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Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Tuesday, June 21, 2011

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•(0850)

[*English*]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Julie Pelletier): Honourable members of the committee, I see a quorum.

I must inform members that the clerk of the committee can only receive motions for the election of the chair. The clerk cannot receive other types of motions, cannot entertain points of order, nor participate in debate.

[*Translation*]

We can now proceed to the election of the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the chair must be a member of the government party.

[*English*]

I am ready to receive motions for the position of chair.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): I'd like to nominate, from the beautiful district of West Nova, Nova Scotia, Greg Kerr as chair. It's not a bad area. It has the highest tides.

The Clerk: Are there any further motions?

It is moved by Mr. Stoffer that Greg Kerr be elected as chair of the committee.

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Greg Kerr duly elected chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I move that all ballots be destroyed and make it a unanimous election.

The Clerk: Just before inviting Mr. Kerr to take the chair, we'll now proceed to the election of the vice-chairs.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the first vice-chair must be a member of the official opposition.

I am now ready to receive motions for the election of the first vice-chair.

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): I nominate, from the riding of Sackville—Eastern Shore, the inimitable Peter Stoffer.

The Clerk: Are there any further motions?

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

(Motion agreed to)

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

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Clerk: Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the second vice-chair must be a member of an opposition party other than the official opposition. I am now prepared to receive motions for the position of second vice-chair.

Ms. Adams.

Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC): Madam Clerk, I'd like to nominate the honourable member from Charlottetown.

The Clerk: It has been moved by Ms. Adams that Sean Casey be elected as second vice-chair of the committee.

[*Translation*]

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

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Sean Casey duly elected second vice-chair.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

[*English*]

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

The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)): Congratulations to my colleagues. I look forward to working with you again and also for the first time.

Welcome to all the members. As we know, this is an introductory meeting to get some routine business out of the way. Obviously we're not going to get down to a lot of agenda activity today.

Is it the will of the committee now to proceed with the routine motions?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: And we're going to do them in the order they are in here?

The Clerk: That's the order that is suggested.

The Chair: There will be individual motions. We will start. I think you all have a copy of the one that's been sent out by the clerk's office.

The first is to appoint analyst services: 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.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We have one abstaining right off the bat. That's a bad sign.

The next one concerns the subcommittee on agenda and procedure, and it is before you. I understand there is a recommendation for a change in it.

Ms. Eve Adams: If there is consensus to create the subcommittee to deal with the agenda, I would move that the subcommittee be composed of the chair, the two vice-chairs, the parliamentary secretary, and one member of the government.

• (0855)

The Chair: Are there any comments or questions?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Next is meeting without a quorum. Madam Adams, I understand you have a motion.

Ms. Eve Adams: Yes. This is in the event of reduced quorum. I would suggest that it be three members present to constitute a reduced quorum, and that those members include one member of the opposition and one member from the government.

The Chair: Are there any comments or questions on the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Now, on opening remarks and questioning of witnesses, I believe there is a motion as well.

Ms. Eve Adams: I suggest on the rounds of questioning that the witnesses from any one organization shall be allowed 10 minutes to make their opening statement; that during the questioning of witnesses, there shall be allocated five minutes to the first round of questions, and I would propose the rotation, Conservative, NDP, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Conservative; and that the second round would be reduced to four minutes each and would be NDP, Conservative, NDP, Conservative. Then we would go through that again. That would bring us in at one hour, one minute.

The Chair: You heard the motion. Questions?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Could you repeat that?

Ms. Eve Adams: At five minutes, Conservative—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Sorry, this is after the witness is finished.

Ms. Eve Adams: Correct. It would be Conservative, NDP, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Conservative. It would alternate between the government and the opposition: government, opposition, government, opposition.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: With respect, I would disagree with that. In my 14 years on the Hill, in every committee, whether it is a majority or a minority government, the opposition has always questioned first. It's

always been the opposition that starts the questioning. If you wish, we could go NDP first and then Conservative.

I remember the last time I was here, sitting in the back, we got whatever dregs were left. In fairness to Mr. Casey, we could go NDP, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Conservative. That way, eventually, at the end of the day, each member would have a chance. That's what we tried to do last time. Every member had at least one opportunity to ask a question or two. In terms of starting the rotation, it was always the opposition that started first.

