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Chair

The Honourable Michael Chong

Standing Committee on Official Languages

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●(0850)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)): Welcome to the third meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages today, Thursday, June 23, 2011.

We are here today to determine committee business and to continue debate on the routine motion concerning the questioning of witnesses.

[*English*]

We have in front of us today a live motion on the floor. It's the subamendment moved by Mr. Bélanger, and it concerns the order of questioning.

Do we have any speakers to this proposed subamendment?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I don't want us to be playing games forever. Discussions took place at our last meeting on Tuesday, and the meeting was adjourned. There seemed to be a consensus. I am asking Mr. Gourde point-blank: does that agreement still work?

The Chair: Mr. Gourde, would you like to respond?

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): I believe other motions had already been moved before this one. Before dealing with it, we should at least debate and vote on the motions that had already been put forward.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Is Mr. Gourde saying that I should have faith in him?

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Majority rules.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That means no then.

[*English*]

The Chair: Is there any further discussion on Mr. Bélanger's subamendment?

(Subamendment negated)

The Chair: We are now back to the subamendment moved by Mr. Harris. I'll read it so everybody is on the same page. You should each have a copy of this.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Harris's subamendment reads as follows:

That the order of questions shall be as follows: for the first round, seven minutes be allocated in the following order: New Democratic Party, Liberal Party and Conservative Party; for the second round, five minutes be allocated in the

following order: New Democratic Party, Conservative Party and Liberal Party; for the third round, five minutes be allocated in the following order: Conservative Party, New Democratic Party and Conservative Party; for the fourth round, five minutes be allocated in the following order: Conservative Party, New Democratic Party and Liberal Party.

[*English*]

Is there any debate on the subamendment moved by Mr. Harris?

Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. First of all, I want to say how delighted I am to be here once again, standing in for Mr. Godin, who should not be away much longer.

I want to make sure that I am very clear on everything and that I follow, Mr. Chair. We have the New Democrats, the Liberals and the Conservatives. Then the New Democrats, the Conservatives and the Liberals. Next the Conservatives, the New Democrats and the Conservatives. Finally, the Conservatives, the New Democrats and the Liberals.

I think that Mr. Harris's subamendment does everything we talked about two meetings ago when I was here. It would give the Conservatives the floor and the official opposition the opportunity to start asking questions. That is in line with committee practice. I also find that proposal to be very generous to the Liberal Party. Mr. Harris managed to include all the considerations we discussed at our first meeting regarding the questioning of witnesses. So I think it is well done. I am not sure whether Mr. Harris would like to say anything, but I think he put forward a good subamendment.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Weston.

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I listened carefully to what Mr. Julian said. Our role here is to represent the interests of all Canadians. As far as the amendment moved by my colleague Mr. Harris goes, I do not think it achieves a balanced representation of the interests of the parties or the individuals here today. Quite frankly, there is too much focus on the Liberal Party, and that does not reflect the opinion expressed by voters in the last election.

Sadly, I have to say that I cannot support Mr. Harris's amendment.

●(0855)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Harris.

Mr. Dan Harris (Scarborough Southwest, NDP): I understand perfectly. In the discussions that took place between the three parties during the break at the last meeting, we found a solution that seemed to strike a better balance for the committee. We had somewhat of an agreement, but that may not have been the case within the ruling party's caucus.

I would be willing to take a step backward and start over based on the method decided upon at the last meeting.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Has the subamendment been withdrawn?

Mr. Dan Harris: I will withdraw it.

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): Are you introducing a new proposal now?

Mr. Dan Harris: We should dispose of this one first.

[English]

The Chair: If there's no further debate, we'll just call the question.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Forgive me, Mr. Chair, but I am not sure what we are talking about in that case. If the subamendment has been withdrawn—

[English]

The Chair: Monsieur Harris, you have the floor. You can tell Mr. Julian in front of everybody what you're proposing to do, just so that we're all on the same page.

Mr. Dan Harris: I was going to propose to withdraw that motion and then bring forward a new one that had been discussed at the end of the last meeting before we adjourned.

