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Tuesday, May 9, 2006

—
Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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• (1535)

[Translation]

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Andrew Chaplin): Ladies and gentlemen, I see a quorum.

[English]

I would like to present myself. I'm Andrew Chaplin. I am the clerk of the Standing Committee on National Defence. Here to assist me today is Chad Mariage, who will act as co-clerk, but normally you'll see him as clerk of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources.

The order of the day is the election of a chair. Pursuant to Standing Order 106(1), I'm prepared to accept motions in nomination for the post of chair.

[Translation]

Mr. Hawn.

[English]

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): I'd like to nominate Rick Casson.

The Clerk: Thank you, Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Hawn has nominated Mr. Casson. Are there any other nominations?

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Is he accepting?

The Clerk: There being no other nominations, it is moved by Mr. Hawn that Rick Casson be elected chair of the committee. The committee has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: Mr. Casson is elected chair of the committee.

Mr. Claude Bachand: And \$10,000 more salary. You'll have to buy dinner for everybody.

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): You'll be dead by then.

[Translation]

The Clerk: I am ready to accept motions for the election of the first vice-chair, who must be a member of the official opposition.

[English]

Following that, I'm prepared to receive nominations to the post of first vice-chair, who must be from the official opposition.

Mr. Khan.

Mr. Wajid Khan (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): I'd like to propose the name of Mr. John Cannis as first vice-chair, please.

The Clerk: Are there any other nominations for the post of the first vice-chair?

Mr. Khan has moved that John Cannis be elected as first vice-chair of the committee. The committee has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: Finally, I'm prepared to receive nominations for the post of second vice-chair.

[Translation]

The second vice-chair must be a member of an opposition party, other than the official opposition. Do I see any motions to that effect?

[English]

Are there nominations for the post of second vice-chair?

Monsieur Bouchard.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): I nominate Mr. Claude Bachand.

[English]

The Clerk: Monsieur Bouchard has proposed Claude Bachand

[Translation]

be elected as the second vice-chair.

[English]

The committee has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I will now ask Mr. Casson to take the chair.

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): Thank you very much, members of the committee. It is indeed an honour.

We have a former chair of the committee now as vice-chair—Mr. Cannis. I know if I stray he'll straighten me out, because he has the experience of the chair.

I think this committee has historically worked very well. It's as non-partisan, I guess, as any committee in the House of Commons. We try very much to work for the betterment of our armed forces and our men and women in uniform. Hopefully that tradition will continue.

In the reality of today's world, the issue of our defence system here in Canada, whether it's for issues at home.... I think we've seen natural disasters in other countries that have caused a great strain on resources. That's an issue that this committee will be thoughtful of. Of course, there's our involvement around the world, whether it's in peacekeeping or in Afghanistan, or whatever our troops are doing, we'll be very cognizant of all these things that are happening and keep that in mind as we go through our deliberations.

There has been a commitment by the previous government and by the present government to increase our regular and reserve forces. There has been a commitment to re-equip our Department of National Defence. As we go through this, I think there will be lots of issues to deal with, and lots of possible avenues for this committee to take when it's doing its deliberations. I look forward to that, and I think we're going to have a very interesting and vigorous session as we work through this next period of time.

Mr. Clerk, what do we do now?

• (1540)

The Clerk: We usually do routine motions.

The Chair: We have a number of things that we need to deal with. First of all, go ahead and read them, and then I'll deal with them.

The Clerk: The first motion is:

That the Committee retain, as needed and at the discretion of the Chair, the services of one or more analysts from the Library of Parliament to assist it in its work.

The Chair: That is moved by John Cannis.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We will move on.

The Clerk: The next motion is:

That the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure be composed of the Chair, the two Vice-Chairs and a member of the other opposition party.

The Chair: It is moved by Mr. Bachand that this committee be struck as presented.

This committee does not meet on a regular basis, but it meets occasionally to deal with agenda items. I guess we'll be having a subcommittee meeting pretty quickly to deal with upcoming events for this committee.

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: Excuse me, do you want to invite Mr. Koerner to move to the table as a researcher?

The Chair: For new members, this is Wolf Koerner, the researcher. I understand he has another engagement, so he may have to slip away before we're done. He might not, seeing how this meeting goes.

Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk: The next motion reads as follows:

That the Chair be authorized to hold meetings to receive evidence and to have that evidence printed when a quorum is not present, provided that at least three members are present, including one member of the opposition.

