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

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Tuesday, March 1, 2011

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Chair

Ms. Candice Hoepfner

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

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●(1140)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Candice Hooppner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC)): We're going to call our meeting to order.

Welcome. We have an hour and 20 minutes to go through committee business as well as the draft report on the long-form census. We'll try to get through the committee business as fast as we can so we can get to the report.

We are going to begin with a motion by Mr. Lessard. Just to recap, Mr. Lessard had moved a motion. I had ruled it out of order. My ruling was challenged and overturned.

Right now, we are at the point where we will begin to debate Mr. Lessard's motion. I do believe that we have a speaking list. We'll hear the speakers on it before we proceed to a vote. At this point I'll check to see if the people on the speaking list still desire to speak.

Mr. Martin, I had you to speak to Mr. Lessard's motion. Do you wish to speak at this time?

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): I'm not sure. I'll wait until I hear what Mr. Lessard has to say.

The Chair: All right. Maybe what we should do then, Mr. Lessard, is give you a chance to speak to that motion, if you would like. That probably would be the best thing to do, and then everyone else could be refreshed on it.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think the best way to proceed is to start by going over the motion. The House of Commons decided on September 29, 2010 to adopt the following motion: "That the House calls on the Government of Canada to reinstate immediately the long-form census, and given that no person has ever been imprisoned for not completing the census, the House further calls on the government to introduce legislative amendments to the Statistics Act to remove completely the provision of imprisonment from section 31 of the Act in relation to the Long-form Census, the Census of Population and the Census of Agriculture".

The rest of my motion reads as follows:

Whereas all witnesses heard by the HUMA Committee demonstrated that the long form should be retained;

Whereas the reintroduction of the long form should be done before the next census is held;

In light of the social impacts anticipated from abolition of the mandatory long-form census;

I move: That, the committee recommend that the government, if necessary, delay the next census to a later date so that it can be carried out in full compliance with the House of Commons decision of September 29, 2010, and that the committee so report to the House at the earliest opportunity.

Madam Chair, today we are able to highlight the work that the committee has done and the fact that it has heard from witnesses. Of course, we cannot refer to the committee's report, which we are currently working on, but there is every reason to believe that it may contain a recommendation of this nature. Why am I raising the issue now instead of when we discuss the report? The reason is that the report is confidential until it is tabled in the House. That would mean that we could not, as of now, inform the House of our recommendation or ask the government to reinstate the long-form census. By doing this, we are giving priority to the report we are going to table in the House, which also allows us, as committee members, to support this motion in the House. Those, Madam Chair, are the reasons why we urge the members of this committee to vote in favour of this motion. I would remind everyone here that a large part of the debate has already been dealt with. You pointed out, and rightfully so, that even the committee had found the motion to be in order.

Madam Chair, that is my reasoning behind the motion. We are ready to vote in favour of the motion.

[English]

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

Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Certainly this has given us and members opposite the opportunity to give this issue some sober second thought. Clearly the clerk or whoever gave the advice indicated that the motion was out of order and the chair so ruled. The motion that set up this committee said that

...the HUMA committee will study the impact of cancelling the long-form census,

—that's what we're here for, that's our mandate—

particularly as it relates to planning and tracking of vital social trends related to economic security, labour markets, and social program development for those Canadians living and on the cusp of living in poverty, and that this committee report back to the House its conclusion and findings...

That motion is out of order. It's also out of order because of Standing Order 108(2). There may have been some confusion that if we were to rule Mr. Lessard's motion out of order, what that would do to the study. Madame Folco raised that issue with me, and I indicated—

• (1145)

The Chair: I'm sorry, just one moment.

Yes, sir.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: I respectfully submit, Madam Chair, and I think my colleague will agree, that the committee has already ruled that the motion is in order. I think it is completely inappropriate for our Conservative colleague to bring that up again.

[*English*]

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

If I understand Mr. Komarnicki, I think it's part of.... I'll just let him finish.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: So let me bring it to the conclusion.

It being out of order, and ruled so by you and the clerk, it's not right for this committee to just overrule that without any good, substantive reason that's based in logic. Once we get into that area, it becomes the law of the jungle. Nothing matters any more; the logic doesn't pertain.