It would bring a speaking order of four rounds, the first round being seven minutes. It would go NDP, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative.

The second round would be NDP, Conservative, NDP. The second, third, and fourth rounds would all be five minutes long, not seven.

The third round would be Conservative, NDP, Liberal. The fourth round would be Conservative, NDP, Conservative.

The Chair: Just to clarify the rules, the only way you can withdraw your subamendment and propose another subamendment is with the unanimous consent of the committee.

Alternatively, I can call the question on the subamendment. If it's defeated, you can move another subamendment. Why don't we proceed in the second fashion rather than the first?

Seeing no further debate on your subamendment, we'll call the question.

(Subamendment negated)

The Chair: If you wish, you can move your other subamendment. You've just read it into the record, so you don't need to repeat it.

An hon. member: Could it be read again?

The Chair: Okay. Please repeat it, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Dan Harris: I propose a new subamendment that would have four rounds of speaking.

The first round would be seven minutes. The second, third, and fourth rounds would each be of five minutes. In the first round we would go in the order of NDP, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative. The second round would be NDP, Conservative, NDP. The third round would be Conservative, NDP, Liberal. The fourth round would be Conservative, NDP, Conservative.

That was what we had discussed and come close to an agreement on at the end of the last meeting. However, I understand there were some concerns with the governing party.

The Chair: Is there any debate?

Mr. Julian is next, and then Mr. Bélanger.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Harris has proposed a good solution. Despite being new to this committee and a new member of Parliament, he has found a solution that incorporates everything we discussed before.

First off, all the Conservatives get to participate. Giving all the Conservative members an opportunity to speak is a principle we support.

Second, the Liberals have twice as much speaking time than their numbers would warrant. That is a principle the committee has always adhered to in the past.

Third, it is consistent with a principle that is very important to us, that the official opposition be able to ask the first questions. In the first round, we start, and in the following rounds, the Conservatives start. I think that is a balanced approach.

I want to commend my colleague because I think his proposal takes into account everything we had previously discussed here. I hope there is unanimous consent for his proposal.

● (0900)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Bélanger, you have the floor.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is not clear to me that that is exactly what had been agreed upon. I would like some clarification here.

If memory serves, Mr. Harris, we had agreed on something else. In the first round, seven minutes would be allocated as you described, but in the second round, the five minutes would be allocated quite differently.

The order put forward by Mr. Gourde was this: NDP, Conservatives, NDP, Conservatives, Liberals, NDP, Conservatives, NDP, Conservatives. That is what Mr. Gourde and the government caucus wanted. Every member of the government caucus would have had an opportunity to speak. In the event of a third round, we would follow the same order as the first round, but with five minutes each. If memory serves, that was the agreement we came to on Tuesday.

Am I dreaming?

Mr. Dan Harris: That was the first approach, but after a number of discussions, you said that you could live with only two opportunities to speak, not three. After that, the proposal changed.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That was in my absence because—

Mr. Dan Harris: No, no, you were here during the discussion. That's where we were at before you—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The friendly amendment I had agreed to was supposed to take away a right to speak from the third party in the third round. I had agreed to that.

Mr. Dan Harris: Mr. Gourde could perhaps....

The Chair: Mr. Gourde, go ahead.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: That possibility was on the table, but we did not necessarily agree on the number of rounds.

My personal preference is having two rounds. In the first round, four people would speak and in the second round, seven people would speak. That would ensure fairness to all members. Eleven people could ask witnesses questions. We obviously came up with that arrangement very quickly, on the fly. We didn't necessarily reach a consensus.

Some people would like us to have three rounds, but I would prefer having only two. Afterwards, we would start over with the first round. We did not necessarily reach a consensus. According to the proposal before us, if we have four rounds, 13 members would speak, but we're 11. That means that at least two parties would be overrepresented. That's why I am in favour of a two-round approach. Four members would have seven minutes each in the first round, and seven members would have five minutes each in the second round. Four plus seven is eleven, the number of members on this committee. We would follow the exact same approach when starting over.