[*English*]

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): I'm just wondering if this is a typical kind of motion that's passed at all the different committees.

The Chair: Yes, it is. This is a routine thing to set a quorum so we can get started at committee meetings without everybody being present. It's something that can be debated and amended, if needed.

Ms. Dawn Black: Can we bring it forth during the work of the committee?

The Chair: Yes, I believe it can come forward at any time.

Ms. Dawn Black: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Have you all heard the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: Did we get a mover for that?

The Chair: Who moved that? Laurie Hawn.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk: The next routine motion reads as follows:

That the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to distribute to the members of the Committee only documents that are available in both official languages.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Bachand would like to move that one, I'm sure. And this is something that I think pertains to all committees and something that we try to adhere to at all times. It's important that this happen, and we certainly encourage witnesses or anybody appearing before the committee to make sure they're well prepared and that any presentations they have are in both official languages.

Mrs. Gallant, go ahead.

• (1545)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): I'd like to amend that motion by inserting at the end that if there are papers in only one official language that have been given to the clerk, and they are available, that he tell us that they are available so we can pick them up. He's not allowed to distribute them unless they are in both English and French, but sometimes we have documents that are in just one language, and some members of the committee pick them up and others don't, because we don't know they are there.

That's not the wording, but that's the essence of what I'd like added.

The Chair: Where are these documents that we pick up?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Sometimes the clerk is given documents, but they are only in one official language, and it is incumbent on all members, unless otherwise stated in an amendment, that we go to the clerk to see whether there are any documents. Some members know that there are extra documents but that they haven't been translated, so they have access to more information than other members do.

The Chair: Are you saying, then, that those documents are presented or used during the committee meeting, or after?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: What I'm saying is that if the clerk has extra documentation that is only in one official language, he tell the committee he has them. He's not allowed to distribute them, but he must advise all members of the committee that they exist.

The Chair: Okay.

Are there any more questions or comments?

Mr. Cannis, go ahead.

Mr. John Cannis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just to pick up on that and add to it, it did occur once in meetings in years past, and we were very flexible. I think it had to do with veterans, and they did not have the time and the resources, and with the consent of all members, we were able to do it.

If I may, I would like to just pick up on Mrs. Gallant's comment. As much as the information might be there, it would not be wise, in my view, that it be distributed during the committee sitting, but that members pick it up at the end of committee, because it might create an unfair balance, if you will. If, for example, they are in one of our two languages and one might not be able to read French or English or vice versa, it would create an unfairness in terms of the questioning to the panel. So it should read "to be picked up".

I don't disagree with "to be distributed or picked up at the end of the committee sitting", as opposed to "during the committee sitting".

The Chair: We have Mr. Bachand next and then Mr. Khan.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I object to a rule concerning the distribution of documents. The rule that currently applies is being bypassed. It does not look good when a document provided only in English is sitting on a table behind us, and those who want a copy must stand up and go get one, because the document will not be distributed.

I, for one, believe that it is all the same. We have always been flexible, but we have always been adamant about the importance of having documents in both official languages. Some members of our party cannot read English. Sometimes, certain members don't even speak English either. Even though there is simultaneous interpretation, it would be unfair to have documents available only in English when there are people who are unable to read and comment on them.

I also object to the fact that documents will be distributed after meetings. The clerk should make a habit of telling witnesses who appear before us that we have an official languages policy and that their documents must be translated.

I am willing to be flexible. It has happened that elderly veterans have travelled here from far away, and did not produce bilingual documents. I know that they would have been heartbroken had we refused to accept their documents when they had gone to the trouble of preparing them.

Please inform us of the exceptional cases, but we do not want to see the rule broken and documents indirectly distributed either before or after a meeting. Documents must be provided in both

official languages. Barring the exceptions, we will not accept documents drafted in only one of the two official languages. That is how we see this situation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Next on the list to speak is Mr. Khan.

Mr. Wajid Khan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I agree with Mr. Bachand. I think the documents, whether they're picked up or distributed, should be in both languages. Exceptions may be made, but with the agreement of Mr. Bachand of the Bloc Québécois.

I think we should make an effort to have all documents in the official languages at all times. There should be no distribution or pick-up, because it is an unfair advantage to those who can speak their language and a disadvantage to those who don't.

