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Tuesday, May 9, 2006

—
Chair

Mr. Lee Richardson

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• (1110)

[Translation]

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Chad Mariage): Honourable members, I see we have a quorum.

[English]

Before we start, let me introduce myself. My name is Chad Mariage. I'll be the clerk of the committee. Beside me here is Eugene Morawski. He'll be following me around the committee for about a month and a half or so to see me through the first few months of my committee work.

At this time, I am ready to receive nominations for chair.

Mr. Tonks.

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Mr. Clerk, congratulations on your post.

I would like to nominate Lee Richardson for the position of chair of the committee.

The Clerk: Mr. Tonks nominates Mr. Richardson. Are there any other nominations?

Seeing none, I declare Mr. Richardson chair.

Congratulations.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Clerk: Before I invite Mr. Richardson to take the chair, would the committee be ready to proceed to the elections of vice-chairs? I'm ready to receive nominations to that effect.

Mr. Richardson.

The Chair (Mr. Lee Richardson (Calgary Centre, CPC): I'd like to nominate Dave McGuinty.

The Clerk: Mr. Richardson nominates Mr. McGuinty. Are there any other nominations? No.

Mr. McGuinty, congratulations on being elected first vice-chair.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

[Translation]

The Clerk: Are there any other motions?

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): I nominate Ms. Bell.

Mr. Chad Mariage: Are there any other motions? If not, I'd like to congratulate you, Ms. Bell, on your election as second vice-chair.

[English]

The Clerk: I would now invite Mr. Richardson to take the chair.

The Chair: Thank you for the distinguished honour, and congratulations to our vice-chairs, Mr. McGuinty and Madame Bell.

Having dispensed with that, are there more routine motions we have to get rid of?

I'm just catching up here with the clerk. Normally we start the committee with routine proceedings to establish the committee and things like expenses, the services of the library, and those sorts of thing. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't proceed with routine motions and get them out of the way, unless anyone has any objection to that. I think we can deal with them today and then perhaps get into a general discussion of where the committee might like to go.

So if I could, I would like then to go to these routine motions.

Hon. Roy Cullen (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Is there a copy?

The Chair: Apparently they were e-mailed to your offices, but the clerk will now also distribute them to members.

If everyone has had a chance to scan these briefly, they're routine motions. I don't think there are any that have normally caused any conflict in setting up the committees. The only one that I think normally warrants any debate at all is the time limits on witnesses. But if we want to proceed through them in the list that's just been distributed, I might ask for a motion regarding the services of analysts from the Library of Parliament.

Would someone move the first motion.

Mr. Bradley Trost (Saskatoon—Humboldt, CPC): I so move.

The Chair: Mr. Trost, seconded by...

We don't need a seconder, so maybe Mr. St. Amand might move the next motion.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand (Brant, Lib.): I'll withdraw my second.

The Chair: All right.

The motion of Mr. Trost 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 in its work.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I would invite our researcher to join us at the table, now that you're getting paid. If I can seek the committee's indulgence, I might just ask our new researcher to introduce himself and perhaps provide some contacts where he might make himself available to the committee.

• (1115)

Mr. Jean-Luc Bourdages (Analyst, Library of Parliament): Yes, my name is Jean-Luc Bourdages.

Bonjour à tous et à Madame Bell.

I've basically been working with committees in different forms for the last 15 years or so, mostly with natural resources, sometimes helping out on the environment committee or on ad hoc studies or otherwise. Those are my main subjects.

I'm pleased to join you again.

The Chair: We'll proceed then with the second motion regarding reduced quorum. Is there a mover for this motion?

This is that the chair be authorized to hold meetings to receive evidence when a quorum is not present and to have evidence printed.

This usually comes up when there is something going on in the House, we can't get everyone here, and we've invited witnesses who have come from a distance. Rather than cancel the meeting, we try to get their views.

The clerk is noting here that four members present, with two from the opposition, have previously been used. I think that's probably worthy of some debate.

Would anyone care to address that issue?

Hon. Roy Cullen: That seems reasonable to me. If you have witnesses coming from far and wide, you want to be able to have the meeting struck with a reasonable number. I think four, with two members of the opposition, is reasonable.

The Chair: Yes, that certainly would be my sense. It really is just about receiving evidence and having authority to print that evidence rather than having anything particularly contentious at that time.

Mr. Trost, did you have a point?

Mr. Bradley Trost: No, no question.

The Chair: Then might I ask for a motion to provide that at least four members are present, including two members of the opposition?

Moved by Madam Bell.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Next, regarding the distribution of documents, 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. Is there a mover of that motion?

Mr. Trost so moved.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: This next one about working meals is one that sometimes has a little debate. I have my own views on this, but I'd welcome the views of the committee.

This will authorize the clerk of the committee to make necessary arrangements to provide working meals for the committee and its subcommittees. I think this is a debate that's going to come up in any event, so we may as well have it now.

Some committees, particularly those that sit between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m., have meals brought in every meeting. I personally have a problem with sitting here and eating in front of witnesses or while the committee is going on. If we can't eat before we go or after 1 o'clock.... I'm in the hands of the committee, if that's what you want to do. I would think if we were perhaps having a solid working session, where we were not having witnesses or anything, it might make sense to bring food in on an ad hoc basis.

What are your thoughts?

Mr. Harris.

Mr. Richard Harris (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Mr. Chairman, I agree with you. Being an hour late or an hour early for lunch is not the end of the world. I agree that eating in front of witnesses is simply not in good taste, nor is it good hospitality. If there is a motion, I would support that we don't have meals brought in unless there is a long working session, and it is at the discretion of the chair.

The Chair: Yes, I'd like that motion. If it's amenable to the rest of you, I think we might go ahead and pass this motion so it is at the discretion....

Mr. Cullen.

• (1120)

Hon. Roy Cullen: I wanted to raise something. First of all, my experience has been that the food is made available to all the witnesses as well, but admittedly, sometimes if they're presenting and answering questions it makes it difficult. The only thing is who's going to have lunch at 11 o'clock? Then at 1 o'clock, often you're running off to other meetings. So I don't think we should have a hard and fast rule. I don't see a great problem. People understand that people have to eat, so—

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: I support the chair and Mr. Harris's point of view and would suggest that the motion be amended to indicate that, at your discretion, the clerk would be authorized to make necessary arrangements.

The Chair: Fine, so I will accept that as a motion from Mr. St. Amand, that "at the discretion of the chair, the clerk of the committee be authorized..." No. Why don't we say, "That the clerk of the committee be authorized, at the discretion of the chair, to make the necessary arrangements to provide working meals for the committee and its subcommittees."

Does that pretty much handle it?

Hon. Roy Cullen: Yes.

The Chair: All right, we'll move that motion—

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: I move the motion.

The Chair: So moved by Mr. St. Amand.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you. This gives us the discretion, Mr. Cullen.

The next one is witnesses' expenses. The motion is 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 for more representatives be made at the discretion of the chair.

In 20 years of this stuff, I've always wondered about that, and the extent of the budgets and how much we pay for these people. I wonder if I might ask my old friend, the previous clerk of the committee, to give us a little background on what kind of expenses are involved, how much is the budget for that kind of thing normally, before we get into the motion. It's for the interest of members. I know I'm interested.

Mr. Eugene Morawski (Procedural Clerk): It depends on what you're studying and how many witnesses you want to call. For example, the fisheries committee predominantly has witnesses from the east and west coasts, so their budget is a lot higher for witnesses than that of a committee that would call witnesses from the immediate area. If you have a study that's ongoing for three or four years, or a year, and you're going to call people from overseas, from Europe and so on, the budget will depend on what your plans are.

The Chair: What is covered, economy airfare and a per diem?

Mr. Eugene Morawski: Yes, economy airfare, overnight stay, and a per diem.

The Chair: Does anybody else have any questions? Dick.

Mr. Richard Harris: This motion is actually written fairly committee-friendly, so that the chair and the committee have a lot of discretion. I think this is a good basic motion to work from, and I would move this motion, if it's required.

