



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

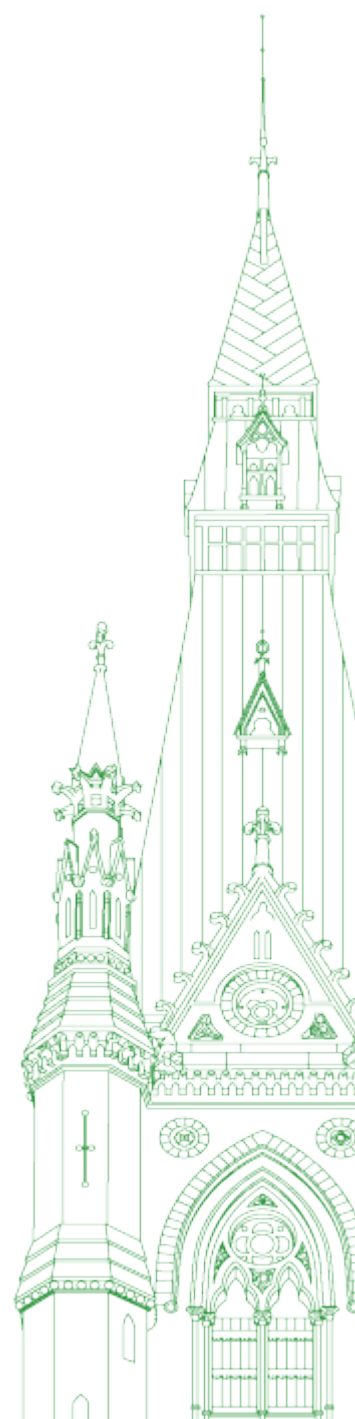
Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 083

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Wednesday, October 4, 2023



Chair: Mr. John Brassard

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• (1735)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC)): Welcome back, everyone.

We're now resuming meeting number 83 in public to discuss the business of the committee.

Members, we're working on getting the privacy, information, ethics and lobbying commissioners here to discuss their reports to Parliament. I know there is some interest, particularly, in the Privacy Commissioner's information as it relates to his report. We're looking at doing that on the 16th.

Then we are talking about starting the social media study on the 18th. I appreciate the list; it's a robust list of witnesses that was submitted by the committee. We're going through that list right now, and we'll make sure we have some good witnesses for that report.

Mr. Barrett, go ahead, please.

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

I have two things I'd like to address while I have the floor.

The first comes in the context of media reports this week and with the backdrop of the cost of living crisis that's facing Canadians. We learned that whistle-blowers have raised serious questions about \$38 million of the spending on a \$1-billion government program. That's just what's been revealed so far, obviously, through these whistle-blower accounts that have been reported in the media.

This is, again, with the backdrop of this cost of living crisis and this national debt that's growing at a record pace. Inflation is at a 40-year high. We have Canadians who are facing mortgage payments; they are facing rent payments that have doubled over the last eight years. Food price inflation is driving record food bank use. Seven million Canadians are using the food bank, and one-third of those food bank users are children.

Canadians need to know that the public purse is being properly tended to and that every dollar is being accounted for.

I have a motion that I would like to give notice of:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h), and in light of the new information revealed through whistle-blower complaints regarding the \$1-billion fund awarded by the government to Sustainable Development Technology Canada to deliver taxpayer money to the green tech sector, the committee dedicate six meetings to this matter and hear testimony from the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry, the Minister of Environment, and the Minister of Finance; and that the committee order the government to produce all documents related to

this program, including emails, briefing notes, text messages, contracts, funding agreements, memorandums of understanding and any other documents that the government has related to this program.

That's what I'd like to put on notice.

While I—

The Chair: If it's just placed on notice, that's fine. Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you.

I previously placed a motion on notice, Chair, with respect to the Minister of Environment, Steven Guilbeault, regarding media reports of his travel to China to participate in the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development.

This raised serious questions by the public, by commentators, by the media and, of course, by opposition members of Parliament about the minister's holding a formal role with this PRC-controlled state body while also serving as a minister of the Crown for Canada.

It's important, of course, that Canada dialogue on the world stage, but in light of the matters we have such fundamental disagreements with the dictatorship in Beijing over, it's objectionable that the minister sits on this body.

