



House of Commons  
CANADA

## Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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PACP • NUMBER 038 • 1st SESSION • 38th PARLIAMENT

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EVIDENCE

**Wednesday, May 18, 2005**

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**Chair**

**Mr. John Williams**

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• (1535)

[English]

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.)):** I call the meeting to order.

I'm going to start by recognizing that we have some guests with us today. We have the Auditor General of China and their delegation with us. I'd like to take the opportunity to welcome you to this public accounts committee meeting, and I hope you're finding your stay here very informative. I'm sure Madam Fraser has had an opportunity to meet and talk with you as well.

Before I move to the orders of the day, I'm going to ask for direction from committee as to how we should proceed today. The committee has a couple of choices in front of it. As we do have one opposition member present and a total of three members, we do have the ability to hear witnesses, so we can proceed with the meeting. Another option would be, because we do not have full quorum yet again for our fourth consecutive meeting, for the committee to disperse. A third option would be to wait for a predetermined period of time to see if a quorum of committee is established. I'd be interested in comments from members of committee on that.

I'm going to start with Mr. Christopherson.

**Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP):** Thank you, Chair.

I know we're not allowed to talk about who's here and who isn't, so I won't violate that law, but I will, hopefully, use the same language as you did and at least acknowledge that we don't have enough members here to form a quorum. We have the same members and the same two caucuses. It leaves us a little unsure, because the leader of one of the those caucuses said publicly the obstruction was over, things would go back to normal until Thursday's vote, and then we'd see what the world looked like.

This is not normal, and I'm getting very upset and very angry and very frustrated. We've been dealing with some significant issues. We went ahead the other day, because of their importance, and dealt with security at airports and marine security. These are things that affect the very life and death of Canadians, and we don't have the opposition members from the Conservative and the Bloc parties here to participate.

That's the last time I'll say that. I know I'm getting close to the line there, Chair.

But it's very frustrating, and although we went ahead the other day and did the meeting with witnesses only, this is just too important. I

have key issues about workers' safety, about the fact that there are no emergency plans for mine workers, and there are a number of other key areas we want to talk about that are important to my constituents and to a lot of other people. They at least deserve to have all of the committee members here.

Chair, I'm going to be very frank. I am not going to let them off the hook. Either they're here to do the business of the people of Canada or not, and if not, then let them go out there and answer to the people of Canada as to why the hell they're not here doing their job. But I am not comfortable doing that work only to find out later they may add a report saying they like or don't like what we've decided or they're going to enter into discussions and haven't had the benefit of what we're going to hear today. And don't tell me they can read the record, because that's never going to happen.

I for one do not believe we should be going forward with witnesses until and unless we have all the members here, all the caucuses here, so the job can be done properly. If you're not prepared to report for work, then stand up somewhere in front of a camera and tell the Canadian people you're not doing their work and then tell them why. But I don't think we should be doing anything here other than the full business. This issue deserves, and the people who are affected are entitled, to have all MPs here who are supposed to be here on the job dealing with this important life-and-death issue.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mark Holland):** Mr. Wrzesnewskyj.

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.):** Last week we saw a serial set of procedural pranks being played in the House. Canadians were upset, and rightly so. Today we have members of the civil service here. They've shown up for work. On Friday the Leader of the Opposition went before the media, spoke to Canadians, and said he would stop obstructing the work of government. Well, I think he must have slipped up. It's quite telling; he admitted that he and his party were obstructing the work of Parliament.

Now they've taken another day off from work. As Mr. Christopherson said, we have important issues to address—transportation security, information technology security...we were even supposed to deal with the issue of foundations. It's just unacceptable that a part of our House of Commons—some of our members—would continually and serially not show up for work.

What's doubly insulting is they made a promise that they would. Their leader did. Then on Monday Ms. Ablonczy went before cameras, and I'm going to quote what she said directly: "...so for the days we have remaining we would like to get as much work done as possible." She was saying this to the cameras while we were waiting on Monday—while we were waiting in committee, twiddling our thumbs because we showed up for work. Our colleagues did not.

It's unfortunate that they're continuing to play these partisan games. It's unfortunate that arguably the most important parliamentary committee has been hijacked for these partisan games. I just wish that Mr. Harper had been truthful when he said he would cease obstructing the work of Parliament, because we have important work to get done and unfortunately we can't get it done.

