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—
Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

Monday, November 19, 2007

• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): We'll get the meeting started.

Welcome back to the second meeting of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

We've asked the clerk to hand out to everyone all the motions that we had the last time around. You'll notice that there aren't two pieces of paper, so we'll make sure we're not confused. Hopefully, we can get through our routine proceedings today.

If you look at the list, the first three have been dealt with. We have the Library of Parliament; we have the chair being authorized to hear witnesses; and as well, we've struck the subcommittee on agenda and procedure. So now we'll get back to what was most contentious last time, the hearing of evidence and the order in which it will be heard.

Mr. Lake, followed by Mr. Savage.

We'll start taking names right now.

Mr. Lake.

Mr. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Mill Woods—Beaumont, CPC): I'm just taking a look at the note we got from the clerk. There'd be one little change, and I guess I'll just move it again.

You can figure out the wording at the beginning. The first round would be for seven minutes each, and would go Liberal, Bloc, NDP, Conservative; and the second round would be for five minutes each, and would go Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Liberal, Conservative, NDP; and each subsequent round would basically be two-question rounds alternating between the opposition and government for five minutes each.

The Chair: Okay, so that's the motion I have before the table.

Did you want to speak to it any further, Mr. Lake, or should I go to Mr. Savage?

Mr. Mike Lake: I don't need to.

The Chair: You'll leave it at that.

Okay, Mr. Savage, sir.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

We obviously were stuck on this last time, so I think we've all been giving this some consideration.

On our side, we have reflected on this. Those of us who were on this committee before feel that the way it was before was a reasonable way of doing business at this committee. So we will vote against this motion, and then I will propose a motion to go back to the rules of procedures that existed before prorogation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Is there any more discussion on this?

(Motion negated [See *Minutes of Proceedings*]).

The Chair: Mr. Savage wants to propose something, and then, Mr. Lake, I'll put you back on the speaking order.

Mr. Savage.

• (1535)

Mr. Michael Savage: In terms of proposing something, perhaps it would be just as simple if I proposed that in hearing evidence we use the same protocol that we used the last time this committee met.

The Chair: So it would be the way it's written out here right now.

Mr. Michael Savage: Yes, but perhaps with the change that the third-round back-and-forth between the opposition and the government would begin with the Liberal Party.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Lake.

Mr. Mike Lake: That's interesting. I'm not sure what the rationale is for that. Again, I think we determined last time, or there seemed to be some agreement then, that it was a completely unfair allocation of time.

It seems to me that in fairness, as we go through this process, we should have the time corresponding as closely as possible to the number of members we have in the House or in committee. Obviously the last time around we had a situation where we had the NDP member, one of 30 members in the House, getting to ask two questions before two Conservative MPs, out of the four sitting at the table, out of 125 or 126 members in the House that seem to be increasing on a fairly regular basis.

It seems there's definitely a fundamental unfairness. Obviously I don't think we'll be able to have a vote on this until we get this resolved, because we're simply not going to go for two rounds of four questions; we're not going to go for a 25% ratio, as we did last time. It's just not going to happen.

The Chair: Okay, we've got a list going here. I've got Ms. Dhalla, followed by Mr. Lessard.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.): I just wanted to ask a question, Mr. Chair. Perhaps the clerk would be able to answer it.

You had stated in the last meeting, and it also states here, that the list of routine motions passed out to us or sent to us is actually from the committee on foreign affairs. Is that correct?

The Chair: This one is not, no.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla: But the one that has been passed out does say subcommittee on agenda and procedure.

The Chair: Sorry, one of the additional ones passed out last week was from the committee on foreign affairs. The one handed out today was from our routine motions from last term.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla: Okay. I just wanted to double-check.

The Chair: Thanks.

Mr. Lessard is next.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First, I would like to remind my Conservative colleague that we did not make any decisions last week.

