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—
Chair

Mr. Leon Benoit

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• (1310)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC)): Good afternoon.

We will start this tenth meeting of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources.

This meeting has been changed. We're dealing with committee business. Often when we're dealing with committee business the committee goes in camera. As of right now, this meeting is televised, as the meeting that we're replacing was to be.

It's up to the committee to decide whether they want to remain with the televised situation, to end the televised portion, or to go in camera. It's strictly up to the committee.

Does anybody want to make a motion to change that or to keep it the same? If nobody does, we'll just keep it as is.

We're discussing future business. Let's get started. Who would like to kick off?

Mr. Alghabra.

Mr. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga—Erindale, Lib.): Mr. Chair, given the testimony we heard from the minister today, and still reserving the right to invite the minister back again, there are three people the Liberal Party would like to invite. We would like to reinvoke Ms. Keen; we'd like to invite Sheila Fraser, the Auditor General; and we'd like to invite Michael Burns, the chairman of the board of AECL.

The Chair: You've heard the proposal.

Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): If we're taking a list of witnesses here, we're certainly going to have a long one as well. We are willing to submit that list of witnesses. That will be fairly extensive, I would think, but that's fine. I'm more interested in our having a discussion about when we're going to do this and whether the committee is interested in doing this as part of our regular schedule once we come back.

A number of us are going to come back from western Canada next week. I think we'd expect that we're going to be here. If that's what the opposition is suggesting, then we're going to have to make it worth our while to be here, which would mean extended hearings, I would think.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Anderson.

I do just want to repeat something that you all know. As members of Parliament, we have a lot of responsibilities in the constituency, as well as here in Ottawa. I would guess that every one of us has events booked with our constituents over the rest of this week and at least the first part of next week. So when we're considering time, let's certainly be respectful of that, and the fact that some of us have to travel for a lot of hours, from western Canada in particular.

We've heard the request. Certainly the way we normally handle this is to set a certain date by which any witnesses being recommended will be submitted. I assume we'll go with that normal procedure, if we do in fact want to carry on with this issue. That's really the first thing to decide: do we want to have further meetings on this issue?

Mr. Trost.

Mr. Bradley Trost (Saskatoon—Humboldt, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would say, as did Mr. Anderson, that if we are going to have further meetings, there is going to be an extensive list of witnesses; it's going to go on. It will start looking like the motion we tabled from Ms. Bell.

I understand there are people suggesting we bring all past natural resources cabinet ministers. I'm not going to be tabling a motion to that effect, but my understanding is that there may be one tabled there. So we would have Mr. Dhaliwal and people like that. This would get to be a very long, extensive thing.

Some of these witnesses are going to take time to prep. This is going to take a little bit of time, so we should think very closely about whether we're going to do this all in this huge fashion or if we're going to roll it into part of our regular committee work, which will be only one week later. Next week is the last break week before Parliament resumes. We may just want to roll it in and then reset the committee's agenda, and go on with it there.

If it's that serious and it's going to be a long study of things that go way into the far past, then we need to do it in a serious and thorough manner, because there are going to be things coming up from witnesses that are going to make us want to call other witnesses. And you just can't call witnesses with one day's notice. So it's going to need to be over a staggered piece of time if we're going to do this in a thorough way.

If we're just going to rush through it and quickly paint over some ideas, yes, we can do it here, there, and anywhere. If we're going to do it thoroughly, we should do it in a regular fashion, in a consistent way.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Trost.

Before we go to other people—and I do have a list—let's start at the beginning. The committee has to decide whether we in fact want any further meetings on this issue.

If someone wants that, bring forth a motion.

Mr. Alghabra.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: I'd like to move, Mr. Chair, that the committee invite the following individuals to attend on Tuesday, January 22: Ms. Linda Keen; Ms. Sheila Fraser, the Auditor General; and Mr. Michael Burns, former AECL chairman; and that the committee reserve the right to invite more witnesses as it chooses later on.

The Chair: You've heard the motion. Is there discussion on the motion?

Mr. Allen.

