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Chair

Mr. James Bezan

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• (1630)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC)): Order, please. We'll get this meeting going.

This is meeting number 42. As you have on the orders of the day, pursuant to Standing Order 106(4), a meeting has been requested by four members of the committee to discuss their request to consider holding a meeting in order to review the government's funding cuts to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Are there any opening comments?

Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We thank you for the cooperation in holding the meeting. I know there's not much choice under Standing Order 106, but you and I have chatted, and we thank you for that cooperation.

We will be looking to see if there's unanimous support to table a motion. The issue relates to what was reported in the media about a secret document at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency that talked about cutbacks at the agency.

Now, there are some facts that we know. We know that a scientist happened to come across such document, or partial document, and because that scientist was concerned, he sent it to his union. For informing the public about a safety risk based on cutbacks at the CFIA, the scientist was fired. I believe that firing is now under appeal.

We know that the document, although we haven't had access to it and we believe this committee should have access to it, was approved by Treasury Board in November. The government's stated reason for not releasing it so we all know, as should be proper under parliamentary procedure, is due to significant communication problems.

We believe—and that's why we requested the meeting—that the move will cut funding for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and that it will download inspections to industry itself. Therefore, it goes in the opposite direction, which every member of this committee knows we have talked about, of there being more inspections to ensure that imported products meet the same standards as Canadian standards and that the public treasury should pick up more of the costs of inspections, as is done in other countries around the world. If the government doesn't do that, it makes our farmers less competitive.

It's a serious matter. It really goes in the opposite direction to the way we believe, and we think the committee actually believes, we should be going.

The key point is on foreign product coming in. We know, as we talked about at committee, that Canadians are greatly concerned about the safety of foreign product coming in. There was the paint scare on Chinese toys coming into Canada. That set off basically an avalanche of concerns over whether foreign products, food or otherwise, were meeting Canadian standards.

Farmers have asked, as this committee well knows, that the border be strictly controlled and that products coming in meet the same standards as our producers.

Basically, the bottom line is that this secret document, we're led to believe, is all about cuts and transferring responsibility. We're concerned that it could jeopardize our food inspection systems. Instead of imposing less cost on farmers, it could actually impose more costs, either directly or indirectly.

I don't want to get into a whole lot of quotes, but it was quoted by University of Guelph professor, Ann Clark.... I want to outline this. If we transfer inspections from a public authority to industry, does anybody in this room really believe that industry is not going to transfer those costs back to primary producers and maybe, in the process, instead of operating at cost, as we expect a public agency to do, add in a little profit for themselves?

• (1635)

I've seen the potato industry operate when they have control of processing grades of potatoes at the plant level. They can put undue influence on a producer and say, "Look, if you don't toe the line, if you speak out in public against us, maybe your grade may not meet standard."

Those are the kinds of games that are played out there. And the government, in terms of transferring inspections to the industry, puts at risk the farming community, puts at risk food inspections, and gives more control over to companies that already have too much control in the food production industry.

Ann Clark, who is a professor at the University of Guelph, states this, and I quote:

The proposals are illogical. Companies are in business to make profit, pure and simple, and we, as a society, have fully accepted and bought into that, but with the understanding that somebody will be riding herd on them—minding the shop—to safeguard societal interests. Otherwise, history has shown that we are at risk.

Professor Clark cited industries such as tobacco and asbestos.

The point is that I think by transferring it to industry, it possibly puts greater costs on producers, takes control out of the public sector and gives it to companies, and the bottom line is that it could put the health of the food supply for Canadians at risk.

Before I close, Mr. Chair, I want to mention this. Canada is seen as one of the most reliable suppliers of food around the world because our inspection system works, generally. It's one of the better ones. If we had even one incident, and Canada being an exporting nation where we export so many of our products, imagine what one incident would do in terms of our international reputation abroad and how it would impact, as was seen with BSE, on primary producers on the ground.

I guess the point is that this proposal could be perceived as the government cutting corners. We know, it's been stated, the government has managed to manage the fiscal situation of the country into a deficit, so are they cutting corners because they have basically made the country broke financially, or is it for other reasons? What the proposal is basically doing, as far as we understand it, is asking the industry to police itself. We believe it could put public safety and consumers at risk.

For all those reasons, we basically asked for this committee meeting so that, number one, we could put forward a motion—and I'll ask for unanimous consent on that—asking that the committee have the so-called secret report put forward to the committee so we can see first-hand what that report does say. I talked to the chair earlier, and he suggested that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency might be available today to appear, and certainly I think we would be in agreement to hear from them, as an initial step.

We've talked through my office to the union, PIPSC, and they would certainly be willing to come as early as eight o'clock tomorrow morning, so that would give us the agency's side of the argument. We know they can't speak out against the government, so it would give us the union's side of the argument. Then maybe we could determine where we meet down the road.

The motion that I have, Mr. Chair, would read as follows, and I put it forward for your consideration:

The Committee demands that government provide the Committee with the plan to abandon critical food safety inspections as was reportedly approved by Treasury Board in November 2007 and that the committee begin a study of the plan to abandon food safety inspections and report the results back to the House of Commons.

