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Tuesday, February 3, 2009

—
Chair

The Honourable Shawn Murphy

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•(1535)

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Joann Garbig): Honourable members of the committee, I see a quorum. We can now proceed to the election of the chair, who, according to Standing Order 106(2), must be a member of the official opposition.

I am ready to receive a motion.

Mr. Saxton.

Mr. Andrew Saxton (North Vancouver, CPC): Madam Clerk, I would like to nominate Shawn Murphy as chair of the committee.

The Clerk: Mr. Saxton moves that Mr. Murphy be chair of the committee.

Are there any other motions? There are none.

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

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. Murphy duly elected chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Clerk: Now, if members wish, we may proceed to the election of vice-chairs.

The Chair (Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I would nominate that Daryl Kramp be vice-chair from the government party.

The Clerk: Mr. Murphy moves that Mr. Kramp be elected as the first vice-chair of the committee.

Are there any other motions?

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): I nominate that David Christopherson be vice-chair.

The Clerk: On the motion of Mr. Murphy for the election of Mr. Kramp as vice-chair, is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion.

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. Kramp duly elected first vice-chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Clerk: For the election of a second vice-chair, who must be a member of an opposition party other than the official opposition, Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I will at this time nominate David Christopherson as that member.

The Clerk: Mr. Kramp moves that Mr. Christopherson be elected as the second vice-chair of the committee. Are there no further motions?

[Translation]

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

(Motion agreed to)

[English]

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. Christopherson elected second vice-chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Clerk: I would now invite Mr. Murphy to take the chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to extend to everyone a very warm welcome to the committee. I am confident we are going to have a very productive, interesting, and enjoyable session.

The next item of business, colleagues, is the routine motions.

Colleagues, this is the wording of the routine motions that were approved in the 39th Parliament, starting with the services of the analysts, but I'll wait until those have been circulated, and we will do each one separately. Some of these motions are relatively routine. I will read them and invite movers.

The first one regards services of analysts, and the wording is simple: 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.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): I so move.

The Chair: It is moved by Madam Ratansi.

Is there any discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

•(1540)

The Chair: We will at this time invite Alex Smith and Andrew Kitching as analysts for the committee. Welcome aboard, gentlemen.

Also, I should have done this earlier, but before I go any further, I want to introduce our clerk, Joann Garbig, to the members of the committee. Miriam Burke is here assisting for this week only, but Joann will be here at every meeting.

Let's move on to the second item, again a routine matter, that the subcommittee on agenda and procedure be established and be composed of the chair, the two vice-chairs and a member of the other opposition party.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: I so move.

The Chair: It is moved by Ms. Ratansi.

Is there any discussion?

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Mr. Chair, I would move a couple of amendments.

I would suggest we add that a quorum of the subcommittee shall consist of at least three members, one of whom must be from the government and one member of the opposition, and further, that each member of the subcommittee shall be permitted to have one assistant attend any meetings of the subcommittee on agenda and procedure.

I think those are self-explanatory, but if you would like, Mr. Chair, I can pass you the text.

The Chair: If you have that written down, Mr. Weston, I'll ask you to present it to the clerk.

Mr. John Weston: Yes.

The Chair: I want to go to Mr. Christopherson next.

It has been the practice of the committee, certainly as long as I've been on it, that anyone attending a meeting of the steering committee can attend with staff, and they usually do, but if we want to put it in a motion, I guess there's nothing wrong with that.

Before we hear from Mr. Christopherson, I'm going to read it again just for clarity. The amendment would include two paragraphs in addition to the paragraph that's before you. First is that a quorum of the subcommittee shall consist of at least three members, one of whom must be from the government and one member of the opposition. Secondly, each member of the subcommittee shall be permitted to have one assistant attend at any meeting of the subcommittee on agenda and procedure.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): I was going to raise another matter relative to this issue, so I don't know whether you want me to put that on the table or speak to the proposal.

The Chair: Perhaps we'll deal with this issue first and then we'll go to your amendment.

Mr. David Christopherson: Okay. I have a thought on that, if I may.

The Chair: Ms. Ratansi.

Mr. David Christopherson: I would like to speak, Chair. If I have the floor, I'd like to speak—

The Chair: No, I'm going to go to Ms. Ratansi and then I'll come back to you.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Mr. Chair, I think Mr. Christopherson said he had a thought on this motion. Do you wish him to continue or do you want me to take—

The Chair: Are you going to speak on this particular motion?

• (1545)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Yes, I am.

The Chair: I'll let you speak, then we'll go back to Mr. Christopherson.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wanted some clarification. In the past the subcommittee's composition has always been the chair and the two vice-chairs and then the member of the opposition party, which would be the Bloc Québécois. My question is, why is this addition necessary? Have there been any problems regarding quorum in the past? The chair has always been as chosen, whether it's government or opposition, and then the opposition parties have formed the quorum of the subcommittee.

So I just wanted clarification, Mr. Chair, via you on this issue of the amendment.

The Chair: In the previous practice I guess we didn't have a quorum, but the subcommittee would never meet with two members; that would be unheard of. We have met with three, usually when one member can't attend. In that case, a lot of times, I guess in all instances, the staff would be at the meeting, although they certainly wouldn't be able to vote and speaking would be limited. Sometimes we ask the views of the party without getting into a long discussion.

