to CIMS, and that's what I have in my amendment, because we want to add the study of the constituent information management system, which Mr. Barrett proudly says is completely paid for by the Conservative Party. But wait a minute: It's not a voter information management database; it's a constituent information management database. The CIMS looks at constituents, paid for by the partisan, political party, but used for the constituents in constituency offices, where that information is and must be kept confidential at all times, as Mr. Gourde so well said.

The overall purpose of CIMS is that it's an integrated voter management and targeting database used by the Conservative Party to target voters and donors, as well as overall campaign management. It's fully funded and managed by the Conservative Party of Canada. As the database is managed outside of Parliament, they use no out-right parliamentary resources. However, they use the exact same database, without a firewall, to manage constituent cases.

• (1435)

Mr. Michael Barrett: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, that's not true. It's been established in this meeting that that system is not used in our offices. In fact, Mr. MacKinnon went on at great length about the system I use in my office, and it is not—

An hon. member: [Inaudible—Editor]

The Chair: Colleagues.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did Mr. MacKinnon get appointed chair during my intervention?

The Chair: I could barely hear Mr. Barrett's point of order because of the yelling by Mr. MacKinnon.

Mr. MacKinnon, you will come to order. Thank you.

Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, it was well established, including by Mr. MacKinnon himself, that the software we use in our offices, mine included.... He even knew whose it was and knew who owns it. I don't even know who owns the company that uses it.

Chair, Mr. MacKinnon is not a regular at this committee and he might not realize how things work, but my understanding was that you are the chair and that he was very concerned about how thick people's skin was. I just wonder if he could be called to order, as he seems very upset.

The Chair: He has been called to order several times.

Mrs. Shanahan, I'll turn to you.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I'd be interested, then, to have that study and to have those contracts tabled so that Mr. Barrett could, indeed, prove that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: There's no contract, because we don't use it.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: It was widely reported in 2007.

CIMS is used not only to track voter allegiance in a given riding—something every political party attempts—but also a host of other data gathered in the course of an MP's constituency office duties.

But the Conservatives use a single clearing house for all data collection, storage, datamining, mailing lists, voter tracking and any other partisan use such information may serve.

Apparently there was a bit of a snafu there. The prime minister at the time, Stephen Harper, asked the Conservative Party to investigate allegations against embattled MP Eve Adams. She crossed the floor a couple of times.

Some Conservative party members in the riding have complained of Adams's unauthorized use of their personal information contained in the party's CIMS database (Constituency Information Management System)—

This is from the National Post, by the way.

—when she's “a member of Parliament who has no history with them on a personal level and does not represent them in Parliament.”

That's what citizens were already complaining about. They were getting mail from this MP, and I can tell you that I was getting it from a Conservative MP. It had nothing to do with me. That's reported in the National Post.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I have a point of order on relevance, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I recognize the point of order on relevance. Mrs. Shanahan has been asked several times to bring her comments.... Speaking about a member of Parliament who crossed over to the Liberal Party from the Conservative Party is probably not relevant to the amendment. I'll ask the member to bring her comments to the amendment that's being discussed at this time.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: It is to the point of why we want to have the study of the CIMS program—not just the CRM program of our party but also the CIMS program—and why we want to have this done by the Board of Internal Economy. That is my amendment.

This has been controversial in the past. In fact, I have far more on that. Maybe a public meeting to discuss this would be the thing to do.

[Translation]

A public meeting is an opportunity to air dirty laundry.

• (1440)

[English]

Sunlight is the best disinfectant, right?

There was another complaint. The Toronto Star reported it. There was a memo to then prime minister Harper, saying that some incumbent MPs wanted to have “nominations held ASAP, including Rob Anders who believes he can win if we open [the contest] now.”

It says, however, that once a nomination contest begins, an MP or his staff will no longer have access to a party database.

