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## Standing Committee on Health

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**Chair**

**Ms. Bonnie Brown**

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## Standing Committee on Health

Tuesday, November 2, 2004

• (1535)

[English]

**The Chair (Ms. Bonnie Brown (Oakville, Lib.)):** Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It's my pleasure to call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Health to order.

As per your agenda, we will begin with consideration of the two motions submitted by Mr. Fletcher, and then we will move in camera to receive your suggestions about possible witnesses on Bill C-12.

In addition to that, the clerk has advised me that we would be wise to get our budget in to the Liaison Committee. She has a budget ready that will cover witnesses for Bill C-12, the witnesses for the hepatitis C meeting, and the tobacco regulations, which an earlier committee asked to have sent to this committee for review. We have those three things to take care of, and probably all of them will require witnesses and therefore a budget.

I also have a legal opinion that I sought out on the question of bringing the three ex-Health Canada employees before us. In order that everyone be fully informed, I thought I should share it with you.

Those are the items for today, but we'll go back to the beginning, as per your agenda, and begin with consideration of the two motions submitted by Mr. Fletcher. The first motion is about inviting the current Prime Minister.

Mr. Fletcher, would you like to speak to that motion?

**Mr. Steven Fletcher (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia, CPC):** Yes, Madam Chair.

In light of some of the comments that were made by the former Deputy Prime Minister in her recent book, it would be helpful for this committee to have the Prime Minister come and clarify some of the positions he has taken in the past. Certainly, it would allow an opportunity for this committee to ask some pertinent questions on how these things come forward.

I think it would also be good for the Prime Minister, as these allegations are quite serious. It would be an opportunity for him to clear up any misconceptions that may exist. It's really important for this government and for Canadians to have the Prime Minister clear things up so that we can move forward. The Canada Health Act is of great interest to a lot of people, and I think it would be helpful.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Dhalla.

**Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.):** I unfortunately am not really keen on supporting this motion. The intent of the motion has stemmed from the allegations made by Sheila Copps, and the purpose of the committee is not to get into “he said, she said”. We're not here as *The National Enquirer* to really take an interest in these matters. Tomorrow, someone else might make some other allegations against the Prime Minister, and I personally don't want to get caught up in having the committee's time spent on having all of these people appear as witnesses.

Second, in regard to Ms. Sheila Copps and the allegations, they haven't been backed by any of the individuals she mentioned, in particular, David Dodge, Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan, or even Don Drummond. In light of that, our Prime Minister has shown his commitment to health care. He has signed a \$41-billion deal in regard to the health care accord.

I think our committee would benefit much more substantively if we actually had the individual that the Prime Minister has given this lead to, and that is Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh. In addition, I don't think the Prime Minister, to my knowledge, has ever testified before any committee before, and I don't think it's in the best interests of this committee that he come here and start setting a new precedent. He has a country to run, he's been given the mandate by Canadians, and I think it's really important that he pursue that mandate.

• (1540)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Ménard, did you wish to speak to this?

[Translation]

**Mr. Réal Ménard (Hochelaga, BQ):** Madam Chair, I think that this motion needs to be put into historical context. Personally, I would be more comfortable if we invited the Prime Minister. Although he is the top citizen in this country, he is still accountable to Parliament. I would rather we invite the Prime Minister to appear than request Cabinet documents. Furthermore, as I pointed out, there is a 35-year statute of limitations for Cabinet documents.

We will be voting in favour of this motion, not so much because of the allegations of the former Deputy Prime Minister that the Prime Minister should appear, but because health is a major concern for all citizens and we must know what principles the Prime Minister intends to defend. We will therefore be voting in favour of this motion.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Ménard.

Mr. Savage.

**Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank my colleague for putting forward this motion, but I cannot support the motion. I agree with Monsieur Ménard that we have a great deal of work to do. I'd like to see us get at that work.

I came to the health committee—I specifically asked to be on the health committee—because I want to take part in some of the substantive discussions on health care. I want to get into a discussion of why we can't keep Canadians healthier than they are, and what we do when they do get sick, and then how we take care of them.

We've already spoken at this committee of how few meetings we have between now and the break and how many we have in total. We're not going to get to all the stuff we want, and to play this kind of politics is very counterproductive, and it's discouraging to somebody who's hoping this minority Parliament might be able to work. I find it discouraging.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Savage.

Mr. Benoit.

**Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Everything that's been said aside, it's an undeniable fact that the comments made by the former Deputy Prime Minister have cast doubt, on the part of Canadians, on the Prime Minister's position on health care. I think it's important to clear the air, and that's what this would do, I would hope—clear the air and get on with it from, hopefully, a more solid foundation.

I think the position the Prime Minister takes on any issue in this country is important. It determines to a great extent whether what's done at committees really comes to anything or not.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Benoit.

Mr. Thibault.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

I think it's a longstanding tradition that the Prime Minister does not appear at committees. He names a ministry. These ministers are responsible for that area of administration within government. They attend meetings of the committees and answer questions. They also answer in the House.

The Prime Minister answers in the House every day. He's made his commitment to the Canada Health Act clear in a number of ways: for one, in the agreement with the provinces—the additional money that's been put there, as was mentioned, at \$41 billion—in his Speech from the Throne, and in his platform. His minister will be here. We've invited him to come to speak to two subjects, to the main estimates—but now it will be supplementary estimates, with him appearing for main estimates in the big chamber—and also for the agreement on health care with the provinces. So there's plenty of opportunity to discuss the commitment of the government, which is what is important.

The question of the Prime Minister has been raised by one individual in a book. She has no authority or right to divulge cabinet confidentiality, so I assume she wouldn't have; therefore, anything she has done would be fiction. It's been shown by four people who were part of the discussion at the time that the allegations that have been made are fictitious. They are not fact.

So we are wasting time. We have serious work to do, as my colleague has mentioned, and as you have mentioned in discussions before—a lot of serious elements to address. I would hate to see that we degrade into having these political “gotcha”, driving-one-another-into-a-corner discussions all the time.

We have areas where we agree. We agreed on hepatitis C in a press conference, where we were not invited and were painted as being in opposition. Now we have this, which is purely a political move, a crass political move.

There is a longstanding, 130-year tradition of parliamentary process. The minister will be here. We will have an opportunity to question him. I don't want my Prime Minister appearing week in and week out at every committee of the House of Commons answering such questions.

• (1545)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Blaikie.

**Hon. Bill Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP):** Madam Chair, this is an interesting debate, and I certainly acknowledge it would be unusual to have the Prime Minister come before the committee, and it would be unusual for the committee to request the Prime Minister to come before the committee. Certainly this was unheard of in days when there was a government majority on committees, because a government majority would never hear tell of it.

But we are in different circumstances, and I think there are a couple of things that maybe should be noted before the vote here. I've listened carefully to what my Liberal colleagues have said, particularly with respect to the fact that this is somehow playing politics. Well, I would say there's probably some truth in that—God forbid there should be politics in a parliamentary committee.

It seems to me this is a case of bad karma on the part of the Liberals. I remember the Prime Minister during the election making the Canada Health Act, and the position of the leader of the official opposition on it, an issue. He called on Mr. Harper to come forward to give his testimony on whether or not he was going to stand up for the Canada Health Act, etc. If you reap the wind, you sow the whirlwind on this kind of thing. It's not as if only one side of the House—either the government or the official opposition—is playing politics with the Canada Health Act. I think it's a timely thing, in a sense, because there is a debate about the Canada Health Act in the country.

If I thought the government was sufficiently committed to the Canada Health Act that I found Sheila Copps' allegations to be totally baseless, I wouldn't want to waste the time of the committee either. But it's not just what Sheila Copps has to say about the past. The fact that others haven't corroborated it doesn't really mean anything because they're still bound by their positions in the government. Even if it is true, they're not going to tell you it's true because they're not in a position to say so. So I don't really find the fact that the others haven't corroborated it terribly convincing. We all know they're not in a position to corroborate it.

What I want to say is it's not just what Sheila Copps has had to say; it's what the government has or has not done. The Canada Health Act has not been enforced for years. We have people jumping the queue right now, paying out of their wallets to get MRIs, CAT scans, or whatever. They're jumping the queue in a publically funded system. That is a direct violation of the Canada Health Act, and nobody on the government side is doing anything about that. It's not even being reported. The data isn't even being collected. In the annual report to Parliament on the Canada Health Act, this kind of data isn't even collected because the government doesn't want to know. The more they know and the more they detail it, the more they would be held accountable for not doing anything about it.

It's not just what Sheila Copps says about the Prime Minister's position; it's what the behaviour of the government illustrates about the government's position—and there are plenty of illustrations. You can pour all the money you want into the health agreement—\$41 billion, or whatever it is—but if you're not enforcing the Canada Health Act, it will be spent in ways that violate the Canada Health Act. It will be spent to help people get treatment before others because they're paying out of their own wallets to get the diagnoses that enable them to jump the queue. So just money alone doesn't say you're enforcing or living by the Canada Health Act.