So I would strongly urge opposition members, including Madame Folco, to say yes, that motion was entertained; yes, we overruled the chair. But when we vote for this motion, we vote it down, because it's wrong, it's outside the mandate, and it shouldn't be allowed to happen. Because once we do that, we're on dangerous ground, and I would therefore suggest that we defeat this motion.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Savage.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I don't have any problem with this motion and would intend to support it. I just have a question perhaps for staff. We're going to be going in camera to discuss another report. There's nothing in adopting this motion that would diminish our ability to do anything with that report, is that correct?

The Chair: The clerk advises me that our report would actually address the impact of delaying the long-form census, whereas Mr. Lessard's motion, which is why I had ruled it out of order, deals specifically with delaying the census.

So to answer your question, it would not have any impact on our report.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you.

The Chair: All right.

Madam Minna, did you want to speak to this?

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): I'll just say that given the fact that we heard a lot of testimony to this effect, in terms

of saying that people were not imprisoned and most of our witnesses wanted it done, I don't see the point.

I think to some degree there's a similar sentiment in the report, which we are going to, soon, I hope. So I don't have a problem with supporting this motion.

The Chair: All right. Everyone has spoken on it. I think we are ready to vote on this motion by Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: A recorded vote, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Chair: We have two other motions that have not been moved. At this point, if the individuals wish to move their motions, we could do that, or we could proceed to looking at our draft report on the impact of cancelling the long-form census.

Did you wish to move your motion, Madame Beaudin?

• (1150)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Indeed. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

If I may, I will read the motion and go over it with you. You have had a copy for a while now, and I would prefer that we go over it together. It addresses a recommendation made by the committee in 2006. The recommendation reads as follows:

That the national budget for the Summer Career Placements Program be adjusted each year to reflect changes in the full-time student population aged 15 to 30, the level of unemployment among this group during the summer months, minimum wage rates and the cost of living.

And whereas this recommendation has never been implemented as part of Canada Summer Jobs (CSJ), the successor to the Summer Career Placements Program, it is therefore proposed pursuant to Standing Order 108(2):

That the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities recommend that the government immediately increase the base budget of Canada Summer Jobs so that it properly reflects changes that have occurred since 2006, and that this motion be reported to the House at the earliest opportunity.

Having witnessed it in your own ridings and provinces, you are no doubt aware that the minimum wage has gone up since 2006. If we calculate the average across Canada, minimum wage is \$9.36.

If you consider that the budget will stay at \$107.5 million, that will mean a loss of 1,350 student jobs in 2011 alone. Therefore, to ensure that student employment continues to thrive and to support the economic development of many municipalities in our regions, we need to increase the funding for Canada Summer Jobs to help every interested student find adequate employment during the summer months.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madame Beaudin.

Would anyone like to speak on this motion?

Mr. Vellacott.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): I think the motion obviously misses the major thing that the government did here in terms of the \$10 million increase. At that time, we had some pretty positive comments from the NDP, Tony Martin in fact himself at that time. He said “This extra money is welcome”, meaning more jobs that may help keep our students in the north to help them make some money and support career opportunities.

It was welcomed by Charlie Angus, NDP MP for Timmins—James Bay. He said:

Ottawa is providing more money to help offset some of the labour market disruptions for youth trying to find summer employment. This program is perfect.

From the Canadian Federation of Students, Dave Molenhuis said:

Student summer jobs will employ more students in the short term. It will also provide skills development in the long term. It's welcome news for students. The CSJ program is important in that it has created employment opportunities for students.

CBC said:

It's helped a lot of students get their foot in the door in a field they're interested in studying.

So it's a very significant increase. That \$10 million means some 3,500 additional jobs across the country, a total of 40,000 jobs for students each summer. And in the province of Quebec alone, the member's own province, there will be some 10,000 as a result of that. So that's pretty huge. I think as a result it obviates the need for this kind of a motion here, which is guised in a whole bunch of factors, when we've just gone ahead and done it already by way of a significant increase. I think it's unnecessary in view of the significant funding increase that's already been done by the Conservative government.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Just to further what Maurice is saying, there's been a significant increase to the Canada summer jobs program, but the increase of \$10 million was not the only thing that's been done. There have been a number of other initiatives, like career focus, pathways to education, and skills link to provide skills and work experience, as well as various kinds of additional programs and the millions of dollars that have been added to it. You have to take it into the cumulative picture.

