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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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•(1015)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Order, please.

We are out of in camera and into the public portion of our meeting. Let's continue along.

Mr. Savage.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Well, I won't repeat everything I've said, just that I think this is an important issue. There is concern that if you have an arm's-length government agency on EI, there could be an impact on workers. There may be some good points. We need to hear that both from people in the department and from people outside. That might include labour groups, that might include economists, that might include any number of people who would have a point of view on this.

I think we need to have a look at this arm's-length agency on employment insurance, and I think this is the committee to do it.

I do, though, want to add that I didn't put a date on this, and the reason is that Tony Martin, who is the NDP member on this committee, has been very insistent, with Liberals and the Bloc, on getting to a study on poverty. So I don't want to discuss adding meetings until Tony has a chance to be here or else at a subcommittee meeting to discuss this.

I think sooner rather than later we have to have an evaluation of this arm's-length agency. I'm not suggesting we necessarily have to go through all this today. Our next meeting after the break will be on Mr. Godin's bill on EI, and if we move through that with any kind of haste that might be an appropriate place. If Tony Martin was given notice, he might want to be at that meeting as well.

The Chair: I'm going to suggest we have a subcommittee meeting during the first week we're back, Mike. I think that would be a good place to talk about that and try to fit that in. Of course, Tony will be a part of that.

I have Ms. Yelich, Mr. Cuzner, Mr. Lake, and Mr. Lessard.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC): I think that's what we should do—wait until we come back. We should maybe just think about this, because it's being prejudged by all the remarks Mr. Savage made. We should just close the conversation on it and, when we come back, discuss with you what we should be doing.

I'm sure there are things being put in place. There is no big surplus, as he knows. I think he's right. If we had had the RESP go through this committee, I doubt it would have ever been in the mess it's in. So I think he's right. Things like this should be studied here.

The Chair: Mr. Cuzner.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): I'd just support the comments made by my colleague here. I know on the report that we put forward on employment insurance, there was consensus. One of the recommendations that came forward was an arm's-length commission to set premium rates, but this is certainly beyond an arm's-length commission to set premium rates.

I believe it's imperative that we do have a look at this as we go forward.

The Chair: Mr. Lake.

Mr. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Mill Woods—Beaumont, CPC): I'll agree with Mr. Savage, in principle—or I don't disagree, I guess, in the sense that this would be something maybe worthy of study. My biggest concern right now is that we just spent two years doing an employability study and we do have this important poverty study. Mr. Savage mentioned three parties. There are four parties that have been looking forward to getting on with this study. I think it is an important study and I am looking forward to starting it as soon as we can.

What other private members' business do we have coming forward? Perhaps I could just get some clarification right now.

The Chair: I understand there's Bill C-362. Is there anything else? There's other legislation but—

Mr. Mike Lake: Nothing else right now....

The Chair: I think there's just one other one that has actually been handed to us.

Mr. Mike Lake: I understand the Liberals have also brought forward another replacement worker bill as well, which obviously took a lot of time the first time around that we studied it. There's a bill that's pretty similar to that. It looks like it might be coming forward sometime fairly soon too, depending on how the Liberals vote or whether they vote.

Given that, I think we have to set some priorities in the committee here. We can't spend two years doing a poverty study. If we're going to do it, we need to do it, and we need to avoid a whole bunch of side issues that might be interesting to study but might sidetrack us from the other business of the committee. If we go in too many directions, we're just not going to get anything done.

I would urge that maybe we just put this on hold for a little. I don't discount the fact that we may decide to study it, but I think we have to get our priorities in order, as a committee.

The Chair: On the list, I have Mr. Lessard now, followed by Mr. Savage.

Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Chair, I think we should not put this on hold. This committee is used to hard work. The Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities is the department's interlocutor, the one that has the biggest budget, particularly when it comes to the social safety net. We represent \$80 and some odd billion out of \$240 billion. We have to expect that this committee is going to have to do a lot of heavy lifting.

For years, all of the parties hoped that the separate employment insurance fund would be brought back. Our colleague Mr. Cuzner is quite right: that hope was unanimous in the previous Parliament. The Liberals in power agreed to review it. When the Conservatives were in opposition, they agreed with us. To the point that they thought that diverting billions of dollars from the fund was very serious. We also all agreed—this is recommendation 4—to put that money back in the fund. That isn't the issue here, but it gives us an idea of what parliamentarians wanted to do at that time, and have always wanted to do.

We are capable of doing two things at once. We have to tackle the question of poverty and organize our work accordingly. Not everyone will be going to the Indian reserves, for example. While some people are investigating on the ground, others could continue to work. We should try to handle both. This work is not going to be a marathon.