• (1550)

The Chair: Mr. Dosanjh.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh (Vancouver South, Lib.): I want to thank Ms. Gallant for alerting us to the fact that sometimes documents are present with the clerk, in one or the other language, and not translated.

I agree with Mr. Bachand that we should not be amending the rule. The rule should stand. We all know there's a possibility that documents might be with the clerk, and we can always check to see if there are any we don't know about.

To maintain the spirit of the rationale of why this rule is in place, we should not be amending the rule.

The Chair: Are there any wrap-up comments, or any rebuttal? Do you still want to bring forward something to amend this, or do you want to leave it as it is? You indicated you would like to amend this procedure.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: It does not appear as though the spirit is willing, so I'll withdraw it.

The Chair: Very good.

We have the motion before us as presented. Would you read it again for us, Mr. Clerk?

The Clerk: It says:

That the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to distribute to the members of the committee only documents that are available in both official languages.

The Chair: We have heard the motion. Is there any further discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We are moving on.

The Clerk: The next motion reads:

That the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to make the necessary arrangements to provide working meals for the committee and its subcommittees.

The Chair: As I recall, this motion was not abused last time by any means. We had very few sandwiches come in. On occasion it is required because of witnesses' timing or whatever, or because of deadlines that require us to work through the dinner hour. At that time, in order for us to keep our work going, we do have meals come in. Do we have any need to put a dollar figure to it at this time, Mr. Clerk? Is there any discussion?

It is moved by Mr. Hawn.

(Motion agreed to)

[*Translation*]

The Clerk: The next motion reads as follows:

That, if requested, reasonable travel, accommodation and living expenses be reimbursed to witnesses, not exceeding two representatives per organization; and that, in exceptional circumstances, payment of more representatives be made at the discretion of the Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Does somebody want to move that so we can discuss it?

It is moved by Ms. Black.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: This committee is off to a good start.

Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk: The motion reads as follows:

That, unless otherwise ordered, each Committee member be allowed to be accompanied by one staff person at an in camera meeting.

[*English*]

The Chair: It's pretty standard. It is moved by Mr. Khan.

Do you have a question, Mr. Bachand?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: How I understand this motion is that a staff person can be someone other than a staff member of an MP's office. A staff person can be a staff member of my party. If my assistant is not available, then I can bring somebody else to an in-camera meeting. That is how I understand this motion. Does everyone agree?

• (1555)

[*English*]

The Chair: Are not members of Parliament allowed at any committee meeting?

Ms. Dawn Black: It is a staff person.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Of course, here the French version has priority over the English version.

The Chair: What's the difference?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: To my mind, I can be accompanied by the gentleman here, who is from the party, or this person here, who can be my assistant. I cannot be accompanied by two people, only one.

[*English*]

One staff person doesn't mean it's staff from my office. It may be that staff from my party will accompany me.

The Chair: It wouldn't matter. How would I know if the person was a staffer from your office or your neighbour?

Mr. Claude Bachand: Okay.

The Chair: As long as there's one staff member per MP...

Mr. Claude Bachand: Okay. That's fine.

The Chair: Is that everybody's understanding?

Yes.

Go ahead, Mr. Hiebert.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): That's the understanding. I don't have any problem with that.

It's been my experience as well, sitting on other committees, that every now and again there is an in camera meeting where potentially a member of this committee cannot attend. We amended this motion so that a staff person could attend even if the member, the *député*, was absent, and that was agreed to by all parties.

The Chair: Okay. Are you making that amendment?

Mr. Russ Hiebert: I am proposing that amendment.

The Chair: Okay.

You've heard that this motion be amended by allowing the staff member to be present if the MP is not.

Is there any discussion?

Go ahead, Ms. Black.

Ms. Dawn Black: I take it that you're talking about a staff person who is employed by the House of Commons. Mr. Bachand was talking about someone who might be a political party employee and not necessarily someone who is a staff person of the House of Commons.

I think it should be clear that when you're talking about a staff person, you mean someone who is employed in the House of Commons, not someone who might be attached to your political party. I think that needs to be—

Mr. Russ Hiebert: I'm not here to further amend my friend's suggestion that any staff member, however we define "staff member", be allowed to attend. I'll defer to the committee on what that definition is.

The Chair: All right.

Do we need to deal with that, Mr. Dosanjh?