I think that would balance out the discussions. If someone could introduce a new proposal.... For instance, the proposal put forward by Royal Galipeau was interesting. I think that he was even prepared to amend it. That proposal is still on the table, and we'll have to debate it.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Dan Harris: We were talking about the second, third and fourth rounds. Everyone would actually get to speak in the second round. That was my mistake.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Pardon me, Mr. Chair, but I would like to get back to what Mr. Gourde proposed because he talked about it

quickly. I am asking, through you, that he more slowly repeat his suggestion for the second round and that he confirm that the third round would be the same as the first round, except that the questioners would have five instead of seven minutes.

• (0905)

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Gourde.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: The first round, where questioners would have seven minutes, would have the following order: the New Democrats, the Conservatives, the Liberals and the Conservatives. In the second round, questioners would have five minutes, and the order would be the following: the Conservatives, the New Democrats, the Conservatives, the New Democrats, the Conservatives, the New Democrats and the Conservatives. That way, we would go through 11 members, and if we start over, we would proceed in the same order as in the beginning: the New Democrats, the Conservatives, the Liberals and the Conservatives. That's almost identical to the other proposals, instead of 13 to 14.... In addition, it helps balance out the number of minutes among all the members. There would still be two rounds: the first and the second. And then we would start over from the beginning.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gourde.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Chair, I just want to point out that, when witnesses are here for two hours, if there are two witnesses, we get 10 minutes each. Therefore, we would have time for a third round. That would balance things out for all the parties. Even if the witnesses are here only for an hour and then we move on to something else, we would usually start over as in the first round. We would still distribute floor time evenly for all the parties. I think that arrangement could be acceptable.

The Chair: Mr. Gourde moved a proposal, but it's not a live motion. The committee is currently dealing with Mr. Harris's subamendment.

[*English*]

We're still on the subamendment of Mr. Harris. Once we've disposed of that, we'll go to the original amendment of Mr. Bélanger, or if you care to move that subamendment to Mr. Bélanger's amendment at that time, you can do that.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Is that something I could have tabled a week ago?

The Chair: Yes.

We're still on the subamendment of Mr. Harris, so let's deal with it first. If there's no further debate on the amendment of Mr. Harris, I'll call the question.

I see a hand. Go ahead, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Dan Harris: During our previous discussions the amount of speaking time was questioned. As the amendment stands, it would give the Conservatives 34 minutes of speaking time, the NDP 27 minutes—

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt. To clarify, which amendment are you talking about?

Mr. Dan Harris: It's the one that is up for debate right now.

The Chair: It's the one you moved. Okay, go ahead.

Mr. Dan Harris: That gives the Conservatives 34 minutes of speaking time, the NDP 27 minutes, and the Liberals 12 minutes. I mention it just so everyone is clear.

The Chair: Thank you.

(Subamendment negated)

The Chair: Mr. Gourde, you can move your subamendment as you proposed it, or we can go to debate on the amendment as originally moved by Mr. Bélanger.

Do you wish to move your subamendment?

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I can move my amendment and repeat the speaking order, but if Mr. Galipeau has moved an amendment and he now wants to modify it or take the floor, that's okay with me. Out of respect for Mr. Galipeau, I won't stop us from discussing his proposal, which is already on the table.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Before I move on to my criteria, I want to know whether there is anything else left on the table. In my case, we're talking about the original motion.

The Chair: Yes. There's your original motion and Mr. Bélanger's amendment.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: We need to make amendments before we discuss the original motion.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

[Translation]

I will now read Mr. Bélanger's amendment.

Mauril Bélanger moved,—

That the order of questions shall be as follows: for the first round, seven minutes be allocated in the following order: New Democratic Party, Liberal Party and Conservative Party; for the second round, five minutes be allocated in the following order: New Democratic Party, Conservative Party and Liberal Party; for the third round, five minutes be allocated in the following order: New Democratic Party, Conservative Party and Liberal Party; for the fourth round, five minutes be allocated in the following order: Conservative Party, New Democratic Party and Liberal Party.

