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Standing Committee on National Defence

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Wednesday, August 25, 2010

—
Chair

The Honourable Maxime Bernier

Standing Committee on National Defence

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•(1005)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Maxime Bernier (Beauce, CPC)): Thank you.

This is the 23rd meeting of the Standing Committee on National Defence. As I said earlier, the committee was convened at the request of some committee members.

[English]

I will give the floor to Mr. Bachand to present a motion to this committee.

Monsieur Bachand.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Chair, you read a little earlier the document that was sent to the clerk with the signatures of the members of the opposition. In my opinion, there is nothing wrong with what is being proposed. After all, the motion is broadly worded, leaving enough room for a discussion of contracts, the plane and a whole range of issues that I have also mentioned.

If we invite the Minister of Public Works and Government Services, we can discuss the signing of contracts. If we invite the Minister of National Defence, we can discuss the specifics of the contract. If we invite the Minister of Industry, we can find out whether it is possible to have the tools to calculate the economic spinoffs. I believe that everything we want to accomplish is in this motion.

In addition, Mr. Chair, knowing your open-mindedness, I am sure we will be able to discuss everything related to the F-18. We should not say that what we want to discuss has not been explicitly stated in the motion and that, therefore, we cannot talk about it. We are here to have discussions and I think the motion is perfectly reasonable, unless my colleagues think otherwise.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. We support that motion wholeheartedly. This is a good-news story for Canadian industry, for the Canadian air force, for the country, for our international and domestic commitments. It is absolutely a good-news story. We welcome hearings. We'll offer ministers, the first meeting back in September, a panel of the three ministers. We have a list of potential witnesses, as I'm sure the opposition does as well.

I'll just put on the record my concern with regard to this particular meeting. It is, frankly, a waste of taxpayers' money to call a meeting

in the middle of summer. We could pay a recruit in the Canadian Forces for a year for what it is costing just to stage this meeting when we could do this just as easily in September when Parliament comes back.

But as far as supporting the motion for the study is concerned, absolutely.

The Chair: Do I have members who want to speak on the motion?

I think we must add to the motion,

[Translation]

the following words: "that the committee conduct a study"

•(1010)

[English]

instead of

[Translation]

We, the undersigned members of the Standing Committee on National Defence, request that a meeting of our committee be convened, pursuant to Standing Order 106(4), in order to begin a study [...]

Instead of that, we would have:

[...] that the committee conduct a study on the next generation of fighter aircraft, the role and mission that would be assigned to this aircraft, the reason the government believes that a sole source contract is appropriate and the terms and conditions to be included in such a contract, such as a guarantee of regional economic benefits.

[English]

That's just to be sure. So that would be the motion.

(Motion agreed to)

[Translation]

The Chair: I should say rather that it is passed unanimously.

Would the members like to tackle other topics? I think the goal of the meeting was achieved.

Go ahead, Mr. Bachand.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Is it too early to propose witnesses now?

Mr. Hawn seemed to suggest that the three ministers be invited. I am in favour of that.

Can we suggest the names of the witnesses now? Or would you rather have us refer them to the clerk?

The Chair: We can discuss the names of the witnesses, and also send them to the clerk. If you have a list of witnesses to suggest right away, then by all means go ahead since it could help the clerk who has to call them.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Mr. Chair, not only do I have a list of witnesses, but I also suggest that we group the witnesses together to save as much time as possible instead of spending a whole year on this process.

As to Mr. Hawn's suggestion, I would like the three ministers to appear. First, we should hear from the Minister of National Defence since it was the Department of National Defence that set out the specific terms of the contract. It would be important for the minister to explain to us why he chose those types of planes and to tell us whether that will change the missions of the Canadian Air Force. So I would call the Minister of National Defence.

The Minister of Public Works and Government Services will be responsible for signing contracts, or for proceeding by way of a memorandum of understanding, so we should hear from her.

Finally, I would also call the Minister of Industry since he usually deals with economic benefits. So it would be important for us to hear from these three ministers. If all three ministers are present, we will need a full two-hour meeting to be able to ask them all the appropriate questions.

