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Chair

Mr. Rob Anders

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Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1535)

[English]

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): I move that Rob Anders be chair, please.

The Clerk: It is moved by Mr. Shipley that Rob Anders be elected as chair of the committee.

Are there any further nominations?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Clerk: I declare Rob Anders duly elected chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

The Clerk: I am now prepared to receive nominations for a member of the official opposition as first vice-chair.

Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, Lib.): I'd like to nominate Anthony Rota as Liberal vice-chair.

The Clerk: It is moved by Mr. St. Denis that Anthony Rota be elected vice-chair of the committee.

Are there any further nominations?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Clerk: I declare Anthony Rota vice-chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

[Translation]

The Clerk: I am now ready to take nominations for the position of vice-chair representing a party other than the official opposition.

[English]

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): I nominate Peter Stoffer.

The Clerk: It is has been moved by Mr. Boshcoff that Peter Stoffer be elected vice-chair of the committee.

Are there any further nominations?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Clerk: I declare Mr. Stoffer duly elected vice-chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

The Clerk: Mr. Anders, would you like to take the chair?

The Chair (Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC)): Thank you very much. I'm honoured to have the position.

We have some routine motions that we can either deal with at this meeting or put off to another, and I have copies of other motions that I believe other members will bring up.

We might as well deal with the fairly routine ones first, I would think. Then we have some that will be introduced by some of the members.

Does everybody have copies of this? Has it been circulated?

Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.): I move that all the routine motions be adopted.

The Chair: Mr. Thibault moves the routine motions.

Mr. Thibault, if you agree, there are a couple of changes or side amendments or what not.

• (1540)

Hon. Robert Thibault: Is it in what has been distributed? Then perhaps we should get most of them prior to the next meeting. Then we can get a review of them.

The Chair: That's fine. Does that mean we want to wait, then, on all of these things?

Mrs. Betty Hinton (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): The motion I'm going to make is regarding the main estimates and supplementary estimates. One of the other ones is about routine motions, and I have no problem at all with notifying all members of the committee beforehand.

Hon. Robert Thibault: I think it would be a good idea, but if you want to go motion by motion, I think we should deal with the ones that are necessary for the staff to do their work in preparing meetings and so on.

The Chair: One of the things I'm trying to get right in my mind, then, is whether the motions that have been brought forward by Mrs. Hinton overlap any of these. Is there one in particular?

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I just want to add to the routine motions of the standing committee.

Hon. Robert Thibault: But they're not part of these, I don't think. There's nothing here—

The Chair: In other words, you're not looking to alter any of the standard ones, are you?

Mrs. Betty Hinton: These are all routine motions as well. I thought we might as well do them all in one fell swoop, but I'm at the will of the committee, whatever you decide.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Okay, but the ones I'm suggesting, Betty, are the ones that got first circulated. I think all these do is permit the staff to do their work.

The Chair: What if we proceed with the routine ones, and at the next meeting we proceed with the others?

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Sure, that's excellent. If that's how you'd like to proceed, that's fine.

The Chair: All right. In that case, I think Mr. Thibault's motion to go ahead with the routine motions is in order. Do we need a seconder for that?

Mr. Rota seconds it. Is there any discussion of that at all? No? Is everyone copacetic?

Next, then, I guess we proceed to the idea of the vote. All those in favour of adopting Mr. Thibault's motion, seconded by Mr. Rota, that we go with the routine motions, please signify.

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

The Chair: With regard to the motions that have been circulated by Mrs. Hinton, we'll wait, I guess, until the committee meeting on Thursday, if we have one on Thursday.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: No, we don't have one. I could read it out to you in advance and will give it to you in writing, if you'd like:

(1) That whenever the Main Estimates or the Supplementary Estimates are tabled in the House, the Committee invite the Minister and any relevant Senior Officials of a Department to appear at a meeting of the Committee, which is televised if possible.

(2) That whenever a Chapter of a Report of the Auditor General refers to a subject under the mandate of the Committee, the Committee invite the Office of the Auditor General of Canada and any relevant Senior Officials of a Department to appear at a meeting of the Committee, which is televised if possible.