The Chair: Are there any other points for debate? Okay.

It is moved by Mr. Harris 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 for more representatives be made at the discretion of the chair.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The next one is with regard to staff at in camera meetings: that, unless otherwise ordered, each committee member be allowed to be accompanied by one staff person at an in camera meeting.

I'll need a little help here, because I'm advised by the clerk that there has been some discussion that it's slightly different in French. Does anyone have any objections to that, or any problems with that?

Basically, the notion is that at in camera meetings we don't have any more than one staff per person, wherever they're from. They may not necessarily be parliamentary staff, apparently.

• (1125)

Mr. Eugene Morawski: Excluding the staff of the committee.

The Chair: Yes, that is excluding the staff of the committee.

Mr. Richard Harris: I'll move that motion.

The Chair: It's moved then by Mr. Harris that, unless otherwise ordered, each committee member will be allowed to be accompanied by one staff person at an in camera meeting.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The next one is in regard to in camera meeting transcripts. This is on the reverse page of the sheet that was passed out. It reads: "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."

Would someone care to move that motion?

Ms. Catherine Bell (Vancouver Island North, NDP): Yes.

The Chair: Is there any discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: This is one that I hope we don't have any difficulty with, but just in case it ever does get controversial we should make this clear.

This sets the notice required for any substantive motion to be considered by the committee so that we don't have anything sprung upon any member by someone bringing it to the table and getting into it. I've found that usually 24 hours is sufficient, just so that the clerk has an opportunity to advise everyone. We meet on Tuesdays, so it's not like a Monday meeting, for example, where you're going to have trouble with the 24-hour notice over the weekend.

I would suggest 24 hours, unless anybody has a problem with that. I'll ask for a mover for the following motion: that 24 hours' notice be required for any substantive motion to be considered by the committee, unless the substantive motion relates directly to 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.

Hon. Roy Cullen: So moved.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We might want to have some debate on this one. There are various formats that have been used. This is regarding time limits for witnesses, statements, and then their questioning—the time they are given for their opening statement and the rounds that we have traditionally gone through in terms of opposition versus members.

I think the clerk has a format that we have used in the past. Tell the committee what we have used in the past.

The Clerk: You'll be aware that in the last Parliament, this committee was part of the industry committee. At their meeting that committee adopted 10 minutes for the opening statement, and that at the discretion of the chair during the questioning of witnesses, time and sequence be allocated as follows: round one, five minutes; then it went to the official opposition, Bloc, NDP; then it would go to the government. Then in round two it would be—sorry, I'm reading, because last time it was government—Liberal, Bloc, government. Then in round three, again for five minutes, it would go Liberal, government, Liberal, government. In round four, if we got that far, everybody would get one more round.

The Chair: Madame Bell.

Ms. Catherine Bell: Can you start again?

The Chair: When we had the last minority government there was considerably more debate, because it hadn't happened for a long time. This is a fairly sophisticated formula to give equal time based on the proportion of members in the House and therefore members on the committee. In the first round of questioning, essentially each party will get five minutes, and you can divide that as you like.

We would start with the official opposition for five minutes, go to the Bloc Québécois for five minutes, then to the NDP for five minutes, and then a government member would have five minutes.

In the second round, you would go back to the Liberals for five minutes, to the Bloc Québécois for five minutes, then to the government for five minutes. The NDP would miss that round.

Then in the third round, it would just be the Liberals for five minutes and then the government for five minutes.

Then we'd go to a fourth round and we'd go back to the same as the first round, and each party would get five minutes.

I know it's tough when you're the only one on the committee, but I think in fairness this is how.... I know it took a long time to come to that format last time, and we felt it was fair to everybody to come to that determination. But we're open for debate.

Yes, Mr. Harris.

• (1130)

Mr. Richard Harris: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to make a couple of suggestions.

The first is regarding witness time. I know—and there is at least one other member who has sat on committees for 13 years in the House—that invariably we find that witnesses have trouble keeping to the allotted time. I see the suggestion was to have 10 minutes for each witness. I'd like to suggest that it be reduced to five minutes and that witnesses be required to provide an executive brief for the members of the committee to follow while they're talking. I think that 10 minutes per witness is a considerable length of time, and if you have, say, five or six witnesses, that is an hour of presentations before you get back to the very first one to ask questions.

I'd like to suggest that we reduce the witness presentations to five minutes, and increase the first round of questioning to seven minutes. That would kind of compensate for that and give the witnesses a little more time in the first round. That way, if you have six witnesses, you would get to the first one with questions in 30 minutes rather than in an hour, and the information would probably be a lot fresher.

The Chair: Just for clarity, Mr. Harris, we will decide with the clerks how many witnesses we might have on a given day, and that might take care of some of that problem. Also, if, for example, it's a panel of representatives from one organization or one area, they may have to divide the allotted time among themselves. So if it is 10 minutes, they'll have to figure out who gets the 10 minutes or whether they're going to speak at all. That's just one suggestion.

You have opened the debate, and Mr. Cullen wants to comment.

Hon. Roy Cullen: This is a perennial issue. My problem with going with less than 10 minutes is that you are bringing people in

from around the country, and if you have to tell them they have five minutes....

I know what you're saying. In the round of questioning there's a little bump there. My preference would be to make it 10 minutes, but have the chair really exercise his discretion to remind people, and maybe in setting up there could be a clock we put up—I don't know, but something—to help us really religiously work with the 10 minutes.

You're right, sometimes we get panels with too many speakers, and by the time you get around to questioning, an hour has blown by.

I would favour the 10 minutes myself, but really have discipline around that 10 minutes, and then have five minutes for the remainder.

I want to raise one question, and we should be clear on this. In the official opposition, we will have four members. So you start with five minutes from the official opposition, then you go to the Bloc for five minutes, then to the NDP, and then to the government side for five minutes. We might have four members who want to ask questions. The next Liberal who puts his or her name on the list would get five minutes, and then you would move down.

What that means is this. The Bloc has two members on the committee and the NDP has one. Catherine, you are the sole member. Let's say we have three or four rounds. That means that Catherine, if we have three or four rounds, will get three or four questions, which is fine. I guess we just need to nail that down, because I have been at some committees where they say it's the official opposition first, and they go one, two, three, four, which is not totally fair, either.

I'm not sure what the way around that is. We have to go with that, but we'd ask the indulgence of the committee members. Rather than just asking questions because they have an allotted time, try to give all members of the committee an opportunity to put a question forward. We need to understand that this is how it works. The Liberal would get the first question, and even though there might be four Liberals wanting to ask questions, it would go around, so to get to those other Liberals, we'd have to go to four rounds, if that's what the committee chooses.

• (1135)

The Chair: I think we're talking about two things here and I want to deal with one at a time. I thought we had gone to that second part of your question, Mr. Cullen.

Let me again see if I've got it right, because I sensed there was a consensus.

The way the questioning will work is this. I will get back to Mr. Harris' point on the witnesses, but on the questioning it's my understanding that what has worked well in the past in a minority government is that we will start off the questioning with five minutes for the Liberal Party, and you can do with that five minutes whatever you want. You can speak for a minute and ten seconds each if you want, but that's your allotment. We'll stick very closely to that. After that five minutes of questioning we go to the Bloc and they get five minutes, and they can divide it up on the first round or not at their discretion. Then we go to the NDP for five minutes, and Madame Bell can obviously take that five minutes on her own, or any part of it. Then we go to the government for five minutes. That would constitute the first round of questioning.

Then we would go back to the Liberals again for another five minutes. At their discretion they can speak how they want. Then we go to the Bloc for five minutes, and then we go to the government again for five minutes. That's pretty much how it worked. Then we'll go back, and the next round is like the first round, and the NDP enters in.

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Four rounds.

The Chair: Yes, four rounds is essentially what we would try to get in for every witness. How does that work out in terms of cumulative time?