However, as we saw in the announcement from July, the industry is also extremely interested in these contracts, which is normal since we are talking about anywhere from \$12 billion to \$16 billion in economic benefits. I have a list of four companies and I would like us to consult them. I suggest that the first group of witnesses consist of representatives from CAE and Pratt & Whitney, and that the second group consist of representatives from L-3 MAS and Héroux-Devtek.

The unions representing aerospace companies also seem very interested in the issue and have already contacted me. So I suggest a cross-section of representatives from these three unions. I believe these unions represent almost 90% of the aerospace sector. So I will be pleased to give you the names. In my opinion, someone like Claude Lajeunesse from the Aerospace Industries Association of Canada (AIAC) would also contribute to the debate. I will provide you with the names formally in writing, but, for the time being, I suggest these witnesses.

The Chair: That's great, thank you.

Mr. Dosanjh, you have the floor.

[English]

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh (Vancouver South, Lib.): I agree with Mr. Bachand that we should have the ministers, but I would suggest that we should have the four ministers rather than three. We should also have the Treasury Board minister, because it is those four ministers who actually make these decisions before the matter is presented to the cabinet.

I would also suggest that we not actually group all the ministers together, because each minister would bring, I am assuming, his or her officials. We should in fact have one minister per meeting so that

we can thoroughly explore each minister's involvement and the officials' involvement in the process.

My further suggestion would be that we invite Mr. John Siebert and Kenneth Epps from Project Ploughshares; Alan Williams, the ex-ADM (Materiel); and if Minister MacKay comes, I'm assuming he will have Dan Ross, the current ADM.

I believe we should also invite representatives of Boeing, Lockheed Martin, and Eurofighter to come and tell us whether they had been approached—particularly Boeing and Eurofighter—whether they were allowed to bid, and why. I think Lockheed Martin should be invited to tell us, from their perspective, how they were able to obtain this particular contract.

Also I believe we should have some expert who could actually enlighten lay people such as myself as to the differences between the fourth- and fifth-generation fighters. I think that would be appropriate.

• (1015)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Hawn, and then Mr. Harris.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: We have no problem with any of those witnesses, because as I said, this is a good-news story. We can add other ones in throwing out names, but I think we should just give the list, because some of them will be the same.

I would like to hear how the airplane changes the missions and the mandate of the air force. It doesn't. It carries on the same missions and mandate: our responsibilities to NORAD, our responsibilities to NATO, our responsibilities domestically and abroad. What it does do is give us an airplane that for the next 40 years would be able to do that and meet potential threats.

We're glad the Leader of the Opposition agrees with our shipbuilding process, but we find it a little bit ironic on this side of the room that he is in British Columbia promising sole-sourced contracts to a shipyard in B.C. at the same time that his people are coming here saying we should shut down the fighter force. It just seems a bit incongruous.

But we will be very agreeable to any witness, because they will all have a story to tell that frankly will show this is the best deal for Canada in all respects. So bring it on.

The Chair: I just want to make sure, regarding the four ministers, that you don't have—

Mr. Laurie Hawn: We don't have any objection to that. A lot of that is going to be, obviously, subject to ministerial availability, whether you get them one at a time or two at a time. We can sort out those details.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Harris, and then Madam Gallant.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

I think we need to go about this study very quickly. I don't think we need to wait until September rolls around. There are a lot of other issues on our plate.

This is a pretty important decision, or potential decision, in terms of the cost to Canadians. Also, Mr. Hawn just made reference to decisions about what our needs are for the next 40 years. So we're looking at a long-range strategy here, and doing that in military terms you really are crystal-balling the future.

What I've heard so far has been fairly flippant, such as that these jets are going to do what the F-18s do only better for the next 40 years. We do really need some sort of analysis of where this could fit into a potential strategy and what our needs are. We're very actively studying peacekeeping right now and what role Canada should be playing in that. We have a retired major-general from the Canadian Forces who was the former commandant of the national defence college in Kingston, Major-General (Retired) Leonard Johnson, who has been critical of the strategic need for an aircraft of this nature. I'd certainly like to hear from him.