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I think the intention here may have been—and I obviously wasn't around when the rule was crafted—that the in camera meetings usually occur when it's a question of security of issues you are discussing and when you don't want wide circulation of the information that's being shared by the committee, because of the nature of the business we're discussing.

Therefore, I think the issue Dawn Black raises is an important one. House of Commons staff are governed by certain ethics and codes of conduct because they work for the House of Commons. I think we should limit the staff to staff employed by the House of Commons.

That may have been the intent of the motion the way it's worded.

The Chair: Mr. Bachand, was that your intent?

Mr. Claude Bachand: I agree. Yes.

The Chair: Good.

It's an understanding, then, that when we're talking about a staff member, it is staff of the House of Commons.

Go ahead, Russ, and then Cheryl.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Just to clarify, every now and again it's quite possible I might have somebody who is formally employed by the Department of National Defence, who is actually my staff member, attend this committee with me. I just want to clarify that that would be acceptable to this committee, because that person is employed not by the House of Commons but by the department.

Mr. John Cannis: I'm confused, Mr. Chair. Is there any clarification—

The Chair: I am, too.

Just help us with that if you can, Mr. Hiebert.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Yes, this is just to clarify that when we're talking about staff, it's a staff person.... We're not going to look at their employment records to see if they're being paid for by a government department rather than a member's MOB. That's all I am trying to distinguish.

The Chair: Okay.

Cheryl, did you have a comment?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: That pretty well is the essence of my question: that the staffer is coming out of the MOB or a department, and that it's not a clerk or somebody coming out of the House of Commons' budget.

• (1600)

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Cannis.

Mr. John Cannis: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm glad Mr. Hiebert explained it. I think this opens up an entirely different area for us, because that would then permit each and every member, given the issues to be discussed, to designate somebody as a staff member.

If I understood it correctly, it could be staff of another department, who will come in to accompany you as a staff member of your team. In other words, I could say, "Tomorrow, I'm going to bring in a military friend. He's not my staff member; he's not on payroll."

I think we have to define now what a "staff member" is. Is he under an MOB, for example—I think that's one criterion that defines a staff member—or another staff member from a colleague in the House of Commons who is on his or her MOB?

I think, then, the common denominator is the MOB, as Cheryl prompted me to....

The Chair: Ms. Black.

Ms. Dawn Black: I believe the purpose of the committee is to hold the executive accountable. So if you're talking about bringing in staff people who are part of the staff of the executive, of government, then I don't think that is appropriate. When we're talking about staff people, we're talking, I would assume, about the staff people to members of Parliament, not staff people to members of the executive council of government.

The Chair: All right, go ahead.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Perhaps we could clarify the definition by defining a "staff person" as somebody employed by the federal government.

To address Ms. Black's question, my staff person, who works in my office—and the former minister would know this—is actually paid for by a particular government department. So it would seem a little bit strange if that person were not allowed to attend these meetings with me, since that's their formal responsibility.

Perhaps if we define "staff person" as somebody employed by the federal government, that might address Mr. Cannis's concerns.

The Chair: Okay. Mr. Dosanjh.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I might know what you said I might know, but I also know that not all staff who work in your office when you're a member of the executive are paid by the department. You still have parliamentary staff. I think in that sense that staff is available to you.

What I had alluded to was the confidential nature of the business we discuss sometimes, and that's why it's important to have House of Commons staff. Although Ms. Black has an objection, I would have no objection to someone sitting and listening, because if they are under certain oaths of confidentiality or a code of conduct and they are employed by the government at large, I think that would be a common sense approach. If we're discussing something here and it is of a confidential nature and we're not supposed to go out and say something about it, I'm assuming that person wouldn't go and say something about it in a place that he or she shouldn't say anything.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: That's true.

The Chair: Mr. Cannis.

Mr. John Cannis: Mr. Chair, maybe this might help. In the past we've all served in other capacities—minister, parliamentary secretary. The exception that was permitted at that time, if I recall, was ministerial staff. For example, I had a ministerial staff person supporting me who was not paid by my member's operating budget.

Is that what you're referring to?

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Exactly.

Mr. John Cannis: Then, to me, that is acceptable. For a moment, and I apologize, I thought you might have been referring to somebody who works in a different capacity paid by the Government of Canada, the Canadian taxpayer, but not in the capacity of....

I have no problems with that, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: That's exactly what I was referring to.

The Chair: I believe parliamentary secretaries have somebody in their office working with them.

That's not part of it. Okay.