Mr. Bradley Trost: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: No, because we don't have five minutes for each party each time. We drop off one party each time. It ends up being 20 minutes for the government and 20 minutes for the opposition, and 10 for the Bloc.

Are we comfortable with that? Does everybody get it?

Ms. Bell.

Ms. Catherine Bell: On the ten minutes, I'm assuming that we're dealing with two—

The Chair: Can I just get a consensus on the questions from members first so we can dispense with that, and then we'll go back to Mr. Harris' point, which I think is what you want to comment on, the witnesses' time.

Ms. Catherine Bell: Both, actually.

The Chair: Sorry, go ahead.

Ms. Catherine Bell: Do you want me to break it up or just do it all together?

The Chair: I'm sorry, I'm not getting your point.

Ms. Catherine Bell: On the ten minutes, I have an issue for the witnesses. There was a proposal to reduce it to five minutes. I want to argue to keep it at ten minutes. I was supporting Mr. Cullen's remarks on that.

Also, if we are inviting people to come from far and wide, ten minutes doesn't seem like a very long time for them to get all their points in. It may facilitate our not asking so many questions later. That was one point. But also I think people need to be heard and it's the purpose of this committee to hear what they have to say.

I argue for ten minutes.

The Chair: Thank you for that. That speaks to Mr. Harris' comments. But I think we're on two tracks here and I just want to deal with one at a time.

Let us deal first, if we could, committee, with the first question, and that is the rounds of questioning by members. Do we have a consensus on the way it's been described by the clerk?

Mr. Mike Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Just as a clarification, Mr. Chair, basically the philosophy of this is that everybody on the committee, in the spirit of all of us being equal here in committee, will have one shot to have a question before we get into a round two. Theoretically, if everybody wanted to pose a question, everybody would pose a question until we went around to round two. Is that right? Everybody on the committee could pose a question?

The Chair: Yes, that's a sound description. Thank you, Mr. Allen.

Roy.

Hon. Roy Cullen: Where these problems sometimes arise is that if it's round one...I guess it depends how you define rounds. You won't get necessarily everybody in if you go that way, because you'll have to keep coming back.

• (1140)

The Chair: No, it's at the discretion of the parties. With the exception of Ms. Bell, it's up to the parties how they want to divide their time in each round. You get five minutes a round in the Liberal Party.

Hon. Roy Cullen: I understand what you're saying there; we can divide our time. I think the way the numbers work is that if there are four Liberals here, two Bloc, and one NDP, and four government members, will that constitute a first round, and then even if we go around and around, everybody will get a five-minute question?

Mr. Mike Allen: The way I was envisioning this is that everybody would have at least an opportunity to ask a question.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Mike Allen: Call it round one or call it round 28; it doesn't matter, but what it means is that if Mr. McGuinty starts with the first question and then Mr. Cardin has the next question and Ms. Bell has the next one, and then we start with the parliamentary secretary, and he has a question, and then we go back again, we keep following that process until such time as each individual... You only get a chance in the first round to ask one question. That's it. Ms. Bell doesn't get a chance, as we go around, to ask five questions when only one person from this side gets to ask one.

I can defer, but regarding your point of its coming back to this side, there will be eleven questions asked, because everybody but the chair gets to ask a question.

Hon. Roy Cullen: That's where you've run into problems. It depends, too, on how long the meetings are and whether we're left with two or three members who haven't had a chance to ask a question on the government side or the official opposition side. If we can agree that everybody has a chance to ask a five-minute question on the Liberal side, on the government side, for the Bloc and the NDP, then I think that accomplishes the mission. I've seen it left hanging before when we never had time, and members on both sides didn't get a chance to ask any questions.

Mr. Mike Allen: I don't want that to happen. I agree with the concept that everybody should have the opportunity.

Mr. David McGuinty: If I understand, Mr. Chairman, in four rounds, the government will have 20 minutes, the official opposition would have 20 minutes, the Bloc Québécois would have 10 minutes, and the NDP would have five minutes over four rounds.

The Chair: What it works out to is.... That's on the first three rounds. Then the last one is a bonus.

Mr. David McGuinty: So the NDP has 10 minutes as well...on the first round and the fourth round.

The Chair: In four rounds, yes.

Mr. David McGuinty: So again, the government gets 20 minutes, the official opposition gets 20 minutes, the Bloc gets 10 minutes, and the NDP gets 10 minutes.

The Clerk: Fifteen.

Mr. David McGuinty: I was right. I'm going to recap: government 20, official opposition 20, Bloc Québécois 15, and the NDP 10.

The Chair: Here we go. We're going to go through this one more time and then we'll just say it.

It does work out, as Mr. Allen suggested, that there's a potential for every member to get one question. That will occur in the first three rounds. Then the fourth round is simply a repeat of the first, so that the opportunity is for somebody to get two questions, particularly the Bloc and Madame Bell.

Again, for the first round: five minutes from the Liberals, five minutes from the Bloc, five minutes from the NDP, five minutes from the government. The next round: five minutes from the Liberals, five minutes from the Bloc, five minutes from the government. The third round—and this is the one that gets tricky—is five minutes from the Liberals, five minutes from the Conservatives, five minutes from the Liberals, five minutes from the Conservatives. That way, everyone has had an opportunity to have five minutes. In the last round we go back to one, two, three, four; each party gets another five minutes to wrap up.

Hon. Roy Cullen: Mr. Chair, I think that's the right way to apply it, but I've seen it at committee where they just keep going around and around, not picking up questions that members of the opposition or the government have. The bottom line is that everybody—

• (1145)

The Chair: It's taken a long time to get to it.

Hon. Roy Cullen: —in the committee should have a chance to put a five-minute question.

The Chair: Everyone will have a chance, and then what it works out to be in the fourth round is that each party, again, has a five-minute wrap or rebuttal.

Mr. Ouellet, go ahead, please.

Mr. Christian Ouellet (Brome—Missisquoi, BQ): Your numbers don't add up, because the last way you said it, you said 20 minutes for the first round, 15 minutes for the second, 10 minutes for the third round, and 10 minutes again for the fourth round, and 20 minutes for the last round; this makes up 75 minutes. The way it was said previously was 20 minutes for the Liberals, 20 minutes for the government, 15 minutes for the Bloc, and 10 minutes for the NDP. This adds up to 65 minutes. So there's a ten-minute discrepancy between the solutions.

Mr. Mike Allen: Mr. Chair, there are 11 people on the committee, and if you use five minutes per person, that's 55 minutes. Then it's 20 minutes for the last one for each party, so that's 75 minutes.

Mr. Christian Ouellet: It's not exactly what was said before.

The Chair: No, it is 75 minutes.

Mr. Christian Ouellet: It says 75 minutes.

The Chair: For questions, yes.

Mr. Christian Ouellet: So it's more than 20 minutes for the Liberals and the Conservatives. It's more than 20 minutes, because with 75 minutes it has to be. I would be keen on keeping the proportion of the representation in the House with the minutes we have here, and with 75 minutes, we don't keep it. I don't see how you separate those 75 minutes among the parties.

The Chair: The Liberals would get 20, the Bloc will get 15, the NDP will get 10, and the Conservatives will get 20.

Mr. Christian Ouellet: That makes 65 minutes. You're 10 minutes short there.

The Chair: I'm glad this isn't the math committee.

Mr. Mike Allen: Mr. Chairman, as already said, the allotment will be 25, 25, 15, and 10.

The Chair: Oh, no. Actually, the Liberals and the Conservatives get 25 each—

Mr. Bradley Trost: Because we get five minutes each in the fourth round as well.

The Chair: I'm sorry. In this we get 25 each, because in the third round it goes back and forth.

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Personally, Mr. Chair, I don't think it's fair, because there are 51 of us in the House, and we have 15 minutes and the Liberals have 25 minutes. I don't think that's fair. If you want to keep up, 15 and 20 minutes is fair, but not 15 and 25.

Mr. David McGuinty: We have twice as many members.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: We have double the seats.

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Yes, double the seats; then double the minutes.

