



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on National Defence

NDDN • NUMBER 032 • 1st SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, February 1, 2007

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Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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•(1005)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): Order. We are in open session.

We have a notice of motion from Mr. Cannis that reads:

That Mr. Wajid Khan, MP, be invited to appear before the committee to speak on his work as a special adviser to the Prime Minister on South Asia and the Middle East.

Mr. Cannis.

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As we're all aware, a similar motion has been proposed at the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs. This is similar to that one. I'll ask the committee and members to comment and provide their views, because I don't want us to be duplicating work.

I'm only going to suggest that the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs should look at Afghanistan or the issue of South Asia from a different perspective. The committee on national defence looks at it from a different perspective. I would ask for comments from colleagues around the table on how they see it.

I tend to think there would be a distinct and very different presentation. I certainly would not want the member to go into any details that would hinder or jeopardize the confidentiality of his mission. Let me put that on the record. I would only ask, should it be approved, that he engage with us only as much as he can or is permitted to do.

I think it has a different flavour, a different perspective. Asking him to come to our committee to give us an overview, his opinion, and his comments I think will go a long way in helping us to summarize our report and at the same time communicate with our constituents, who are asking us to keep them informed on an ongoing basis, Mr. Chairman, as you know in your riding as well, aside from what they hear and see on television.

The Chair: Mr. Martin.

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I agree with Mr. Cannis's motion. There are many reasons, as we all know, why the defence committee ought to be looking at this. There are India and Pakistan, with the nuclear situation there, and Iran, with their nuclear capabilities and the trafficking of arms in the region. I'm sure there are a lot of things we could learn from an individual who has travelled in those areas.

I would, however, like to put a friendly amendment towards Mr. Cannis's motion, which I think would be supportive and helpful to the committee. The amendment is this, and it continues on at the end:

and that Mr. Khan bring with him his reports done to date to committee in both official languages.

Mr. Khan has apparently done reports on these important issues. I think it would be educational for all of us to see what those reports are.

The Chair: Okay. We have a motion, and we now have an amendment to that motion.

We have a list of speakers. Mr. Coderre, and then Mr. Bachand.

•(1010)

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, I agree entirely with my colleagues. Obviously, without moving an amendment to the amendment, we agree on the fact that we want to deal with matters having to do with defence. We do not want to duplicate the work being done by Foreign Affairs, so there is no point in my proposing anything. In any case, I think that this is related to the type of work we want to do, and our purpose is to get a sense of the general thrust in matters of national defence.

I fully support this motion, and this visit should eliminate any doubt as to the possibility that a report exists. I think this is important so that we can see what has been done. This person is not just an MP, he is a special advisor to the Prime Minister. I did such work myself, for the region of Haiti in particular. He has duties in the area of national defence involving humanitarian aid, in a context similar to that of Afghanistan, that is to say the 3D policy, in order to ensure that we can use our troops as agents of stability and security as we did in Haiti. That is why we had a good mission there. It is clear that if he is studying issues involving South Asia and the Middle East, he will have a perspective on defence. We have to see, on the basis of his work, whether we feel it could be useful to us or not. But I think that for transparency's sake, it is essential and important that we also examine this report.

I think that it should not be too difficult to obtain the committee's support for the motion and the amendment.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Bachand, and then Mr. Blaney.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): At the risk of displeasing Mr. Coderre, you will have trouble with me.

Hon. Denis Coderre: It won't be the first time.

Mr. Claude Bachand: No, it's normal. I think that you have trouble with a lot of people, Mr. Coderre.

Personally, I want to avoid a meet-up with a lynch mob for Mr. Khan, who is a turncoat. That is my first objection.

Secondly, who is Wajid Khan? Is it because he changed camps and is a special advisor to the Prime Minister that we have to make a big fuss? We already have a great deal of work. We have just come to an agreement on the work we have to do. I don't see the point of convening someone and thus increasing our workload.

Moreover, if the Prime Minister decides tomorrow morning that he wants three other special advisors, for himself, for NATO or for something else, that is his business. Whenever the Prime Minister decides to appoint a special advisor, are we going to try to bring this person before the committee to put his feet to the fire and ask him to give us his reports?

Personally, I think that the Standing Committee on National Defence has a heavy workload and we already have a role to play. I don't like having my role changed by some sudden or random event. Because someone has just been appointed, we are expected to put all of our work aside in order to examine this new person or this new situation.