• (1640)

I don't know if others want to speak first before I move that motion. I think maybe it would be appropriate.

The Chair: You've moved the motion that's on the table—

Hon. Wayne Easter: I haven't moved it yet; I just stated the motion.

I'll move the motion. Then we can get into a debate on the motion and discuss it at the same time.

The Chair: So we're debating the motion tabled by Mr. Easter.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I think we know what this particular meeting is about. It's about changing the channel on the infamous carbon tax.

An hon. member: Oh, please. That's just insulting.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: It's about fear-mongering.

The truth of the matter is that there have been no funding cuts. This meeting was called to review the government's funding cuts. There have been none. We have the CFIA officials standing by. I would like to adjourn this current meeting, go into a new meeting, and call the CFIA officials. Let's get the truth from the CFIA officials. The fear-mongering has to stop now.

The Chair: Okay. I have Mr. Dewar on the list to speak.

Just so you know, I don't see that as a point of order. It's a point of debate on Mr. Easter's motion. We have to deal with Mr. Easter's motion first, and then we'll move on to the other motion that you're suggesting.

Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think the public was quite shocked by the revelations that were brought forward by an employee of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. I think many people who have seen the story unfold, instead of wanting to give him a pink slip, actually want to give him an award for bringing this information to the public.

Again, it seems the government is not wanting to share this information with the public, otherwise it would concede it. I guess the question is, what is the government hiding? We need to probe into this. This is an issue that has seized all Canadians.

Mr. Easter talked about what the implications would be on the food industry, and then he picked up on the most recent case of BSE. BSE was something that had been on the radar of scientists who were working for the government, and there's still an outstanding case being fought by Dr. Shiv Chopra, who told the government a year before the first case, a year before the first case of BSE arrived, that this was going to happen—a year before. What happened? He was fired.

So don't tell the public to trust you, because they don't.

We need to shed some light on this. BSE is not gone, and we need more stringent regulation, not less. There are better methods of dealing with it—European Union, Japanese, to name a couple—and if this government is going down the path of deregulation and handing it over to industry, the public needs to know that.

I might add, Mr. Chair, that this also touches on the problem of what this government considers sensitive documents and how they arrange that. That's probably for another committee, but I think it's clear that they have problems with what they consider is...I think everything is confidential according to this government. I suppose the milk calendar that comes out every year would be seen as confidential by this government if they thought it was going to undermine their political interests.

I think we need to have some light shed on it. I think this proposal, from what we can glean, is heading in the wrong direction. We've seen what has happened in other jurisdictions, when you hand over what is a core service of government to industry. It's not a pretty sight, and Canadians will not have it. Producers will pay the price.

I want to share some facts—and I think it's important in terms of this motion—that many Canadians will be interested in, which is the skyrocketing cost of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency over the last number of years in hiring temporary help agencies. In front of me—this is from government, a government document, and I'll table it later—a document that shows that as of 2005-06, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency was spending over \$1 million on hiring temporary help agencies to do its work.

Mr. Chair, do you know what that clocks in this year? And we're not even finished. This is only for half a year. Almost \$4 million. I cite this evidence, Mr. Chair, because the Canadian Food Inspection Agency seems to want to get out of the business of using public servants, who are experts, who are trained and work for the public interest.

This is order paper information that I have. The government has gone in the last five years.... The data I have here starts with 2002-03, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency spending \$280,000 per annum on temporary help agencies—in other words, external from government and bringing them in—clocking in at \$3.575 million, and we haven't even finished the year.

I cite that as evidence, Mr. Chair, simply to underline the point that has been made, that many people have serious and grave concerns, myself included, about the direction in which the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is going. This government seems to want to go down the path of getting out of the business of.... The least we can have from this government is some transparency by tabling the documents that people have been concerned about and, for their benefit, clear the air.

• (1645)

The worst thing we can have in our food industry is speculation and concerns about what goes on people's table. The last thing we need is for our government to walk silently out of this room without providing evidence that Canadians demand—and mind you, this is a government that said it was going to be different and be accountable and transparent.

I guess that's what the motion is about, so we will be supporting it. Hopefully the government will see the wisdom of that and will do the same.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1650)

The Chair: Monsieur Bellavance.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): It's too bad that it took an unfortunate event, the dismissal of a Canadian Food Inspection Agency employee, for the government to reveal its plan for cuts. I don't know where Mr. Lauzon learned that no cuts were in the offing, since all the media talked throughout the summer about the plan for cuts at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Perhaps he was on vacation.

Even if the media hadn't talked about it, our committee had already expressed its concerns over the matter. Mr. Lauzon can't convince us that he wasn't aware of what had happened since the committee held a meeting on May 15 at which some committee

members, including the one speaking to you, expressed their concern about the budget cuts between 2008-2009 and 2009-2010.

Obviously, the fact that there is less money means a cut in services and in the possibility of conducting adequate inspections. And yet, every time we ask the people at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency whether there will be fewer inspectors and inspections, they reassure us by saying that there won't be fewer inspections. They even claim there will be more inspections and that they will manage to do better, even though they haven't yet found a way to do that in view of the cuts to their budget.

