



House of Commons  
CANADA

# Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri- Food

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AGRI • NUMBER 035 • 2nd SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

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EVIDENCE

**Tuesday, May 27, 2008**

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**Chair**

**Mr. James Bezan**

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## Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

Tuesday, May 27, 2008

• (0915)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC)):** Order. We're back in session.

Mr. Bellavance.

[Translation]

**Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I wanted this to be on the record because I think Mr. Steckle was right to mention this morning the government's announcement about Canadian products. We cannot criticize the announcement, since we have been working on this very issue, and I think all parties agreed that some changes were in order.

Was I surprised to see the Prime Minister take advantage of a photo opportunity, with a farm orchard serving as a bucolic backdrop? Not at all, because last week, he was photographed with members of the military. Next week, he might be photographed with police officers and the week after that, he could be standing next to a car and talking about automobile theft, or in a garage announcing a cut to the GST. There are countless photo opportunities. That is how this government operates.

When asked by a reporter whether I felt, as a member and vice-chair of the committee, that the committee's efforts had been trumped by the government's announcement, I responded that it was impossible to think otherwise. Furthermore, I believe the government's plans as far as this issue is concerned have already been made and that the government held off unveiling them on May 21. I believe that's true because of the comments the parliamentary secretary would make each time witnesses would speak to certain specific issues. Mr. Lauzon would often comment that the minister agreed with something or other the witnesses had said and that they couldn't begin to know how much he agreed with their position.

Therefore, I always had the impression that the government had already come to a decision as to the criteria for changes to the labelling of products in Canada. My impression was ultimately confirmed when the Prime Minister and the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-food made this announcement. It is sad and unfortunate for the witnesses who made their views known to the committee.

Moreover, the committee will be drawing up some recommendations. I have to wonder how useful they will be since clearly, the government has already decided how the new policy on Canadian products will be drafted. Our time would have been better spent on other matters. That is unfortunate.

[English]

**The Chair:** Mr. Atamanenko, and then Mr. Lauzon.

**Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP):** Thanks, James.

I would like to reiterate what Paul and André have said. When I heard the announcement—actually, I was asked to respond, but I didn't have a chance to, since I was out of cell range and all that kind of stuff—I just found it kind of strange. Although I welcome the initiative of the Prime Minister, I would have thought there would have been some kind of wording that said, for instance, “We're watching closely what the committee is doing, and we're going to work closely with the committee to try to implement the recommendations.” But that kind of cooperative spirit wasn't shown.

As well, I question the relevance of what we were doing here. I question the relevance of bothering all these people to come as witnesses here.

Our minister is a former chair of this committee. Obviously he knows how things work and how we try to work things together.

To my colleagues across the table, I'm just wondering what you think. I know we often don't agree, but I do have a lot of respect for your opinions. I don't want to put you on the spot, so I'm not sure if you want to respond now or later, but we have worked together. This is not a contentious issue. It's not something we're divided on. The recommendations, with some modifications and some compromise, we probably will all agree on, and probably unanimously. I don't quite understand why this is happening, and I'm just wondering if you feel the same way I feel. Is the work of this committee relevant? And if we feel that maybe we've all been slighted, perhaps we should have some kind of wording to our minister in terms of trying to make this a priority.

I'm not sure how to attack this. I just know that I'm going to be throwing some stuff together today, because I'm not happy with what has happened. I'll just leave it at that.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Mr. Lauzon.

**Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm sorry the opposition feel the way they do. I think that, as you have said, we're all going together on this. I think there's 100% agreement that this is a good thing and that it is what we want for our producers and our agriculturalists.

The whole idea of this report is going to be part of the consultation. The regulation and everything is not set in stone. This is part of the process.

Alex, I disagree with you. I think a lot of what these witnesses brought forth is going to shape and is in our report and then, going on to the final draft, will form part of.... That's what we'll have, as a result of what these witnesses brought forth and what the committee has brought forth.

I feel bad that a good-news story is turning out to be.... Hopefully it doesn't, but I would hate to see it be a bad-news story, because I think we all have the producers' interest at heart.

I think we're headed to a hell of a good thing here, which we as a total committee can be proud of. Maybe, if we can take a look at it a little differently, the glass is half full rather than half empty. It's too bad, Paul, that—as I think you said—the government has to make announcements. It chose to make an announcement, but this report is going to be considered and seriously considered.

**The Chair:** Mr. Miller.

**Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC):** Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

What we have come out with certainly doesn't make our work here illegitimate. We've called all the witnesses; they've been here. We know what the public wants. We know what the agriculture sector wants; we know what the consumer wants; I think I know what this committee wants. We're all headed in the same way.

Paul, nobody other than myself have I ever heard.... You've been as exasperated as I have been over the years at how slowly things happen in government. You don't have to be a rocket scientist, in the Prime Minister's or the minister's office, to know that, from the feedback we had from our witnesses, this was the right thing to do.

With him going ahead and acting, we have a chance here today to basically endorse the action. If you want to tweak it or something, everybody has that right, but for God's sake, let's not play politics with this. It's the right thing to do, and in no way does it make our work obsolete or whatever.

We have a job to do to follow this through and get it as part of legislation and enacted for the benefit not just of our farmers, who need it more than anybody, but of the consumer.

The one thing I hear from consumers all the time when my urban people phone me up is, "Larry, we hope you're helping agriculture. We hear the problems out there. What can we do to help?"

I always say, "Well, if you don't buy local, buy Canadian". They say, "Well, things are confused in the grocery story. We don't know what we're buying." So I know they're going to want this.

To me, the intent of the Prime Minister is not to take anything away from the committee. It's to get something done that's the right thing to do and to quit delaying it.

