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—
Chair

Mr. John Cannis

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Thursday, June 23, 2005

• (0910)

[English]

Hon. Bill Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Mr. Chairman, I was in the parliamentary dining room yesterday when I noticed in one particular alcove what I thought to be a very strange configuration of people. I'm not referring to their appearance, of course, but to their status. There was the chair of the committee, the clerk of the committee, all the staff of the committee, and all the Liberal MPs on the committee, and not an opposition member to be found. It reminds me of that old ad: water, water everywhere, and n'er a drop of Quik.

This was certainly something I had never seen in all my years here. I can't express what a sinking feeling I had that no matter what was going on there—even if it was harmless—it was inappropriate. It compromised the integrity of the staff and their non-partisanship, and it compromised what I thought had been a pretty good working relationship—despite the odd argument between Mr. Martin and me—in this committee.

I went directly to the House after that for question period. I spoke to the Clerk of the House of Commons and expressed my concern and then I was thinking about raising it on the floor of the House after question period. She said she would look into it and get back to me. She did get back to me with the view that this, in her judgment, was an inappropriate thing for the clerk to have done. And frankly, I think the implication was that it was inappropriate for the clerk to have been asked and to have been put in that position as well, although I had the impression that the clerk knew it was going to be a kind of Liberals-only meeting.

I regret that she didn't seek guidance from her superiors as to whether or not she should go to such a meeting, because had she, I think she probably would have received advice to the contrary.

I think it would have been perfectly fine for the chair, who is a new chair, to have wanted to be briefed, even over lunch, with the clerk and the staff. It's the addition of one side of the committee without others present that I think was the wrong move.

Anyway, I had this response from the Clerk of the House of Commons and then I found out that all of a sudden the meeting I expected we would have this morning had been cancelled. That decision may have been taken before the dining room meeting, and that's fine, but I feel that perhaps other members of the opposition were consulted about this—whether or not we should have a meeting today—but I certainly wasn't.

Anyway, I did talk to our clerk about this. Subsequent to learning that the meeting had been cancelled, I was not satisfied at that time that she appreciated the full magnitude of my objection to what had happened. I'm still not satisfied. And subsequent to that, I talked to other members of the opposition, some of whom had also noticed. We were wandering around the dining room, saying “Do you see who I see?”

This meeting was called. Subsequent to the calling of the meeting, I spoke to the Minister of National Defence, who was a long-time committee chair. He thought it was inappropriate that this should have happened, and here we are.

I think things can be quite simplified, Mr. Chairman. I'm not accusing you of nefarious motives in this case. I think at best it was bad judgment in terms of committee relationships and dynamics, and I would hope you would consider an apology to the committee for doing that, for putting the clerk in that position, and for putting the committee in this position. And I hope we would have some assurances from the clerk that she appreciates that it could have been done differently by her as well, and that we will have some assurances that this won't happen again.

• (0915)

The Chair: Mr. Casson.

Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC): Mr. Chairman, I think I expressed to you yesterday in a phone call that I felt that this meeting was important, after what we observed yesterday, just to give everybody an opportunity to quantify what happened, or to clear the air, or to justify it, or whatever.

I support most of the comments Mr. Blaikie has made that we found it unusual on a committee that I feel worked with one purpose in mind, and that was to be non-partisan to the utmost extent, of course, and to do the best we can for the Department of National Defence and our men and women in uniform.

In order to keep that kind of relationship and to keep that kind of committee atmosphere operating, all committee members have to feel part of what's happening here. I guess we'll wait to see what you have to say about that.

The Chair: Mr. Martin.

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): I can certainly appreciate the comments that were made on the other side. Having been at the meeting, I will say that nothing nefarious was taking place, and if something nefarious were taking place it wouldn't have been done in the middle of the dining room at lunch, that's for sure. Maybe Mr. Blaikie has been around here too long and is getting a little paranoid, but we'd be far more clever than that if something untoward were happening.

So nothing was meant by that at all. I'm sure that the fact that the chair is holding this meeting today is testament to the fact that there's a great intent to clear any problems that are in the air and any concerns that might be there and to reassure everybody that we are a team, we are working together, albeit with different views, but we're working in our own way to help the Canadian Forces and do our best for them to ensure that we serve them in the best way possible in our duty as members of Parliament.