Considering all the cuts that have been made in other sectors—no need to tell you what's going on in the area of culture, Mr. Chairman—we realize this government has a plan for cuts at each department. It isn't pleasant to see cuts in the field of culture or elsewhere. Only the armed forces are not subject to budget cuts. However, in the case of food inspection, we're playing with people's health.

In the United States, it's the industry that handles food inspection. What is strange is that all the foods that have been subject to recalls in Canada, including one case that dates back to August 10, come from the United States. Ground beef from the United States, which is also an organic product, contained the E. coli bacterium. Tomatoes—a recent case—cantaloupes and spinach, were also recalled. The public is aware of these recalls of products, most of which come from the United States. So that's not a model we should follow. And yet that's precisely what the government is still doing: it's following the Bush model. It's a very, very bad idea.

I don't think anyone has cried "Wolf!" And yet this matter is urgent. We must prevent this at all costs. This matter has come out in the media, and it's important for us to meet immediately to hear not only the people from the agency, but also the union representatives. I moreover agree on Mr. Easter's motion that the union people be summoned before the committee. One employee disclosed what happened, particularly since this supposedly secret document was on the website or was accessible to employees. That employee acted correctly. Perhaps the secret was invented after the fact, but it would be important to say that that employee should be congratulated and protected. Parliament has a number of measures it can use to protect public servants who engage in this kind of whistle-blowing. This is a good example in which a person was right to take action.

Our duty is to examine this matter. If the agency people are available right now, let's proceed. If the union people were available tomorrow morning, that would be perfect. We'll at least have managed to conduct a summary of the question before Parliament resumes. If we could obtain the document, that would enable us to continue this study as soon as Parliament returns.

[*English*]

The Chair: *Merçi.*

Mr. Miller, you have the floor.

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It's always good to be back here in Ottawa to discuss things of importance to agriculture in Canada, and hopefully we'll get to the truth here when the CFIA officials come in, and what have you.

Things must be really hot in Malpeque over the carbon tax this summer to bring us down here. But that's okay. As I said, we're willing to talk about that anytime.

Just going back to some of the comments that Mr. Dewar made about the public being surprised, they absolutely were when they found out that a government employee in a place of trust could take documents and release them. I had a lot of people comment on that at the time, and I'm sure that Mr. Dewar did, too, if he'd talk the truth on it.

As well, he talked about the BSE and—I don't know whether it was fictitious or not—some person who was fired a year before the BSE. He seemed to be insinuating that it was this government that did it.

• (1655)

Mr. Paul Dewar: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. Larry Miller: I never spoke while you were talking.

I know he has a lot of farmers in his riding; I don't know whether they're on Bronson Avenue or Queen Street, but anyway, I'm sure that he consulted with them. Or if he had consulted with them, he'd have found out that the BSE crisis started in 2003. It was under the former government. And I'm not point any blame at them. The BSE was something that happened, and what have you. I just point it out because it's a mistake in some of the things that he said and it should be pointed out. So there could be other mistakes.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, I never talked about which government. And just for the record, I have three farmers markets in my riding.

The Chair: That's not a point of order; it's a point of debate.

Mr. Larry Miller: Good for you. That wasn't a point of order.

Mr. Paul Dewar: It was a point of order with some clarification of which government. I never said it was yours.

The Chair: Mr. Miller, you have the floor.

Mr. Larry Miller: As well, Mr. Chairman, some of the things that have come out here are over a proposed strategic review of inspection and everything that the CFIA does. Of course, everybody wants, at the end of the day, to see that food is inspected, that it's safe, whether it's produced here in this country or whether it's food that comes in, and a strategic review is very, very important. Frankly, what surprised me—and maybe I shouldn't be surprised—is that the two former ministers across the way should know what a strategic review really is all about.

The other real issue here that I didn't bring up, but Mr. Easter did, was about fear-mongering. If you go back to fear-mongering here, I'd just like to bring out a quote.

My colleague across the way, when she was a former public health minister, basically accused anyone raising questions about the federal government's preparation—that would have been her federal government at the time—for a potential avian flu outbreak... Well, it wasn't basically; she did accuse them of fear-mongering. She didn't deny that there was more work to do, but at the same time, she chastised those who criticized the plan as doing so out of partisan politics or fear-mongering.

She made another quote:

We all have to be in the business of expressing legitimate concern and legitimate action, but fear-mongering and giving misinformation is really not in the public interest.

Well, amen to that, Mr. Chairman. I can agree with that statement. Back in those days, if she'd have contacted all the poultry farmers in her riding on Bloor Street, or wherever it was, I think she'd have found out then, too, that there was an issue out there.

So we know what this is all about, but I'm prepared to get down to the work of having CFIA come in here, and let's hear the real facts today, not just more fear-mongering.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Bennett, you have the floor.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Thanks very much.

I think there's quite a difference between fear-mongering and asking for the facts, and those of us who have been ministers do understand very much what program review can mean. So for Mr. Lauzon to say that there have not been any cuts...there is a very different thing in terms of cutting a budget and cutting what should have been an increase. That's why we need to see the report, that this still is cutting back.

