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# **Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri- Food**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Thursday, September 29, 2011**

—  
**Chair**

**Mr. Larry Miller**



## Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

Thursday, September 29, 2011

•(1635)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC)):** Mr. Storseth.

**Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC):** Well, I think it's pretty straightforward. It's just a technical motion for the committee and entertaining discussion anybody has on it, but I don't think we need to waste a lot of time with it.

**The Chair:** This is just a bit of history on it.

I sent a letter out to all the committee members a little while ago, because as chair I can't table a motion. I asked Mr. Storseth if he would be interested.

Our committee had the highest witness expenses of any committee in the House of Commons last year, and I take that as an embarrassment. It wasn't always abused, but I can think of examples where it was.

Brian's motion—and I'm not trying to take over your discussion on it, Brian—gives us discretion so if we feel strongly that we need more than one witness to come from an organization, we can do that.

Many of the groups or organizations we have come before this committee have representatives in Ottawa who they can send here. They don't always have to send somebody from across the country. I'm not trying in any way to stop somebody from coming from the east or west coast or halfway in between. That's not the objective. Quite often we've paid expenses for two or more witnesses when, in my opinion, it has been unnecessary.

Mr. Storseth, that's where this comes from.

Malcolm.

**Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP):** I understand. I sat here and saw five folks from a similar group.

**Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC):** And one talks.

**Mr. Malcolm Allen:** And one talks, to be honest.

We've gone in public, and that's okay. I actually voted to do that. Arguing against it feels like arguing against the chair, which, of course, isn't the case. The actual motion is surrounded by the chair saying he'll have the discretion, so to argue against it says you really don't have confidence in the chair, or perhaps you don't, which is not the case, from my own personal perspective.

I'm not sure why we needed this immediate change, when, I think only a couple of months ago, just before we adjourned, we actually talked to this particular issue. It seems, at least on the face of it, that

we're being more restrictive than we wanted to be earlier. I would hope that's not the intent. Otherwise, it seems as though we're starting in the wrong direction.

A couple of my friends on the other side said this is a four-year journey that we're undertaking. Perhaps it will be, or it might be longer, or shorter. Who knows? We'll know when we get there.

As much as I absolutely agree that having five folks come to have one person speak to us just doesn't make any sense from the perspective of time management and money when it comes to the committee's expenditure, I can remember times when I, as the deputy critic, sat on the wall because there were so many folks who came that I simply gave them my seat so they could have a mike, which they actually didn't use.

That's my only piece with this. The spirit, the intent, is for sure to keep the cost down. We'll use the Cattlemen's Association as a prime example, because I happen to know John Masswohl's late father, Rudi, very well. When I first came to this committee in late 2008, he walked through the door, and I saw his name, and he said, "Yeah, yeah, Rudi's my dad." He knew I was from the Welland area and I actually sat on a board with his dad.

John's already in town, so it makes perfect sense for John to come and represent the Cattlemen's Association, unless he wants to send someone else. And I know over time the Cattlemen's Association have had some very fine ranchers here who also come to support John, basically saying, "Yeah, we agree with what he's saying."

It seems to me if we take the spirit and the intent of trying to keep it that way, but keep it open, so that if one side or the other says, you know what, maybe we need to hear from not only the association—and I've heard in the past not everyone agrees with the association. Take the trade union movement, for instance. The union doesn't necessarily have unanimity of opinion. If you asked Buzz Hargrove, the past president of my union, to come before you, he might give you one statement. I'll leave the name of a local union's president out because this is on the public record, but he'd disagree with Buzz. Maybe we should have Buzz and that local union president come, because we're actually going to get two different opinions about the same organization.

I thought we narrowed it before in the spirit of trying to keep the costs down. It just seems to me now that we're really trying to squeeze tight, and then, unfortunately, placing the burden of making the decision on the chair, which makes the chair—

•(1640)

**The Chair:** There are two points. We haven't narrowed it down.

**Mr. Malcolm Allen:** Well, from my view, I see it being narrower than before.

So that's my only fear, the sense that this is what it would become. You're in the unenviable position—regardless of who comes to you, whether it be the parliamentary secretary Mr. Lemieux, or me, or Mr. Valeriote—of having to say yes or no when we say we'd really like you to ask one, or we'd really like you to ask two.

Quite frankly, I think what will happen down the road is that if you say yes to one and no to the other, you're going to get into a war of justifying it to whomever—i.e., “But you said no to me and yes to them.” That's an unenviable position to have the chair sit in, quite frankly.

I understand, as my friend Mr. Lemieux has quite ably said, that there's a new dynamic. I'm okay with that. That's what democracy is about, dynamics and changes, and things change. But I would offer this up: why don't we send it back to the steering committee to review if there's an additional request for more than one rather than placing the chair in the unenviable position of always having to make that final decision and end up as the person who's saying yes and no?