I was surprised it happened this quickly, but I'm very pleased that it did, and I think we all should be.

●(0920)

**The Chair:** Before I get to Mr. Easter, let me say we're getting a lot of BlackBerry interference on the mikes today. So keep the BlackBerrys off the table and away from the mikes, please.

Mr. Easter.

**Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.):** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I think this was extremely unfortunate and wrong on the part of the Prime Minister to do it this way. I really do think it's a slap in the face to the relevance of parliamentarians and the relevance of committee. I went through the transcript and I went through the Prime Minister's release. The Prime Minister has to know, I expect, that this committee has been holding hearings for a couple of months, but not a word. If the Prime Minister had even said in here that he's following up on the work of the committee or that he's looking forward to the committee work—but nowhere in his transcript, or even in the media scrum, is the work of this committee mentioned.

My first impression when I listened to the press conference was that I was glad to see we were moving ahead with "Product of Canada", but what about the relevance of the committee? What are we, chicken soup? Why did we bother? I mean, go to the listof.... There's the Prime Minister own consultation process that he talks about in his release:

We're seeking feedback from Canadians on our proposed initiative. Over the coming days and weeks the Minister of Agriculture and Canadian Food Inspection Agency officials will meet with a wide range of key stakeholders including farm groups, processors, retailers and consumer groups. .... The timeline for consultations is May 21 through June 11, 2008.

We met with all those groups. Why do we bother meeting? Why don't we just turn it over to the Minister of Agriculture and CFIA to do their thing? That's the way I felt.

I think it was wrong for the Prime Minister to do it this way and not at least give some relevance to the chair of the committee and committee members, who have done good work. I think we've done good work, but now I have to question if it was worth the effort. I see the role of Parliament and the role of committees undermined and undercut by the way the Prime Minister did this, and the lack of at least acknowledgement that the committee itself has done a lot of work here.

●(0925)

**Mr. Larry Miller:** When you've been in politics as long as you have, you should have thicker skin.

**The Chair:** Order.

**Hon. Wayne Easter:** It's not about having thick skin. It's not going to hurt me any, but I think it does hurt the relevance of Parliament. You wonder sometimes if this Prime Minister even gives any relevance to his own caucus. Everything is run out of the PMO.

He certainly ignored Parliament and the work of all members on this committee: Conservative, Liberal, NDP, and Bloc.

**The Chair:** Mr. Steckle.

**Mr. Paul Steckle (Huron—Bruce, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I thank you for the opportunity once again to address what I addressed earlier in camera.

I am a former chair of this committee. Wayne and I have been on this committee off and on since 1993, so we're nearing 15 years around this table. Over the years we've had agreements and disagreements, and we've had very important decisions made. I think this committee has done great work over the last many years. I've been proud to serve on this committee because I was proud to serve the people who elected me, and they were farmers.

On this issue we're not only talking about farmers but about consumers; all of us as Canadians are involved in this. I have never seen this committee work better on an issue than on this particular issue. I was so looking forward to coming into a meeting today, or two weeks ago, whenever this was going to happen, and being able to sit down and think, with a bit of tweaking here and there, we were going to be able to follow the recommendations as outlined by our person from the department.

And here we are this morning. When I heard the announcement last week in the Prime Minister's own words, he was basically precluding the work of the committee. As referenced by my colleague, never did he mention the committee, the work they were doing. Going forward and having more consultations with the same people or the same kind of people we dealt with—obviously they'd necessarily be the same people—we could conclude we would never find the end number of people we should listen to.

I just felt as a member of Parliament, not myself only but all members on both sides of the table, that our privileges.... And you're going to tell me my privileges weren't violated, but my privilege was violated, in my estimation. Whether your good book tells you that or not isn't really important to me. The fact is that my attitude coming into this morning's meeting has changed as a result of what happened last week.

Mr. Miller speaks about not making this political. Well, it was nothing but political. That's what it was. I would like to think the work this committee does is important, that the recommendations we conclude when we're finished with this report will be reported, and that if guidelines are used in bringing forward these recommendations that they be done quickly and that there be due credit given to the people around this table. I'm not looking for credit for myself; this is for Canadians. Canadians have told all of us that we need to move forward on this file, and we've done that.

Mr. Chair, you have done a good job of leading this committee on this issue, and I commend you for it. I just feel the work we have done has been violated by what the Prime Minister and the Minister of Agriculture did last week. As others have said, it was simply for political purposes. I feel that unless this changes, this committee cannot function with the same kind of cordiality we have enjoyed around this table. While we've had our differences, I think that's what this is all about. But again we were able to have good work done here, and that's what this committee is all about.

I would encourage you, Mr. Chair, that when this work is finished, if you think it's worthy of us going forward, that the Prime Minister and the minister be made aware that these recommendations had better be a big part of what goes forward in terms of the guidelines, regardless of what he hears in those consultations in the 21 days going forward. This is where the work was done. We were commissioned to do this work. We've done our work. I want to see

the work conclude in such a way that Canadians recognize that government is working for them, not just the politicians.

**The Chair:** Mr. St. Amand.

**Mr. Lloyd St. Amand (Brant, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I agree with all those who have spoken, except Mr. Miller. I particularly take issue with Mr. Miller's naive comment that we shouldn't be playing politics with this. Frankly, that wasn't our intention. It was the Prime Minister who decided to play politics with this in his lengthy press announcement neglecting or failing to make any mention whatsoever of the workings of the committee.

