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Wednesday, February 4, 2009

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Chair

Mr. David Sweet

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• (1535)

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): Honourable members of the committee, I see a quorum. We can now proceed to the election of the chair. I'm ready to receive motions to that effect.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): I'd like to nominate Mr. David Sweet as chair.

The Clerk: It has been moved by Mr. Peter Stoffer that David Sweet be elected chair of the committee.

Are there any further motions?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and David Sweet duly elected chair of the committee.

Before inviting Mr. Sweet to take the chair, if the committee wishes, we will now proceed to the election of vice-chairs.

I am now prepared to receive motions for first vice-chair.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I'd like to nominate Madam Judy Sgro, please.

The Clerk: It has been moved by Mr. Stoffer that Ms. Judy Sgro be elected as first vice-chair of the committee.

[Translation]

Are there any further motions?

[English]

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I am now ready to receive motions for the second vice-chair.

Madam Sgro.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): I would like to nominate Peter Stoffer.

The Clerk: It has been moved by Madam Sgro that Mr. Peter Stoffer be elected as second vice-chair of the committee.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I now invite Mr. David Sweet to take the chair.

The Chair (Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much, colleagues. I appreciate the trust and confidence—however, the word “confidence” sometimes is bantered around here in interesting ways—that you have put in me as chair.

I'll just speak about the history of this committee. Of course, Mr. Stoffer is quite a longstanding veteran, and we have some recent veterans like Rob Clarke. I understand that Roger Gaudet is going to be joining us as well, and he's one of the veterans of the last committee. In the 39th Parliament, we had quite a good working relationship and a number of reports with unanimous consent. I hope we can carry on that tradition. I know that our veterans of all ages are expecting that, and I look forward to working with all of you.

If it pleases the committee, we can move on to routine motions, and we can finish that off in this meeting as well as the elections. Would that please the committee?

Does everybody have a copy of the routine motions? We'll use those that were adopted in the 39th Parliament as models.

We'll begin with services of analysts from the Library of Parliament. We'll go through them paragraph by paragraph.

The motion is that the committee retain, as needed and at the discretion of the chair, the services of one or more analysts from the Library of Parliament to assist it in its work.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Subcommittee on agenda and procedure: that the subcommittee on agenda and procedure be composed of the chair, the two vice-chairs and a member of the other opposition party.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Reduced quorum: that the chair be authorized to hold meetings to receive evidence and to have that evidence printed when a quorum is not present, provided that at least three members are present, including one member of the opposition.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Distribution of documents: that the clerk of the committee be authorized to distribute to the members of the committee only documents that are available in both official languages.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Working meals: that the clerk of the committee be authorized to make the necessary arrangements to provide working meals for the committee and its subcommittees.

Is everybody agreed on that?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: With chocolate milk.

The Chair: Not with chocolate milk, Mr. Stoffer, sorry.

(Motion agreed to)

• (1540)

The Chair: Notice of motions: that 48 hours' notice be required for any substantive motion to be considered by the committee, unless the substantive motion relates directly to the business then under consideration; and that the notice of motion be filed with the clerk of the committee and distributed to members in both official languages.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Witnesses' expenses: that if requested, reasonable travel, accommodation, and living expenses be reimbursed to witnesses, not exceeding two representatives per organization; and that in exceptional circumstances, payment for more representatives be made at the discretion of the chair.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Allocation of time for questioning: that during the questioning of witnesses the time allocated to each questioner be as follows: on the first round of questioning in the following order: Liberal seven minutes, Bloc Québécois seven minutes, NDP five minutes, and Conservative seven minutes; and on the second round of questioning, five minutes per party in the following order: Liberal, Bloc Québécois, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Conservative, Bloc Québécois, Liberal, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Liberal, and Conservative.

Mr. Kerr.

Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC): Mr. Chair, I would like to move an amendment to that, given the redistribution of the committee makeup. Would this be an appropriate time to do that?

The Chair: Yes, it would be appropriate.