The Chair: I recognize Mr. Barrett on a point of order.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, on the subject of relevance, although I haven't heard the date of the article that's being referenced, it has to be at least 14 or 15 years old. I would imagine it's a bit of a stretch to find this relevant when we're talking about a government that hasn't been in place for six years. We're talking about MPs who haven't been in office for nearly two decades. The amendment to the motion is a little more narrow in scope than, perhaps, the news recitation that we're getting from the member opposite.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. MacKinnon, go ahead on the same point of order.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Mr. Barrett's very motion references media reports. We are here on the strength of media reports.

Madam Shanahan, my colleague, is giving you media reports.

The Chair: Mr. MacKinnon, I will rule on this point of order. You have pointed out exactly why I have to rule against Mrs. Shanahan. We aren't discussing the main motion. We're talking about the amendment.

I would remind members, as I have tried—

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Mr. Chair, if you would permit me to finish my point of order—

The Chair: I have the floor.

I have ruled against the point of order. I would ask Mrs. Shanahan to come to order, to speak to the amendment, to allow for a vote, and for members to then debate the motion as amended or not amended.

Mrs. Shanahan, go ahead on the amendment.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Well, Chair—

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, my colleague, Madam Shanahan, is now going through a number of examples of reports of usage of the database of the Conservative Party and its possible misuse as a constituency management tool, and that goes to the very name. I can't think of anything more relevant to the amendment, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. MacKinnon, I have ruled, and this is debate that you're engaging in.

Mrs. Shanahan, go ahead on the amendment.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Chair, I actually have far more to say, but I can save it for another time, because I am moving forward. It was Mr. Gourde who was telling us about the history going back 15 years and how important this kind of—

The Chair: Yes, thank you, Mrs. Shanahan. You'll recall I brought him to order in the same way that I will with other members. We are speaking on the amendment.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Indeed.

As I say, I have more incidents that indeed point to questions that can be asked about the party databases that are being used, apparently with constituent data. It's being turned around and could be used for pre-campaign or campaign purposes. I think these are very legitimate questions that Canadians would have. I personally would prefer to see them dealt with in BOIE, where they can be dealt with, very frankly, so that we don't have all of this partisan theatre

that this committee has been subjected to almost from its beginning. That is the amendment we have before us.

I would actually welcome the support of any of my colleagues on this amendment. If they want to offer a subamendment that we can support, then I say we're ready to study this question. Mr. Fergus generously offered something before that would be substantive and that would certainly go a long way to reassuring Canadians that their private data is being handled correctly by political parties and, more importantly, by MPs. This is why we're here in this capacity, to represent our constituents.

As I say, I have far more that I can go into, but I'm happy to save it for another meeting and organize it and put it together, because there are some interesting things from the leadership campaign and data contracts that are going back and forth, and questions about who's a management consultant and who's not, and so on. That's why I offer yet again to opposition colleagues that if they want to study this.... Actually, the more I look at this material the more I think it needs to be studied, so I thank Mr. Barrett and the members who signed the letter bringing this to our attention.

• (1445)

Mr. Michael Barrett: Let's vote.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I think it's something that we're waiting for on the amendment. Let's be open to sending this matter to BOIE if there's an appetite.... I'm looking at my fellow members. I know someone is going to be speaking a bit more fulsomely. I never quite get all the words together for an amendment, or a subamendment, but maybe someone else will have something to add to the discussion.

On that note, Mr. Chair, you can put me back on the speaking list and I'll pull this together.

Thank you.

The Chair: We'll have Mr. Dong and then we have Mrs. Shanahan again on the speaking list.

Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you very much, Chair.

I've been listening to the conversations going back and forth. I'm a little disappointed that my colleague MP Fergus's proposal for a solution has not received positive support from the opposite side. I said earlier that when I first saw the notice of meeting, I was saying to myself that if it's about process and procedure, or members' code of conduct, I don't think this committee that we're sitting at right now has the mandate for it or is the most appropriate to look into it. If it's about ethics or a breach of privacy of our constituents, yes, this is the right committee, but I think all members would agree that we should look at the practice of the constituency offices of all members of Parliament.