The Chair: Monsieur Bachand.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): In light of the remarks just made by the Parliamentary Secretary, it seems to me that they don't realize that there is an appearance of a conflict of interest. However, perhaps he was only speaking for himself. Perhaps there is no conflict of interest. I agree that if the meeting was supposed to be secret, it would not have taken place in the parliamentary restaurant. The fact remains that persons with considerable House experience apparently believe that what transpired was completely inappropriate.

One must understand as well that the opposition wants an explanation. How did the meeting come to be called? Who called it? Did the people attending the meeting know what kind of meeting it was? Did they know that only Liberal MPs would be present? It's important for us to find out the circumstances surrounding this meeting.

We're not asking you to do the stations of the cross on your knees. However, if the Liberals are agreeing with Mr. Martin in saying that there is nothing here to get upset about, I say that this reflects an attitude that we see all too often on their part. We see things that are unacceptable to us, while the Liberals tell us that things aren't as bad as all that. They stab you in the back, but it doesn't hurt, so why worry? Getting stabbed in the back doesn't hurt!

If that's the kind of attitude Liberals have, I can tell you that this won't be the end of this incident. We need to get more plausible explanations than the one provided by the Parliamentary Secretary.

● (0920)

[*English*]

The Chair: Before I pass the floor over, I do agree with your comments, Monsieur Bachand. Unfortunately, I am the chair and I have to give you the floor first. There have been specific comments made and requests for explanation.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Let's hear from you now.

The Chair: At the appropriate time I will have the opportunity, I hope, to respond to questions that have been put and concerns that are on the table.

Mr. Blaikie.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: On a point of order, Mr. Chairman, before we work ourselves up into an unnecessary argument, perhaps some comments by you could settle the matter.

The Chair: I'm at your pleasure. My job is to chair.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: I can give you the water, but I can't make you drink. I'm giving you the opportunity to intervene. It's about something you did, so let's—

The Chair: And I sincerely appreciate that, but I left that up to your good judgment. You obviously picked up on it, and I thank you for that, but I do have an obligation to go to Mr. Desrochers first, unless he decides to allow me to speak.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Odina Desrochers (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, BQ): I do have some questions, Mr. Chairman, but first, I'd like you to respond to the comments, since I share my colleague's concerns.

Who called the meeting? Were House of Commons staff aware of the purpose of this meeting? Is it normal to hold meetings of this nature?

These are all questions that committee members would like to have answered, in my view. Give us some explanations and, if we're not satisfied, you can rest assured that we'll continue to press the issue.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

First of all, let me begin by apologizing for the optics and how it has been construed. At the end of my responses to the questions you'll see that even though the apology is appropriate and will be well placed, I think you'll interpret it the way I present it.

On the appearance of conflict that Monsieur Bachand talked about, there's no question about it. Any kind of appearance that relates to a comment Mr. Martin made.... Had this been a clandestine, premeditated thought to construe or map out a strategy, rest assured we would not have chosen a facility where each and every person, member or not, would have had the opportunity to see us present. I can assure you that the optics were wrong, but the intent was not harmful in any way.

Being the new member on this committee at the same time as a chair, I came in one day and there you were. Without getting into the fine details, here you are chairing the committee that has been doing such good work all along from my predecessor, Mr. Pat O'Brien. As we were closing down what I felt I needed to do was to get to know everybody. I will tell you ahead of time now that my intent was obviously to get to speak to the staff here first of all and help them bring me up to speed. At the same time, as the session was closing, my intent was to thank them for their warm welcome and the prompt and good responses I had from the clerk and the researchers. That was the focus.

I called the meeting, by the way. There was nobody who asked to get together. I, on my own initiative, called the meeting and I spoke with everybody. I said I'd like to get together, spend some time, maybe over lunch or whatever is convenient. I talked about it a couple of days prior to that, and knowing very well how our schedule was going, it was very appropriate. Wednesdays, as you know, we meet at twelve.

