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Chair

The Honourable Diane Marleau

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Diane Marleau (Sudbury, Lib.)): We have quorum. We're anxious to get going.

I'm told by the clerk that he is still trying to get a solid date for the Treasury Board and from Mr. Toews and Mr. Fortier. Perhaps he'd like to tell us what's happening.

Mr. Clerk.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Richard Rumas): Thank you, Madam Chair.

We've been trying to get a number of the departments and agencies that have had supplementary estimates referred to us to appear. Basically, we're having difficulty getting somebody to come first. That's the issue here.

I would suggest, Madam Chair and members of the committee, that you be very firm with staff and tell us to get Treasury Board here, because I believe we can do it. There may be a representative of Treasury Board in the audience.

I might as well do the other matters.

The Chair: Sure.

The Clerk: A couple of other smaller agencies, such as Privy Council and the Labour Relations Board, have had estimates and we're trying to tee them up.

The Minister of Public Works was supposed to have appeared next Wednesday. He apparently has an engagement that he can't get out of, in Montreal, and he will come the following Wednesday, which is December 5.

On December 3, which is a Monday, we'll deal with the issue of the payment of public servants and that whole issue that this committee is very familiar with, the payroll issue.

The Chair: Who's coming on December 3?

The Clerk: That's being coordinated by a lady from the Canada Public Service Agency, Madame Boudrias. She's coordinating that to bring Public Works officials and Treasury Board officials, so that they have all the right people in place.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Madam Chair, while I certainly appreciate the work and the diligence of the clerk to arrange and get us going where we need to go, shouldn't we

make a decision on where we're going first? Shouldn't we have a collective decision on where we're going first?

I know we only have a limited time and there hasn't been a lot of advance on this, but I thought the intention of the meeting today was to have a committee of the whole to set the agenda. Once we have the agenda set, then obviously it's a clear direction for the clerk so that there's no ambiguity. Some of us might have access to some information, or we might have some other priorities that various members might wish to see step in at some particular point. I'd just bring that to the attention of the chair.

The Chair: Our first responsibility, of course, is to review the supplementary estimates of Treasury Board and of the Department of Public Works. We had started right away in inviting the ministers to come, because I think one of the last days for us to report will be on or about December 5 or 6. So we really can't wait very long to review the estimates. That's why we had already started in asking the ministers to come, and it's very important that we get them here as soon as possible.

Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I've looked closely at what's been brought forward. In general, I'm fairly supportive. I believe, as you said, we have to deal with the supplementary estimates. We have to deal with that soon. If we could do that next week, I'd be very happy. Certainly we'd like to see the minister come before us.

On the issue of a follow-up discussion on the sale of public buildings, I think we need to get that done and off the agenda.

I had a chance to ask you about the other issues before we started. It looks to me like something that will get us to Christmas. Certainly there are a million other things we need to deal with, but in order to get to Christmas, this looks like a good housecleaning list to me.

• (1540)

The Chair: Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I have two thoughts. Obviously if we can get our ministers here as soon as possible, that's wonderful. I think everybody appreciates that's where we need to go with that. But if there are some difficulties during that week period, I have two suggestions.

Number one, I think we obviously need to hear from the Auditor General. There are a number of various topics, and she might potentially be readily available. That might be a fill-in position. If we have difficulty, for the sake of a few days, with picking up a minister, that might be something the committee can consider.

Another point that I would certainly like factored into our agenda here was a result of our meeting the other day with the public service, with Madam Barrados. At the end of the meeting I was honestly blown away when I heard some of the numbers that came out about the turnover rate. This plays right into a number of issues that dovetail with that: why aren't people getting paid, benefits payment clerks, on and on. I honestly had no idea that even in HR there was a 76% turnover of staff in one year. I was astounded.

Between that and 40% in one department and 50% in another, I'm wondering how can a government be efficient and effective? We are government operations. I really believe we have a mandate to find out what the heck is going on that we have that kind of substantial turnover in the federal government. It just should not be acceptable.

There are a number of areas we could go in. We could call in an associate jurisdiction, of one of the provinces—it doesn't matter to me—just as a comparison. There may be a couple of other people. I believe two people were quoted in the actual report. There were a couple of professors locally. There was Mr. Zussman and another one.

These could be potential people, but at some particular point this to me goes right to the crux—as well as our other duties that we are responsible for. There are so many overlapping concerns with this issue of the effectiveness of government. When we have a turnover rate like that, we just cannot be effective. This is something we need to get to the bottom of.

The Chair: I'm wondering if the Public Service Agency of Canada would be able to give us some answers on that. We could ask them.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Wonderful—whoever the committee deems to be an acceptable source of information.