Fooling with the numbers is not going to increase the confidence of Canadians in their food supply. We want, this summer, every Canadian to know that what they're putting on their barbecue, what they're putting in the ground, is safe for Canadians.

When it comes to avian flu, the idea—

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: On a point of order, Mr. Storseth.

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

I can assure Ms. Bennett, and Canadians, that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has one of the highest standards in the world. And I can assure them that what Canadians are putting on their barbecues from Canadian stores is safe.

I do not think it's right that the Liberal Party continues to try to play this fear-mongering game. It absolutely destabilizes the market.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That's not a point of order, Mr. Chairman, with due respect.

The Chair: That's not a point of order.

I'll make those decisions, madam.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes, thank you.

One of the main concerns we had in the preparation for a pandemic influenza was to make sure we would be able to keep avian flu a disease of birds. We wanted to make sure that human transmission couldn't happen. It meant that there needed to be preparation with all the poultry farmers of this country, who didn't want to witness with their flocks the culling that was seen around the world a couple of summers ago.

The rumour that \$25 million would be cut from avian influenza preparedness, that \$25 million could be cut from BSE testing, particularly for our cattle producers, who are in such terrible trouble now, and the idea that actual inspections to feed and meat processors would be deferred to the industry and an American model do not increase the confidence of Canadians. And also, regarding this pre-market assessment that should be there for foreign products coming into Canada on meat and fruits and vegetables, we want to know if these cuts are actually happening.

In the spring, Mr. Chair, Michèle Demers, from the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada—the scientists of the Government of Canada—came to lobby members of Parliament that they were short-staffed and to say they were worried that they could not do their jobs in a scientific way. The fact that we now hear about this report, which had been approved by Treasury Board probably in November, makes us understand why they were very concerned. Even at that time they felt they didn't have enough staff, and then there might be the potential of these cuts that had been rumoured.

I think it is extraordinarily important, as my colleague has suggested, that we hear from the CFIA people. We need to see the report, and we need to hear from the scientists in the Government of Canada in terms of what the impact of these cuts could be.

There are those of us who understand what cutting inspectors meant in terms of Walkerton and what happened at the Aylmer meat plant. We have a moral obligation to get the facts on this.

We cannot continue to allow this government, with their Bushization of ideology versus science.... This is enough already. We heard the health minister this morning chastise the doctors of this country for 30 minutes straight that he knew science better than the doctors of this country.

Let's just get on with the facts. And let's get Canadians confident. Any cuts in this area decrease the confidence of Canadians and the world markets. Let's get on with it and find the facts. If there weren't cuts, and if somehow this report has been reversed by this government, then we will be the first to say that's a good thing. But let's get the facts, and then let's get on with hearing from the scientists to see what these cuts might mean.

• (1700)

The Chair: Just for your information, Madam Bennett, your examples of the Aylmer and Walkerton situations are both provincial inspections, not federal.

Mr. Storseth, you have the floor.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think the inspectors were cut. It's a sort of global thing, I think, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: But it's provincial.

Mr. Storseth.

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

First, could I ask for a clarification? Does Mr. Easter have a motion on the floor?

The Chair: The motion is on the floor, and it has been circulated. It reads:

The Committee demands that government provide the Committee with the plan to abandon critical food safety inspections as was reportedly approved by Treasury Board in November 2007 and the committee begin a study of the plan to abandon food safety inspections and report the results back to the House of Commons.

That was the motion. It's not as though we'd been discussing calling in the CFIA right away, or bringing the union in tomorrow at eight o'clock. That's not part of the motion.

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

I guess that's my concern. It's that Mr. Easter, while he did deliver an eloquent soliloquy that was well rehearsed, didn't actually address the issues we are here today to talk about. On this side, we're more than happy to get down to the truth of this, to show a little professionalism. Let's have the CFIA come to the table and sit down, and ask them whatever questions you want to ask in that regard. If you want to have further witnesses come forward, we're more than happy to do that, but let's have a level of debate here and not go on a bunch of assumptions.

My problem with this motion is that they've already coined the debate with a whole bunch of assumptions that are surrounded by zero facts. I think the most pertinent thing and the most responsible thing for us to do as members of Parliament would be to have the CFIA come forward today, sit down with them and ask them some questions, and if Mr. Easter has a list of other witnesses prepared that he'd like to ask questions of, fine, then move forward with a motion after that.

Once again, he's moving forward with assumptions and motions and he hasn't even taken the time to get all the facts straight on this stuff. That is what concerns me.

We have one of the safest food inspection standards in the world. There are 200 more inspectors this year than there were last year. There's \$113 million more this year than there was last year. Let's get some of the facts on the table, and if Mr. Easter still wants to move forward with his study, or report, or however he wants to put it, we can discuss it at that time. I think we should be taking the time to discuss facts, as we on this committee have done traditionally in the past.