I have a little problem with it and I'll just relay my concerns. I don't have a problem with the quorum, but it says that a government member or an opposition member must attend, and if they say they won't attend, you've basically shut down the steering committee. I also point out the fact that any decisions of the steering committee have to be confirmed and ratified by the whole committee to be binding, so it can't go out on its own and take a course of action that's not approved.

Normally we publish the minutes of the steering committee and they're presented at the next meeting of this committee, and sometimes they're overturned. Most of the time they're not, but they certainly have been overruled on occasion.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: I don't recall a problem and I've been on the steering committee all those years too. The subcommittee can only recommend. There are no delegated powers at all other than to spend some time usually delving into details of witnesses, procedures, getting the horse in front of the cart, that sort of thing, and then it's recommended to the committee.

So again, I'm open to any changes, but I don't hear a good reason for this one and I share the concern. Right now if we get partisan... we try not to, and we really don't that often in this committee, we really don't. But when we do, we're up front about it and we say we're partisan, and then we go and do our thing. We really do try to work together, and it just makes it too easy for one of those parties to throw a wrench into the whole deal. I see no reason for that and no gain from it.

If I can, though—I'll save my change for later—it's the makeup of the committee. It will only take me 30 seconds to throw it out.

Right now, when we have a full committee, we have the chair—and I remember this from when Mr. Williams from the Conservatives was the chair, when they were the official opposition. So we would have the representatives. But what happens is that the person who is the chair ends up being expected to play two roles somehow. First, they're the chair of the subcommittee, so now the chair is playing gatekeeper to our getting the floor; that's what he or she does at subcommittee, at the steering committee. But at the same time, in the case of our current chair, Mr. Murphy, he's the only Liberal at the meeting and is expected somehow to chair the meeting and express the concerns of the Liberal caucus, and it's not even his role. In my experience, the chair is not recognized as the lead person for any of the caucuses; it's always somebody else.

So I was going to make a suggestion that we allow a member from the chair's party to be at the steering committee. So in effect you would have four representatives, one from each of the caucuses and the chair. The chair is non-partisan, just as our current chair is at this meeting.

I've found it awkward, because when we try to get a deal and it's complex and we're talking about a lot of different pieces and we finally put together a deal that we think we can all live with, the Liberals really haven't been represented from a political point of view; and when we get to the full committee, those concerns come forward and it unravels what we've done. If we had them there at the first meeting of the steering committee, we could possibly avoid those longer discussions at the full committee.

So I leave that with you. Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, your last point will be another amendment, so we'll deal with the first one first and then we'll go to your other amendment.

Mrs. Crombie.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): On Mr. Weston's proposal, I think the spirit of his amendment is already implicit in the existing motion, and thus I don't think the amendment is necessary. And on Mr. Christopherson's, I think that could be revised by adding the words "two other opposition parties". We could just say that the subcommittee on agenda and procedure be established and be composed of the chair, the two vice-chairs, and members of the two other opposition parties.

The Chair: Again, Mrs. Crombie, I'm going to deal with one amendment at a time, so we'll deal with the one we have on the floor.

Madame Faillie.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faillie (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, BQ): I would just like to point out that in the past, this motion has never caused problems, but, on occasion, the parliamentary secretary was invited to take part in order to help with the organization of the agenda and advise on the minister's availability to appear before the committee. So I do not see why it is important to amend the motion at this time.

• (1550)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Are there any concluding comments? Mr. Weston.

[*Translation*]

Mr. John Weston: I would first like to recognize the long-time members of the committee, especially Mr. Murphy and Mr. Christopherson. I have heard that this committee works very well. I did not move this amendment to be partisan, but just to clarify the role of the subcommittee. Clearly, the two members mentioned in the amendment will allow the committee to operate more smoothly.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm prepared to put the amendment to a vote at this time, and we're dealing only with the amendment that came from Mr. Weston.

The vote is a tie. For the reason that I briefly....

Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Would you perhaps indulge the member just one comment?

The Chair: Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: In the spirit of moving on, and not wishing to put the chair in an awkward position, to start these proceedings I think it's really important that we try to deal effectively and not come to a situation where that would happen. For that particular reason, as a member who voted the previous way, I would abstain from this and leave that responsibility so it wouldn't have to be handled by the chair. And I think we could move on to the next issue, if that's possible.

The Chair: I have received advice from the clerk, and she indicated to me that the proper procedure, given the circumstances, is to take the vote again. Following her advice, I'm going to do that.

(Amendment negated)

The Chair: Now we're into another one, back to the original motion.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I amended it. It is a friendly amendment.

Mr. David Christopherson: I liked the wording of my colleague, if you could raise that. Bonnie, I thought the way you worded it worked great.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: All right, my amendment is as follows: that the subcommittee on agenda and procedure be established and be composed of the chair, two vice-chairs, and a member of the two other opposition parties.

Mr. David Christopherson: Perfect.

• (1555)

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Mr. Chair, we have an amendment to the amendment. It's a friendly amendment, just a clarification.