There's a clear thread throughout the Prime Minister's comments, Mr. Chair, that it's a done deal. I'm quoting: "We have made a plan to update the labels according to our new guidelines", he repeats "our new guidelines, under our plan, under our new rules". Mr. Chair, it's a done deal. I presume when the Prime Minister uses the collective "we" or "our" he's referring to himself, Minister Ritz, and Minister Clement, because there's nary a mention of you, Mr. Chair, let alone the workings of the all-party committee. If in fact it's already a done deal—and it surely seems to be a done deal, as this is a government plan that is being advanced, and nothing to do with the committee—then I don't know why we would bother to spend one or two meetings dealing with a report that has now been rendered superfluous, whose recommendations have been undermined by the Prime Minister's announcement.

● (0930)

**The Chair:** Mr. Storseth.

**Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I think the first thing we need to start with, point of fact, is that this government continues to work with Canadians and continues to listen to Canadians. This committee is one stream of information that has come in. These consultations that were announced is another stream. I'm sure the minister and the Prime Minister and the government will take all the information, all the recommendations that are gathered from all the streams that are out there, to make the recommendations and final changes that are going to come forward.

But addressing the political side of this.... I mean, this is a joke. The only thing this threw a kink in was when Wayne was going to send out his press release taking credit for all of it. Mr. Easter willingly admits that the Liberal government looked at this for two years and didn't get anything done. He admits it in his own press release.

We are finally trying to get something done on some of these things. This committee has done a lot of good work on it. There are going to be more consultations, more stakeholders involved. We want to see action on some of these things.

The only response I've had from constituents is that they're happy to see the Government of Canada moving forward for consumers and for producers. Mr. Easter even admits that we knew long ago that this measure could improve farm income and provide valuable information to consumers. Why do you want to delay this any longer? Let's move forward with getting this done. These are Mr. Easter's own words.

We need to move forward and continue to work together and put forward strong recommendations. I think it helps to see where the government is coming from on some of these things. Maybe we can strengthen some of the recommendations we want to make, but there's nobody saying we're not going to be relevant when it comes to the overall result of this.

Each and every one of you put out press releases, and none of you are going to give the committee chair any kudos for the work that was done on this. It's embarrassing.

We have people like Len Troup, the chairman of the Ontario Tender Fruit Producers' Marketing Board, saying, "...this is absolutely an improvement. It's the right thing to do, and I shook the prime minister's hand and thanked him for it."

Now, let's continue moving forward with getting things done for Canadians.

**The Chair:** Mr. Lauzon.

**Mr. Guy Lauzon:** Thanks again, Mr. Chair.

We're going off the rails here, and it's unfortunate. Like Brian, after the announcement I got nothing but good news from the producers and consumers. And it wasn't partisan. They said this is long overdue; we should have had this, etc., etc.

We've done a good thing. We've started a good thing. Maybe your concerns are a little premature. Let's say—

**Mr. Lloyd St. Amand:** Who's "we"? Who are you talking about?

**Mr. Guy Lauzon:** All of us. You're talking semantics.

I mean, if you can read through the final version and see that we've had some input.... I think that would have been the time to question this. Do you want to wait until the fall? Do you want to wait until next whatever—next January?

I think the government took some action. Maybe it was a little premature, but we're heading in the right direction. We're going to have input. There's going to be some additional consultation. We're going to have our say, as a committee, and we're going to be able to take the credit. But if we start fighting like other committees, all of us collectively are going to have egg on our faces.

I think this report is going to be included in the final version, and hopefully it will put your concerns at rest.

• (0935)

**The Chair:** Mr. Atamanenko.

**Mr. Alex Atamanenko:** I have a final couple of comments.

If what you're saying, Guy, and what Brian and Larry have said reflects what you folks are saying over there, I don't think you get it. I don't think you understand.

It's not that I'm against what the Prime Minister is doing, but we have a democratic process. We have an all-party committee, and on this issue we will probably come out with a report where we're not even disagreeing on a lot of issues. It's the fact that somewhere in this announcement it could have been mentioned that "I, as Prime Minister, support the work of the committee".

Why wasn't the chair at that announcement? Why wasn't James there on behalf of us, and why wasn't he getting some credit as our chair: "This is the committee. They're doing the work. Let's recognize this, and let's make this a priority for us. We've gone through the democratic process. They've brought in witnesses, and we're going to look very closely and we're going to make the report a priority." That's all we're saying.

I personally feel that regardless of what you say, what we're doing is irrelevant. That's how I feel. I want that for the record. I think there has to be some kind of recommendation coming out of this discussion to the minister and Prime Minister to reflect this.

**The Chair:** Mrs. Skelton.

**Hon. Carol Skelton (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC):** I've been listening to all the comments. I wasn't invited to the press conference, but that doesn't bother me, because I was at home working in the riding. When the Prime Minister and the minister talk about our Government of Canada, most citizens of Canada look at all of us as the Government of Canada. We're the parliamentarians. We're the ones who are doing the work. I know that everyone in my riding is looking at the agriculture committee and the report. I don't feel slighted. I think we're doing great work, and the people of Canada see that.

Every one of us sitting around this table is working for our constituents and for the agricultural community in Canada. I don't feel slighted. I'm glad that the Prime Minister looks at this issue as being serious for all Canadians. He will go forward after we put in this recommendation and look at it very seriously.

I don't know why we have to get into this discussion. I don't think it's political. We're moving ahead on something. We're not going to talk about it and wait for two months after the report comes in. We're going to move faster on it. We have to stop and look at it as a positive move.

I don't feel slighted about it. I wasn't there. I was working in the riding. I think that's how we have to look at it. We have to look positively at it and say thank God the government's doing something on our behalf. We're the ones who started it. We put the pressure on the minister and the Prime Minister. I think it's a very positive move.

