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Chair

Mr. Massimo Pacetti

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Thursday, June 9, 2005

• (1110)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.)): Good morning, everybody. We will begin.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Chairperson—

The Chair: Yes, Ms. Wasylycia-Leis.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: I'd like to raise a point of privilege before proceeding with the first item, which I believe is my motion that I submitted 48 hours ago.

The point of privilege has to do with the comments that appeared in the press today, and if they are accurate, they are clearly offensive to our parliamentary system and ought to be addressed by you, Mr. Chairperson, and our committee.

I find it absolutely offensive for the Conservative members, particularly Monte Solberg, if he's accurately quoted, to criticize the hard work of our clerk, to suggest that he is anything less than neutral, and to suggest—and I'm quoting—that “there's been some jiggery-pokery” is absolutely unacceptable.

We have hard-working staff in this House of Commons. Our clerk has been diligent and faithful to the work of this committee for many, many years, certainly during my recent experience as critic for the NDP for finance. He has done an incredible job over the last couple of years ensuring that witnesses we recommended for appearance before this committee were contacted. I know he has worked very hard in trying to coordinate the work around these two bills on short notice. I personally want to say, on behalf of my colleagues, that this kind of public attack on the clerk of this committee is wrong, it's hurtful, it's offensive, and it must be withdrawn by the Conservatives.

I hope that you, Mr. Chairperson, will take appropriate action following this outrageous, unwarranted, unfair, and disgusting attack on the staff of this House.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wasylycia-Leis.

Just to enlighten the rest of the members of the committee, what newspaper article are you referring to?

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Sorry, Mr. Chairperson. It's today's *Ottawa Citizen*.

The Chair: Okay. I haven't read the article, so I don't want to—

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: It's on page A5, entitled “Conservatives angry after witnesses left out of budget hearings”.

The Chair: Okay.

We can have Monsieur Loubier speak on this. I don't want to spend too much time on this, because I didn't read it.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvan Loubier (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Mr. Chairman, I concur with Ms. Wasylycia-Leis. I was dismayed to read this article in this morning's *Ottawa Citizen*. Mr. Dupuis does not in any way deserve to be treated in this manner. Mr. Dupuis has been doing admirable work. His competence has been well recognized for many years. I had the opportunity to work with him not only at the Standing Committee on Finance, but also at the Subcommittee on Fiscal Imbalance. He brilliantly organized the pan-Canadian tour that we have done. He did some painstaking work in terms of producing the report within schedule.

I find completely unacceptable that Mr. Dupuis has been the target of attacks of this nature, just as I would find it completely unacceptable if any permanent employee of the House of Commons were to be attacked in this way. If there is to be attacks, I can withstand some of them, just as Ms. Wasylycia-Leis as well as my liberal colleagues can.

I know the full story and I know that Mr. Dupuis has diligently approached witnesses that the Conservatives have asked to hear, and I consider unacceptable for politicians to launch completely unjustified attacks against members of the staff. I fully support the motion introduced by Ms. Wasylycia-Leis.

On behalf of all my colleagues, I want to tell you, Mr. Dupuis, that you can count on our support and our affection.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Loubier.

Ms. Minna.

[English]

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I haven't read the article yet, but if what's in the article is accurate, I think it's unconscionable. The clerk is here as an independent person, and I don't think he has ever been biased.

If anyone has any concerns with respect to the services this committee gets, I would expect, as professionals, that would then be dealt with through you, Mr. Chair, in the appropriate manner, not through the media and other gratuitous comments. I would hope this committee will deal with that and straighten that situation out this morning before it goes any further.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Minna.

We'll go to Mr. Solberg, and then I'm going to wrap it up.

Mr. Monte Solberg (Medicine Hat, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this.

Here are the facts.

The fact is that when we looked at the witness list for today, we noted there were very few, almost none, of our witnesses on the list, so we started making some calls.

We phoned the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. We asked if they had been contacted by the clerk with respect to coming to the committee. Their answer was no. We phoned the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. They said they had been contacted, but they were under the impression that someone would get back to them again to offer specifics on when they would come. I asked the taxpayers federation to phone and confirm that they would be coming. I see they're still not on the list.

This is what has occurred.

On top of that, of course, Mr. Chairman, we asked seven ministers to come and appear today. Now I'm not suggesting that the clerk had anything to do with this. There were seven ministers, two of whom initially, apparently, said yes, and now no one is on the list. Not one of them is on the list, when we're talking about spending \$4.6 billion in areas of their responsibility, and there are absolutely no plans on how to spend that money and there are no programs in place as to how to spend that money.

Do you know what? I am a little frustrated with the Mickey Mouse approach of the government on this. I'm mad about the fact that we don't have witnesses who can testify on how irresponsible Bill C-48 is, because it doesn't have any controls at all on how this money would be spent.

Yes, I'm very frustrated. I'm frustrated that when I contact witnesses who we have asked to come, they haven't heard from the clerk, or they have been sent what they interpret as a vague e-mail and had expected to hear more from the clerk on when to appear.

Mr. Chairman, I don't know how many names we submitted. There were probably 20 names. I think there's maybe one person who's on here as a witness.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would ask the indulgence of my colleagues for a moment to consider this.

I understand and accept the desire of the government and the NDP to fast-track this bill, and that's well understood in the general population. It is understood.

I can understand the remarks of my colleagues who would be in support of lessening the transparency of this process and lessening the degree of input at this juncture. I can understand that it is out of a self-serving motivation. I can understand that. But I would ask my colleagues this—

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: That isn't the point.

I have a point of order, Mr. Chairperson. Mr. Chairperson, the point of privilege we are dealing with is simply about Conservative members commenting publicly in a very inappropriate way on the work of our clerk. We are not talking about anything but the offensiveness of that incident.

I think all that is required is an apology from the Conservatives or we can wrap this up and you can deal with it as you see fit, Mr. Chairperson.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wasylycia-Leis.

I'm hoping Mr. Pallister is going to get to the point. I'm going to allow everybody the opportunity to speak.

Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: You may hope that, sir, but I would hope that I'd have the chance to get to the point without the interruptions of my colleague.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Okay.

Again, I'll repeat—

The Chair: To continue is fine.

Mr. Brian Pallister: I am asking for the indulgence of my colleagues to consider this for a minute and set aside their personal agendas in terms of wanting to speed this through and move it forward rapidly.

Consider this. At some point, they may well be in our position in opposition. At that point, their attitude may be remarkably different from the attitude they're demonstrating today—

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: I have a point of order.

Mr. Chairperson, this has nothing to do with the point of privilege. We all have differences and we will talk about those differences.

Mr. Brian Pallister: I'd suggest to the member that if she wishes to chair the committee, she should—

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: We are now talking about—

The Chair: Could we have some order here?

Ms. Wasylycia-Leis, can we let Mr. Pallister finish?

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Yes. Could you get him to get to the point of the point of privilege?

The Chair: Yes, I've been trying to, but he seems to be losing track every time there's an interruption.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Well, he's trying to make a political statement about the bill as opposed to—

The Chair: That's fine. I think there have been political statements made by other members in the past.

Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: The “two ears and one mouth” analogy applies to all of us, I hope, and I hope the member would understand this. She should listen more than interrupt.

The Chair: Okay, enough. Come on.

Mr. Brian Pallister: I will try again to get my point across, Mr. Chairman.

In good faith we have asked you—and the clerk, through you—to demonstrate that this committee can function in a non-partisan way by inviting witnesses of different perspectives to appear. We have evidence that this was not done. That should concern every member of this committee. Every member, without exception, should be concerned with that.

I value the input of the witnesses who come before this committee; I value it very much. I listen to their testimony and I appreciate their perspectives. But I must express concern when I see evidence that only one side of the argument is going to be presented to our committee. I have to express concern about that, and I would hope members opposite would also be concerned about that, regardless of their particular view at this juncture about this bill. We're not here to do a whitewash job or be Santa's little helpers when the government wants to introduce spending legislation.