If he says yes to me all the time when I make the request, I'm a happy camper. If he says no to me all the time, I'm an unhappy camper. But if he says yes to just one other person one time, then I'm really an unhappy camper. In my view, it's not fair to put the chair in....

I'll leave it at that.

**The Chair:** Malcolm, just for the record, that part of the motion was not anything that I had in there. Frankly, I would be much happier, even delighted, if either the committee or the subcommittee did it. That was my intention. It wasn't for it to be solely my decision, and that is a fact.

If that's changed, with agreement, I certainly have no issue. It would make my job easier, in fact.

Mr. Zimmer.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC):** That new question kind of affects what I'm going to say. If the chair is wanting to have a slight change in the motion, maybe we should—

**The Chair:** I'm certainly comfortable with that. As I said, that part of the motion, Bob, was not part of my letter, if you go back and see it. I spoke on this issue when we first talked about it in June, long before I knew what the expenses were. That wasn't my reason for speaking. I was in favour of this thing then for other reasons, and I'm even in favour more now, since I found out what this was.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I think there is, though, a positive in this. It does streamline the process a little bit. If we do have a guest.... As you say, if a representative of the Cattlemen's Association shows up, you can make that quick decision to either allow or disallow on the spot, versus going to another group.

So I think it's more expeditious that way, to have it with the chair.

**The Chair:** If there's a bunch of them in town, Bob, like they were the other day, and we happen to have a meeting and they show up—as they have, lots of times—there's no problem with them being

here. In fact, as far as I'm concerned, if they want to bring one of them up and sit with them, that's fine; it's just that they wouldn't qualify for the expenses.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Right.

**The Chair:** I don't think they've ever abused it that way. Anytime they've ever been in town and attended, I'm not aware of any abuse of it. That's not one of the examples that I had in mind.

Mr. Valeriote.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I absolutely understand where you're coming from. I think for the record, though, it needs to be understood that this is a very unusual committee. Its obligations are enormous. I mean, this is one of the few committees that has to hear from people in an industry that crosses Canada. I'm not saying it's any less or more serious work than other committees; I'm just saying the work is voluminous. We don't have the luxury of having some accountants come in here to talk to us about the state of the books, or spending all our time on two or three witnesses.

I think the public needs to know why our expenses may have been larger. The public needs to know that we've had to travel across the country to go to the industry, to farms, to processing plants.

• (1645)

**The Chair:** I want to point out that it has—

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Nothing to do with travel.

**The Chair:** —nothing to do with travel.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** I do understand.

**The Chair:** The costs I talked about concerned only witness expenses.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** I perfectly understand.

I'm content for the chair to decide. I really am. I trust the chair's discretion. You've been fair in the past, and I expect you'll be fair in the future. We may want to change that once you're no longer the chair, but who knows?

My point is this: what does “organization” mean? For instance, sometimes we will ask a number of witnesses from the University of Saskatchewan to come here. I would hate to think that the University of Saskatchewan is considered an organization from which we really want to hear from only one witness. They come from different backgrounds at the university.

**The Chair:** Can I respond to that, Frank?

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Yes.

**The Chair:** In that case, I think I could say that there are ways around it: you can invite them as individuals. Because while some professors—I'll use that term—or specialists in a certain field might be employees of the University of Saskatchewan, for example, or the University of Guelph or whatever, they're also individuals in a certain field. I don't think we'd be hog-tied by having more than one or maybe even three who all happen to teach at the University of Saskatchewan.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Okay.

**The Chair:** I wouldn't see that as a barrier.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** All right. Thank you for that explanation.

The second point, then, is the word “exceptional”. This motion is going to be here for a while. People come and go from this committee, and what we may understand as exceptional around this table as “well, we’ll take a look at each circumstance and each witness as the situation arises”, might be considered by other people to be “exceptional”, if you get my drift—like only in extremely exceptional circumstances.

I would like to see that word changed to “and that....”

Sorry, if I can have your attention...?

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC):** I’m sorry.

You distracted me.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** I would like to see this changed to “and that, where circumstances warrant, payment for more representatives be made at the discretion of the Chair”, because the words “circumstances warrant” imply a little more latitude than the word “exceptional”.

So as a friendly amendment—if you consider it friendly—I would change the words “in exceptional” to...actually, you’d have to remove the words “in exceptional circumstances” and change this to “and that, where circumstances warrant, payment for more representatives be made at the discretion of the Chair”.

**The Chair:** Mr. Storseth, do you accept that?

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** Well, I disagree with Mr. Valeriote’s interpretation, but by looking at the chair, yes, I accept that.

**The Chair:** Mr. Hoback, you were on the list.

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** No, I’m okay.