As far as Mr. Blaikie, who says he never has seen this in all his time up here, you're probably right, Mr. Blaikie. I believe you are right. My response to that is there was nothing unusual about it. You've probably not seen meetings like this because whenever they were held in the past they were held maybe off the Hill or maybe one evening when nobody was to know. I chose not to go in that direction because I had no motive behind it.

Important for the clerk to have done, and also to be asked... I'll take full responsibility as far as the clerk is concerned. I spoke to the clerk. I asked everybody. I felt it would have been inappropriate to ask Wolf, Michel, and Joseph, for example, and not to ask the clerk. That was my initiative; she simply responded to my call. I take full blame for that.

The addition of the rest of the committee as inappropriate, that's to be judged by you. I felt, as colleagues of mine, there was nothing specific to be discussed, but I'm trying to get on the same page with them. I've not served with any of these people in any committee in the past. Mr. Rota is a new member, Mr. Bagnell is a relatively new member, Mr. Martin is a new addition to the Liberal team, and Judi Longfield I've never served with on any committee, from my recollection in the 12 to 13 years that I've been here. So it was a matter of getting together.

In terms of scheduling, there was also a question in the meeting this morning; I believe Mr. Blaikie brought that up. I do know it was discussed, and I do know that notices were sent around after we had the meeting with respect to Agent Orange. There was nothing specific on the agenda for the following day. To my understanding, the clerk did notify members.

• (0925)

The Clerk of the Committee: No meeting had been scheduled for today. I got a couple of calls at the my office yesterday afternoon, so I just sent an e-mail saying there was no meeting, but as soon as the meeting was requested I sent out a notice. Unfortunately, those events happened fairly quickly, one after the other. But it wasn't as if this meeting was cancelled; it hadn't been planned.

The Chair: The vice-chair, Mr. Casson, called me yesterday expressing his strong concerns. I appreciated his comments, and I assured him immediately that we would undertake to call a meeting for today. So if I wanted to derail and defuse this by using time, rest assured any excuse could have possibly come up to not call this meeting.

I will tell you other members on the committee what my thoughts were. As I've done with other committees in the past—the transport committee, for example—I would encourage that the entire membership on the committee spend a lunch or a dinner together. In this case, I understand you've worked very well together. You've been together for quite some time. I find myself not in that position. So my plans, as I tell you now, being asked, were eventually to bring

everybody together for an evening of dinner or lunch so that we can get to know each other a little bit better. We know each other in the House. We vocally exchange our positions, but I felt that kind of meeting would have brought us together.

I look at Cheryl, who has been here for many years, and Mr. Bachand, and Mr. Desrochers, and Mr. Blaikie. I've yelled your way and you've yelled my way, but I find these types of settings give us an opportunity to work in a different way. I'll use Mr. Martin's comments, that we're here—as you said, Mr. Blaikie—for the good of our men in uniform, to try to do the best we can.

Mr. MacKenzie and Mr. O'Connor are new members. Mr. Casson I've had exchanges with in the House. But I find it very rewarding and fulfilling when I sit in committee and we have a kind of non-partisan relationship.

That was the intent of getting together with the committee. I underline again, yes, there is an appearance of conflict, Monsieur Bachand; you're absolutely correct, sir. I cannot dispute that, but I can assure you and Mr. Blaikie and all other members on this committee on both sides that there was no ill intent in bringing the people together. It was more, as I said—and I'll close with this by way of summarizing—to thank them for the warm welcome, their cooperation, their call to make arrangements. We've been working back and forth with the clerk consistently, with Mr. Blaikie's support, to try to crunch the numbers for travel.

Am I in consistent contact with the staff? Absolutely. I have to be. I've been plunged into this position, and I stated I was happy doing whatever else I was doing. Circumstances moved me in this direction, and I'd like to do the best I can. I seem to be getting a lot of cooperation and understanding from you, and I'd like to take the opportunity also to thank each and every one of you for the type of patience you've exercised with me chairing this committee.

So to all of you, yes, I have no problems apologizing for how it was perceived. It may be the undertaking.... Maybe there was a lesson—I'm sure there is a lesson here—to be learned, I say, but I have nothing but good intent to make sure this committee works as efficiently as Mr. O'Brien left it and to continue doing the kind of work we have....