I appreciate that Mr. Barrett pointed out that he maybe used a different service from other members, but I'm still confused as to how the opposition, collectively or caucus-wise.... Do they use one service? How do they tackle the differences in the different software and remain able to share information to serve their constituents? If it's about privacy protection, then we should be looking at all members' constituency office practices.

Nevertheless, here we are. We're here to discuss the use of NGP VAN and Data Sciences by the Liberal caucus members. As some members pointed out, it was reported on recently. However, again, I want to reiterate that the article spoke about more than just Liberal members' usage of data. I want to share with all the viewers that since day one, our caucus has always strived to have members of Parliament who are serving and accountable to their constituents. With hundreds of thousands of constituents per riding, this is not a simple task. Effectively managing constituency casework, outreach programs and communication is often a complicated task.

We heard from Mr. Gourde that it was more manual in terms of managing constituency casework. I too have had that experience. When I was working as a junior staffer at a local constituency office for a federal member, it was all paper and faxes. Right now, just with the amount, and especially during the pandemic, it's not possible to perform very efficient work for your electors. Having effective data management and technical infrastructure is critical to the work that members of Parliament need to do. In fact—

• (1450)

The Chair: Mr. Dong, I hate to interrupt you, but it seems as though your comments are more suited for the debate with regard to the motion and not the amendment. Did you have comments with regard to the amendment?

Mr. Han Dong: It's coming up.

The Chair: Let's maybe fast-forward to that part. I know you're hungry and want to get out—

Mr. Han Dong: I was speaking for all members. That's why I asked for a break.

The Chair: Well, those members might want lunch too.

Mr. Han Dong: I see.

The Chair: If you move to the part where you're talking about the amendment, then colleagues will be able to hear that. I suspect that you'll have some words on the motion, whether it's amended or not, so maybe save these comments for that point and move to the portion where you'd like to discuss the amendment.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Chair. I do have a bit more to say.

On that point, I wonder if we can canvass the committee members and see if we can take a half-hour break before I go on to finish my remarks.

The Chair: I'm not getting any requests on that matter, other than from you, Mr. Dong.

I have heard from several who would like to go to the vote. Maybe I'll canvass members.

Is there any support to move to the vote on the amendment? Would any members like to do that?

Mr. Han Dong: I'm not doing that.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I oppose. No.

The Chair: We're getting a lot of support for a vote. It's not unanimous support, but there's a lot of support for moving to a vote.

Mr. Han Dong: I think it's very critical to know that not only on this side do we use digital infrastructure, but also that I hear the Conservative, NDP, Bloc and Green Party members support having large databases to help them to manage their constituency work. We live in a country with 37 million people. I know that the Conservatives are fine with the idea of helping constituents, otherwise they would have recalled this committee for other purposes.

I want to again point out the fact that this meeting is not a regularly scheduled meeting. It's a special meeting called by opposition members based on what was reported in the media. I think it's fair for Canadians to have some concerns on the issues of privacy and the procurement of services for the appropriate use of these resources by parliamentarians to serve their constituents. However, to ensure that we are all able to continue our constituency work in an ethical way that is not an abuse of parliamentary resources is why the service provided by NGP VAN is completely separate from the operations of Liberalist.

We've heard that this is a program used for election purposes. They are completely separate. I understand and respect the rules around the separation of party from parliamentarian, and we still strive to be the best caseworkers for our constituents. The use of NGP VAN also has the advantage of being familiar to many members and staffers in terms of its layout, format and usability.

Thanks to the use of Liberalist in the campaign, many of the incoming staff are familiar with and know how the program functions and works. It kind of helps them to get on with this software that they have become familiar with, but with a completely different set of data. This is very important to stress: There is a fair bit of a firewall or restriction built in to protect the privacy of constituents, which I hold dear to my heart.

