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—
Chair

Ms. Bonnie Brown

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Subcommittee on Committee Budgets of the Liaison Committee

Thursday, December 2, 2004

• (1310)

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Bosc (Procedural Clerk): We will now proceed with the election of the Chair of the Subcommittee on Committee Budgets of the Liaison Committee.

[English]

We'll now proceed to the election of a chair for the Subcommittee on Committee Budgets of the Liaison Committee.

Mr. Telegdi.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi (Kitchener—Waterloo, Lib.): I nominate Ms. Brown.

Mr. Marc Bosc: Ms. Brown has been nominated. Are there any other nominations?

Mr. Gurmant Grewal (Newton—North Delta, CPC): I nominate John Williams.

Mr. Marc Bosc: Mr. Williams is nominated. Are there any other nominations?

We will now proceed to a secret ballot election.

Ms. Bonnie Brown (Oakville, Lib.): Who else is on this committee and isn't here?

Mr. Marc Bosc: Ms. Catterall and Mr. Pat O'Brien.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Mr. Clerk, Marlene Catterall just came in.

Mr. Marc Bosc: I declare Ms. Bonnie Brown elected as chair of the subcommittee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Marc Bosc: I will now proceed to the election of the vice-chair. Are there any nominations?

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: I nominate Mr. John Williams.

Mr. Marc Bosc: Mr. John Williams has been nominated.

If there are no other nominations, I declare Mr. Williams elected vice-chair.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

• (1315)

Mr. Marc Bosc: I now invite Ms. Brown to take the chair.

The Chair (Ms. Bonnie Brown (Oakville, Lib.)): I didn't bring my papers today because I didn't have a chance to go back.

Ms. Marlene Catterall (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): I have a question, Madam Chair. Is there a quorum for these meetings?

The Chair: It says here that a quorum is seven members. That's a mistake. On your agenda, it should say that four members is a quorum. I think there are seven members in total, are there not? Four is the quorum.

We've taken care of items 1 and 2. On item 3, do we have a financial report, Mr. Clerk?

Mr. Marc Bosc: Yes, we do. If members would turn to the third page in their packets, they will see that the Liaison Committee has a balance of unallocated funds approximating \$1.3 million. Today's new requests total approximately \$519,000. That's it in a nutshell.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk.

Now we'll look at budget requests, which are summarized in the front of the packet, but you will see more details further down.

Let's look at B-25. Mr. Patry is here, and he will tell us what it is he's going to do.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. In response to that question, let me simply say that this is the operating budget of the Subcommittee on International Trade, Trade Disputes and Investment. This subcommittee is currently doing a study on border security. It has already heard from witnesses on the question of foreign markets, including textile markets. Next week, it is slated to hear from the Minister of International Trade, Mr. Peterson. It will also hear testimony from experts on softwood lumber.

Budget funds are being requested in order to bring witnesses to Ottawa to hear their testimony. The subcommittee has already begun its study, but has yet to request any funding from the committee, since all of the witnesses who have testified to date are from the National Capital region. It is now requesting \$9,4000 in order to bring seven witnesses to Ottawa.

[English]

The Chair: You're moving that, are you?

Mr. Bernard Patry: Yes, I'm moving it as the chair of the main committee.

The Chair: Are there any questions or comments?

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: We'll move to B-26. Ms. Karetak-Lindell is here to support this budget.

Oh no, she's not; I'm sorry.

Mr. Harrison.

Mr. Jeremy Harrison (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Actually, I'm here for Nancy. I'm the vice-chair of the committee. Nancy is attending to her son, who apparently received a concussion playing hockey last night. It was very unfortunate.

The budget I'll be presenting here is for review of Bill C-20, An Act to provide for real property taxation powers of first nations, to create a First Nations Tax Commission, First Nations Financial Management Board, First Nations Finance Authority and First Nations Statistical Institute and to make consequential amendments to other Acts.

We are requesting a budget of \$14,100 to bring in a total of five witnesses: three from British Columbia, one from Alberta, and one from Ontario.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Are there any questions?

Mr. Williams.

Mr. John Williams (Edmonton—St. Albert, CPC): I noticed in the previous one we approved that the witnesses' expenses were \$1,200 per witness, and I thought that was our standard price. Now I'm seeing here there are three from Alberta at \$3,100, one from Ontario at \$3,100, and—

The Chair: Ontario is \$1,200. It's three from British Columbia at \$3,100, one from Alberta at \$3,100, and one from Ontario at \$1,200.