Does anyone want to debate that amendment?

• (0910)

[English]

(Amendment negated)

The Chair: We are now back to the main motion.

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: For form's sake, I would like to move an amendment to the agreement we arrived at during last week's discussions. We agreed on two rounds then. In the first round, questioners would have seven minutes in the following order: New Democrats, Conservatives, Liberals, Conservatives. We agreed last Tuesday that we would hold a second round, where questioners would have five minutes in the following order: New Democrats, Conservatives, New Democrats, Conservatives, Liberals, Conserva-

tives, New Democrats and Conservatives. If there was a third round, we would start from the beginning, with five minutes per questioner.

I agreed to that because it was in keeping with two major principles. First, every party would speak in every round, as we have always done. Second, there was what the government party wanted to add, that all the members be able to speak. To honour that agreement, I formally move this amendment.

Mr. John Weston: Thank you.

I am referring back to what Mr. Galipeau said. If my math is correct, seven minutes are allocated to your party in the first round. Therefore, you have a privileged position. You're assured of an opportunity to ask a question every time. Also, you have one-ninth of the total time, or 7 of the 63 minutes. That is more than what's usually proposed, since there are 11 people. I think that Mr. Galipeau's remarks are correct, and all three parties are represented. You would be assured of an opportunity to ask questions, and you would have more time to speak than if we calculated it based on the fact that there are 1 Liberal and 11 people. We have been discussing this for a long time, and I think it's time to adopt a fair proposal that's in keeping with all the principles we have discussed.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bélanger, go ahead.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I would like to respond to Mr. Weston's comment. Mr. Chair, certain statements are incorrect. A committee's role is not only to ask questions, but also to ensure that the government is accountable. That's the role of a parliament. That reality is well reflected in question period, as the majority government has about 3 questions out of 40.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: We need to have all the answers and a number of questions....

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: When the minister responsible for official languages comes here, it's not unusual for him to be held accountable. That is the role of a parliament.

So we shouldn't say that a committee should be the exact reflection of Parliament when it comes to the allocation of speaking time, as that has never been the case.

I want to point out that, when there were four parties in this committee, the fourth party had the right to speak in all but one round. Mr. Godin, who was often the representative, and Mr. Julian, who replaced him from time to time, often spoke three or even four times. That was never an issue.

The Bloc Québécois was the third party. We shouldn't forget that too quickly, since it's part of our history. The Bloc Québécois members had the right to speak in every round, Mr. Weston. That was never questioned. I want to point out that the arrangement was the same when the Liberals had the majority in Parliament.

Whether I was part of a majority government or the official opposition, I have always stood up for the third and fourth parties in this committee. Therefore, it is based on those principles and that experience that I say that all three parties should be able to participate in every round.

This isn't a matter of how time is divided up and so on. It's a matter of Parliament's role. It's also a matter of tradition, of how we proceeded in the past.

If the government majority really wants to break that tradition, it will perhaps succeed; I acknowledge that. I won't keep insisting on this for the next seven meetings. I also want to work; I have shown that a number of times. I am trying to be reasonable. Others will decide whether or not I was successful in that.

However, Mr. Weston, in a parliament, certain basic principles must be protected and respected. There's an attempt here to set those principles aside. I will resist that. You will perhaps succeed at some point, but in the future, in other parliaments—because there will be a 42nd, a 43rd and so on—people will go back to read what was said, and they will be able to see how the principles have evolved and whether or not rights were respected.

So, Mr. Weston, when you make such statements, it goes against a parliamentary tradition, to an extent.

• (0915)

The Chair: Mr. Lauzon, go ahead.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): I just want to remind my colleague Mr. Bélanger that the members on this side are also members of Parliament. We also have the right to ask questions.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Absolutely, and I acknowledge that.

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

[*English*]

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Richmond Hill, CPC): I don't think it is proper to assume or to compare the way Parliament runs in the House of Commons to how we should operate in the committee.