(3) This is the same routine motion that all Committees have passed concerning speaking times and rotation, with the only change being the positioning of Liberals and Conservatives: That witnesses be given, at the discretion of the chair, ten minutes to make their opening statement, but during the questioning of the witness, the time allocated to each questioner will be as follows: on the first round of questioning, seven minutes to the representative of each party in the following order: Liberals, Bloc Québécois, NDP, and Conservatives; on the following rounds of questioning, five minutes per party, beginning with the Liberals, the Conservatives, the Bloc Québécois, the Conservatives, the Liberals, the Conservatives, and the Liberals, and in the third round the order would be the same as in the second round, with the NDP being able to ask questions at the end of the round; and that when a minister is in attendance in the first round of questioning, ten minutes be allocated to each of the opposition parties and ten minutes to the Conservative Party; and in a second round, five minutes to each party in the following order: Liberal, Conservative, Bloc Québécois, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, and Liberal.

In the third round, the order would be the same as in the second round, with the NDP being able to ask questions at the end of the round.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Again, I'd like to get these in writing and compare them with what the typical ones are. As for the first one, it seems absolutely to make sense.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Yes, it's a housekeeping step.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: I'm generally in favour of the chair having good discretion to balance things out, and if there were clearly

consensus in the room that, say, it wasn't Peter's turn but there was nobody else with a hot question at the moment and the chair felt Peter could jump in.... Is it a formula you can't vary from? I'd like a little proviso at the end that the chair have some discretion to manage that scenario in the best interests of the committee as a whole.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Well, I could answer you partially, if you would allow me to. This is standard procedure, the way things are normally done, but I think that since you're new to the veterans affairs committee, you'll find that in the veterans affairs committee, if past practice is any indication, we are very non-partisan in the issues we are dealing with, and that if no one else has a question, quite often that's exactly what happens. But we didn't put it in a written format last time; it just happened.

● (1545)

The Chair: I'd say briefly to that, Mr. St. Denis, that you're kind in terms of affording the chair some discretion on these matters. I think we probably lay these things out mostly for the consideration of opposition parties in terms of their order of precedence and that type of thing, as opposed to a benefit to the government, as it were. I keep mindful of that.

All right. We have that tabled and then we'll have it for consideration at the next....

Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Mr. Chairman, in terms of the first one, where we would have the invitation to the minister to come, I'm wondering, in terms of this committee getting out of the chute and being able to get the feel, the direction, the agenda of the minister, if it wouldn't be good to have that okayed so that we can get him on the agenda to come to speak earlier rather than later. That's all. I think it's always good to have the minister as soon as we can.

The Chair: I had a discussion with the minister, as a matter of fact just before question period today, on that very subject, and he said he's more than willing to come talk about the estimates. I don't know how much news you're going to have in that per se, but he's certainly willing to come and appear.

Mr. Thibault.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Robert Thibault: I have two comments. First, I think the chairman could ask the minister if he has any suggestions to make to the committee. It is standard procedure for the minister to write to the committee to advise it of the issues that should be examined.

Finally, so as to avoid any misunderstanding or so as not to put anyone in an awkward position, I want to make it clear to the committee right now that I will not agree to allowing any unilingual documents to be tabled. Often, people, particularly members, table unilingual motions and documents, and that puts some persons at a disadvantage. Since Parliament is a bilingual institution, I will oppose this practice at all times.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, I think distribution of documents is actually in there in terms of both official languages. With regard to the consideration of Mrs. Hinton's motions, since it's 48 hours—

Hon. Robert Thibault: No, absolutely. That's the normal course; it's for the committee to track. But you will probably see at this committee—like every one I've been on—every now and then you have something that's urgent, something that's pressing, and somebody asks, will we have unanimous consent that we do it? Most of the time it's a good one that you'd like to do, but as a question of principle, because it puts people in embarrassing situations, some people have to object by principle. So I've taken the principle that I object every time. I just want to warn the committee of that.