Now, the charter for this organization states that it was founded “With the approval of the Chinese Government” and that the “Ministry of Ecology and Environment of China (MEE) serves as the executing agency of CCICED, providing guidance for its operations, implementation, and daily management.” It's not an independent body. It is at arm's length from the PRC state and the ruling Communist party.

Should that be in doubt, it is chaired by an individual who is the PRC's top-ranked vice-premier and a member of the political bureau of the central committee of the Communist party—their politburo. This individual has been described as the most trusted aid of the President of China and was recently appointed to oversee the seizure of power in Hong Kong.

Canada's involvement with the CCICED is not new, but a lot has changed in recent years with this organization.

Of course, we just dealt with a study on foreign interference in which we heard testimony that implicated the dictatorship in Beijing, and we've heard reports from our national security bodies concerning the targeting of members of Canada's House of Commons, including a member of the NDP, Ms. Kwan; a member of the Conservative Party, Mr. Chong; and former members of Parliament.

We saw actions by China's government, the dictatorship in Beijing, that were reprehensible, including the imprisonment for an extended period of Canadian citizens Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. They were illegally detained in that country.

We've recently heard, and it's been verified, that the People's Republic of China, the dictatorship in Beijing, was operating police stations in this country to intimidate members of the Chinese diaspora community who are living here, and our Parliament recognized that there was a genocide being perpetrated by the dictatorship in Beijing on Uyghur Muslims.

All of this is happening while China is also not a good actor on the world environmental stage. The New York Times posted the following:

Last month, China generated 14 percent more electricity from coal, its dominant fuel source, than it did in June 2022.

It also said:

As of January, China had more than 300 coal-fired power plants in various stages of proposal, permitting or construction, according to Global Energy Monitor....

That was in The New York Times on July 20, 2023.

This trip by a minister of the Crown, a Canadian minister, to China—in the context that I've just described—is completely inappropriate.

- (1740)

That's why I'm now moving the motion I put on notice previously. I move:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h) and in relation to Minister Steven Guilbeault's recent collaboration with the Chinese Communist Party, a foreign government undertaking human rights abuses and actively interfering in Canada's democracy, the committee invite Minister Guilbeault to appear before the committee and testify for no less than two hours, within two weeks of the adoption of this motion.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: The motion has been on notice since September 15. It is in order. The motion has been moved.

Is there any discussion on the motion?

Ms. Khalid, I see your hand up. Please, go ahead.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

I appreciate Mr. Barrett's concern with climate change. I think it's a great turnaround, and I look forward to working with him on Canadian climate change issues.

There are a couple of things I want to put on the record, Chair.

Firstly, the council that Mr. Barrett is talking about was created in 1992. When the opposition leader, Mr. Poilievre, was a cabinet

minister under Stephen Harper, the last environment minister under Mr. Harper, and his colleague Mr. Poilievre, actually praised the council for the work it had done to help China tackle its environmental problems.

I think we need to be mindful of being consistent and clear in what we're trying to do. It's a little disingenuous for colleagues to put forward a motion that clearly contradicts the work of that previous government, now that they are in opposition.

The second point that I'd like to make, Chair, is that I really don't see the relevance of this motion in our committee. We are tasked quite clearly...I think our mandate is quite clear. As much as I appreciate Mr. Barrett's new-found love of tackling climate change, I think this is not an issue that belongs in this committee at all. In fact, I encourage him to take this to our environment committee or to many others. In this committee, we talk about access to information, privacy and ethics. We have a very specific mandate. I don't think this motion falls within that scope.

I would ask if you can consider it, but I'll leave my comments here and I look forward to the discussion with colleagues.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Khalid.

I have Mr. Kurek next, followed by Mr. Green.

Go ahead, Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Thanks very much, Chair.

I appreciate the motion that Mr. Barrett has brought forward. I think it emphasizes a couple of things that I heard loud and clear from my constituents when Minister Guilbeault's trip made its rounds in the media. The fact that you have an environment minister from Canada who seems more interested in collaborating with communists than actually being proactive and productive in dealing with environmental challenges in our country is deeply troubling.

When it comes to the revelations about not only what his actions were, but his attitude and the way he has conducted himself, I think the least we can do is ask those very serious questions. When you have a minister who, at that exact same time, was attacking provincial governments for various things, it constitutionally calls into question his understanding of his role. He was more interested in attacking provincial governments than the human rights and environmental violations of a Communist dictatorship. It was unbelievable.