If something very important and very urgent comes up, if the Prime Minister decides to withdraw our troops from Afghanistan, then we can invite the Prime Minister or one of his representatives to ask him what is going on. I don't agree that from one day to the next, because the Prime Minister decides to appoint a special assistant, we put our work aside to convene this person. Not only would I like my colleagues to convince me that we aren't getting ready for a public lynching, but I consider that our workload is already sufficiently demanding at the Standing Committee on National Defence. I don't see the point in convening Mr. Khan at this time.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Blaney.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): I have been told that Mr. Khan is to appear before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, which would appear more relevant to me, as a first step. I think that we could let the committee do its work. As for us, we are the Standing Committee on National Defence and we have a Minister of Defence. I think that we have important files to study. I share my colleague Mr. Bachand's opinion.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Cannis.

Mr. John Cannis: If I may, Mr. Chairman, let me assure my good friend Claude that when I proposed this motion, there was no intent or ill will to publicly hang, as you describe, Mr. Khan. But where I find, maybe for the first time, that I disagree with my colleague, my good friend, is why do we need...? The question then becomes, why don't we bring in one military procurement company or supplier, and leave the rest? The whole idea of committee work is that we bring in

witnesses from all sectors so that the committee can hear all sides and draw some conclusions. He has just been added as part of this overall Afghanistan issue—or Middle East issue—if I may say, and I am asking the committee to consider this motion and support it with the condition that we're seeking knowledge and information, so that we can do as I described earlier.

When we invite a minister, when you're in opposition or we're in opposition, we don't bring the minister in to lynch him in any way. I recall the issue of Agent Orange. Our good friend, the Minister of Veterans Affairs today, Mr. Thompson, indeed came in without the intent of lynching Ms.... I forget her name, but we managed it well. Today, as I said, we're making comparisons. We bring in witnesses, in the plural. Why? It's to hear different views. As I said in my earlier comments, I stress that we're not asking him to go beyond where he can with his presentation, and in no way are we jeopardizing the Prime Minister's initiative and the confidentiality of Mr. Khan's mission.

•(1015)

The Chair: Mr. Coderre, and then Ms. Black.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Mr. Bachand's problem is that he has never been in power—and he never will be—and he does not understand the subtlety and the nuances involved. A special advisor plays an extremely important role, and there is nothing in the motion to suggest that this will prevent us from doing our work on the acquisition policy, or that we are going to change everything.

We want to meet Mr. Khan in the context of his duties. He has an important role to play, because he is familiar with the issues in Pakistan. You yourself, my dear colleague, spoke about Pakistan, and you were quite right: this is an extremely important aspect of the situation and one which contributes to the complexity of the Afghanistan file. I don't think we said that we would be convening him immediately. We have work to do on the purchasing and acquisition policy. We will do our work.

In the meantime, we can decide when we want to invite him. It is important to emphasize that he will not be meeting with a lynch mob. If that were the case, we would lend him an even higher profile, and he would try to increase his credibility with that.

That is not our purpose. Our purpose is to confirm that he did indeed do useful work. We are immersed in our report on Afghanistan, we are dealing with data, and information is power. There is information that is essential for the very analysis that must underlie our work. In any case, we do not have to invite him right away. We have work to do, work is already being done at the foreign affairs committee, and we will have time to assess whether or not it would be useful to invite this gentleman here. Saying that we would like to see him without setting an actual date reflects what my colleague Mr. Blaney was saying: we have work to do. We have been charged with examining the acquisition policy, and if there is anyone here who wants this to go forward, it is indeed your humble servant. I think it is relevant in this context to generate a report that will properly reflect the whole range of points of view.

If this person advises the Prime Minister and has been appointed a special advisor because of his understanding of and expertise on a geopolitical situation, this will help to move our work forward. We have not said when we wanted to invite him; we simply said we wanted to do so. He will be going before the foreign affairs committee. In the meantime, we can work on the acquisition policy. We have already changed our February 27 agenda because we will be having a briefing session with Mr. Alexander and another person on the UN and NATO. This could also be a way of examining the situation. This will give us ample time. That being said, we are not here to save time, because if there is one party that is really interested in the matter of acquisitions, it is our party. Consequently, we want to start to work right away. When we can have additional tools that will help our colleagues to draft the best possible report, we will use them.