Now, the issue here is one of fairness, transparency, and balance.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: I'm not complete in my comments, sir.

There are very few checks on the power of the government in this place, very few of them. One of the places there's a check on the power of the Prime Minister's Office is supposed to be here.

The parliamentary secretary to the finance minister, of course, because of this government's innovative approach to top-downism, now sits on this committee and actually represents the government minister at the same time we're supposed to be a non-partisan committee dealing with issues that are of concern to the public. That's been tainted by the approach of this government.

I am naturally concerned, as are my colleagues and as should be the other members of the committee, when that permeates yet further into the operations of the committee.

On Wednesday, at the end of our deliberations, you, Mr. Chairman, attempted to introduce a change in our procedure, a change in our sitting date, by telling us we were going to be hearing the Minister of Finance on Wednesday afternoon. You introduced that without consultation with any of the committee members here whatsoever. That demonstrated to me a lack of impartiality and balance on your part, sir, so naturally I'm concerned.

Again, I have to emphasize that the members of this committee have very few opportunities to check the power of the Prime Minister's Office. I understand the governing party's reluctance to even consider this as an important aspect of committee work; nonetheless, it is.

When something like this happens and there is serious doubt cast on the neutrality of officials on the basis of evidence, Mr. Chairman, I would hope the chairman of the finance committee would have some concerns about that and not try to rush through the discussion.

I believe my colleague has a motion that I think we should discuss seriously at this point.

● (1120)

The Chair: Could we just address this point of privilege quickly, Mr. Bell, and then Ms. Minna?

Mr. Don Bell (North Vancouver, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In reference to what has been said, there is an appropriate and non-partisan way in which a concern of any member or members of this committee should be dealt with, and that is to contact the chair and/or the vice-chair and to raise that concern and determine how best to deal with it.

Issues related to parliamentary staff should be dealt with in a respectful manner, and particularly initially in camera, so that the reputations of the staff can be protected from scurrilous and unfounded attack. I think staff are in a disadvantaged position in terms of the power balance between elected officials and staff.

I'm sure we would hear a concern from any member of this committee were a staff member to make comments such as this in the media about members of this committee. It wouldn't be expected, nor should the reverse be expected, where public statements about staff's competency or the bias of staff are going to be dealt with. If there is a matter, then in terms of equal justice you allow that staff person an opportunity to respond to the concerns that have been raised and to do so before members of this committee without turning it into a partisan spectacle.

I'm very disappointed. If there are concerns, they could have been addressed. This is the first I've heard of it, and I don't know, Mr. Chair, if it's the first you've heard of it, but it sounds like it is. If it is, that's the avenue that should have been first pursued. In the end—and I'm not speaking to the specifics of this concern—it may well be that ultimately it needs to be dealt with in public. But certainly this is not the stage, until there's been a fair hearing, first of all.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bell.

Next is Ms. Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna: Mr. Chair, I'm not going to comment with respect to Mr. Pallister's and Mr. Solberg's reasons for...or the problems with respect to witnesses. That issue is obviously one that this committee could deal with and should discuss.

My only point was strictly to mentioning the clerk in the media without having first contacted the chair or this committee, or anyone else, for that matter. I think it's unfair. In the work of the committee there are major concerns, and that's one issue, but to attack an official in public who is not an elected official is not fair. That's the only point I was making. It does not go to any of the other stuff, which is over and above that. To second Mr. Bell, I think that's where there is a problem. I don't think we should be doing that. I just don't think it's professional.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Minna.

Mr. Penson.

Mr. Charlie Penson (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Chair, this is a very serious issue. Maybe we could go in camera to discuss it further. I have some things I want to raise and I don't think it really should be here in front of our witnesses. I wonder if we could ask for an in camera session—a break for the witnesses—to hear the rest of this and move to some kind of resolution.

The Chair: I'll be honest. I'm very reluctant to do this. There seems to be a lot of trying to defer and put this off. Maybe we can find a better time to do this.

Mr. Charlie Penson: No, now is the time to do it. This is an issue.

The Chair: Well, I'm the chair, and I haven't even read the article. I'm not sure even what the point of privilege relates to. I haven't seen the article.

I just want to clarify a couple of things that were said. The Conservatives did submit a list of 24 names, of which only four were not related to the government. That is just to put it in perspective. I'm not sure how many of those 24 have been confirmed or not confirmed. I know there was some contact with the minister.

I ask that everything be done in writing. The notices did go out on Monday. Everything is in writing.

I think we can address some of these issues—

• (1125)

Mr. Charlie Penson: Mr. Chairman, on the point about it being in writing, if you want to discuss this in front of the witnesses, we can continue, but I have some things I want to raise as a matter of what went out in writing. If you don't want to move in camera, we can do this messy business in front of our witnesses if you want.

The Chair: Listen, we're limited as to time here. We're already 25 minutes into—

Mr. Charlie Penson: We're limited to our witnesses; that's the big issue, Mr. Chairman. We are limited to the witnesses we have asked for. That's a serious issue.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Mr. Chair, our time wouldn't be limited at all if we had no witnesses at all. I think that's a fair point to make, right?

The Chair: No. We have witnesses.

Mr. Brian Pallister: The preoccupation with time is something you should consider in the broader context, sir.

The Chair: No. With all due respect to the witnesses who are in the room, who decided to come, I want to give them the opportunity—

Mr. Brian Pallister: What about respect for the process for those who weren't contacted?

The Chair: Okay. We can discuss that at a later time.

An hon. member: No, we can't.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: I have a point of order, Mr. Chairman.

The witnesses have been summoned here to discuss Bill C-48 with us. I understand that we may want to settle this issue, but I believe that the priority...

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Penson: Mr. Loubier, it's some witnesses—some witnesses—not all the witnesses.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Mr. Penson, please let me finish.

We have here in front of us witnesses who are here to share with us their points of view on Bill C-48. I want to hear them, Mr. Chairman, as do most of our colleagues around the table.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Yvan Loubier: So we should get to the bottom of this issue elsewhere, some other day or late this afternoon. We could have an in camera meeting if necessary, but let us proceed with the agenda, because I find frustrating to see witnesses waiting to appear before us.

[*English*]

The Chair: I need to see the article. I can't rule. If I can put this off, and if we want to meet in camera, I'm willing to do it at 3:30 p. m. That's my ruling.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Sorry, that's not acceptable.

The Chair: That's nice. That's fine.

Mr. Monte Solberg: If that's how we want to do things, that's fine.

I have a point of order, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Monte Solberg: As a member of this committee, I have the right to question your judgment on this.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Monte Solberg: And I have a right to speak to it. I'm going to do that right now.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Monte Solberg: We're in a situation, Mr. Chairman, in which we are on the cusp of debating a \$4.6 billion expenditure. We submitted a list of witnesses we wanted to appear before this committee because we think it's kind of important to shed light on that type of expenditure from a perspective different from the one from which the government wants to shed some light.

Ms. Judy Wasylcia-Leis: Is there a point? You were going to make a motion—

Mr. Monte Solberg: Are you going to filibuster, Judy, or what are you doing?

Ms. Judy Wasylcia-Leis: No, I'm wondering.... The chair had called...that we get to this point. Could you make your motion then?

The Chair: Can we just allow...?

If you keep interrupting, this is going to go on forever.

Ms. Judy Wasylcia-Leis: Mr. Chairperson, you had ruled that this discussion was over for now.

The Chair: That's right. He has a point of order. Allow him to get to the point.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, my point is that if we are not allowed to bring witnesses to this, witnesses who have a different perspective, then what is the point precisely of our sitting on this committee? What is the point of going through the motions?

The Chair: Let me answer that. It's very easy. We have witnesses. Let's continue with these witnesses, and we'll address the additional witnesses in camera.

Mr. Monte Solberg: So on trust we're supposed to just go ahead and say we will deal with this after this is done, after the process is done and we move to clause-by-clause and it's all over?

