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—
Chair

Mr. Gary Goodyear

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• (1120)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC)): Colleagues, let's resume the meeting. The meeting is now in public.

Mr. Preston, I'll give you the floor to introduce your motions.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): I'll leave the members to read the motion by themselves. It certainly reflects other conversations we've had in this committee, but I will bring to their attention that there is a translation error that has been caught and corrected at the bottom. The definition of "civic literacy", versus what it says *en français*, is incorrect. So they're fixing it.

The Chair: Okay.

We'll have Mr. Hill and then Mr. Proulx.

Hon. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): This is the first time I've had a chance to look at this to see this motion by my colleague, Mr. Preston.

We did a study. Procedure and House Affairs did do some work looking at alternate electoral systems and that type of thing.

It says, "conduct a study of Canada's democratic and electoral systems"—it is plural there. So I just wonder, as a starting point, if this is agreed to as an initiative of this committee, if we can at least start with what we've done in the past, albeit in a former parliament, and have that information available to all of us so we're not, in effect, starting from square one. We would at least have that information. I know there was some travel involved to other countries, where we studied their systems in consideration of what was possible for future reforms to our system.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hill.

We'll go to Mr. Proulx and then to Monsieur Godin.

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Chair, just on a point of clarification, I appreciate that Mr. Preston has said that the translation from English to French is not exact, so maybe he could describe for us in English what he understands as "civil literacy", and from this we would have translation services give us the French version.

Mr. Joe Preston: Well, an understanding of civics, I guess, is a really good short version of what I'm trying to say. Do voters understand the system we're using? So it's literacy with respect to our political systems. Do they understand their political systems?

The Chair: Perhaps I can help, Mr. Proulx.

We do have a corrected translated version. The translators have the corrected version. I could ask our clerk to read it.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Lucile McGregor): The interpreters helped us in coming up with this. It is,

[Translation]

"connaissance des droits civiques" rather than "la capacité de lire et d'écrire de la population municipale".

Mr. Marcel Proulx: "Connaissance des droits civiques?"

The Clerk: It is about their civic rights.

Ms. Pauline Picard (Drummond, BQ): It does not make any sense.

[English]

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Maybe we should change the English version now.

The Chair: Next we'll go to Mr. Owen, please, and then to Monsieur Godin. Do I see another hand down there?

Hon. Stephen Owen (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I think this is a good motion for us to be pursuing, for a number of reasons. First, as was mentioned by Mr. Hill, there has been previous work done on this by this committee, before the last election, which really responded to the September 2004 Speech from the Throne, which was amended to put the question of electoral reform into it. So things are under way, and we would be picking up the work that had been left out.

I have a couple of other observations. First, in the spring of 2004, the Law Commission of Canada put out a massive report on electoral reform and on different electoral systems in the Commonwealth, in particular, but also in the European and American systems, and it came up with a whole set of recommendations. The Law Commission of Canada Act requires that they do extensive public consultation, which they did, and deep research—social research—which was done. So we have a tremendous body of work to consider.

While it's important that this committee continue with this work, that it not interfere with the consultation and polling process that the government announced two weeks ago, I think it's equally important that we make sure that they're complementary and that Parliament continues to have a role in it. We've begun, and this independent law commission has reported. I just think we should take advantage of all the information that's necessary.

Having gone through the B.C. process and having watched their Citizens' Assembly for a year and a half really deliberate, and seeing both how valuable that was and how confusing it can be with different electoral systems, I think we should draw on all this work that has been done. I would suggest that this is the appropriate committee, rather than a special committee, because it does have overlapping relationships with a lot else that we deal with.

• (1125)

The Chair: Mr. Owen, just for clarification, you mentioned a report in the spring of 2004. I have in front of me the 43rd report. Is that the same thing?

Mr. James Robertson (Committee Researcher): Yes.

The Chair: We have that report right now. Apparently, it was sent out to all members last week, but we'll make sure...

Hon. Stephen Owen: Is it the Law Commission of Canada report?

The Chair: That's the clarification, the same thing?