I see a smile. I've only been told that it was working very efficiently and very well.

I wish to continue in that direction, and with your help try to improve it, and with your help, as we move forward to our next undertaking, to deliver whatever kind of report I believe we're mandated to do.

Monsieur Desrochers.

• (0930)

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: I have a few questions for you, Mr. Chairman.

Is this your first experience at chairing a committee?

[English]

The Chair: As a full chairman, yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: In the other committees that you've...

[English]

The Chair: Actually, let me apologize. I was the starting chair on the Subcommittee on International Trade, Trade Disputes and Investment at the beginning of this mandate.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: In your previous incarnations as chair, have you ever taken part in one or more meetings like the one convened this week, obviously, without the presence of the opposition parties?

[English]

The Chair: Yes, I have.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Was this a common practice for you?

[English]

The Chair: I have a human resource background, and I believe the key element to any successful operation is the staff; it's people, it's human resources.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: [Inaudible—Editor].

The Chair: It's people I'm generally discussing, not staff. These would be considered staff to some degree, Bill, and maybe I should rephrase that.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: We need to discuss that.

The Chair: Maybe I should rephrase it. I work well with people. I can spar with the best of them and I can work with everybody. Yes, I've done this, primarily because it's one methodology I have used to develop a better working environment. I've done so in the past, and without any ill intent or any premeditated thoughts behind it, I always have encouraged it.

I know when we sit in opposition, often we see members on both sides cross the floor to discuss issues, in essence working together. How many times have members of the opposition crossed over to speak to the minister? Obviously, if we did not share and spend time together—

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Mr. Chairman, I have more questions, this time for staff members.

What kind of instructions were you given for this meeting? What were you asked to do? Did you have an agenda? Did you know what business you would be attending to, or did you simply respond to the chair's request to attend a working meeting? Describe the sequence of events here.

My questions are directed to the four staff members.

[English]

Mr. Wolf Koerner (Committee Researcher): I can tell you I got a voice mail Wednesday morning that had been sent to my office late Tuesday. I wasn't in my office Tuesday; I was giving a talk over at Ottawa U. The voice mail said that the chair would like to meet with

you and the staff and some members in the parliamentary restaurant. So I went.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: You say “*some members*”. Therefore, you were unaware that only Liberal members would be in attendance.

[English]

Mr. Wolf Koerner: No, I think it said “some Liberal members”.

Hon. Judi Longfield (Whitby—Oshawa, Lib.): I have a point of order.

I can appreciate that Mr. Desrochers wants to find out what happened, but I really don't think it's fair to cross-examine the staff. If someone's at fault, then it should be the elected members who take the heat and not the staff. I think it's probably fair to assume that the staff got a request to attend a meeting and they went to the meeting.

I really don't think it's fair to put the staff in this kind of a position. Look, if you're going to cast blame, then I think you do it on the elected members. Please, let's not put our staff in that very difficult situation. I think they're already feeling in a very difficult situation through no fault of their own. They were asked to go to a meeting. They attended the meeting. They weren't the organizers of the meeting. They weren't the instigators of the meeting. As I say, they simply attended the meeting.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Mr. Chairman, I agree with my colleague, but I simply wanted to be sure. My question was answered. They were told “some members”, not “some Liberal members”. In my opinion, this is proof once more that the meeting was called somewhat secretly, because you didn't even have the courage to tell your staff that all of the members attending would be Liberals.

● (0935)

[English]

The Chair: I assure you, Mr. Desrochers, on the credibility and the honourable title that we carry as parliamentarians, I solely took the responsibility. It was my initiative. It was my undertaking. It was my request. The staff didn't have any idea of the meeting. I told the clerk that I wanted to get together with everybody so that we could start to get to know each other a little bit better, and to thank them. They had no clue whatsoever. The request put through the clerk was, “Angela, could you make arrangements and see if everybody's available?” It was a very short notice, as you just heard. It was my request.

There was no agenda, so there was nothing really to say please come prepared, bring some notes, please get yourselves tuned up, because I want to discuss A, B, C, D.