Mr. Mike Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Yes, Mr. Chair. It's really great to list a bunch of people we want to invite to a meeting, but for what purpose? In trying to deal with this motion, I think what you want to do is put your invitees around what kind of objective we want to achieve; it speaks to the point of setting committee business. What we are doing now, by entertaining a motion like this, is potentially changing the committee business we set prior to Christmas, which is a study on forestry. That would end up changing this.

My problem with this is that unless we have an objective, how are we going to know what we would want to build a witness list around and who are the proper witnesses we would invite?

Furthermore, I will reiterate the chair's comments. I do know that my constituents like to see me in my riding. I'm not sure about the others, but they do like to see me. There's some business I would like to accomplish.

I think we should make this a normal part of our business when we return. It's only a week and a half.

The Chair: It would be one week later than proposed, in fact, and that's all.

On the motion, Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Chairman, I'm certainly pleased to hear that after so many years of being forgotten and left by the wayside, attention is being paid to AECL and the whole plant at Chalk River. It's unfortunate that a crisis had to occur for it to get the necessary attention. It is our premier research centre for nuclear science and it needs to receive that attention.

What I would suggest, as part of following through with any motions, is that you allow the clerk the time to put together a proper study framework if you're going to go ahead. If it's going to be as extensive as the motions that were mentioned the other day, set a frame of reference; do the study plan. I'm sure the people at AECL would be very pleased to have you visit the small research reactor that's housed there. I think there's a misconception in the minds of many of what is really there. It would be helpful for you to put into perspective exactly what it is they do there.

Thank you.

• (1315)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gallant.

Is there nobody else to speak on the motion?

Ms. Bell.

Ms. Catherine Bell (Vancouver Island North, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

While I would like to hear from the three people suggested in the motion, I just want to remind my colleagues that I do have a motion on the table to do an independent investigation into all of the proceedings and to go back over a long period of time. I've requested many documents in that regard. So I don't want the motion before us today to forget that.

I've heard from my colleagues from the Bloc, from the Conservatives, and also from the Liberal Party that this is an important issue that needs to be thoroughly investigated. But whether or not the natural resources committee is the body to do this thorough investigation is the question that I have. Would it be more appropriately done under the Auditor General or another eminent person we may decide upon, someone independent, so there is not the back-and-forth "he said, she said" rhetoric that we've been subjected to for the last couple of days?

So I would support hearing from the three witnesses, but as to the extensive investigation, I'd consider having that done under an independent body. I've heard people bring that up outside this House as well as inside. I think it's important that we have an independent investigation that can focus on the procedural and administrative issues we are investigating here. This committee can focus on the other important topics that are facing Canada. We're looking at a crisis in our forest industry, and we want to continue studies on other issues as well.

That's not to say that this isn't important, but with an independent investigation done thoroughly, by an independent person, we wouldn't be getting into the back and forth at this committee.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bell.

Madame DeBellefeuille.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We undertook a process whereby we asked the minister questions, listened to his version of the facts, and heard from the person who accompanied him. We are disappointed at not having heard from Ms. Keen. I think that members of the committee should hear from and question the three principal players in this medical isotope crisis. We do not perhaps have to get into an elaborate study involving a long list of witnesses, but we should at least hear from the main players who were on the front line during this crisis.

Mr. Chair, we have heard from the minister. I would like Ms. Keen to come and testify, as well as the senior Atomic Energy of Canada official who resigned. I would also like to hear from the Auditor General about any shortcomings connected with the Chalk River laboratory

After hearing from those four main players, the committee can decide if it wants to do a longer and more detailed study involving more witnesses. In any event, we first have to hear the various versions in order to be fair and equitable to all. The minister, Atomic Energy of Canada and the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission clearly disagree on how this crisis should be interpreted.

First let us shed light on the questions we have. As a committee, we will then be able to decide if we want to formally study the matter more completely. I move that we meet next week.

• (1320)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Alghabra, then Mr. Anderson.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Well, Mr. Chair, I've put a motion on the table. We haven't decided on the direction we're going to take, but there are a lot of reasons why we want these three witnesses to appear before the committee. It's important that we do this as soon as possible.

We have an agenda set out for the committee for when we come back. That's why I'm suggesting we do this next week. It's urgent. We have caucus on Tuesday, but I'm willing to skip caucus to come here on Tuesday. It's really important that we hear from these witnesses.