An hon. member: But we're not. We're prepared to be generous. If it were double, we'd have 30.

The Chair: Madame Bell.

Ms. Catherine Bell: It's my understanding that other committees have set precedent by alternating between the government and the opposition. It would maybe alleviate some of the math issue here to move from government to opposition and....

The Chair: The committee is an all-party committee. Basically what we're trying to do is treat the committee members as individuals and have it on a pro rata basis so that it's quite equal for each member. That's why in the first three rounds there is a potential five minutes for each member of the committee. The fourth round is where it might skew slightly, but it goes back to the standings in the House to balance that side of it.

The first three rounds actually give everybody five minutes. That's the premise we start at; then in the wrap we go back to the standings in the House and give everybody an opportunity to wrap up.

I know it takes a while to get into, but having gone through this in the last minority Parliament, I think it's pretty fair. Generally, it's been perceived as fair.

Mr. Ouellet, does that satisfy you, or do you have any more concerns?

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Okay.

The Chair: That's good, then.

Mr. Trost, did you want to comment on this item?

Mr. Bradley Trost: I hope you guys got the math right. I'm not going to say anything.

The Chair: This is the mathematician. If it's okay with Trost, we're probably all right.

Yes, Mr. St. Amand.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: When this is finished, I'd like to make a point about the length of time for witnesses.

The Chair: We're going to that next. I just wanted to clear this up first.

Yes, Mr. Cullen.

• (1150)

Hon. Roy Cullen: I think the 75 minutes, in the way it's been described, works, but I think we need to look at it in the practical realities of a meeting that will typically last two hours. The idea that we'd have this full turnout for every meeting and that everyone would want to ask a question is not totally realistic. By the same token, there could be a topic that is very hot and topical and everyone will want to get their dibs in.

I think the chair and the staff need to be guided by this being a two-hour meeting and by how many witnesses we have, so that there's an opportunity for this to happen. Otherwise, 75 minutes of questioning becomes a practical impossibility.

If it's a two-hour meeting and you have four on a panel—

The Chair: That's 120 minutes.

Hon. Roy Cullen: And none of them will keep to the 10 minutes. You know that as well as I do.

The Chair: I think in the spirit of cooperation sometimes we just have to trust judgments. That's why we say "at the discretion of the

chair". I'm sure that if you're not happy with the discretion of the chair, I'll be hearing about it. Basically this is a method that's probably going to work best for all of us.

Mr. McGuinty, did you want to wrap on that one?

Mr. David McGuinty: I just wanted to go back to Mr. Harris's question.

The Chair: Okay, so let us then have an agreement that we're going to go with that format as described. Each member essentially will get five minutes in the first three rounds, and then we'll have a fourth round where we revert to the first five minutes from the Liberals, five for the Bloc, five for the NDP, and the last word to the government party.

Okay, so that's the way we're going to go with our questions, and I'd like now to go back to the question that Mr. Harris raised with regard to witnesses, the times for minutes.

Ms. Bell commented that she thought that with the distances people come to a committee maybe 10 minutes was adequate. We wouldn't want to cut it lower than that. So that's where the debate stands on the question, and let's limit our discussion here to the witnesses' times for opening statements.

On the list that we had prior to that little break, it was Mr. St. Amand.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: I'd like to incorporate both ideas. I agree with Ms. Bell that witnesses come here often from a great distance and we should listen to them respectfully. But left unfettered, of course—Mr. Harris's point is well taken—that could be 10 minutes times....

Frankly, from the point of view of the witnesses, I think it's unfair to the witnesses when four or five of them are huddled, and have prepared, and they're told for the first time, "By the way, folks, I, as chair, am exercising my even-handed discretion. You'll be limited to 25 minutes among the five of you." In my experience, I think that has caught them off guard.

So I would propose that individual witnesses be provided with 10 minutes for their opening statements, but a panel of three or more will, in totality, be limited to perhaps 30 minutes, and that would afford us time for the potential 75 minutes of questioning.

The Chair: Excuse me, did you make a motion, Mr. Harris, or was it for debate?

Mr. Richard Harris: I think I was just opening the discussion.

The Chair: Because we wouldn't be able to continue the discussion if we had a motion on the floor. So let's presume it was just debate for the time being, and if we want to make a motion after the discussion, we'll do that.

Let's continue this. Mr. McGuinty.

Mr. David McGuinty: I'd like to pick up on what Mr. St. Amand said, and I support one of Mr. Harris's comments very strongly, and support Mr. Cullen.

It's really difficult for witnesses to speak for less than 10 minutes and encapsulate...I speak as a person who is new to Parliament but who spent many hours preparing to appear before committees in a previous life, and it's very difficult to hold oneself to 10 minutes when one is dealing with a complexity of the kind we're going to be dealing with.

I would rather see a general approach where we reduce the number of witnesses and have a more fulsome and probing discussion with those witnesses, but I would also strongly support something Mr. Harris said. I really do not like to see witnesses appear here without having delivered to us, say 24 hours before their appearance, a five-page executive summary of what they're going to say. That is common practice in most places today, so I would certainly support Mr. Harris. I think Mr. Harris mentioned this. It would be very useful for us to have a quick synopsis—three or four pages, five maximum, perhaps. To receive, as members, disparate kinds of documents—some translated, some not—on time.... I think it would be fairly easy, Mr. Chairman, for the clerk to frame some kind of general parameters for witnesses' documents as they submit them to committee.

• (1155)

The Chair: Yes, thank you. I sense there is a consensus here, and in fact, perhaps before we go to Monsieur Godin next, the sense I'm getting is that we're all on the same wavelength here. We want to allow the witnesses to say their piece but not go on forever. There are obviously going to be some differences, if there's a group, if we have more than one.

I think one of the key elements to make this work better is going to be the instructions the clerk gives to potential witnesses as they come in, as suggested by Mr. McGuinty, Ms. Bell, and Mr. Harris, and that is we should just make it clear that their brief will be limited to 10 pages with attachments, if there are any, that there's to be an executive summary, and that we do have this provided to the committee 24 hours before the committee meeting, in both official languages. They must be prepared. I think it works out better for the witnesses as well as for us, and we can determine it, and then we'll flow with the will of the meeting and the discretion of the chair in each case.

As our researcher suggested to me briefly a moment ago, there are occasions, of course, when we're going to have ministers here on estimates, we're going to have briefings from departments, and we might just want them to go on a little longer in terms of where they're coming from before we get to questions. So I think we're going to have to leave a little latitude, but I think the general consensus we seem to be getting here is that what's important is firm instructions from the clerk to potential witnesses ahead of time.

With that, I'll go to Mr. Cardin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cardin: We agree on the 10-minute rule. If we want to have some time left, we need to arrange not to hear from 20 witnesses, each of whom would have 10 minutes. There wouldn't be any time left to ask questions. In short, we will need to manage our time according to the number of witnesses scheduled to appear at each meeting.

In any event, out of consideration for the witnesses, we need to allocate a minimum of 10 minutes to each individual. Witnesses will have the chance to respond and to clarify their comments if members confine themselves to asking more direct questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, I agree.

Mr. Harris.

Mr. Richard Harris: I can live with the 10 minutes. I won't push that one anymore.

The big concern is that we've sat in committee meetings where the witnesses had been advised, prior to coming, of their time limit for talking, whether it was ten minutes or five, but with great respect, totally disregarded the time. They were allowed to go on and on, five minutes would turn into ten, and then the first thing you'd know, you'd be running out of time and all the questions weren't answered.

So I would like to suggest that the chair, or whoever is in the chair at the time of the meeting, be very judicial in the finishing of the allotted time, that witnesses are not allowed to simply disregard the time and go on just because they have good stuff. They all have good stuff, but it's important that the committee be punctual, that all the witnesses get a chance to have their allotted time, and that there's available time to ask all the questions.

The Chair: Mr. Cullen.

Hon. Roy Cullen: Not to belabour the point, but sometimes these things become problems later, so this is a good time to talk about them.