So I'm saying to you as an honourable member that no, that was not the case, and if this clarifies their position, so be it. And if you want to inquire of them, please exercise your privileges.

Mr. O'Connor.

Mr. Gordon O'Connor (Carleton—Mississippi Mills, CPC): Mr. Chair, we're living in a very conflicted partisan Parliament at this moment, and I don't have any objections to you going off to speak to any of the members, having lunches with any of the members. What really offends me is involving the staff, because we have to trust the staff. You are the chair, and you have to follow certain orders, but you're still a member of the Liberal Party, so we take that into account. But the staff are supposed to be servants of Parliament, and they are servants of Parliament.

Again, I'm not going to pick on the staff, but through you I'll say that the clerk who reports to you doesn't really work for you; she only reports to you. She works for a higher-level clerk in Parliament, and she has a certain degree of independence. And if she and her staff are put in positions of conflict, then they have the possibility of getting themselves out. They don't have to follow your orders in that sense.

I'll accept at the moment that this was a judgment on your part that ended up in this appearance of conflict. But if you're intending to do this stuff in the future, I would hope you would meet with MPs by themselves and not involve the staff, because right away, the minute you bring the staff in, it becomes an official representation of Parliament.

We have to trust that the staff are unbiased. When we ask them questions, we expect we're getting objective answers. I'm not questioning we're not, I'm just saying that's what we expect. But if we see the staff meeting with government members, we don't know what's going on. I don't think you're doing great plots and everything else, because the staff are there, so it would be rather difficult to do the plots, but it just looks bad.

I'm saying that's the fundamental error here. You can meet with the Liberals, the Conservatives, or the Bloc all your want, but don't involve the staff.

The Chair: Let me respond, if I may. I was asked a question earlier if this had been done before. Of course I could not respond, but I will give you an example now, if I may.

When I served on the transport committee, and Mr. Comuzzi was the chair at that time, this happened. It was with members from the opposition, and the staff were there.

Mr. Gordon O'Connor: It's still wrong.

The Chair: I'm not disputing that. That's something we have to weigh.

I was asked if this had been done before. It probably was done with other committees. I remember it was—

Hon. Bill Blaikie: What happened with Mr. Comuzzi?

The Chair: I'm sorry...?

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Mr. Comuzzi was the chair?

The Chair: I believe he was the chair.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Yes, and he had members of the opposition there too, so he had both sides there.

The Chair: No, but I'm responding to the comment that this shouldn't happen and the opposition should be there. We did get together, as individuals, and the staff were there as well, and it took

place on both sides. So has it happened in the past? Yes, it has happened in the past.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: No, it hasn't.

The Chair: Well, Bill—

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Not like this—not like this.

The Chair: At least my way of doing it was open and transparent. Had I wished to meet in a different setting—

Hon. Bill Blaikie: You're not getting it, John. I'm sorry, you're not getting it.

Anyway, I'll take my turn whenever you recognize me, because you're not getting it.

The Chair: Yes, well, I'll go to Mr. Martin, then I'll go to you.

Hon. Keith Martin: I think the case on both sides is being laid out very clearly, what the concerns were, what happened. This is fairly innocent. If one wants to call it a mistake, then one can call it a mistake.

We can spend all day long, if we want to, just sit around here and beat up on—

● (0940)

Hon. Bill Blaikie: We will.

Hon. Keith Martin: —the chair, if that's what you want, but surely we all have better things to do with our time.

Maybe the way to resolve this in a constructive way is to determine, as a committee, what the rules ought to be for any further meetings. Maybe the opposition members would like to offer what they would feel to be fair, so that whatever meetings are taking place in the future can be done in a way that the chair feels confident, the opposition feels confident, and the government members feel confident that there isn't, as Mr. O'Connor said, any sense of a feeling of bias or a feeling of things that are happening in a non-transparent way, which was clearly not the intent of that meeting.

The Chair: Before I go to Mr. Blaikie, you made a very strong comment that "You just don't get it". Bill, I did get it. If I didn't get it, I wouldn't have said I apologize.

I think the assurance was asked by Mr. O'Connor, if I recall, to be assured that this would not occur again. Am I correct, Mr. O'Connor? I think those were your words.