The Chair: No. I said at 3:30 we can meet. If you want to meet at 2 o'clock—

Mr. Monte Solberg: No, that's not acceptable.

The Chair: I'm not going to send the witnesses home and delay this any further. It's contradictory to what you just said there.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Well, we can raise points of order all day, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: That's fine, and I can overrule them.

Mr. Monte Solberg: You can try.

The Chair: That's what I'm doing.

Mr. Pension.

Mr. Charlie Pension: Mr. Chairman, this point of order that was introduced by Mr. Solberg is questioning your involvement, your judgment here, and I have to say, Mr. Chairman, that I have something to say on this.

This whole business of the NDP-Liberal budget was an add-on—\$4.6 billion more than was introduced in the minister's budget on February 23. That may be fine, but we have to scrutinize this. We have to scrutinize it carefully, Mr. Chairman, because when we do not scrutinize carefully, we get things like the ad scam that has rocked this Parliament for the last two or three years. In addition to that, we have businesses across the country that have floundered, and some have gone under, because of corporate malfeasance.

Mr. Chairman, if we are not allowed to bring the witnesses here that we've asked for, this is in serious contravention of our rights in committee, and I question you, Mr. Chairman, in this regard, because in our planning committee meeting you had said we were going to limit the witnesses to Thursday. We did not agree to that, Mr. Chairman. We further submitted a list that would have taken at least all day Thursday—two sessions, including an afternoon, and probably more—and we suddenly discover there is one person on the list, or nobody that we submitted on our list.

I would ask, Mr. Chairman, at the very least, that the clerk circulate to our committee the e-mails that went out to all of the invited people, so that we can scrutinize to see whether it was something that was done in good faith or.... As some of the organizations that were contacted have told us, they didn't seem to have a very clear understanding of what the clerk was intending. If that's the case, Mr. Chairman, it is not good enough. We are only hearing a selected panel of witnesses here today, and I think you're in contravention of this committee when you try to move on, Mr. Chairman, because we have a right to be heard. We have a right to have our witnesses heard, and you are not allowing us to do that.

The Chair: That's exactly my point. We'll allow the clerk to go back to his office and get copies of all the e-mails that were sent out and all the replies that were done. We can hear the witnesses—they've been asked to come before the committee—and this afternoon we'll go through all the e-mails if we have to.

Mr. Charlie Pension: We'll suspend until then.

• (1130)

The Chair: We'll spend all the time in the world.

Mr. Charlie Pension: No, that's too late. After the fact is too late.

The Chair: Your point is very contradictory in terms of what you're saying. We did meet. I asked that the list of witnesses be submitted by Friday, and you did so, because we would try to fit all the panels in on Thursday, and that's what we're trying to do. Now, whether they accepted or not.... I haven't seen—

Mr. Charlie Pension: But we did not agree to that, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: —the list of whether everyone has accepted or not accepted.

That is my ruling. We will go on with the committee.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Are you proceeding now?

The Chair: Unless there's something else, I'm proceeding.

Hon. John McKay: It's not something else, so if you're proceeding, proceed.

The Chair: We're proceeding.

Yes, Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, on a point of order, I am moving a motion.

My motion reads as follows:

That the Standing Committee on Finance report to the House that it is irresponsible for the Ministers listed below, representing the departments affected by C-48, with over 4 billion dollars of spending of taxpayer's money, have not appeared before the committee, contrary to the doctrine of ministerial responsibility, in order to answer questions on this plan to spend, and that the committee call on the Ministers to appear before the committee begins a clause by clause consideration of this bill.

- Minister of Finance
- Minister of the Environment
- Minister of Labour and Housing
- Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development
- Minister of Indian and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians
- Minister of Foreign Affairs
- Minister of International Cooperation
- Minister of State (Infrastructure and Communities)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Solberg.

Are you going to provide that to the clerk? All right.

Again, we're proceeding with witnesses.

Mr. Monte Solberg: No. On a point of order, I'm moving that motion. I'd like—

The Chair: Forty-eight hours.

An hon. member: Are you going to speak to that motion?

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, I would like to speak to the motion.

The Chair: Wait a second, no, it's a 48-hour—

Mr. Monte Solberg: Excuse me, I have raised a point of order. That's my right on this committee.

The Chair: Right, and I've accepted your point of order. I'll accept the motion, and thank you. It's a motion, not a point of order.

Mr. Monte Solberg: On a point of order, Mr. Chairman—

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: I have a point of order after him.

• (1135)

Mr. Monte Solberg: I am raising this because if we proceed now.... It's very clear what the intention is here, Mr. Chairman. The intention is to move through these witnesses—

The Chair: It's to listen to the witnesses. Get to the point. Come on.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Go ahead and speak then.

The Chair: Ms. Wasylycia-Leis.

An hon. member: I'd like to speak on the same point, if I might.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairperson. I would like to make a couple of points and suggest that in fact you've made a ruling and that should be respected. If in fact the Conservatives, and particularly Mr. Solberg, doesn't like your ruling, or any of your rulings, then they ought to challenge the chair and we should get on with it.

With respect to the issue we're dealing with at hand, he has moved a motion and the normal process is 48 hours. We will deal with this and debate it at that point.

I think in the process of having this discussion, which arose after a legitimate issue being raised by myself about the disrespect in the public for the clerk of this committee, expecting a simple apology from the Conservatives, it has turned into a game being played by the Conservatives to actually stall the work of our committee, to drag things out, and to obstruct as long as possible.

Mr. Chairperson, we know the Conservatives are against Bill C-48. They have made that very clear. They say they hate Bill C-48.

Let me finish my point.

The Chair: Well, it's taking a—

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: I won't be very long, Mr. Chairperson. I'm not trying to drag this out. All I'm suggesting, Mr. Chairperson, is that in fact if they hate this bill, they can vote on it. We can get on with the work at hand. We don't need to in fact drag this out into the summer. If they want to drag it out, I'm prepared, we're prepared, to stay through the summer. But Canadians expect us to get the job done. There is no reason why we need to allow for these kinds of games to be played, these kinds of antics, this whining that's going on by the Conservatives because they can't have their way. I would suggest, Mr. Chairperson, that they respect your ruling.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Mr. Chairman, in response, this member is on record—

The Chair: There was no point of order, Mr. Pallister. If it's a new point of order—

Mr. Brian Pallister: It's a point of order, Mr. Chairman. I wonder if any of the members who want to fast-track this have even read this particular document. I'd like to quote for my colleagues from this document in terms of my point of order—

The Chair: Mr. Pallister, we're trying to get to the witnesses. The point of order is not applicable. We're trying to get to the witnesses—

Mr. Brian Pallister: When it created the sponsorship program the federal government did not inform Parliament of the real objectives of the program, nor has it ever reported the result. Parliament was disrespected throughout the process.

Now, what's happening here this morning is exactly that. What's happening here this morning should demonstrate to anyone who cares about the proper processes being followed in Parliament—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Mr. Chairman, I want to make a point of order.

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Pallister: —should demonstrate clearly that this government has learned nothing from this particular Auditor General's report, because they're repeating the mistakes of the past—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Loubier.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Mr. Chairman, we do have an agenda this morning. I am getting more and more uncomfortable and overwhelmed by the behaviour of Conservative's members today. It is a lack of sensitivity and an unwelcoming attitude toward our witnesses who are waiting to speak to us about an important bill. We do not agree with Bill C-48, but we are not obstructing the committee's work. Even more important, we are not making an affront to witnesses.

Mr. Chairman, could we please proceed with the agenda?

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. McKay, quickly.

Mr. Yvan Loubier: It's impossible to hear seven ministers in two days.

An hon. member: Two of them have already said they weren't called.

Hon. John McKay: Mr. Chair, I'm in the strange position of actually agreeing with Mr. Loubier on something. I think we should hear from the witnesses.

The Chair: That's my ruling. Is this a point of order?