**The Chair:** Madame Thi Lac

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ):** For several weeks now, the committee has been examining product labelling. While Parliament was in recess and members were back in their ridings, the minister made an announcement. There is nothing unusual about that. The other committee that I serve on is currently looking into the problem of cigarette smuggling. Here again, the Prime Minister has made a number of announcements, even though the committee has not yet completed its study. This seems to be typical pattern of behaviour for the government.

I am a newly elected MP. When I meet with the local press, I am proud to speak to them about the committee's work. They question me about procedure and about when measures will be adopted. They report that I seem to have a lax approach because I am not up on my committee's work. I tell them what the normal procedure is, but the following week, the government comes out with an announcement. People then say that Mrs. Thi Lac takes a lax approach to her work. I'm not saying this because I am biased. I'm only saying that resorting to unusual tactics seems to be the norm for this government, because the same thing is happening in several committees. Last May, the two committees on which I serve had this happen to them.

Does the government plan to take a similar approach with every committee? Is the work of MPs destined to be rendered obsolete? As committee members, are we destined to serve nothing more than a decorative purpose? It's important to get an answer to that question. You maintain that this is good news for Canadians, but I want to know what purpose committees are serving then? We approve budgets to hear from witnesses. We have yet to hear from all of the witnesses and yet, the government is making announcements. It is important to follow standard committee procedure, that is to wait for our recommendations, out of respect for the work we do as parliamentarians, and also out of respect for the witnesses.

● (0940)

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Boshcoff.

**Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I feel very sorry for the government representatives having to try to defend this, because this committee has got along reasonably well. We've all, each and every one of us, taken our shots at Mr. Easter, and that's kind of held us together.

All that aside, it's hard not to believe that there's something else going on. In a committee that Mr. St. Amand and I are on, there was a very similar issue. We had proposed one thing in our report, through the course of many meetings on a national summit for forestry. Before the report was released—it hasn't been sent to Parliament yet—the Minister of Natural Resources announced a watered-down version of what we were proposing in our report. To me, this is very similar.

Considering we've been meeting since February on this, there are lots of other topics we could have done if this whole thing was going to be dealt with in this way.

Mr. Chairman, clearly the consultation process.... The dynamics of this are that the minister and the CFIA officials will meet with key stakeholders, farm groups, processors, retailers, and consumer groups. Well, who have we been inviting? Who have we been hearing as witnesses testifying to us?

If you ask me to give up my time from February to the end of May or early June to do something that, in a matter of a constituency break, a media release is going to subvert.... And look at the timeline.

June 11 is the deadline, starting a couple of days ago. You've really got to ask what we were doing.

I think we have actually been meeting in quite good faith here. There has been a high degree of collegiality in terms of the way we conduct ourselves, and I have to agree with all the colleagues here that it's impossible not to assume that there is some hidden agenda and some trick has just been played on us for all our time.

**Mr. Guy Lauzon:** I have to reassure Mr. Boshcoff that there is no secret agenda, no hidden agenda.

When you think about it, you're criticizing the government for taking action. Now, if we were to do this six months from now, everybody would be complaining that we were dragging our feet and all that. You know, let's face it: we've got a minister who is a man of action; we've got a Prime Minister who is a man of action. Whether the opposition wants to agree with that or not, I think they have a reputation for that.

The whole reason we're here is for the producer, for the agricultural people, right? You know what? They want this. The other interested people are the consumers. They want this. And I'm sure, when you went out into your ridings, you got exactly the same feedback as I got. The people we're here to represent want this, and so do the people who buy the product. Why are we complaining because the government takes action?

● (0945)

[Translation]

Mrs. Thi Lac, the government must take action. It is a responsible government.

[English]

And that's the problem. If we're the government—and we are the government—we have to take action. If anything, the government, the minister, and the Prime Minister should be commended.

Let's not let our personal egos get in the way here. We are going to have our input. Our input is here, if we can ever get this damn thing done and get it in to the minister. We'll make sure this is included in the final draft, and that's what it's about. But in the meantime, the people we're here to represent, the people who grow the product, are the ones who are the big winners. And we seem to be criticizing because the government took action to make our agricultural people the winners. That doesn't make any sense to me, not from an agricultural committee.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Mr. St. Amand.

**Mr. Lloyd St. Amand:** Mr. Chair, I wonder if perhaps we, as a committee, could agree to issue a press release from all of us—this is our first meeting back since the Prime Minister's announcement—expressing our pleasure, as committee members, that the Prime Minister has seen fit to advance an issue the committee has been studying for a couple of months and to invite, for a second round of presentations, virtually the same people the committee has already seen fit to have present to us.

That would be a clear expression of the non-partisanship, the non-political bent to this, and I think frankly would be the appropriate way to go.

**The Chair:** Mr. Easter.

**Hon. Wayne Easter:** On the parliamentary secretary's points, this is not about taking action—we want to see action on this issue—but this is about the relevance of Parliament and committees. Somebody has to speak up some time—and we are—about this Prime Minister's attitude toward parliamentary democracy. That's what we're saying.

The Prime Minister didn't mention the work of this committee. Then he turned around and basically said “CFIA and the Minister of Agriculture will do the work, so we don't need to worry about the efforts of the committee and meet with the very same witnesses”. If I were a witness I'd ask why I bothered meeting with the standing committee.

This is not unusual coming from this Prime Minister, Parliamentary Secretary. We're seeing abuse of the relevance of Parliament with this issue. We see it on other committees, where government members are filibustering their work because the Prime Minister's Office doesn't agree with this or that. We've certainly seen it on the Wheat Board and other issues, where democracy and the rule of law have basically been supplanted by the attitude of the government itself.