The Chair: I'm like you: I'm very concerned about the turnover in terms of employment. You can't get good service if people keep changing jobs all the time.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: If we have 75 people responsible for pay and benefits—and as the witnesses reported at this committee, it takes a tremendous amount of experience and corporate knowledge to be able to handle all of this—and 50 of them are gone in the one year per se in HR, then there's no wonder we have problems with people getting paid and/or accommodated through various raises and all that. That is maybe only one sidebar to many inefficiencies and levels of ineffectiveness that are taking place.

As a committee in charge of government operations and reporting to Parliament, obviously government is not working the way it should. So I'm really concerned. At some point, when we go through the mandatory things that we should be perusing, I really think this is an optional one that we should explore as soon as possible.

The Chair: I agree.

Mr. Warkentin first, and then Mr. Angus.

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I was just going to follow up on Daryl's point. I actually had the opportunity to ask Madame Barrados following our meeting the other day, and I specifically asked her about this situation. I asked her because we had some discussions as to how this compared to the private sector, and she just looked at me and said, "We're high, we are really high".

So what I would like to do is, in addition, ask if there is any possibility that before Christmas we might be able to hear from an expert in this field, somebody who's out of house, who could look at this objectively, in terms of how this compares to other public jurisdictions, but also the private sector as well. It was a wonderful suggestion that we talk to somebody from internal, but I think it's also important that we get somebody external as well. As Daryl said, this really cuts to a lot of the issues we're finding in government services, if it be passport issues, if it be the Canada Revenue Agency...there are a number of different agencies it's important for.

• (1545)

The Chair: Mr. Angus, and then Mr. Bouchard.

Mr. Charlie Angus: To follow up on Mr. Kramp's suggestion, I certainly agree we need to look at it.

The question I would have is whether one meeting with the government official is going to help us. I have always found on my other committees, for example in agriculture, that what we heard in Ottawa was that everything was wonderful, but when you went out in the field where the cows pooped on the ground, the reality was so dramatically different that we would probably need to look at who we need to bring forward, and I think have a discussion to make sure that we're not comparing apples and oranges, to make sure that if we're going to have a private sector comparison, it is comparable.

I certainly think we need to hear from PSAC. If there's massive discontent and people are leaving for reasons, I'd like to hear that. There has to be something to explain a 76% turnover in a year. It's a big issue. I'm not saying we shouldn't do it before Christmas, but I think we have to make sure that we bring the people forward who we can all agree are going to give us enough of a clear picture that we can make clear recommendations.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Bouchard.

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Thank you very much.

I do not know if what I am going to say is appropriate, but I would like, on behalf of my colleague, Ms. Bourgeois, who is a member of this committee, to suggest subjects to be included in the committee's work plan. On November 28, we could add witnesses such as a representative of the Public Service Alliance. We could also invite one or two representatives of the firm Informetrica. They have a mandate from the Public Service Alliance to look into the sale. It would be worthwhile to meet with representatives of this firm.

We notice that on December 3, we will be discussing implementation of accrual accounting, the regulation of fictitious jobs, the problems with compensation systems and the hiring and retaining of human resources professionals. We would like to add to that list the use of temporary staff and of employment agencies.

Finally, on December 12, several businesses have been suggested for Item 6 regarding the new rules at Public Works Canada. Among other companies we could invite Wizent, represented by Mr. Michel Rotaru.

The Chair: What kind of company is it?

Mr. Robert Bouchard: It is a small enterprise from Quebec which had contracts with Public Works Canada.

The Chair: It would be good if you could forward the name to the clerk.

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Yes, I can even provide the clerk with his coordinates and tell him how to reach him.

The Chair: If we could deal with the tendering process and how to encourage small companies, this would be a good thing.

[English]

Mr. Moore.

Mr. James Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam, CPC): There seems to be general unanimity here. I don't think we need to belabour this too much. Minister Fortier will be here on December 5. That's confirmed.

The larger addendum that I'd make to this is on the proposal for meeting 5, on December 10. Those new regulations are just coming in. It would probably be more effective to do that when we come back in January, if that's all right, if you want to free up a day.

The Chair: That's fine. We just pencilled in stuff. There's no real need to do that on that date.

You're right. If they're just starting, we're better to have them in place so we can actually speak to what they're doing.

Mr. James Moore: Right, so then I would suggest that we not scratch that but just move it back to January.

The Chair: To the new year.

Mr. James Moore: Yes, because it will be more effective at that time.

So we could free up a day there. We already have the Auditor General coming. We can do a number of other things.