Before starting this work, the government should have firm intentions regarding three things. First, the nature of this committee's terms of reference, which are set out relatively clearly in the budget, could be reiterated. Second, how will the commission be created? What will be the composition of the commission, and how will it operate? Third, what will its relationship be with the House? The budget says it reports to the Minister. I think there should be more.

It should report to the House, which was the unanimous will of the committee. The commission, led by the Chief Actuary, will set the premium rate and make the rules. When the premium rate changes, it will submit the change to the House. We have to stop saying that the commission's purpose is to regulate premiums. Saying that sort of thing is a distortion of its mission.

Every time, we are told there is virtually no money in the fund. Certainly the more the premiums are reduced, the less money there is. It is that dynamic that the committee should be looking at. It is not enough just to know what the organizations think about it. When

they come to testify, they have to have the operational structure in front of them in order to express an opinion. We might have a fine car with a bad engine. We have to make sure that the car we are going to be driving has a good engine, so that it can get this mission to its destination.

• (1020)

Do I have to make a motion about this before we start our proceedings? In the next two weeks, we could draw up the terms of reference and decide what the composition of the commission will be and how it will operate, and what its relationship with the House will be.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Lessard, may I recommend that we discuss that issue when we have our subcommittee meeting? I think Mr. Savage wanted to include Mr. Martin in the discussion, given the fact that we had all talked about moving forward on poverty. I don't think Mr. Savage was suggesting that we necessarily need to move ahead with this right now. That's why it doesn't have a date on it, but he does want to have some discussion. You're part of that subcommittee meeting, so why don't we address those three issues at the subcommittee meeting, and then bring them back to the group as a whole?

Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Could we hold the subcommittee meeting by tomorrow afternoon? If we could decide this opinion before the adjournment, the officials might be able to prepare something during the two weeks we are away.

[*English*]

The Chair: We've got business before us when we get back, with the private member's bill. My suggestion was going to be that when we get back, either on the Monday or Tuesday when we return in April, we would have our subcommittee meeting to lay out what we are going to look at. So we meet the first part of the week when we get back in April.

I'm going to hear Mr. Savage. He's next on the list. Then we can come back. I have Mr. Savage, Ms. Yelich, Madame Savoie, then Mr. Lake.

Mr. Michael Savage: Further to Mr. Lessard's comments, I would be quite prepared when we consider this to look at a reasonable amendment to perhaps add some of the scope that Mr. Lessard is suggesting into this amendment, so we can have a vote on it. I'm not suggesting we vote on it now, for the reason I've said before. Mr. Martin from the NDP should be here because we have all made a commitment to him on poverty. I want to do this study very much. It's very important to me that we get started on that poverty study, so I don't want to take away from that.

This is one of the most significant announcements that could be made, to many Canadians: how the EI fund is going to be administered. There are large parts of this country that are very nervous about what this means. All we've seen so far on it is one page in the last budget that spoke about this fund. There's nothing in that one page to provide comfort to workers or to people who draw EI or may need to draw EI as the economy perhaps continues to worsen. It's a huge issue.

Madame Yelich suggested that I prejudged something. I haven't prejudged anything. That's why I think the government would welcome the opportunity to have people come and talk about what the mandate of this committee should be. The economy is in some trouble right now. We have a manufacturing sector and a forestry sector that are really struggling. We need to make sure any move we're involved in in this committee or as parliamentarians takes that into consideration.

I am prepared to put it on hold, as Mr. Lake suggested, for almost two weeks until the next meeting. When we do come back from the break, we're going to look at Mr. Godin's bill. If we move quickly on that, we could actually have this discussion at that meeting. I would be prepared to consider friendly amendments to this motion or other motions that Mr. Lessard may put forward.

• (1025)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Yelich.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: My point is that there was a wish to have the program reformed. The separate EI account has been talked about for quite a while, and it's about governing and managing it. We have to see what comes in place. I think we are prejudging it by running out there and getting everybody frightened that their unemployment insurance might not come. I think this is what's happening.

Mr. Lessard made some comment about other committees. He talked about a car. I think we should have all of us people who are involved with this committee at both. We can't have the poverty study and the employment insurance separate funds study. I would like to see us go on with the poverty study. I'd like you people to get together in a subcommittee, decide, and then come back to us. I don't think we should be discussing.... This is the whole idea of Mike's motion: to discuss it.

Can I move adjournment?

The Chair: If you're putting that out there, a move to adjourn, it's a non-debatable motion.

All in favour of moving to adjourn please signify.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: All right, thanks.

The meeting is adjourned.

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