It's not new, but it's not about action. It's about the relevance of Parliament and our work. I just want to make that point clear.

**The Chair:** Monsieur Bellavance.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. André Bellavance:** Through his comments, the parliamentary secretary is proving exactly what others have criticized him for today.

I want to explain to you the difference between what would have been acceptable, and what is not acceptable. The Prime Minister chooses the backdrop for his announcements: an apple orchard, a bucolic scene with the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-food looking on. He could have said that the government firmly intends to change the 51% rule, that this was not the correct approach to product labelling, that the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-food has been examining this issue for several months and that the government would be weighing the committee's recommendations very carefully because the current policy was inadequate and consumers were not being properly informed.

Had he said nothing more than that, we would not be having this discussion. However, he used this as an opportunity to make a political announcement on behalf of the Conservative Party. It is all well and good for Ms. Skelton to say that we are all proud of the Prime Minister and that he represents everyone. I'm sorry, but he is the Leader of the Conservative Party. He realized that this initiative would be popular with the public and he turned the event into a political announcement. It is the exact same kind of announcement that is heard week after week during an election campaign. That is exactly what the Prime Minister chose to do. He gauged the mood of the public and decided to jump at this opportunity to trump the committee.

However, he did not say anything at all about the work that we have been doing for the past several months. Therefore, the announcement resembled an advertisement for the Conservative Party, which is responsible for doing good things and for taking action, just like the parliamentary secretary said. That's the key difference. What the committee is doing is really of no consequence, quite simply because the Prime Minister has grabbed the spotlight for himself. He seems to have made up his mind already about the policy that will be implemented. We can go ahead and table our recommendations, but I'm far from convinced that it will do any good. As I see it, it's a *fait accompli*.

• (0950)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Storseth.

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Perhaps Mr. Atamanenko and Mr. Bellavance speak from the heart on this, but it's absolutely shameful the politics the Liberal Party of Canada is playing when they come here today and say “We can't believe you made an announcement without us”. But not five minutes after Mr. Easter saw it, he put out his own announcement taking credit for the entire measure and saying the Liberal Party would have got this done if they'd had three more days in office.

How are we supposed to move forward with some of these initiatives, Mr. Bellavance, when you take an example like biofuels? I haven't heard you criticize any of the witnesses who have come before us on that, but your own party doesn't support the initiative on biofuels. The opposition parties are back and forth on these things.

The Liberal Party supported it until it was time to get something done for farmers on biofuels, and now they're teetering on that as well. If the Government of Canada were to run the way the opposition parties do, we'd never have a decision made on anything. That's exactly what was done for 13 years. So I'm glad we have somebody who wants to stand up and get something accomplished for Canadian farmers.

On “Product of Canada” and what the Prime Minister and the minister announced, it's very clear that's exactly what all of our constituents want to see, so we got something accomplished. As a committee, we should be happy that we helped push that forward.

If you're hoping to get recognition for work of the Government of Canada, I don't think you'd run for the Bloc Québécois.

**The Chair:** Mr. Lauzon.

**Mr. Guy Lauzon:** Thank you very much.

I wasn't going to make any new comments today. We seem to be going around in a vicious circle here. Mr. Easter talked about this committee and other committees. If we continue to split hairs, we're going to end up like other committees. It's not the big issues that you get hung up on; it's the little issues. We have to rise above this partisanship. When we have good news, gentlemen and ladies, why don't we take advantage of that fact?



I go back to the question, why are we here? We're here for the producer. For every one of us, if we look each other in the eye, that's why we're supposed to be here. Why are we playing with certain semantics about what the Prime Minister said, or suggesting "He announced it, and I wasn't there in the picture", and this and that? What the hell has that got to do...? Can you imagine having to explain to one of your farmers that "I wasn't there in that photo op, and that's not right, and that's why I opposed this"? To me, that's not what we're here for. We're here to advance the cause of the farmer.

We have farmers who, by your own admission, are losing their farms, and here we are trying to split hairs. Mr. Bellavance doesn't think the Prime Minister should make the announcement. Well, who the hell should make it, the leader of the Bloc? The Prime Minister of this country has the right to make the announcements regarding the direction the government's going to go in, and I think it just makes sense that the agriculture minister should be there, not a representative from the Bloc. That's the government.

How can the Bloc say the Prime Minister doesn't have a right to make an announcement to help a farmer? You people sit on this committee, you go into the House of Commons, and you say you support the farmers, but you don't want good news being told to farmers? You don't want to move forward with good news?

Where are we coming from? We're supposed to be here for the farmers. What are we doing discussing this? It just doesn't make any sense.

Let's move on with this and let's get going with what we're supposed to be here for: to help the farmer.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Mr. Boshcoff.

**Mr. Ken Boshcoff:** Mr. Chair, in our committee work, timing is everything. We're only a week or so away from presenting this to Parliament. We've been doing this since February. The government members seem to be trying to distort our intent here. I haven't heard anybody here say anything different from there needing to be respect for the work of the committee.

I'm trying to be patient here. Maybe you've been told to spin it one way, that this is good news, but the bottom line is that we've all been working in common cause for this. If this isn't subverting our work, why would it not have been held off until you, as chair, presented the report after we've gone through it on Thursday or whenever? To me, the media announcement would have had much more credibility in saying that the Prime Minister is going to act on the recommendations of the report to Parliament.

To me it is a question of sincerity, and the fact that you people won't understand what we're trying to say... We've been working on this since February. If it were so simple that we could have done a two-pager, why didn't we just do that in February and have the Minister of Agriculture phone these people up and say we've contacted all these people and they all agree we should raise the percentage?