Ms. Eve Adams: Could I suggest the following, then? We could start with the NDP, and then Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Conservative, Conservative.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Fine. I agree with that.

Ms. Eve Adams: Then the next round would go to four minutes—NDP, Conservative, NDP, Conservative—and then we would start again. That way, everyone would have asked a question.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: And if there is an opportunity at the end, the Liberal member could ask another question.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Could we leave that to the discretion of the chair?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes, at the discretion of the chair.

The Chair: Next on the list is Mr. Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey: This has come up in some other committees, and we've done a bit of homework on it. The last time there was a big majority, 2000 through 2004, the speaking time for all the parties was divided evenly.

What I suggest, and what I request for your consideration, is that at a minimum I be afforded an opportunity to question in both the first and second rounds. I ask that I be slotted in to the second round as well, that there be a spot for the Liberals.

The Chair: Reaction?

Mr. Storseth.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Chair, I don't want to belabour this point, but I believe that a committee is not necessarily representative of political parties but rather of members of Parliament. It is a right of all members of Parliament to be treated equally. You should be allotted your fair time, as is everybody else. I believe Mr. Stoffer is being very generous, more generous than the Liberals were in their official opposition role, by ensuring you get to ask the second opposition question.

One of the key principles, though, that we have to respect on all sides is that as members in this committee we all have parliamentary privileges and we should all be treated the same. Everybody should have the opportunity to ask a question before any member gets a chance to ask two questions.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Casey again.

• (0900)

Mr. Sean Casey: One of the difficulties I have with being allowed to ask questions only in the first round is that other things invariably will come up that will need to be followed up on. That's why I would ask that I be given an opportunity to question in the second round as well.

The Chair: Are there other comments?

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Casey, may I respectfully suggest that there will be four members of this committee who will only be entitled to ask questions for four minutes and that you will in fact receive a greater privilege than those four members?

I do concur with my colleague on the opportunity for everyone to pose at least one question before we go back and allow one person to start posing second questions. I think, though, that at the end of the day we do have an earnest desire to better the lives of our veterans, and we can leave some of this to the discretion of the chair. I would suggest that we go with what has been suggested. We would begin with the NDP, we would continue for five minutes each, and then the last four speakers would speak for four minutes each.

The Chair: Is there anything new to add to the discussion?

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I'm just questioning why we have five minutes and not seven?

An hon. member: Yes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: It's customary that it would go back to seven minutes each, or sometimes even 10 minutes. I wonder why it is five minutes to start the initial one. Usually you have seven minutes, and then the second round goes to five minutes. I just wonder why the parliamentary secretary would think that five minutes for the opening is sufficient.

The Chair: Before she answers, I would interject to say that everybody agrees that 10 minutes wouldn't work because you couldn't get all the members in. That would be excessive.

Do you want to respond?

Ms. Eve Adams: I was hoping that more individuals would have an opportunity to speak. The five minutes allow a hearty discussion. I have spoken with members of a number of other committees and there are a few committees that are actually moving towards five minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: They are...? Okay, fair enough.

The Chair: Is there anything else new to add to the discussion?

Yes, Ms. Mathyssen.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Chair, I would simply like to say that in the committee on which I served, we made sure in that case that the fourth party—in this case, the third party—had equal opportunity. I support Mr. Stoffer, inasmuch as I wouldn't like to set a precedent whereby the third or fourth party was cut out in the second round.

The Chair: I see.

Is there any response to that? It's not a new item. It supports Mr. Stoffer's suggestion.

Mr. Lobb.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): There's only one thing I'd like to add. In the last Parliament, when Mr. Stoffer was in the place where Mr. Casey is now, if there was time for any supplementary questions at the end or near the end of the meeting, Mr. Stoffer was afforded that time. It was at the discretion of the chair.

So as far as the routine motions go, I think we'd leave it as proposed, with the little change of the NDP leading off, and leave it to the discretion of the chair for any remaining time at the end of the meeting.

The Chair: That's fair enough.

I should also add that one of the things we have to do to make this work is to make sure that we start punctually, and that the witnesses, if we're all in agreement, aren't allowed to stray past their time. We might even encourage them to be as brief as possible, because that makes all of this work easier.