• (1540)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mark Holland):** I'm going to take the opportunity to remind committee members—some have gotten close, while some have gone a little bit over—about referring specifically to the absences of particular members at meetings. I think you can refer to a lack of quorum or to other matters, but again, I just remind members of committee of that.

Next is Mr. Carr.

**Mr. Gary Carr (Halton, Lib.):** Thank you very much.

I wanted to take the opportunity to apologize to the Auditor Generally personally, on behalf of all the members. I think you know in what high regard you're held by members of this committee, and what has happened is that we've turned this into a political charade. I'm sad to see that happen.

I know you are uncomfortable here today and were uncomfortable the last time, during that period of time. It isn't fair to you to do that, to be part of the political games. You have been honest with the people of this country and have never done that. So I want to apologize to you personally—not only for this, but also for the last time, because you don't deserve this, with all that you've done. This committee should be doing your work and following the great work that you do in a non-partisan way. That's the way it has operated, but now it's turned into nothing but an unmitigated circus. It's a shame, and I apologize that we have let you down for your hard work, because we're an extension and are supposed to follow what you're doing.

I won't allude to who the members are. I think we all know what's happened, but I did want to say to you personally, on behalf of all the members—I know the members of the Liberal caucus and I think I speak with Mr. Christopherson as well—that we apologize to you. You shouldn't have to be put into these silly political games and you don't deserve it.

Having said that, I also would say to our friends, the delegation, that I hope people will be able to explain to you what's happening. It's very confusing, and you may look at this and not understand what has happened. If I could put it in a nutshell, the opposition had a motion last week that they said was going to defeat the government. They referred it to this committee and wanted to bring down the government. The polls have now changed; they've gone down dramatically in the polls. If they come to this committee, they will now lose that vote, because the members who are here present

will defeat it. Anybody who can count will see there are six members from two parties here who would be able to defeat that motion.

They wanted last week to bring the government down. If they want to have a fair vote, come in here and vote. We'll all vote and we'll live with the results, but they aren't going to like the vote because you don't need to be a math scientist to understand that they would lose the vote. Now what they're going to do is simply not show up. They're going to avoid the vote in hopes that someday they call pull this motion and referral out.

That's fine. If you want to do it, if you want to bring down the government, as one of the two parties does and now the other one does, then let's have that vote. If you succeed, then away we go—it goes back to the House. They don't want to have that vote, so they're not showing up for work.

To our delegation here, forgive us; this isn't usually the way it works. This may be one of the parts of our political system that you look at and.... Believe me, even the people here shake their heads; it is an absolute disgrace, and I'm sorry you have to be here. It would have been nice for you to see how it works with the Auditor General.

Having said that, Mr. Chairman, I will turn it over to my colleague, but it's a shame that the whole process does not work. We should be able to make this thing work in a non-partisan way, but unfortunately, time and time again, the politics come into it. It's a disgrace, and I'm embarrassed on behalf of all the members.

Thank you.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mark Holland):** I know members are frustrated and certainly I deeply share that frustration. I'll make some comments in a moment.

Certainly, the apology that Mr. Carr gave to the auditor and to all the witnesses is indeed due. This is four meetings in a row. Clearly, that's unacceptable. It's a matter I take very seriously. I'll come back to that in a minute.

I would ask members, if they would, about the direction they want to give and then I'll turn to Mr. Lastewka, specifically. I'd be interested in your thoughts, members, on how we proceed. I know Mr. Christopherson was of the opinion that he didn't feel it was appropriate to proceed today. I believe I heard the same from Mr. Wrzesnewskyj. I wasn't sure, Mr. Carr, if that was also your feeling.

**Mr. Gary Carr:** Yes.

**The Vice Chair (Mr. Mark Holland):** It is.

I'll go to Mr. Lastewka. I also have Mr. Wrzesnewskyj again. But please speak very briefly so we can bring this matter to a close and either move on or adjourn.

Mr. Lastewka.

**Hon. Walt Lastewka (St. Catharines, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I come from the school where I agree with Mr. Christopherson on his points. I thought this would be over with after we had 26 civil servants here last week. I understood that this was going to stop and that we would be carrying on.

Mr. Chairman, I'm not afraid to say that I'm very disappointed in our full-time chairman, who so often talks about his non-partisanship and so forth, but now he's become the judge, the jury, and the boycotter. I think that is very tragic for the public accounts committee. I believe he owes us all an explanation of his actions.