This report is much more comprehensive than that, and the work is much more comprehensive than that. I really was quite into it, and I know all the witnesses really felt they were contributing to some

significant change in direction and improvement in the country. I thought the committee work was refreshingly absent of partisanship and that we were getting somewhere. This, I think, completely takes all of this report and says: "We will continue to operate without you; it's nice to have you, but don't bother." I find that shameful.

Thank you, Chair.

• (0955)

**The Chair:** Mr. Atamanenko.

**Mr. Alex Atamanenko:** I just wanted to make a couple of points here. This is not about photo ops, not about splitting hairs. It's not about not supporting farmers or playing politics. The Prime Minister's announcement... Yes, he is the Prime Minister of our country, and I respect him for that. What I have a problem with and what I don't understand is the way it was done. There is a democratic process. We're representatives of the people. We have an all-party committee that's working on a very important topic: we're going to be changing the way we look at "Product of Canada" labelling.

I don't understand why this committee... It just appears in the announcement as if the work this committee is doing was not respected. There was no mention of the committee. There was nothing saying "I look forward to the report of the committee, thanks to the witnesses who were here, and let's move forward. As Prime Minister, I'm going to give priority to the hard work."

It's not that we just want to get credit for it. I don't even know if I really feel like coming back to work on this thing, because I think the work has been done. That's how I feel. I'm not playing politics when I say that. I just wonder what the point is.

It's not only us. The work that has been done here to put this together, the research that has been done to give us this briefing, why are we going through it? If everything is done over there, let's just give it to them and go on. We've got other important issues to deal with in the next couple of weeks we're here. Let's get on with it. To me there's something that just doesn't make any sense here.

That's the point I want to make. It's not so much that we should all be getting credit for this. It's the fact that I don't think a democratic process has been respected.

**The Chair:** Mr. Steckle.

**Mr. Paul Steckle:** I don't want to prolong this debate, but I think a number of things should be clear. I don't think anyone on this side believes that the Prime Minister or the Minister of Agriculture shouldn't be making announcements.

There are two things that caused me to raise this issue this morning. One is the very fact that there was no recognition of the committee's work and that there is ongoing work being done by the committee. The other is the fact that he suggested there be another 21 days of hearings. He could have said "The committee is going on with its work. I believe there's more work to be done, and I would advise them that they should go back and see a few more people and bring forward a full and comprehensive view of what hasn't been heard yet."

Nothing was said to that effect. It's a *fait accompli*. If you read the transcripts of what he said, both in the main statement and in the following statement, it was a *fait accompli*. The deal was made over there. For us not to be invited to be there is not a problem. I mean, I go through that all the time. I had a phone call on Saturday evening that I wasn't being invited to a certain event that was taking place. People from the riding thought I should be, but they were told by the government that I'm not a government member and therefore I have no right to be there. This is my riding. This is the way this government operates.

So this is not new. We've become used to this. We don't like it, but that's the way you people operate. So this is just another way of expressing to us that really what we do over here is not very important.

Larry, you know what I'm talking about. I've had this discussion with a number of you people over there, and that's the way you people operate.

•(1000)

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** That's utterly shameless. My former member never got.... In the west, it was always Anne McLellan in Alberta who went and did all the announcements. It's the way governments operate. Your government operated that way for 13 years, Paul. I never heard you complain about that once.

**The Chair:** Mr. Steckle on a point of order.

**Mr. Paul Steckle:** I'm talking about my own experience. I'm not talking about anyone else's experience. I'm talking about Mr. Steckle's experience.

I'm saying this work this morning.... I need assurances before I move forward that this work is important. I'm not necessarily hearing that. I'm getting some vibes from you, Mr. Lauzon, that it's important, but it's hard for me to be convinced that it's important when you've given us all these reasons to believe that basically the work is done outside of this committee.

I think it's a disgrace. You have never heard me really become very partisan in this committee. In 15 years I've not become partisan, and I don't want to start now, because I'm leaving shortly. But it disturbs me greatly that my democratic role as a member of Parliament, my privilege as a member of Parliament to come to this table and to work on behalf of those people, farmers and consumers, has been violated by someone going out for what is said not to be political but is nothing but political, absolutely politics at its worst. I find that repulsive. I'm sorry if I offend anyone by saying that, but I think Canadians need to understand that this work has been going forward and I thought was going forward rather well.

We put aside the report for a week so we could deal with some other matters: estimates, meeting with the minister, meeting with Mr. White and these people. We put this work aside for that. But I have to wonder now whether this work was put aside so this announcement could be made before we came back to look at it. I hope not. I'll leave that for you to tell me.

These are the reasons I have raised this issue this morning. Normally I wouldn't. I would have looked past this and looked beyond, but I couldn't do that this morning in good conscience. So I

do that out of the sincerity of what brought me to this place 15 years ago.

**The Chair:** Mr. Lauzon.

**Mr. Guy Lauzon:** I want to reassure Mr. Steckle that the recommendations in the report will be considered in the final analysis.

The other thing is, as I listen to your comments, Mr. Steckle, you say the Prime Minister should have said this, he should have said that, he should have had this reference. That really is not what the farmer wants to hear. What the farmer wants to hear is whether we are moving ahead with this issue. We've spent an hour here, and we're not making any progress.

Alex, with all due respect, you say "it appears". Well, damn it, don't base your decision on whether it appears or not. I might think that you think a certain thing, but maybe that's not what you think. Never mind appearances. What are the facts?

The facts are we're taking action for farmers. You've been promoting that since I met you. Every one of us has been promoting that, and now all of a sudden we take action, and you have to find something wrong.