Mr. Gordon O'Connor: As long as the staff aren't involved, we can meet whoever we want.

The Chair: Right. I think I've stated that very clearly, and as we summarize, I think we'll come back to the apology aspect of it as well.

The two requests you've made I think I've responded to, although I've said it's been done in the past. For me, again, I state that this was done in an open and transparent setting and there was no intent to mislead or misguide or hide or pre-plan or plot or what have you.

I hope that kind of clarifies, Bill, when you say “You just don't get it”. I think I did get your message.

The floor is yours, sir.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Well, let me just say why I don't think you get it. After you apologized, you said it was bad optics, but what I want is an acknowledgement that it was a mistake to create those bad optics.

The Chair: I apologized. I responded to that.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Okay, but then you went on to say that as for whether the Liberals should have been there or not, that was a matter for debate and judgment. Well, that's exactly what is at stake here. It's not you meeting with the staff; it's you meeting with the staff and the Liberals. And it's not a matter of judgment. If you still think that's a matter for debate, then you haven't got it, because that's what we want said will not happen again, that the staff and you will meet with the Liberals, and the Liberals alone.

The Chair: That was part of the umbrella, Bill. I'm sorry to be misunderstood. I apologize on that, but it included basically that aspect as well, if I can clarify it. Okay?

Are you finished?

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Yes, because that's the basis on which I said you didn't get it.

The Chair: No, no, those were the bases. I hope I've clarified that for you right now, because I believe I mentioned that earlier.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: And I would like an assurance from the clerk, because she's able to speak independently, that she gets it, and that if she's ever asked to go to such a meeting again, she won't go.

Hon. Keith Martin: A point of order. That question's out of line.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: It's not out of line.

Hon. Keith Martin: That line of questioning is out of line.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Okay, fine, then I'll raise it—

Hon. Keith Martin: This is not a debate between you and me. I have the floor.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Then I'll raise it in the House.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): He has the floor.

The Chair: Bill, let's keep it...

Hon. Keith Martin: The issue I was bringing up is that it is not appropriate for us to be questioning, as Ms. Longfield said—

Hon. Bill Blaikie: I didn't question her. I asked her for an assurance that she wouldn't go to such a meeting again.

Hon. Keith Martin: That's the same thing.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: No, it's not.

Hon. Keith Martin: You are not going to engage the staff. If you're going to engage anybody, you engage any of us.

The Chair: Keith, if I may, I personally don't have a problem that the clerk respond. Why? Because the premise of this meeting was what I described earlier. If Mr. Blaikie or the rest of the members on the committee are going to be happy to be assured, not just by me but by the clerk, as is his request, I don't have a problem with it. So I would then ask the clerk to respond for herself on that.

The Clerk: Thank you. May I respond?

I'd just like to say that definitely I appreciate the concerns of the committee, and I do assure them that I will not carry out any kind of meeting like this again.

I'm here to serve all members of the committee. I will meet with any member of the committee at their request and provide any procedural advice or any information they require that does not put me in a position of—

● (0945)

The Chair: Compromise.

The Clerk: —compromise. Thank you.

I want to assure you that I don't have any ulterior motives. I'm here to serve all the members of the committee. I'm an employee of the House of Commons. I'm not even a government employee; I am employed separately by the House of Commons. I'm not a member of the federal civil service, and that's part of a way of ensuring my independence. I have no partisan motives.

I enjoy working with this committee. I like the members of this committee. I agree that there was a lapse of judgment in what happened, and I apologize for that. It was not intentional to offend any member of this committee, and I will do my best to make sure that not only am I completely independent and that my integrity is above impeachment, but that all appearances of that are maintained in the future.

The Chair: And again, I take full responsibility for what occurred.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: I'd still like to ask a few questions, just to allay—

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: —the sense of a breach of trust that I have. We were on such a good, non-partisan footing before, and if and when we meet as a committee again in this Parliament, I'd like to resume that relationship.

So I'm going to ask Wolf, because he has been on this committee for a number of years, whether or not in his experience this type of meeting had happened in the past.

Mr. Wolf Koerner: You know, what happened at that meeting was—

The Chair: May I interject? “In the past”, you're saying, you're concerned....

