



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Finance

FINA • NUMBER 045 • 3rd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Wednesday, November 17, 2010

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Chair

Mr. James Rajotte

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton—Leduc, CPC)): I call this meeting to order. This is the 45th meeting of the Standing Committee on Finance.

We will go to a notice of motion from Mr. Brison, please.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I move: “That the Committee requests that the Parliamentary Budget Officer provide it with a general analysis, within 21 calendar days, of the Department of Finance’s response to the motions” that I moved and that were “passed by the committee on October 6, 2010”. It continues: “That analysis shall include, but not be limited to, the following items: The Department of Finance’s assertion that the majority of the Government of Canada’s justice legislation can be implemented without any incremental fiscal cost to the Government—

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): A point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Szabo.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Since the committee has this in both official languages, I wonder if the committee would agree to deem it to have been read.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Oh, I’m happy to have it deemed to be read.

An hon. member: Agreed.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Not that we don’t like your reading. You’re an excellent reader, Mr. Brison.

The Chair: Order.

Hon. Scott Brison: I just didn’t... I wasn’t aware of the—

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Brison. We all have the motion. Are there any arguments in favour that you wish to put on the record?

Hon. Scott Brison: I have a couple of points. One, it’s very clear that the Parliament of Canada Act states that the PBO is entitled “to free and timely access to any financial or economic data in the possession of the department that are required for the performance of his or her mandate”. There is a precedent for providing classified documents to the committee, and many members of the PBO have secret or top secret clearance and are positioned to work with classified documents.

There are several aspects to my motion, including the justice bills of the government, the crime bills, and also the issue around the cost of corporate tax cuts. We have heard several reports as to the actual

cost of the corporate tax cuts. It would be helpful to have the PBO’s study of that. We’ve had former deputy ministers of finance and directors of fiscal policy of finance provide contrary information, and I think we would benefit from the PBO’s analysis.

In terms of the cost of the F-35s, my previous motion requested the estimated cost of the F-35 aircraft per airplane—how it fits in the fiscal framework—and the government response said it would be low- to mid-\$70 million U.S. per aircraft. Frankly, it did not provide a lot of information, including issues around related costs, spare parts, weapons training, and infrastructure.

Given the anemic nature of the information provided by the Department of Finance, media reports, and the Auditor General’s warning of significant cost overruns, we believe it’s very important that parliamentarians receive the PBO’s analysis on this.

With respect to the motion on the strategic acquisition report, again it requests information on that. This information is important. The U.S. Congress is being provided with this type of information. We, as parliamentarians in Canada, have not been provided with that kind of information.

Again, through previous motions of this committee, we did request much of this information from the Department of Finance. The Department of Finance did not provide us with detailed information. As such, we believe the PBO can help us to function more effectively, to have that information so we can do our work as a committee.

That covers the aerospace acquisitions and the justice bills. I think it’s clear, based on the previous motion which, again, was a motion that was passed by this committee. It requested information from the Department of Finance, information that was not forthcoming in the detail that is satisfactory to the committee.

I believe the committee ultimately will demonstrate that the PBO’s analysis would be beneficial.

• (1535)

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Brison.

I have Mr. Menzies, and then I have Monsieur Paillé.

Mr. Menzies.

Mr. Ted Menzies (MacLeod, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Further to this motion, I think we need to take a very, very serious look, under your tremendous leadership, Mr. Chair...and with all due respect, I think you're a pretty busy chair and it's pretty busy committee. Looking at our agenda, which is beside us here, we can see that we have a lot to cover that's pretty important and pretty timely, which is not to diminish the fact that parliamentarians deserve this type of information.

I would suggest that it would be much more timely to ask the justice committee to look at the information dealing with justice bills.

In dealing with the acquisition of the F-35s, I think there's something missing in this. If we're going to look at the cost of the acquisition of F-35s—and I would suggest that it should be in the defence committee—we should also look at the benefits across the country, the jobs created, and the tremendous amount of industrial impact this will have, with new plants going up across this country. That should be heard at the committee that deals with defence. So I would suggest that both of those pieces of this should go there.

Considering that the mover of this motion was actually a member of the government that approved this, I guess one would have to wonder if, in actuality, as a member sitting in that government, he actually asked this question of his government when they said, “Yes, let's do this and put \$172 million of taxpayers' money out there to buy these planes”. I'm not saying that it was a bad idea, but let's not even ask what the amount is...? Obviously he hasn't, if he's now asking what that amount is.