I think somehow in the communication with witnesses we should tell people, in the most polite way we can, that it's not appropriate that they read their brief. This is where we always run into problems. People sit there and read their brief, and they invariably go over the time. We need to tell the witnesses that their brief will be circulated, that members will have it.

David, your idea about an executive summary is good. When you get into five pages, though—of course, it depends on the font—five pages is getting heavy. I don't know what the right length is, but a one- or two-page executive summary can basically form the thrust of their presentation, and the detailed brief will be available to all the members.

We really need to hammer this home, because I don't know how many meetings you've sat on where the people came and read their brief and droned on and on forever. It just drives you nuts.

• (1200)

The Chair: Christian.

[Translation]

Mr. Christian Paradis (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): I'm not very familiar with the procedure regarding submissions. At the Court of Appeal, for example, lawyers cannot table submissions that are drafted in small print or that run on and on. Perhaps some guidelines are in order, if some aren't already in place.

When a minister is invited to appear before the committee, the 24-hour rule could be a problem because of his or her schedule. Could we possibly take that fact into consideration?

[English]

The Chair: In those areas, whether it's a ministerial briefing or whatever, there certainly can be exceptions to this general rule. I think what we're discussing primarily is the normal course of events of witnesses appearing, and they have something to say. We're interested in what they have to say; that's why we invited them to appear as witnesses. And then, of course, we have, as was pointed out earlier, 75 minutes of questioning to elaborate on their 10-minute opening statement.

I think we're finding a pretty good format here, if we can get the clerk to insist that some executive summary is presented—and maybe a page is enough, or two pages at the most, just a little executive summary—and that they keep it to 10 minutes.

The clerk has just advised me that he's going to bring a timer, and we'll strictly adhere to it, again at the discretion of the committee and at the will of the committee. It may be that in questions you'll bring up more stuff, but I think we should point out at the same time that the five minutes each that's allotted includes the answer time for those questions. Much of it will depend on the length and content of your questions as well.

Mr. Cullen.

Hon. Roy Cullen: Yes, sometimes people take up the whole five minutes asking a question or making a statement. I know you can't rule on that, but it's often rude to have witnesses here and not put a question to them. We'll have to be guided by our own good judgment.

I don't know, Mr. Paradis, if the question was also with respect to the lead time to get ministers to come to the committee. I think that's what you're on to as well.

Mr. Christian Paradis: Yes.

Hon. Roy Cullen: Having been in government, I can tell you on this side we try to resolve that collegially, as long as the minister is not being obstructive or trying to stay away from the committee. We understand—and the Liberals here and others—that fitting it into a schedule is something we have to try to accommodate.

Certainly from the Liberals we won't find a problem, and I'm sure from the other colleagues. We understand that ministers have lots on their schedule. So unless it's a national crisis or emergency...there will be cooperation on this side to recognize that.

The Chair: Is there any more question about that, or can we have a motion?

Mr. Harris, did you want to make that motion?

Mr. Richard Harris: Sure.

The Chair: The motion then is that witnesses be given 10 minutes for their opening statement and that at the discretion of the chair, during the questioning of witnesses, five minutes will be allocated for the first questioner of each party, and thereafter five minutes will be allocated to each subsequent questioner, alternating between the government and the opposition parties, on the basis of the formula we discussed.

We can get into pages doing that, but I think everybody gets the sense of what we're after, do they?

Do you understand?

The Clerk: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. If the clerk gets it, then we're in good shape.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: This is not something we need to deal with today. The clerk has brought to my attention that usually at the first committee meeting there's a discussion about whether we want to have any kind of subcommittee. Sometimes those come up in the course of debate, or when we're hearing a bill, or whatever it is. But often a subcommittee on agenda and procedure is formed, with one representative from each party, to meet with the chair, so we don't have to take the committee's time each week to look at the agenda down the road.

I'm open to discussion.

Mr. Cullen.

• (1205)

Hon. Roy Cullen: It would be interesting if at some point the government could give us an inkling as to what program, legislative or otherwise, will be coming to the committee—maybe not necessarily today. But my sense is that there are some committees where the volume of work is so extreme that a subcommittee is a good idea.

I don't think we're going to be swamped, and maybe we need to have a work plan. I have some ideas—I'm sure everyone has some ideas—recognizing that we don't want to make work for the sake of making work. But we need to prioritize or maybe establish what's worth looking at. It would be useful at some point to get a sense from the government side if there is anything in the pipeline that's going to be coming here in terms of legislation, because often that drives the agenda. I don't think it's a full plate, from what I can gather.

What I'm saying is that I'm not sure a subcommittee for this committee is required, but we certainly need to have a plan of action.

The Chair: That's right, and perhaps we will get into that later in this meeting. I don't think we're going to be here for the full two hours, but I think there is an opportunity to talk generally about the direction the committee wants to go in. I would like to seek ideas, but I think we're going to do this in a very open way.

Again, I perceived this as a committee of independent members. We're in a minority Parliament. What we discuss, what topics we go into, the formation of the agenda are going to be the will of this committee. We can do that in an open committee with all of us, at the discretion of the committee, or we can have a subcommittee on agenda to pick those things out.

At this meeting, perhaps we might just blue sky—throw out some thoughts and then at the next meeting, or in a subcommittee meeting on agenda, decide where we're going to go. But before we get too far along that line, let's continue in this line of questioning.

Mr. Trost.

Mr. Bradley Trost: I would like to say that even if you're part of the same party, as independent members, you may have slightly different ideas about where you want to go on agendas for studying and so forth.

I'm of the view that maybe we should wait either until the end of June, when we're about to recess, or next fall to figure out if we need a subcommittee to guide and to follow all the way through. I'm more interested in saying what our work plan, the "blue sky", as you said, is. Regarding the subcommittee, my recommendation is to wait and see if we need it, and not to implement it unless the need is absolutely proven.

The Chair: Mr. Harris.

Mr. Richard Harris: I've always been used to steering committees being formed just from the members. Isn't the steering committee automatic, without our having to declare it as a subcommittee?

The Chair: It's basically the same thing. Some have called it a steering committee, some have called it committee on agenda. That's exactly what we're talking about, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Richard Harris: Okay.

The Chair: Perhaps I should just intervene for a second and tell the rest of the committee members that I have been approached in the past couple of weeks by members of the committee—by Mr. Trost, by Mr. McGuinty, by Mr. Tonks—about possible suggestions and about the modus operandi of the committee. Let me just share that with you—if that's all right with you, Mr. McGuinty, so that I'm not telling stories out of school.

Basically, because of the timing, here we are into May. We have a new committee with new members. There are various levels of expertise and background with regard to the subject matters. It has been suggested by members from the opposition and from the government that we might just take these six weeks—perhaps even less than that, four weeks—to get up to speed on a broad area of subjects with regard to natural resources.

That might include, say, a briefing from the department, an overview of what the department does, what their position is. For example, as Mr. Cullen suggested, could we have an idea of what the department's agenda might be in the next year, or the proposals, that type of thing? We might also invite witnesses to really not do anything more than educate us, bring us up to date, tell us about their industry, tell us about the oil and gas industry, about mining, about forestry industries, just broadly. I've had this suggestion from a couple of members.

In the course of that discussion, I got a book that was produced by a non-profit energy group, sort of a cross-industry group. The book is used as a primer in some of the schools across the country. It just gives a general idea of what natural resources are in the country and what issues might come up. I ordered a bunch of them, and I would be happy to distribute them today, in that vein. I just mention that as a tangent to this discussion.

I wasn't able to locate copies of this little book in French, but I do have a CD in French for those who would like that as well.

So that gives you a general sense in terms of opening the discussion about where this committee wants to go. With regard to the agenda and what we were just dealing with, we had opened the discussion by asking if we wanted to have a steering committee to set the agenda. Or maybe that's premature.

Let's open it back up to discussion. What do members see as our committee's role? Where do we want to take this thing, and what do we want to do as a committee over the next year, particularly until, say, the summer break?

