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• (0905)

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Mrs. Angela Crandall): Honourable members of the committee, order.

[Translation]

I see a quorum.

[English]

We can now proceed to the election of the chair.

[Translation]

I am ready to receive motions for the election of the Chair.

[English]

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): I nominate Pierre Lemieux.

The Clerk: Are there any other nominations?

The question before the committee is that Mr. Lemieux be elected chair of the committee. Is everyone agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Clerk: Is it the will of the committee to proceed to the election of the vice-chairs?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Clerk: The order of the House creating this committee says that there will be three vice-chairs, one from each opposition party. I'm now ready to receive motions for the first vice-chair.

Mr. Rae.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): I nominate Mr. Bryon Wilfert.

An hon. member: He's not here.

Hon. Bob Rae: No, but that's why we nominated him.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Bob Rae: Do you want to tell him about it? I'm not going to tell him. I don't have the heart to tell him.

The Clerk: Are there any other nominations?

The question before the committee is that Mr. Bryon Wilfert be elected the first vice-chair for the official opposition. Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Clerk: I'll accept motions for the second vice-chair.

Mr. Bachand.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): I nominate Vivian Barbot.

[English]

The Clerk: Are there any other nominations?

The motion before the committee is that Madame Vivian Barbot be elected second vice-chair of the committee. All in favour?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Clerk: I'll accept motions for the third vice-chair.

Mr. Bachand.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I nominate Dawn Black.

[English]

The Clerk: Are there any other nominations?

The motion before the committee is that Ms. Dawn Black be third vice-chair. All in favour?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Clerk: Mr. Lemieux, would you like to take the chair, please?

The Chair (Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC)): First of all, colleagues, thank you for the great honour in electing me as chair of this committee. I certainly look forward to being your chair and to the good work the committee will do.

I would like to just highlight a few things. The first is with regard to the Manley report. One of the important statements in the Manley report is that the panel is convinced that the Canadian objectives in Afghanistan are both honourable and achievable. I believe we all believe that, as parliamentarians, particularly given the debate we've had in the House.

I'd also like to refresh our memories regarding the passed motion that had an influence over bringing this committee together. The particular paragraph reads as follows:

that, the special parliamentary committee on Afghanistan should review the laws and procedures governing the use of operational and national security exceptions for the withholding of information from Parliament, the Courts and the Canadian people with those responsible for administering those laws and procedures, to ensure that Canadians are being provided with ample information on the conduct and progress of the mission;

This is in keeping, I think, with another recommendation that was made by the Manley panel; namely, that the government and Parliament foster open and positive communication, both within Parliament and with the Canadian people.

Just before we move on, I'll give you a little bit of my own history. I served in the military for 20 years. I joined at the young age of 17. I served in the Canadian army in the branch of the electrical-mechanical engineers for 20 years. It was a great honour to serve in our Canadian Forces, and again, it's a great honour to be your chair with that sort of experience.

We have just convened the first official meeting of the Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan. Before we tackle the routine motions, why don't we settle on when would be the most convenient times for us to meet as a committee. We can perhaps also settle on the regularity with which we will meet as a committee.

I will open the floor to my colleagues to discuss this particular matter.

Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Was there a proposal for Wednesday between 6 and 8?

The Chair: We have a proposal for meeting on Wednesday evenings from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Hon. Bob Rae: We have an internal committee meeting, but we could change that if it needs to be done. We could do that.

So are you suggesting we meet only once a week?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Yes, unless something happens that requires a special meeting; otherwise, normally and as a routine, once a week.

The Chair: We have a proposal on the floor for meeting once a week on Wednesdays from 6 o'clock to 8 o'clock.

Is there any other discussion on this matter?

Hon. Bob Rae: The only trouble with the 6 o'clock time, Mr. Chairman, is that it gets eaten up by votes on Wednesday nights. I wonder whether we could say 6:30, maybe, and agree to go to 8:30.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Yes, that's fine.

The Chair: Then it's 6:30 to 8:30. Is that okay?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Bob Rae: I'd just like an informal understanding, in any event, that if there are votes that take us to 7 o'clock, we'd sit for two hours; that we understand we would keep going for two hours.