Mr. Bachand.

•(1605)

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I have a problem. Firstly, if my friend Russ carries on with his great comments, and continues to hold the same opinion, I will tell the Conservative Party that the parliamentary secretary should not sit on the Standing Committee of National Defence. We all recall the issue. Since he looks like a nice fellow, I think he can stay. However, the issue is outstanding.

As well, I would remind you that the Department of National Defence, is, if you will, divided into two structures: a military structure and a structure made up of elected officials. I would feel uncomfortable if we were holding an in camera meeting amongst ourselves, and somebody in uniform came in to sit behind Russ. I want to avoid that scenario. I don't know if his proposal would allow this, but I believe that it would be wise to prevent this from happening because our discussions must be kept private. Uniformed officers hold many private meetings that we do not attend. Therefore, I don't see why we should deprive ourselves of the privilege of meeting amongst ourselves.

Therefore, I would prefer that there only be members of Parliament, accompanied by their staff members. We can allow people from the department to attend, but I don't want to see anyone in uniform here, not because I hate them, but because some discussions must be held amongst ourselves.

[English]

The Chair: Okay. Your comment is taken.

Are there any other comments? Have we exhausted the need to define "staff"? Are we all clear on where we are on that?

We'll vote on the amendment first, and if it's passed we'll vote on the amended motion.

Go ahead and read the amendment.

The Clerk: I've drafted it as follows:

That one staff member of an absent member's staff be permitted to attend during in camera proceedings during that member's absence.

The Chair: Is that clear as mud? Is there any further discussion?

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: Now to the amended motion. Do we need to put the two together, and then we'll vote on that?

The Clerk: The full motion, as amended, would be:

That, unless otherwise ordered, each Committee member be allowed to be accompanied by one staff person at an in camera meeting and that one staff person of an absent member's staff be permitted to attend in camera proceedings during that member's absence.

The Chair: Is there discussion?

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: We're moving on to the next one.

[Translation]

The Clerk: The motion reads as follows:

That one copy of the transcript of each in camera meeting be kept in the Committee Clerk's office for consultation by members of the Committee.

[English]

The Chair: Does somebody want to move that?

It's moved by Ms. Black.

Is there discussion?

Mr. Bachand.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I don't understand the phrase "for consultation". Does that mean that if I go to the clerk's office, I can make a photocopy of the document? No.

However, I have been to the clerk's office and was not allowed to make a photocopy of a document. However, I was able to take a few notes, that is allowed. We agree on that.

[English]

The Chair: Is everybody all right with that? Is there any further discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I believe we have one more.

The Clerk: The motion reads:

That 48 hours' notice be required for any substantive motion to be considered by the committee, unless the substantive motion relates directly to the business then under consideration; and that the notice of motion be filed with the clerk of the committee and distributed to members in both official languages.

•(1610)

The Chair: Is there any discussion?

This is moved by Mr. McGuire.

I think this is a standard rule that all committees work under on the notice of motion.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Those are the routine motions that we needed to deal with.

Hon. Joe McGuire (Egmont, Lib.): Mr. Chair, should the time limit for witnesses and questioning be included in this list?

The Chair: Yes, we can deal with that if you wish.

I just want to confer with the clerk.

Can the notice of motion that we received be dealt with at this organizational committee, or does it have to be deferred to the next committee?

The Clerk: If the committee is ready to proceed with it, they can, because more than 48 hours has certainly been given.

Mr. John Cannis: Mr. Chairman, the committee has just been struck. It is my understanding that the committee has just commenced activities now that we have the chair and the vice-chairs of the committee. So does it not make sense that with the proposal of motions, the 48 hours would commence now?

The Chair: I understand that can happen.

Do we want to deal, committee, with the order of questioning and the time limits now? Would you like to do that?

Okay. We have some documents to hand out. This is what the process was in the last go around.

Hon. Joe McGuire: Would that be changed to “Liberal, Bloc, NDP”, instead of “Conservative, Bloc, NDP”?

The Chair: Yes.

Have you all got a copy of what we did last time?

There were two sets of time limits. One was just general witnesses and one was changed somewhat when the ministers were here. So the first one is what's in front of you now.

I'm assuming then that we just change “Conservative” and “Liberal”, and that should do it.

The first round of questions would be what's being proposed here. The Liberals—the official opposition—would start off with seven minutes, the Bloc would get seven, the NDP would get seven, and then it would switch to the government for seven.