If there's anybody else who has a perspective on that, we can add a couple of names to that part of the witness list. Other than the kind of comments we just heard from Mr. Hawn and we've heard from the minister, I haven't seen any serious military analysis demonstrate what exactly is the need for these new jets in the future, and not only that, but even if we do need to have a certain number of these aircraft in terms of our commitments to NORAD, etc., whether we actually need 65. Do we need 25 jets? Do we need 20? Do we need 35? All of this is just thrown in front of the Canadian people with a price tag of \$16 billion and everybody is expected to swallow it whole.

I think we owe it to the Canadian public to investigate this more fully.

• (1020)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My question or clarification arises from Mr. Dosanjh's comments.

It is my understanding that the decision to participate in the development of the joint strike fighter program predates this government. As a consequence of deciding to participate in this program, we already have more than 75 or 80 companies that have benefited through participation in this project.

Mr. Dosanjh asked how these decisions on who acquired what contract came into being. Some of these contracts may have come into force before this government even took office. Is he suggesting that we call as witnesses ministers who were in charge and would have that intimate knowledge from the previous administration?

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Perhaps you want to let Ujjal answer that.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Far be it for me to enlighten Madam Gallant, but there was no commitment to purchase any aircraft whatsoever. It was a program to develop the fighter. I'm glad we got benefits, and my concern with respect to this particular contract is that there is no absolute guarantee of industrial and regional benefits to Canada in the amount of \$16 billion.

If you have a competitive bid, usually benefits accrue, dollar for dollar, to Canada and Canadians. There is absolutely no guarantee.

In fact, one of the ministers who made the announcement wasn't able to provide any guarantee that there'd be industrial and regional benefits in the amount of \$16 billion.

Those are the kinds of questions we have. If you want to go back 10 years, fine.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Hawn, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I have just a couple of points on that. This wasn't laid on the Canadian public on July 16. The Canada First defence strategy has been out there since 2008. We've run elections on it. There was nothing secret about it. The joint strike fighter, the next-generation fighter aircraft, was in there as part of that, along with shipbuilding and everything else. So to suggest that this was somehow secretly foisted upon the Canadian public is just absolute nonsense and absolutely false.

The contract is \$9 billion for the acquisition of 65 airplanes, for weapons, simulators, infrastructure, and training. I don't have the exact figure, but with the F-18 program, about 60% to 65% of the program cost was airplanes and the rest of the program cost was for the type of things I mentioned.

The other \$7 billion that people like to throw in and call it \$16 billion is for long-term support. I'll point out that the long-term support contract for the F-18 wasn't signed until about six years after we started flying the airplane. These support programs are done in collaboration with allies. We have nine partners in this program. It's going to be a collaborative process. It's going to be similar to the process we followed with the CF-18 support. It was very effective with the CF-18 and it will be very effective with the F-35, and in fact, to segue to that for a little bit, it opens up Canadian industry. It opens up opportunities for Canadian industry to participate not just with 65 airplanes, but with a worldwide fleet of up to 5,000 airplanes.

Canadian industry is very competitive. The rules and procedures around what used to be called industrial and regional benefits have changed. We are adapting to those changes and Canadian industry is very good. Avcorp, for example, as I mentioned, just signed a \$500-million contract. We're buying a number of simulators. I suspect that CAE—and this isn't to be taken as anything other than a guess—is the biggest simulator builder in the world and I suspect they will do very well in simulators for the F-35. It goes on and on and on.

Canadian industry is very competitive. They will do very well, as they have already done well in contracts related to the F-35. Actually, 82 companies have benefited from contracts signed since I'm not sure when.

On the issue of the contract, people need to be clear, and that's why we need to bring in people from Public Works, and so on. The contract itself is not signed. The MOU has been activated. The contract itself is signed somewhere down the road. The lead time on all this is to allow us to get airplanes when we need them, around 2016, to allow us time to phase in the F-35 as we phase out the F-18. It is exactly the same process we followed with the CF-18 when we phased out the F-5, the F-101, and the F-104 and phased in the CF-18. This is nothing new; it's just the next stage in this process.

So we welcome all those people and more. If anybody else wants to come and share his or her expertise and opinions on this, we welcome that.

• (1025)

The Chair: Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

While I fully understand that the old government did not commit to this project, other than the development of the program, the result of which is that the longer it took us to commit to it the longer the delay in Canadian companies actually being able to compete for the contracts, I do agree that we should go back to the tendering process that was engaged in internationally by all the partners when they came together, how these contracts were tendered internationally in the program as a whole. So we may even need to invite witnesses who are outside Canada, through conference calls, as that would be more cost-effective.