[English]

The Chair: We have Ms. Black, Ms. Gallant, and Mr. Bouchard.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): It seems to me that we've really mapped out an incredible workload for ourselves already, and as the previous speaker said, we've adjusted the schedule to include the former ambassador to Afghanistan and the person from NATO. The researcher wants our input on the report on Afghanistan. We have work to do on that.

It seems to me that we do need to prioritize what we're doing, and this witness can and has been included in the foreign affairs committee, where they will have an opportunity to question him on all of the aspects that have been raised here. I think we need to get on with the work that we've laid out for ourselves. We have the pressure of the potential of an election coming. We have a two-week break coming in March. I don't think it's necessary for us to hear from him when the foreign affairs committee will have the opportunity to question him.

• (1020)

The Chair: Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): I'd just like to say that I agree with the fact that we have to look at the three-D diplomacy, and hearing what happens in foreign affairs is looking at diplomacy first. Any defence decisions ever made with respect to Afghanistan would depend upon our foreign policy.

There may also be delicate negotiations under way, and I wouldn't want the curiosity of committee members here to interfere with any of the headway they're making. After all, our overall objective is to help the situation in Afghanistan.

Just out of curiosity, Mr. Coderre, in your capacity as adviser to the Prime Minister, did you ever appear before any committee?

Hon. Denis Coderre: Yes, I appeared at foreign affairs, and I was available for any other committee. So yes, it was in order. I was up front. Any time they asked me, I was available.

The Chair: Mr. Bouchard.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): As has just been said, it seems to be duplication to convene Mr. Khan here, since he will already be appearing before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. We have sufficient

work to keep us busy here at the Standing Committee on National Defence. Personally, I trust the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, which will be hearing his testimony.

For the moment, it does not seem opportune to me that we hear Mr. Khan here at the Standing Committee on National Defence.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Cannis.

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

Two points from the previous speaker... He indicated that our workload is heavy enough. Just a few minutes ago I supported willingly, and I continue to support, adding these two gentlemen from the UN and NATO to the February 27 meeting—I believe was the proposed date—only because I truly believe they would add another dimension and probably bring forth some other suggestions or ideas or their knowledge to this committee, which I know has worked so well over the years, no matter which side of the House we sit on. So I'm very disappointed, and I find that argument totally unacceptable for me.

Second, Mr. Chairman, somebody mentioned the three-D concept. I've said before, and I'll close with this, the foreign affairs committee indeed plays a very vital role on one aspect of our initiatives, and defence plays another important role. I think committee members here are intelligent enough to understand the difference between the two.

On that, I urge you to support this motion.

The Chair: From the mover of the original motion, let's take that as the last submission. We have two processes to go through.

Mr. Martin, I understand from the clerk that we have to add into your amendment that Mr. Khan be “requested” to bring reports with him. We can't command him to do it, we just request him to do it.

Hon. Keith Martin: Why can't we command him to do it?

The Chair: It says here, and I'll read this, from Marleau and Montpetit:

Committees are not empowered to summon Members of the House of Commons or Senators.

So you have to “request” it, not—

An hon. member: Ask nicely—we “request”.

The Chair: Yes. Are you all right with that?

So the amendment would read after “Middle East.”:

That Mr. Khan be requested to bring with him his reports to date in both official languages to committee.

Hon. Keith Martin: His reports “on this issue”. We don't want his householder.

• (1025)

The Chair: Okay, are we all right with that?

(Amendment negated)

An hon. member: Can I have a recorded vote, please?

The Chair: No, it's been asked that a recorded vote happen on the main motion.

Hon. Keith Martin: I don't think that everyone necessarily voted on that. I question, sir, the vote. I don't think it was actually defeated. There were a lot of people who didn't vote. I counted differently, with all due respect.

The Chair: You didn't look behind you.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: We've asked for recorded votes in the past during an in camera committee, and that was—

The Chair: It's not in camera.

An hon. member: We're public.

Hon. Keith Martin: Can we just do that again?

The Chair: Okay, we'll call the motion on the amendment.

(Amendment negated)

The Chair: Now on to the main motion. It's been asked that it be recorded.

(Motion negated: nays 7; yeas 4)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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