Also, I do not share his opinion on the assessment based on number. It should be remembered that, unlike the previous government, this is a minority government. The allocation established in the previous two sessions was done on the basis of a minority government. It is therefore completely normal for the opposition to have an extra say based on the majority it represents in the House; I would also like to point out that we have taken into consideration the fact that the opposition has to be able to ask questions more often than the government since the government has the advantage of being able to speak more often than the opposition, through the Minister or various House representatives.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lessard.

I now have on the list Mr. Chong, followed by Mr. Savage.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The previous routine motion that we had here in committee is unfair to the Liberal members of committee and unfair to the Conservative members of committee, because the previous routine motion, as I understand it, has the first two rounds according each of the parties equal time. That's not fair, because between the two parties we clearly have eight of the 11 members on this committee.

I think there should be a little more proportionality about this, so I would be prepared to modify this previous routine motion so that the

Liberal members and the Conservative members have a fair amount of time on this committee.

As it presently stands, in the first two rounds we get a quarter of the questions and the Liberal members get a quarter of the questions. That certainly doesn't reflect our membership on the committee: we have four out of the 11 members on this committee, and the Liberals have four out of 11 members. That's almost 40%. I think it's reasonable for us to have 35% or 40% of the questions in the first two rounds, so I would propose that we come up with an amendment or a change to the previous routine motions so that there's some more proportionality in it.

Otherwise you get into the situation in which the New Democrat member on this committee, Mr. Chair, has a quarter of the questions in the first two rounds. The NDP doesn't have a quarter of the seats in the House; they certainly don't have a quarter of the members on this committee. My constituents and the constituents of other members on this committee have every right to be represented, have every right to question witnesses, have every right to make interventions. I don't think it's fair that a party with only 10% of the seats in the House would be accorded 25% of the questioning time, so I think it's in the interests of the Liberal members of the committee, as it is of the Conservatives, not to go with the previous routine motion.

The previous routine motion had a first round of seven minutes. It went Liberal, Bloc, New Democrats, Conservatives. The second round was of five minutes: Liberal, Bloc, New Democrat, Conservatives. How is that fair for members of either the Conservative Party on this committee or the Liberal Party?

● (1540)

I think we should change it to better reflect the proportionality of the representation we have in this committee, and that's what Mr. Lake's proposal was to do. If you don't like that proposal—speaking through you, Mr. Chair, to the Liberal members of the committee—why don't we come up with an alternative?

You're short-changing yourselves, with 25% of the questions in the first two rounds; we're getting short-changed as well. In other words, eight out of the 11 members are getting half the questions in the first two rounds. That's not fair. I think we should work together to come up with a first and second round that are a little more proportional to our representation.

I'm willing to forgo some of that to ensure that the New Democrats have an ability to ask questions in the first two rounds, as members of the Bloc have, but the previous routine motion that the committee operated under is not fair, and it's frankly not reflective of the rules under which parliamentary committees should operate. There's a concept here that we have our members on this committee in proportion to our representation in the House; therefore, we should also have some proportionality about the number of questions we get to ask witnesses.

Hopefully we can come to a quick agreement on this, so that we don't have a protracted discussion.

Maybe, as was suggested to me, Mr. Chair, we could suspend for five minutes to work something out and then continue in five minutes.

The Chair: Let me just hear what Mr. Savage has to say, and then we can come back to discuss it.

Mr. Savage, and then Mr. Lake.

Mr. Michael Savage: The rules as they existed last year were rules that those of us who were on the HRDC committee inherited after we came on at Christmastime. Presumably they worked before that. I didn't hear a lot of complaints last year from members who were on the committee that they weren't getting enough time, when I was on this committee.

These are rules that have been in place. We feel that this is a committee that's worked. We've all heard about the dirty tricks the government was bringing in—the manual. We've never seen evidence of this here. I've spoken in the House about this committee and how it actually works, and I have a high regard for my colleagues from the Bloc and the NDP as I have for those from the government side.

These are rules we've inherited that have worked. I would listen to some proposed amendment, but I would have to suggest, while giving it some consideration, that the most important thing for this committee is that we have a system that works, that reflects the views of the members of the committee, and that can get work done. I've seen work done at this committee under these rules. If somebody else has a better proposition, then....