We suggest that the subcommittee on agenda and procedure be established, to be composed of the chair and a representative from each of the parties.

The Chair: You might want "and a representative from all the parties".

I'll read what I have here and I'll go back to you, Ms. Ratansi.

The amendment is that the subcommittee on agenda and procedure be established and be comprised of the chair and one representative from all the parties.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: That sounds fine.

The Chair: You're fine with that. The intent, of course, is that it be the chair and one Conservative, one Liberal, one NDP, and one Bloc.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Does that mean that the chair is going to have a vote or not have a vote in a situation?

The Chair: No, the chair would have no vote in a situation like that.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Can we neuter a chair? I don't know.

Mr. David Christopherson: We usually have unanimous recommendations or non-unanimous recommendations. It's usually in one of the two camps. I doubt we would go to the chair for a tiebreaker. It would fall into the category of not having unanimity. When that happens we don't spend too much time fighting the minutia. There's no point to it. That's what is to take place here. So there would be no recommendation, or there would be an acknowledgement that we tried to give us a starting point but we didn't have unanimity.

Very rarely...and I stand to be corrected, but I can't think of an instance when the steering committee sent something to this committee that was really important on a majority vote only. I think we just sent it as not being able to come to an agreement, with the factors we looked at, where we got stuck, and where we are. Otherwise, we just have that whole discussion and then have the whole discussion all over again here.

•(1600)

The Chair: Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Looking at that particular item and at this committee as it is now, where we have a Liberal member as chair, a vice-chair from the government, a vice-chair from the NDP, and the opposition is the Bloc, if you leave that as it is written, it accomplishes without an amendment.... So I'm not sure why we're talking about an amendment. It's actually about when another committee changes, but in this particular one, the next year or when the next committee forms, they will come back and do it for that committee.

You have to be careful, Mr. Chair, that we actually have equal and balanced distribution on it. That may change if we were to change it to a member of the two other opposition parties. We very easily could have, for example, the Bloc with two people on that subcommittee. And that isn't, I don't think, what the spirit would be...whether it was any party.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Mr. Shipley, we have removed the “two” in this, recommending instead that the subcommittee on agenda and procedure be established and be composed of the chair and one representative from each party.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I understand, but quite honestly, if you leave it the way it is, you've accomplished that.

The Chair: If I may, Mr. Shipley, I believe—somebody please correct me if I'm wrong—the intent of the amendment is to increase the membership of the steering committee from four to five. We would have the chair plus a Liberal, a Conservative, a New Democrat, and a member of the Bloc. I believe that is the intent.

Mr. David Christopherson: And that wording would work regardless of which party was in the chair.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Can I also ask what the quorum is of the subcommittee?

Mr. David Christopherson: Bonnie came up with better language, so I just deferred to her motion. It was the same thing. The effect of this motion as just read is to increase the membership so that we would have an actual representative from the party that the chair comes from. Right now we don't.

So when John Williams was the chair, we had no Conservative there. Now, that was fine, because John pretty much ran everything. It wasn't a problem. But in fairness, when you're having meetings like that, you really want to hear all the political perspectives. It's difficult for the chair to do that and be a partisan.

The Chair: Ms. Crombie, back to you. I have you on the list.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: My question had to do with quorum. I just want to ensure that since the chair is usually neutral, if there should be any discussion requiring a vote of any kind, everyone is represented at the subcommittee level, Mr. Shipley.

The Chair: Mr. Saxton.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: I think we now also have to insert that if there is a tie vote, then the chair does not cast the deciding vote; it comes back to the main committee.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: It can't be tied if there are five.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: The chair is the fifth.

The Chair: Just one speaker at a time, please.

Mr. Saxton is making the point that the chair wouldn't vote, and I think I agree with him. There's no question about that.

Having said that, Mr. Christopherson is right; I don't recall ever having a vote. But we can insert that if that's the wish of the committee's honourable representatives from all parties.

•(1605)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Mr. Chair, has the subcommittee ever had...?

I'm sorry, did you have me recognized?

The Chair: I'm going to go to Mr. Shipley first, then to you.

Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Just going to Mr. Christopherson's amendment in terms of the chair, I do agree with that. Actually, we had that discussion this morning at another committee. We couldn't convince your colleague that this was the right way to go. I agree that you have a chair who is independent, who is neutral, and then each of the parties have their input.

So I do support that.

The Chair: Then can we just put “non-voting” in front of the word “chair”? So it would be composed of the non-voting chair and one representative from all parties. Do you think that would clarify that?

An hon. member: Sure.

The Chair: Okay, agreed.

Friendly amendment, Mr. Christopherson?

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm fine with it, but just a thought: do we really want to tie the hands of the chair?

Let's say the committee is caught up in something and we have debated it. It came here from the subcommittee, we debated it, we're still nowhere, and we send it back to the steering committee to work on some details to try to make some sense of it. Given that it's controversial, it may not have unanimity available to it. We may be tying the hands of the subcommittee to at least have a vehicle of a recommendation that would come. By tying their hands, we may....

It's not that big a deal, but I'm just saying, as a small detail, that I'm not necessarily that keen on it. There are times when we want the committee to act in a leadership role and make a recommendation, but most of the time we don't get into that. I'm just saying, do we really want to deny the chair the right to cause a positive recommendation to be denied? That's all.

