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

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Thursday, October 1, 2009

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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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

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•(1530)

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Georges Etoka): Good afternoon.

Honourable members, I see that there is a quorum. Pursuant to Standing Order 106, we are going to proceed to the election of the chair. I'm ready to receive the motion to that effect.

Madam Cadman.

Ms. Dona Cadman (Surrey North, CPC): I'd like to nominate Dean Allison as chair, please.

The Clerk: Are there any other motions?

Ms. Cadman moves that Mr. Dean Allison be elected chair of the committee. Is everybody in agreement?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare Mr. Allison elected.

If the committee wishes, we may now proceed to the election of vice-chairs.

I'm ready to receive motions to that effect.

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): I would like to nominate Raymonde Folco for vice-chair.

The Clerk: Madame Minna moves that Madame Folco be elected first vice-chair. Is everybody in agreement?

(Motion agreed to)

[Translation]

The Clerk: I declare Ms. Folco elected vice-chair of the committee.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): I nominate Mr. Lessard for the position of second vice-chair.

The Clerk: We have a second motion. Ms. Beaudin nominates Mr. Lessard for the position of second vice-chair.

(Motion agreed to.)

The Clerk: I declare Mr. Lessard elected second vice-chair of the committee.

[English]

I now invite Mr. Allison to take the chair.

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): I want to welcome everybody back. I don't want to keep you here too long today. We really want to talk about future business. I know that we've been talking amongst ourselves, but I want to make sure we're on the same page as to where we're at.

Since Bill C-50 has been sent to our committee, we should look at starting it right away and working through it. My question is whether I have agreement from the committee that this is how we'd like to proceed.

Just to throw out some of the other things we have on our plate, we have a couple of private members' bills. We probably added one last night to make that three. We are also trying to complete our study on poverty. It would be nice to complete it by the wintertime, but we'll see what happens. There's the possibility of travel out west as well. We'll talk about that too.

My question to the committee—and you can determine how long you want to stay today—is whether this is the process we want to move forward on, starting with Bill C-50. We'll have other steering committee meetings to determine what some of the other orders of business need to be. But for the sake of moving forward right now, that's what I want to propose to you at this time.

We'll take names if anybody wants to speak to that.

Tony, you have the floor.

•(1535)

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): I agree with your recommendations so far. I think we should move quickly to deal with Bill C-50. In fact, I have names of some witnesses here today to table with the clerk.

I'd actually like to see us get this done next week, if we could. My initial thoughts were that we would have one day of witnesses and then a day of clause-by-clause. I'm certainly open to as well, and would probably welcome the presence of, ministry officials for a session and the minister herself to come and talk to us about this amendment and to answer any questions we might have. That might take three days, or perhaps four, but I would not like to see us go beyond that. Personally, I think we have a lot of people out there who are waiting and wanting this relief that will come, if and when we pass this amendment, so that they can deal with the challenges of daily living. That would be my first comment.

I was hoping as well that in the interest of getting a study done that's very important, that we've put a lot of effort and time into so far, crossing two parliaments, we would move to try to finish the study on poverty. I would recommend that we agree that we are in fact going to travel, with perhaps a week out west, where we could hit some of the communities agreed upon earlier, and we might also, while we're there, get up into the territories or to an aboriginal community.

I also want to see whether we could somehow spend at least a day in a rural area so that we get a sense of that. I had suggested earlier that Saskatchewan might be a good place to do that, although Mr. Komarnicki tells me there's no more poverty in Saskatchewan. We might want to check that out for ourselves and see if that's true or not, but we would do that.

I put forward today the request that we travel as part of the western leg of the poverty tour, so we can actually put a request before the committee that determines and agrees to the resources necessary to do that, and we can get that moving now. When that is approved, we can look for a week when we can see ourselves clear to do that.

We can deal with the other private members' bills in between and try to get as much work done as we can between now and the Christmas break, in the interest of trying to assist the significant number of people out there in our constituencies who are challenged in this difficult economic time.

The Chair: Thanks, Tony.

I'll just continue with the names and then recap as we get more of a consensus.

Ms. Minna, and then Mr. Lessard.

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Obviously I don't think we would have any problem working on government bills. Legislative bills always take priority. But I would want to make sure that we did proper hearings. There are quite a lot of organizations that want to come before us. I don't have a problem with what Mr. Martin suggested, but we don't know yet—maybe the clerk will tell us—how many organizations have already indicated that they might wish to appear.

I know we have some names, and I would imagine there will be an overlap with some of them. So we will have to see who wants to appear and decide how many we will take, and why, where, and so on, or how many of them we can even do with video conferencing and what have you. That could be utilized as well. You don't have to travel across the country, necessarily, to talk to people.

But I would like to see, at some point soon, us finishing the poverty program report. It's a very important report. It is extremely important in this country that we start addressing this issue. This study will hopefully have some impact or give some direction for government and for all of us to actually start implementing.

The hearings have to be finished quickly. I would suggest that we could split up, with part of the committee going west, part of it going north, and then, at some point, part of it going rural. The last time we split, it wasn't really a split, because we were only allowed two members to travel, or one per party at a time. It's not like the other

members were somewhere else; they just didn't go anywhere. If we were to do as the finance committee does and be allowed to actually split and do some additional work, that might be helpful.