Hon. John McKay: I'm speaking to—

The Chair: There's no speaking. No, there's no point of order here. We are going directly to—

Hon. John McKay: Can I see if I can bring a little bit of calmness to the discussion here? If we could proceed with the witnesses we have here presently, between the witnesses we can deal with the issue that's been raised.

I read the article just like everyone else has read the article, at the last minute, and maybe there is a point being raised here. I'd be interested in hearing it. It certainly is not the intention of the government—and I say this publicly—to load the witness list. I don't control the witness list.

Mr. Brian Pallister: He does in fact control the witness list.

Hon. John McKay: There is an interest, though, in the government in making sure that this bill proceeds through committee in a timely fashion, which we had rather hoped would be going to clause-by-clause on Monday. In that respect, I'm authorized to say that the Minister of Finance will be available on Monday at the convenience of the committee in order to deal with the issues raised by the committee.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McKay.

Mr. Charlie Penson: I have the same point of order as Mr. McKay, please.

The Chair: There is no point of order. We're going directly to the witnesses.

Mr. Charlie Penson: You allowed Mr. McKay to speak, and I want to ask him a question on his comments, Mr. Chairman.

The question is...he said the Minister of Finance would be allowed to be here—

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Mr. Chair, you have the power to bring this meeting under control.

Mr. Charlie Penson: —but what about the other ministers who were requested? Can the parliamentary secretary explain to us why the other ministers who were on our list are not being provided by government to come before this committee to tell us about the \$4.6 billion in spending that's being projected under this bill?

Hon. John McKay: This is a finance bill, and it's customary for the Minister of Finance to speak and defend his bill. That's the only person who should be called.

Mr. Charlie Penson: He can bring them with him.

• (1140)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McKay. Thank you, Mr. Penson.

Mr. Monte Solberg: I have a point of order.

Mr. Chairman—

The Chair: These are not points of order, but go ahead.

Mr. Brian Pallister: How do you know? He hasn't raised it.

The Chair: Well, because I've been hearing points of order that have not been points of order, so—

Hon. John McKay: Let's go to the witness list.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Just make a ruling.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Do we assume all points of order are out of order from now on? Is that a new rule this committee is going to adopt, sir?

The Chair: I have no idea. We may get to that—

Mr. Brian Pallister: Are you going to work on the assumption—

The Chair: We may get to that if we continue along these lines.

Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Brian Pallister: That will be the first time in the history of Parliament that's ever happened.

Mr. Monte Solberg: I have a point of order—

The Chair: Well, there have been a lot of things happening for the first time.

Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Brian Pallister: I dare you to try it, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, the parliamentary secretary said a minute ago that it was not the intention of the government to load the witness list, but it's also a fact that we know that two ministers had agreed initially to come and appear before the committee—the Minister of Housing and the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development—

The Chair: Okay. Let me handle that right away. That's why I'm saying at 3:30 we'll have all the documents that the clerk—

Mr. Monte Solberg: Now they're no longer appearing before the committee—

The Chair: It's not the parliamentary secretary's job to try to bring forward the witnesses. The clerk did that—

Mr. Monte Solberg: Well, he just said he was speaking on behalf of the government.

The Chair: During the break, between 2 and 3:30, the clerk will go to his office and get a copy of all the e-mails he sent and all the replies—

Mr. Monte Solberg: No. Mr. Chairman, we are not proceeding on faith that somehow this is going to get fixed and all of a sudden our witnesses will be here. I'm sorry, no.

The Chair: I'm not guaranteeing you it's going to be fixed, but at least I'll be able to respond.

Mr. Monte Solberg: I'm sure you aren't, because that's a guarantee you couldn't possibly fulfil. So, Mr. Chairman—

The Chair: That we're going to have a meeting at 3:30 and that the clerk is going to go downstairs and provide us with the documents that have been requested?

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, we know you're not going to fix this because we know it's the government's—

The Chair: I can provide you with that guarantee.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Well, Mr. Chairman, we know it's the government's intent to avoid bringing witnesses—

The Chair: But I can guarantee you that you're not going to get any documents at this moment, so let's go ahead. We have the witnesses, and that's my ruling.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Well, Mr. Chairman, that's not acceptable.

The Chair: Well—

Hon. Maria Minna: Can we vote on whether we go on or not?

Mr. Charlie Penson: The very least, Mr. Chairman, we can expect are the documents of the requests that were made from the clerk—

Hon. Maria Minna: Let's vote on whether or not this committee continues—

Mr. Charlie Penson: —for the witnesses to appear. You should be able to produce those right now, so let's have a look at them and see who's right on this issue, whether they have actually had an invitation—

The Chair: We don't have them now, Mr. Penson. Right now—

Mr. Charlie Penson: Well, I'm sure the clerk will have them.

The Chair: Yes, he'll have them in his office, which is across the street, which will take—

Mr. Charlie Penson: Well, send him over.

The Chair: Okay, I will send him over. Can we continue?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Mr. Chairman, could we ask for a vote with a view to proceeding with the items on the agenda? It is a shame, Mr. Chairman, to behave in this way.

The Chair: I agree with you, Mr. Loubier.

[*English*]

Is that a motion I hear? Okay. It's a motion to proceed to the witnesses.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: I ask for a vote.

[*English*]

The Chair: Can—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Mr. Chairman, I propose that this committee proceed with orders of the day and hear the witnesses that have been invited in this regard.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. All in favour?

Mr. Monte Solberg: We'd like to speak to the motion, Mr. Chairman. We have a right to speak to the motion.

Mr. Charlie Penson: We'd like to speak to that motion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: The motion is not debatable, Mr. Chairman.

[*English*]

The Chair: We don't have to speak to the motion.

An hon. member: Oh, yes, we do.

Mr. Brian Pallister: I'd like to speak to the motion, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: No, we don't. We've already spoken.

Mr. Brian Pallister: I would like to speak to the motion that was just put on the floor, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Monte Solberg: I have the right to speak to the motion on the floor.

The Chair: Can there only be one person to speak?

All in favour of the motion to continue with the witnesses, please raise your hands. One, two, three, four—

Mr. Brian Pallister: I would like to speak to the motion, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to speak to the motion that was just put on the floor.

The Chair: All opposed?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We'll continue with the witnesses.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Mr. Chairman, as a point of order—

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Mr. Chairman, you just refused to allow a comment to be made or an opinion expressed on a motion brought before the committee.

The Chair: That's right.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Would you consult with your clerk, please, sir, and determine if that is the correct procedure to follow?

The Chair: I decided it was non-debatable.

Mr. Brian Pallister: You decided there would be no speaking on motions brought before a committee.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: No. On that point of order—

Mr. Brian Pallister: I'm asking you a question, sir.

The Chair: It's a fair question.

Mr. Brian Pallister: You just arbitrarily decided that there would be no comment on a motion brought—

The Chair: No, it was non-debatable. It was not that there would be no comments. There were plenty of comments.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Who determined it was non-debatable?

The Chair: There were plenty of comments.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: On that question, I can inform Mr. Pallister that our rules state—

Mr. Brian Pallister: Who determined the motion was non-debatable?

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Mr. Pallister, our rules—

The Chair: Mr. Loubier's motion indicated it was non-debatable and I—

Mr. Brian Pallister: No, he did not, sir.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Mr. Chairperson, no.

Mr. Brian Pallister: If you would like to consult the minutes of the committee meeting, you will find that was not the case.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Our rules state clearly that when one moves to return to the order of the day, the business at hand, it is non-debatable. That is a fixed rule. So, Mr. Chairperson, you may move now, with your vote, to hear the witnesses.

The Chair: I have, but I have a point of order.

Mr. Charlie Penson: You've just heard a point of order from Judy Wasylycia-Leis about the motion that was made. I would ask for that same opportunity.

The Chair: I'm working on Mr. Pallister's point of order.