Normally I wouldn't want to vote for this kind of motion, because I'm a great respecter of parliamentary tradition, but the fact of the matter is I don't see any respect in the behaviour of the government toward the Canada Health Act. For that reason I'd very much like to have the Prime Minister here. I'd like to have him explain why he wouldn't come to defend his position on the Canada Health Act. His position on the Canada Health Act, at least behaviourally, is quite suspect.

• (1550)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Merrifield.

**Mr. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, CPC):** I think I made this point last time, and I'll do it again very quickly.

The accusations were made not just by some ordinary person, or even a backbencher; this was the Deputy Prime Minister of the country. Because of that, I think we have to lend some credence to it. I imagine that if it were all bogus, all lies, and slanderous, lawyers would be lining up behind to try to defend this in a court of law, because that's where it should be taken.

I don't see that happening, so I think we have to consider exactly what's going on, where the country is going, and where the leader of the Liberal Party, the Prime Minister, is going with regard to this. As

my colleague just mentioned, some of the Prime Minister's behaviour is a little suspect, with regard to the use of private clinics. This is where he gets his own health care, as publicly noted, in Montreal. I'm not saying that's good or bad; I'm just saying there are a lot of clouds around that.

**Hon. Bill Blaikie:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I did not raise that. I talked about the government's response to various violations. I didn't raise the Prime Minister's personal medical care, and I don't want that attributed to me because as far as I'm concerned that has nothing to do with it.

**Mr. Rob Merrifield:** That's fair enough, and I didn't necessarily want to attribute that to you. What I was alluding to is that there is suspicion around the actions of the Prime Minister. I think that's what I heard you say and I believe we'd see it if we looked in Hansard. At least, that's what I thought I heard you say.

I would agree with that in the sense that there is some cloud around this, and I don't see having the Prime Minister here to clear this up as a negative thing. It may be a very positive thing so the committee and the government can move ahead.

I'll leave my comments at that. I think there's really nothing wrong with our request.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Merrifield.

I'm sorry, Mr. Fletcher, but when you introduced your motion, I forgot to ask you to move it. So as you close the discussion, would you move the motion at the beginning? Then we'll call the question after your comments.

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** Madam Chair, I'd like to move the motion as per the chairperson's advice.

And I'd like to conclude with this. I actually take quite great offence to the suggestion that this is just about politics. This is about the health of Canadians. I want to know that when I retire and want to go see my friend Réal in Quebec City 50 years from now, I will have the appropriate health care.

I think the allegations of the former Deputy Prime Minister of Canada certainly should be viewed.... I'm sure my Liberal friends would agree that the position of Deputy Prime Minister of Canada is a significant position and that the people who occupy that position, regardless of the party they come from, have the degree of integrity we all would expect from someone in that position. I'd be quite taken aback if what my Liberal friends are saying is true, that Ms. Copps has no credibility. That would make me wonder what that says about all the time she was in office.

Having said all that, I think this is good for the committee and is in the spirit of cooperation. I would look at it as an opportunity for the Prime Minister to clear the air. It's a great opportunity. I think he should take advantage of it, and we look forward to providing him with that opportunity.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Fletcher.

Are you ready for the question, ladies and gentlemen?

**Hon. Robert Thibault:** I have a point of order, Madam Chair. Could we have a recorded division, please?

(Motion agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4)

**The Chair:** Could we move on now to the second motion? I'll ask Mr. Fletcher to move the motion and introduce it to you.

● (1555)

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** Madam Chair, I would first like to move the motion.

I'd just like to say we've already had a lot of discussion around Ms. Copps' comments, and I think it would be very helpful, again, to clear the air and to see how the 1995 budget came into being. It was the budget where the Liberals did cut \$25 billion from the transfer payments to the provinces.

Also, given that we're moving forward into budget season, it would give the committee members—certainly me as a new member—the opportunity to see how the process is developed. In a minority parliament I'd hope that the Liberal members would be open to having input from the opposition parties, and seeing how the 1995 budget came forward would be very helpful in that. It would also provide the Liberals an opportunity to clear the air as far as Ms. Copps' comments are concerned.

Now, I suspect we're going to hear all the same arguments that somehow this is politics and so on, but we need to look at the big picture and at what's good for Canadians. I think some transparency in this would be very helpful.