Mr. James Robertson: No. The Law Commission report is a separate document. It pre-dates the consideration by this committee of the order of reference from the House. I'm not sure offhand if it's available electronically, but we will endeavour to get copies.

Hon. Stephen Owen: It's on the website.

Mr. James Robertson: We'll get the link circulated to all members in both languages.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Owen. That's a great suggestion. We'll do that.

Monsieur Godin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Tank you, Mr. Chair.

We must remember that Ms. Catherine Bell introduced in the House of Commons a motion dealing with the same subject matter, which will be debated very soon. When we dealt with electoral reform, the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs did some considerable work. Ed Broadbent contributed to this debate. I believe that we should perhaps review this and determine what has been done in this area. As Mr. Hill was saying, there were visits abroad and a study was made. We should not reinvent the wheel.

I am not in favor of the motion as it is presently written. I believe that we should rather review the matter and reassess the situation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Redman, and then Madame Picard.

Hon. Karen Redman (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): If I could through you, Mr. Chair, I have a comment, but I'd like some clarification. Stephen may have touched on this in his questioning. There was the statement: "As part of this study the Committee should consider the product of the public consultation process currently underway across Canada." Can I just ask Mr. Preston to elaborate on exactly what that line means? I found that somewhat confusing.

Mr. Joe Preston: Mr. Owen did bring it up. There is a public consultation process going on out there. I would like, if we're looking at the same subjects, to take into account what they're also learning.

Hon. Karen Redman: I would just make an observation, and I recognize that this is a beginning rather than an ending point.

I look back to some of my experience in the environment field specifically. And I don't mean this to be as partisan as it may come out sounding, but there has been a substantial amount of funding cut by the current government from the bureaucracy that was used to do consultation, to do citizenship engagement. I'm wondering if we could look at the impacts and ramifications of that.

If I can use the illustration of species at risk and how it was held out as a gold standard of a process that worked, because it did deal with aboriginal traditional knowledge, and it did bring those people into the process in a very substantive way.... This piece of legislation took 10 years to finally come to fruition, so they had a long time to engage people. But I think we can't underestimate that kind of a more subtle engagement of citizens that isn't necessarily looking specifically at electoral reform but does make citizens feel like their voice is being heard, and in that instance it absolutely did help shape what the final product looked like.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Picard.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Pauline Picard: Ms. Pauline Picard: I sit on the committee that has been charged with studying the electoral and democratic systems of Canada. We have visited all Commonwealth countries to examine the processes they have followed to reform their electoral system. Many hours of work and lengthy discussions have been dedicated to this review and I would not like us to start from scratch. We would need the recommendations that have been made at the end of the study. We could not continue our work because the election was called, but the idea would be to pick up from where we had left, in order not to redo what has already been done.

I do not often have to make disagreeable remarks, but when a translated text talks about "la capacité de lire et d'écrire de la population municipale; la Chambre des communes; et le Sénat", I get the feeling that we, francophones, are considered a bunch of illiterate people. I would like some care to be given to the French translation, so that it really conveys the meaning of motions that are written in English.

As for "the public consultation process currently underway across Canada", I have no idea what it is all about. Who is holding that consultation? I would like some clarifications about this.

[*English*]

The Chair: Would you care to clarify who is leading?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): We can, and perhaps Mr. Reid can join in as well.

I believe the minister made an announcement on January 9 that he would be setting up—for lack of a better word—civic consultations or citizen consultations across Canada. I believe he is having twelve meetings, with one in each of the provinces, one in the territories, and one special youth consultation meeting.

They have gone through the process of engaging or at least asking for tenders for an event management firm, I suppose, to conduct these consultations across Canada. But that wouldn't be a parliamentary group, that would be a citizens' group that would go out and perhaps bring back its findings. I think they asked for the consultations to be completed in the winter of this year—no later than March, I suppose—and the results are to be brought back before Parliament no later than June of this year. That was an announcement that I think was made January 9.

[Translation]

Ms. Pauline Picard: What are the consultations about? What is the purpose of this consultation? Why are they consulting the people? Is this about the electoral process?