Mr. Pallister, in answer to your question, on page 451 of Marleau and Montpetit, if you look at dilatory motions, when we're asking to adjourn debate or adjourn the House or proceed to orders of the day, they're non-debatable and non-amendable—

An hon. member: Mr. Chairman—

The Chair: Could I at least finish?

• (1145)

Mr. Charlie Penson: Who's making the decision? You or Ms. Wasylycia-Leis?

The Chair: Do you want to know what happened? I'll explain to you. Ms. Wasylycia-Leis brought the book from where she was sitting over to the desk and referred me to the page to which I'm referring. The clerk advised me that it was okay, and I read it with my own eyes.

An hon. member: The NDP-Liberal coalition works well, doesn't it?

Mr. Charlie Penson: Why doesn't she just take the chair, if that's the case?

The Chair: Can we proceed to witnesses? Thank you.

Mr. Monte Solberg: A point of order.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, what you're asking the committee to do right now is to proceed with hearing from witnesses when, at the same time, we have expressed the concern that our witnesses have not been allowed to appear before the committee. We submitted a list with 25 names on it; apparently not a single one of them is coming before the committee. We're talking about the expenditure of \$4.6 billion, and I note—

The Chair: We already addressed this in the point of order. Let me address the point. The witnesses—

Hon. Maria Minna: That was the vote.

The Chair: Our witnesses—

Hon. Maria Minna: You lost the vote. You just don't accept it; that's the problem. It was agreed that there would be a meeting at 3:30—

The Chair: Ms. Minna, it's not a point of order. We are going to address the witnesses that the Conservatives asked for at 3:30 when we'll have all the documents in place.

Mr. Monte Solberg: No, Mr. Chairman—

The Chair: If anything related to the witnesses.... That's it, we had a ruling. Can we go to the orders of the day?

Mr. Monte Solberg: Irrespective, I have a right to raise a point of order and state my concerns.

The Chair: And I have a right to rule on them.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Yes, well, I haven't even finished my point of order, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: But it was not a point of order that was outside the point of order that you haven't already yet addressed.

Mr. Monte Solberg: You haven't heard what I was about to say.

The Chair: So you've got to get to it.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Well, my point, Mr. Chairman, is that—

The Chair: That's why it's called a “point” of order.

Mr. Charlie Penson: If you keep interrupting, how are you going to hear his point of order?

The Chair: I'm just waiting here.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, my point is this. If we go ahead and proceed now and hear from these witnesses, the witnesses that government and NDP members have requested, we will basically be in a position where we will have given up any leverage that we have at all to ensure that we get our witnesses here. You say, well, we've already had witnesses; gee, it's too bad about the fact that none of your 25 witnesses was able to appear before the committee. Never mind that we're spending \$4.6 billion, never mind that we're—

The Chair: If you're referring to the witnesses, we've already addressed the witnesses. We're going to meet on the witnesses today at 3:30. We are going to listen to the witnesses that are here immediately. That's it. We've already ruled on this point of order.

Mr. Monte Solberg: But it's after the fact, Mr. Chairman. Are you saying, Mr. Chairman...? That implies that there will be time for witnesses again, when, on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday?

The Chair: If the committee decides at 3:30 that we're going to have witnesses through the summer, as Ms. Wasylycia-Leis has referred to—and I think Ms. Minna alluded to it—if the committee is fine with it, knock your socks off.

Mr. Monte Solberg: If the committee is fine with it. Oh, in other words...no, that's not acceptable.

The Chair: We'll decide at 3:30.

That's not acceptable, but we've already ruled that we're going to go ahead with the witnesses.

Hon. Maria Minna: So the member will not accept the committee's decision—only when it goes their way.

Mr. Charlie Penson: Mr. Chairman, that differs from your opinion the other day that restricted witnesses to Thursday. You just said “if the committee is fine with it”. The committee wasn't fine with your decision on Tuesday that said we're going to hear all the witnesses on Thursday; we objected to that and you made a ruling. Now you're saying if the committee is fine with it we can have witnesses all summer. What is it?

The Chair: Sure. If the committee wants to hear more witnesses....

It's not a point of order. The committee will decide at 3:30.

Mr. Charlie Penson: I'm asking you to explain what you just ruled.

The Chair: I just ruled that at 3:30 the committee will decide whether we'll hear additional witnesses.

Mr. Charlie Penson: How is that consistent with what you ruled on Tuesday, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Because I asked...with the agreement of the committee, from the prior meeting we had on future business, we would try to get all the witnesses in on this Thursday on C-48.

Mr. Charlie Penson: Look at all the problems you've created for yourself by trying to restrict our witness list.

The Chair: I'm not trying to restrict your witness list. Come on.

Mr. Charlie Penson: Some of these witnesses were not contacted, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We'll have your answers....

[Translation]

There is no debate on the point of order.

[English]

We're going to go to the witnesses.

Mr. Monte Solberg: No. I have a point of order.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman—

[Translation]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Mr. Chairman, from now on, could you ask on what article the points of order are based? If they cannot tell you on what specific article they are basing their points of order, just reject the point of order.

•(1150)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, this is unbelievable. We have moved to have 25 different people here—

Hon. Maria Minna: It's the same thing. It's the same point of order; it's nothing new.

The Chair: I haven't heard anything.

Hon. John McKay: Rule that there has been no point of order and go to the witnesses.

Mr. Charlie Penson: Oh, oh! Who's chairing this committee?

Mr. Monte Solberg: Well, here we go with the parliamentary secretary telling the chairman what to do, when he's not being a witness.

Hon. John McKay: Well, you're trying to tell him what to do.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, this is completely undemocratic. We know that Parliament sometimes is a farce, but this is going beyond the pale—truly it is.

When we are not allowed to have any of our 25 witnesses appear, and even after we've had two ministers agree and then all of a sudden they no longer agree for some reason, that's ridiculous. We're talking about a tremendous expenditure of taxpayers' money, and we're talking about a bill that has been roundly criticized because it's so open-ended.

The Chair: Mr. Solberg—

Mr. Monte Solberg: The parliamentary secretary says—

The Chair: Mr. Solberg, on your point of order, there's nothing new. We said we're going to discuss whether the witnesses on your list have been contacted and replied to, and we'll address whether or not two or five or all seven ministers are willing or are going to be able to appear before the committee.

Mr. Monte Solberg: The parliamentary secretary said a minute ago—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Solberg.

If we can go to the witnesses—

Mr. Brian Pallister: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: All right. Again, if I hear any mention of the word “witnesses”, there is no point of order, because I think we've exhausted that. So let me help you with that—

Mr. Brian Pallister: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you making that point.

The Chair: No, no, go ahead. Please, I insist that you interrupt me. Go ahead.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Okay. Thank you.

The point I'd like to make, Mr. Chairman, is that I think all committee members would agree that it would be in the best interests of Parliament itself, and certainly of all the members of this committee as a subset thereof, that every effort be made to ensure that we are bearing witness to a balanced perspective today, that we are not in any way part of some type of effort to direct one point of view forward while on the other hand not allowing another one to be brought forward.

That's a broad concern I would hope all of us would share. This is a place where we should always be able to bring evidence to the Canadian public that we're hearing balanced perspectives. That is important, sir, as a principle of the conduct of this committee; that is a very important thing.

So if we were to take what I gather you have indicated repeatedly is your preference, sir, to take your direction and hear the witnesses that have been solicited to come forward, we would entertain the concept that we are willing as a group to listen to one side of the debate but not the other. And that should not be—

The Chair: I agree.

Mr. Brian Pallister: That should not be a message we convey to the Canadian people about the operation of this committee.

There's an important principle at stake here, sir. If we proceed as you are indicating we should—

Hon. Maria Minna: It's the same point of order.

Mr. Brian Pallister: —we will send a message that this committee condones that type of thing. I don't want that message to be sent forward, nor I hope does any member of the committee.

The Chair: This is a very good point of order that we can address at 3:30. This is exactly what we're going to address at 3:30, because it is the subject of the witnesses who are not here—

Mr. Monte Solberg: That is not acceptable.