The Chair: As I mentioned at the beginning, members will send a list of their witnesses to the clerk, maybe before the end of next week. After that, we will pick a date for the first meeting.

I will now give the floor to Monsieur Laframboise.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Chair, this matter is urgent. Today's meeting is important since we want to discuss the guarantee of regional economic benefits. I have a hard time understanding the Conservative members. If they agree with the motion, why didn't we hear from any witnesses today?

This summer, I attended committee meetings, specifically the meetings of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology. We had already made commitments and witnesses were waiting in the hallway. The motion was carried and we started the discussions right away. Regional economic benefits are too important an issue to defer. Obviously, if we had done that, we would have saved taxpayers' money.

So, I am in favour of proceeding with this as soon as possible. We can sit full weeks. I do not have a problem with that since the summer is meant for working and spending as much time as possible on settling a matter. I hope that, if there is a consensus, we will do it as soon as possible, and I know, Mr. Chair, that you will be vigilant.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hawn, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Mr. Laurie Hawn: With respect to the timing and to the importance of the issue, we don't disagree about the importance of the issue, but this is not an emergency. This is not something that has to be done in the next three weeks. This is not something that has to be done before Parliament comes back on September 20. That is absolutely not required.

People's summers are, frankly, screwed up enough as it is. We all have responsibilities in ridings. I'm not talking about me personally; mine has an extra aspect to it, as does Bryon's. There are responsibilities and commitments that we have all made in our ridings, and so on, and this is just not an emergency that has to be dealt with before we come back on September 20. We will oppose any motion to have meetings before then.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Laframboise, you have the floor.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Mr. Chair, we are talking about regional economic benefits and the financial planning of each company. This government is talking about economic recovery. You keep talking about Canada's economic action plan, but when it's time to discuss regional economic benefits, that topic is not deemed urgent or important. That is what you have just said, Mr. Hawn. Mr. Chair, perhaps that Conservatives should get their story straight.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Hawn, and then Mr. Dosanjh.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: No one is denying the importance of this. That is not what I said. What I said is that it is not an emergency. In terms of these kinds of industrial benefits, we are talking about benefits from now until 2050. We're talking about contracts that won't be let for years. It is not urgent to address this issue in the next three weeks. That is just pure nonsense. It is political game-playing. If it comes to a vote, we'll probably lose. That's just fine; that's the way this works. But we will oppose it because it is not an emergency in the next three weeks. It's just not.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Wilfert, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Hon. Bryon Wilfert (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would appreciate from the clerk a work plan once we have the witnesses who have come forward and there's agreement on how we're going to approach this in terms of categories such as economic benefit. Certainly, in our view, the issue is whether we're getting the economic benefits for this and whether this is the right aircraft given responsibilities and the needs of Canadians in regard to the air force. It may well be, but I think we need to have that discussion and a very clear work plan.

I would agree with Mr. Hawn that we need to roll this out in a way that is as clear and transparent as possible. When we do this, let's try to be concise in terms of the witnesses, the objective that we are looking for here, and then what outcomes we will have, which hopefully will deal with recommendations to the government. Clearly Mr. Hawn has indicated that these contracts aren't going to be awarded tomorrow, but I do believe there are other issues as well. So I think we need to be crisp, clear, and direct in terms of what we're looking for, and then hopefully we'll see where we go from there.

•(1030)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wilfert.

Mr. Dosanjh.

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I believe we should actually look at what the next possible date might be for a meeting. We should hold at least one meeting between now and the time we return to the House. I would suggest that we do a meeting on September 9. I've checked with some friends here on this side, not all.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I'm in Cold Lake on that day, doing an announcement relative to some of this. If we're going to do one meeting before we come back, why don't we do it towards the middle or the end of the week before we come back? September 9 is a non-starter for me.

The Chair: My understanding is that the members of the committee will submit their lists as soon as possible—if you agree, before the end of next week. The clerk will work on that list. We can have a meeting just before the session starts—

An hon. member: September 16.

