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—
Chair

Mr. Leon Benoit

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone. I'd really like to welcome you all back. It's great to be back after a summer of work in the constituency.

I only see one order of business on the agenda today and that is to deal with a motion from Mr. Preston.

In terms of planning, with the agreement of the committee, we should schedule a subcommittee meeting for a regularly allocated time on Wednesday, if that would be acceptable, and just deal with the future business of committee in that way, if we could.

We will have elections again, but until that time. I'm in the chair, so my colleagues—my colleagues being from my own party, I want to make that clear—can't continue their campaign to oust me.

So we will go ahead with the agenda and deal with the notice of motion from Mr. Preston.

Mr. Preston.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

It being the duty of this committee to look at the governance of crown corporations, I put forward this motion, with due notice: That the committee call on the former president of the Royal Canadian Mint, David Dingwall, to appear before this standing committee.

I will leave it at that.

The Chair: Is there any debate?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Yes. I'd like to begin by offering my support for this motion. I think all members of the committee who value accountability will certainly rise to the occasion and invite Mr. Dingwall to explain his activities before this committee. Furthermore, those members of the committee who happen to believe, for whatever reason, that Mr. Dingwall has done nothing wrong will especially support this motion, I suspect, because it will give the former president of the mint an opportunity to defend his behaviour.

I'd just like to commend Mr. Preston for once again continuing his crusade for greater taxpayer accountability, and I invite all members to rise in support of this motion.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Szabo, go ahead.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I don't have an objection to ultimately hearing from Mr. Dingwall, or the board of the Royal Canadian Mint, for that matter. However, for the consideration of the committee, I would like to suggest that prior to bringing Mr. Dingwall to the committee, we seek to obtain as much information as possible, so the members can apprise themselves of some of the facts and the details and so we can ask informed questions, rather than be speculative.

It seems to me there is information available, notwithstanding that there is an investigation already going on. In fact, our experience with the George Radwanski case was that we were able to get copies of each and every expense report. Some information was blacked out in accordance with access to information rules, but I think it would be helpful for the committee—if it was going to do this—to do it properly and to ensure that we have all the possible information that is available to us to do a good job.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Szabo.

Of course, it's the responsibility, I'd say, of each member to get as much information as possible when we're dealing with any issue before the committee.

Madam Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First, I'd like to say a few words. It is truly a pleasure for me to welcome my colleague Christian Simard, MP for Beauport—Limoilou, to our committee. I'm sure he'll enjoy working on this committee.

Thank you for letting me do that.

Regarding Mr. Preston's motion, I spoke with him earlier when I called his office. I'd like to propose a friendly amendment. I agree that the committee should call Mr. Dingwall here to testify so that he can explain his version of the facts to us. Mr. Szabo has made an interesting suggestion.

Mr. Chairman, I took note of your comments that each and every person is responsible for keeping records. Nevertheless, what's interesting, in my opinion, about Mr. Szabo's suggestion, quite apart from the fact that each and everyone of us can do this, is that if we obtain relevant factual records—and the clerk can tell us if her office can do that for us—and that everyone has the same information, we won't be able to argue later on that people have different information, which would only be a waste of our time.

Therefore, I'll take these two suggestions under advisement: that we obtain a information package as quickly as possible...I don't want to delay this — nobody wants that — and I'm confident this isn't merely a stalling tactic on Mr. Szabo's part. Seriously, no one would ascribe motives of this nature to him. Once we have the information, we could then move on the amendment. I agree that we should proceed in this manner.

I'd simply like to suggest adding two or three words to further clarify this motion, that is if you have no objections, Mr. Preston.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Could we have the exact words, please, Madam Thibault?

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: I propose that the motion read as follows:

That the committee calls on the former President of the Royal Canadian Mint, David Dingwall, to appear before the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates [...]

Here, we'd change the date.

[...] to discuss the activities of the office of the President of the Royal Canadian Mint.

I'm proposing this friendly amendment because I wouldn't want us to miss out on an opportunity. I wouldn't want us to focus on these activities or to have the witness say that we're focusing a great deal on expenses. I'd really like to have all bases covered and, having talked to Mr. Preston, I know he worded his motion in such a way that there would be no possible confusion for the witness. I repeat, this is a friendly amendment.

Thank you.

• (1540)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Thibault.

Mr. Preston, it seems to be a friendly amendment. Is that okay with you?

Mr. Joe Preston: It seems to be a friendly amendment. I had thought the activities of the president would include that, so I had left that specific phrase out. But if it's the will of the committee to add that as a friendly amendment, I'll go either way on it.

The Chair: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Martin.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to add my voice in support of Mr. Preston's motion. There is not only justification, but there is great merit, from a public interest point of view and a public policy point of view, to have the President of the Treasury Board here, because there is this overshadowing question in the public's mind now about the status and the role and the terms of conditions of employment of CEOs of crown corporations. It's not only the public's genuine interest in this

particular individual, but their interest in knowing just how these arm's-length organizations are structured and what is the nature of the role of a CEO in this quasi-public, quasi-private entity.