The Chair: If I may, Mr. Christopherson, before I go to Ms. Ratansi, I think we're probably overplaying the role of the steering committee. If it ever came to that stage, I would feel uncomfortable voting. It can go back to the whole committee to have a discussion, vote upon it, and the committee decides. I just don't see that dynamic playing out in the steering committee. It never did before, and hopefully it won't. So I don't personally have any problem with it.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: I'm fine with your explanation.

The Chair: Mr. Weston.

Mr. John Weston: I think the consensus building is to create a very independent chair. To create even the impression that he or she may vote takes away from that.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: You've answered my query.

The Chair: Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I'm looking for clarification. I have just one "if" position.

On the two vice-chairs, in this particular case we would have a member of the government as a vice-chair. If that member could not attend, can that member be replaced by the parliamentary secretary, other members on the committee, and so on?

I just want to ensure that validity is there. I just want to ensure that, for example, the parliamentary secretary could replace me should I not be able to be there.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's a separate issue, though, the parliamentary secretary. I know on some committees it's an issue of whether they're to be part of this or not.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: But for example, if I'm a vice-chair and I can't be there, we have no representation. How is that representation replaced? That's my point.

Mr. David Christopherson: You could send someone.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: When you use that example, I don't know if that's the right one, but—

Mr. David Christopherson: We do that all the time.

The Chair: [*Inaudible—Editor*]...substitute, there's no problem at all.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes.

The Chair: Ms. Crombie.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Mine was the corollary of that, actually. If one of the vice-chairs happened to be sitting in the seat of the chair that day, could we send a different representative? There might be an occasion where the chair would be absent.

The Chair: I think we're getting way ahead of ourselves here.

Mr. Saxton.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: In the interest of time and in the interest of cooperation, I would suggest that we move ahead with Mr. Christopherson's proposed resolution, if you could just add that the chair will not break ties.

The Chair: I will just read it again: that the subcommittee on agenda and procedure be established and be composed of a non-voting chair and one representative from all the parties.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The next one should be a little quicker. It is 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.

I'll just explain this. The normal quorum for voting in a meeting such as this is 50% plus one: six members. It's anything over half, and six members is the quorum. This is the reduced quorum; to hear evidence, all we need is three.

Madame Faillie.

• (1610)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faillie: I propose that we keep the motion and call the question.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I'd like clarification on it. When it says there would be three members, does that include the chair?

The Chair: Yes, it does.

Mr. Bev Shipley: So out of a committee of 12, we would actually have just two members present to receive evidence. I don't know how well that represents the committee in its objective of having people, even if there were four members on it. It just seems really slim. You have the chair and two people. I'm not so sure it reflects very well to the witnesses in terms of our being able to receive their presentation.

The Chair: Ms. Ratansi.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: My question concerns this reduced quorum, which was put in under the previous committee. Was there a reason? There are times when members are not available and witnesses have already been asked to come before the committee. Have there been occasions when this has happened? Perhaps a history would help us.

The Chair: If I may, before I go to Mr. Christopherson, there are such occasions now and then, late in the meeting. A meeting starts, we're hearing evidence and something else is going on in the House. Of course, if it's a vote, we'd suspend, but there might be a reception or something else. I've seen it go down to two or three members around the table.

Mr. Shipley is quite correct. It doesn't reflect well on Parliament and it doesn't reflect well on the committee, but if we have to adjourn, bring the witness back at another date and the witness is from another part of Canada, that doesn't reflect well on the committee either. It's a fine line.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair.

There have been incidents—two types I can think of. One occurs when there is something going on and there are a whole lot of people rushing out and we don't want to just dismiss the meeting. Let's say everybody is having an emergency caucus meeting, but we have all these witnesses we've brought in from who knows where.

This is a fail-safe, that's all. It's a last-ditch effort to prevent the money and the time spent to arrange the meeting from being lost. The reason it's one member of the opposition is, again, just to prevent government members from a situation where all the opposition is gone and the meeting is happening without anyone knowing it. As we do in all places, it's a check and balance, just to make sure we don't have that.

As for the only other time it's happened, there was a caucus in a meeting, the largest caucus at that meeting, that had reasons to boycott the meeting. It happened at the last minute. It's only happened once that I can recall, but that left us with half the committee. If we'd had a few people away for any reason, we'd have lost the day again. This allows a caucus to make the political statement they want by not being here and protesting something of substance or procedure, but again, it still allows the committee to not lose all that time and money. That's what it's really all about.

As you know, the public watches people coming here. People spend a lot of time making their presentations. They bring staff and support people. They come here, and then, through no fault of their own, the whole bloody committee dissolves in front of them all of a sudden and it's over. At best, they get to redo the whole thing, often on the taxpayer's dime.

This just allows the committee, in those circumstances.... No decisions can be made. It doesn't matter whether we're here or not, because everything that happens will then be on the Hansard, available to everyone. It lets us save face, quite frankly, as a committee and as a Parliament, when we spend money and time to bring people in as witnesses. It's pretty innocuous.