On the timeline in trying to get these numbers, some members of the committee and I have talked about this. Our finance department is tasked now with putting together a very difficult budget. I would much rather see them dedicate good, solid time to that and provide an opportunity for the justice committee and the defence committee—those departments and those committees—to deal with this.

If we are looking for information from the Parliamentary Budget Officer, I would remind all of us that my colleague, Mr. Wallace, brought forward a very important motion that would have seen this committee become educated with respect to the fiscal impact on the federal treasury of several private members' bills, but unfortunately the opposition voted that down. I'm not sure what the difference is. If it's the opposition's idea, it's a good thing, but if it's the government's idea to actually critique what the cost is...? I would remind all honourable members that one of the main mandates of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is to actually cost private members' bills. That's the advice and opportunity they have to receive that information on what their private member's bill may cost and what it might impact.

Finally, I would wrap up by saying that this is the type of request that can be put forward in a parliamentary return. I'm sure that all opposition members, all honourable members, are aware of what parliamentary returns are. They are questions asked of the minister, of the department, and members receive that information. I would suggest that what's in this motion could actually be evaluated in a parliamentary return, so I certainly will not be supporting this motion.

Thank you.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Menzies.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mr. Paillé.

Mr. Daniel Paillé (Hochelaga, BQ): Mr. Chair, I'm fine with giving the Finance Department more time to prepare its budget, as long as it's a good one.

We have tabled an amendment to this motion which we fundamentally support. A copy of the amendment has been distributed. After paragraph eight, the longest paragraph which begins with “That the committee also orders” and ends with “consequential amendments to other acts”, we would like to add a request for information about four other bills, namely C-48, C-50, C-51 and C-52.

This amendment would essentially tie everything together as far as these bills are concerned. We have Bill C-48 which amends the provisions of the Criminal Code respecting sentence discounts; Bill C-50 which also amends the provisions of the Criminal Code respecting investigative tools for serious crimes; Bill C-51 which pertains to investigative powers for the 21st century; and Bill C-52, An Act regulating telecommunications facilities to support investigations.

Mr. Chair, having this committee look at this is an excellent idea, as ours is a very important House committee. That is why you were appointed chair. Not just anyone is given that honour.

We support the motion, with the four added changes which I think all members, including Mr. Wallace, will unanimously agree to.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Paillé.

Go ahead, Mr. Mulcair.

Mr. Thomas Mulcair (Outremont, NDP): While I want you to know up front that I intend to vote in favour of the motion and the amendment, I would like to draw your attention to a rare translation error in the French version. It is important, because it is the jumping off point for Mr. Paillé's amendment.

The first two lines of the eighth paragraph read as follows in the English version:

[*English*]

That the committee also orders that the Government of Canada provide the committee with electronic copies of the following documents as they relate to each justice bill listed in—

[*Translation*]

The translators misunderstood the meaning of “as they relate to”. They thought it meant “car ils ont trait à” or “puisque'ils ont trait à”. In fact, what it really means is “en ce qui a trait à”. The translation is completely different from the original meaning and I simply wanted to point that out so that the error could be corrected.

So then, I suggest that in line two of paragraph eight of the French version, the words “car ils ont” be deleted and replaced with “en ce qui a”.

The Chair: Okay then.

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Thomas Mulcair: That's if Mr. Wallace agrees....

• (1545)

The Chair: Okay. I have Mr. Brison.

I'll just remind you, Mr. Brison, that you did request that we deal with this within 15 minutes, so if you keep the debate going....

Hon. Scott Brison: I actually agree with Mr. Menzies that this committee has an important responsibility to provide solid recommendations for a good budget. To do that, we need to have solid information on the fiscal situation and the cost of these initiatives. I think that we agree on the importance of having solid information. That's why the finance committee needs to be seized with this.

If other committees want to pursue other courses of action—the industry committee seeking information on job creation, or government ops on.... They're free to do that, but this committee is the one that is most closely in charge of developing budget recommendations, which is why this committee is the appropriate place to be asking these questions.

The Chair: We will have the question first on Mr. Paillé's amendment.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: The amendment is carried, 6 to 5. All in favour of the motion as amended?

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: Colleagues, before we go to our in camera discussions, we have one outstanding operational budget request for \$4,500 for witnesses.

Mr. Mike Wallace: I so move.

The Chair: *D'accord?*

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you, colleagues. We'll suspend for a minute or so and then go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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