Also, there have been significant benefits to the region that this member represents with respect to the devolution of funds under this program. As it's working now, and taken into the context of the overall investment, I don't think this motion deserves our support at this time, perhaps at another time.

Just before I quit speaking on this matter, I register my disappointment in the members opposite in ruling in order a motion that's out of order. There need to be consequences to that along the way, because that's not the way to operate a committee.

Thank you.

• (1155)

The Chair: Mr. Savage.

Mr. Michael Savage: I generally support this motion and will in all likelihood vote for it.

I don't think the \$10 million that Mr. Vellacott and Mr. Komarnicki referred to could be considered significant investment. It's 10%. Youth unemployment is double the national average, and there are other programs in jeopardy in the youth employment strategy of the government.

We know what happened to the summer jobs in 2006 and 2007 under the government. The program was literally butchered and destroyed, and then they went back to the previous Liberal program, which at least worked. So this does provide some good support for students.

I wonder whether Madame Beaudin would consider it friendly—not as an amendment—to see if we could get a report from the department. This doesn't speak only to the amount of money, but to the process of determining where the jobs go. I wonder if it might be helpful to get something from the department that updates their criteria for allocating Canada summer jobs. The most recent \$10 million goes proportionately by riding, but this goes to the issue of student unemployment, minimum wage rates, etc.

The Chair: I think we'll deal with the motion, unless you have an amendment that wouldn't change the scope of the motion, and then—

Mr. Michael Savage: I have no amendment.

The Chair: Okay. Then you could maybe have that discussion after this.

Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: I tend to agree with you, Madam Chair.

I think Mr. Savage's suggestion is a good one. We will indeed have to figure out how to address the issue of employability. We would be willing to support a separate motion on that. The program is applied in such a way that some jobs are sometimes inaccessible to students. For example, under Canada Summer Jobs, a budget was allocated to aboriginal communities. But that budget no longer exists, and the members of those communities are now being directed to the riding where the reserve is located. And that eliminates a certain number of jobs in that region, as a result. This roundabout way of cutting the funding allocated to aboriginal communities is totally unacceptable. This issue could perhaps be analyzed along with Mr. Savage's motion.

As for the motion put forward by my colleague, Ms. Beaudin, it is wrong to claim, as the government does, that the budget increased by \$10 million this year. The government's so-called \$10-million increase has been around since 2008. So this is the fourth year that that \$10 million has been invested. In Quebec, in 2008, a total of 2,600 agencies called on the government not to cut that budget. In response, \$10 million was added to the budget but on a time-limited basis.

Every year, the government has maintained that investment, which has also given it an opportunity to come off looking good. But it is still the same \$10 million. There has been no increase since 2007. My colleague is absolutely right. In Quebec, minimum wage has gone up three times since 2007. In my riding, we used to be able to provide 165 student jobs a year, but today that number is just 130. That is happening in each and every one of your ridings because the financial burden on employers is greater given their payroll obligations.

I think the time has come to address the matter. I am certain, Madam Chair, that you have the same problem in your riding. This program, for which people are very grateful, was put in place a number of years ago. It benefits students not only financially, but also in terms of knowledge and skills. Some people end up being hired by the employer they used to work for back when they were a student, and they spend their career working for that same employer.

For once, I think we need to recognize a program that is really doing its job and is very appreciated. Its effectiveness is in danger. So we all have reason to stand united and vote together so this program can fulfill its initial mandate, which is giving students jobs.

• (1200)

[English]

The Chair: Madame Beaudin.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My colleague basically said what I wanted to reiterate. Nevertheless, I would once again point out that this has been the situation in Quebec and elsewhere since 2006. When you consider that the average minimum wage used to be \$7.50 and is now \$9.36, a quick calculation is all you need to figure out that the number of jobs available through the program this year will likely drop and that the length of each student's employment will also be shorter. Students do not know what to do once their employment comes to an end.

A new reality has emerged, and we are going to have to address it in the next few years. I am already seeing it in my riding, and perhaps you are as well. What about all those students who are above the age of 30 and therefore too old to participate in the program? There are 35 year olds. In my riding, some of these people are women who have gone back to school. They have raised families and now want to re-enter the workforce. These summer jobs are not accessible to them, even if they are full-time students. This is a new reality that we will have to address.