The Chair: I think that's the aim.

The aim is to meet for two hours, then, once a week, Wednesday evenings from 6:30 to 8:30, unless the beginning is delayed by votes, in which case we would start a little bit later.

We'll start through the routine motions. The first is for the services of analysts from the Library of Parliament. The motion reads:

● (0910)

[Translation]

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 it in its work.

[English]

Is there any discussion on this particular point?

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Do we need a mover for it?

The Chair: Yes, we should have a mover for that.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: So moved.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hawn.

Is there any discussion on this particular motion?

(Motion agreed to)

[Translation]

The Chair: The second one reads:

That the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure be composed of the Chair, the three Vice-Chairs and a member of the Conservative Party.

[English]

I need a proposer for this motion.

Thank you, Mr. MacKenzie.

Is there any discussion?

Mr. Keddy.

Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC): Mr. Chair, the only discussion would be that a member of the whip's staff be present at that subcommittee meeting. That's the only addition.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Most of the whips are going to be there anyway.

The Chair: I think this is in fact covered under "Staff at *in camera* meetings". The subcommittee meetings would be in camera meetings.

Thank you for the remark; we will arrive there in due course.

Is there any other discussion on this point?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The motion for distribution of documents is:

That the clerks of the committee be authorized to distribute documents to members of the committee and only when such documents exist in both official languages.

I need a proposer for this motion.

Yes.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): This is just a point of frustration more than anything else. I'm sure this committee will be the exception rather than the rule, but in pretty well every committee I have ever sat on, the documents arrive about the same time as the committee starts, and it's very frustrating. My preference is to read material in advance. I don't know whether you can do it through your clerk or whether it should be a rule of the committee so that people have some discipline about this, but I would have thought that a rule of 24 hours in advance for document distribution is not such a bad rule. I appreciate that there are difficulties with witnesses, etc., but if you don't impose the discipline on yourself, then nothing will happen.

I'm not a member of this committee, but I offer that as an observation, from being 10 years here.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Black.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): I would support Mr. McKay's intervention, because I know in the past—it was routine a number of years ago in Parliament—you received the documentation at least the day before the meeting. I don't know whether we need a motion to the effect that we receive it 24 hours in advance, but I'm prepared to move that motion in support of it.

The Chair: Okay. After consultation with the clerk, let me just frame this discussion. I think it's a valid point. As parliamentarians, we all like to receive our material early so that we can be fully prepared for the meetings.

I think there are probably two issues at play. Number one is with respect to the witnesses and their key information, that is, when exactly do they deliver their material to the committee? Is it important for the committee to have that material, I think is the fundamental question.

And the second issue, which the clerk was just mentioning to me, is the issue of translation. Oftentimes the witnesses submit documents in one official language. We are able to provide translation services to ensure that they are in both official languages for the meeting. However, that does take time.

So if we do end up amending this particular routine motion so that witnesses' material be provided 24 hours in advance, I think the fundamental question is whether it will block us from getting written information from witnesses that we might find valuable.

That's my point, and I'll open the floor once again.

Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: When we're only meeting once a week, it should alleviate part of the problem with some witnesses being late, and so on. But when we're getting briefings from departmental officials or whomever, I think it's a reasonable rule that they provide us with their material 24 hours in advance, because they know they're coming and they have the staff to do it. Their material can come here already translated.

That would at least legislate part of this.

• (0915)

The Chair: Mr. Keddy.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: I agree with Mr. Hawn's statement, especially the fact that we'll be meeting once a week—at least in the beginning. The only thing I would add to that is, “whenever possible”, because there may be times when it won't be possible to get the material 24 hours in advance. This would give the clerk and our assistants a bit of leeway.

The Chair: Good. Thank you, Mr. Keddy.

Monsieur Patry.

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): I fully agree with Mr. Keddy, in the sense that if it's a department, they know the rules and they need to come out right away with their material in both official languages. They know the rules, whether it's Foreign Affairs or Defence.