I heard from many constituents. In fact, I did a number of events in the aftermath of Minister Guilbeault's trip and some of the headlines that resulted from it, and constituents who are no fans of the Liberals on the best of days were truly ashamed that the Government of Canada and a minister of the Crown would conduct themselves in this way.

I think it's the least this committee can do to ask that minister the tough questions he needs to be asked about his conduct in this matter.

• (1745)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kurek.

Go ahead, Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you.

You know, I reflect on the way in which people's perspective changes depending on where they sit. I always get a kick out of my Conservative friends for pursuing these kinds of red scare tactics when much of the work and relationship that Canada has with China—this is all on the record, like everything else—happened under the Harper government. It is what it is.

I'm not sure what has changed. The last time I checked, there wasn't some kind of massive switch in government there. Certainly the nuances in international diplomacy have changed. I'm not even clear that they're still a communist country. I'd say they're probably more state capitalist, but that's for people who probably have a better analysis on both economics and politics, which sometimes we seem to miss.

I would say this. In the opening remarks—this is a question I'm going to put through you, Mr. Chair, that hopefully Mr. Barrett can answer—there seemed to be an inference that by being the minister and being a member of this committee.... I'll admit that I'm not 100% apprised of it. Is there a conflict of interest? Is there a pecuniary interest? Is he being paid and compensated in ways that are untoward?

There's a whole conversation we can have around that. If there are those things, then I absolutely think it is worthy of this committee to examine. If that's not the case, and this is simply a way to drag a minister into this committee, then I would highly suggest, and I say this respectfully, that you bring it up in question period, which is a perfect way for you to hammer; you could do it every day. You could have a petition. You could do whatever, but in terms of spending our time in this committee, I would say that unless you have evidence that the minister has received contributions from the Chinese government that are not in keeping with our conflict of interest laws....

If he's being paid, compensated or influenced in any way, I'm all for it. If it's a headline in a story that people are uncomfortable that he's dealing with one of the largest industrial powers in the world around climate change, I'm not doing that here. That's where I am on that.

I will say this, and I'll take the privilege, although I know it was a notice: I happen to like the first notice of motion. I'm all for that. I think that's an important discussion, and at the appropriate time we should definitely be doing it. I don't want to see public funds used to greenwash industries, or the black hole of government money going to subsidize and line corporate pockets. I would rather see that invested in better ways.

I'm all for that, so at the appropriate time, if we're prioritizing where we're spending our time, I'll just put it to my friends in the Conservative caucus that I am much more interested in the motion that was put on notice than I am in this one.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

I'll let Mr. Barrett respond, and after that I'll have a few comments.

Go ahead, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks very much, Chair.

I appreciate Mr. Green's comments. Look, the biggest challenge that is presented by a minister of the Crown, a minister for the Government of Canada, in this situation—aside from the discomfort and what I think is in bad taste, a lot of it as I described—is that this isn't an independent organization, and you have the top people from this government working hand in glove with it in this fashion. The transparency that we're used to here, aside from whatever characterizations or analysis we want to make about the structure there....

You talk about what changes there have or haven't been over the last couple of years. There haven't been any elections. We know that. This is a committee that a minister of the Crown is sitting on that is controlled by a foreign government. The conflict that's presented is that the interests of this organization are not in the environment or in addressing global climate change. It's in whatever the political desires are of the CCP.

That's not clear when you go to their website. It takes some examination. You need to parse out who these people are, who they represent and what they're doing. Bringing Canada there, with respect to the other motion you spoke to, to greenwash is 100% what they're trying to do with their image.

What I would like to see, and I hope the committee will take the opportunity to do it, is that we speak with the minister about this perceived conflict and his ability to represent Canadians while acting on this organization that is clearly under the control of the CCP. It's not an altruistic organization that's looking to meaningfully reduce the emissions in China. They're not gathering our best practices. They're dining out on Canada's reputation. That's a problem.

• (1750)

The Chair: Listening to the discussion, I'm compelled by both sides of the argument. One of the challenges I have, as chair, is that we don't know whether in fact—to Mr. Green's point—there are any ethical lapses here. We don't know, and this is what I am saying.