[English]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: We can get the exact statement if you wish, Madame Picard, but the objective was to consult with Canadians on the electoral system, hearing directly from Canadians on what they perhaps see as flaws in the electoral system, what changes they may suggest, and that type of thing. But we can get the exact wording of the speech to you if you wish.

The Chair: In fact, Jamie just pointed out that there were tenders that went out for consultative processes. Did the members of this committee get a copy of that tender a couple of weeks ago, give or take? We'll recirculate the tender process to all members.

Mr. Reid, you have it there. Did you want to make any comments before I move—

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): I only have the copy from Jamie, and it's in English only. It appears to just be a web document, so it's available online. After Jamie gets back, anybody can just jot down the web address and look it up in both official languages.

The stated purpose of the consultation process—the “citizen engagement process”, as it's referred to—is to deal with a part of the Speech from the Throne that said:

Building on the work begun in the last Parliament

—that is, of course, a reference to this committee's work—

this Government will seek to involve parliamentarians and citizens in examining the challenges facing Canada's electoral system and democratic institutions.

That's the part of the Speech from the Throne that serves as a justification, and it goes back to the previous Speech from the Throne, from 2004, in which these same themes had been raised.

The 43rd report of this committee specified that a citizen engagement process was to begin. From a technical point of view, “citizen engagement process” means something technically in terms of how one goes about carrying out consultations and who is capable of doing it. That really is the basis on which this went forward, so this is a follow-up on that.

In terms of the other side of the resolution that we made, like many members of this committee, I was on the committee at that time as well. You may recall that we had discussed having two components. One was the citizen consultation process that would report back first. The parliamentary process would then report back at a later date. This all fits into that framework.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reid.

Monsieur Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: *C'est correct.* I'm ready to vote.

The Chair: You're ready to vote. I have one more member who wants to speak to this, so we'll do that first and then we'll call the question.

Madame Redman.

Hon. Karen Redman: Thank you.

I'm troubled by this motion. I don't understand how that process as it has now been explained to me reconciles with the processes before us. The committee that is currently under way has tendered an event management and is going ahead with this, and this is then being reported to the House directly. Is my understanding correct?

Mr. James Robertson: In the last Parliament, the predecessor to this committee recommended a parallel process in its 43rd report. One would be a special committee of the House, and separately there would be a citizens' consultation group. I believe it was anticipated that the citizens' consultation group would do the polling, but it would be undertaken at the expense of the government. The government would put out the tender and award the tender.

In the recommendations, there were provisions for the two groups to meet at certain stages in the process. The citizens' consultation group would come up with its recommendations and feed those into the special committee of members of the House. As you know, the election intervened.

What the government did a few weeks ago was start the process for hiring someone, or a group, to undertake the citizen consultation aspect of the recommendation. At this point in time, that is entirely at the decision and discretion of the government. At this point in time, there is no parliamentary decision to set up a special committee or, as I think Mr. Preston is suggesting, the idea that this committee undertake that part of the recommendation, with an added element of dealing with certain other issues.

Hon. Karen Redman: So this process and the one the government has launched don't necessarily intersect.

Mr. James Robertson: No, but they could. That would be I think the intent of part of Mr. Preston's motion. This citizen consultation process would feed into a Procedure and House Affairs study, but that is for you to decide at this point in time.

I assume the government will make the recommendations or the results of this process available to whichever committee ends up studying this issue. At this point in time, though, no decision has been made about that.

Hon. Karen Redman: What's the timeframe?

Mr. James Robertson: The timeframe in the original report had a closing date of the end of January for the tendering process, and, I'm sorry but I don't recall.... It's to complete the project to draft report stage by May 23, 2007.

So public consultations were to begin by March 9, 2007, with a draft report by May 23, 2007. There is no final date that I see here, very quickly.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I may be wrong, Jamie, but I believe the minister, when he made the announcement, said they were to report back by June of this year, with the first draft in by May 29.

• (1140)

The Chair: Mr. Hill, please.