But if you already have a witness in town who is coming here with prepared text, we cannot ask him to come up with bilingual text at the time. He's going to read his text, and we're going to deliver the text as translated, as we usually do.

I agree with the words “whenever possible”, because it's not always possible.

The Chair: Right.

Ms. Black.

Ms. Dawn Black: I'm just a little bit worried that it will be like a Greyhound bus loophole in not asking that it be provided in translated form, because people will say, well, sorry, it's not possible.

I know it was routinely done 10 or 12 years ago in Parliament, when you always got witness testimony or a précis of what they were going to say the day before the meeting. So it can be done; it was done in the past.

Perhaps instead of saying “whenever possible”, we could put in some other phrase. But if we don't ask for this in a serious way, I don't think it's going to happen.

An hon. member: It's an obligation.

The Chair: Okay. I'll just make one final comment that there is no obligation for witnesses to provide written materials, which means that if it's onerous to do so, they may just decide not to distribute written material, which might be to our disadvantage.

To bring this discussion to a conclusion, we have a routine motion on the floor concerning the distribution of documents. Would anyone like to propose an amendment to that motion?

If yes, fine; if not, we'll just move on to the vote on the routine motion.

Ms. Black.

Ms. Dawn Black: I would move an amendment that unless there are exceptional circumstances, we should receive the witness testimony 24 hours in advance.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: I'd like to say, “in practice”—

Ms. Dawn Black: Okay.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: It would not tie anybody down. If we just say “in practice”, it would mean that it is the practice of the committee to have documents in advance.

The Chair: So that's a friendly amendment you're proposing, Mr. Obhrai.

The motion is that the practice of the committee will be that unless there are exceptional circumstances, written materials will be distributed to members at least 24 hours in advance of the meeting.

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you very much, colleagues.

Next is the motion on working meals.

[*Translation*]

We will now deal with the motion on working meals. It reads:

That the clerks of the committee be authorized to make the necessary arrangements to provide working meals for the committee and its subcommittees.

Indeed, we will meet at dinner time. This will be the case on a regular basis. I will have a personal talk with the chef.

[*English*]

First I need someone to move the motion.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mrs. Boucher.

Do we need to discuss it? Who is in favour? Who is against?

(Motion agreed to)

[*English*]

Merci beaucoup.

On witnesses' expenses, the motion reads:

That, if requested, reasonable travel, accommodation and living expenses be reimbursed to witnesses, not exceeding two (2) representatives per organization; and that, in exceptional circumstances, payment for more representatives be made at the discretion of the Chair.

I need someone to move this, please.

Mr. MacKenzie, thank you.

Is there any discussion on this routine motion?

(Motion agreed to)

Hon. Bob Rae: Is there anything here we object to? Why don't we just move the whole gamut?

• (0920)

The Chair: I think we should just go through it quickly. We have three more to go through. It'll take us a few minutes.

Concerning staff at in camera meetings, the motion would be:

That, unless otherwise ordered, each Committee member be allowed to be accompanied by one staff person at *in camera* meetings; and, that a representative of the Whip's office of each party be allowed to attend *in camera* meetings.

We have Monsieur Bachand.

Mr. Claude Bachand: I'm just proposing it.

The Chair: *Merci, Monsieur Bachand.*

Is there any discussion?

Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Because of the fact that I hold two positions, both for CIDA and for Foreign Affairs, I would propose that I have two staff come; otherwise, one staff will have too much work.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: It's not a bad idea.

The Chair: Is that a serious amendment, Mr. Obhrai?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Yes, because otherwise I would have a problem with one staffer being overburdened.

Hon. Bob Rae: You're not serious.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: We're going to vote him down.

The Chair: Do you want to propose that amendment or not?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: No.

The Chair: Moving on....

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: For in camera meeting transcripts, it is:

That one copy of the transcript of each *in camera* meeting be kept in a Committee Clerk's office for consultation by members of the Committee.

I need someone to propose that.

Thank you, Mr. Hawn.

Is there any discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: On notice of motions, it is:

That 48 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 Clerks of the Committee and distributed to members in both official languages.