That's what I would like to see the committee move forward with first, and try to keep some of the partisanship out of this. This is about food safety, and we as a government have led the way on this issue. In our mandate the Prime Minister has been a leader on this in this country and around the world. I think we should move forward with getting to the truth of this matter.

• (1705)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Boshcoff.

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

If the report was produced in November 2007, someone must have it. My concern and the public's concern is, what is in this report that is so worthy of being kept secret? If the report was defined as being secret, what does the term "significant communication risks" mean to the public, and is that enough reason for us not to receive it?

Also, the implication here is that farmers, as has been very clear to me, want the same rigorous rules to apply to imports as are applied to them. Does this report change that, or does it actually make it easier for imports to not be inspected? I think that's the concern about health risks to Canadians.

I'm asking that the report be presented to us tonight so that we can study it and at least have some basis for more detailed questioning, Mr. Chair.

The minister has been before us a few times, and in our questioning I don't know if he was duty bound not to tell us about what was in that report in his responses. I would like to know if that tempered the way he responded to some of our questions in terms of the past six months of the committee. It would really come down to, as was mentioned, that we actually see this so we can determine...

Right now there's a lot of speculation. Is there a \$25 million cut from avian flu preparedness, yes or no? I'd rather know definitively as opposed to trying to guess, because since November 2007 we probably could have done a lot in terms of avian flu preparedness.

I thank you for the opportunity to make those points, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

To the health question, I agree that the health and safety of Canadians and food safety is a priority. It's certainly important and it is something this government has taken very seriously and has taken major steps toward improving, with more inspectors, as my colleague has indicated, and \$113 million in the budget. There are no spending cuts. There are increases and, certainly, spending maintained to ensure we get the best use of the dollars.

I think this motion by Mr. Easter requesting to have a meeting and much of what he said is a lot of smoke and making political hay for his own benefit. The fact of the matter is that this government has taken a lot of steps in the right direction, including in the area of food labelling and ensuring that products made in Canada are indeed made in Canada. Steps are being taken to modernize the system and get the best use of the dollar.

I agree that we should hear from the officials and others to see the steps that are being taken, but from what I can see from the motion itself, it is a bit of politicking going on.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. St. Amand.

• (1710)

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand (Brant, Lib.): Briefly, Mr. Chair. I don't understand the coyness, the paranoia with which the government members are operating. In November 2007 this report was found by Mr. Pomerleau. He was since let go or fired, after 20 years of good service to the country, apparently. If the allegations made by him are completely unwarranted, if his interpretation of the report is baseless, as the members opposite seem to be hinting, why not release the report?

Why would the government, last December, not have said, "This guy's allegations are off the wall; here's the report, Canadians"—

Canadians who have a clear inherent interest in the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, after all. "Here it is, Canadians, judge for yourselves; we are not, definitely not reducing funding for this agency." Why did the government not do that seven, eight or nine months ago? Why are they now wanting the witnesses to come forward without yet having provided the report to us and, by extension, to Canadians? What are they hiding with respect to the report? I'd like to challenge or ask the parliamentary secretary, why has the report not been released to the Canadian public?

The Chair: Mr. Storseth.

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

I make a motion that we suspend debate on this motion and call the witnesses forward. Then we can resume it, if Mr. Easter wishes, after we hear the witnesses.

The Chair: Okay, we'll go straight to the vote on this dilatory motion to suspend debate on this motion, to return to it at a later time, and to call witnesses forward.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Is there any discussion on this—

The Chair: No, none. Unless Mr. Storseth wants to clarify calling witnesses—

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Chair, first of all, I think this is common courtesy. This is what we've traditionally done. We have witnesses here, so let's call them forward. We're not saying we're not going to continue this thrilling debate afterwards, but if the witnesses could come forward, maybe they could shed some light on some of the questions that Mr. St. Amand and Mr. Easter brought forward. We could then resume this debate afterwards.

Traditionally, this committee has been very hospitable toward witnesses. Call them forward and move on. If Mr. Easter has more witnesses he wants to bring up afterwards, that can be a part of the discussion after we resume debate. I'm not asking that we adjourn the meeting; I'm asking that we suspend the debate.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Part of the reason, Mr. Chair, for the—

The Chair: If it's only based on a clarification, Mr. Easter. I'm being very, very lenient here.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Okay. Well, I'm clarifying that part of the reason for the motion that is on the table is so that you get to a report dealing with the consequences of the secret report. Once you've decided that, you're going to do a report that will eventually get to the House of Commons, and then you call witnesses. It seems appropriate to me to first deal with the motion, and then the committee is dealing with the report of substance, of which the first two witnesses would be the CFIA and PIPSC.

The Chair: We don't want to debate this. We have a dilatory motion on the floor, which is not debatable, and the clarification is that we're simply breaking to hear the witnesses who are here now, and we'll come back to this after the witnesses present. At that point in time we can decide about future business of the committee and how we move forward from there.

We'll have a recorded vote on this.

(Motion negated: nays 7; yeas 4)

The Chair: We're back to discussing the motion, and I have Mr. Easter in the line-up.

Hon. Wayne Easter: One point that I would agree with Mr. Storseth on is that we do have one of the safest food inspection systems in the world. There's no question about it; bar none, we do now.