•(1615)

The Chair: Ms. Crombie.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I concur. It is the same point as I was going to make. These witnesses take the time and trouble to come here. The solution is that we should just be present and attend the meetings.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: [*Inaudible—Editor*]...I still go back. I'm not going to die on it; I'm just going to make the point, just to follow up.

I agree with you, Mr. Christopherson, that we have the responsibility to be here or have someone else be here. If I had come from across Canada or from somewhere else, had brought my resource people, was sitting as a witness, and there were the chair and one person on each side, I'd think that maybe my contribution wasn't that important to the committee.

I think the obligation actually reflects back to us. We have an obligation. Should an emergency come up that shuts us down, then we have to do it; I mean, if a vote shows up. But if a caucus decides to have something for its members, they have to make the decision on whether they're going to leave somebody at an important meeting or not. It won't affect everyone, whether it's your caucus or ours.

My point is that I just don't think we're reflecting to the public and to our witnesses the sincerity that we've talked about here in terms of being receptive to hearing people who come to us with their issues. I just think expanding this one where we have the chair, because we have said the chair should be non-partisan in all the subcommittees and here....

I don't think ending up with two people reflects well. I would move that we add one person and leave the wording as it is—"and one member of the opposition"—so that it doesn't get into those concerns you raised, David. That's all.

The Chair: I take it that you're making an amendment.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I am.

The Chair: Right now it says, "provided that at least three members". Are you increasing that to "four"?

Mr. Bev Shipley: Correct.

The Chair: From three to four members—a one-word amendment. Okay, then.

Mr. Weston.

Mr. John Weston: I'm hearing that the issues are a balancing of the political interests, making sure there's balance there; number two, making sure there's some reliable reporting going on; and number three, respect for the witnesses.

I've both a comment and a question. The comment is that it seems to me that 40% of the committee, as in four, makes a reasonable number. It's quite arbitrary, but it still seems a little more credible than three.

The question I have is that when this committee travels to gain evidence, it will make us more effective and streamlined if a smaller number can receive evidence. Is that not correct?

The Chair: Yes and no. The first part of your submission is correct.

Historically, this committee has never travelled. There is nothing precluding us from travelling, but there's really no reason to bring us outside of Ottawa. In my eight years, and before that, I am not aware of it having travelled; it just doesn't travel as other committees do.

Ms. Ratansi.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: I think that Mr. Shipley's increasing of the number to four members solves the problem. It is a fail-safe mechanism, and I hope we will be adult enough and not boycott meetings.

That's all we need to know.

The Chair: I would like to put the amendment to a vote. I think we've had a good discussion. You've heard the amendment. The amendment is simple, changing it from three to four.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: The motion is quite clear. It's in front of you. I'm going to put the vote on the motion as amended.

(Motion as amended agreed to)

• (1620)

The Chair: The next item should be simpler: 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.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: So moved.

(Motion agreed to)

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

So moved by Mr. Kramp.

(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.

So moved by Christopherson.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The next one is that, unless otherwise ordered, each committee member be allowed to be accompanied by one staff person at an in camera meeting.

That's an in camera meeting where we're discussing committee business like the reports. Everyone is entitled to bring one staff member.

So moved by—

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Can I ask a question, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Perhaps, we'll get it moved first.

It is moved by Ms. Ratansi.

And now your question.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Is it the general practice, and perhaps the clerk can help us out...? When we called it in camera in the other committees that I was on, we didn't allow anyone to come in, because in camera was in camera. There had been times when leaks happened, and so we then stopped the staff from coming.

Has it been general practice that staff are not allowed in? I just want to know. If it is not general practice, then I'm fine with it.

The Chair: The general practice of this committee—and perhaps Alex can correct me if I'm wrong—is that when we do have an in camera meeting, and most of our in camera meetings are to discuss committee business and to discuss reports, the staff are allowed in. And I'm not aware of any problems.

Is there any other discussion?

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: I would like to make just a short amendment. There are some committees, Chair, that allow a representative from the whip's office of each party. I would put for consideration that we allow that too, because sometimes, especially in a case where I'm sending a substitute—maybe my assistant is with me—whoever is here is going to need the whip's office here to give advice. Otherwise it's going to slow the meeting down.

Some other committees are doing it. I would move an amendment that we would also be allowed a representative from each of the whip's offices.

The Chair: We can say “if desired”.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I would ask to make a friendly amendment to Mr. Christopherson's.

The Chair: Could you just give us a second here?

Mr. David Christopherson: [*Inaudible—Editor*]...from a caucus office, the whip or the House leader, call it what you will.

Your point is well taken. How do you want to word that, though? Each of us can bring a staff support person plus the whip or the House leader or a caucus representative. Do you want to say one party staff representative?

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Sure.

Mr. David Christopherson: That works for me.

The Chair: We're looking for some wording here. We can leave it the way it is and add one sentence: in addition, each party may have in attendance one official, or one representative. It's each party. It's one per staff, and then each of the four parties can have a representative.

• (1625)

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, if we were in camera right now, then I would have my personal assistant, and Theresa Kavanagh would have the ability to come in from the whip's office. So that is exactly what we're looking for—only in camera and when there is more than one of you, you'd still have only one representative, so we're not doubling the number of staff who are in camera.