It's true, as Mr. Lobb said, that last time there were occasions when the government members felt they didn't have to use their last round, and certainly that was passed along, I think to Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I have just a couple of additions to the opening remarks. I agree with the time slot. It will obviously be agreed to, but there's one thing, Mr. Chairman. When you work with the whips and the other House leaders, can we be assured that as often as possible we'll get room 112 north as our meeting room? There's one thing missing there, which is the RCMP emblem, which will be there soon, but if we can get that room as much as possible...?

Secondly, could I recommend that when a minister appears we have those meetings televised? It gives the minister an opportunity to speak to a wider audience. As well, it gives all of us an opportunity to ask the minister or his or her staff the appropriate questions. Could those meetings be televised? That was the general practice with our meetings.

The Chair: Okay. I'll certainly take that under advisement.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

The Chair: We've already started trying to get room 112. I think everybody agrees that it was the appropriate room.

As far as the minister is concerned, certainly—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Oh, and—sorry, last one—I don't know what time the meetings are going to be. Have we worked out the time slot?

• (0905)

The Chair: This is the time: 8:45 on Tuesday and Thursday.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Okay, good.

The Chair: We're through on the motion.

Do you understand what the motion is? Does everybody have it now?

All those in favour of the motion, by a show of hands, please?

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Okay: one opposed, as so recorded.

Thank you for that.

Turning now to document distribution, I don't know that there's any suggested change on that one from anywhere.

Ms. Eve Adams: I'll move it as is.

The Chair: All right.

So the motion on document distribution remains as it is before you—with, yes, “and that witnesses be advised accordingly”. That was a bit of a...

Okay, thank you.

The next motion is on working meals.

Ms. Eve Adams: I'll move it as is.

The Chair: Are we agreed?

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: Including chocolate milk; we understand that it's a given

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No chocolate milk, no meeting; there's no quorum right there.

The Chair: Okay.

Did I actually take a vote on the previous motion?

My apologies; I got so excited about the working meals that I forgot.

Let's go back up to document distribution.

In favour, by a show of hands?

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Thank you.

Going back to the motion on working meals, all those in favour?

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: I know there has been some discussion on travel and accommodation, but I don't know that there has been any suggested change for this motion.

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Chair, I might simply and formally suggest to you, and leave this at your discretion, that we try to limit organizations to one representative each. So I would move the motion as it is currently but simply provide that as direction to the chair.

The Chair: Is there other discussion?

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I'd have one slight amendment to it.

I noticed that last time when we had witnesses who came in, some of them required either a medical assistant or a spouse to travel with them. Take a veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder, for example; their spouse is with them sometimes. You may want to leave a little leeway in there that if we invite two, one of them may require a medical assistant or a person of substance beside them in order to get them through the meeting.

So sometimes you may, with certain exceptions, allow a third person to travel. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen.

The Chair: Is there any comment on that?

One of the things we wanted to try to limit was that we had a few occasions where two witnesses from one institution arrived. Many felt that one would have been enough unless they had a totally different presentation. I think that's the concern, that we don't double up.

Do you accept Mr. Stoffer's...?

It doesn't need to be amended, I don't think; just keep it mind that there will be special circumstances. I'm sure the committee will be receptive to receiving those, if that's agreed.

Yes, Mr. Shory.

Mr. Devinder Shory (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Actually, Mr. Chair, this motion addresses what Mr. Stoffer is suggesting. It says “in exceptional circumstances, payment for more representatives be made at the discretion of the Chair”.

The Chair: So you're suggesting that we actually change the wording, then?

Mr. Devinder Shory: No. It addresses it already.

The Chair: Oh, okay.

You're sharp.

All those in favour of the motion, by a show of hands?

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Next is access to in camera meetings.

I know that you have before you a suggestion, but I understand that the PS has a recommended change.

Ms. Eve Adams: I would propose the following: that each committee member in attendance shall be permitted to have one staff member attend any in camera meeting. In addition, each party shall be permitted to have one staff member from a House officer attend in camera meetings.

The Chair: Is that clear with everybody? Are there any questions on that?

It's to give it a little more flexibility to the party House leaders.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I have a certain amendment. It's not for the official record, though; it's more a personal one.