**The Chair:** Mr. Lemieux.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** I think the committee needs to be sensitive to costs. The chair raised a good point. If we’re the most expensive committee in Parliament due to the number of witnesses coming in, I think we should be sensitive to that fact.

I think the chair would probably like to see the committee... I mean, the chair responds to the will of the committee, so I think the chair is asking the committee to say that the normal procedure, rather than having two, which was what happened in previous Parliaments, will be that we have one as the standard operating procedure.

Your amendment is a fine amendment, so I think that’s been accepted all the way around.

I think Malcolm made an excellent point about that responsibility falling to the chair. I would make one other friendly amendment, then, and it is that in “be made at the discretion of” we take out “the Chair”. We could change it to “of the committee”, because the chair responds to the committee, and I think the chair has had tremendous latitude in setting up witnesses.

He has done a great job, but I think this leans more to your point, Francis, in that if the committee feels there are these circumstances, the committee is going to have a discussion on it and the chair will follow the will of the committee.

So just to touch on Malcolm’s point, I think it’s valid that this should just be worded to say “at the discretion of the committee”, because it’s going to be the committee that gives direction to the chair in those circumstances where warranted.

So this would be another friendly amendment, then: that we remove “Chair” and replace it with “committee”.

**The Chair:** Even if it were “Chair”, I would still want to get direction from the committee, but I’m much happier with it as “committee”, as you’ve just suggested.

I have a couple of speakers.

You’re the second one, Mr. Valeriote—

• (1650)

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** I need some clarification on what Pierre just said.

**The Chair:** Okay.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Does that mean the committee is going to have to meet like this and make a decision on witnesses?

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** No.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Okay, so—

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** What I’m thinking of, and I think what we’re all talking about is the normal operating procedure—

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** When we phone in and—

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Yes. It’ll be one witness coming from an organization. I don’t think anyone is saying that it’s one organization per province or something like that. It’s just one person per organization.

Let’s say you had a strong case for a university providing two witnesses because they’re from two completely different departments. I think you would end up bringing that to committee anyway. We would have a discussion on that exception...not exception, but should the circumstances warrant, we would have a discussion on that, and we would say to the chair, “Yes, in that case, it’s a good point, and we should have two witnesses.”

I’m not saying that the committee is involved in setting all the witness lists all the time. I think that would use up an inordinate amount of time. I’m just saying that, by exception, you would have brought it to committee anyway, so let’s just change this wording so that it’s at the discretion of the committee. The chair will follow our lead.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Go ahead with the other speakers, and then I’ll respond.

**The Chair:** We’ll hear from Mr. Zimmer, and then it’s back to you anyway, Frank.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I’ll be really brief.

I wasn’t in the committee when it had the highest amount, but I think we need to take this step, especially in this new era of cost-cutting. I absolutely support it. I just don’t want to water it down. The message should be very clear that it’s one, and if you need more, there have to be exceptional circumstances.

**The Chair:** Frank.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** I agree with our need to be frugal, but I'm concerned about the process. My experience has been that from time to time we examine issues requiring us to go to another city or whatever, and we're suddenly phoning your office or the clerk's office and making recommendations about witnesses. In the perfect world, we would have the opportunity to all meet and talk about witnesses, but, Mr. Chair, you and I both know that sometimes these witnesses are put together at the last minute.

For instance, we were hoping to have a discussion on Tuesday on whatever it is that we may be discussing. That leaves us tomorrow and Monday to get witnesses. What if, under these circumstances, there's an organization from which, one of us feels, two people need to come? The committee isn't going to have the opportunity to get together and talk about it.

I'm suggesting that it be the decision of the chair in consultation with the subcommittee so that you need call only three people to talk about it instead of having it implied that the whole committee has to agree on this.

**The Chair:** I think on the discretion, whether it's me, the committee, or whatever comes into this, it isn't one of those "has to be done today" things.

For example, maybe on the biotech part of the Growing Forward 2, as we're doing it, somebody says they think we need a little more here. So then we'd go ahead and do it. I'm just using that as one example.

I doubt there's going to be any urgent need to all of a sudden have those extra ones on Tuesday. I think it'll be within the general realm of a study that we're doing at the time. We might all agree that we needed more witnesses on something, and we'd do that.

I think, Frank, I'd use that old saying: trust us. I'm not going to have the power to amend the motion. I'm happy not to have to make that decision on my own.

I think with the direction of everybody here, let's get started and get to work and deal with these as they come.

Mr. Lemieux.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Chair, I think there's been a lot of discussion on this, and it's using up a lot of committee time. I think Malcolm made another good suggestion, that maybe this should go back to the steering committee. Let the steering committee flesh this out and report back to the committee. The committee has to vote on it in the end anyway, but there's been a lot of discussion on it.

I'm sorry, Frank. That was your suggestion.

