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Mr. Merv Tweed

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•(1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Merv Tweed (Brandon—Souris, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone. This is meeting number 33 of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. You have the orders of the day.

We have a notice of motion from Mr. Julian, and then I suggest to the committee that we might go in camera to discuss the results of the subcommittee meeting of earlier this week, and also to review the witness list that we've prepared and talked about on Bill C-6.

At the subcommittee meeting we talked about Mr. Julian's motion and allocated 30 minutes for it. I would defer to Mr. Julian and ask him to bring it forward.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I move the motion of which I have given notice. I won't take 30 minutes, even though Mr. Jean sometimes accuses me of wanting to take a lot of time for speeches.

The circumstances are pretty clear. CBC reported on December 20 that on the Thanksgiving weekend there was a significant gap in security at Toronto's Pearson Airport. Essentially, what CBC reported was that about 250,000 passengers were rushed through with either minimal or no screening. An investigational report produced by Transport Canada says that the security screening process was circumvented; in some cases it was abandoned altogether. For example, on October 10, no bags were searched, and x-ray images were largely ignored. On October 11, strollers were allowed through the screening point without being searched.

So essentially, there's no doubt that on Thanksgiving weekend at Toronto's Pearson Airport, the security systems essentially broke down, and screening was not undertaken.

That report appeared on December 20. On December 21 Mr. Cannon said he was launching an inquiry into that security lapse, but it is important to note that prior to that story breaking, on November 6, CATSA basically announced, through Garda World Security, which is responsible for security at Toronto's Pearson Airport, that... Garda World Security announced it had won an extension of its current screening operations at 28 airports, worth about \$220 million. That extension was for two years, from April 1, 2007, until March 31, 2009.

I think it's very clear this is a responsibility of this committee. Here we had a serious security lapse. We've also had a contract

renewal that took place after the security lapse. The minister was looking into the issue. I believe it would be important to have the minister come before this committee to answer questions about how this occurred and what the follow-up has been.

The Chair: Are there comments?

Monsieur Laframboise.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): I'm going to support Mr. Julian's motion, because the issue of airport security is beginning to get to me, in particular relations between CATSA and the private security firm Garda. A laissez-faire attitude seems to have set in when it comes to Garda, the firm in charge of security. Furthermore, I'm starting to get a little concerned about past relations between Mr. Duchesneau and Garda. If security is threatened because of this laissez-faire attitude, then we have a problem, one that I hope we can resolve. Therefore, I support Mr. Julian's motion requesting the responsible officials be invited to testify about the events that transpired. I hope the problem is not related to CATSA's lax approach.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Volpe.

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for the welcome.

I agree with Mr. Julian. Having a breach of security of that size needs, at the very least, an explanation. I'm not sure who the best person to provide that explanation would be, but certainly the accountability rests with the minister, and I suppose with the president of CATSA.

At the very least, we ought to be able to get an indication of what it was that was breached, how it was breached, and what measures were taken to correct the breach. Secondly, I can't imagine that we wouldn't have an interest, on the public's behalf, in understanding what process was followed to renew the contract for Garda, given the fact that you had this breach not once but twice.

I think at the very least we need to support Mr. Julian's motion to see whether we can get some straight answers on this. If there's actually more to this than meets the eye—one would hope there isn't—at the very least we ought to then be able to assure the public that the breach was one-time, minimal, and of little consequence.

In the absence of that kind of information, I don't see how anybody could have anything other than an alarmist view of what has transpired.

The Chair: Mr. Jean.

Mr. Brian Jean (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC): Quite frankly, we have the same concerns from this side, especially having heard the newspaper reports and heard about other situations that were taking place.

This is a two-part motion, and I'd like to speak to both parts. I think both are important, but we have to look at the business reality involved with them.

Mr. Julian, just to confirm, I've never said that you give long speeches; I've just said that you filibuster things in order to not have to deal with things such as Bill C-6, which is of course coming before us. I've heard rumours that you want to put it off and put off the work of the committee, which bothers me with motions such as this.