Of course, it would be a dereliction of duty if this committee were to ignore the Conservative Party's behaviour on this issue. We're very much aware that Mr. Barrett talked about how his management organization in his constituency office may be different from that of his colleagues, but I would like to remind the committee that in 2007 there was the discovery of gross misuse of the Conservative Party's constituency information management database by the Conservative government. That was an incident in which the Conservative Party of Canada used its constituency database to send voter information straight to its party apparatus, a party that would be fighting an election in the very next year.

• (1455)

To put that in contrast to the meeting that we are having today, the Conservatives—or some of the Conservative members, because I don't like to use big names that tag everybody—are making the accusation that we on this side are using the same company to separately manage constituency work and campaign work, while by contrast the Conservatives, or some Conservatives, decided to use the same companies for constituency work and for campaigning, for election purposes. Canadians who would go to their Conservative or some of the Conservative members of Parliament looking for service—looking for help that is offered by their office, their CO—have their information sent straight to the Conservative Party and its election machine.

This dishonest practice was prominently featured in the media and was also reported on by a former Conservative member of Parliament and Conservative officials in the former Conservative MP Garth Turner's report on this practice when he left the Conservative Party in 2006. He said the party had been using constituency case-work that had been collected by a Conservative member of Parliament, and there was lots of evidence to support this allegation of malpractice. In 2006 several individuals made complaints about receiving Rosh Hashanah greetings from then prime minister Stephen Harper, despite not being Jewish.

Later, Conservative MP Cheryl Gallant—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Chair, on a point of order, I believe you already ruled on a point of order dealing with the exact same subject matter that Mr. Dong is referencing. If it was to be referenced briefly as part of making a bigger case.... That's why I didn't raise the point earlier, but it seems that it will make up the substance, or the bulk of what he's offering. Again, we're digging some dry holes here, I think, to repurpose Mr. MacKinnon's phrase.

The Chair: Mr. Dong, I would encourage you to move to the....

Mr. MacKinnon, please come to order. Please come to order, Mr. MacKinnon.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: I'm making a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I didn't recognize a point for you yet.

Mr. MacKinnon has a point of order.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for granting me the same privilege that my colleague, Mr. Barrett, was arbitrarily granted. He can interrupt a member who is in the middle of making a speech to this committee—

• (1500)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. MacKinnon, do you have a point of order? What is your point of order?

[Translation]

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Yes, Mr. Chair.

It really seems to bother Mr. Barrett that Mr. Dong is repeating himself and going on and on with some apparently documented allegations of the inappropriate or questionable use of software by the

entire Conservative machine in Parliament. That is why he keeps rising on a point of order to interrupt my colleague's speech.

Mr. Chair, I urge you to let my colleague, Mr. Dong, finish his speech. I'm sure people want to hear the rest of his intervention.

[English]

The Chair: The only person holding the floor at the moment is Mr. MacKinnon.

Thank you for finishing your point of order.

Mr. Dong, we will now hear from you, but I would encourage you to draw a link to the amendment in your statement.

Mr. Han Dong: The link is pretty obvious.

The Chair: Mr. Dong, it hasn't been obvious to members at this table. If you struggle to make the links then I may rule it out of order. I would ask that you seek to speak to the amendment specifically.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Chair.

To me the core essence of the amendment is to show the Conservative members that their service, or their usage, or their decision on a point of service from providers that previously donated to the party is also quite concerning as well. Therefore, I think the essence of the amendment is to invite their service providers. If the motion is set out to correct some bad behaviours, if you will, or some misuse of public funds, I think we should be looking at all members of Parliament.

I previously had the opportunity to share with the committee some numbers, some facts, and how according to a member's report a service provider to Mr. Barrett's office had links with the Conservative Party and had made donations. I have a few more things to share with the committee and the public. I was going to save them for later, but, respectfully, I've heard you, Chair, and you indicated that I should get to the point.