I realize your job as opposition is to criticize, but come on. You don't like hearing about splitting hairs, but we are splitting hairs. Come on. When he says "He should have said this in the announcement" and "It appears..."—come on—we're splitting hairs. Let's do what's right for the farmers.

You're not going to like to hear this, but the minister says put farmers first. Let's cool things down here, and let's put farmers first right here. Let's use the minister's own words, and let's put the farmers first. If we put the farmers first, we'll go ahead with this announcement and we'll get this done.

**The Chair:** Ms. Skelton.

**Hon. Carol Skelton:** I don't know. This is really bothering me, because I feel that since I first came here, about eight years ago, working on committees and everything, governments have sincerely looked at committee reports. In my heart I know that this report is going to be looked at, and I know the work will be taken seriously.

I'm sitting here, and we've talked about this for an hour. I want to know what the committee members from the opposite side of the table want us to do. They've brought their feelings forward to us, but I want to know what they want us to do. Do they want us to not finish our report?

I think we would be losing a lot of valuable time and it would not accomplish anything. We've wasted.... Well, we haven't wasted time, but we've talked about this for an hour. Can we go forward and complete the report?

I know the minister and the Prime Minister will seriously look at what we've brought forward. Everyone has expressed their feelings on the whole situation. Let's move forward and get this finished.

•(1005)

**The Chair:** We have been talking about this for an hour, and I have three more people on the speakers list. I would ask that people be concise with their comments.

Mr. Miller.

**Mr. Larry Miller:** Thanks.

I want to speak on this again. I'm amazed, Mr. Chairman, that we're still talking about it.

What probably intrigued me to speak, Paul, was the comment that you made about how it was done, this secrecy thing.

Paul, when you were in government and I was in opposition, you came into my riding in Meaford and made an announcement, and I never knew a dang thing about it and basically had to cross the thing. So don't tell me about that.

Now, good for you. When I went to you, you said "Larry, it will never happen again", and it didn't.

**Mr. Paul Steckle:** I wasn't aware of it.

**Mr. Larry Miller:** I know you aren't.

My point is that this happens, whether it's the bureaucracy or whatever. I wasn't invited down to this announcement either, but I couldn't have gone anyway. My nose isn't out of joint about it; I was so danged pleased to get it.

The bottom line here is that I know every one of you over there knows that this announcement was good. Now, let's cut out the BS and get on with it. If your feelings are hurt, get over it. I could have been upset too because I didn't get an invite, but I'm not. I'm happy about what it was.

André, you even referred to the fact that you don't have much choice but to support this, but I know you believe in it as well. That's the kind of thing we heard from our witnesses at committee. Let's cut it out and get some work done.

**The Chair:** Mr. Easter.

**Hon. Wayne Easter:** Larry, you are missing the point. This is not about being at a photo op or about being invited; this is about the relevance of committees. We all talk about committees in this country not being seen in any way close to the way committees are seen in many other parliaments around the world, and we believe, as MPs, they should be. So this is about the relevance of the committee itself.

But on Carol's point, as far as I'm concerned, Mr. Chair, we've registered our concern. We would ask that you at least make note of this to the Minister of Agriculture and the Prime Minister, that we do feel slighted by the way the press statement reads.

I do think we are obligated to finish the report. I'm not suggesting in any way that we don't finish the report; I think we're obligated to finish the report as quickly as we can. That obligation is to the witnesses who came before us and who put in a good effort at making their presentations and who expected us, I think, to act on them. So I think we have to complete the report with as much haste as we can.

**The Chair:** Mr. Boshcoff.

**Mr. Ken Boshcoff:** Mr. Chair, I refuse to get involved in a debate where the government members keep telling me to be happy and get on with this.

My point, and I'll make it very clear, is that since February we've been interrogating witnesses, hearing from Canadians, and trying to do this job in a very positive way. In a couple of days the report is going to be presented to Parliament. Consequently, to me, this is respecting the parliamentary process and not about dismissing work for whatever reasons.

Ms. Skelton asked what we wanted to do with this. I will propose this resolution. I could have used a lot stronger words and been much nastier about things, but I'm going to do it in this way:

That the Prime Minister recognize and respect the work of the Standing Committee on Agriculture with regard to food labelling in Canada; and ensure that the work of the committee will not be subverted; and the recommendations, based on input from Canadian stakeholders, will be implemented.

● (1010)

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** On a point of order, Mr. Chairman, this is a substantive motion that requires 48 hours' notice.

**The Chair:** We are on topic, though. You don't require notice of motions when we are on the topic.

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** What topic, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** We're talking about "Product of Canada".

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** This all came out of Mr. Steckle. This isn't something that was on the order paper.

**The Chair:** The order paper is for "Product of Canada" and the motion is about "Product of Canada".

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** The order paper is about studying the report on "Product of Canada".

**An hon. member:** At our very first meeting we decided—

**The Chair:** Whenever you have business before the committee, a motion can be moved at any point in time on that business; and this is concerning the business of committee, so this motion is in order.

**Hon. Wayne Easter:** I'm glad that man sleeps with that book under his pillow.

**The Chair:** Mr. Boshcoff, could we have your motion in writing, please?

**Mr. Ken Boshcoff:** It's coming.

**Mr. Larry Miller:** Could we see a hard copy of this motion?

**The Chair:** It will be read into the record.

**Mr. Larry Miller:** It's quite a long motion. Could we read it again?

**The Chair:** Okay, this is the motion that was carried:

That 48 hours notice will be required for any substantive motion to be considered by the committee, that the period of notice be calculated from the time the motion has been distributed to the members of the committee by the clerk of the committee. The motion shall be distributed to members in both official languages and all motions received by the Clerk shall be placed upon the agenda of the first committee meeting following the period of notice.