I don't care what happened. I explained myself, Cheryl, what I've done in the past.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: No, that's not what I meant, Mr. Chair. I meant, in his experience as a researcher on a committee, has the chair ever called such a meeting?

Mr. Wolf Koerner: I've been in meetings with the chair, the parliamentary secretary, and maybe another member of the governing party. I've been in meetings with members of the opposition. We serve both sides of the table. We work for the committee, through the chair.

The other end of the question that we have to ask ourselves here is if a couple of Conservative members call me and say, "Listen, we'd like to talk over aspects of this draft report, so can you come over to my office?", do I now have to say, "Well, yes, but I have to drag a Liberal along"? We can bog things down here by putting too many rules in place.

The fact is, when we draft a report, we ask for input from all committee members, both sides of the table. At the meeting we had yesterday, there was no discussion of recommendations. There was no discussion of what absolutely had to be put into a report, or anything like that.

It's our responsibility to make sure that's a determination made by the committee, by committee members on both sides of the table.

So we don't have any really hard and fast rules in that regard, to be quite frank, but we're very careful about being non-partisan. It's not our job to give partisan advice, but if you ask me for a partisan analysis specifically, I can provide you with that.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: So this parliamentary secretary has met with you in the past, as well, regarding committee—

Mr. Wolf Koerner: Mr. Martin? No.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Okay.

At that meeting yesterday at lunch, were any aspects of the issue with the ombudsman or Agent Orange discussed?

Mr. Wolf Koerner: No.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Cheryl.

We'll go to Mr. Blaikie.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Mr. Chairman, I don't want to lay down a whole bunch of strangulating rules for the staff as to how they can be a resource to members of the committee, either collectively.... Yesterday was very unusual. Yesterday was like having a meeting of the committee without the opposition present. That's what it was like, because everyone was there except us.

That's different from Claude calling Wolf and wanting to meet over some aspect of defence policy or a report, or the researchers meeting with the Tory caucus without the NDP present, or even the researchers meeting with the Liberals to discuss what their concerns are, because they have a particular policy thrust. Let's not confuse all these other things with the fact that yesterday was a unique event.

I disagree with you when you say it was not unusual. I think it was highly unusual, and that's one of the reasons we're making a fuss about it. But let's not extend that to all the other permutations and commutations that may have to happen from time to time if the

researchers, in particular, are going to be a resource to the committee, and, for that matter, the clerk. The clerk is going to talk to all of us individually. She's not going to want to have others. But let's not do a *reductio ad absurdum* on this.

The fact of the matter is that something unique did happen, the optics of which compromised the committee momentarily. We now have an apology and we have an assurance, and I'm prepared to turn the page, but not if we're going to try to morph it into a big argument about other things.

The Chair: Mr. Blaikie, as you clearly stated, not only has the committee received an apology and an assurance, but also an apology and an assurance on my part as well. I had no objections to the questioning of the researchers and the clerk. I think I've tried to conduct this—I don't want to use the word "inquiry"—question period, if you will, in an open and transparent way. I don't think I've tried to obstruct it in any way.

But I do want to say, unless there are any other comments in closing, that I have no problem apologizing for something that occurred yesterday that was unusual. You have my assurance that it will not happen again under any circumstances. But as I've often said, to err is human, to forgive divine, in certain circumstances. I've heard that this committee is quite divine, and we can move positively forward.

It was unusual, and I really want to come back to that. But please try for a moment, as we leave today, to think that had there been any ill intent, surely to God that type of meeting would not have taken place in such an open and public place, especially on a day such as Wednesday, in the middle of the parliamentary dining room. We could have—

● (0950)

Mr. Gordon O'Connor: That's how good espionage is done.

The Chair: —moved on somewhere, into some room, to discuss whatever. That was never discussed.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Well, we're not going to recommend your appointment to CSIS, that's for sure.

The Chair: The floor is still open.

Monsieur Bachand.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I for one accept your apologies, Mr. Chairman. It takes guts for a Member to admit that he made a mistake and to apologize for it.