Ms. Eve Adams: I can only imagine.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Well, I notice this at all committees, and all parties are to blame for this. When we have witnesses, members of Parliament immediately go to their BlackBerrys and read the news of the day. They're not listening and they're not paying attention.

We heard from some veterans last time when they came here to make a presentation that when they looked up, half of us were looking down at our BlackBerrys and not looking at them. I just request that we keep an eye on that and monitor ourselves accordingly.

I know that the BlackBerry—I don't have one, and have never owned one in my life—is an addictive thing, and I know it's difficult for MPs and others to get their minds off these things. I just exercise caution that when we have witnesses, these are veterans, and they don't often get a chance to appear before a committee. We should at least do the best we can to look like we're listening.

● (0910)

The Chair: I'd actually like to hear some comments, because I don't want to be going around the room saying, "Put your BlackBerry down", or something like that. By the way, that also means you can't use the phone during the meeting as well, then.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: That's difficult.

The Chair: Oh, okay, yes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: It might be my mom. You never know.

The Chair: Are there any comments on that? I don't know if you want to read it into the record.

Brian.

Mr. Brian Storseth: I think Mr. Stoffer was just giving the committee advice. I don't think it was an actual official motion, was it?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: It's advice.

The Chair: It's advice to you folks and not for me. I understand. Okay.

Yes.

Ms. Eve Adams: I would simply state that I certainly concur. If veterans have been kind enough to come before us to share their experiences, to provide their best advice, obviously it certainly behooves us to respect them and their time.

I thank you for your advice. I certainly concur.

The Chair: If we're comfortable with that, then I'll leave it to the appropriate leaders on each side to monitor that.

You have the amended motion.

(Motion as amended agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Transcripts of in camera meetings is next. I don't know if there are any suggested changes to this one.

Ms. Eve Adams: For transcripts of in camera meetings, I move that in camera meetings be transcribed and that the transcription be kept with the clerk of the committee for later consultation by members of Parliament.

The Chair: So it's simply members, and it doesn't extend to staff.

Ms. Eve Adams: That's correct.

The Chair: Are you okay with that? You have the amended motion before you. Please indicate whether you are in favour or opposed.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Now, on notice of motions, there was some discussion. Did we end up with—

Ms. Eve Adams: I propose the following: that 48 hours' notice shall be required for any substantive motion to be considered by the

committee, and that the motion shall be filed and distributed to members by the clerk in both official languages. Completed motions that are received by close of business shall be distributed to members the same day.

The Chair: Is everyone okay with that?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Those are the routine motions. What else do we...?

Sorry, just before that, the clerk advised me that what Mr. Stoffer actually raised on the cameras was that when a minister's attendance is motionable, the committee will have to make a decision as to whether it wants cameras automatically or whether it wants to leave that open until prior to that meeting.

I think you're suggesting it be automatic when ministers are here?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes. I don't know any minister who's ever said no to that opportunity. It gives us a chance, and it gives the wider audience a chance, to see the minister and to hear what the minister and departmental staff are saying. It's just an opportunity.

The Chair: Are there any comments?

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Chair, I just have a question on the room. Is there that capacity in room 112 north?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No, you'd have to move it to another room.

Mr. Brian Storseth: So you're actually looking...

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes.

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Chair, I think that's acceptable, but perhaps we could make it subject to best efforts.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: That's fair enough. There are certain circumstances. The minister's schedule is always up in the air. If we can actually get the minister at an appropriate time, that's always a good thing. I'm sure the chair is a decent fellow, and he will do the best he can to accommodate that, but there will be circumstances in which it can't happen and we'll have to live with that, and that will be fine.

The Chair: Ms. Mathyssen.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: I understand that ministers have challenging schedules, but my experience has been that every time a minister has given testimony, we have indeed had it televised. I think that is very important, particularly in the case of veterans. They don't have access to this place, and they need to see the minister. They need to have that opportunity. So I would underscore that it is very important that the minister's appearance always be televised.

● (0915)

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Storseth.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Thank you. I appreciate it.

It's not that anybody has anything to hide, but when you put in writing that something has to be a certain way all the time and it's a motion by the committee that we have to go through every time even if we don't want to do it, there will be circumstances, as we see sometimes, in which we need to go in camera and other circumstances that preclude us from having the cameras going.