There are 11 members in this committee. We are going to be hearing depositions from third parties coming in and we want the opportunity to participate in that process. You cannot compare that to question period in the House.

I think it's fair to go around twice. In two rounds, everybody has an opportunity to ask a question. Then we start again. I concur with Mr. Weston. Giving the opportunity to the Liberal Party to speak for seven minutes in the first round gives a little bit of an advantage there, but we concede that advantage.

With all due respect, I just don't see the logic of applying what happens in the House to what happens in the committee. We're here to represent all of us together as one collective body, one committee. I understand that we have party differences, but when we're questioning somebody who is coming in to see us, we should all have an opportunity to ask those questions.

That's my point.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Dan Harris: Well, I think this does give everybody the opportunity to speak. It does recognize the third party as getting an opportunity to speak in each round. I don't think I have a problem with that.

As for holding to parliamentary traditions, forget what happens in the House. The speaking time in this instance would give the Conservatives 34 minutes, the NDP 22 minutes, and the Liberals 12 minutes. The time for both opposition sides adds up to 34 minutes, so in terms of the speaking time, it would actually be equal on both sides. Nobody can say that's not fair, I think, and it does still recognize that everybody, should they so choose, would get the opportunity to question a witness. I certainly I have no problems with this amendment.

• (0920)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Is there any further debate on the amendment moved by Mr. Bélanger?

(Amendment negated)

The Chair: We're now back to the main motion moved by Mr. Galipeau.

Mr. Dan Harris: Are we at Mr. Julian's subamendment now?

The Chair: No, Mr. Julian's amendment was defeated.

[*Translation*]

I will read the motion moved by Mr. Galipeau:

That, at the discretion of the chair, the witnesses from any one organization shall be allowed up to 10 minutes to make their opening statement. During the questioning of witnesses, there shall be allocated seven (7) minutes for the first round of questioning, and thereafter five (5) minutes shall be allocated to each questioner in the second and subsequent rounds of questioning.

[*English*]

That is the motion on the floor.

Is there any discussion or debate on this motion?

We'll have Mr. Galipeau, followed by Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Royal Galipeau: I want to remind the committee that I moved that motion in two steps. What was just read is the basic principle, without any allusion to the specific members. It simply says that ten minutes are allocated for the questioning of witnesses, that members have seven minutes in the first round, five minutes in the second round, and so on.

As for the list of questioners, that's a proposal I had introduced at a different time. In fact, I had not yet put it forward. I discussed it at Mr. Julian's request, since he wanted to know what I was hiding behind it. For the sake of openness, I told him what I was hiding behind it. I had not yet introduced the proposal. I had simply put it on the table to inform all the members of it. All I have proposed so far is what you just read.

The Chair: Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, I never asked what Mr. Galipeau was hiding. I know that he never hides anything; he's always open. I just wanted to get an idea of the government party's intentions.

I think that we could proceed in two stages, but it seems to me that you already have an idea of how you want to proceed. It would be better to simply move this amendment, whether it's by Mr. Galipeau or Mr. Gourde. When we decide something, the decision should be considered as a whole.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Mr. Chair, last week, I announced the following order, but I did not propose it formally. The order of questioning for the first round would be the following: government party members, official opposition members, government party members, third party members. In the second round, questions would be asked in turn by government party members and official opposition members in the following order: government party, official opposition, government party, official opposition, government party, official opposition, government party. The principle is to give all the members an opportunity to question the witnesses. In the remainder of the time, the next series of questions would follow the speaking order of the first two rounds, at the discretion of the chair. That's what I told the committee.

The amendment I will move today takes into account the discussions I have been listening to over the last three meetings, but I will make a small change, which affects only the first round. Rather than proceeding with the government party, the official opposition, the government party and the third party, we would have the official opposition, which would go first, followed by the government party, then the third party and, to wrap things up, the government party. That would be the procedure in the first round, and the second round would be exactly as I set it out.

• (0925)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Galipeau.

The motion now before us is the one Mr. Galipeau moved last week.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Including the order.

The Chair: Mr. Weston, go ahead.