My point is that according to some of this public information, I think there are quite a few reasons why we should also hear from service providers to the Conservative members of Parliament. Gerald Soroka also has a licence contract with Momentum BPO. We've heard that its leadership is a very generous donor to the Conservative Party—that's quite a reason—at, in 2020, on November 5, a value of \$2,200. To Rosemarie Falk from Momentum BPO Inc.—

The Chair: Mr. Dong—

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: On a point of order, Madame Gaudreau.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: We're talking about a very specific amendment. Could members refrain from making comments not related to the amendment? Otherwise, we could spend three days on this. I agree that this is important and interesting, but can we focus on the amendment so that we can make a decision?

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dong, I think that's been expressed by many members. Maybe for the benefit of committee members, because maybe I'm missing the connection, you could draw the connection between Momentum BPO Inc. and the amendment that we're considering.

Mr. Han Dong: I said earlier, in my previous opportunity to speak, that Momentum has made contributions to the Conservatives.

The Chair: Momentum is not mentioned in the amendment at all.

Mr. Han Dong: Right.

The Chair: Perhaps you'd like to bring in an additional amendment, or a subamendment at some point that might be relevant, but the discussion with regard to Momentum is not indicated in the amendment, so I am ruling it out of order.

• (1505)

Mr. Han Dong: Are they not a service provider to a Conservative member of Parliament?

The Chair: I'm ruling that because it's not mentioned in the amendment—

Mr. Han Dong: If we're talking—

The Chair: —Mr. Dong, I have ruled.

Mr. Han Dong: I am not challenging you.

The Chair: I appreciate that agreement, so let's move on to the subject material with regard to the amendment.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: On a point of order, go ahead, Mr. MacKinnon.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We're only here because Mr. Barrett and his colleagues are alleging that there was a mix-up with the database we use to serve our constituents and the one that the Liberal Party uses for partisan purposes.

Mr. Dong gave a perfect example—

[English]

The Chair: Mr. MacKinnon, are you challenging the chair?

[Translation]

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: —that Conservative supporters—

[English]

The Chair: Are you challenging the chair, Mr. MacKinnon?

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: I would note, Mr. Chair, that you are not affording Mr. Dong the latitude—

The Chair: Mr. MacKinnon, are you challenging the chair?

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: I am indeed, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We'll move to a vote on the ruling of the chair.

Madam Clerk, could you call the roll?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Miriam Burke): The question is this: Shall the chair's ruling be sustained?

(Ruling of the chair sustained: yeas 6; nays 4)

The Chair: Thank you, colleagues.

Mr. Dong, the floor is yours.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know exactly what I was voting for. I just want to repeat the point I want to make. I'm not here to challenge the chair, but I do want to say that I appreciate my colleague's intervention. Obviously Mr. MacKinnon sees a clear connection between the evidence I'm presenting and the point I'm making. Hopefully my opposition colleagues will see that point as well, and understand why it's very important that we need to call in a service provider, not just for the Liberal caucus members but also for the Conservative caucus members.

I heard my colleague Mr. Fergus trying to bring a solution that would really serve Canadians by shining a light on what's going on between these service providers, the contracts and the parliamentarians. I'm obviously open to doing that. I was ready to support his proposal that Canadians have the right to know, when they elect an MP, how their privacy is being protected, how the database is being managed, what the requirement is when it comes to procuring these services, who, quite honestly, makes these decisions and who, whenever there is a need, will be going there and fine-tuning all of these requirements so that taxpayer dollars are respected. I think the public needs to know.

If you were to canvass your respective ridings and ask your voters if we should be looking at just the Liberal MPs, because we think they are using public funds for partisan reasons, I think they would tell you that every MP should be looked at.

It's unfortunate that my good friend and colleague MP Fergus's proposal was not supported, but I'm here to ask my NDP and Bloc colleagues to consider the amendment and bring forward the service providers for the Conservative MPs as well, so that at least we will have a broader scope.