Mr. Greg Kerr: That in the rounds of questions, the witnesses from any one organization should be allowed 10 minutes to make their opening statement. During the questioning of witnesses, there should be allocated seven minutes for the first round of questioning and thereafter five minutes shall be allocated to each questioner in the second and subsequent rounds of questioning.

The Chair: Mr. Clarke.

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): It's just that in all the other committees we've sat on it's been 10 minutes. I think it might just be a typo.

No?

Hon. Judy Sgro: Usually it's seven.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I'm sorry. I was pointing at the wrong one. I thought it sounded awfully familiar.

The Chair: I was trying to discern a difference, yes.

Mr. Greg Kerr: That's my new French. It's not doing so well. My apologies. It is the speaking order one.

I'll try it again, Mr. Chair, if I could. It's in the speaking order, not in the round of questioning.

It's that the order of questions for the first round of the questioning should be as follows: Liberal, Bloc, NDP, Conservative. Questioning during the second round shall alternate between the opposition members and government members in the following fashion: Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Conservative, based on the principle that each committee member should have a full opportunity to question the witnesses. If time permits, further rounds shall repeat the pattern of the first two, at the discretion of the chair.

The Chair: I take it you probably want that repeated again, but first, Mr. Stoffer.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Can you repeat it again?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Actually, I had my own amendment to move.

If you look at the way it is now...and for those who were here last time, you'll notice that we're down at the lonely end here. If you look at the second round, the reality is that after the second one it says NDP, and it goes Conservative, Bloc, Liberal, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative. We're nowhere near there. So the reality is between the second last line, between "Conservative, Liberal" and then "Conservative, Liberal"... Between Liberal and Conservative is where I'd like to insert the NDP.

The Chair: Could I just ask you, Mr. Stoffer, to hold on to that, and we'll deal with one amendment at a time. Then we'll come back to that.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes, sir, okay.

The Chair: Could you repeat that amendment and maybe just walk through it slowly, because people will have to discern the difference on their own as well.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Okay.

On the speaking order, Mr. Chair, it is that the order of questions for the first round of the questioning should be as follows: Liberal, Bloc, NDP, Conservative. Questioning during the second round shall alternate between the opposition members and government members in the following fashion: Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Conservative, based on the principle that each committee member should have a full opportunity to question the witnesses. If time permits, further rounds shall repeat the pattern of the first two, at the discretion of the chair.

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): There's no NDP there at all?

Mr. Greg Kerr: Yes, Peter pointed that out.

Hon. Judy Sgro: It's Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Conservative.

Mr. Greg Kerr: For the second round, yes.

Hon. Judy Sgro: The second round.

The Chair: Mr. Kerr, just so the clerk can follow the amendment appropriately, does the time remain the same on the first round?

Mr. Greg Kerr: Yes.

The Chair: The time remains the same on the first round.

Mr. Stoffer.

• (1545)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: With great respect to the parliamentary secretary, what that basically means is that if the minister is here with his appropriate staff and they go into the detailed estimates or whatever it is they're doing, by the time we get to ask the second question the meeting will be over. It's just not right.

If you wish to change that a bit, I'd be happy to help you on it. But the reality is that for us to get five minutes' worth of questioning in a two-hour span simply will not do.

The Chair: I'm going to now hear from the Bloc.

Monsieur André.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): I am not in favour of Mr. Kerr's motion. I move that we vote on the amendment.

[English]

The Chair: Okay, but I had another hand up.

Madam Sgro.

Hon. Judy Sgro: I think it's very important that everybody participate and have an opportunity to ask questions, but I don't think it's fair to the NDP the way this is. Frankly, I've reviewed this and I don't have any problem with the list that's in front of me. I think we should consider what was presented to us as reasonable.

I will be voting against the amendment proposed by Mr. Kerr.

The Chair: In trying to act as a conciliator as well as a chairman, I detect that there are two issues here that may be able to be married together. One is a disparity, as far as Mr. Stoffer is concerned, in the capability of the NDP to question, and one is a disparity in equal time for the Conservative Party now that there's an extra person here because of the makeup of the House.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I have the solution, if you'd like.