This is moved by Ms. Black.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We have one other motion here. Everyone has it in front of them. This is the allocation of time for witnesses' presentations and the questioning of witnesses:

That, at the discretion of the Chair, witnesses be given ten (10) minutes to make their opening statement;

And that, at the discretion of the Chair, during the questioning of witnesses the time allocated to each questioner be as follows:

1st round (seven minutes each): Liberal, Bloc Québécois, NDP, Conservative

2nd round (five minutes each): Liberal, Conservative, Bloc Québécois, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative

And that when a minister is in attendance the order and time allocation for questioning witnesses be the same as above, with the exception that in the first round of questioning ten (10) minutes be allocated to each questioner of each party.

Is there any discussion on this point?

Yes, Ms. Black.

Ms. Dawn Black: I know this is modelled after the process that's used in the defence committee, but it's not the process that's used at many other committees, including the foreign affairs committee.

Everything in Parliament is allocated on party representation in the House, and this method of deciding the questioners is not allocated on party representation in the House.

My point is, in the second round, as a member of the New Democratic Party, I don't get an opportunity to ask a question. I would prefer to see an allocation of the time more in keeping with the majority of committees in the House of Commons, whereby the New Democratic Party does get an opportunity in the second round.

The Chair: That's a good point. Thank you very much.

You're quite right, every committee is different in the way in which it operates, so I open the floor for discussion on this matter.

We have Monsieur Patry.

Mr. Bernard Patry: There's no problem with this. We agree to give another spot to the NDP. We fully agree with this.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Rae.

Hon. Bob Rae: As long as Ms. Black promises to ask constructive and positive questions....

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll need an amendment, so that we know exactly what we're talking about here—where we would like to slot this in.

Do we have an amendment—perhaps from Ms. Black, on what you're thinking of when you say this?

Ms. Dawn Black: I don't know how the rotation works on the foreign affairs committee, but could we model it on something like that?

Do you have it with you?

It would be the fifth one down in the second round—is that right?—after the Conservative Party.

The Chair: So it would go Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Conservative, NDP.

Ms. Dawn Black: Yes.

The Chair: You're now in position five?

Ms. Dawn Black: Yes, in the second round.

● (0925)

Mr. Bernard Patry: We're giving the Bloc and the NDP the same amount of time as the official opposition. We should go Liberal, Conservative, Bloc Québécois, Conservative, Liberal, then NDP.

The Chair: We have Monsieur Patry recommending that the NDP slot come after the Liberal slot, not before it.

Is there any other discussion on the point of where the NDP should be sitting in this roster?

We need a formal amendment that we can actually vote on.

Mr. Patry.

Mr. Bernard Patry: Yes, that's the amendment.

The Chair: Did you propose an amendment, Ms. Black, or was it more of a suggestion?

Ms. Dawn Black: I simply opened the discussion.

The Chair: You opened the discussion, so we go over to Mr. Patry.

We have a formal amendment that the NDP position be in slot number six, right after the second Liberal round of questions.

Is there any discussion on this point?

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Is it the number seven slot?

The Chair: They become number seven, yes, that's right.

All in favour of the amendment—

Some hon. members: No, no.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: No, we have some confusion. It's number six.

The Chair: Oh, I'm sorry; it's my mistake. You're right, it's number six. Thank you for the clarification. I'll be taking remedial math right after this meeting.

Is there any discussion on the NDP filling slot six?

All in favour of the amendment, please signify.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: I have a point.

The Chair: Mr. Obhrai, you're 30 seconds behind us. What's up?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: After the last one, with the Conservatives, is it done, or should we have more time?

The Chair: It's a valid question. Oftentimes we can go past two rounds of questioning; we can move into a third and a fourth round.

Hon. Bob Rae: I would say it should be on the same basis as the second round.

The Chair: We start over then?

All right. We'll draw a line after the NDP and we'll just recycle that list.

Hon. Bob Rae: I just want to go on record, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Rae.

Hon. Bob Rae: I think we should conduct ourselves in a completely fair and collegial way in this committee. I don't think any of us is going to deny a space to anybody else. I think we should try to be constructive and get on with it. I'm certainly not going to exclude a member from asking a question.