Mr. John Williams: I thought we had a standard fee of \$1,200 per person.

Mr. Marc Bosc: Unless we have specific information as to where the witnesses will be coming from, in which case we try to be more precise with the estimate.

Mr. John Williams: Okay. Where are they coming from in British Columbia and Alberta?

Mr. Marc Bosc: From those provinces.

Mr. Jeremy Harrison: Perhaps the clerk could address that.

Mr. John Williams: Are they coming business class or economy class?

It's for economy class? Do they need \$3,100 for an economy class ticket?

Mr. Jeremy Harrison: Apparently the witnesses are coming from fairly remote areas—British Columbia Indian reserves—and it costs more than just coming from Vancouver or Victoria.

• (1320)

Mr. John Williams: Okay.

Well, perhaps we may want to make some editorial change there with the chair and the clerk later on, because I don't think we should be approving \$3,100 per witness. I thought we had a fairly standard rule in the last Parliament that we more or less set it at \$1,200 per person.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: [Inaudible—Editor]...about \$5,100.

Mr. John Williams: No, we said \$1,200 per witness was basically what we're doing.

Am I right in saying that, Mr. Clerk?

Voices: No.

Mr. John Williams: Am I wrong?

The Chair: If we didn't know, and if it was someone from Ontario and Quebec, we suggested that was the base. But if it was someone from the maritime provinces or the west, we were asking people to get more precise numbers.

The other thing is, those numbers are not just for an airline ticket. If someone's coming here from the interior of B.C., we would be putting them up overnight, so there's a hotel bill there, too.

Mr. John Williams: I appreciate that, but it seems to me it's fairly generous in the amount. We had a long discussion about this in the springtime and we came up with a \$1,200 number.

The Chair: That was for Ontario and Quebec.

Mr. John Williams: Is that what it was?

The Chair: Yes, and maybe even for New Brunswick; I'm not sure. But certainly for Newfoundland and the far west, we... There's an interim number that's for Manitoba, I believe.

Mr. John Williams: As long as they're travelling economy like everybody else, that's fine.

The Chair: Mr. Telegdi, would you move this?

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: I'll move it.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: The next is B-27, the finance committee.

Is Mr. Pacetti here?

A voice: He's not here.

The Chair: Is there anybody to present his budget?

Would one of the members present like to move the budget for Mr. Pacetti? The clerk is here to answer questions.

Dr. Patry moves the budget of the finance committee. Are there any questions or comments?

Mr. John Williams: On this one, there is an issue about the witnesses, Madam Chair. In Quebec it's \$1,300 a person. Remember we said \$1,200 was the number we were using, and this is next door—Quebec. Why is it \$1,300, then?

You have \$3,100 for Alberta. These people are likely coming from small business and major cooperatives. Are they coming from Edmonton and Calgary, in central Alberta?

Mr. Richard Dupuis (Clerk of the Committee, Standing Committee on Finance): Yes.

Mr. John Williams: Why do they need \$3,100? Saskatchewan is the same, and it's \$2,000 in Halifax. We're back into these arbitrary numbers that we spent weeks wrestling with in the springtime.

The Chair: Mr. Dupuis.

Mr. Richard Dupuis: We were provided with the template based on the average cost for any witnesses coming from wherever—Calgary, Vancouver, and so on. That is why we average those numbers, and Mr. Williams, in the case of Quebec, we were advised to budget for \$1,300.

Mr. John Williams: Who advised you?

The reason I want to get into this, Madam Chair, is this. I'll give you a specific example that happened with my staff. My staff were coming down here for a conference we had for the orientation seminar back in September. They wanted to travel on a \$500 ticket from Alberta.

You can't travel down here on a \$500 ticket; it has to be a \$2,000 ticket from Alberta. Why? It's because the House of Commons will not issue the ticket until two or three days before the travel date, which means you can't get the ticket two weeks in advance, which means you can't take advantage of a \$500 ticket. I therefore had to buy the two \$500 tickets and get the reimbursement to save the government \$1,500, because of some asinine policy in the travel section somewhere in this town that says because MPs change their minds so often, we only issue the tickets two days in advance, and damn the cost.

We can't have that.

The Chair: Dr. Patry.