That means not everybody gets to hear everything, but certainly the researchers will be able to bring back and collate the information for us.

• (1540)

The Chair: All right. I'm going to go to Mr. Lessard, and then I'm going to summarize what I'm hearing.

Mr. Lessard, the floor is yours, sir.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Congratulations on being re-elected chair.

Poverty is something that affects us all, and we must not put it off too long. It is my understanding that the bills have priority under the circumstances. Two bills are before us. We talked about Bill C-50, but there is also Bill C-241, which addresses the two weeks and the waiting period. It was held up at second reading by all of the opposition parties, which represents a larger number of members.

This bill also affects all those unfortunate enough to lose their jobs because they will be able to start receiving benefits as of the first week, rather than the third. Do the math. Bill C-241 helps more people quickly, whereas Bill C-50 is an exception bill that targets one region in relation to the industry of two specific regions.

I am not debating the substance, Mr. Chair, but the priority level that we give each one. We sincerely hope that Bill C-241 is studied first for recommendation to the House, and immediately afterwards, we can consider Bill C-50.

As for Bill C-50, we will of course recommend a certain number of witnesses who have been present throughout this debate since the bill was introduced a week ago. It would also be a good idea for officials to come and explain how they arrived at these figures: 190,000 unemployed workers affected and \$935 million earmarked in the supplementary estimates. We will need some clarification on that. Everyone that we have met with so far, including the senior officials who made a presentation—which was supposed to last 30 minutes but ended up lasting a little over an hour—has admitted that they cannot tell us the method used to arrive at these numbers.

We are also going to ask representatives of the NDP to come and tell us how they arrived at a figure of \$1 billion. We want that clarified as well. Their figure is higher than that of the Conservatives. Perhaps they will be able to convince us that the numbers are right. To get that kind of a figure, 85% of the people receiving employment insurance would have to use up all their benefit weeks, but only 25% actually do.

I do not want to debate the issue now, but I just want to be clear about the kinds of witnesses we should ask to appear before the committee.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Based on what I'm hearing, this is what I'm going to suggest we look at as we move forward.

I'm going to suggest that we try to start Bill C-50 right away, invite the minister right away. I'm going to look at four meetings to start, but if we need to hear more witnesses, we can. My suggestion is that the first meeting would be with the department. We would look at that on Tuesday. The second meeting could be with the minister for half and witnesses for half, depending on the minister's availability. A following meeting the following week, which is after the break week, would be on the Tuesday and would be with witnesses once again. Then we would have clause-by-clause on the Thursday.

Now, if we get an overwhelming number of witnesses, then we're going to have to add there. I'm suggesting for the time being that we try to contain our witnesses to two meetings. If we feel we need to hear more, by all means we could have that conversation. This is for the purposes of the clerks as well as the researchers to try to get some information out.

I'm going to suggest that right after that, Mr. Lessard, we look at Bill C-241 and get that dealt with—right after we deal with Bill C-50—because it has been the one that's been on the longest and I feel it should be done.

In the meantime, Mr. Martin, I'm going to suggest that the clerk look at putting together a plan without dates on it, just what it will cost to go to wherever we're going to be. If we're in Edmonton, it would maybe be a northern jaunt from Edmonton, or Calgary, if that happens to be the case. I'm going to leave it to the clerk to talk about that. Make that a week in the west. And we could also try to cover off a rural part, as well as a northern part. We don't need to put a timeframe in, but we do need to cost it to get approval, as Mr. Martin has said.

So I'll recap. My suggestion is that we start Bill C-50 this week, as in Tuesday, when we come back. We'll look at it for a potential minimum of four meetings, but have that done, and then right after that we'll look at Bill C-241.

We still have two other private members' bills, but as I said, once we get going on this I'm going to suggest that we call a steering committee just to look at future business and try to work in how we can look at some of these things.

Mr. Lessard, I see your hand.

• (1545)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Chair, you said that Bill C-50 has been around for longer, but that is not true. Bill C-241 was passed at second reading before Bill C-50.

[*English*]

The Chair: No, I said that Bill C-241 has been out the longest, but because it's government business, Bill C-50 will take priority over that. So we will get right to Bill C-241 after Bill C-50. It's government business, and government business takes priority over private members' business. We'll work on it right away, as that has been the one that's been outstanding the longest. We still have two private members' bills, and we'll determine how to work those in, in between witnesses and what we have.

How does that sound as far as moving forward is concerned?

An hon. member: That sounds good.

The Chair: Okay. So I'm going to leave it at that. We're going to adjourn the meeting for now, and we'll continue to talk about the schedule in the coming weeks.

Tony.

Mr. Tony Martin: As far as lists of witnesses are concerned, do we start submitting them now?

The Chair: Yes. I would like you to get them to the clerk as quickly as possible.

Mr. Tony Martin: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Vellacott.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): I would also commend you, Mr. Chair, on your non-partisan display, as shown by way of your tie: you've covered off every political party that we represent.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

An hon. member: Maurice, he couldn't make up his mind this morning when he got up, that's all.

The Chair: Thank you. You wanted that on the record, didn't you?

The meeting is adjourned.

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