Hon. Jay Hill: To add to the discussion, Mr. Chair, Jamie has done a good job of recapping where the committee was and of the report we made back to the House. Looking around the room, quite a number of us had the privilege of participating in that study. I would just state for the record here that certainly I and everybody who participated in that were very supportive of that report, and it went back to the House.

I don't think there's anything in Mr. Preston's motion. I think he's amenable to amending it if the committee would like to see more in it or less in it, or whatever. It's merely to launch the parliamentary process that was foreseen to dovetail with the independent citizen process that, while being funded by the government, was not to be directed by the government.

That was a concern that many of us had at the completion of our study that we did in the last Parliament. We didn't want to see the politicians, the parliamentarians, directing and thus unduly influencing what the citizens had to say about a potential future electoral system that they might envision. Rather, we would have our input through a parliamentary process—not just us, obviously, but our colleagues in both Houses—and the citizens would have their input through this consultative process.

The two, as Jamie said, would be parallel tracks. They would intersect at periods so that we would be apprised of the progress made, one or the other. Ultimately, in the end, we would then have a comprehensive a process and study completed as possible.

Until Jamie just read those out, I wasn't aware that the timelines were that tight. That might be problematic, but I guess we'll have to see how this is unfolding. I haven't had an update as to how the tendering process has gone. In particular, I would think that May 9 date is going to be very tight. We're almost into March already.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: May 29, I think.

Mr. James Robertson: May 23. That's for a draft report.

Hon. Jay Hill: Yes, but didn't you say the consultation...

Mr. James Robertson: Yes, I'm sorry. It says, "Bidders MUST demonstrate their ability to launch the public consultations by March 9, 2007".

Hon. Jay Hill: That's, what, three weeks from now? Maybe we're not aware of how far along that tendering process is. Anyway, we had agreed to this process, so I find it strange if we start to question it, because we ourselves, in a previous Parliament, drafted that report and sort of agreed to this two-track process. That's the intent I think

of the motion, to just have the parliamentary half of that, and they're not supposed to be in conflict; they're supposed to be complementary. That was how we ourselves had envisioned it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Colleagues, there are lots of conversations going on.

Madame Robillard, please.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): I would simply like to ask the mover of the motion, Joe Preston, what interest would the committee have in beginning this work before receiving the citizen consultation report.

I know that this report will come in two months, that is, in May or early June, but would it not be preferable for us to receive this report before our committee starts examining the issue?

[*English*]

Mr. Joe Preston: We already have the past report of this committee that created the citizen engagement process, so they're parallel. As Mr. Hill just alluded to, it's not a political event, the citizen engagement process. We might as well be doing our work at the same time as the other so that they'll sometime meet, instead of waiting for the other to be completed. That's the intent.

The Chair: If you have comments, please direct them to the chair.

Madame Picard.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Pauline Picard: I would need some clarifications, Mr. Chairman. Do we already have the report submitted by the citizens who have been consulted?

An hon. member: No.

Ms. Pauline Picard: No.

An hon. member: We will have it at the end of May.

• (1145)

[*English*]

The Chair: No, we don't have that report yet.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Pauline Picard: We will have it in May.

[*English*]

The Chair: Correct.

From the chair's perspective, I'm looking at our schedule and when this type of a study would begin. It might not even begin until May. So maybe we're premature on deciding whether the timing is right or not. I'm wondering if we could just clarify that the motion really is to begin a study at some point. My next question will be, when can we do that, but I think we're just going to get it on the agenda. Depending on what comes along, we may not be able to study this until May.

Are there any other comments?

Mr. Hill.

Hon. Jay Hill: In respect of some of the comments that have been made, what we're seeing here is that there is I think general agreement to proceed, but I think the process would be that we would first meet and consider the report that the previous committee and the previous Parliament already produced on this issue and whether there is further study needed in certain areas where we feel we want to expand upon the testimony we had from witnesses we heard from during that study. In light of further consideration, maybe we would want to draw upon additional expert testimony. Maybe we would state, after having a look at that and having a good fulsome discussion amongst ourselves here, that indeed we were prepared to wait until we got the input from the citizen engagement process, but that we at least have one meeting to consider that report from the last Parliament and then decide on a way forward.