I ask that we call for a vote so that we can decide what we're going to do.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Chair, if we're going to do this, I think we need to deal with it fairly. I'm going to make a couple of amendments to this. One is that we change the date to the 29th; it's only a week later and we'll all be back here. We can begin to do this as part of our regular meetings. Then if we want to go further from there, as Madame DeBellefeuille said, we can do that.

I would like to make a second amendment—and this can be written—that we expand the witness list to include witnesses submitted from all parties.

The Chair: Mr. Anderson, you were just reading the motion you were going to bring forth for the record, were you?

Mr. David Anderson: Yes.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. David Anderson: The amendment is to change the date to the 29th. It's an amendment to Mr. Alghabra's motion. The second part of the amendment is to expand the witness list to include witnesses submitted from all parties. I know Ms. Bell has said that she would like to have some witnesses as well, and so would we.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Do you want to speak to that at all? It's kind of obvious, I think.

Mr. David Anderson: I think that's clear. It looks to me like the Liberals have selectively picked people who they want to bring in here, and I think the other parties should be allowed that same opportunity. So that's simply to allow that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Anderson.

You've heard the proposed amendment. Is there discussion on the amendment?

Mr. Alghabra.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, the motion states that we reserve the right to call more witnesses if we need to. I'm not sure how different it is from the amendment, since he's not naming witnesses. I think he's agreeing with my amendment, that we reserve the right to call more witnesses, and we will probably do that.

The Chair: The amendment calls for the date to change to our normal committee time, which is the 29th, just a week later.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: I understand why he would be interested in pushing it further, but I'm proposing.... I have a constituency too, and, as I said, I have a caucus meeting as well. This is an urgent matter. I'm proposing that we do it next week, and I'm asking the committee to vote on it.

The Chair: Okay.

To the amendment, Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Anderson makes sense, because we've already seen, as each week progresses and with the passage of a full week, new information surfacing. It may be to the committee's benefit to hold it a week later because more information may have surfaced by then, and we won't be recalling witnesses the way it has been proposed today.

The Chair: Interesting point. We have no knowledge as to whether any of these three witnesses would be available in as short a time as you're asking them to come, less than a week. That's another point we have to consider here. We can wish for that, but I think all of these witnesses would want some time. One of them has already decided not to attend a meeting. What's to say that she will attend less than a week from now?

But there was someone else, I thought—no, that's all. Any other discussion on the amendment?

Mr. Trost.

• (1325)

Mr. Bradley Trost: I just want to again put on the record that I have advertised events in my riding on the 21st and the 23rd. For you people from urban Ontario and Quebec ridings it's a very different world. Living in rural ridings...it takes an awfully long time to get through. I take my responsibilities on the natural resources committee seriously. I'm not the most aggressive partisan player in the House. I think people know I value the technical information here, and I just don't feel that that's been afforded due respect by all members of this committee, some of whom have a fairly cavalier attitude toward calling meetings whenever it is at their personal pleasure.

I do not want a substitute for me; I will have to have a substitute. So I'm essentially being asked to skip the next meeting.

The Chair: Ms. Bell and then Mr. McGuinty.

Ms. Catherine Bell: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just following up on some of the comments, while I agree that nuclear safety is an important issue and it needs to be discussed, and again I go back to my motion to have a full investigation, I also am not opposed to waiting until we are back in our due time on the 29th.

As my colleague referenced, coming from out west it takes me 12 hours to get from British Columbia to Ottawa. It's a full day. I have to cancel two days' worth of appointments, and to return I have to do the same thing. While I take my committee responsibilities very seriously, I also take my riding responsibilities very seriously.

So given that it's only a week and that we are, as other members said, hearing new information daily that may assist with our deliberations, and it would give witnesses time to come to our discussions with full reports or information that needs to be provided....

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bell.

Mr. McGuinty? Okay.

Mr. Alghabra.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, in the spirit of cooperation, I think we'll accept the 29th date for many reasons that were brought up here.