Mr. John Weston: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm thinking about this proposal. First, I want to assure Mr. Bélanger and the other members that I'm here to participate vigorously in this committee in the spirit of cooperation. I have been a member of this committee before, and I had the opportunity to go with Mr. Bélanger to a school in his riding. That was a good initiative and I supported it. I will do the same in the future.

The proposal Mr. Galipeau just put forward reflects all the principles and provides the Liberals with a very privileged position in the first round. All three parties represented here will have the opportunity to take the floor, as will all the members.

If there is a disadvantage in the House of Commons during oral question period, it's for individuals like myself, the backbenchers, who don't regularly get the opportunity to participate. Therefore, I want to participate here and I also want all my colleagues to have the right to speak. It may not be a perfect proposal, but it reflects all the principles we have been talking about. In addition, according to

parliamentary protocol, members of the official opposition will take the floor first. That's enough for me.

[English]

The Chair: Just to be clear, Mr. Weston, Mr. Galipeau introduced during debate the idea of the order of questioners, but we're not actually on that motion right now. We're on the original motion as moved by Mr. Galipeau last week, which concerns ten minutes for opening statements, seven minutes for the first round, and five minutes for the second round. He's going to formally move his motion concerning the order of members after we dispose of the motion that is currently in front of us, I presume.

Just to be clear, the motion in front of us that we're debating is the one moved by Mr. Galipeau:

That, at the discretion of the chair, the witnesses from any one organization shall be allowed up to ten (10) minutes to make their opening statement. During the questioning of witnesses there shall be allocated seven (7) minutes for the first round of questioning, and thereafter five (5) minutes shall be allocated to each questioner in the second and subsequent rounds of questioning.

That's what we're discussing and debating right now.

Mr. Julian is next, followed by Mr. Harris.

• (0930)

Mr. Peter Julian: I'd call the question.

The Chair: If there is no further debate, I will call the question.

Mr. Harris, did you have anything to say?

Mr. Dan Harris: No, that's fine. I just wanted to follow up on what Mr. Julian said earlier, which was that when we originally asked for the proposed speaking order, it was just to seek out the context as to why we were looking at changing the number of minutes.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: That is how I understood it.

The Chair: Is there any further debate?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The motion is adopted. Thank you.

We have one half of the final routine motion adopted.

[Translation]

Mr. Galipeau, go ahead.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Mr. Chair, it's out of openness that I suggested to the committee the order that I will now propose. I should have resisted: given the fact that my motion was unanimously supported, we would have already adopted it three meetings ago.

I won't mention the order I was thinking of then and will just stick to what I announced earlier today.

I propose that the order of questioning in the first round be as follows: official opposition, government party, third party and government party. In the second round, all questions would be asked in turn by the members of the government and opposition parties, in the following order: government party, official opposition, government party, official opposition, government party, official opposition, government party. The principle is that all members should have the opportunity to question the witnesses. If there is any time remaining, the next rounds will follow the speaking order of the first two rounds at the discretion of the chair.

It's clear that, in the event of a third round, we would proceed as in the first round. On that occasion, a representative of the third party would have the right to speak.

The Chair: We are going to debate that proposal.

Mr. Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I have an amendment, that at the end of the second round, we give the third party an opportunity to speak.

[English]

The Chair: We have an amendment moved. We have the main motion, moved by Monsieur Galipeau,

[Translation]

and an amendment from Mr. Bélanger.

[English]

Is there debate on the amendment?

[Translation]

It has been moved by Mr. Bélanger that, at the end of the second round, the third party be given an opportunity to speak.

[English]

Is there any debate on Mr. Bélanger's amendment?

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Chair, since I have moved an amendment, perhaps I should provide some explanation.

What is happening here is very interesting, and I think it will probably catch the attention of parliamentary procedure experts at some point. We are talking about certain principles, one of which has always been upheld. I think that if we turn our backs on it, we risk doing a disservice to Parliament. Previously established precedents could come back to haunt us one day. According to the principle I am referring to, every party should have the opportunity to speak in every round. The majority will decide if it does not wish to adhere to that principle, and I understand that. But we are talking about principles, and the majority needs to understand that. I will stop there to see what everyone thinks.