I have to say that in the past two and half years I've served on this committee, it's been very collegial. It's not like some of the other committees I've been on in which things get fairly acrimonious. I'm sure the chair will ensure that we have cameras whenever possible, but there will be some circumstances in which it would not be appropriate for the cameras to be there. If we put this in motion and underscore that, then I think we end up tying our hands somewhat.

The Chair: Before we go further, could I respond?

My understanding, from Mr. Stoffer's reaction to the PS's intervention, is that we make the best effort we can to have cameras. That means making sure we schedule the right place that can be adapted and so on. It won't be automatic that there will be, but certainly the request will be made on behalf of the committee that cameras be made available when the minister's here, and there will be some flexibility. We don't want to cancel the meeting if it turns out we can't get a larger room or we're back in room 112 or something.

Can we leave it with that general understanding, that we'll make our best efforts to have the camera in place when ministers are in attendance? Is that reasonable? Is everybody comfortable with that?

We can reflect that in the motion.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: What other stuff do you have for us here?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: [*Inaudible—Editor*].

The Chair: Before you go off on your tangent, this is, as I said, introductory. We have this wonderful clerk here, I think, for one meeting, and then we'll be changing again at some point. Personal matters are taking her away. It's got nothing to do with giving up on us already.

We wish you all the best, by the way, in that regard.

The Clerk: Thank you.

The Chair: I just want to indicate—and there will certainly be clerk services and analyst services—that it's really important that in the time before the September meetings all members really think carefully about the items they want brought forward for consideration by the committee. We have some time to work on that and think about it. I know there are some very important items, and there's also some unfinished business we didn't get through from the last time. But I think every member should have the time to reflect on it and have the discussions with their own folks to see what they want to bring forward.

I'd ask you all to take that seriously. Don't come back in September and say, "Oh, we should sit down and think about it." I think we want to come back fully prepared to move on the agenda as punctually as we possibly can. Okay?

You had another comment?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: There are just a couple of things.

Prior to the last meeting—and you were there as well, sir—there was a letter from the clerk that was going to go to the new chair regarding the unfinished business. It's now been almost five months that we've been waiting for the 24 resumé of the individuals on

VRAB, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. Something that should take 12 hours has taken five months.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I just reiterate again that it would be nice to have that.

One of the concerns we had—and you even expressed it yourself, sir—was with the qualifications of the people on the VRAB. We would just like to know who they are. That request was granted. We just haven't seen the documents yet.

The Chair: We'll discuss that along with the minister.

Your memory is very good, Mr. Stoffer. There was an election in between, which may have slowed the process down.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Things happen, you know.

The Chair: These things happen.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: But there was also the letter from the clerk that was supposed to go to the new chair—remember?—regarding unfinished business.

The Chair: Okay, now that I'm chair, there's a letter somewhere. We'll have a look at that for sure.

Is that it?

Mr. Brian Storseth: There was a far more difficult parliamentary secretary in the last Parliament, so....

Mr. Peter Stoffer: The parliamentary secretary last time was hard to get along with.

An hon. member: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Is there any further discussion or business to bring before us?

Yes, Mr. Lizon.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cookville, CPC): I would like to be advised on the budget that this committee is working with, on how it works and whether it is a set budget. I would like to sit on a committee that spends the money responsibly. It's always very easy to spend someone else's money, but I think we should show some responsibility in how the money is spent. I would like to be advised about the budget we're working with, how big it is, whether it is set at a certain amount, and how it works.

● (0920)

The Chair: Madam Clerk, do you want to answer that?

Go ahead.

The Clerk: I was not prepared for that question, so of course I don't have the numbers with me right now. I'll certainly be able to prepare a paper and something can be distributed to you. Then, if you need more discussion on that, you can do that maybe in September with the next clerk.

The Chair: So a paper will be prepared and distributed amongst the members of the committee.

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Chair, I would just like to take this opportunity to thank everyone and to indicate what a huge honour it is to serve our veterans. I truly look forward to working with each and every one of you. Have a wonderful summer.

Thank you very much to the staff.

I wish Julie every happiness as she delivers her new baby girl.

The Chair: Thank you. I think you speak for all of us.

If there is no further business, could I have a motion for adjournment?

An hon. member: I so move.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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