If you see this as fitting the mandate of this committee—if that's what you honestly believe—then we should do something constructive. Hopefully, at the end of the study—I know that one meeting is being talked about, but I don't think it's going to end with one meeting—we will have something constructive to move forward with. Then, when you go back to your riding and people ask what happened with the study, you can say that we provided recommendations A, B, C and D, and that we will improve the system. If at the end it's just to prolong the news story and give more material to attack the ruling party, or the governing party, I think the public will see through that.

My colleagues talked about this as being preparation by the Conservatives for an election, a near election. They assume that there will be a near election. I haven't heard that called by my leader or the writ dropped. This is sort of preparation for that and they have created some news stories about it, using public dollars.

I hope the Bloc member and the NDP member will see through that and not be supportive of it. If we are, indeed, to have some value from today's meeting and future meetings, let's call in a few more service providers. Then we can compare and see the differences.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll cede the floor.

● (1510)

The Chair: Thank you.

We have Mrs. Shanahan and Ms. Lattanzio on the speakers list.

Mrs. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Chair.

I thank my good friend Mr. Dong for his remarks. I'm always gratified to see that on this side, certainly, among the people I've gotten to know over the past years, there are a lot of different trains of thought. There's certainly a range in terms of where members on this side want to go when we're talking about changes to the Standing Orders and about how we can do things better here in politics. As I already indicated—that cat's out of the bag—I guess I'm what you call more of a “blue” Liberal. I'm on more that side of the street. However, I am very much gratified, as I say, to see that with such members as Mr. Dong and Mr. Fergus, for whom I have great respect, who are very experienced in political life, we can move forward. We can come together. I actually had my doubts, with some of the things I witnessed here, especially in this current Parliament, but that hope springs eternal. That's really where the amendment I have proposed is coming from. What it seeks to achieve is that we can discuss....

You know, when members come in and they're brand new, they're looking for direction from colleagues, from caucus and so on. It is possible that members, regardless of political party, may not have been aware if they were asked by their whip or their party leader to sign a contract that would impact their expenses on their MOB, as we call it, in their House of Commons budget. Of course, this is public information now. Our expenses are made public. I believe that was—I'm looking for a nod here—our leader, when he was leader of the third party, who started that practice, which

quickly became public. Certainly, all parties had to adopt it or questions would be asked about why they didn't want to disclose their House of Commons expenses.

That's how we now have them public. As a former banker and so on, I certainly appreciate that kind of transparency. We are going in that direction, which is why I'm open, at this point. I think this is most appropriately studied by the Board of Internal Economy, but if, as my colleague Mr. Fergus suggested, we want to have a full-scale study of all parties in public, it could be very educational.

I hesitate to use personal names, but please bear in mind, Mr. Chair, that we did not call this meeting today. It's not we who are naming an individual citizen and wanting to drag that person in front of this committee. However, if we're going to go there, then there are members who have been paying—that's what my colleague Mr. Dong was referring to—for contracts. It's public knowledge. Tony Baldinelli of Niagara Falls is paying Momentum as well—

● (1515)

Mr. Michael Barrett: On a point of order, Chair, the committee voted, in fact, on your ruling on this very specific item. There was a chair challenge initiated by Mr. MacKinnon. We voted on that. It's highly disrespectful and disruptive that members are now contravening the will of this committee and an order of the chair. If that organization were named in Mrs. Shanahan's motion, it would be a different story, I suppose, but now she's not even talking about her own motion. That's against both the ruling of the chair and a vote of this committee.

The Chair: I have made it very clear, Ms. Shanahan, because we have exhaustively debated this amendment, that all comments moving forward must pertain to the amendment. The comments about other contracts that have to do with other businesses that are not named in the amendment will be ruled out of order. Of course, the member knows the amendment because she drafted it. I would encourage the member to move to the relevant information with regard to the amendment.

Mr. Han Dong: Chair, I have a point of order. When I was listening to your ruling, there was a very important part that I think wasn't repeated by Mr. Barrett. You said it wasn't relevant to the amendment; however, it is relevant to the main motion, so this information that Ms. Shanahan is bringing forward can wait—

The Chair: I encourage members to always support me, and I'm thankful for the support, Mr. Dong, but I think we got to the bottom of that as it pertains to the amendment.

