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—
Chair

Mr. Kevin Sorenson

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• (1715)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC)): Order.

We are proceeding with committee business.

Mr. Dewar.

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

I simply want to ask that we vote on bringing forward the motion I had been putting forward at the last committee meeting; that is, to have the Minister of Foreign Affairs come to discuss with this committee his record, particularly around the events in Afghanistan and his public comments.

The motion I'm speaking to right now and the one I have moved is simply to bring that motion to this committee to vote on. I would appreciate our voting on the motion presently; then we could have the motion and have a debate on it. But I'd like to get to it speedily, so that we can actually discuss the motion. I'll leave it with you, Chair, and with my colleagues.

The Chair: All right, Mr. Dewar.

He has expressed his desire to proceed with the vote quickly.

Mr. Goldring.

Again, just to remind you, the motion is that we bring his motion to call the minister to the front of all the other motions that have been presented.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): I suppose that's my major concern, that we're jumping the queue, calling for the minister on a narrowly focused issue when the minister could be brought forward in other circumstances on much broader issues. I think we have a responsibility to utilize in the best way possible the most efficient method for the time of the committee business. I don't think we should be jumping queues unnecessarily in situations such as this.

Certainly there are time-sensitive issues. We have a great number of outstanding motions here that are to be discussed, and which one of those should be moved forward because of a priority over the others?

Either we have an organized process to manage the business of the committee or not. I think it's the first prerequisite, particularly if we examine the nature of the motions themselves. As I said, I think we have that overarching responsibility to address the issues of importance and significance in an orderly fashion. If somebody

brings forward a motion that is too narrowly focused, it takes time from the committee business. That is one reason.

The other one is that it should be an issue or a motion of importance that is of great significance to the committee, for the committee's time to be able to properly deal with it.

And then, what do we do with the other motions we have on this list, and how much time on our schedule over the next months do we have to go through them? I believe there are many motions here that have value, have significance, and should be accorded the proper amount of time of the committee. I fail to see that there is a great need to have this urgent requirement to push this one narrowly focused motion to the head of the agenda over all the other motions we have here, each one of them deserving the time and attention of the committee to individually address their concerns.

There are many issues throughout the world that are very important and very deserving of being brought forward to the committee, and most of those, unless there are absolutely urgent circumstances, should be dealt with in the orderly fashion of the committee's normal way of business.

I don't see that urgency on this motion, that great need to jump a queue. I think, rather than that, this really is just the opposite: it would be giving preferential treatment to what I would consider to be a more minor and narrowly focused, insignificant motion, compared with many of the other motions here.

Mr. Chairman, I have difficulty seeing the great need to bring this forward. I do not believe it has the sense of urgency, of immediacy that would warrant that type of queue-jumping, and I think it would be precedent-setting also to put this in the order of contents of what I would call important motions, when it is of a more minor nature than many of the others that are here. If you set this precedent to tie up committee time on the discussion and debates of minor motions, then we may not be able to get to the more major motions that are very deserving of the committee's attention and time.

So, Mr. Chairman, I do not support the bringing forward of this motion, and jumping the queue over the other ones, mainly because of its narrow focus of intent and also because there are many other issues here that should be discussed and have the appropriate time spent by this committee.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Goldring.

I want to say that my intentions are to close this at 5:30.

I know Thursday nights there are planes to catch and lots of different people are planning on going home for the weekend, but I also want to say that.... Well, I guess it's not up to me right now to say this.

We'll go to Mr. Dewar very quickly, and then Mr. Khan, Mr. Lebel, and a few others on the list.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Well, with all due respect to Mr. Goldring, I think a couple of things need to be pointed out in terms of his concerns about queue-jumping.

I note that the next four motions happen to be mine, so if there's any effect or concern, I appreciate his concern about the motions I've brought forward, which we would then be discussing. I've taken that into careful consideration, obviously, but more importantly, it's not about me; it's about this committee, and the most important issue this committee has been seized with is the issue of Afghanistan.

In fact, we're just rolling up our study on Afghanistan. I would argue that the minister's most recent visit to Afghanistan deeply affects not only how this committee sees our role there and how we're doing, but has also affected how our Parliament views Mr. Bernier as minister.