We have an invitation from Energy Dialogue Group, which apparently is a consensus of electrical, oil and gas, and other industries across the country. They have what they call "summer school". This was done last summer, and it involved two days of bringing people up to speed, in a non-partisan way, on natural resources in Canada. That's something else I'd like the committee to think about, and we can discuss it.

Mr. Trost, maybe you want to explain. You did it last year for a group of members of Parliament. What went on?

• (1210)

Mr. Bradley Trost: To give you a little background, as those of you may know, the Conservative caucus has a rather informal series of caucuses, one of which is concentrated around energy policy. One group that has made presentations to us over the years is the people from the Energy Dialogue Group. It's a broad organization; I think they represent 15 or 17 various groups, everyone from wind power, solar power, the Canadian Gas Association, petroleum, everyone across the board. They're industries that you don't normally think of together.

One of the things we organized in conjunction with them was about a day and an evening's worth of sessions only on energy issues. There were again a wide variety of issues dealing with energy in general and different industry specifics. We then arranged some tours to get a grasp of some of the issues that related directly to projects; one was up to the oil sands in Fort McMurray, and in southern Alberta, some of the members took a wind power tour.

It was a concentrated day and a half of study, lectures, and interaction on energy issues with a wide variety of people, and then some tours to get a bit of a foot-to-the-earth grasp of what was going on. It's something we're working on again this year, and it's something we could do with natural resources and so forth. It was a very concentrated education on specific issues that we often don't get in the one-hour clips when we meet in committee.

The Chair: Mr. Cullen.

Hon. Roy Cullen: Yes. Thank you.

I think the idea of bringing in some witnesses and getting all members of the committee up to speed on the various sectors, perhaps starting with the department to describe the various portfolios that are under NRCan, would be a good approach. We might want to prioritize that at some point.

I know that softwood lumber is primarily a trade issue, but it seems to me there are some issues, for example, the anti-circumvention clause, that raise questions about forest policy and the ability to have independent forest policy in Canada. After the department, we could invite the FPAC, the Forest Products Association, and maybe other stakeholder groups.

I'm certainly going to go out to the oil sands in Fort McMurray sometime in the next few months. If the committee could organize a tour out there that involves a visit to Fort McMurray, with maybe some meetings with the oil and gas industry and other stakeholders in Calgary, that's certainly something I would support. In the Liberal caucus, many of us haven't had the opportunity to visit the oil sands. That would certainly be my preference. I know there are other options we could look at, but I think the oil sands and that whole development is a huge project in Canada. It has a number of implications that we need to understand very clearly. I think if the committee were to bring in the Energy Dialogue Group to help orchestrate that, my preference would be to go the oil sands, with maybe a day in Calgary to meet some of the stakeholder groups.

I think energy is going to be a big-ticket item in terms of the work of this committee. There are a lot of opportunities and a lot of challenges.

Then later, if we bring in the mining industry, there are issues there too, of course, about reserves, access to labour, and a whole host of other issues.

If we start with the more general briefing by the department and bring in the various stakeholders, my preference would be to start with softwood lumber. There's a certain timeframe during which that deal will be fastened together. I think there are some issues that affect the natural resource economy in that agreement. I'd like to see them discussed at this committee.

My second priority would be to look at the energy issues, maybe starting with an orientation by the Energy Dialogue Group and then visiting the oil patch in Fort McMurray.

I think the general orientation you've proposed is a good one.

● (1215)

The Chair: I have a list.

Monsieur Cardin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cardin: It's important for us to remember that for a number of years now, the Natural Resources Committee has not been focusing its attention exclusively on natural resources. We've also examined issues related to aboriginal affairs and industry. Therefore, we have never really exhausted our study of a range of topics.

We need to review the overall energy management plan, as it applies to the provinces as well as to the United States. As everyone knows, energy has become a critically important component of our

economy. After several lean years on the natural resources front, the committee has a number of issues on its plate. But first, we need to know what the department's plans are in order to establish some parameters to guide our work in this area.

Regarding natural resources, the committee should certainly look into lumber and various mineral resources. We should tackle a number of issues that have not been examined in years. In my opinion, we need to have a meeting as soon as possible to identify priorities. Perhaps we should hear first from departmental officials, in order to maximize any future meetings. There wouldn't necessarily have to be many meetings. We're talking about one meeting to hear from departmental officials and another meeting to set our priorities.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, I agree with you. From what others have said here, I sense that in the period before we recess in June we might want to hear from the department. It might even be helpful to hear from the mining association and others—you know, hydro people, the electricity producers—to put us into a context, before we decide on the priorities. I'm trying to get a better knowledge of the broad picture.

That's why this book says, "our petroleum challenge", for example. It's just one thing I found in preparing for this meeting. It kind of takes a broad view of the whole country, and not of just oil and gas. That's going to be so important in the coming years—Canada's position.

Maybe we shouldn't just hear from the department before we set priorities; let's hear from a few representatives of various natural resources industries and other related groups in the country before we do that. We might not even set our agenda until some time in June, if that's agreeable to people.

Am I getting consensus from people to do that?

Monsieur Ouellet.

● (1220)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Mr. Chairman, mention has been made of sending committee members to visit tar sands operations. We've long known how the extraction process works. It's no mystery. In my view, there are far more important matters to attend to, not the least of which are the problems associated with methane gas terminals that will be located along both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. We need to examine security issues surrounding these terminals. We're currently waging a war on terrorism, but we've never really determined whether such terminals should be constructed or not. They could prove to be very dangerous indeed.

Therefore, it's far more important for a committee like ours to examine different and alternative energy sources. Boston and Marseilles have both encountered security problems with their methane gas terminals. We need to know what we're dealing with here. I agree with my colleague that an energy management plan would shed light on various energy sources. Consequently, there would be no need for us to visit all of these facilities.

Moreover, some major studies were undertaken during the 37th Parliament. The committee should also focus on the exploration of the seabed, particularly in the St. Lawrence where gas and oil reserves have been found. Any activities undertaken should be respectful of the environment. However, it remains to be seen to what extent that is possible.

Another source of energy in Canada, one about which little is known, is geothermal energy. This energy source has not been exploited very much and in my opinion, that needs to change. We're talking about a potential energy gold mine. The proper development of this alternative energy source warrants further study so that hopefully by the end of our mandate, we have some idea of output capacity across Canada.

And finally, Bill C-4 which was tabled during the 37th Parliament, calls for the establishment of a foundation to oversee financing and technological support for sustainable development. To my mind, sustainable development is a key consideration when it comes to energy. It determines whether a particular energy source is of interest or not. We need a status report on the work of the Canada Foundation for Sustainable Development Technology, which was set up in 2002. It's important that we focus on these topics and that we continue to carry out interesting studies on renewable energy sources, particularly those of concern to the High Arctic.

[English]

The Chair: I think that's very important and something that we'll see develop as we get these various witnesses and get a broader view of the overall context. Clearly, alternative energy sources and sustainable development are going to be big parts of this one.

There is a division with the environment committee. In the environment committee in the last Parliament, we spent a lot of time talking about these kinds of things. There's some real expertise around this table in regard to sustainable energy. We are a natural resources committee and we've got to look at the big picture. I think it's clearly one that will be in.

Mr. Trost.

•(1225)

Mr. Bradley Trost: With the general consensus between Serge, Roy, you, and so forth, it's no surprise to endorse that positioning for this May and June, of dealing with certain subjects to get a broader overview and dealing with discrete units.

The other thing I'd like to pick up on is on what Serge said when he noted that energy policy was an absolutely crucial and all-encompassing thing. Even though we shouldn't necessarily decide or pick out specifics right now on how to deal with it, I'd like to note that energy policy is very important for forestry, mining, oil and gas, and encompasses everything we do.