Ms. Shanahan, with regard to the amendment, I'd ask that you move to speak to the amendment.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Indeed, and I—

Mr. Chandra Arya (Nepean, Lib.): Mr. Chair, on a point of order, I've been listening carefully to what Mr. Dong said about Mr. MacKinnon's intervention and to Ms. Shanahan's talk on this. When I go through the wording of these amendments, the issue is the same system that enables partisan, election-related actions to be taken by constituency offices and parliamentary offices, because it refers to the actions taken at constituency offices. When we are discussing that, it is possible that which organizations are involved in that is relevant, so there's no—

• (1520)

The Chair: I have ruled with regard to this. I am hopeful that we can get through this without another chair challenge, so I'd ask that Ms. Shanahan move to the discussion with regard to the amendment.

Ms. Shanahan.

Mr. Chandra Arya: Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Thank you for your intervention. I'll take it under advisement.

Mr. Chandra Arya: No, but related to that, it's just for a small clarification.

The Chair: I apologize, but the floor is not yours. If you'd like to be on the speakers list, we can do that, but the floor is now Ms. Shanahan's.

Ms. Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Chair.

Actually, we've been hearing a lot of information during this meeting.

[*Translation*]

We could keep talking about it. We would learn a lot more.

[*English*]

I think there is some concern, and Mr. Gourde pointed to that. It's more and more difficult now to get contact information and so on. Again, this points to how important it is to direct this question to the Board of Internal Economy. Maybe members don't know that there are major Conservative Party donors who received thousands of dollars of licensing contracts. Maybe the individual members, whose names I have here, which are public, do not know that this is the case, and they may prefer, as Mr. Barrett mentioned, to hire a different company. This is something we could certainly explore in the vein of what Mr. Gourde was saying, and whether it would be something that is more neutral.

I think there's something there, and I believe that the other parties here—the NDP and the Bloc Québécois—would also benefit from an exploration of data management.

[*Translation*]

That's true.

[*English*]

If anyone wants to suggest a subamendment that would bring us to some place where we can study this question fully, I certainly would welcome hearing that.

On that, I think there's room for further discussion on the issue before us, the fact that a number of databases are used by all party members, and that it is the place of the Board of Internal Economy, I think, to study that.

Thank you, Chair. I now cede the floor.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Lattanzio.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Following up on the intervention of my colleague Mr. Dong, and quite recently my colleague Mrs. Shanahan, I think Mr. Dong was making his points, and from your intervention, Mr. Chair, I understand that it was going beyond the scope of the amendment. Therefore, the question was, could there be a subamendment?

In light of everything that's been discussed this afternoon and to be able to cover what we've sent from this side of the fence, we're saying that if we want to be transparent, then let's look at the data from all members of Parliament. We want to be transparent. Let's look at it all, because today we came in with one idea, and as we keep talking we keep discovering more and more information that perhaps Canadians ought to know.

I mean, we want to keep it very brief but I'm sort of coming to the conclusion that there's so much more information out there that maybe could be of interest for the Board of Internal Economy to examine.

Here's my subamendment, Mr. Chair. You will recall the paragraph that my colleague, Ms. Shanahan, seeks to amend. If you want to follow in the second paragraph, where it says “that the issue of the CIMS system”, I would add, “and all providers of data services to members of Parliament”, then I would continue, “which facilitates partisan election-related actions to be taken from constituency offices and Parliament Hill offices to determine if they are in compliance with the rules set out by the Board also be”, and I would add “examined and” before “referred to the BOIE”, the Board of Internal Economy.

Is that okay, Mr. Chair?

• (1525)

The Chair: Are you able to send that to the clerk?

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: I will. I have it handwritten. I'm going to type it out and send it over to you.