We're about to enter a new phase—that is, post-extension of the mission to 2011. I had no idea that Mr. Goldring or anyone on the government side had all of a sudden decided that Afghanistan was not important, because by default that's what you're saying. You're saying there are more important things that we're....

In the narrow focus there's an amendment that could be made, if you wish to, and questions that could be put to him. The narrow focus that you may be concerned about has an opportunity to be dealt with when we get to the motion, and that's all I'm asking for. I'm asking that this motion be dealt with by this committee and be amended if you wish.

I meant to add that instead of just calling for the resignation of the minister, as was done by others, I asked that this minister come before this committee. If it's not to be this committee, then where do we have an opportunity to hold the minister to account, and what is the role of this committee? The role of this committee, in my opinion and in the opinions of the people I represent, is to make sure we hold the government to account and to make recommendations to the government, and that's exactly what's in this motion. You'll get your talking points right now so that you can refute me, but to say that it's not important to this committee or to Canadians to have the Minister of Foreign Affairs appear to talk about what he did most recently in Afghanistan is, I think, out of bounds.

However, I will just leave with the two points I made at the beginning of my intervention. The first is that if you're worried about the sequence of the motions, the next four motions happen to be motions that I've submitted, so we'll be dealing with them. I'm fully aware of that and I'm taking that into careful consideration. The second and most important point is that the mission in Afghanistan, no matter what you think of it, is the most important issue that we're seized with. We're studying it right now, and that's what we should be dealing with. I would disagree strongly with the point that this isn't important. If you believe it's too narrow a scope, then, of course,

we can amend it, but you have to have it in front of this committee to be able to amend it.

On that, Mr. Chair, I would refute what has been stated by Mr. Goldring. I would like this committee to at least have this motion in front of us so that we can deal with it. If it is to be amended, then that we can do, but the essence of it is to ensure that this committee will have the minister in front of us so that the committee can hold the minister to account. It is being responsible and not just going off and calling for his head. I'm not doing that; in fact, I'm doing what I think Canadians want us to do—be responsible, be evidence-based, and do our job as a committee.

• (1725)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dewar.

I'll go on the record here as to a number of problems that I see in this motion. One of them is that I would love to see Mr. Obhrai's motion before this one, because as a committee chair I understand—and I think we all understand—that the minister must appear here before the end of May, if you want him.

A lot of the time in government, if the opposition doesn't ask for a minister, he won't come. If he doesn't get the request, he's not coming. I think it's a great opportunity to at least have the minister appear here on the estimates; your motion could be dealt with some time after that. The point is that I think we're going to be asking for a minister to come twice, and we may end up not seeing him at all.

Mr. Paul Dewar: That's the choice of the minister and the government. I don't think that would be a smart decision for him.

The Chair: It's the choice of our committee.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Yes, but essentially you're saying go to Mr. Obhrai's motion, which wasn't in the queue, and then go back to Mr. Goldring on that. It's supported, it's something the committee does upon request for the estimates and should be done.

But you should note, and probably it's been passed on to everyone, that the estimates will be going to the House anyhow, upon request of the official opposition. That's going to be happening, so we have the window.

I guess I understand what you're saying, but that has changed since we last met.

The Chair: On that point—and I'll come back to you, Mr. Dewar—if they go to the House, we have no opportunity to bring the minister on that.

Mr. Paul Dewar: And that's the choice of the official opposition, right?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Yes, and they've made that choice. So it's to buttress my argument that we should have him here on the motion that I put forward, for reasons aforementioned. And you're quite right to have him on the estimates, which now have gone to another process, another forum, and that would be the House.

I was going to suggest that at some point, if we have the motion here, we could factor a way or have a compromise so that we could have time for both.

I don't believe that what I'm referring to in my motion would take a long time. The estimates now are going to another forum, and that would be in the House. I'm simply wanting to have the minister here for the reasons I mentioned, which I think are important reasons. It's a matter of holding the minister and the government to account, and that's part of our job.

The Chair: Thank you.

Seeing that the clock is at 5:30, it is time to adjourn.

All in favour of adjourning?

We're adjourned.

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