Walkerton and Aylmer were mentioned earlier. No question, they were the responsibility of provincial inspection systems. Who do you think was in the cabinet when those incidents happened? One was John Baird, two was Jim Flaherty, and three was Tony Clement. I believe those three are in the current cabinet, a cabinet and a government that operates in secret.

We're fortunate that a scientist managed to find it. Somebody in senior management slipped up and they put on a website what the government's intention really is, which is to cut our inspection system.

Did they never learn a lesson when they were at the provincial level? We know the Prime Minister wants to decentralize the national government, that's for sure. We know Flaherty has driven us pretty nearly to the brink of deficit again, and to do cost savings for that area....

The fact of the matter is that we do have one of the safest systems in the world, and I can tell you that everyone on this opposition bench is certainly going to do everything they can to not allow this secretive government to put at risk Canadians' food supply and our international reputation. That's why we've called this meeting. That's why we want to see the secret report. It's so that we can see what the government is really up to in the light of day.

Once we decide on that, that we're going to do a report, then we can hear from the CFIA and PIPSC. If we get the document, we have all that information to research and work through over the next few weeks, as we start up again and hold the government to account on what they're really trying to do, not only to our food inspection system but to this country.

So I can't emphasize enough the need to support this motion, because we need to get the document that the government is trying to cover up.

I might mention, if Mr. Lauzon wants to get into it—he talked about carbon tax—that there's one difference between Stéphane Dion and Stephen Harper. Stéphane Dion put it all out there where everyone can see it. You know that Environment Canada has a document called *Turning the Corner* that talks about a \$65 per tonne carbon tax that the Conservatives would impose, but the tax is in secret, not telling Canadians what you're going to pose on them down the line. At least Stéphane is up front and puts it out there so people can debate and discuss it. If you want to debate that issue at any time, I'm willing to debate it.

•(1715)

The Chair: That's not the debate we're having right now, Mr. Easter.

Mr. Lauzon, you have the floor.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: I'd like to clarify that there's more than one thing different between Stéphane Dion and the Prime Minister of Canada. There are many things different, thank God.

The truth of the matter is that there's an awful air of desperation. I know the opposition wants to change the channel on this carbon tax, but boy, you're going over the top to try to change it. The truth of the matter is that what's embarrassing is the carbon tax. If you want to talk about things that are going to ruin food safety and agriculture, that's a carbon tax.

However, Mr. St. Amand wanted to know what happened, what our reaction was to November. I'll tell you what our reaction was, Mr. St. Amand: \$113 million announced for food safety by the Prime Minister. You folks are fear-mongering about \$25 million cuts, all kinds of wonderful cuts, but the truth of the matter is that in December 2007 the Prime Minister of Canada announced \$113 million for food safety. That was the answer.

The Chair: Mr. Komarnicki, you have the floor.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I find it absolutely remarkable that this committee is called today to discuss issues with respect to funding with CFIA. We have officials here who are prepared to testify and discuss the issues that are very pertinent to what this member has raised, and he chooses not to hear them. Why is that? Simply because they're trying to get political hay made and they're politicking on this issue when they should be getting down to the facts.

We have the officials here to present the facts, but they're not prepared to hear them today because they don't want to. They're playing games, and I think the member from Malpeque is just blowing a lot of smoke.

The Chair: Mr. Storseth.

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

Finally we get to the bottom it; Mr. Easter is just happy to get out of his riding.

Mr. Chair, we brought CFIA officials here today to tell the truth and get to the bottom of this story. We have officials here to talk about the modernization and innovation this government has brought to food inspection. This committee knows full well about the movement we've made on food labelling after 13 years of non-action. These are the kinds of things our government has led, and we've been up front and honest every step of the way. As a matter of fact, the Liberal committee members complained we were doing it too quickly and taking away their political hay.

What we should be doing today, Mr. Chair, is getting to the truth, and the truth lies in hearing witnesses and testimony from people in the know. The opposition seems hesitant to do that. They're scared to hear anything other than their fear-mongering.

If Mr. Easter and Mrs. Bennett want to talk about downloading to farmers, I can tell you that I come from rural Canada and I haven't been Ottawashed yet, Mr. Easter. I still represent my riding. You and I both know, and so does Mr. Boshcoff, because he was quoted as saying it this year, that your green tax is going to be a \$15 billion redistribution from rural Canada to Stéphane Dion and his priorities.

You're unhappy with tax cuts. You're unhappy with looking after the middle class. This green shift, this so-called green tax you talk about, has nothing to do with the environment and everything to do with increasing costs on rural Canadians.

An hon. member: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Brian Storseth: You know that the price of diesel was \$1.12 per litre for farmers last year. You know that your tax—and it's been proven in British Columbia—is only going to increase that. How can you possibly support that?

I'll be more than happy to have that discussion with you all through the fall.

The other thing you wanted to talk about, Mr. Easter, was hidden agendas. The Canadian Wheat Board has been one of your greatest hidden agendas for the last 13 years.

• (1720)

The Chair: Let's get back on topic here.