The Chair: If you have the solution, sir, I'd like to hear it.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Okay. You'd start off with Liberal, Bloc, NDP, and Conservative. Then you'd go to Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Conservative, Conservative, NDP. Then if there's a third round you'd just go back and forth. The second round is really where we're concerned. If there's a third round, I'll throw it up in the air for whoever is still here or still awake.

The Chair: Do we need that repeated once more?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I can do it again, if you wish.

The Chair: Do we have consensus?

Just go nice and slow. Make sure the clerk has it.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: The allocation of time for questioning would be Liberals seven, Bloc Quebecois seven, NDP five, and Conservatives seven. The second round would be based on five minutes, starting with the Liberals, the Conservatives, the Bloc, the Conservatives, the Conservatives, and the NDP. A third round could follow that same logic again.

The Chair: Do we have agreement on that?

Mr. Greg Kerr: I want to hear Peter ask a question.

I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, are we comfortable with the time allocation?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes.

The Chair: Right now I'm trying to do it on an open conciliation basis, so we might move to Mr. Stoffer's amendment rather than the previous one. I want to see if there is some kind of agreement there.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I think that's reasonable, as long as there's enough time for everybody to question.

The Chair: What about the Liberal Party? Are members amenable to that?

Hon. Judy Sgro: I am told that this committee works well together in a non-partisan way, so if Mr. Kerr is happy with that, we're certainly happy with it on our side. I think it's a good way to start.

The Chair: I'm confident that with you here it will even get better.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Thank you.

That's why he's Sweet.

The Chair: We have an amendment from Mr. Stoffer on this, and it seems that we have a bit of agreement. Do we need a vote? Is everybody in favour of this?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy André: That is fine.

[English]

The Chair: It is unanimous.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Do you have it copied down?

The Chair: I think we've repeated that one enough that we have a good copy.

I believe that brings us to the end.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: As you may recall, it's usually the tradition of this committee, on behalf of the new members, to thank the previous chairperson for his work. Our previous chairperson was Rob Anders. I thought he did a great job as chair, and a letter from our committee thanking him for his work would be appropriate, I believe.

• (1550)

The Chair: I am prepared to draft that and circulate it at the next meeting for the committee's approval. Is everybody in favour of that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: There's one more thing before we adjourn. I'm willing to entertain a motion, because of the new members we have on the committee, that our first meeting be a briefing from Veterans Affairs. It would be an open meeting where they could present and be questioned, so everybody would have a comfort level about the department for which we are the committee.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: As you know, we are also in a bit of a rush regarding the estimates, so they could be dealt with at the same time. It's pretty difficult to get department officials here twice in a row—first for “Hello, how are you, here's what we do”; and second on the estimates, which is a little more detailed. We don't have much time to get the estimates through.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I'll have to run to catch up with this fellow. That's exactly what I was going to raise on behalf of the minister. He is ready, at the will of the committee, to come in. We know when our time is blocked, so any time we want to bring him in he'd be happy to come.

The Chair: Our next meeting is scheduled for Monday. Is it the pleasure of the committee to have the department and the minister here for the supplementary estimates?

Hon. Judy Sgro: Yes, it's a great idea.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Everybody is in favour, so we'll ask the clerk to try to arrange that with the department and with the minister's office.

We'll leave that to the schedule, and if there's a feeling after that that more information is needed in the department, then we can make that decision on the Monday regarding the next meeting. And of course we'll save some time at the end of that meeting for a future schedule as well.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I did it not to pile up your work more, but sometimes it's appropriate to tell major organizations who our committee members are. That's a quick note or an e-mail to the Royal Canadian Legion, the NCVA, to let them know who the chairperson is, the vice-chairs, as well as the committee members, so those organizations have a good understanding of who's now on their committee, because this committee is fairly new. It's only been around since 2006, technically, on its own.

The Chair: That's a good idea, Mr. Stoffer. I think the clerk probably has quite a robust list, and we'll make sure that all those who are stakeholders will be notified.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes, just a quick note.

The Chair: Could I have a motion to adjourn?

Hon. Judy Sgro: So moved.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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