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—
Chair

The Honourable Shawn Murphy

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• (1245)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.)): We're going to open the public meeting. I call the meeting to order.

The only item on the agenda, members, is the request from the Treasury Board contained in a letter dated June 9 dealing with the endorsement of this committee for the following waivers. They deal with the merchant navy veterans, pending since 1999-2000; heating fuel rebates, since 2000-2001; claims arising from the Indian school system, since 2001-2002; and RCMP disability benefit payments, in 2005-2006.

The request is self-explanatory. It's set out in the letter. We have handled it differently in other years.

Are there any comments from the committee?

Monsieur Ménard.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, BQ): I'd simply like to have time to read it.

[English]

Mr. John Williams (Edmonton—St. Albert, CPC): Mr. Chair, to conform with what we've done in previous years, when we've granted the waiver but for one year only, it is not to be considered a permanent waiver.

For those who want to know what it's about, the merchant navy veterans were finally recognized, and there are some *ex gratia* payments going to them. The heating fuel rebates program was one introduced by the government prior to the election of 2002. If I recall, last year in the public accounts committee, Mr. Chairman, we paid out approximately \$5 million for 2000, in the fiscal year ending March 31, 2005, I guess. Why we're still handing out heating fuel rebates is beyond me, other than that it's all based on people filing late tax returns and they still qualify.

For the Indian school system and RCMP disability benefits, normally they would have to list everybody by name and amount and so on, and some of that is confidential, private information.

The heating fuel rebate perhaps could be debated, but it's a waiver for one year only, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Are you prepared to make that a motion, Mr. Williams?

Mr. John Williams: I move that we grant the waiver requested by the Treasury Board and that the waiver be for one year only, for the year ending March 31, 2006, I guess.

The Chair: I acknowledge Monsieur Nadeau.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): I would like some clarification. Is it standard procedure to apply for a waiver in the case of public expenditures? What's the reason for this? I'm trying to understand. If we are dealing with public expenditures, why are we putting this temporarily on hold? This is what people want. I don't understand.

[English]

The Chair: Perhaps I'll get Alex to....

Mr. Brian O'Neal (Committee Researcher): Mr. Chair, I believe these amounts will all be recorded in the *Public Accounts of Canada* in an aggregate, but to break them down into individual payments would result in a *Public Accounts of Canada* that would be about a foot thick. Mr. Williams mentioned privacy concerns, but this is one of the reasons why the government is in effect approaching the committee and asking it for permission just to record the aggregate amounts, rather than the details of these payments, in the *Public Accounts of Canada*.

• (1250)

Mr. John Williams: Let me add to that, Mr. Chairman. It is a requirement of the Financial Administration Act that all *ex gratia* payments be recorded in the *Public Accounts of Canada*. *Ex gratia* payments are payments where we'll settle payment in lieu of a lawsuit and that type of thing: to somebody who breaks a leg and is going to sue, we give some money, and they don't sue. It's an *ex gratia* payment. We don't admit liability; it's just a payment. The Financial Administration Act requires that each one be individually recorded.

However, these are payments that the Parliament of Canada has authorized to our merchant navy; there's no liability per se, but we have recognized that we have an obligation to help the merchant navy veterans. We're not going to list them all individually; I don't think it's appropriate, because of the Privacy Act, that we list the names. But we do want to know how much collectively, and we do not want them to think they have a carte blanche to do this forever; hence one year.

The Chair: Is there any other discussion?

Mr. Fitzpatrick.

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick (Prince Albert, CPC): When we agree to do this sort of thing, will cheques be issued and paid under these accounts?

The Chair: Depending on conditions.

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick: Was it an oversight that they weren't dealt with beforehand?

The Chair: It's just the way it's handled, how they handle it.

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick: How much money are we talking about? Do you have any idea?

Mr. John Williams: Last year, Mr. Chairman, \$5.4 million was paid out on the heating-fuel rebate through the public accounts committee.

The Chair: That would be people who filed their income tax late and they would qualify because of the GST.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): It's not a money request, it's a procedure request.

The Chair: Procedure request. To my understanding, if we didn't grant it, it could be interpreted that they'd have the list of people. It would be fairly cumbersome.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): There was a motion on the floor, and we didn't get an opportunity to second it, we had gone into discussions and debate. I'd like to second the motion.

The Chair: Any further discussion?

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

The Chair: Members, I propose that we come back on Tuesday for our next meeting and we'll go right to the report "Canada Revenue Agency—Collection of Tax Debts" and the report "Public Works and Government Services Canada—Acquisition of Office Space". Of course, the first item will be the conclusion of the report

on the management of programs for first nations. That will be given to you people as soon as possible. I hope that won't take a lot of time.

Anything further to come before the meeting before we adjourn?

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick: Maybe I should have followed better, Chair, but I agree with doing this firearm thing in the fall, but there are other buttons in this report we should all be dealing with. There's more than one issue that isn't.... I'm still confused how you could have a legal opinion on something that would say it's neither a debt nor a liability, and there's no obligation on the part of the government, so we don't have to deal with anything, but then weeks later it's reported as a non-recorded liability in the books. I think a lot of things need clarification. The answers are unsatisfactory about what in the world went on here. We fought at two or three already, but I'm not exactly sure we should just abandon our review of this initial draft. We could spot the issues we want more clarification on.

The Chair: I believe we agreed to do that.

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick: There's more than what we just talked about here. That's my point, or we'll be back at it in the fall.

The Chair: Can I have everyone's attention again? There's one item of information I neglected to mention. This afternoon at 3:15 you're all invited to a meeting in Room 300, Confederation Block, to meet about half a dozen visiting Chinese parliamentarians who are involved in the public accounts committee in China.

• (1255)

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick: That's mainland China, right?

The Chair: The People's Republic of China.

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick: Does the opposition party there chair their—

The Chair: That's the first question you should ask them, Mr. Fitzpatrick.

The meeting is adjourned.

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