The first part of the inquiry deals with the failure of the security system, which is under investigation, as you know. The minister launched an investigation immediately thereafter. The department will not comment on particular investigations that are still ongoing, and that's the situation there.

I have received an undertaking from the department that as soon as the investigation is finished they will notify me, and I am to notify the committee immediately, and at that time they can comment on it. That's the first part.

The second part of this particular motion deals with a private company. Garda is a private company, and CATSA will not comment specifically on contracts between them and why they make purchasing or management decisions as to why they assign or do not renew contracts or renew contracts. I don't see how we can compel them to do so, but certainly I would suggest a private corporation should not be obligated to do so, especially in a situation where it's bidding on contracts.

In summary, we can't support the motion as it is, but certainly if the committee wants notice of when it's finished, I have received affirmation from the department that they will notify me, and I am to immediately notify the committee, and then we can get cooperation from the department to provide information. But as past ministers know—we have two here—they cannot comment on ongoing investigations.

• (1540)

The Chair: Mr. Volpe.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I didn't say we were asking for a comment on an ongoing investigation.

The issue really is that since the occurrence took place in the middle of October, it now being the middle of February, you have passengers who either need to have a sense that the security measures are necessary—and if they're necessary, that they're effective—or have to be told that all of those security measures are unnecessary, because we can't even identify how long it takes to determine whether they are effective or not.

Certainly from October to now is more than enough time to have investigated what went wrong. There's no reason we can't find that out now. Having an open-ended terminus for when this thing will be ready is just unacceptable, quite frankly. We couldn't, on this side of

the table, for a moment suggest that this is really a good answer and that we'll be happy with it.

So the answer is no, I think we'd still need to have the minister and/or CATSA here to explain that breach and do it ASAP.

Secondly, with respect to the business relationship, I beg to differ. Canadians are paying a security fee. I know it's going into consolidated general revenue, but it's what is supposed to be paying for CATSA. The general public has an immediate interest in understanding what it is about the relationship between Garda and CATSA and the Minister of Transport that would have satisfied a business model that said performance doesn't matter. Unless we have an indication that the investigation is satisfactory, I couldn't imagine any business model accepting that the services that were supposed to be rendered not being rendered makes it okay to renew a contract.

The Chair: Monsieur Laframboise.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Laframboise: I'm having a hard time understanding. My comments are directed to the parliamentary secretary, because he should be comfortable with this subject matter. The Liberals created a situation when they decided to put domestic security in the hands of a private firm.

You're telling us that we cannot question representatives of CATSA when the head of this agency had ties with Garda and a laissez-faire attitude has prevailed. There have been security breaches. Contracts are being renewed and parliamentarians are being told that they cannot ask questions about Canada's domestic security.

I'm having trouble accepting this, Mr. Jean, but I don't want you to feel uncomfortable. The Liberals have created a situation that greatly concerns me. I'm trying to understand your message, but I think CATSA representatives should account to the committee for the contracts awarded by the agency. Security breaches have occurred. Why should these firms' contracts be renewed when they failed to do the job on several occasions?

I think that in such instances, we should be allowed to ask questions. I'm prepared to discuss this with you if you ask for an in camera meeting or if you want us to bring in certain measures, but I can't quite get my head around the fact that it's impossible for parliamentarians to have discussions with the people responsible for domestic security, ostensibly because we're dealing with a private firm.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Bélanger is next.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Maybe you were right at the offset; perhaps allocating half an hour for this was the right course. Thanks for the welcome, as well.

I wish to pick up on what Mr. Jean mentioned. He referred to having two ministers here—two ex-ministers, or current privy councillors. As such, Mr. Chair, I am quite obliged by Mr. Jean's desire to be helpful, but in my estimation, a committee need not have an intermediary to have information sent to it. If we as a committee—through you, Mr. Chair—accept a motion and request that someone come and talk to us or tell us about the current status of an investigation, without talking about the investigation per se, surely to God there's generic information that can be shared with the committee. Again, I'm sure that if the minister and his parliamentary secretary wish to advise us, they should; that's fine, but we don't necessarily need the information to be conveyed through them.