However, you have to realize that you have lost some of the committee's confidence. I'm sorry to have to say it, but I think that you're going to have a harder time of it now, because we will be more vigilant. I'm not saying that we're going to put you under a microscope, or anything, but it might be harder for you to negotiate with the committee in future.

You also have to understand that we have a hard time accepting what happened, even though you have apologized. One can make amends up to a point, but clearly, our confidence in you has been eroded somewhat. I trust another incident like this will not happen again. It's possible to lose some sympathy, or confidence, up to a point, but when one goes too far and loses the confidence of the committee, then in my view, it's time to step aside.

I'm not trying to make any threats. I'm not someone who does that, but you must understand that I didn't appreciate at all how things unfolded. But, since you've apologized, I'm prepared to move on. However, I will be more vigilant in the future.

[*English*]

The Chair: I appreciate your constructive comments, and I do accept them and understand they are not meant in a threatening way. That's why I used the words "constructive comments". If I was in your shoes, I'd be expressing the same comments as well.

I can assure you now of the process that will unfold, the procedure on my part, as I said earlier. I have no problem apologizing and assuring you this will not happen again. But the challenge for me now is the confidence part, which to a degree has diminished, I do agree, and I accept that as well. That's the challenge put to me right now, to somehow work towards recapturing that level that was there and, if anything, to move higher than that. It's up to me to prove to you that you can once again look forward to having confidence in your chair.

I'll certainly be seeking everybody's input on an ongoing basis, and I look forward, again, to working together to bring forth suggestions and recommendations in the future on how we can best respond to Canada, to the military, to the provinces, and to the needs of the country as a whole.

Mr. Blaikie.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: I move to adjourn, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. MacKenzie.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Oxford, CPC): Just before we adjourn, can I ask, given the volatile situation of the House, about the plans for the American trip?

The Chair: That's a very good question. I think we're still moving forward. Off the top of my head, I can say we've been working back and forth, because there's been some extra money available to us; Mr. Blaikie and I went and did battle on behalf of the committee. The clerk has worked very hard to try to work with the figures.

One specific aspect of the trip has to do with the European side. In order for us to increase the number of participants, there is talk about adjusting the type of travel in terms of train from country to country and in terms of the arrangements from Canada to wherever as to coach or business. I have my views on it; I expressed them—

• (0955)

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: I think I saw that before. My more immediate concern is if the House continues to sit our whip will not allow our members to leave.

The Chair: We will respect the wishes of each party. There might be difficulties in doing so, and if need be, as we discussed before, we have measures in terms of the money coming back and the usage of it. It's still up in the air.

Mr. Blaikie.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Mr. Chairman, I ask this in the interest of the committee members who are actually going. How is it looking? Are we able to line up the people we actually want to meet with?

The Clerk: It's looking very good. They haven't sent me official programs yet, but they know exactly what we want and they are assuring me we will get as much time as we can. Their House is sitting during the period of time we will be there, so they may be called away from meetings for votes—that's all I've been told—as would happen if we received a delegation here. They are sitting during that week, so they will be in Washington and available to us.

The Chair: I'm going to need your help when we return, to go to the Liaison Committee and plug for that very small amount of money—there might be some moneys there—in order to increase the number of member-participants for the European side. It's very minute, and I believe you and I can request it.

Are there any other comments?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: For some time now, the prospect of extended sittings has been looming large. If ever the House session was extended, do you intend to continue holding meetings of the National Defence and Veterans Affairs Committee, or will this be our last meeting, so that we can focus all of our efforts on the program that the government should be putting forward in the next few hours?

[*English*]

The Chair: We don't have anything specific on the agenda.

As you may recall from our last meeting with respect to Agent Orange, I believe it is today they are in Gagetown doing the briefing. We don't know what's going to come of that, but I can tell you I'm at your pleasure, should we be here, for a request on any specific issue that needs to be discussed, whether it be a follow-up from the briefing or whatever. I'm more than prepared to call a meeting, even on short notice.

Obviously, for someone to request a meeting there has to be something of importance, but I'm at your pleasure for calling a meeting at any moment, depending on how the schedule unfolds.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Thank you.

The Chair: Let me apologize again.

Thank you for your cooperation and understanding.

We'll adjourn.

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