Being compelled by both sides of the argument, I think what we should do is let this motion go to a vote and then let the committee decide whether, in fact, this is a direction we want to take on this particular motion, as presented by Mr. Barrett.

Go ahead, please, Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thanks, Chair.

I understand and appreciate the role of the opposition, which is to find anything and everything and just throw it at the wall, whatever may stick, whatever may not.

However, I have been waiting—and pardon my frustration, Chair—for months and months to start a study that is so important to me and so important to young people all across this country. I just had a meeting with my youth council, who all tell me how afraid they are of social media and the use of their data, their privacy, their safety and security online.

I am just not understanding why there's one thing after another on what sounds like mere conjecture: “Maybe there is something there, so let's go and dig it up to see if we find a bone here.” I would rather we take up a motion and study it, knowing and understanding how much my constituents and Canadians are waiting for us to do something about the issue of social media and how it impacts the safety, security and privacy of Canadians, especially young people in my community.

Chair, I strongly think this motion should be voted down and that we should move on to an issue that Canadians genuinely care about, on which we could put out solid recommendations. We could hear from solid experts and actually try to resolve an issue that is going to impact the daily lives of Canadians today.

Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Khalid. You'll have that option to vote soon, I hope.

We are planning on starting the social media study, as I said earlier, on the 16th, so we're going to proceed on that basis, depending on what happens with this motion.

[Translation]

Go ahead, Mr. Villemure.

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ethics being the purview of this committee, we are in pursuit of what is fair, what is right and what is appropriate. We must be careful not to confuse bias with reality. We must be careful not to make a value judgment without the facts. We must be extremely diligent.

At the end of the day, the purpose of ethics and our committee is not to lay blame. Rather, it is to shed light on the situation.

In this case, I'm having a hard time seeing how this is a matter of public interest. I'm not saying the public interest is non-existent, but I want to say this to my fellow members: With all the issues we need to examine, I'm not so sure this is the best decision for us to make right now. As Mr. Green pointed out, we would have to look at this as a potential conflict of interest. Was there really a conflict of interest or not? For the time being, it's more of a made-up conflict of interest than anything else.

I think we should opt for an alternative to this motion.

• (1755)

The Chair: All right. Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

No alternative has been put before the committee. This is the motion currently before the committee, and that's what we are going to vote on.

[English]

Mr. Green, go ahead, please.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you. I am going to try to explore some alternatives.

If this is a developing story and more information comes out beyond an editorial scope, i.e., that there is nefarious funding, dark money involved.... I heard “dining out”, which was interesting to me. If there is some egregious stuff happening at these meetings and it is a developing story, I would be interested to hear evidence. I would not be interested at this time.

I would say to my Conservative friends that if they want to hold this motion and allow this to develop, and should there be an opinion from any of our commissioners on this, should there be any kind of evidence floated anywhere about improprieties at this particular meeting of people, I would be open to it.

At this point we don't have any of that. For that reason, perhaps we have the ability, Mr. Chair, to request a document, a briefing by the minister prior to dragging them forward, something that's an intermediate step, rather than taking up the time and the theatre of having them come in.

Absent of that, as I mentioned before, there is question period for the honourable members from the Conservative side. There are Order Paper questions and other things we can use as tools, but if there is a smoking gun, I would need to see it. If there is not one, then I will not be supporting this.

If they think this is something they want to pursue in earnest and not in the way of political theatre, then I would urge them to maybe hold off on moving it now and allow it to develop. If it goes to a vote now, it fails. I am saying that if there is more to it, I am open to it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green. I really appreciate the options you've presented here. I think they're reasonable options.

I don't see any further discussion on this, so I'm inclined to go to a vote on this. There is an option to adjourn debate if somebody chooses to, but in the absence of that option being proposed, I am going to go to a vote.

I see that we don't have consensus on this particular motion, so I'm going to ask the clerk for a recorded vote, please.

(Motion negated: nays 7; yeas 3)

The Chair: The motion is defeated.

I don't have any other committee business in front of us.

Mr. Green, we've spoken about your motion. It's on notice. The Privacy Commissioner is going to be coming on the 16th. We can deal with the issue then.

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• (1800)

Not seeing any other business, I'm going to call the meeting and adjourn. Thank you.

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