We've done 10 of 41 chapters that the Auditor General has forwarded to us. It's almost like we should be preventing the Auditor General from coming here and wasting her time reporting to us, because we're not taking action on anything. I come from the school that says we should be taking action on each of the sections, on the priority ones. I've said to the chair before, let's find out the major ones at least in the groupings and let's deal with them.

I would agree with Mr. Christopherson that we should not continue. We should wait until we get an agreement for a full quorum and do things properly, not in this tomfoolery.

• (1545)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mark Holland):** I'm inclined to agree with the members who have spoken today. I think we have tried our best over the course of the last three meetings, this now being the fourth, to continue to conduct our business despite the fact that we did not have quorum.

I think there does come a point when the committee can no longer operate, and it is not fair to witnesses to continually be calling these meetings and having people come in front of us and not being able to conduct business or pass motions. All we are able to do, unfortunately, now is to hear from witnesses and to receive that information. The problem is in dealing with the reports that emanate from those deputations; we cannot pass them. In fact, if we were to deliberate on those reports, we are in a position where we only have less than half of the members of committee present. Therefore, if they ever do return, then we're in a position where we're going to have to revisit those same discussions because they weren't present.

It certainly pains me—

**Hon. Walt Lastewka:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chairman.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mark Holland):** On a point of order, Mr. Lastewka.

**Hon. Walt Lastewka:** I'm also understanding that we cannot deal with the amendments and any other referral motions to the committee. We cannot—

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mark Holland):** I'm sorry. Repeat the question, Mr. Lastewka.

**Hon. Walt Lastewka:** I take it that because we don't have quorum, we cannot deal with the motions that have been brought forward and referred to the committee?

**The Vice Chair (Mr. Mark Holland):** That is correct.

**Hon. Walt Lastewka:** Even if we overrule the chair?

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mark Holland):** This is correct. Unless we have a quorum present, we are unable to conduct any business.

On that basis, as much as it pains me to do so, and as much as I'm going to apologize to our witnesses, I'm going to disperse in just a moment, after I hear from Mr. Murphy, for a lack of quorum. I'm going to recommend that the committee cease calling meetings until

such time as we have an agreement to have a quorum present and have all the members present for the meetings so that we can properly conduct business.

In regard to the witnesses we have heard from, both on national security and on passports, those reports are in the works. I was particularly interested in the national security report. I am understanding that it can be ready by the time we return from the break week. I'm anxious to deal with that upon our return. I think we had a good session there, and I'd like to be able to act upon it. But obviously, until we have quorum, I don't think we can proceed further. As much as it pains me to do so, I think that's the direction I'm going to head in.

Mr. Murphy, I'm going to turn to you for the last comment.

**Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.):** Mr. Chairman, am I to understand there's a steering committee meeting tomorrow?

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mark Holland):** There's a meeting of steering committee tomorrow, but again, I have every reason to believe, on the basis of this meeting and the previous three, that there will not be quorum present at that steering committee.

**Hon. Shawn Murphy:** They don't show up at the steering committee either?

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mark Holland):** We haven't had a steering committee meeting. The steering committee meetings have been on hold for some period of time. I suspect that we'll have the same problem at the steering committee that is scheduled for tomorrow as we have here today.

**Hon. Shawn Murphy:** The only comment I was going to make, Mr. Chairman, is should the steering committee meet, what I would like to see is this issue being aired by the steering committee, and perhaps I'll ask you to get back to the members present as to just where this committee is going. I do agree with some of the comments made already around the table.

Really, it's getting to a point where if there is no.... We're going on a week's break. This is the last meeting before the break. But if there's no return to normalcy, I would recommend perhaps we consider disbanding the committee, because there's really no point in continuing in that, and perhaps go right to the Speaker's office to seek direction.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mark Holland):** Certainly, on behalf of the committee, I will write a letter as vice-chair to all members, asking them to give their intent with respect to future meetings immediately and stating that if there isn't cooperation to establish quorum at these meetings, then certainly it would be my opinion, as your vice-chair, on the advice that I've received here today, to recommend that we suspend all such meetings until quorum is agreed. So that's an undertaking I'm making now on the basis of the discussion we've had here.

There being no further discussion on this item, I again will turn and apologize to the witnesses for lacking quorum today. I thank them for their continued patience as we move through these trying times.

I will call the meeting dispersed for lack of quorum.





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