So I'd just like to say again, let's concentrate on this broad picture, with maybe the mining, forestry, or whatever other suggestions we've had here, and then begin to think and move the focus to something along the lines of energy policy that we could specifically pick out and that would be useful, targeted, and not so broad that it became useless. We did that in the industry committee where we didn't have a focus for our studies, but it should be discrete enough on an element of energy policy, eventually.

We're maybe looking toward the fall on this, so that we can get something accomplished in a timeline that wouldn't be interfered with by potential elections in that period. So for the first few months, we should continue to look at the consensus that seems to be building, and at an energy policy in which there will be elements that we can agree on and that fit everyone's constituencies across the whole country, because energy is such a broad category.

The Chair: Ms. Bell.

Ms. Catherine Bell: Thank you.

I appreciate the discussion on how you see the committee working, and I look forward to seeing and hearing from the witnesses we'll be calling, to educate myself especially. But I'd also just add a couple of things that haven't been mentioned yet.

One thing that I think is very big right now and on a lot of people's minds is the issue of water. I know there are some issues around the Great Lakes and also with water worldwide, not just in Canada, but I think it's something that this committee should discuss and hear from people on.

I think the boreal forest is another very large issue for Canada, and it overlaps again with the environmental issues with the environment committee. But part of the boreal forest issue is the encroachment of the pine beetle infestation, which is moving eastward. I think that's something we need to talk about, and also just generally the forest policy in Canada. Others have mentioned the softwood lumber issue, which is also important.

With regard to energy, someone mentioned sustainable energy development. That's a very large issue that I would like to have on the agenda as well, as it relates to what's becoming the topic in the world of peak oil and where we're at in the world and our oil and gas exploration, talking about the tar sands, offshore oil and gas, and those kinds of things.

The Chair: Yes, right on.

There's another book. I don't know if people have seen this. It's Peter Tertzakian's book on the break point in oil and gas and changes over history. It's a remarkable book. We might even ask him to come in and give us a nutshell, because it does show the trends over history, from whale oil to kerosene, to oil and gas and substitutions, and all this stuff. It really does paint a broad picture, which I think is where you're going in terms of sustainability and carrying on.

Perhaps I could just interject for a second. I'm sort of getting a sense here of where we might go in the next little while. We're going to meet on Thursday at 11 o'clock, and I wonder if between now and then we could flesh out some of these ideas as to not so much, Brad, where we want to go in the fall or with a major project, but in the vein of establishing priorities. So if there is some need or an interest in sustainable development or the boreal forest, for example, or water or geothermics, we bring somebody in during the next two or three weeks to give us a little briefing on that.

If all of us had more information on some of these matters that maybe we're not up to speed on, they might move up the ladder of our collective priorities a little bit when we know more about them.

So I'd ask that in the next couple of days you put your thoughts to any area that might be considered for future consideration by the committee, but also areas that you as individual members want to get more information on to make a determination. Do we want to have a major study on geothermics or the boreal forest, or whatever, in the broad context, or do we put it as part of a general discussion of something else?

Let's have a blue sky meeting on Thursday of, first of all, who we want to hear from in terms of the forest industry, mining, alternative energy sources, sustainability, really to bring us all up to speed, to give us a broad education of the issues. Then I think we will all be in a better position to determine the priorities of this committee, and maybe as we move into the first week of June we'll have a better sense of what our priorities might become. Then, from there, we can collectively decide where we want to go with the committee and what specifics we want to go into.

In addition to that, I think it has been a good suggestion that we hear early from the department on where they're going and how much time we're going to have. Are we going to be dealing with legislation, or are we going to have some liberty to really do a productive study on a certain area that is of common interest and a priority to all of us?

Monsieur Paradis.

• (1230)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Paradis: Mr. Cardin spoke about getting an idea of where the department stands on certain issues and then deciding on an agenda and timetable. Since all points have been dealt with, either by Mr. Trost, Mr. Cullen or Mr. Cardin, I will dispense with any further discussion.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cullen again.

Hon. Roy Cullen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have a couple of things.

One, I think we need to hear from the department, but at some point I think it would be useful for either the minister or the parliamentary secretary to apprise the committee of what the plans and priorities are, because some of these decisions are political decisions as well, and what is the political agenda in terms of the natural resource sector.

Secondly, I don't know if I misunderstood you, Mr. Richardson, but I don't think I'm terribly prepared to have two months of briefings. I think we need to, maybe in the month of May, get up to speed on a bunch of issues. What I'd like to see in June is that we actually start tackling something.

There are some issues that are time sensitive, for instance, the softwood lumber deal. I know you probably have the same issues within your caucus. Who takes the lead on this? It's international trade. Yes, technically we know it's international trade, they're the negotiators, but whatever they negotiate impacts our natural resource economy and our forest products sector.

Maybe, Mr. Chair, there is an opportunity. I don't know. Is there a standing committee on international trade? I don't know if they will be looking at the softwood lumber proposal, because I think there are three to four months now before it's absolutely nailed down. Maybe we could do some joint work on it, but I don't want to wait until the fall to look at the softwood lumber deal, because it's going to be either a done deal or it's going to be not a done deal.

There is an issue there specifically around the anti-circumvention clause, which could mean that if it's not spelled out in detail.... I know the government is seized with this, but I think as parliamentarians it would be useful for us to have a look at the state of play there, because we know the reason for the anti-circumvention clause. It means to say that if governments, meaning provincial or federal, take retaliatory measures to compensate, let's say, for export taxes that click in.... But there are some on the U.S. side who, if the federal government, for example, decided to launch a program in terms of innovation in the forestry sector or skills development at the provincial level, whatever it is, would argue, sorry, that's breaching the softwood lumber deal.

I know the government is trying to thread the needle on this, but I think we should be a part of that threading of the needle and understanding of what it is. Maybe if there is a joint piece of work we could do with international trade, that would be good. I think it's useful to get all briefed up, but I don't see it being very useful if we spend May and June getting all briefed up. I think I'd like to see us getting briefed up, but then sometime, maybe at the end of May or thereabouts, saying okay, now is the time to zero in on the issues, particularly those that are time sensitive.

With respect to Mr. Ouellet and the other members, I agree with a lot of their ideas, but security of ports, in my judgment, would be outside the scope of this committee. I think we need to be careful about what we take on, but there is overlap. Natural resources overlaps with many issues, for instance, on climate change. We see that in the House every day, we know there is overlap. I think we need to be mindful of that, but not limited.

But when we start getting into national security issues, the only way I think we could look at that would be in respect of our interest in our natural resource economy infrastructure, maybe our natural resource assets, but it's something that's been looked at by public safety—our infrastructure assets.

My main point is let's get briefed up, but let's have a game plan, and let's deal with those issues that are time sensitive in a timely manner, like softwood lumber.

• (1235)

The Chair: My point is I really just want to get a consensus committee, so it's not driven from the chair. We want to establish our agenda as a committee, and sometimes it take a little longer that way.

Point well taken, and the committee will decide how soon we want to get into dealing with a specific issue.

Monsieur Cardin.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Cardin: Mr. Cullen has just raised an important point. Take, for example, softwood lumber. Live trees are considered to be a natural resource. Lumber is an industry concern. Lumber exports are a foreign trade issue. Sustainable development is an environmental consideration. Some issues that fall within this committee's mandate involve several departments.

First of all, it's important to avoid any duplication. Some matters fall within the scope of our mandate. In my opinion, that includes resources and sustainable development. We've skirted the issue of climate change which, although within our committee's mandate, also falls within the purview of the environment committee. We need to safeguard our renewable resources for the future, with an eye to sustainable development. Finite oil and mineral resources, as we well know, are not renewable resources. It's important to ensure that we sustain our natural resources for as long as possible, in the spirit of sustainable development.

As Mr. Cullen was saying earlier, we could discuss softwood lumber at considerable length, but that's also a topic that the industry and foreign trade committees will be taking up. As for the briefing session, I agree with him that it shouldn't take six months. We need to take stock of the situation, then identify departmental plans and urgent questions. Then we can turn our attention without further delay to the priorities that we have identified.