On the second round, the Liberal Party would go with five, it would go back to the government for five, to the Bloc for five, to the government for five, to the Liberals for five, and so on, as it states there. Then for the last question it would be the Liberals.

In the third round, it would be as it's laid out there, for five minutes, and then the NDP would be back in the round.

Is there any discussion on how that happens?

Does that surprise you, Ms. Black?

Ms. Dawn Black: I guess every committee has an opportunity to look at these. Perhaps members of this committee would like to consider having the NDP in the second round as well.

The Chair: The reason it was structured this way is that there are the same number of spots as there are members from each party, and it actually gives everybody a crack at it. That's with just one member from the NDP, but we'll open up for debate if we want to.

Mr. Cannis.

Mr. John Cannis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

For the new member on the committee, I know the chair has also signalled or indicated that this committee has worked so well and flexibly over the years that most of us have served on it. I want to assure Ms. Black that I'm confident the new chair will exercise the same flexibility as there was in the past, and he has indicated that as well. This system served us well. The flexibility was there.

I suggest, Mr. Chairman, that we retain this as a blueprint that has worked well for us and leave it to your discretion as committees unfold in the future.

•(1615)

The Chair: That's a fair comment. I can't recall a committee meeting where somebody who had a burning question was left out in the cold. We were always able to accommodate that. And we try to make that concession.

Go ahead, Ms. Black.

Ms. Dawn Black: No, that's fine. I just wanted to raise that issue.

The Chair: Mr. Bachand, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: To my mind, there is a difference. I have in hand the minutes from 2004. I would remind colleagues that we have always tried to avoid partisanship. However, when it comes to committees, British parliamentary tradition allows for adversarial debate. Indeed, we think that the government has several tools at its disposal.

During the last Parliament, the Official Opposition was the first party to ask questions when a witness finished speaking. The floor was then passed to the third or fourth party, and then the government spoke after them. Correct me if I am wrong, but I do not believe that is what is written here. This text would allow for the Conservative Party to ask the first question, would it not?

[*English*]

The Chair: Just to verify, this is the presentation from the last time. Where it says “Conservative”, put in “Liberal”, and where it says “government”, it'll be “Conservative”.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Fine.

The Chair: I fully understand the mix-up there.

Hon. Joe McGuire: Mr. Chair, I was going to ask if, when a minister is attending, there is a minimum amount of time that this committee wants the minister to stay. Many times they have a very important engagement in an hour's time and off they go. You probably remember that.

The Chair: I remember that, yes.

Hon. Joe McGuire: Is that a fair way to handle a minister who is coming in and wants to leave prematurely, against the committee's wishes?

The Chair: I'm not sure how much control we can have over the minister's time, but I think that in the request that is sent to the minister, we could indicate that we want him here for such and such a length of time. I know there have been some ministers who have had to leave early, but it has been my experience on this committee that when they've come, they've stayed until the time was exhausted. I don't know if that'll change. I can't comment on that.

Are you suggesting that when we do invite a minister, we say that we want him for a minimum length of time?

Hon. Joe McGuire: Right. We normally want to meet for two to two and a half hours.

The Chair: It is two hours.

If the minister is the only witness scheduled for that meeting, the assumption is that it will be for two hours.

Mr. John Cannis: Mr. Chair, if I may put my colleague, Mr. McGuire, at ease, the time for the minister to be here before committee is predicated on the time slots available to the members to ask questions. If the Liberal team, for example, has three rounds, it's their prerogative to exhaust the seven minutes, five minutes, five minutes, and so on that we have. If other members choose not to, it results in some flexibility. I know the chair always exercises flexibility for other questions. There's no question, I'm sure, that the minister will be more than receptive to allowing us to go through our time slots.

The Chair: I was going to say, Mr. McGuire, that when the minister is here, the first round is ten minutes each, not seven. That takes up 50 minutes there, and then after that it drops to five. That gives every party an opportunity. It's the same rotation; it would be the Liberal Party, Bloc, NDP, and then the government.

Is everybody all right with that?

Do we have somebody to move that? Mr. Calkins.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I'd like to acknowledge Patrick Bertrand. If you could stand, so we know who are.... He is the committee's assistant, and he works for the clerk in the Wellington Building. He's often the contact person. If you phone the clerk's office, it's Patrick you may be talking to most times. So now you can put a face to a name.