I have Mr. Boshcoff.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Unless there are other speakers who want to speak to this, I'd like to put the question so that we can—

The Chair: I still have speakers on the list, Mr. Boshcoff.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: If we could pass the motion and then call the witnesses, I think that would be appropriate.

The Chair: I still have people on the speakers list.

I've got Monsieur Bellavance, Mr. Dewar, and then Mr. Miller.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The members say they want to get to the bottom of this matter. I believe we all agree on that. The ideal would be to vote in favour of the motion put before us. Getting to the bottom of the matter does not just mean hearing the version of people from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. That's only one version, part of the story.

Earlier Mr. Lauzon talked about a regime of terror. I don't think that an agency employee would publicly say that he is opposed to a plan to make \$24 million in cuts solely because one person was dismissed for disclosing the plan, not to the public, but to his union. That was the right action to take, when he learned that the government was intending to cut the food inspection budget, the budget of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

The people who come to testify before the committee will be somewhat afraid to speak. With all due respect for the people who will appear, and whom I trust, this should not stop here. If we want to examine the entire matter, we should also hear from the union people and the minister, and the sooner the better. On the government side, we can get to the bottom of things. If we manage to obtain this report, that will give us a good indication of the government's intentions.

Before moving on to the vote, we must pay attention to what Mr. Lauzon has said. He seems to want us to believe that the \$113 million constitutes an increase in the budget of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. The committee had a breakdown done of that \$113 million figure, which was spread over two years. The agency didn't receive the entire \$113 million. In fact, they received

\$23 million in the first year and \$39 million in the second, a total of \$62 million. No one was talking about an increase.

This summer, we learned that an employee discovered a plan for \$24 million in cuts. Make any calculations you want; there is no \$113 million increase, as Mr. Lauzon would have us believe. We're indeed talking about cuts. The proof is that no one in the government—and it's the minister who should have done this—when this came out in the media, denied the fact that a plan had been put forward. If he had said there wouldn't be \$24 million in cuts, the problem would have been solved and the gentleman would not have lost his job.

• (1725)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I have a couple of quick points on this motion, Mr. Chair, and the importance of dealing with this promptly.

This is not only about what's happening in this particular agency. It's also the road map of this government to divest itself of what has been our standard for generations. Essentially, Mr. Chair, that is to have government scientists involved in the business of food inspection.

We also know there have been plans put forward to government—there has been a panel that has looked at this—that this would be the first step. We're looking at food inspection today, but we're also hearing that the government is talking about a vast range of other areas of which it wants to divest itself to save a couple of bucks, which will cost us many more dollars in the end, of course—everything from horticulture, fisheries, environment, ocean systems, health, biological sciences, medical devices, and so on. And I think when you—

The Chair: On a point of order, Mr. Miller.

Mr. Larry Miller: On a point of order, I believe we're here at the agriculture committee, not the fisheries committee or the environment committee, so I'm wondering what the relevance is.

The Chair: Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Certainly, I'd be happy to answer. I was saying that this is the first step and that your own government has a panel looking at how to divest itself, and I'd be happy to share this with you. But it is something the government has asked for, and you've had a panel look at this, how to divest itself with “partnerships”, which is code for getting the government out of doing the business of regulation.

I simply underline the importance of dealing with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and what the government has reportedly been doing already.

The final point I want to make, which is really important to my mind, Mr. Chair, is that this goes back to Treasury Board wanting to have all agencies and boards and ministries save money. That's not news; that's a fact. Why was the Canadian Food Inspection Agency engaged in this? They were directed by Treasury Board. Every ministry was. Everyone knows that in this town. So what's the motivation here?

We saw program review in this city with the previous government. It wasn't pretty. And we thought we were out of that and into rebuilding government structures and agencies again, and now we have a new gang in town and they think they can do a better job of taking government apart. I say that as something that should be stated from the beginning, that this was Treasury Board driven.

This government is trying to save \$2 billion in its operating. We all know that. Mr. Baird told me that personally, publicly, and everyone knows it. As Treasury Board president, he asked all agencies, boards, and ministries to come forward and provide savings. So it's about the money.

I think Canadians would rather have investments in their Food Inspection Agency than try to save a couple of dollars for a government to look better, and that's the bottom line on this.

The Chair: Mr. Miller.

Mr. Larry Miller: Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

I'm having a hard time getting my head around why we don't want to hear the truth about this issue. In voting against Mr. Storseth's motion, basically what the opposition is saying is one of two things; you either don't want to hear the truth or you're saying that CFIA officials aren't going to give you the straight goods. That's what it appears to be.

I would think, Mr. Chairman, that if anyone has a care about food safety and inspection in this country, it's CFIA officials. I think we need to get back to them and let them tell us the story here. We're on a merry-go-round here and we're going nowhere.

An hon. member: Then let us—

• (1730)

The Chair: Order.

Mr. Larry Miller: I didn't interrupt you.