I think the second amendment is no different from the initial one. I don't know if he still wants to keep it, because the motion itself leaves it open to call more witnesses. So if we can just adjust the date and keep the motion, then we'll accept the first amendment and keep the motion as is, so we can invite these witnesses. We already know who we want. As a committee, we will be happy to receive a list of other witnesses that you can invite.

The Chair: As I see it, having the date be the 29th has been accepted as a friendly amendment.

Regarding the second part of Mr. Anderson's amendment, on the one hand, Mr. Alghabra, I think you're saying you can't support it, and yet you are saying on the other hand that it's the same as what you had.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: There's no need for it, if he wants to withdraw it, because it's already in the motion.

The Chair: I think there is a subtle difference and an important one, and that's that we want not only those three witnesses to be on a witness list but also other such witnesses as members of the committee choose right from the start, not after, necessarily, we hear from these three.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Could I hear from Mr. Anderson?

The Chair: Mr. Anderson, could you explain that?

Mr. David Anderson: There are two issues. One issue is that Ms. Keen has indicated she doesn't want to attend the committee, so the committee is going to have to determine whether it is going to order her to appear or not. She's apparently today made a decision that she doesn't want to. If you are putting her on the list, that's going to require the clerk to make sure that she comes. It's not just an invitation, because it will be part of the motion.

Secondly, if the motion reads that everyone is being allowed their witness list and allowed to bring their witnesses, we are fully supportive of that. If you want to name your witnesses, that's fine.

We just don't want witnesses to be excluded because of the motion made.

The Chair: Is that understood?

Mr. Proulx, on a point of order.

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Is it not a rule that witnesses must be approved by the committee, in the sense that just because one member wants 14 different witnesses that doesn't mean the committee will necessarily accept that?

The Chair: Absolutely. It is also generally accepted that all members of the committee, all parties certainly, can submit a list of witnesses for the committee to choose from.

Is this motion meant to allow that then? Is that clear?

• (1330)

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Is the motion meant to allow that? Absolutely.

The Chair: That's okay as long as that is clear. Could you make sure that is clear in the motion? Then I don't think there's any argument. Can we just...?

Yes, Mr. St. Amand?

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand (Brant, Lib.): I just have one further point on one issue—and Mr. Anderson might entertain it—which is to have an extended sitting on January 29 to accommodate potentially three witnesses appearing that day.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. David Anderson: That's better asked to the chair, I think. I don't think we would object to that, but potentially there may be more than three witnesses on that day and on Thursday. We may end up in a situation in which people have sent in the names of half a dozen or more witnesses. I think we need to be prepared to hear them, whether it's all on the 29th or the 29th and 31st, or however that works out. We're willing to do that.

The Chair: The way this is headed, it really seems to me that there will be more than three witnesses.

We've had a request for the motion to be read back to us, so could the clerk read the motion before we carry on? Let's make sure we know what we're discussing here.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Chad Mariage): Thank you, Mr. Chair. The motion as moved by Mr. Alghabra, including the friendly amendment, would be that the committee invite the following individuals, Linda Keen, Sheila Fraser, and Michael Burns, on Tuesday, January 29, and that the committee reserves the right to invite further witnesses at a later date.

The Chair: But the motion as read does not accommodate what Mr. Anderson is asking for, which is that all parties be allowed to submit lists of witnesses they would like and then the committee can decide which ones would attend or leave it up to the chair and the clerk to make sure that some of all the witnesses submitted are accommodated, whatever approach the committee would like. There is a difference there. If the difference can't be accepted as a friendly amendment, then we'll have to go back to discussion on that part of Mr. Anderson's amendment and carry through to a vote.

I heard agreement from the Liberal Party that they would accommodate other witnesses besides these three, but that's not what the motion does.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: I don't understand why you would think the motion doesn't allow for that. It says the committee reserves the right to call, which means there's an opening for more witnesses.

You're saying we're going to have the other witnesses at the same meeting, on the same day?

The Chair: Well, to be considered at the same time.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: To be considered and to be invited are different things. In my opinion, this motion leaves the consideration wide open.

I'm telling you, the intent and the letter of the motion leaves wide open any room for inviting more witnesses as submitted by other parties. We might have more witnesses too.

The Chair: But that's different.

Let's go to further discussion on the part of Mr. Anderson's amendment dealing with how we will choose witnesses.