[English]

The Chair: I agree. I'm certainly getting it that the committee is anxious to get at it. We want to move along a little more quickly. That's certainly fair.

I'm thinking that we should try to get the department in sooner rather than later. I don't know if we could do it this week—that's pretty tight—but am I getting the sense that we want to have the minister come, or department officials? How do you want to handle that?

Mr. McGuinty, you're next on the list.

Mr. David McGuinty: Perhaps I can pick up on something else first and then come back to that.

[Translation]

Of course, everything is interconnected. Mr. Cardin has just shown that by going around the table once, each member was able to propose some important topics for discussion. As a rule, the various topics of discussion proposed are tied to our interests or responsibilities. However, do they constitute a sound basis for a working agenda for the committee?

• (1240)

[English]

With respect to going forward on the briefings, I agree with your view, Mr. Chairman, that it's important for us to get to a certain level of understanding before we dive into details about specific challenges. I'd like to see the department officials not only come and talk to us about the mandate of the department, with which we presumably are most centrally preoccupied, but also just remind us very quickly about the constitutional division of responsibilities and powers with respect to natural resources. I'd like to see them speak to

the sustainable development aspects of their responsibilities, as they cut across all the natural resource sectors.

I like the idea of the Energy Dialogue Group, but the challenge with the Energy Dialogue Group in isolation is that it is a purely industrial grouping. It does not bring in either consumer views or environmental views. I think we can buttress that and get a more wholesome view.

I'd like to see us start with the department and perhaps put the question to the department officials—as well as the minister, in due course—and anybody who would appear before us as witnesses on what are the salient questions they believe we should be addressing in this committee. What do they believe? These are full-time actors in the natural resource sector. They are the ones who probably know best. Is it a fiscal issue from a mining perspective. Is it a technological and scientific issue from an oil and gas perspective? Is it a regulatory issue from an environmental perspective, or ecological integrity?

I would rather see us flip it a little bit on its head, Mr. Chairman, and ask those who are appearing before us if they can help us think through what the salient questions might be. Of course, we'll ultimately go to the minister and ask the minister what his plans are and what his government's plans are in this regard. Is there some meat and potato that can be dropped on the table here?

Perhaps as soon as this Thursday we could have the departmental officials here to give us what I know already exists inside that large department. The work has been done. I'm sure it's been done for transition. I'm sure it's been done for the government and so on. I don't see why they couldn't come on Thursday and bring us up to speed just generally on questions. How big is this? What part of the GDP is it? Who's responsible for what under the Constitution?

The Chair: I think that's a very good question, and at this point it's really only a question of time. My understanding is that the department might prefer to come next week. But I think we can get them to come Thursday. I'm not sure of the minister's schedule, but we don't need to have the minister to get into the kinds of points Mr. McGuinty has just talked about. That is generally the mandate of the natural resources department. I think these constitutional questions are a very interesting point with regard to jurisdictions, the federal-provincial issues as they relate to natural resources.

If there is a consensus, let's try to get the department in here on Thursday. I know they can give us a limited version. As you say, they've had to brief a new minister and a change of government. If we can get the minister to lead that off, we will, but in any event, we will try to get the department here on Thursday. Is that generally agreeable to everyone? That's how we start out?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: I'd also like to continue the other notion of seeking your suggestions as to groups, topics that we may want to be briefed on over the course of the next few weeks. I think Mr. Cullen's suggestion seems to be accepted by people, that we maybe move this agenda up a little in terms of getting further briefings; we may get that done in May and then start into June with a specific topic. Fair enough.

But I'd like to hear from everybody on Thursday too, even at the start of the meeting, or we could have a brief in camera session at the end of the meeting, to seek your input as to who else we might want to be briefed by. We'll start on Thursday, if at all possible, with the department. There are some obvious ones that come up with regard to the larger industries—mining, oil and gas, and that sort of thing, because they have industry associations. Those would be useful. I want to hear everybody's thoughts on who else they might want to have—if there are NGOs, if there are private sector groups or others that have an interest, such as water, for example, or sustainable development. Let's get your ideas, specific or general.

Mr. Allen.

•(1245)

Mr. Mike Allen: I have a couple of points that concern me. One, we're going to have no choice around this, but on departmental policy, and I would assume departmental estimates and private members' bills, we're going to have to handle those as a matter of course. The other thing is that every time you break yourself into a department or a committee or something, you create a silo, and that concerns me a little, because when we talk about our energy future, it links so much with the environment, it links with agriculture, and it links with forestry.

Being relatively new to this committee process—or completely new to this committee process—I'd just like to understand how we stay integrated with all those other committees and don't get ourselves in a mess. I see in the past we haven't necessarily integrated our energy and our environmental policy very well. I think in the future we're going to have to have a big focus on that.

So that's a concern I have, and I'm hopeful we'll be able to address how we integrate with other committees as well.

The Chair: Mr. Cullen, you can start the wrap-up.

Hon. Roy Cullen: On that point, I think I agree with you, Mike, that we need to stay focused in terms of our primary mission. But there's so much overlap in natural resources.

With respect to Mr. Cardin, if you look at, let's say, forestry, there's the growing of trees, there's the processing of trees, and then there are trade agreements. If we apply that so rigidly, I think we wouldn't be fulfilling our responsibilities. I think if you look at softwood lumber, whatever is done there will heavily impact the natural resource economy.

So if we could use as a guiding principle any issue or any policy matter that can impact on the natural resource sector, or that the natural resource sector is driving, it should be of interest to this committee. Then it's a question of do we do it jointly? Is another committee working on it? I think we'd be remiss in just applying a very limited parameter to that.

I think having the department here on Thursday is good. They do have a whole deck, believe me, and they can do that on Thursday, I'm sure. Then at some point I think the minister will come for the estimates, or is it the priorities and plans? I'm not sure of the timing or sequencing of all that, but at least we should get the minister here at some point.

In the interim, I wonder if we could ask the parliamentary secretary to feed into this committee what the general sense of the program of the government is that could take up some time of the committee. That would be helpful.

I think we should get the minister here. When would the minister be called, for example, for the estimates? What's the timing on that?

The Clerk: The committee has to report back by November 10.

Hon. Roy Cullen: On November 10.

The Clerk: We have to wait on the reports on plans and priorities that we anticipate at some point.

The Clerk: That's—

Hon. Roy Cullen: When will they be tabled? There's nothing in the spring, before the House recesses for the summer, that would cause the minister to be called to the committee for estimates or the reports on plans and priorities or anything like that, is that right?

The Chair: No, not yet. I've spoken to the minister and he's quite amenable to come to the committee earlier on; it's just a question of working out the schedule. We have a representative of the department here, but we haven't got the schedule yet.

I think we can safely presume that we're going to hear from the department on Thursday. We'll start at 11 o'clock with a briefing from the department, with essentially their mandate and perhaps constitutional jurisdictions, whatever, but essentially their mandate, from the department's perspective, what it is this department does specifically. Then we'll get into how it relates to Environment and other departments, International Trade, whatever.

Let's start at 11 o'clock on Thursday with the department officials. Perhaps we should ask them for an hour and a half of their time. We may have some questions, but I think generally we'll probably go for the first hour with an information session and then allow some questions. But my sense is that most of the questions would probably relate to seeking further clarifications of matters, or written responses, rather than things they had been asked.

Let's have an open dialogue. We'll have them start off with maybe 40 minutes of briefing on Thursday and then have an open dialogue with the committee, if that's amenable to people. We'll wrap that up within the first 90 minutes so we would have 30 minutes at the end of that meeting to perhaps continue a general discussion of agenda setting and priorities. If it's agreeable to the committee, I suggest that maybe that last 30 minutes on Thursday be in camera, wherein we can decide what we want to do with the future committee meetings.

Is that agreeable to everybody?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Then let's start off on the right foot and get done early.

Is there any further business before we adjourn for today?

Great. Thank you very much. We'll see you Thursday at 11 o'clock.

This meeting is adjourned.

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