The Chair: —to approve the witnesses and the timeline.

Mr. Payne.

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): September 9 or 10 certainly wouldn't work for me. I already have other commitments that I can't get out of right now.

The Chair: For me, Monday of that week, September 13, won't work. I'm supposed to be on holidays outside the country. The members will decide, but I won't be able to be here as the chair at that time. I would prefer that we have that meeting on the Tuesday, but it is up to the committee.

Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris: The completion of the helicopter safety inquiry in St. John's is on September 8, 9, and 10, so it's not a good time for me.

On September 2 or 16, it could be done, but I don't think we should schedule a meeting to organize witnesses. I think we can do that in the interim. If we're going to have a meeting between now and when the House resumes, one of the values in doing so is that we can have an all-day session and perhaps two or three panels in one day. It would require some coordination, but there is time to do that. The chair and the clerk can work on that and we can agree on a date to submit witness lists. I don't see why we can't have a full day.

I know the industry committee is doing that with respect to the census. I believe they're having three panels in one day, with three two-hour sessions. Something like that could be done.

I agree with Laurie. I don't see the point in a committee meeting just to discuss who the witnesses are going to be and in what order we're going to hear them. I think there's a pretty broad consensus of certain people we do have to hear from. I have faith that the chair and the clerk can organize these witnesses with suggestions from members so that we can have a full-day meeting. It is pretty hard to do when the House is in session. Frankly, we don't get to do that. But prior to the House coming into session on September 20, we could have a full-day session here in Ottawa with many of the witnesses we've been talking about.

That's my suggestion. I'm not going to put it in the form of a motion yet because we're still in the process of discussion, but I don't think we should have another organizational meeting. We should have a meeting to hear from witnesses, and the clerk and the chair could coordinate that meeting.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: We would support that. I would suggest September 16 or 17. The only cautionary note is that you probably won't get the ministers on that day. I can't speak for them, but they probably have some fairly firm commitments. But other witnesses, any grouping that makes sense to the clerk and the chair, are fine with us.

•(1035)

The Chair: My understanding is that we have agreement in regard to witnesses. I think Mr. Hawn was pretty clear that the opposition wanted the four ministers and we'll have the four ministers, but it is just a question of their agenda. We will also have the experts from the industry, the union, and any other experts.

If the members agree, we can ask all the members to give us a list of their witnesses before the end of next week. I think we have consensus on not having a meeting to discuss the witnesses. The clerk and I can work on that. I see agreement that it's important and we must have a fair balance of witnesses, our next meeting must be a meeting with all the witnesses, and we could have an all-day meeting.

I can suggest September 15. A meeting on that date could be chaired by my very good vice-chair Mr. Wilfert, because I'll be outside the country that week, the only holiday I will take during the summer. I know you all appreciate it when Bryon is the chair of this committee.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: I agree, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: So I just want to suggest to you the date of September 15 for an all-day meeting. Does everybody agree?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: So, Bryon, you're going to chair—

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Mr. Chairman, you always give me the best tasks to do.

The Chair: I appreciate that.

Do you want to discuss other matters in line with that motion?

Mr. Jack Harris: Have we discussed the duration of the meeting on September 15? Is it a two-hour meeting as usual, or is it a full-day meeting?

The Chair: My understanding is that it's going to start at 9 o'clock in the morning, break at 11:30, start again around 1:30, and go until 4:30. It will be a full-day meeting. The clerk is going to do his best to get all the witnesses we want.

Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris: I don't know if we need a formal motion on this, but my suggestion was that we have at least three panels, three two-hour sessions that we could fit in there. Maybe we don't need to have the full half hour being taken up by presentations. Maybe they could have shorter presentations. That would give us more time, an hour and a half at least, for questions from the committee. So

whatever witnesses we have, give them the maximum of 30 minutes between them.

That's my suggestion for format, and if that's acceptable, we don't need a formal motion of it.

Is that format okay? We can get three panels in.

The Chair: That is why we need the lists as soon as possible, so we can work on that with the clerk to be sure we have witnesses all day.

Are there any other comments?

Everybody agrees. So we will see you back in Ottawa on September 15 at 9 a.m.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is adjourned. Thank you, members of the committee. Have a great day.

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