So I certainly intend to support this motion, and I think if the investigators are not done, they might be able to tell us when they expect to be done and answer some generic questions. If not, then we'll deal with that at the time. A committee has authority—I mean, we are mandated by the House of Commons to have an oversight function over the government and its administration, and what is before us is purely acceptable in terms of that mandate.

In terms of the contract, again, if somebody wishes to tell us they don't want to tell us information, I'd want them to come and tell us that themselves. Again, I suspect that on a particular individual contract, there might be some reticence. I can understand some of that, but surely there's also some generic information, some policy questions, that can be asked that may not pertain specifically to a contract but might be very enlightening.

So on both counts I think the resistance we're sensing from Mr. Jean is not meritorious, and I certainly will therefore support the motion before us.

• (1545)

The Chair: Mr. Dhaliwal is next.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My intent is to support the motion by Mr. Julian as well. When I look at this, it's very disturbing to see that so many innocent Canadians were put at risk by the act of this Garda World Security Corporation. When we look at this, there's nothing wrong with giving a contract to a private agency—I come from private free enterprise and I believe in that—but at the same time, it is their duty to do a job with full morals and with ethics as well. I personally see that in a breach of security we should bring someone here who can answer to us, and then we can answer to fellow Canadians who were put at risk.

So I'm going to support this motion.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Jean.

Mr. Brian Jean: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to take a step back. I was thinking of the Greek terminology to say “Don't shoot the messenger”, but I couldn't think of it. I'm sure Mr. Bélanger could come up with it.

First of all, let's talk about the situation and the motive that brings this motion forward, and think about who might be bringing it forward or why there might be pressure to bring it forward at this time, and I'm not going to debate that issue. Also, as Mr.

Laframboise said and made very obvious, what could be the bad part in the government's allowing this to happen and leaving the Liberals out to dry? I certainly would have a nice smile on my face at the end of the day because there's a bit more ammunition.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: There's no partisanship.

Mr. Brian Jean: There's no partisanship, of course not.

So think about the motive from this side of the table. We'd be happy to bring this forward, but I want to be clear. They're not going to comment on the business relationship—that's my understanding—and it's not about the security itself; it's not about what steps have been taken, but about the particular incident that took place that day, and if this goes forward, that's not an issue. I just think it's going to be, quite frankly, a waste of time for the committee, except from a general context. We've already supported the motion in relation to Montreal, and we're supporting the motion to deal with railway safety and the motion to deal with airport security in a general context, but we've got a specific incident that took place here, and an ongoing investigation. My understanding is that they're not going to comment on an ongoing investigation because they can't, because it would compromise the situation of the investigation.

I don't know how long it takes to do an investigation, but I've seen how fast these matters have moved under the Liberal government, and I think this is a very speedy process so far.

The situation is this. If you want to pass the motion, feel free to pass it. I don't think it's going to be constructive. I would suggest that we put it in with the issue of Montreal or some other issue at the same time.

• (1550)

The Chair: Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Jean is, I think, raising other questions that as far as I'm concerned reinforce what the other members have said about the importance of moving forward on this. He talked about tendering a renewal of a contract. There's no indication that there was any tendering or renewal of the contract itself, just an announcement of a contract extension.

Another question that is extremely important is when the investigation began. Did it begin before or after the contract extension? It didn't come through a tendering process.

So there are a number of questions, and the more the parliamentary secretary speaks, the more I think it becomes evident that we need to have the minister come here to answer these kinds of questions. I certainly agree with some of my colleagues that CATSA as well has questions to answer.

I disagree completely with any idea that this committee has no mandate to investigate these kinds of situations. I feel quite the contrary: this is our responsibility. That's why we're elected to Parliament, to oversee.