Mr. Bernard Patry: I noticed what Mr. Williams just mentioned regarding Quebec, at eight times \$1,300. I think we should stick to \$1,200. I will make an amendment to reduce it by \$800 for the eight people. I think we can live with \$1,200, as every other committee does for Quebec, and instead of requesting \$25,800, we'll request \$25,000.

• (1325)

Mr. John Williams: I also want the clerk, Madam Chair, to talk to the travel office to find out if they insist on that asinine policy, and if they do, let's bring it back here and we'll change it.

The Chair: Dr. Patry, as the mover of this motion, has suggested the total number could be \$25,000 as opposed to \$25,800. Are there any other comments?

Madam Catterall.

Ms. Marlene Catterall: I appreciate the work the previous committee did around costs and so on, but how long ago did the previous committee set \$1,200 as reasonable for travelling? Maybe it has gone up by \$100 since then. I know there are extra air carrier charges, for instance, since a year ago.

Mr. John Williams: We did it in the springtime, and we thought we were reasonably generous.

The Chair: The clerk would like to comment on this question.

Mr. Marc Bosc: The only thing I would add to what has been said is that we're constantly attempting in committees directorate to come up with as reliable estimates as we possibly can for the Liaison Committee. We discovered, upon looking at our past estimates.... We did a survey of the past and found that in some cases \$1,200 was underestimating the actual cost, and that wasn't serving the Liaison Committee well.

It may well be that our logistics officers are spending more time looking at the provenance of the witnesses. And frankly, it's quite possible for members' offices and staff to plan perhaps two, three, or four weeks in advance, but as you will know, committees are sometimes at the mercy of what's going on in the House or elsewhere and may not have that flexibility.

These are estimates. If it's possible to go for less, then obviously we make every attempt to go for less.

Mr. John Williams: I do want you to talk to the travel office, because I gave you the \$500 versus \$2,000 scenario, and that was buying the ticket one week in advance. In the worst case scenario, if you have to change your \$500 ticket, the worst they can do is charge you the full fare by doing it the day before. So you can book the ticket a week in advance, and if perchance things don't work out, you don't walk away from the \$500; you get that back. But if you have to change a flight, you just pay the full price.

Yet at the House of Commons, here we were booking the fare several weeks in advance and saying there's absolutely no way you can get a \$500 fare, because we're not going to allow you to take advantage of these discounts.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: It is possible to pay \$75 to change a flight.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Williams.

Mr. Williams has had a little rant here. But we have a motion for \$25,000.

Mr. John Williams: Less \$800.

The Chair: Yes, I said \$25,000.

Mr. John Williams: Oh, my apologies. I shouldn't correct the chair.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: On B-28, Standing Committee on Public Accounts, Mr. Williams.

This is the one we all have to watch really carefully.

Mr. John Williams: That's right. This is from the public accounts committee, Madam Chair, and of course they are the ones who are most prudent and frugal with the cash.

There's an invitation by the Australasian Council of Public Accounts Committees, which meets every two years. This time they're meeting in Brisbane, Australia; last time, it was in Melbourne. They have invited us to go down there, and the committee discussed it and decided they would recommend that one person from each party go there. We said we're not going to go all that way just to go to the conference; therefore, we decided that if this is approved, it would also include a visit to Canberra to find out what they're up to in accrual accounting and other methodologies of accountability.

According to the clerk, she says we can't do it for less than \$109,700, and that of course includes hiring translation when we're down there for about \$12,500.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Catterall.

Ms. Marlene Catterall: I wonder, Mr. Williams—and I'm sure there's a logical explanation—why in Canberra we need five days of interpreters at \$2,500 a day. Is that Canadian dollars or Australian dollars?

Mr. John Williams: I'll bring the clerk forward here, Madam Chair.

Ms. Elizabeth Kingston (Clerk of the Committee, Standing Committee on Public Accounts): Thank you, Ms. Catterall.

No, in fact, in Canberra we have two days of interpretation, and in Brisbane three days of interpretation. The conference is three days, and as Mr. Williams explained, due to our study of governance and accountability, the committee decided we would take advantage of the time in Australia and further our study in Canberra. So it's a five-day total within Australia.

• (1330)

Ms. Marlene Catterall: That wasn't the question. The question is why do you need interpreters?

Ms. Elizabeth Kingston: Why do we need interpreters at all? We have one member from each party, and one of them is French-speaking and has requested that interpretation be provided at all times.

Ms. Marlene Catterall: At \$2,500 a day?