The Chair: You're warning us ahead of time. Sure. The only times I've ever seen that to cause an issue sometimes is if you have witnesses who are appearing who weren't aware of that and then they're stalled in terms of their ability to present because they don't have their documents translated. It's a bit of egg on our faces because they don't take well to that.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Again, I want to clarify, but I think it's a good time to have these discussions. If the witness is somebody we call for from the general public, I have a different level of expectation from what I have if the witness is an employee of the Government of Canada. If it's DND or if it's Veterans Affairs, I would certainly expect that they would come with translated documents. If it is a member of the public who we've called and they don't have the access to all the translation facilities that our federal government has, then that's a different question.

[Translation]

The Chair: I understand.

Mr. Perron.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Good day, Mr. Chairman. Congratulations on your election. We'll try to work well with you.

For starters, I agree with my colleague Robert on the bilingualism issue. However, I do believe that the clerk has a responsibility, when inviting witnesses to testify, to inform them that their documents must be prepared in both official languages. I don't see a problem with that. It's important to me that we respect the bilingualism principle as well as the 48-hour notice rule for motions.

[English]

The Chair: All right.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Speaking on behalf of the minister, I will assure you that this government has total respect for both official languages. Having sat on the committee with you last year, Monsieur Perron, you remember some of the problems we ran into with some documentation we wanted to examine that was not in French. So I assure you that will not happen this time. We will be very cognizant of both official languages.

• (1550)

The Chair: I will undertake, then, to invite the minister. He expressed that he had an interest. We'll talk about that with him to see about setting up a time. At that stage, I guess we could either adjourn or, if people have some other issues they would like to get on the plate....

I know that as far as legislation goes, the veterans bill of rights is something that's near and dear to all our hearts. It was endorsed by all the parties.

Mr. St. Denis.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Yes. Congratulations to you, Mr. Chair.

Is this our time slot—Tuesday afternoon and Thursday afternoon?

That's until June, I guess; then there will then be another time slot.

So we can plan our Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Is there a meeting this Thursday?

The Chair: That is an excellent question. I think that is at our discretion, sir.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: I'm just wondering, because I have to reschedule some stuff.

The Chair: Would you like one?

Mrs. Hinton points out that, because she has tabled these motions, she'd at least like to have them dealt with on Thursday, because it sets the tone for business thence forward. Maybe it can be a short meeting, but at least get those out of the way. I doubt we'll be able to get the minister by Thursday. We'll probably leave that for some other week.

Does that sound acceptable?

Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): If we're just rushing in, would it be possible to do it on the following Tuesday, rather than have us show up for three minutes, vote, and then go back? It doesn't really change anything.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: It's at the discretion of the committee. We want to be accommodating, so it's whatever you like.

Mr. Anthony Rota: I'm just thinking it might be good to do it on Tuesday, as opposed to come in for three minutes, vote on something, and then head out.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: That's fine with me.

The Chair: We're at your discretion.

Does somebody want to propose a motion to that effect?

Mr. Brent St. Denis: I'll move that we deal with the routine motions of the committee at our next meeting, which is on Tuesday.

The Chair: All right. We have that motion. Is there anyone willing to discuss it?

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

The Chair: Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Mr. Chairman, I'm a new member. Just to help some of us who are new, I'm wondering if we have some time now to discuss a little bit around the table what is important for this committee—some ideas to go out, so that we aren't coming back next week at this time. It would be a fresh start in doing some things, and we could maybe put on the table a list. That way we'd have some time to think about some priorities. It would also be helpful to the minister, in that he would know some of the things we have as we listen to his agenda. This may be beneficial to all of us.

I'll take your direction on that.

The Chair: Fair enough.

I know I mentioned previously the Bill of Rights. I understand there are a couple of other countries that already have those on the books—Australia and Great Britain, I believe. We may want to look at how they've configured those things in comparison with what we have, because I think that document is open to some revision, drafting, and improvement along the way.

As well, there are issues we could probably discuss with the ombudsman, and the VIP program and its potential extension. Those are some of the ones I can think of. Obviously, having the minister before us to talk about budgetary estimates and to answer any questions there may be about that is another one. I know Mr. Stoffer has some private member's business he's rather keen on with regard to gold diggers and other things; I'm sure he'd like to talk about that.