So we did say "any substantive motion"—and Mr. Storseth is right on his point of order.

So, Mr. Boshcoff, I'd ask that your motion be tabled and we'll discuss it in 48 hours. I'll let you finish off.

**Mr. Ken Boshcoff:** Could I ask whether, if we had unanimous consent, we could deal with it now? Is that possible?

**The Chair:** You can ask for unanimous consent.

Does Mr. Boshcoff have unanimous consent to table the motion?

I don't see unanimous consent.

Mr. Boshcoff, are you finished with the floor?

•(1015)

**Mr. Ken Boshcoff:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Mr. Storseth.

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In light of Mr. Easter's comments and Mr. Boshcoff's comments, I would propose that this committee be happy for farmers and move forward with this motion: that we go back in camera and study the draft report that we have before us on "Product of Canada" and get moving with the business of the day.

**The Chair:** Okay. That closes off debate.

I'm going to first of all have to make a few comments. One is on the question of privilege that Mr. Steckle raises. As chair of the committee, I have no authority or power to rule on questions of privilege. That lies with the Speaker.

I'd just like to say that the work we do here as committee is extremely important, that it always is important. I don't believe the announcement by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food pre-empted any of our recommendations. They still have open books until June 11. I know from my conversations with the minister that they are waiting for our recommendations and that these will be taken into consideration as they move forward with the development of the policy.

As to the power to change guidelines and the issue of whether or not our democratic ability and parliamentary powers have been compromised, I would just say that changes are coming to guidelines—we're not talking about orders in council; we're not talking about legislative changes. Essentially, the government, at any point in time, for the past 30 years since the "Made in Canada" and "Product of Canada" labels were introduced, had the power to change them at the departmental level without any consultation from parliamentarians or from witnesses. I don't think there are any questions concerning whether our ability as committees to do work has been compromised.

Mr. Steckle raised a question about whether or not our schedule was delayed. I would like to say that the earliest we could have had this report prepared in both official languages and presented was essentially last week, which was a recess. It was decided to have the Wheat Board and the Canadian Grain Commission at committee to fill in the time until we had the report finalized and ready for discussion.

I'd also like to add that in the work we have done here at committee, especially on this issue of "Product of Canada", we have heard a lot broader base of issues than what is being dealt with by the department, from what the minister has said. The recommendations we have here are, I think, very substantive and go beyond what the minister is looking for in his consultations.

We still have a great number of strong recommendations to make to the government by tabling this report in the House of Commons. As Mr. Easter says, let's get it done and let's get it into the House as quickly as possible.

With that, I'd like to entertain a motion that we move back in camera.

**A voice:** He's already moved it.

**The Chair:** He's already moved it? Okay.

I'll hear a quick comment from Mr. Atamanenko.

**Mr. Alex Atamanenko:** I have a question.

**The Chair:** Make it a quick question.

**Mr. Alex Atamanenko:** If we're not back in camera yet, can we deal with the motion I have, so that we don't have to waste time going back in camera after? Or do you want to wait until the end?

**The Chair:** I think we should wait until the end. That's where it is on the agenda, and Mr. Storseth has put a motion on the table to move us back in camera so that we can work on the report.

Is that okay?

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

**The Chair:** I'm going to suspend so that we can go back in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

•(1015)

(Pause)

•(1055)

[*Public proceedings resume*]

**The Chair:** We're back in public session.

We're going to move to Mr. Atamanenko's motion. Can you put it on the floor?

**Mr. Alex Atamanenko:** Do you want me to read it?

**The Chair:** You have to read it into the record.

**Mr. Alex Atamanenko:** The motion is as follows:

That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food call on officials from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) to provide a briefing to the Committee on: (a) the status of the updates to Animal Transport Regulations that are being proposed;

[*Translation*]

(b) when it is expected the regulations will be sent to Justice for a final draft; (c) anticipated timeline for when the final draft of these regulations will be posted to the Canada Gazette.

[*English*]

So it's my understanding that all this is saying is that they're working on it and they have something. I hear from inside sources that they would like to be able to put this forward. There are also groups concerned about transportation of animals that are asking us when something is going to happen.

The idea is that they have done their homework, and I think it would be worth while to get a briefing from them on these three points. That's all it is.

**The Chair:** Mr. Miller.

**Mr. Larry Miller:** I'm going to support this motion, Mr. Chairman. I know that a lot of the livestock haulers in my riding—and eventually farmers—are very concerned about what some extreme groups are hoping for and trying to get. I think we need an update to clear the air and that kind of thing, so I'm going to support the motion.

**The Chair:** Okay, thank you.

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** Before we adjourn, on Thursday we have to figure out now what we have. We have Mr. Boshcoff's motion to deal with. We have the study to do, and we haven't dealt with the votes on main estimates. If they're not done by May 31, they're just deemed to be adopted. If you guys want to deal with the motions, we have to deal with them on Thursday. It's your call. If not, we'll just let her slide by.

**Mr. Paul Steckle:** My view is that the first priority is to get the report done, and if we have time—

**The Chair:** We'll deal with motions.

**Mr. Paul Steckle:** —if not, let them slide.

**The Chair:** Okay. I'll tell you what then. On that recommendation, we'll do the study of “Product of Canada” first, Mr. Boshcoff's motion second, and if time permits we'll do the votes on the main estimates. Then at that point in time we'll have to look at what we'll do about supplementaries.

**Hon. Wayne Easter:** That's fine, Mr. Chair. We know the government's going to do what they're going to do anyway, so....

**The Chair:** Okay. With that, can I get a motion to adjourn?

Okay, the meeting is adjourned.

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**Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons**

**Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes**

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