I'm looking forward to the debate, not just to talk about the Chicklets that Mr. Dingwall may or may not have charged to his expense account, but the broader public policy debate about the compensation of directors of crown corporations.

Mr. Chair, there's another issue at play here too. Part of the public's frustration about the lack of accountability and transparency that has been the motif, the thread, that flows through these recent years is not just the absence of the tools and instruments we need, it's our failure to exercise the rights we currently have on behalf of Canadians. One of those is the power of this committee to get to the bottom of this public question mark that exists. It's within our power, but it's also our mandate to dig deeper and to provide that transparency where no transparency exists. It's a fitting role. It's a suitable role. It's our obligation and our responsibility to use what powers we've been given as members of this committee. It's a power that we haven't exercised thoroughly and completely or to the full extent that we have available.

I don't think there's going to be any debate to the contrary, but we should remind ourselves that there's good precedent for this committee, if we needed one, to justify calling Dingwall. There is precedent recently with André Ouellet and certainly Radwanski. One of the really defining moments of this committee was when we got to the bottom of the Radwanski scandal, and it was the tenacity of this committee that served that great public service.

This is a recently formed committee, and we've yet to actually reach out and extend our arms to the full boundaries we have. We're still exploring the boundaries and the responsibilities of this committee. We should test those boundaries until somebody tells us to stop. It's an obligation that we have to go as far as we can in the interests of transparency and accountability, in the interests of serving our role as members of Parliament. To answer these thorny questions that are in the public mind, we should do this.

The closing point I'll make is that we should do it without delay, because these issues have a tendency to go off on tangents when we're still dealing with the core basic question here. I don't want this to evolve into some wild goose chase in other directions. We want to keep it clean and keep it relatively simple, and that means, I would suggest, at the next meeting of this committee. That's reasonable, now that Mr. Dingwall is his own man. He doesn't have a lot of other commitments. I would urge you, Mr. Chairman, not to entertain the kinds of delays we saw.... This committee was jerked around by previous witnesses in similar circumstances, where it wasn't convenient for them to appear before our committee.

When we do invite Mr. Dingwall to appear before this committee, we should make it abundantly clear in the tone of our letter to him that we expect people to come when called to a standing committee of the House of Commons, and we're not going to accept that it's not convenient right now or you're visiting your aunt in Philadelphia. These kinds of excuses are not acceptable.

Thank you.

•(1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

I have four more people on the list: Mr. Lauzon, followed by Mr. Bagnell, Mr. Preston, and Mr. Godbout. Then hopefully we can go to some of the questions.

Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): I share Mr. Martin's thoughts almost to a T. After same-sex marriage and the gas tax—and this news only broke three or four days ago or whatever it was—I have not received more inquiries or more comments on any other thing than this at my constituency office. There has been an outpouring of anger.

We've tried to address this in question period, but you know, in fairness to everyone involved, 35-second questions and 35-second answers don't really give you a lot of time to get to the real crux of the problem. What people have told me...and I think we owe it to the Canadian public. I think we owe it to our constituents, each and every one; it's the whole Canadian public. As Mr. Martin says, we're responsible to the Canadian public. We are the duly recognized committee of Parliament to investigate and come to some conclusions about this.

What people are telling me in my constituency, and I'm sure you've probably gotten this throughout the country, is that there seems to be a pattern. As Mr. Martin said, there are three or four now, and they're asking us, what's going on here? Is this a pattern? What are you going to do about it?

I agree with Mr. Martin, again, that immediately, if not sooner, we should have the person come here when all the answers are fresh in his mind. We should be able to ask direct questions and expect very direct answers. No more fooling around here. We're talking about a considerable amount of money. If you start making allowances and start saying, well, we'll deal with that next month.... I think it should be immediate and I think it should be direct. I would expect direct answers to my direct questions—on behalf of my constituents, at least.

The Chair: I certainly will put this to the committee, but so far I'm hearing everyone say the same thing: let's get to it. Should we just go straight to the question, or is there someone who really does want to make a comment?

Mr. Bagnell and Mr. Godbout, you're on the list. If you would like to speak, go ahead.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I basically agree with a lot of things I've heard.

Pat, when you were mentioning the president, you said the President of Treasury Board. You meant the president of the mint, didn't you?

Mr. Pat Martin: So I did. No, I have no interest in calling the President of Treasury Board.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Okay.

I just want to say that I agree with Mr. Szabo and Madam Thibault about the collection of information in advance. In particular, as you

know, committee members never have time to do that, so the research bureau and the department involved usually provide good information to committees.

Just to help frame the debate, Mr. Preston, perhaps you could outline for me the items you were interested in calling the member for. They're not really in the motion, and it would just help me be prepared.

Mr. Joe Preston: They weren't stated in the motion so that there was a broader aspect to it. The expense piece is the obvious piece that's before the public at the moment, but I would expect, as our crack researchers do a bit more work, that we may find other areas about which we'd like to ask questions of the former president of the mint. I therefore wanted to leave it with some broadness in case questions were found during the research.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bagnell.

Mr. Godbout.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Godbout (Ottawa—Orléans, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have to say that I really appreciated Ms. Thibault's explanation, her amendment and some of the points raised by Mr. Martin.