I suspect what we'll do at the next meeting is consider the motions; then after that we'll be able to report and let everybody know where the minister is with regard to his appearance and move from there. I think it would be a good idea to have the minister before us and maybe set out some of the things he wants to address and bring before us.

• (1555)

Hon. Robert Thibault: What we did at the health committee last year—not that it had 100% success, but it had some success, if we had only had more time, and I hope that committee continues it—was have the staff circulate a bit of a questionnaire, very simple, to all the members asking them to indicate the areas of study members would like to have. Let's say we do that and we come up with 14 or 15 areas of study—sometimes they can be bunched into two or three general areas—then we have a working committee and name the vice-chairs, and they can make a plan for how we deal with it.

You can't achieve as much as you'd like in the committee on that stuff, because the priority is government bills—I don't know that there are any government bills pending, or private members' bills—and then you get to the areas of study that you want. You can't achieve 1,000 of them, but sometimes you could do two or three areas that are priorities in common as much as possible around the committee. That might be a way to get us started, by circulating that type of simple questionnaire.

The Chair: How does the staff feel about extra homework?

They laugh nervously, they smile.

Mrs. Hinton.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I did have an opportunity to meet with the lead critics from all three opposition parties and ask for a list of priorities. It was sort of narrowed down for me by all three opposition parties. I've extended the invitation to tell you there's no question we will go ahead with a bill of rights. I wondered if there was a commitment on behalf of the committee to have input into that, and I received an affirmative. If you'd like to change subjects you're certainly able to, but I received a bit of a consensus suggesting they would like to be a part of a bill of rights.

Hon. Robert Thibault: I think we should proceed at the committee and not by informal consultations.

The Chair: I want to recognize Monsieur Gaudet. I think he wants to make an intervention.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet (Montcalm, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I have a very simple question. I'm curious as to the government's objectives. If we don't know what these objectives are, we run the risk of undertaking studies that do not tie in with these aims and it will be hard for us to do a good job.

I agree with you that the committee should focus on a charter of rights. However, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that responsibilities must also be spelled out. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms does not have much to say about responsibilities. At times, persons are guaranteed full rights, but have no responsibilities. If we focus on a charter, but in the process disregard people's responsibilities, then you won't have my support.

[*English*]

The Chair: Given this, I think the wisest course of action is to have the minister in and hear straight from the horse's mouth what he's willing to address. You don't get any better than that, so I'll work on getting the minister to come before us, and then you can hear his priorities straight from him.

Hon. Robert Thibault: I just want to be clear so that people understand what I meant. When I said that we should invite the minister to discuss what we want to study, I'm not looking at that as orders to the committee; I'm looking at that as a request to the committee. The committee does its own work, and the minister and the department do their own work. If he presents a bill, we have no choice—that becomes priority one for us. We have to deal with the government bills, then we deal with private members' bills, and then we can do our own study.

I have no problem with studying the charter. The government provides the documentation about where you're going, and we start with that documentation. But there might be other areas of study that are of interest to the committee, and I think we shouldn't wait too long to start that, because it's very quick. This spring is almost over. We won't be able to call three witnesses before the spring recess. So we're really working for the fall session right now.

The Chair: Monsieur Thibault, may I ask you for a motion for the committee staff to prepare the questionnaire you're interested in?

Hon. Robert Thibault: Certainly. I'd make it simple, but I'd be contradicting myself, because it doesn't have unanimous consent and I don't have it written in bilingual form.

The Chair: Then we'll wait.

Hon. Robert Thibault: I don't think it's that complicated. All I'm suggesting is that the staff contact each of the members, or that each member send a note to the clerk with their priorities on what they would like to see studied by the committee. That would give the chair and the vice-chairs a chance to work together to see if they have something in common that can be put before the committee.

•(1600)

The Chair: I think this discussion is healthy, though, because even as Monsieur Thibault points out, we may not want to consider motions today since we're still waiting on Mrs. Hinton's. But at least it gives us a chance to sense where everybody is on the issues, and maybe gives us some things for consideration at the next meeting.

Mr. Stoffer, are you good to go?

All right then. I'll call the meeting adjourned until we have our next one on Tuesday.

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