The Chair: We will suspend until such time as that has been circulated to members in both official languages.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1525)

(Pause)

• (1605)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

We're debating the subamendment. I have two speakers on the speaking list. They are Mr. Arya and Mrs. Shanahan. Then we have Madame Gaudreau and Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I've read the subamendment, and I'm just wondering.... I understand the Liberal strategy here. The original motion that brought us in today was talking about a study on the conflict of interest related to taxpayer-funded contracts with Data Sciences and about the committee's inviting Mr. Pitfield to appear. Basically, it seems that we're getting further and further away from that. We're talking about everything else but this. It seems that every time the Liberals have an opportunity, it just brings it further and further.

Now we're debating a subamendment. I'm just wondering if it's actually in order with what we're talking about, with the original motion that we have on the table.

The Chair: I'll leave it to members to determine how far distanced they feel it is from the original, but I have said it before and I'll say it again: While there have been times when things have been referred to the subcommittees of a committee or to the House, it would be unprecedented for a committee to tell another committee what to do. I suspect that it would be met with some resistance from that committee. I know that we do not have any authority over that committee. We cannot tell another committee what to do.

You are correct that this is unusual. I have allowed it. I will allow members to use their discernment to determine whether or not they want to set the precedent of committees telling other committees what to do.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that.

The Chair: We have Mr. Arya on the speaking list.

Mr. Chandra Arya: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The subamendment proposed by my colleague is very relevant, because the main motion was on the management of the constituency offices. The amendment by my other colleague referred to another party's system of managing the constituency office operations. The subamendments in fact make it very clear that we have to take a global approach and look at every single member of Parliament—how they manage their constituency office operations and whether the taxpayer-funded operations are partisan or not. It allows us to have a good overall look. However, in my view, the committee best suited to study this is the Board of Internal Economy.

That's it, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mrs. Shanahan and then Madame Gaudreau.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Chair.

I'm just reviewing the subamendment as referred to by Ms. Latanzio. If it were adopted, the amendment would then read as follows: "That the issue of contracts related to Data Sciences be referred to the BOIE. That the issue of the CIMS system and all providers of services to members of Parliament"—we don't know all the names of the providers, so it's all providers of services to members of Parliament—"which facilitate partisan, election-related actions to be taken from constituency offices and Parliament Hill offices to determine if they are in compliance with the rules set out by the Board also be examined and referred to the BOIE."

I have a question, Chair. In the overall amended motion—maybe the clerk can read it out to us—do we still have the public meeting in there? I'm just curious.

• (1610)

The Chair: No words have been removed. Your amendment simply inserted your full text between the words "that" and "pursuant". The subamendment didn't remove any words either. All of the words that were there at the beginning are still there. They have simply been added to.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Okay, so that's interesting for all members to know that we're still dealing with a public component of the study as well. I find this subamendment, again, very interesting. To take that study of all the different political parties and the software we use and the practices we have in our constituency offices and on Parliament Hill would, I think, be very useful. There would be one part in public and then part of it at the Board of Internal Economy.

I think, as we know, different committees will work on different aspects of a problem, and it can inform another committee when the work has already been undertaken elsewhere. I'm not always in favour of that. I like everyone to stay in their lane, but we can see there's that flexibility in the parliamentary system, right, and that we are authors of the work we do here, as are other committee members when they are there.

On that note, and in the interests of time, I move that this meeting do hereby be adjourned.

The Chair: There is a non-debatable motion with regard to the adjournment of this committee meeting.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Pardon me?

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Are we talking about adjourning the meeting or suspending it until later?

[English]

The Chair: This is a motion to adjourn the meeting, not to suspend the meeting.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: What's the difference between the two?

[English]

The Chair: That would be final, and this meeting would cease to happen. A suspension would allow the committee to come back at a later period of time, but it is an adjournment vote, so we will ask the clerk to read through the roll call with regard to the adjournment.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 3)

The Chair: Colleagues, the meeting is adjourned.

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