Without question, we are a watchdog committee. However, we do not conduct inquisitions. I admire the professionalism shown by members during the course of debate on this motion and I hope that spirit will continue to prevail when the witnesses testify, because our job is to get to the bottom of this matter. I agree with Mr. Martin that the mandate of this committee is to review the facts, not to make gratuitous accusations before getting the facts.

Therefore, Mr. Chairman, I support the motion. I hope that we can carry out our mandate and discuss this matter in a professional manner.

•(1550)

[English]

The Chair: Merci, Monsieur Godbout.

Mr. Preston, let's make sure we have the wording of the friendly amendment in there as well. As the mover of the motion, perhaps you could go ahead with your comments, if that'll work, and we'll make sure we're clear on the friendly amendment.

Mr. Joe Preston: Very quickly, I don't need to go over everything that was said. But certainly on what was asked for by Madam Thibault and reiterated by Mr. Martin, we need to get a package of facts and details. I'm sure our crack researchers will be able to do that for us as soon as possible.

Mr. Martin talked about the boundaries of this committee and on continuing to find new areas in which to go. But because of the broadness of the mandate of this committee, I think it's hard for us to ever cover all of it. We have to cover the peaks as they jump up. This is one that has jumped up, so let's cover it while it's there.

It will set the precedent for future members of this committee to know that the element of crown corporation governance is theirs to do. Certainly the mention of the precedent setting by the former President of Canada Post, André Ouellet, in coming to this committee, has set the precedent that we have that type of governance over crown corporations.

While again reading through the review of the framework of crown corporations this morning, when Mr. Alcock put this out last year, he said that Parliament has the authority to hold the executive accountable. Crown corporations are included, and they're accountable to Parliament through this committee. If no one else, I think this committee has the right and the willingness to do so.

Let's see what Mr. Dingwall has to say, by bringing him before us and asking those questions.

The Chair: Okay. If we could get to the question, we'll read the motion with a friendly amendment.

Could you do that, Miriam?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Miriam Burke):

That the committee calls on the former president of the Royal Canadian Mint, David Dingwall, to appear before the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates as early as possible...

Do you want to say that?

Mr. Joe Preston: I would take the words "as early as possible" to be a friendly amendment.

Can the clerk give a friendly amendment?

The Clerk: No.

...to discuss the overall activities of the president of the Royal Canadian Mint and the relevant expenditures.

The Chair: Mr. Martin.

Mr. Pat Martin: Briefly, I didn't hear anybody ask to have that changed from "Wednesday, October 5" to "as soon as possible". Was that the specific amendment from my colleague?

Mr. Paul Szabo: He dropped the date.

Mr. Pat Martin: I understand. My only concern is that if we go beyond Wednesday, there's a week break. We're then two weeks down the road, and some of us want answers to this question very soon.

I feel strongly that we can in fact have this meeting on Wednesday, October 5. I know that the language doesn't preclude having it on Wednesday, October 5, but I would urge that we make every effort to make it on Wednesday, October 5, with whatever information we have.

The Chair: Does the date remain, as was originally in the motion, or was the friendly amendment accepted by the committee?

Mr. Pat Martin: If you've already accepted the amendment, I'm not asking you to reverse the amendment.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Joe Preston: Mr. Chair, if I can clarify, on both the motion and the friendly amendment, the answer here is to do it as quickly as possible. If it can be done by this Wednesday, let's do so. If it cannot, let's accept a good reason for why it can't. But as Mr. Martin said, let's not get strung along for a couple of months, as we did the last time, where someone can't be here because of the cat's furball or something.

The Chair: Let's put "as soon as possible" as a friendly amendment, and we can take it from there.

On the motion as amended, is it unanimous?

(Motion as amended agreed to)

• (1555)

Mr. Paul Szabo: I assume that in regard to notice to anyone to appear before the committee we have had some variability on how it's done. Sometimes it's by a telephone call and sometimes it's through an e-mail.

Under these matters, we should use "belt and suspenders", maybe under the chair's signature, and lay out the nature of the inquiries, as has been described by Mr. Preston and others. It's respectful to witnesses who come before this committee.

The Chair: That's a very good point, Mr. Szabo.

To be fair, we don't really know whether there will be any resistance at all on behalf of Mr. Dingwall to attend. We shouldn't assume that.

We will make a phone call, as in the past. At the same time, we will also send a letter to give as much information as possible to Mr. Dingwall, in this case, so he knows why we want him to come before the committee.

Thank you, Mr. Szabo. That was a good suggestion.

There is one other order of business and that is on the meeting of the steering committee. We could do that in two ways. We could agree to have a steering committee meeting on Thursday or we could schedule it for Wednesday, in the event that Mr. Dingwall can't appear on Wednesday.

How would the committee like to handle this? Should we do it like that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay. We'll do that.

Mr. Paul Szabo: You will advise us as things evolve.

The Chair: Very good, Mr. Szabo. I do appreciate that.

I look forward to seeing all or some of you on Wednesday, then, depending on what happens. Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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