Another notice that just came in is that the Parliamentary State Secretary to the Federal Minister of Defence of Germany will be in Ottawa on June 6. The German embassy is preparing a program for the visit and has been in contact with our clerk to explore the feasibility of a meeting of the Parliamentary State Secretary with the committee. He has a brief biographical note, which we will translate and circulate to the committee in both official languages. We'll keep that in mind as we work through our agenda, and on June 6 there may be an opportunity to meet with this person.

We have run out of the routine things to do, and we now have a notice of motion to deal with. Now that we're fully loaded and ready to roll, we'll do that.

I'll give the presenter of the motion the first opportunity to speak, and then we'll have a speakers' list and go through that.

The motion from the NDP, Ms. Black, states:

That the Committee invite the former Minister of National Defence, Bill Graham, and the current Minister of National Defence, Gordon O'Connor, to appear before the Committee to answer questions regarding Canada's role in Afghanistan.

Ms. Black.

● (1620)

Ms. Dawn Black: Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.

I present this motion to the committee because obviously the entire issue of what's happening in Afghanistan right now with the Canadian Forces is very topical for Canadians. People from every region of the country have serious concerns about this and are asking questions.

When I look back on the former Minister of National Defence's presentation to this committee in November—and I've read the transcript—the role that was presented at that time appears to be

quite different from the role that is being performed there now. It seems to me that it has evolved considerably. I think it would be a good thing if the people on this committee had an opportunity to ask questions about the rationale for the movement down to the southern area of Afghanistan and to hear firsthand from the past Minister of National Defence about exactly how things evolved to this point, particularly concerning the agreement that the Chief of the Defence Staff signed during the election campaign on the transfer of prisoners. I think that needs to be explained more thoroughly to Canadians and the committee.

Obviously, the current Minister of National Defence could answer questions that the members of Parliament around this table have about what's happening now. I think that's a valuable role to play as well.

So I put the motion in and ask for support that we invite both the previous and current Ministers of National Defence to appear before the committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: We think Mr. Dosanjh was first here. Anybody else, please put your hand up.

Mr. Hawn.

Okay, go ahead.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: First of all, it would be my preference to defer this motion. If we want to deal with it, we can deal with it. My view is that the committee is not fully constituted until the chair and the vice-chairs are in place and we're ready to roll, in a manner of speaking. The 48 hours should commence then.

I propose we defer this motion and deal with it as we look at our work plan at the next meeting to figure out what we need to do as a committee.

If that's not where the majority of members are, however, it would be my view that.... If you look at the practice in the House of Commons, when you move ministers from portfolios, they aren't answerable to Parliament for their actions in previous portfolios. I believe that if we begin to veer away from that in our practice before the committees, we would be opening up a Pandora's box and playing partisan games with these issues. Then we would have leaders of all the opposition parties, and any other member of the House, before us on a rotating basis.

I don't think that's a good way to start the work of this committee. I am told by all of you who previously were members of this committee that it functioned in a serious, sober fashion because it deals with a very serious issue: defence. Therefore, my view would be that we not pass this motion, that we defeat it as it's currently worded.

There will be opportunities to have the current Minister of Defence before us, either through estimates or otherwise, and we should talk to him respectfully but probingly. But if we go back to asking questions of ministers in the previous government or in their previous portfolios, we're on a very slippery slope towards a disruptive, partisan approach to our work. I submit that shouldn't be done.

•(1625)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dosanjh.

Mr. Bachand is next, and then Mr. Hawn.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Firstly, I would like to thank my colleague for handing me her motion ahead of time. It took me a while, but I managed to find a section in Marleau-Montpetit that deals with summoning witnesses. I will disregard the paragraph on senators, that is another procedure. Mr. Marleau was a great man who heavily influenced work and procedure in the Chamber. With respect to MPs and senators, he writes:

Committees are not empowered to summon Members of the House of Common or Senators. Should a Member refuse to testify when requested to do so by a committee, the committee can report to the House which will then decide what action, if any, is necessary.

I am afraid that this will lead to delaying tactics and other similar things. By summoning MPs and former ministers and senators who were previously ministers, I believe that we risk creating a dangerous precedent. Indeed, if we call the former Minister of Defence and he declines our invitation, we may have to ask the House of Commons to intervene and do what is necessary. I, for one, would prefer avoiding this scenario.