The Chair: Madame Faille.

[Translation]

Ms. Meili Faille: I move an amendment to the French version. It is not "du personnel"; it is "de son personnel".

[English]

The Chair: There's a technical change in French.

Is there any other discussion? All in favour of the amendment, which would include one representative from each of the four parties.

(Amendment agreed to)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Mr. Chair, could you read what you added?

The Chair: In addition, each party may have in attendance one representative.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: You said "one".

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Or it could be "and a representative from each party".

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: In camera meeting transcripts. The motion is that one copy of the transcript of each in camera meeting be kept in the committee clerk's office for consultation by members of the committee.

So moved by Madame Faille.

Is there any discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The next one is on notice: that 48 hours' notice be required for any substantive motion to be considered by the committee, unless the substantive motion relates directly to 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 before consideration is given.

That is moved by Mr. Kramp. Is there any discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Opening statements. The motion is that witnesses be given five minutes to make their opening statement, and if they have additional information, it should be deposited with the clerk of the committee; and that during the questioning of witnesses the time allocated to each questioner be as follows: on the first round of questioning, eight minutes to a representative of each party in the following order: Liberal, Bloc Québécois, Conservative, NDP, Liberal, and Conservative; on the second round of questioning, five minutes per party in the following order: Liberal, Conservative, Bloc Québécois, Conservative, NDP, Liberal, and Conservative.

So moved by Ms. Ratansi.

Is there any discussion?

Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: We could attempt to make some improvements on this one. I have a couple of suggestions that I would like to bring to the floor to entertain some thought from my colleagues.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: On the first round of questioning where we have basically six people having their eight minutes now, in the principle of fairness and having more questions from more of our members, I'd like that time to be reduced to seven minutes. I'd also like the Liberal and the Conservative to be removed from the first four. In other words, we would have simply Liberal, Bloc, NDP, Conservative. Then after that we would go through the rotation period for the five minutes and we would just keep on rotating through. That way it is pretty fair all the way. We would each get one shot at the full seven minutes, and then we could just rotate. In order that we would always have a contrast, the order to start with would be for the first four: Liberal, Bloc, NDP, Conservative. Then we would start Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Conservative. Should we go beyond that, we'd just rotate through again on the second—

I will do that again more slowly. On the first four, it would be Liberal, Bloc, NDP, Conservative. On the first round of the five minutes, we would start off with Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Conservative. And should we have ample time left over, which we would hope to have by giving more available time to our members, we could simply repeat the secondary portion of that again and rotate through that.

This is for your consideration. This allows more members more of an opportunity to possibly speak more often.

• (1630)

The Chair: We're going to make sure everyone understands it. I will repeat it for the record.

Mr. Kramp, you are suggesting the first round would be for seven minutes and there would be only four questioners. The first would be Liberal. The Bloc would be second. The New Democratic Party would be third, followed by the Conservatives. That would conclude the first round.

Then we would go into the second round for five minutes each. The Liberals would lead off, then the Conservatives, Bloc Québécois, Conservatives, Liberals, Conservatives, NDP, Conservatives. Then if there was sufficient time for a third round, we would just repeat that rotation as in the second round.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: That's correct.

The Chair: Is there any discussion?

Ms. Ratansi.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: I was counting the number of minutes that would translate into. In the way Mr. Kramp suggested, the Conservatives would be getting 27 minutes and the Liberals would be getting a maximum of 17 minutes, the NDP would get a maximum of 12 minutes, and the Bloc would get a maximum of 12 minutes.

Generally if you go the second round and if there are five witnesses and they have taken five minutes each, we might end up with the first round, and the second round we might cut off at the Bloc or the Liberals. The NDP would not get its second round. So would you consider Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Conservative, Liberal, NDP, and then Conservative? I am just removing one Conservative and pushing up the NDP.

I'm asking if you would consider that.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: No.

The Chair: Madam Faïlle.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faïlle: We support Mr. Kramp's motion. I have sat on two other committees where this was the order. It worked very well in terms of time on the floor; everyone got to speak.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Kramp was good enough to give me a heads-up before the meeting, so I've had time to look at this. I don't have a problem with it.

However, I was going to raise a point, and I thank Mrs. Ratansi for being generous enough to raise it. I am a little concerned that in the second round we're so far down that we may not get that second one. Quite frankly, when you're not in the second round, half the meeting is all but irrelevant, except as a listener. One of the nice things about this is that at least there's a chance to participate. Many times we just have to cut the rotation, and we're quite a way away.... I mean, it's the seventh person, so we're over half an hour before we get the floor.

Any consideration along the lines that Mrs. Ratansi was raising to move us up even back to our normal position in the second round—Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Conservative, NDP—would keep us in the same place. I'm worried that because of time we won't get that second round. I don't get nearly as many slots as it is, so I would make that friendly amendment.

•(1635)

The Chair: Okay, that's a friendly amendment. If I interpret it correctly, you're moving into the fifth spot instead of the seventh.

Mr. David Christopherson: Correct, you've got it.

The Chair: Let me read the second round again so that everyone's clear: "Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Conservative, NDP, Liberal, Conservative, Conservative".