I suspect some people will say, well, some of these documents may not be for public viewing, and I respect that. I'm sure the committee can handle the business in camera appropriately, and I look forward to getting some insight into how this whole process works.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Fletcher.

Seeing no hands waving at the moment, I'd just like to ask Mr. Fletcher a question. It says “all pertinent documents”, and then part of the list is “interdepartmental correspondence and consultation papers” in the period prior to the budget. Now, do you want to define which departments, or do you mean all departments? It would seem to me there would be a fair amount of interdepartmental correspondence in that particular period. I'm wondering whether you mean all departments, and I would ask you, who is going to read this truckload of material that's going to be forthcoming?

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** I will volunteer Rob Merrifield.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** The intent is for interdepartmental correspondence that is relevant to the health section of the budget.

**The Chair:** If I can, I'll respond to that. It would be relevant according to whose judgment? Is there something about health in here or is it more about finance and budget preparation? I think a bureaucrat or a public official who receives this motion is going to have a lot of questions about exactly what it is you want.

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** Well, I'm particularly interested in health, finance, and the Treasury Board in particular. I'd be happy to clarify it as time goes on if necessary. Certainly, I would welcome suggestions from the other committee members as well if there are

specific areas they're interested in hearing about. The spirit of the motion is to allow the committee to get the papers we feel are necessary in order for us to get insight into how the federal budget speech was put forth.

● (1600)

**The Chair:** Seeing as you volunteered Mr. Merrifield to do all this reading, does Mr. Merrifield agree with that nomination?

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Rob Merrifield:** I have no comment right now.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mrs. Chamberlain.

**Hon. Brenda Chamberlain (Guelph, Lib.):** In the spirit of being friends and partners in this committee, I want to ask the chair if... Either I can do it by motion next time or, if the mover would take this as a friendly amendment, I'd like to include that I'd like a costing of how much this is going to cost somebody to dig all this stuff up. That's very important to me. If we're going to take time away from the committee to do stuff like this, I think we need to know the manpower or womanpower behind this. This does not look like an easy task to me, and I'm sure the mover would want to include that, being as his party is, I know, fiscally responsible. We should know that, Madam Chair, and I would ask the mover if he'd mind including that.

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** That would not be a friendly amendment, I don't think, because in a lot of ways this is just like a freedom of information request. Given the importance of the issue and the total dollar amounts, I think comparing tens of billions of dollars to what may be in the hundreds of dollars is not really relevant. It's important that this committee get the information it requires.

**The Chair:** Mr. Blaikie.

**Hon. Bill Blaikie:** Well, Madam Chair, I want to express some reservations about the motion. I'm content to have the Prime Minister come here. What we're trying to get to the bottom of is the Prime Minister's alleged lack of commitment to the Canada Health Act, and I'm assuming he'll respect the will of the committee and show up. If he doesn't show up, then maybe we have to revisit how else we might get at the truth of this matter.

In the meantime, I have some reservations about the cost and the energy that would go into this—and for that matter about what precedent this would set for public policy making if every e-mail anybody ever sent anybody else in a department when they were considering options.... It would be like making public every discussion people had in caucus meetings about whether we should do this or should do that. People take positions for the moment to see what other people think or to explore something, and then they hear other arguments and change their mind. They want to be able to do that in the confidence that they're not going to be held responsible for every position they take in the course of a discussion. I just find this difficult to support, although I understand well what is behind it.

I think we've already broken enough ground here today by inviting the Prime Minister to come before the committee, and that suffices for me for today.

**The Chair:** It's one plan at a time, Mr. Blaikie, is that it?

Mr. Fletcher.

**Mr. Steven Fletcher:** In the spirit of cooperation and getting along, I would be open to withdrawing the motion, given the hope

that the Prime Minister will come to the committee. Perhaps at that point the committee would be in a better position to determine if the other documents were necessary or not.

**The Chair:** Mr. Fletcher has offered to withdraw this motion. The clerk tells me we need unanimous consent to do that. Do I have it?

**Hon. Robert Thibault:** I have to ask a question before I can give my agreement. In speaking to withdrawal, he mentioned some provisos.

**The Chair:** No, he didn't.

● (1605)

**Hon. Robert Thibault:** If it's being withdrawn plain and simple, then I agree.

(Motion withdrawn [see *Minutes of Proceedings*])

**The Chair:** We'll move on to the next item on the agenda.

We need to have a couple of minutes' break in order to go in camera to hear about your witness suggestions.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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