The Chair: —or, in your case, you have determined they have not been invited. That's what we're going to address at 3:30.

Mr. Monte Solberg: That is not acceptable, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Well, we've already voted on it, Mr. Solberg, and I don't see a point of order, so—

Mr. Brian Pallister: Mr. Chairman, if I may—

Mr. Monte Solberg: Yes, I know, Mr. Chairman. The people whose interest it is to push this through have voted on it.

The Chair: Pushed it through? I don't know if we voted on it that we pushed it through, but anyway—

Mr. Monte Solberg: What exactly does that indicate? That's why we have rules in this place, Mr. Chairman—

The Chair: That's not a point of order.

Can we continue with the witnesses?

Mr. Brian Pallister: Mr. Chairman, on my point of order, if I may, I believe you just indicated that I had a very good point of order, sir.

The Chair: For 3:30.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Well, now you're making an arbitrary decision that you wish to deal with my point of order at a later date.

The Chair: No, just at 3:30, because it's relevant to the discussion that we began—

Mr. Brian Pallister: But, sir, you're contradicting the point of order I'm making, that the decision.... The point I'm making is—

The Chair: I'm not contradicting.... It's just if you cut it...but if you continue—

Mr. Brian Pallister: Mr. Chair—

The Chair: I said it's a very good point of order that we can discuss at 3:30. If you had just cut it at "very good point of order", then.... If we're going to have a discussion, let's have a discussion and I'll just have everybody go home. But we've already decided, so can we continue with the witnesses?

Mr. Brian Pallister: If the point of order is, as you've suggested, a good point of order, it should be discussed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: It should be dealt with now. The point of order was, sir—

The Chair: Pursuant to the order of reference of Thursday, May 19, 2005—

Mr. Brian Pallister: —that we should not hear one side of the argument to the exclusion of other views—

The Chair: —Bill C-48—

• (1155)

Mr. Brian Pallister: —and that is exactly what you're prepared to do.

The Chair: —an act to authorize the Minister of Finance to make certain payments—

Mr. Brian Pallister: Is this committee being held in the "railroad room"? I'm just curious.

Mr. Monte Solberg: A point of order.

The Chair: I hesitate, Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Why, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: Because we haven't had a relevant point of order in the last—

Mr. Brian Pallister: Mr. Chairman, just a minute ago you said mine was.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, if the chair and the committee refuse to respect the rules and the spirit of the rules in this place, we might as well all go home.

The Chair: Actually, Mr. Solberg, we are not refusing to respect the rules. I think I've been very lenient. We've offered endless time limits for the meeting at 3:30 p.m. We can go on all night if you like.

Out of respect for the witnesses who are sitting across the table, I think we should try to give them the opportunity to voice their point of view.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Well, Mr. Chairman, I wish you would accord the same respect to members of this committee.

The Chair: We will address that at 3:30 p.m.

Again, your point of order is not relevant, and we will bring it up at 3:30 p.m.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, this committee is protected by particular rules. One of the rules is that we have the right to call witnesses and have them heard. What you're proposing is that at some future point we will consider this whole issue of witnesses.

The Chair: Again, we're not going to discuss the witnesses—

Mr. Monte Solberg: In the meantime, we'll hear from these witnesses and then it will be done—

The Chair: No, we've already ruled.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Then it will be done and you'll say we've heard from witnesses—

Hon. Maria Minna: A point of order.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Monte Solberg: —and you'll move on and you'll push through your bill with no scrutiny—

The Chair: Thank you. We will move on. Thank you, Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Monte Solberg: —which is exactly what you want, and I don't blame you, because the bill is terrible. It's completely open-ended, it's open to abuse, and it's open to misspending, which we already have lots of in this country; you don't need more.

The Chair: I have a list of witnesses here. We lost track.
[*Translation*]

We are welcoming the Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain, the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada, the Canadian Urban Transit Association and the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association.

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Penson: Mr. Chairman, a point of order.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Giguère, I know that you will have to leave, so you will speak first.

[*English*]

I have five minutes to give all the groups for opening statements. Is that okay?

An hon. member: A point of order.

The Chair: Monsieur Giguère.

Mr. Charlie Penson: A point of order.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Giguère (President, Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain): Does each group first make a presentation?

The Chair: Yes. Each will have five minutes for a presentation.
[*English*]

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, if you refuse to hear points of order, then we'll—

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Please, please, Mr. Solberg, respectfully, please.

Mr. Monte Solberg: It's interesting to hear that coming from you.

Mr. Yvan Loubier: It's not fair, Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Nobody has been more disruptive to this committee over the years than you, Yvan Loubier.

Mr. Chairman, if you refuse to hear points of order, we will raise this in the House and it will be addressed. Is it your ruling that you're going to refuse to hear points of order?

The Chair: No, I'll allow you one more. How is that?

Mr. Monte Solberg: No, Mr. Chairman, you don't have the right to put a limit on the number of points of order we can raise.

The Chair: There is no point of order. I'm not ready to rule that I will not hear any more points of order.

Hon. Maria Minna: Not on the same one over and over again.

The Chair: I just want points of order that are not irrelevant.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Giguère, we will attempt to proceed with hearing your presentation, please.

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Listen to him, he is here.

[*English*]

Mr. Monte Solberg: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I haven't made a ruling to the reference—

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Giguère: Good morning. I want to thank members of the committee for hearing us. My name is François Giguère. I am the president of the Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain...

[*English*]

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: No, I didn't. He didn't have a point of order.

Mr. Charlie Penson: You never heard it.

The Chair: He didn't have one. He asked—

Mr. Charlie Penson: I want your ruling—

The Chair: I don't have a ruling.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Giguère: It is a community organization based in Quebec comprising about 100 organizations that are members of FRAPRU. There are 26 housing committees and tenant associations and some 65 community, union and religious organizations supporting our request to implement social housing projects.

I thank the members who are interested in hearing our point of view. It is an honour and we will try to be worthy of it.

[*English*]

Mr. Monte Solberg: A point of order.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Giguère: I would like to remind members of the committee that in the past 12 years, only \$1 billion have been granted...

[*English*]

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, I'm asking to be recognized on a point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Solberg, sorry, I was listening to the witness.

[*Translation*]

Please wait a moment, Mr. Giguère.

[*English*]

Oui, Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Monte Solberg: I want to understand whether or not it's your intention to allow us to be recognized on a point of order.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Giguère.

Mr. Monte Solberg: No, Mr. Chairman, I—

The Chair: I answered your question.

Mr. Giguère.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Francois Giguère: This amount meant that \$236 millions...

[*English*]

Mr. Monte Solberg: A point of order.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I apologize for interrupting you, Mr. Giguère.

Mr. Solberg.

[*English*]

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, Standing Order 116 gives us the right to speak as long as we want on issues, and I intend to use that right. I'm sorry if it inconveniences you, and I'm especially sorry to the witnesses, but this wouldn't have occurred if the committee had operated in good faith.

We brought forward a list of 25 witnesses so that we could scrutinize one of the most important pieces of legislation this Parliament will deal with. Not one of them is appearing before the committee. That is ridiculous. It's anti-democratic. It flies in the face of proper scrutiny—

• (1200)

The Chair: Your point of order is not relevant again. We're referring to the witnesses—

Mr. Monte Solberg: What do you mean it's not relevant?

The Chair: We said we would discuss it at 3:30. I didn't limit the number of witnesses. The witnesses who are here, I want to hear from. The witnesses you provided on a list...we'll determine what happened to them and why they didn't accept our invitation, or if they even received our invitation. We'll discuss that at 3:30 when we have the appropriate evidence to that fact.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, that's not acceptable. We will be raising points of order, just so you know.

The Chair: That's not acceptable, okay, but you cannot raise points of order on the same point of order.

An hon. member: A point of order, Mr. Chairman.

Hon. Maria Minna: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I am sorry, Mr. Giguère, we will try to do our best.