That would be my suggestion. I think that's what I'm hearing from other colleagues, that nobody wants to reinvent the wheel here, or start from scratch, as Madame Picard said. So that would be the obvious starting point, I would think.

The Chair: Monsieur Godin.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: The consultants will write their report and I believe that we should wait for it. Thereafter, the committee will study the report and then we will do what will have to be done. It would be premature to do anything now.

[English]

The Chair: Madame Redman.

Hon. Karen Redman: Thank you.

Along the same lines, this committee has a steering committee. I don't sit on the steering committee and I didn't hear this raised, so I guess it's what I'm grappling with.

I would not say this is ill will. It's more a matter of timing. This identifies the what and the how, but it doesn't do it very clearly.

I would make a friendly suggestion that rather than voting on this so that it's not misinterpreted in any way, if we hold this in abeyance, we can get the researcher to either draw it to our attention or supply some of the past work this committee has done and review it. At a future steering committee meeting, they could talk about the appropriate timing.

At this juncture, because the process is launched and we're almost playing catch-up with it, I would be more than willing to wait to hear about this other process and the product of that before we decide on going ahead with what we're going to do.

Because it hasn't come forward at any of the steering committee meetings, to my knowledge, I was surprised to see it here today. I guess that's why I'm grappling with exactly what it means.

It hadn't been a topic of conversation, so that would be my suggestion for moving forward.

The Chair: Mr. Proulx, you're next on my list.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: I would suggest that we wait and get the researchers to give us the background on it. We can wait until we at least get the preliminary of the draft report in May, and then we can decide what we want to do with it.

The Chair: All right. I'm not sure I have a consensus yet.

But on what I am hearing at this point, it seems we want to wait for the citizens' report in May. We want to find the law reform review report that Mr. Owens brought up earlier. The committee will study it but not necessarily right now.

Is that what I'm hearing?

Okay. That is what I'm hearing. Mr. Preston is shaking his head no.

Mr. Joe Preston: I see no reason to wait. I see having parallel processes so that we all get there at the same time.

Mr. Chair, you already mentioned that this committee has other work to do. This isn't imminent tomorrow, if we start with it. But I have no reason to say, why can't this committee take this on?

• (1150)

The Chair: I'm open to more comments.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Why don't we vote?

The Chair: Mr. Preston, you obviously have some suggestions in front of you. I'm going to ask you to put the motion forward, table it, and we'll be required to vote on it or you can pull the motion back.

It sounds to me like the committee's going to end up studying this regardless of whether the motion goes forward or not.

Mr. Joe Preston: Well, then why don't I do that? I'll table the motion and move it forward.

The Chair: Are you comfortable with that?

I'm not suggesting how you should proceed. I'm only suggesting that the committee is ultimately going to end up studying this. Are you going to withdraw the motion or do you want to vote on it?

Mr. Joe Preston: It's not my intent. I suggest we vote on it.

The Chair: Mr. Preston has tabled the motion and will require a vote.

I'll put the question to the committee right now. All those in favour of the motion?

I'm sorry?

Mr. Scott Reid: I apologize, but on a point of order, are we voting on the motion or are we voting on tabling the motion?

The Chair: Mr. Preston has tabled the motion. We're voting on the motion.

Hon. Jay Hill: He introduced it. Tabling means that you set it aside.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm sorry, Mr. Chairman. I've been off in the land of *Robert's Rules of Order*, where "table" means the opposite of what it does here. Please disregard my previous comment.

The Chair: That's fine.

We're going to vote on the motion before you. Are all members clear on that?

(Motion negatived)

The Chair: Colleagues, is there any other business?

I will remind you that at Thursday's meeting this week we will have Mr. Allison from the liaison committee. We've asked him to appear, and he's coming before this committee.

On Tuesday next week we will try to set up in a televised room for the new Chief Electoral Officer, Mr. Mayrand.

Then on Thursday, February 22, Jean-Pierre Kingsley will be attending our meeting.

Is there any further business?

I would encourage the subcommittee members to stick around because we'll proceed with the forms.

Thank you. This part of the meeting is adjourned.

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