The Chair: It's a good point, and I think we are working in a collegial manner. But it is good to map it out, because we never know what witnesses will be in front of us and what the tone of the meeting will be—hopefully always positive. I think it's fair to map it out.

What we've done is add the NDP to position six. We've removed “Conservative, Liberal, Conservative” at the very end, because we'll just recycle up to the top and come back down.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: So are we going back to the top of round two?

The Chair: Yes, round two.

On the amendment, all in favour, please signify.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: All in favour of the motion as amended, please signify.

Yes, Mr. Patry.

Mr. Bernard Patry: I have just one comment about the last wording. It says that “ten (1) minutes be allocated to each questioner”. It’s “to each party”, because we could divide our time between two members.

The Chair: Yes, right there it says “to each questioner of each party”.

Oh yes, I understand: if you split your time. That’s fair; we’ll take out the words “each questioner of”.

Is there any discussion on that point?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay, we have consensus on that, so that’s done.

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

The Chair: All right, we’ve put all that in motion. We have a subcommittee in place.

My recommendation would be first of all to thank you all, once again, for having selected me as chair, and secondly, for having worked so well at this first, opening meeting.

Hon. Bob Rae: I have just one point, Mr. Chairman.

The foreign affairs committee is just completing its study on Afghanistan. Its report is coming down. As much as possible, I think, we want to make sure there’s no duplication or overlap of our work and theirs. I think it’s important for us to be working with that committee. I know that some of the staff will overlap, but it’s important for us to take advantage of the work of that committee and not simply go back to square one. The same thing is true of the defence committee’s work.

We just need to figure out what’s been done. That will then help us to establish our agenda. I certainly have no intention of duplicating the work that’s been done by the foreign affairs committee or the work that’s been done by the defence committee.

The steering committee can look at that.

The Chair: It’s a good point. We’re going to be working cooperatively amongst ourselves but also with other committees, and we don’t want to duplicate work. I think we do want to move forward in a constructive fashion, so that is a good point.

Ms. Boucher.

• (0930)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): Will the first official meeting of this magnificent committee be held next Wednesday or when we get back after the break?

Hon. Bob Rae: In spite of everything that we read in the papers.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: In spite of everything that we are going through...

[*English*]

The Chair: I think we want to have a subcommittee meeting first. In order to have the subcommittee meeting, I would recommend that our second official meeting of the Special Committee on the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan be the Wednesday right after the break. That would give us an opportunity to meet as a subcommittee and to put forward recommendations.

Monsieur Bachand.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I would like to know whether the subcommittee will define the mandate of this committee. I think we will have to make sure that we do not duplicate everything that has been done in other committees. We must have a rather specific mandate. We should start by working on the mandate of this committee.

Are you contemplating that the subcommittee, the steering committee will, at its first meeting, develop this mandate, which will then be submitted to us at the first meeting of our committee?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachand.

Are there other points of discussion? The subcommittee will examine the mandate of our committee and will also discuss its future business.

Mr. Claude Bachand: I would like to deal with another point, Mr. Chair.

If we want to fulfil our mission successfully, we must have as much information as possible on what is happening in Afghanistan. We may not be able to discuss it today, but we will have to do so at some point. I have already raised the issue at the Standing Committee on National Defence. I am not saying that we should have access to classified information every time, but we should be able, some day, to know exactly what is going on in the field.

Of course, there is another aspect to this. If there are 50 journalists waiting at the door, we cannot explain what has been happening during these briefing sessions during which classified information has been shared.

If we examine how various international committees are operating in the United States and in Great Britain, we realize that some of them have access to classified information. This greatly helps them make more informed and appropriate decisions.

Are you suggesting that I should come back to this question? Or could we discuss it today?

The Chair: I would ask you to come back to it later on, because this will give me the opportunity to discuss this issue with the clerk and learn about the operation of other committees. Thank you.

Are there any other issues?

[*English*]

Thank you very much, colleagues.

The meeting is adjourned.

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