I don't like the one that was presented to us; I prefer the one that exists.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Savage.

Mr. Lake.

• (1545)

Mr. Mike Lake: Going back to the percentages, I think Mr. Chong talked about trying to have the number of seats that we have on the committee reflect the number of seats that we have in the House.

I would point out that obviously this proposal by Mr. Savage would give us each 25% of the minutes allocated for questioning in this committee. I would point out that the motion I put forward earlier would have only given us each, as Conservatives and Liberals, 29.3% of the minutes allocated for questioning, far below the percentage of seats we have in the House and significantly below the percentage of the vote we had at least, pretty close to the percentage of the vote that the Liberals had.

I'm not sure about Mr. Lessard's comment regarding the minority government, because obviously the motion that I put forward in the first place was more than fair, even considering the fact that we're in a minority government. We would still only get 29.3% of the minutes allocated for questions. Even so, we would still be in a situation where we were under-allotted in terms of the number of minutes allowed for questioning.

Obviously there's a game being played here. I guess the Liberals are playing a game of, you know, we'll shaft ourselves if we can only shaft you as well.

I would hope that common sense would prevail here and that we would take a look at something that was obviously unfair. If you

were to go back before Mr. Savage and the rest of them joined the committee last time, there was an obvious unfairness. This is not the way the questioning rounds worked, going back into previous Parliaments. It was only the rules that were put in place after the last election. Anyone who watched what happened on the committee could tell that there was a clear unfairness in terms of the way those questioning rounds worked.

So I'd like to propose an amendment, that we leave the first round as is, but that in the second round we add a five-minute round for the Liberals and a five-minute round for the Conservatives, to get still below 30% for each of us but at least somewhere near some semblance of fairness.

I would point out that it would still leave one member of the Liberal Party and one member of the Conservative Party unable to even have a turn to ask any questions during most meetings, unless we have a chance to go to a third round, while each of the Bloc's members get to ask a question, and in fact, the NDP member gets a chance to ask twice as many questions as anybody else. So I would point out, when we're talking about fairness, that this gets taken into account.

The Chair: If I understand correctly, what you're suggesting is just inserting between round one and round two, the way it stands, the way Mr. Savage proposed, a second round, a short round of just one Liberal and one Conservative, before we move on to round three.

Mr. Mike Lake: No, I would say, adding one Liberal round and one Conservative round. Actually, what I would propose is that we replace the second round of questions in Mr. Savage's motion with a round that goes Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Liberal, Conservative, NDP.

The Chair: Okay, so we have an amendment there.

I have on the speaking list now Ms. Yelich, Madame Bonsant, and then Mr. Cuzner.

We need to look at speaking to the amendment right now.

Ms. Yelich.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC): I guess I'll wait.

The Chair: Would you like to be put back on the list? Okay.

We're going to go, then, to Madame Bonsant.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Chairman, I propose that we vote immediately on Mr. Savage's motion.

[English]

The Chair: We'll move to Mr. Cuzner, please.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It's my first meeting with the committee. I'm looking forward to being part of a productive group here. I guess this is the start of trying to work together toward something that works best for all, and in that spirit, I understand and respect what the government is trying to do here and the point that's being made.

One thing we have done in fisheries and oceans is that during the first round of seven minutes, we've gone to the NDP and Bloc with a five-minute round in the first round. What I might suggest is that in the first round we go seven, five, five, seven minutes to the Conservatives, then we go to the two five-minute rounds that the government is putting forward between the first and second round, and then on with the five-minute rounds past that.

• (1550)

The Chair: Can you repeat that?

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: The first round would be as is.

The Chair: So it would be seven minutes and five minutes.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: No, it would be seven for the Liberals, five for the Bloc, five for the NDP, and then seven for the government. Then we would go to the two five-minute interventions by the official opposition and the government. Then we go back to round two. Is that okay?

The Chair: All right, here's what I'm going to do, and I'm not going to give this more than five minutes. People asked for a quick recess. I have a couple of amendments on here; I can accept that, but we have to go back to those amendments.