Mr. David Christopherson: *Oui*. That puts us in the same place in the second rotation.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: To accommodate what Dave is saying, just change the Liberal and the NDP so we don't end up with two members back to back from the same party.

Mr. David Christopherson: I appreciate that. Thank you.

The Chair: Somebody mentioned that they shouldn't have two Conservatives together, but I don't know how we're going to do this. My reading of it is Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, NDP, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Conservative.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: No. I'll repeat again then, with the changes for the amendment as proposed by Mr. Christopherson.

The Chair: Okay, you repeat what you want. Go ahead.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: For the second round, it's Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, Conservative, NDP, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative. That would be the amendment Mr. Christopherson has recommended.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Crombie, on the amendment.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I'm trying to understand the need for the amendment. Is it because there's a fifth Conservative member? I'm fine with the way the original reads. I'm sure it's served the committee well in the past. It was used previously, and I don't understand the need to amend it.

The Chair: Okay, you're speaking against it.

I will ask Mr. Kramp at the end to elaborate further than he already has. Before I go to him, is there anyone else?

Okay, I'm going to turn the floor over to Mr. Kramp. Perhaps he can address Mrs. Crombie's concerns and add any final comments he wants to make, and then I'll put the question.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I'm actually quite comfortable with the existing motion. I don't have too much of a problem with it, except that what we have right now takes up more time in the first session.

And it does put an imbalance within the parties on the first round of questioning, because both the Liberals and Conservatives have two rounds in the first round, if you know what I mean. If you have a premier round that way it does put a bit of an imbalance, even though they have the superiority in numbers. I'm suggesting we need a balance through the entire process, not just in one area versus the other.

If you take those two and leave the four with equal time, that does allow some extra latitude of time to put into your other section of five minutes. Then, when we run through those on the prescribed list, where we've been alternating as per the proposal from Mr. Christopherson, it actually shows that we're committed to parity and "fairity"—if you love that word.

The Chair: I'm going to call the vote on the amendment.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Sorry, can you repeat it.

The Chair: This is on the amendment.

(Amendment agreed to)

•(1640)

The Chair: I call the vote on the main motion as amended.

Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I need you to help me.

When I read through the part on opening statements, when we have witnesses—and I don't know in this committee whether you often get one or two or if you get half a dozen, in terms of groups—I think in terms of presentation, five minutes is the shortest I've seen at any committee. Usually they have 10 minutes. You're asking someone to come in and make a presentation worth five minutes. We're giving ourselves seven minutes to ask them questions, but we're only giving them five minutes to present their case, and I'm wondering how that has worked.

It would seem to me that if an organization comes in with two or three people, then they make the decision of how that's going to be presented.

So there are a couple of things. I think the five minutes seems really short, when we have more question time than they have presentation time. My suggestion on that would be 10 minutes per organization, in terms of witnesses.

There's an amendment to that effect.

The Chair: If I may, are you making the amendment to witness...?

Mr. Bev Shipley: No, the witness presentations.

An hon. member: Opening statements is what you mean, I think.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Yes.

The Chair: Right now, it's five minutes.

We're off kilter on the procedure here.

Mr. Shipley wants to make a further amendment and change five minutes to ten. If I may, let me just say the five minutes has worked. At this committee, normally the witness would be the Auditor General. She has presented, and she's quite used to the five minutes. The other witnesses are normally the accounting officer, the deputy minister or the agency head, maybe Treasury Board, and sometimes private witnesses. If they need additional time, we usually give them two to three extra minutes to conclude. I don't normally cut people off, but I have if I see they're going to go on and on.

That's been the practice of the committee, and I don't think we've ever had any complaint that we don't give people enough time. But again, it's up to the committee to decide.

The amendment, colleagues, is to delete the word "five" and insert "ten". Is there any other discussion?

Mr. Bev Shipley: Mr. Chair, maybe I'll leave it. I'll go with your discretion. I was trying to get clarification, as much as anything. It just seemed really short, but if the committee has worked well with that, then it's fine.

The Chair: We can revisit this if we find there's a problem, Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: And you have flexibility in that?

The Chair: We have flexibility.

Mr. John Weston: In a committee I was in earlier today, we came to the same point and we inserted the words "subject to the discretion of the chair, the witnesses be given x minutes". So that would give you the flexibility to give the witness longer time.

The Chair: We'll go to that vote again, the motion with Mr. Kramp's amendment. There's no amendment from Mr. Shipley. We already voted on Mr. Kramp's amendment.

Mr. David Christopherson: Oh, I see where we are.

The Chair: We're voting on the amended motion now.

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: There are a few comments I want to make about the committee and the future business of the committee.

First of all, I want to welcome everyone here. I am confident that we will have a productive session and I want to say a few words because I know most of you are new to the committee. Mr. Christopherson, Mr. Kramp, Ms. Ratansi, and I have all served on the committee before.

This committee is fundamentally different from any other committee in the House of Commons, and in my opinion, it's the most important one. It's fundamentally different in that it does not deal with policy, but rather administration. In other words, it does not examine why things are done, but how they're done.