Ms. Elizabeth Kingston: That is the cost that is quoted for us per day. That is the estimated cost, but I have sent a message as well to the Canadian High Commission in Canberra requesting a specific amount. Due to the fact that I have not received an answer back, this is the default amount that we have been provided within the committees directorate.

Ms. Marlene Catterall: May I ask if the committee is taking advantage of the fact that six people are travelling? Are you paying full business fares, or are you paying economy fare and counting on an upgrade to business class?

Mr. John Williams: You did the work, so you answer the question. I'll support what you say.

She has the information.

Ms. Elizabeth Kingston: Ms. Catterall, again, there is a policy within the House of Commons that if one is travelling seven hours, I believe, or under—

Ms. Marlene Catterall: I understand the policy. I also understand that most of the international organizations I've travelled with book economy class and arrange with the carrier for an upgrade to business class, and therefore only pay economy class.

Ms. Elizabeth Kingston: I appreciate that very much.

This is again according to the guidelines and policies of the House of Commons that business class was provided as a figure.

Ms. Marlene Catterall: I understand that.

Mr. John Williams: I think what we'll do is this. If this is approved, it will be done in the way that you suggest. For those who don't have upgrade certificates or elite status with Air Canada for flying Air Canada, I'm not sure if that's available.

Ms. Marlene Catterall: John, excuse me, but normally when I have travelled with an international association, it doesn't require upgrade certificates. The airline does it.

Mr. John Williams: Okay. The clerk will ensure that we request it from the airline.

Ms. Marlene Catterall: It seems to me that we should have a standard practice around here. If one group can do it, all can do it, especially when, as the House of Commons, our collective travel is quite substantial.

Will we be provided with the revised budget, Mr. Chair of the public accounts committee?

Mr. John Williams: Of course.

Ms. Marlene Catterall: Thank you.

Mr. John Williams: Perhaps we could have a discussion to make it a policy of the Liaison Committee that we do what Ms. Catterall has suggested. For long-distance travel, if it is business class, it is upgraded economy, rather than putting a business class fare in the budget.

The Chair: I don't know if that can be managed, but we'll certainly investigate the possibility.

I have a question for you, Mr. Williams. It says the 8th biennial conference. How many times have you personally been to this conference?

Mr. John Williams: I've been to two of them.

The Chair: How many times has public accounts, or you personally, gone to Australia in the last 10 years?

Mr. John Williams: I'm sorry. What was that?

The Chair: How many times have you personally gone to Australia in the last 10 years? It seems to me that I've approved a budget almost every year for you.

Mr. John Williams: I've been there twice.

The Chair: Only twice?

Mr. John Williams: Only twice.

The Chair: That was for this. What about for anything else?

Mr. John Williams: I've never been for anything else, personal, private, or any other reason.

The Chair: Okay. I was sure that you went every second year. I can't understand—

Mr. John Williams: I was there in 1999 and in 2003.

The Chair: Okay. I was mistaken. I had a more vivid memory of this, an inaccurate one.

Mr. John Williams: By the way, if this is approved, the Auditor General will likely come with us as well. The Auditor General went in 1999 at their expense and from their budget.

The Chair: Any further questions or comments?

Mr. Grewal.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: Madam Chair, I would also like to know this. Of course, for transportation, it seems that they have chartered a bus in Canberra that will cost \$600. They will use it for two different trips on two different days for \$2,400. Why would that bus not be used instead of six persons individually using taxis? Six persons could go together, rather than individually using taxis.

• (1335)

Mr. John Williams: Yes, I'll take a look at this. I think the bus in Canberra is likely not that appropriate. The hotel in Canberra is not that far. It all depends. The High Commission has always been able to move us around, so I wouldn't think we'd be talking about the bus. Instead, we'd rather use a cab. Two cabs would take everybody, I think.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: Okay.

Mr. John Williams: Therefore, scratch the bus.

The Chair: Do you want to suggest a reduction in the full cost here? We seem to have an awful lot of questions, Mr. Williams.

Mr. John Williams: Yes, questions are good. We take out the bus at \$2,400. On the interpretation, as I said, we don't know. It has been requested by one member. It is a policy, I believe, that we have to provide it. Therefore, it's in there and we don't have a number.

The Chair: Mr. Patry.

Mr. Bernard Patry: I'm not sure that we should cut the bus. This is a small item. How are you going to travel from the airport to the hotel? It could cost \$50 to \$60 when going to an international capital. I have no idea. You're not going to spend the money if you don't need it. That's clearly the process.