On the other side of it, André, you talked about the person who was let go for leaking government documents. If you had someone in your office who leaked something about an issue connected with one of your constituents, you would be forced to let that person go. That's a reality. You know that and I know that. That kind of thing is unacceptable. There was no other way, so you can't go into that. And to say otherwise, it makes it a farce if—

The Chair: Monsieur Bellavance, on a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: I'm directly concerned, Mr. Chairman. I don't think the comparison is really a good one because he informed his union that there was a problem. This isn't a leak or anything of that kind; it's very different. I don't want us to try to compare this with what I would do or not do. I think this employee did the right thing. This isn't at all the same thing as a leak from my office.

[*English*]

The Chair: That's debate.

Mr. Miller.

Mr. Larry Miller: I'm surprised that you would support that kind of thing, André, but that's certainly your prerogative.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to hear what CFIA has to say on this, and the sooner we can get to it the better.

The Chair: I have nobody else left on my speakers list. Seeing none, I'll call the question.

I'll read the motion by Mr. Easter one more time, just so we know what we're voting on:

That the Committee demands that government provide the Committee with the plan to abandon critical food safety inspections as was reportedly approved by Treasury Board in November 2007; and that the Committee begin a study of the plan to abandon food safety inspections and report the results back to the House of Commons.

(Motion agreed to)

An hon. member: It was unanimous.

The Chair: No, we had abstentions.

The Chair: We don't have a motion to call witnesses.

Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: I'll make another motion that we call the CFIA witnesses—and maybe we can get unanimous consent to have them here as soon as possible to come to the table—and hear the truth.

The Chair: So we have a motion on the table to call the CFIA witnesses, with an amendment by Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes, the amendment is that we call CFIA witnesses immediately, but that the union, PIPSC, be asked to appear before the committee tomorrow morning, at 8 or 8:30. I know they're willing to come at 8 o'clock. That would give us a balance in terms of the witnesses we have heard from. The agency no doubt will speak for the government; and we'll hear from the union, which will speak for the people who work in the system.

The Chair: The amendment shall be that we call PIPSC to the committee tomorrow morning at 8 or 8:30, according to their availability.

Is there any debate on the amendment?

Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: We're more than willing to hear as many witnesses as you'd like. Unfortunately, I think, at least in my case, it's an impossibility for me to be here tomorrow morning. I have another commitment that was made some time ago. I would like to suggest that maybe we can negotiate that. This has sort of been sprung on us. We have the CFIA officials here and we're all here, so that's one thing, but maybe even you yourselves or others might have other commitments. If there's any way we could negotiate a little more notice, that would be helpful.

The Chair: Are there any other comments?

Mr. Miller, and then Mr. Easter.

Mr. Larry Miller: Mr. Chairman, personally I have things on tomorrow too, but I can make it work. I know what Mr. Lauzon has on, and I think it's going to be next to impossible for him to change it.

Just out of fairness and what he said, last week when this came out—Wayne talked about it earlier—in conversation between you and him, there was flexibility. We talked about it and we made it work. I think there's an indication here to make it work. We could ask for that same thing here again to get a time that is suitable for everybody.

The Chair: Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I do think, Mr. Chair, we have to hear from both in, really, the initial hearing. That can be done with the labour union tomorrow morning. I have, and I know some others have, commitments as well tomorrow, but in order to balance the arguments, I do believe we have to have that hearing tomorrow morning. We'd like to be accommodating, but we all are going to end up having to cancel some stuff. You have other members who may be able to replace you.

The Chair: Are there any other comments?

I'm going to call the question on the amendment, which is to have the union, PIPSC, at the committee tomorrow morning at 8 or 8:30.

(Motion agreed to)

• (1735)

The Chair: We're back to the main motion, which now reads:

That the committee call CFIA officials as soon as possible;

— which would be immediately following this—

and that the union, PIPSC, be asked to appear tomorrow at 8 or 8:30 in the morning.

Are there any further comments or debate?

Mr. Storseth.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Chair, I'd just like to make one small point on this—not that I'm going to vote against it. But this definitely, to me, is outside the scope of the motion that Mr. Easter passed about some secret document. We're actually talking about another issue here. I just want to make that point clear.

The Chair: Is there any other debate?

I'll call the question on the main motion, as amended, to call the CFIA.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I need to adjourn this meeting.

Mr. Storseth.

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

As we are entertaining motions outside the relevance of what we were originally brought here for, I would also like to move a motion for the committee to entertain. The committee doesn't have to do it now, but I will be giving 48 hours' notice before this meeting ends and we move on to the other one. I think that's procedurally the correct manner in which to go about it.

My motion is that the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food explore the differences between the Canadian Wheat Board and the Informa Economics study to investigate the real costs of the Wheat Board to western Canadian farmers.

This is a discussion that I think is critically important to our western Canadian farmers, who it's been shown are being shorted in the neighbourhood of about \$620 million a year, according to this study. I'd be more than happy to have this debate with Mr. Easter in the fall.

The Chair: Okay, that's just 48 hours' notice. We're not debating it; it's just a motion on the table.

With that, I'm going to adjourn the meeting. We have to take a bit of a time-out here for some technical purposes, and then we'll call in the witnesses. It's going to be about a five-minute break, guys and gals.

The meeting is adjourned.

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