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Penson: A point of order, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Penson.

Mr. Charlie Penson: Mr. Chairman, we have just been in contact with one of the witnesses we had suggested, Mr. Jack Mintz, and he told us that he has informed the clerk—

The Chair: Mr. Penson, no—

Mr. Charlie Penson: Just a minute, hear me out—

The Chair: I've made it very clear, if we're going to discuss the witnesses—

Mr. Charlie Penson: The reason he's not at the table today, Mr. Chairman, is that he informed the clerk he could come at 11 o'clock and the clerk was going to get back to him and never did, he told us. What's this about?

The Chair: Can he submit that to us in writing?

Mr. Charlie Penson: This goes back to the motion that was proposed this morning by Ms. Wasylycia-Leis—

The Chair: All I ask is that he put that in writing and we will address it at 3:30. That's all I'm asking.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Well, Mr. Chairman, that is unacceptable.

The Chair: It is acceptable.

Mr. Monte Solberg: That is not acceptable. It's amazing how all of a sudden—

The Chair: No, no more points of order regarding witnesses.

Mr. Monte Solberg: No more points of order, is that right?

The Chair: Not regarding witnesses. We've already addressed the witnesses.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Well, we'll see about that, Mr. Chairman.

A point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, we are debating an issue that is fundamental to the operation of this committee. I don't care whether or not you like it or whether members on the other side like it—

The Chair: It's not up to me to choose whether I like it or not—

Mr. Monte Solberg: Are you going to interrupt, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Finish your thought, please.

The Chair: Get to your point of order.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, I don't care whether or not you think it's important that we deal with an issue that is fundamental to the operation of this committee. You can't have parliamentary democracy unless there is some agreement to abide by the rules in the same way for everybody who's involved. Clearly, that's been violated in this case, and I am completely unwilling to allow this committee to proceed unless there is going to be fairness and balance.

The Chair: At 3:30 we will have fairness and balance.

Mr. Monte Solberg: No. Mr. Chairman, no, because what the government wants dearly is to push this through without witnesses from the other side, because they don't want scrutiny brought to one of the worst bills to ever come into this place.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Solberg.

Mr. Brian Pallister: A point of order, Mr. Chairman—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Mr. Chairman, in these circumstances, the Conservatives are making a sorry spectacle of themselves, unworthy of the House of Commons. I believe that we will not be able to hear the witnesses. I propose that we suspend the proceedings of the committee, that we stop offering such a sorry spectacle and that we ask the witnesses to give us their written briefs which we will examine attentively. That is what I propose to do.

The Chair: No. I prefer to go on and hear the witnesses. We are here until 2 o'clock and we will stay until 2 o'clock. If they choose to offer such a spectacle, so be it.

[*English*]

If the witnesses have to leave, I'm sorry, but I can't....

The first group of witnesses has been asked to stay from 11 until 12, and then we have some from 12 until 1. We'll see how much time we have and we'll try to spread it out evenly. If anybody has written submissions, we'll take them, but we're going to continue.

Sorry, Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I, too, apologize to the witnesses for the circumstances of this, but—

The Chair: If it's a point of order on the witnesses, we can just continue.

Thank you, Mr.—

Mr. Brian Pallister: No, no, it's not. It's a point of order on the comments made by my Bloc colleague. This I find particularly offensive coming from someone dedicated to the breakup of the country, and I think it's important to note the irony of a member talking about the traditions of Parliament at the same time as he'd just as soon not be here and not be part of it. So I would like to make the point—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Mr. Chairman, it is an attack.

The Chair: You cannot raise a second point of order within a point of order.

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Mr. Chairman, it is not a point of order. It is an attack. For 12 years, the Bloc Québécois has always respected this institution. As well, we have always respected the witnesses who are invited to appear before committees. Of course, we have fought battles, but still, we have always shown respect for the people who were here. We have never offered such a sorry spectacle as that is being given to us by Conservatives this morning.

Mr. Chairman, I find these personal attacks shameful. I find that unacceptable.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Loubier.

Mr. Pallister, your point.

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Pallister: Yes, I'd like to finish. The terrible scene of breaking up the country I think is probably more significant than this.

● (1205)

The Chair: Just stick to the point.

Mr. Brian Pallister: What I would suggest, though, is that Mr. Loubier's comments have no place in this place.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: And I would also like to suggest that if Mr. Loubier had submitted a list of witnesses to you, sir—

Ms. Judy Wasylcia-Leis: I have a brief point, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Thank you.

So we're back to the witnesses at 3:30—

Mr. Brian Pallister: —and found that none of them had been contacted or only some—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: —if he had submitted a list and had that same thing happen—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pallister.

We're going to address that list, that very relevant list of witnesses, at 3:30.

Mr. Brian Pallister: —Mr. Loubier's position might be radically different, sir.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Brian Pallister: It might be very different, because the fact is that he is also engaging in—

The Chair: A point of order, Ms. Wasylcia-Leis, or can we continue?

Ms. Judy Wasylcia-Leis: I have one very brief point of order. Given the behaviour of the Conservatives today, it's easy to see why they've just dropped 10 points.

The Chair: That's no point of order.

Thank you.

Monsieur Giguère.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Francois Giguère: The federal funding granted to social housing in the past 12 years totalled only \$1 billion. In Quebec, this represented about \$20 million per year. The \$236 million from the affordable housing program have already been spent. So there are no longer any federal funding to develop social housing in Quebec. This is why we are asking members of this committee to pass Bill C-48, so that an amount of \$1.6 billion be available to develop social housing everywhere in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Giguère.

Mr. Solberg.

[English]

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, again with apologies to the witnesses, I want to raise a point of order again with respect to the conduct of this committee. Mr. Chairman, we are calling into question whether or not the preparation leading up to this particular session of the finance committee was done on a basis of neutrality. Other members have raised this, and they've questioned whether or not I was out of line in suggesting some of the things I said to a reporter, who happens to be sitting in this room, who called me yesterday when we were finding out from witnesses that they had not heard back—

The Chair: We've already addressed this in the point of privilege. I said I would get back to you regarding the newspaper article, which I haven't read—

Mr. Monte Solberg: —when they had not heard back—

The Chair: Regarding the witnesses, this is exactly the point. I think the clerk has done his job by setting up three panels. For one of them we've already gone over the time, which I like to keep—

Mr. Monte Solberg: Twenty-five witnesses from our party—

The Chair: We will address the other witnesses—

Mr. Monte Solberg: —and not one of them is here.

The Chair: Well, we'll try to get an answer at 3:30, with the appropriate documentation.

Thank you.

Mr. Charlie Penson: On your point, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to respond.

The Chair: I don't have a point. I've already—

Mr. Charlie Penson: You just raised it, about the clerk.

The Chair: No.

Mr. Charlie Penson: Yes, you did.

The Chair: I just answered Mr. Solberg's point. It's not a point of order.

I want to go to the witnesses.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Côté (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, BQ): Mr. Chair, I would like to come back to Mr. Loubier's proposal. It is obvious that we will not be able to hear the witnesses that are here today, and I apologize for that.

We are asking you, not to cancel the meeting, but rather to suspend the proceedings on the order of the day, in order to settle this issue. It is obvious that nothing will be accomplished anyway. We are facing a filibuster from the Conservatives, and that is really a shame.

Most witnesses who are before us have written briefs that they can leave with us. I am sorry that we are not able to hear them. So let us put to a vote the suspension of this meeting.

The Chair: That is not a point of order. I have an agenda to follow and the expected duration of the meeting is three hours. The witnesses are free to stay or to leave. I am prepared to declare a two-minute pause, but I will not suspend the meeting.

[English]

If you have written submissions, we'll take them, but I'm not willing to suspend the meeting right now.

That's it, and if there are any more points of order regarding that, I will not take them.

Mr. Penson.