When I worked for an agency, I submitted applications to offer employment under the Canada Summer Jobs program. For years, many organizations have seen their applications denied. Some community agencies need students to work during the summer. They may need four employees, but they get approval for just one. These organizations are already making the most of the limited resources they have to begin with. The program could create a lot more jobs if the budget were adjusted to reflect the increase in minimum wage and in the cost of living. Minimum wage has gone up in every single province. So I would think this has been happening everywhere, especially in the regions, where municipalities are often the ones applying for student workers. The program gives students valuable

work experience. If we indeed want to continue encouraging youth employment and economic development in the regions, then I think we must support an increase in the budget.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Watson.

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Madam Chair, my only intervention on this is that the motion calls on the committee to make a conclusion and prescribe an action. It's not asking us to study or weigh any of the empirical evidence as to whether this aim has been achieved in some fashion or another.

My only difficulty is I'm hearing some statistics being presented now. I'm not sure what the entire coast-to-coast situation looks like. I know there have been \$10 million increases both in the economic action plan and now the decision is that the base budget reflect that on an ongoing basis. I don't know for sure that it hasn't been accomplished, so how do I support a motion like this one that comes to a conclusion? I'd be more amenable to actually hearing evidence and then coming to a conclusion, rather than being asked to support a conclusion.

Madam Chair, I'll confess I'm newer to this committee than most of the members. Maybe that was hashed out before I got to this committee and everybody else understands it really well, but I don't. The reason I'm opposing this is that I don't really know what the picture is. I'm not sure I can make that conclusion. I'd much rather hear the evidence and weigh it and evaluate whether what the government has done actually meets the intent of where they'd like this motion to go. I will be opposing it on those grounds.

• (1205)

The Chair: Mr. Lessard.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: For the benefit of our colleague, Mr. Watson, I would like to point out that we have already done a study. You mentioned it. If memory serves, it was back in 2007-2008. A full report was done. The committee made a total of 19 recommendations to the minister at the time, and this motion was one of those recommendations. As we said, the work has already been done. Now it is time to vote, unless we want to reinvent the wheel every time. And I don't think that is what Mr. Watson wants.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Watson, do you want to respond?

Mr. Jeff Watson: Yes. If that's the one that's mentioned in the motion itself, that was done in 2006, not 2008, as the member is now saying. It was on a precursor program with a different budget. If that's what he's referring to, then the work hasn't been done. Work was done on a different program and a different budget.

That's why I'd be much more amenable to seeing what the impacts of a new budget and a new program are, and whether it actually meets the objectives. Then it would be the other way around.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I was present as a member of that committee when that study was concluded, to go back a ways in history. There were a number of recommendations made, not just the one that the member raises. If there were formula changes, it might have a negative impact on one region or another, including that of the member who's bringing in this motion.

If you're looking at the whole picture, you have to take everything in that report into consideration. There were a number of recommendations, including how the formulas may have been applied or should be changed.

I'd just raise that.

The Chair: Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Once again, for the benefit of Mr. Watson, the only thing different was the name. When the Liberals were in power, it was called the student summer employment program. The Conservatives dropped the word "student" and now call it Canada Summer Jobs. That's all well and good, but the actual program did not change one bit. It is exactly the same. I have nothing further to add except to say that if my colleague, Mr. Komarnicki, would like to introduce all the other amendments, he can do so through another motion. There were indeed a number of other recommendations. We did not put forward those other recommendations because this was not implemented at the time. But if he would like to come back with the others, we could deal with them. We chose to focus on this particular recommendation because we believe urgent and swift action is needed.

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: We are ready to vote.

[*English*]

The Chair: All right, I think discussion is complete. We are ready to vote on Madame Beaudin's motion.

You would like a recorded vote?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Please, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: All right.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5) [See *Minutes of Proceedings*]

The Chair: Mr. Savage, you had a notice of motion. Did you wish to move your motion at this time?

Mr. Michael Savage: I'll reserve that for now, if I can, in order to go to our next piece of business.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Michael Savage: If we finish that, I'd like to come back to this. I'd still like to keep it as a priority of the committee, and I do believe very strongly that we need to have a subcommittee. I recognize that in the time we have to discuss it today, it wouldn't do it justice. Perhaps we can move on and then come back to it.

● (1210)

The Chair: Okay, that's fine.

What we'll do is suspend for a moment, and we'll go in camera. Then we'll proceed with the agenda.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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