Why don't we do that and bring it back to committee?

**The Chair:** I'm glad I don't have a vote on it, because I'd have to vote against that.

Guys and girls, this is a motion about frugality. I don't know what the big thing is or why we'd want to send it back there, but I'm at your mercy.

•(1655)

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** We'd go back to the steering committee for sure.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** So it's the chair in consultation with the steering committee.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** The chair is on the steering committee. He'll be there.

**The Chair:** We have to have a motion to adjourn debate, I guess, if that's where you're going.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** No, we need to move an amendment to that motion I think.

**The Chair:** The motion has already been amended a couple of times.

**Mr. Randy Hoback:** Chair, I move that this whole motion be deferred to the steering committee for consideration and then brought back to the committee.

**Mr. Malcolm Allen:** I would concur with Mr. Hoback.

In the spirit of what Mr. Storseth and the chair have said, I think there's a way to actually make this work. I think we're all in agreement about keeping the costs down. I don't think there's any argument from us and we're all there. Mr. Zimmer pointed out just a minute ago that this is an issue of keeping the costs down. I would say it's also about keeping the chairs available for some of us to sit in.

Ultimately, I think we can find something to bring back that we will find unanimity on. Perhaps we don't have it right at this very second, because we've had additions here and take-aways there. I think we can bring something back to which we could all say "yes".

**The Chair:** All in favour of the motion?

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

**The Chair:** It goes back to the steering committee.

Now we need direction on witnesses for Tuesday.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** I have three recommendations, if you're looking for names.

**The Chair:** I am. I'm wanting some direction from the committee.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Themes first.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Theme: biotechnology.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Then you can just submit your names to the chair.

**The Chair:** Ben.

**Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC):** In my own opinion, before we get too far into themes and all the other things we're talking about, I wouldn't mind hearing what the department has done so far in soliciting input and opinions in order to give us a better idea of where they've gone and what they've done.

We've all read news articles. We've all been following what they've been doing around this. I think at the very least we have to hear what they have to say on what's really been done. They're likely easy witnesses to have appear.

I think this committee then would have a bit of a foundation to move forward. We would have a better idea of where we want to go in terms of next direction.

**An hon. member:** That's a good point.

**The Chair:** Are there any further comments?

Malcolm.

**Mr. Malcolm Allen:** I think Mr. Lobb has actually hit on a very cogent point. There is information available on Growing Forward 2 from the department, and the department is right here. We're not asking the minister to come. Obviously we're asking the department to give us a briefing on what they've compiled to date. Let's get that information disseminated to folks. Some folks are new, and this is new material. Some will have been plucking it off the Internet and some will not have.

So let's do that. It speaks to the austerity of the committee's new mandate. It's not going to cost us anything in travel to bring them here, and it makes the little Scots guy over here happy not to spend money, Mr. Chair, if we don't have to.

**The Chair:** Mr. Lemieux, what do you think the chances are of getting the department here on Tuesday?

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Oh, no problem.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Good. That solves that one.

As well, Mr. Valeriote mentioned the biotech.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** If I may, Chair, I think we should have the department come, have them orient especially new members on Growing Forward, and explain some of the details I handed out today. I just handed out headline-type initiatives and objectives within Growing Forward 2, so let the department brief us and let us ask the department some questions.

Then, I think, after that meeting, Chair, we can map out where this committee wants to move first.

**The Chair:** Okay, but it hog-ties us, Pierre, for the meeting on Thursday and leaves us a two-day window—even worse shape than we're in today—for trying to get witnesses.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Mr. Chair, that's the point I was going to make. We need to give witnesses more notice.

I'm happy, Mr. Lemieux, to go ahead with having the department come in and talk to us about Growing Forward 2 on Tuesday, with a view to on Thursday going forward with the biotech.

• (1700)

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** I wouldn't call it "biotech"; I would call it the science and innovation objective. It's one of the objectives on here, and the idea is that biotech is going to fall under that. That allows us to bring in a variety of witnesses.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** I'm okay with the wording you're using.

**The Chair:** In order to allow the clerk as much time as possible, would 10 a.m. Monday morning to have your witnesses in, or some witnesses...?

Okay? So for 10 a.m. on Monday we'll try to get some.... All we need is a few for starters, and then it carries on from there. It allows the clerk to set up a Thursday meeting.

Okay?

Is there any further business today?

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** Mr. Chair, I notice that the subcommittee didn't invite me in to discuss my motion in their meeting. I just hope you'll keep the content and the heart of my motion alive in the subcommittee.

**The Chair:** I'll do my best, Mr. Storseth.

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** All right.

**The Chair:** In the past, lots of member have been in the same boat. They've had motions but they weren't members of the subcommittee.

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** Thank goodness we've had you in the past.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** The meeting is adjourned.

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