Mr. Charlie Penson: As a point of information relevant to the discussion, Mr. Chair, I just have a short thing I'd like to read regarding Mr. Mintz. He informed us he wrote back to the clerk asking what time the meeting would be scheduled because he would have to be back in Toronto for a luncheon. He could have attended a nine o'clock meeting today. The clerk never responded. If the clerk had written back, Mr. Mintz would have suggested a videoconference, in which he could have participated. I want to put that on the record.

The Chair: Mr. Penson, this is exactly what I—

Mr. Charlie Penson: I want that on the record.

The Chair: —would like to address at 3:30, so at least the clerk will be ready to answer those questions, but at this point there's no documentation the clerk has with him to address those points.

Again, I don't want to hear any points of order related to the witnesses.

Mr. Monte Solberg: But, Mr. Chairman—

The Chair: Can I just again clarify...? Perhaps my English is not very good, so I just want to clarify that with respect to the points of order related to the witness list the Conservative Party submitted, the clerk will have whatever documentation and be able to answer your questions with a little bit more clarity this afternoon at 3:30.

I have three panels of witnesses who want to discuss Bill C-48. If we could go ahead with that, I would appreciate it, not for myself but out of respect for your colleagues and for the witnesses.

● (1210)

Mr. Monte Solberg: For the party.

Mr. Chairman—

The Chair: For your party, that's fine. Yes, that would be good. Thank you, Mr. Solberg. That would be a start.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, I know you desperately want to hear from these witnesses.

The Chair: There's no debate on this, Mr. Solberg; there's no debate.

Mr. Monte Solberg: I have a point of order.

The Chair: What's the point of order?

Mr. Monte Solberg: Do you want to hear it?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Monte Solberg: Mr. Chairman, I know you want to hear from these witnesses. I want to hear from these witnesses.

The Chair: So let's go.

Mr. Monte Solberg: But, Mr. Chairman, we can't allow this hearing to go forward—

Hon. Maria Minna: That's not a point of order. We just voted to continue and deal with it at 3:30.

Mr. Monte Solberg: —when there is doubt about whether or not—

Hon. Maria Minna: They do not respect the vote of the committee. This is very interesting. So much for democracy and civility.

Mr. Monte Solberg: —these hearings are being done in the correct way.

Hon. Maria Minna: It's not a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Monte Solberg: The whole issue is whether or not some members were allowed to bring their witnesses and others were not allowed. That's the issue. How can we proceed with this if we don't have an answer to that?

The Chair: Mr. Solberg, I'll give you a little bit of leniency. Your point of order is based on the hearings. I think we conducted over 40 or 50 sessions during our pre-budget consultations, and—

Mr. Monte Solberg: What else would the point of order be on?

The Chair: —we have always had hearings in this type of format, so I don't think that's a problem. If you don't want to hear from Mr. Giguère,

[*Translation*]

We will now hear the next group.

[*English*]

Can we maybe go to the next group?

On my list I have the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada. Mr. Wilson, do you want to give it a shot? Perhaps you'd be more engaging and more enlightening.

Mr. Brian Pallister: I just have a question, if I may, Mr. Chairman. If I could, I'd like to get some information, Mr. Chair, pertinent to the discussion. Is it possible to have questions—

The Chair: No. Question period will be after the witnesses have testified. That's a point of order, Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Thank you. I'm just curious if the chair could make committee members aware if similar circumstances have arisen in the past. I think that would be helpful for our discussion that you propose to have later on, and I think it's very pertinent to our discussion, frankly.

If there have been similar circumstances and we haven't acted on them or you haven't acted on them, I'd be very concerned about that. If on the other hand there haven't been other circumstances such as this, I'd be very concerned about the precedent we're creating today by going ahead under this cloud.

These witnesses whose names we submitted to you are as important to this process as these witnesses here today, with all due respect to them. If in fact, sir, we proceed, as you're suggesting repeatedly, we are creating a precedent where regardless of the nature of the approach taken to witnesses, regardless of the fairness or lack thereof, we will be forced, and other committees may well be forced, to proceed in the face of one side of an argument being presented to them and in the absence of the other. Again, sir, that does not strike me as a fair and reasoned way to deal with any issue.

I would hope that members opposite, some of whom have demonstrated to me, certainly, that they are fair-minded, would understand that were this to happen to them, that if they were to submit the names of witnesses to the committee—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: —to be called and those witnesses were not called, those members.... I ask them to consider, would they now be speaking up or would they be sitting on their hands, as they appear willing to do now?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pallister.

I can give you an answer to your point of order. This is not a precedent. We've had this before, but not with as many points of order. Working in good faith I think the committee has put the points of order and other issues aside so we could address the committee witnesses. We did that in the past; we did it during the pre-budget consultation. This is not a precedent, so I think we can continue. We don't have to worry that we're creating precedents; it's happened in the past. I think we should allow the witnesses to testify, okay?

Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Christopher Wilson (Senior Public Relations Officer, Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada): Hello. My name is Christopher Wilson. I'm here on behalf of the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada.

I'd like to make it clear that we're not here on a partisan basis. Our activities are non-partisan—

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Penson.

Mr. Charlie Penson: Mr. Chair, I know this is kind of a strange process this morning, and I know the witnesses must wonder what's going on here. Quite frankly, what I want to raise is a point of privilege. I believe, Mr. Chair, that my privileges as a member of this committee have been affected by this committee's decision not to allow the witnesses that we asked to bring forward. We've been in contact with some of them, and they've said that they didn't get very good information about when they would be allowed to appear. I think just as a matter of fairness, Mr. Chairman, it seems to me—

•(1215)

The Chair: Again, we're discussing witnesses. We've already addressed this.

Mr. Charlie Penson: It's my privilege as a member of Parliament that I'm talking about. I would think that we would want to hear from a broad range of Canadians and Canadian groups about how \$4.6 billion of taxpayers' money is to be spent.

I represent a constituency of 125,000 people. I know they want me to do due diligence as to how their hard-earned tax money is being spent. Otherwise, we get into situations like the sponsorship scandal, and I don't want a repeat of that. I want to hear from a wide range of witnesses. I want to know what they think of this government's intention to spend \$4.6 billion of their money.

The Auditor General has talked about how things can go off the rails if we don't get due diligence. Because you have restricted us and not allowed our witnesses to come to this committee, we are only hearing from a certain segment. This is not my understanding of how the Parliament of Canada should work, and I believe that my privileges as a member of Parliament are being affected—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Penson, I haven't made a ruling that I'm not going to allow any other witnesses. Again, we're talking about witnesses. This is not a point of privilege.

Mr. Charlie Penson: You're only hearing certain witnesses and then you're going to—

The Chair: We're not even hearing these witnesses. Let us—

Mr. Charlie Penson: You're only hearing certain witnesses, and then you're going to ask—

The Chair: No, I'm hearing the witnesses who are here. We will address the other list of witnesses this afternoon. I have no problem with listening to witnesses. I asked that the list of witnesses be submitted by Friday. We also had an informal agreement that if other witnesses—

Mr. Charlie Penson: I suggest, Mr. Chairman, that my privileges as a member of this committee are being abrogated.

The Chair: —wanted to be added to the list, we would invite them to come. But we had set a limit that we would try to set them all in on Thursday.

Mr. Charlie Penson: If you won't hear this, Mr. Chairman, I will take it to the Speaker in the House of Commons.

The Chair: These witnesses are here and we're going to hear them.

Thank you, Mr. Penson.

Mr. Wilson, can we try?

Mr. Christopher Wilson: I don't know, can we?

The Chair: We'll try.

Thank you.

Mr. Christopher Wilson: This is interesting sport.

Mr. Brian Pallister: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Right now?

Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, I'm concerned—

Mr. Charles Hubbard (Miramichi, Lib.): *[Inaudible—Editor]...* not debatable.

The Chair: There is a motion to adjourn. We'll put it to a vote.

All in favour of adjourning? Against?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you to the witnesses for your time. If you have any written submissions, we'll take them in.

The meeting is adjourned.

● (1220)

● (1225)

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