My suggestion is that if I give you five minutes just to discuss what amendments you want to put forward, that would be done. If not, we've got to vote on the amendment that was presented. That would have to be defeated before you could present your amendment, Mr. Cuzner.

I'm going to break for five minutes. In five minutes we need to be back at the tables, please.

• (1550)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1555)

The Chair: Order, please. We've had five minutes to discuss some of the motions.

I'll just remind everybody that we have an amended motion on the table right now by the Conservatives. I'll review that one more time. The first round is as is. The second round is Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, followed by Liberal, Conservative, NDP—all at five minutes each. That's where we're at right now. The third round would alternate between opposition and government. That's the amended motion we have on the table right now.

If there's no more discussion, I'm going to call the vote on that.

• (1600)

Mr. Mike Lake: Can you repeat that?

The Chair: I certainly can.

The first round would be just the way it is there: Liberal, Bloc, NDP, and Conservative, for seven minutes. The second round, which would be five minutes each, would be Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Liberal, Conservative, NDP. Any subsequent rounds would be back and forth between opposition and government. What you have there is that the Bloc would get both of their interventions, and the NDP would get an extra intervention at the end of the round.

Mr. Mike Lake: I want to speak to that before we vote. I want to make the point that I made before. Before we vote on this, I want to be very clear that under this amended motion the Conservative Party

gets almost 7% fewer questioning minutes than we had percentage of the vote—lower even than our percentage of MPs in the House. The Liberal Party gets more question minutes than they would under the original proposal. The NDP and Bloc both get more minutes than their allocations as a proportion of the vote or a proportion of the seats in the House.

So under any measure of fairness, this amended motion is completely fair. I just want to make that point before we vote on this.

The Chair: Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: If I understand our colleague Lake's motion correctly, in the second round, it will also be five minutes for each person.

[*English*]

The Chair: *Oui.*

If there's no more discussion, I'll call the vote.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: Now I'll call the question on the motion as amended.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla: Sorry, can you go through the final wording?

The Chair: By all means.

The first round, which will consist of seven minutes each, will be as it's laid out there in the example: the Liberals, followed by the Bloc, the New Democratic Party, and Conservatives. The second round will consist of five minutes each for Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Liberal, Conservative, NDP. Any subsequent rounds will go back and forth between opposition and government.

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

• (1605)

The Chair: We'll now move to routine motions:

That, if requested, reasonable travel, accommodation and living expenses be reimbursed to witnesses, not exceeding two (2) representatives per organization.

Can I have someone to move that, please?

Mr. Michael Savage: I so move.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We'll move down to the next one:

That the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to distribute to the members of the Committee documents only when they exist in both official languages.

Mr. Michael Savage: I so move.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The next is as follows:

That the Committee authorize the Chair, in consultation with the Clerk, to make the necessary arrangements to provide working meals from time to time, and that the cost of those meals be charged to the Committee's budget.

So moved by Ms. Dhalla.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: This is the last one on this page:

That, unless otherwise ordered, each Committee member be allowed to have one staff person present at in camera meetings.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I have an issue with that.

The Chair: Ms. Yelich.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I'd like to add "In addition, each party shall be permitted to have one party staff member at in camera meetings". That's an addition.

The Chair: You're moving that it contain what is already in the motion, plus that each party be allowed to have one staff member. Is there a reason for that?

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: At in camera meetings. It was suggested that each party have an extra staff member.

The Chair: For the whips to get back.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Yes.

The Chair: Mr. Savage.

Mr. Michael Savage: I need a little more explanation on that: "That, unless otherwise ordered, each Committee member be allowed to have one staff person...". That would mean somebody from the whip's office, House leadership. It wouldn't mean the Conservative Party of Canada or the Liberal Party of Canada.

The Chair: No, it would be in addition to your own LA, so that possibly someone from the whip's office could be there.

Mr. Michael Savage: That's fine.

(Amendment agreed to)

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: We will now turn the sheet over. What we have here is the motion on 48 hours' notice:

That unless there's unanimous consent, two days written notice must be given before any new item of business be considered by the Committee.