Anyhow, I think the staff has done a good job here taking the suggestions and I don't think we need to go on much further.

● (1550)

The Chair: When it comes to accrual accounting, I was saying to the analysts here that there's an ad hoc committee meeting. I think it's on November 28. Mr. Kramp and I are meeting with them. But once we know a bit more where it's going, we'll ask them to come and make a presentation, whether it be before Christmas or after. We'll have to see what they're bringing forward.

Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: As a suggestion, on that point, we've heard from Treasury Board as to what their thoughts and plans are as far as following the recommendations of both the public accounts committee and the government operations committee and their implementation process is concerned. We've heard about some of the suggestions and we're incorporating some thoughts on it ourselves.

I think our ad hoc committee could probably just very briefly make a report to this committee, but in order to do it justice, we should have a meeting or two of this committee where Treasury Board officials could come and not rehash the entire thing that the ad hoc committees went through, but give at least a more complete explanation of the direction they think would be preferable. Hopefully, it would be complementary to the thoughts of the ad hoc committee to start with, but if it's not, then so be it.

The Chair: Yes, but we would like to have a final meeting—

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Yes. We could call Treasury Board in for a meeting or two, whatever would be necessary for that.

The Chair: That's right, but we'll have a better idea after, is it next Wednesday's meeting—

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Yes.

The Chair: —with the ad hoc committee?

Daryl and I and a couple of others are on that committee, and we've been meeting. It gets a little complicated and boring for many.

Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I was just going to suggest that if we do have a date that becomes available before Christmas, it would be good to get on with some of the suggestions we've made in terms of just beginning to look into the 40% turnover. I think it would be helpful if we could get a panel of different union representatives, maybe a private sector or a third party, and then maybe somebody internal to maybe consider what parameters we might even want to look into for a future study on this particular issue.

The Chair: Maybe we could have a full meeting on that issue on December 10, rather than on the procurement ombudsman and put that off—

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Good idea.

The Chair: Then we can have time to get witnesses in.

The challenge with that is that it's a problem within government more than it is outside, and it will be difficult to get a handle on it. According to Madame Barrados, the public service didn't grow that much; it's more of a turnover within the public service. So that's more difficult to get a handle on.

Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Just to throw into the mix—and again, we don't have to have all this hammered out for a meeting—if we're looking at terms and a vision on this, I'd like to get a sense also, are we seeing extreme turnovers in certain areas of the country as compared to others?

My gut feeling tells me that when you have federal government buildings in the regions, you have very low turnover and you have a very stable workforce. So, again, we might be able to make recommendations. Are we putting more resources into areas where we train people up and they're spinning and moving all the time and we're always throwing more money at it, as opposed to other operations in various parts of the country where it might be very stable and they're actually much more effective?

So that would be a good piece of the puzzle to have a handle on.

The Chair: I can tell you for a fact that when we had Passport Canada officials, they opened and expanded a call centre in the city of Montreal with another 500 employees there. These are probably areas where there are lots of jobs, so it's easy to move from one job to the other—you're right.

I think you're seeing the same thing here in Ottawa, an expansion in certain areas, and people come in and then they go to other jobs because they're there and they're better.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: PSAC—

The Chair: PSAC could tell us that, but I don't know who really could give us the answers on that. I think it's a systematic problem, and maybe, overall, Treasury Board should look at that for the future. Who knows?

We would like to have Treasury Board on Monday coming. If we can't get the minister, can we at least get officials from Treasury Board on the estimates? If I could ask, would somebody be willing to put forward a motion that we pressure Treasury Board to start this Monday? Time is a-wasting and we're not going anywhere fast.

Mr. Warkentin.

•(1555)

Mr. Chris Warkentin: We absolutely need Treasury Board to come here. It would be nice if the minister could come along. Is there any possibility that we could have the Auditor General come to this first meeting, if the minister and Treasury Board aren't? Does it make a difference to Treasury Board folks if they come the following meeting?

The Chair: Let's see what the clerk can do. I think what's important is that we start doing our work as quickly as possible. This is basically the first week, and we're—

Mr. Daryl Kramp: See what the clerk can do.

The Chair: See what the clerk can do—

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Superman.

The Chair: —with a lot of pressure from the committee.

The Clerk: Which one?

The Chair: From this committee. You're going to have enough trouble with the other committee, but....

Are there any other issues that should be brought forward? There are no other issues at this point?

Are there any motions needing to be tabled with the clerk 48 hours before?

The Clerk: Mr. Holland?

The Chair: Mr. Holland has a motion, but it's not for now anyway.

That said, Mr. Clerk, you must get somebody here for Monday, absolutely.

The Clerk: That will happen.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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