Ms. Bell, on that.

Ms. Catherine Bell: I was going to ask for some clarification, but with regard to inviting more witnesses, just to see if I'm getting Mr. Anderson's friendly amendment correct, we're looking at being able to submit our list of witnesses prior to the meeting on the 29th so that those witnesses would be considered to be heard either on that day, at an extended hearing, or at a future date?

The Chair: I don't believe there's anything in his motion as to when they would actually appear before the committee.

Mr. Anderson, maybe you could clarify your intent there.

Mr. David Anderson: I don't think I had any particular intent there. We've had hearings where we've had six or eight witnesses in two hours.

It sounds to me like the Liberals are suggesting we're going to spend at least an hour with each one of these witnesses, so we're spending an extended hearing just hearing three people. Other times we've had groups of people. We could put three of them at the table at once and bring three other witnesses.

So it doesn't really matter to us. We're just saying we want to have the same right that the Liberals do to bring witnesses in. The way the motion's worded right now, they get to bring their witnesses, and then everybody else has to wait until the committee decides whether the rest of us get our witnesses or not.

I'm saying let's just open up the witness list. If we want to hear those first three that day, or in that first two hours, or add some others, we can do that. That's what the chairman and the clerk are for. That way we can get some usefulness out of the time we're going to be spending.

•(1335)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Anderson.

That's the intent of the amendment. We'll go to a vote on it....

Yes, Ms. Bell, just before we go to the vote.

Ms. Catherine Bell: Sorry, Mr. Chair, but I'll go back to my other point of clarification.

If we are to undertake this study, which is different from what we were planning, what does that do to the study on forestry? Will we be pushing that off until a later date or will we be able to maybe alternate meetings, one on this and one on that? They're both very large, important issues for us.

The Chair: It's an excellent question.

We had scheduled eight meetings, I think, on the forestry industry. Obviously it's a very important subject. The committee has to deal with that and decide that. Are we going to just push that study off?

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Unless Mr. Anderson is willing to withdraw his date amendment....

I proposed that we do it next week because of the existing studies we'd agreed on, but even Ms. Bell said she couldn't make it next week. So I'm confused here. I'm at a loss.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Bell, you understand what the intent of the amendment is?

Ms. Catherine Bell: Oh, I do, yes.

The Chair: Okay.

Let's go to the question on Mr. Anderson's amendment.

(Amendment agreed to—[See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

(Motion as amended agreed to—[See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: I think it was unanimous, or very close; it's hard to tell sometimes.

Very good. Is there any further business for this committee?

We need a date, of course, for when members of the committee will submit lists. Can we make that deadline next Tuesday? Is that reasonable as a deadline for members to submit the witnesses they would like to appear? Even the end of this week would work too, or next Monday afternoon, or sometime in that timeframe.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: That's fine, although I think we have more time. We know we're not going to invite them on Tuesday, the 29th, since we already have witnesses for that date, unless we're planning to interview witnesses all day. So we have more time.

The Chair: We don't know for certain that all three witnesses will be available. I think we have to have backup. Maybe none of them will be available. It's quite possible with that timeframe. There's a better chance certainly with this timeframe than with the former one.

By next Monday afternoon? Is that...?

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Can we make it next Thursday, please?

The Chair: Okay. Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. David Anderson: I would just ask other people to abide by that, if you don't mind getting the witnesses in. We had one other situation where people were bringing witnesses for two or three weeks while we were trying to have hearings. So if we can get them in, it makes it easier for the chairman—

The Chair: It also makes it easier for the clerk, of course.

Mr. Omar Alhabra: Will we examine it and consider it as a committee and agree on which witnesses to invite or not?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Omar Alhabra: I'm assuming that there should be some screening process; otherwise we might end up—

The Chair: We may have to do that, the clerk and I, two members, without a meeting, if you want to go ahead with the meeting on the 29th and we can't get the witnesses you're talking about.

Mr. Omar Alhabra: As long as we're all consulted on the witness list.

The Chair: Sure. The clerk will do that. Agreed?

Is there any further business?

Thank you all very much for your cooperation. Have a good week in your constituencies.

The meeting is adjourned.

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