If you go to France, or you go to any other place, it costs you a fortune. You might get a bus to take you from one place to the other at \$600 for the trip or for the day. I don't know why we're discussing this. It's part of a budget. That's it.

The Chair: Mr. Telegdi.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: We know that Mr. Williams is always very careful watching the public purse. So we'll let you go with the budget, and then when you come back, show us where you might have been able to make savings to make suggestions to all the people.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: Or let's give him \$109,699.

A voice: Oh, you're knocking a dollar off.

Mr. John Williams: I move it, members.

The Chair: You've moved it, and the clerk reminds me that any money not spent is clawed back. I think Mr. Williams has the mood of the committee, that this looks a little bit rich to them, so perhaps there could be notes taken all through this of where you've saved money and how. We don't want to spoil anybody's trip; we just want care.

Mr. John Williams: But if we can knock \$10,000 or \$20,000 off the airfare.... We may save on the translation, but we will have translation, a bus, and so on.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: We're now on B-29, citizenship. Mr. Telegdi is here to move his budget.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: I move the budget, Madam Chair.

This isn't quite as exotic as the one we talked about before. It's more like going to Siberia than going to Australia. We did have an opportunity to make a good case for Australia, but we chose not to do so since we have business to do in the winter land of Canada. We're going to go and enjoy it.

What we're doing is we're travelling. We just tabled a report to the Minister of Citizenship on the new Citizenship Act the other day. We're expecting legislation back early in February, and the committee is going to get it referred after the first reading. We're going across the country to update and modernize our Citizenship Act. Many attempts have been made at it in the past, and it's much outdated.

We're also going to be studying the issue of international credentials or foreign credentials; I prefer "international". Also, we're going to be dealing with the issue of reunification of families; that's an area where the committee feels we need action to speed it up because of the hardships it might cause.

The cross-country trip is in three parts. One goes out west as well as to Toronto and Kitchener, and that's 13 days; the other one is east, and that's five days; and then there's Quebec and Montreal, which is three days.

Those are the budgets before you. The first one is the one to Quebec and Montreal. That's B-29.

• (1340)

The Chair: I think we might be able to do these together, people, because they all have the same purpose. The second one is \$115,520 and the third one is \$199,627. This is the one that goes out west with all those stops. B-31 is the expensive one, almost \$200,000, but you can see they're going to be gone—did you say 13 days, Mr. Telegdi?

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: That is correct. The total travel time we're going to be gone is 21 days with all three put together.

The Chair: Are there any questions for Mr. Telegdi?

Mr. John Williams: Is it \$360,000, more or less, in total?

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: Yes, you are correct.

The Chair: Are there any questions?

Mr. John Williams: Is this supported by the whole committee, Mr. Telegdi?

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: Yes, it is.

The Chair: Dr. Patry.

Mr. Bernard Patry: I just want to point something out, Mr. Telegdi, about transportation. I'm just looking at Quebec and Montreal, and I think it's good they're using a charter. They are saving a lot of money by using a charter instead of having a full-size, like \$1,200. It's going to cost \$2,400 for all these people, and I think it's good. I appreciate it and I just wanted to let you know.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: Thank you very much.

The credit belongs to the clerk.

Ms. Marlene Catterall: We get to see more of the country.

The Chair: Mr. Grewal.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: What's wrong if members use their points in travelling for the committee? I have seen in some other committee travel that members have used their points. What is the ruling on that, actually?

The Chair: This has been debated almost annually, and there was huge resistance to asking members to use their points for executing their work. We really don't want to get into that debate again, Mr. Grewal. If you had a vote on a day when all the committee chairs were here, you would probably find at least 20 of them voting against the use of points by members. It's a subject that's been beaten to death.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: It's been brought up.

The Chair: Many times.

Mr. Williams, did you want to have the floor?

Mr. John Williams: I was just going to say that we know Ms. Catterall, being a member from Ottawa, really doesn't have points.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: No, but she has. MPs are given 64 points. We're not using the air miles but the points.

Mr. John Williams: Ms. Brown said that we're not going there.

The Chair: No, we're not going there.

Are there any other questions?

Seeing none, I will ask Mr. Telegdi, are you moving all three budgets?

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: Yes, I am.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: I thank you very much for your attendance.

This meeting is adjourned.

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