When we see concerns such as a quarter of a million people receiving at best rudimentary screening, then it is our responsibility to say, whoa, there's a problem here. What has the government done about it? How are these contracts extended without tender? When are the investigations put into place, when serious security breaches like this are identified?

These are all questions that need to come forward, and I agree with my colleagues on this side that this is an important motion.

The Chair: Mr. Fast.

Mr. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Mr. Chair, I have one question of Mr. Julian, and then a comment.

The motion really requests that the committee inquire into the failure of the security system at Toronto International Airport. My question to Mr. Julian is, what do you see as the scope of this inquiry? Are you suggesting that numerous witnesses be called from the airport, perhaps from the union, from the contractor, from government? Is there a limit to this?

I am getting used to this process of delay from you. We just saw it yesterday in the House: another four motions on material that had already been addressed at committee stage, just dredging up and rehashing the same old stuff again.

I'm looking at the number of motions we haven't yet acted on. We're talking about a future meeting with Canada Post; we're talking about looking at the Toronto Port Authority, about which your colleague brought forward a motion; we're looking at—what do we have here?—infrastructure; we're supposed to be addressing rail safety. And that's in between Bill C-6 and the freight provisions that we still want to bring forward.

Security is important, and I don't want in any way to diminish the value of it.

Mr. Peter Julian: You just have.

Mr. Ed Fast: No, I have not; I'm not diminishing it. But if there is an existing investigation ongoing within the ministry to determine what the cause of the security failure was and what steps should be taken, for us now to get involved in a parallel process, which will simply delay other work at this table, bothers me.

Perhaps you could explain what the scope of the inquiry you're looking at is.

The Chair: Very briefly.

Mr. Peter Julian: Well, Mr. Chair, I would be pleased to answer, but I will make the comment that, as the member well knows, the report stage amendments were largely brought forward by the government, so there was no delay yesterday in the House. Indeed, if anything, it was the minister's own bringing forward of motions that led to the report stage motion, as the member knows—

Mr. Ed Fast: Housekeeping ones, not substantive ones.

Mr. Peter Julian: —so I'll correct him on that, and I hope he understands the difference.

Secondly, you've heard from members on this side of the committee what the scope is, to begin with. Certainly, the minister and a couple of the members have mentioned CATSA, and that is, I think, the scope to begin with. Members of this committee have the opportunity after that to decide whether they want to enlarge the scope or whether they're satisfied with the answers.

The Chair: Mr. Zed.

Mr. Paul Zed (Saint John, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I simply want to remind all honourable members that this is our job: to review ministerial decisions, government decisions. Our names were on the ballot, and at the end of the day that's our responsibility.

So in fact there would be no parallel process. This is the ultimate responsibility for the people of Canada, and I call the question on Mr. Julian's motion.

• (1555)

The Chair: I'm advised that for procedural reasons you can't do that.

Mr. Paul Zed: Well, I'll call it now then.

The Chair: I'm advised that you can't.

Go ahead, Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

When I look at this, as Mr. Zed said, this is our job. In fact, I would go even further; it's our duty to answer to Canadians, and this is the best way. I don't see anything...because when there's a major breach in security, it is not a matter of delaying the process; in fact, it is answering the Canadians for whom we are elected. I personally think we should support this unanimously and let the answers be here so that we can report to Canadians.

The Chair: I'm certainly prepared to call the question. Does anyone else have any other comments?

The vote is on the motion put forward by Mr. Julian.

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

The Chair: In anticipation of Mr. Julian's motion, I asked our analyst to prepare a briefing on some of the issues that we will now be looking at following this motion. It will give us a background and a history on it.

Mr. Paul Zed: Do we read this now, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: I'm just going to circulate it so that you have it. You certainly don't have to comment on it today. It will come to you electronically as well.

Now, as I stated earlier, with the committee business that we're going to discuss, I think we will go in camera for the rest of the meeting, if that's suitable to the committee. We can discuss the committee business and the witness list.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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