We're concerned with the proper and prudent expenditure of public funds. We are concerned that the expenditures are legal, that they're made in accordance with the Financial Administration Act and all Treasury Board guidelines and procedures, and that the principles of prudence, propriety, and compliance are adhered to.

As I've indicated, the main witnesses to appear before this committee are the Auditor General—and she's usually accompanied by two, three, or four of her officials—and normally the deputy minister or the agency head and his or her officials, as the case may be. I should say it's unusual, and I hope it doesn't occur, but it does occur now and then that this committee will call ministers.

I point out that the Federal Accountability Act, which was passed a couple of years ago, has designated all deputy ministers and agency heads as accounting officers, who are accountable to Parliament for the following management responsibilities: measures taken to organize the resources of the department to deliver departmental programs in compliance with government policies and procedures; the measures taken to maintain effective systems of internal control in their department; the signing of the accounts that are required for the preparation of the public accounts; and the performance of other specific duties assigned to him or her by the Federal Accountability Act or any other act in relation to the administration of the department.

In May 2007, this committee adopted a protocol for the appearance of accounting officers before the public accounts committee. This protocol, which is included in your committee binder, was concurred in by the House of Commons and is therefore part of the parliamentary law of this country, and I urge you and invite you to read it very carefully.

The work of this committee is the final step in the parliamentary accountability cycle, which starts with the budget, continues with the estimates, the departmental reports on plans and priorities, the departmental performance reports, and then finally, the audits: both the public accounts audit, the financial audit, and the various performance audits that the Auditor General does on a regular basis. That is the final step that concludes the government's financial cycle.

So this committee follows the work of the Auditor General very closely, and she will usually be a witness every week or every second week, mostly dealing with the various performance reports.

I should point out that this Thursday morning, February 5, the Auditor General and the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainability will be providing a briefing to all members of Parliament and senators. It's on Thursday morning at 10 o'clock. Technically, it's not a meeting of the public accounts committee, but it is a meeting similar to this, where the auditor presents her report, as does the commissioner. The auditor has eight chapters; the commissioner has five, and each member who attends is given an allocated amount of time to ask questions. You see critics and other people coming in for this meeting; all members are urged and invited to attend.

Every year we also do a meeting on the *Public Accounts of Canada*. That is the consolidated summary of all revenues and expenditures of the Government of Canada for the fiscal period ending March 31, 2008. Those documents, which I have in my hand, have been circulated to all members. At that meeting we would have the Comptroller General of Canada, representatives from the Department of Finance, and of course the Auditor General.

I should point out that the report this year is a clean report. There are no qualifications in the auditor's report. To a certain extent it's old news now—that is, for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2008.

● (1645)

Before I go any further in my comments, do I have the consent of the committee to have that meeting on Thursday?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: So consented to.

I should point out that normally these things go to the steering committee and then the steering committee comes with a schedule, but I have to jump ahead here and get the committee's concurrence so that proper planning can take place immediately.

For next Tuesday, what I propose is this. Once the auditor tables her report, the practice of the committee has been that at the earliest opportunity we would have a public meeting, usually televised, to deal with all eight chapters. The auditor has recommended that we can have the environmental commissioner also, because there is some overlap there. Most of our attention, of course, will be directed to the reports of the Auditor General and those eight chapters, which I'm going to circulate now in both official languages so that you have the chapters being tabled by the Auditor General on Thursday.

That would take place next Tuesday. I've spoken with the auditor's office, and she's quite prepared. She would be the only witness. At that meeting there would be no representatives from any of the departments, because we're dealing with all eight chapters.

Before going any further, do I have the consent of the committee to have that meeting next Tuesday and have the Auditor General there?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: After I adjourn, I would ask that the members of the steering committee remain for a very short meeting just to talk about the future schedule.

Before I conclude, there are a couple of housekeeping points I will remind members of.

Most of the witnesses on this committee are deputy ministers or other very experienced public officials. I urge members to keep their questions concise and to the point. I will be very vigilant in demanding the same from the witnesses. There's nothing worse than having long, rambling preambles and then letting the witness go on. Of course, this seven minutes that we agreed to can be eaten up in one question and one answer. As any person who has practised law will tell you, it's 90% preparation and 10% execution. So again, I'd urge members to keep their questions concise and precise, and I as chair will certainly try to make sure that the witnesses answer succinctly and to the point.

I plan to start on time. Once I have my five other members, the gavel comes down. We start at 3:30, and I'd ask everyone to be here on time. To be fair I will, as best as possible, be adhering strictly to the time limits. I don't cut people off, but I will have a red flag to give you a one-minute warning. I take no joy in that, because a lot of times I see the examiner almost getting to the point and then the time is up, but again, I have to enforce the time limits.

Also I want to remind members that we don't deal with policy issues, such as whether we should have gun control or shouldn't have gun control. Those questions will be ruled out of order. Those issues are really not at all the domain of this committee. Of course, the auditor will not answer any policy questions, so you'd be wasting your time in the first place. I just want to remind you of that.

● (1650)

Having made these comments, colleagues, I think it will be a rewarding committee, and it will be enriching. I think if we all work together as a team, we will have a very productive and effective session.

Thank you very much.

Are there any comments before we adjourn?

The meeting is adjourned.

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