That's what we followed last time. Who would like to move this?

Thank you, Mr. Savage.

(Motion agreed to)

• (1610)

The Chair: It carries two to one, so there we go. That's what I like to see.

The next motion is this:

That one copy of the transcript of all in camera meetings be kept in the Committee Clerk's office for consultation by members of the Committee.

Moved by Ms. Dhalla.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: All right, three to one, there we go. We're moving forward.

The next one is:

That the Chair be authorized to call the meeting to order no sooner than 15 minutes after the time indicated on the notice as long as four (4) members are present.

Once again, I think we had quorum at three before. I'm not sure I understand the motion.

Mr. Martin, did you want to talk to that for a second, then Mr. Savage.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): It's a bit problematic in that the chair could call a meeting with his four caucus colleagues present and without any opposition at the table. And I believe this motion is unnecessary as there is already a motion in place, an older motion, that the chair could call the meeting with four members, including an opposition member.

The Chair: Do you want to amend that, Tony, just to say that it must include an opposition member?

Mr. Tony Martin: Okay.

The Chair: Okay, that's a good amendment.

Mr. Savage, is that your point?

Mr. Michael Savage: That was my point.

The Chair: Okay. So that will read then:

That, the Chair be authorized to call the meeting to order no sooner than 15 minutes after the time indicated on the notice as long as four (4) members are present, including an opposition member.

Thank you, Tony.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: This one, I believe, has been specific to what our committee has dealt with:

That, if requested, reasonable child care care expenses of witnesses be reimbursed.

Who would like to introduce that?

Mr. Tony Martin: I so move.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

Is there any discussion on that? I think that's applicable, given the nature of our committee. If there's no discussion, I'll call the vote.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: What do we have here left?

That the Clerk circulate to all Members of the Committee, Order in Council appointments referring to the Standing Committee on Human Resources.

To make sure that the information is circulated to the members, I think that would make some sense.

Who would like to present that motion?

Mr. Michael Savage: I so move.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Savage.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: That is carried by the slimmest margin of two to nothing. There we go.

Then we have the last routine motion on here. It reads:

1. That whenever the Main Estimates or the Supplementary Estimates are tabled in the House, the Committee invite the Minister and any relevant Senior Officials of a Department to appear at a meeting of the Committee, which is televised if possible.

2. That whenever a Chapter of a Report of the Auditor General refers to a subject under the mandate of the Committee, the Committee invite the Office of the Auditor General of Canada and any relevant Senior Officials of a Department to appear at a meeting of the Committee, which is televised if possible.

Who would like to recommend that motion, then?

Mr. Tony Martin: I so move.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: That is all the routine motions I have on this list. Are there any other motions we would like to look at?

Mr. Savage, and then Mr. Martin.

Mr. Michael Savage: On other business, Mr. Chair, I'd like to suggest that we should invite the minister to appear at the earliest possible opportunity on the subject of the supplementary estimates that came out recently.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Martin and then Ms. Dhalla.

Mr. Tony Martin: I'd just like to second that motion.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Ms. Dhalla.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla: Also in terms of other business, I know we've looked at a variety of other potential opportunities that we could utilize moving forward in terms of studying in the committee. One of the issues I would like to propose is that we take a look at and do an in-depth study on poverty. Perhaps we can utilize some of the opinions and suggestions that committee members have in terms of the framework and what that would look like. But I think poverty is an important issue that impacts many Canadian families and I would suggest we study that as our in-depth study.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Martin, and then I have Mr. Lake and Ms. Yelich.

Mr. Martin.

Mr. Tony Martin: Again, given that I've proposed this study of poverty now for probably close to four years at this committee, and I think it is an important priority out there, I would second that motion as well.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

Ms. Yelich.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: We're really good with that, except that first of all we must get the employability study done.

The Chair: I think you almost have unanimous consent for that one. Sure, we've been working on that.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I know. We have to put that on record, because I've seen some other strange things happen.

The Chair: Well, we'll put that on record.

Okay, if there's nothing else, I'm going to adjourn the meeting for today.

Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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