There is also the problem of Afghanistan. I believe we will have to invite the minister when we consider appropriations for the department. We are not strictly limiting ourselves to the issue of Afghanistan. I understand my colleague's intention, but I would like us adopt a broader perspective. From the outset, I have a few reservations on this proposal. My colleague will have to provide me with additional explanations on this subject. For now, I am not convinced.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hawn.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I agree with my two colleagues.

[*English*]

I also think it should be deferred. The current minister of any department is answerable for what his or her department is doing, and if we start going back we can wind up going back forever. Where does it stop? But I would prefer to see the motion deferred or defeated.

The Chair: Okay.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: I think we should defeat it and then it can come back.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I agree with that.

The Chair: Ms. Black.

•(1630)

Ms. Dawn Black: It's clear that there's not support for the motion.

To the member from the Bloc Québécois, I know we cannot summon a previous minister, or anyone from the House for that matter, but an invitation is different from a summons. It's simply an

invitation to ask someone to come and talk about what happened under their authority during the election campaign, when agreements were signed about which I think a number of people have really serious concerns.

It's interesting that my friend Mr. Dosanjh is opposed to this. I know he wants to bring the current minister in and ask him some questions about his past work. I don't see that it is such a difficult thing to want to discuss. I agree that it is a very serious issue, which is all the more reason why we should hear from the people who've been involved in a leadership capacity. But it's clear that there isn't support, so I'll leave it. Thank you.

The Chair: So you're withdrawing the motion?

Ms. Dawn Black: No. I prefer to have a vote.

The Chair: Okay.

Is there any further discussion?

Mr. John Cannis: I just want to clarify something, if I may. I sat beside my colleague here, and I do not recall hearing—I don't know if anybody else heard—that he wanted to bring in the current minister to discuss anything but estimates. That's the word he used. For the record—because it's now on the record—I would ask in all fairness that that be taken out, the transparency.

The Chair: Ms. Black, do you have any comment?

Ms. Dawn Black: I believe it was a question in the House of Commons.

The Chair: It had nothing to do with the comments of Mr. Dosanjh at this meeting. Okay. We understand that.

The motion is:

That the Committee invite the former Minister of National Defence, Bill Graham, and the current Minister of National Defence, Gordon O'Connor, to appear before the Committee to answer questions regarding Canada's role in Afghanistan.

(Motion negated)

The Chair: Is the steering committee for agenda items the chair, a member of the official opposition and one other, or one from each party?

The Clerk: It's the chairs and the member from the other opposition party.

The Chair: Okay, so all the parties would be represented.

Our next meeting is scheduled for Thursday. Are there any suggestions on how we should move forward from this meeting?

Mr. Cannis.

Mr. John Cannis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know we've had our discussions. This is my first opportunity as a good friend to congratulate you on your election.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. John Cannis: As I said earlier, I'm confident that you're going to continue the tradition we've had.

I have one request that I will ask you to go to bat for us on. That is, this is a lovely room and we enjoy it, but there's a certain tradition and a certain attachment, if I may describe it as such, to having our committee sessions in the so-called "war room" in the East Block. I don't know if we can, but would you take that under consideration such that every effort be made to have that room as the steady location?

It's difficult, as you know, every week or every committee, to go from one building to the other. There is a certain continuity we've created there. If you would move in that direction, I personally would appreciate it, and I'm sure everybody would.

The Chair: I don't know if the clerk wants to comment on that right now, if he can, or whether we are scheduled into the war room for the rest of our meetings. He's indicating with a nod that we are.

I agree that moving committees from room to room can be dangerous, because committee members have become lost in the past and failed to show up. So we'll make sure to try to stick to the routine days and routine locations.

Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Chairman, were you asking for possible subjects to cover for the upcoming meeting?

The Chair: Should we do that now?

If I may, I think we would like to do that at the subcommittee on agenda. Any suggestions you do have we certainly would like to have supplied to, in your case, me, as representing your party, and the other parties will have theirs. We'll bring them together and see what we can come up with, and then we'll bring those back to the main committee for approval, of course. So any issues you have, please let us know and we'll discuss them at that meeting.

The next meeting, this coming Thursday at 3:30 p.m., will be the subcommittee on agenda. So that will be the vice-chairs and Ms. Black. Is that correct? Okay.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: The next meeting is the agenda meeting.

The Chair: Yes.

Since there is nothing else, this meeting is adjourned.

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