• (0935)

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Dan Harris: I'm totally fine with the amendment. Certainly I appreciate Mr. Galipeau's changing the order in the first round, which partially recognizes the parliamentary tradition that the official opposition leads off questioning. Continuing in that vein,

the third party having the opportunity to speak in each round, or close to it, is also an important tradition to uphold. Certainly we appreciate the government's efforts in the past and the governing parties' efforts in the past, when we were the third or fourth party, to keep that going to make sure that all voices were heard.

We understand the principle of trying to give every person at least one speaking opportunity. I can understand that. Mr. Bélanger is the only person from the third party on the committee. Whenever I participate in debates anywhere, inevitably different people ask different questions, and you come up with potentially more questions after you have already spoken. At least the way this is proposed, even if I have already spoken, I can pass on the question to my colleagues so that they can follow up later on in the debate. That opportunity certainly exists on the governing party side, and we should make sure that it exists for the third party as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Go ahead, Monsieur Aubin.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to move a friendly subamendment to Mr. Bélanger's amendment. If everyone is open to the idea of the Liberal Party speaking in the second round, I think that round should start with the New Democratic Party. That way, there would be a constant rotation between parties in our discussions, and the Conservatives would not have the floor at the end of the first round and at the beginning of the second. We could add the third party at the end of the second round, between two government members, which would produce the following order: New Democrats, Conservatives, New Democrats, Conservatives, New Democrats, Conservatives, Liberals and Conservatives.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aubin.

[English]

We now have a subamendment in front of us.

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Our chair does not try to settle matters amicably.

[English]

The Chair: We have a subamendment to Mr. Bélanger's amendment. It is that the second round would be New Democratic Party, Conservative, New Democratic Party, Conservative, New Democratic Party, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative.

Actually, the clerk has pointed out correctly that I should rule the subamendment out of order, because it's not actually modifying the amendment. Mr. Bélanger's amendment was simply to add the Liberal Party to the list. You're not actually modifying that amendment, so I'm going to reject that subamendment. If you wish to reword your subamendment, I will allow it.

Frankly, what I would do is—

● (0940)

[Translation]

I move that we finish the debate on Mr. Bélanger's amendment. Then, you could move another amendment.

[English]

Is there any further debate on Mr. Bélanger's amendment?

Seeing none, I'll call the question.

All those in favour of Mr. Bélanger's amendment?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Could we have a recorded division, please?

The Chair: Yes, you may.

We're going to go to a formal recorded division. I'm going to hand the floor over to the clerk of the committee to record the vote.

Mr. Clerk, you have the floor.

[Translation]

(Amendment negated: nays, 6; yeas, 5)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk.

Mr. Aubin, you may now move your amendment.

Mr. Robert Aubin: I still move that the second round start with the New Democratic Party and that the Conservatives' two successive speaking opportunities occur at the end of the second round rather than between the first and second rounds.

The Chair: So, the first round...

Mr. Robert Aubin: The first round would follow this order: New Democrats, Conservatives, Liberals and Conservatives.

The Chair: And the second round?

Mr. Robert Aubin: The order would be as follows: New Democrats, Conservatives, New Democrats, Conservatives, New Democrats, Conservatives and Conservatives.

An hon. member: The Liberals would not speak?

Mr. Robert Aubin: The amendment has just been negated, has it not?

An hon. member: No, no, they can be included.

Mr. Robert Aubin: Really? Okay then. They can be included between the Conservatives' two opportunities to speak at the end.

[English]

The Chair: We're all on the same page.

Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, we can put an end to this entire discussion on speaking order by accepting Mr. Aubin's amendment. We have an hour left in this meeting. Personally, I think discussing the same thing for three meetings in a row is a problem.

The government side proposed that all its members have an opportunity to ask questions. That is covered in Mr. Aubin's motion. The Liberal Party said this committee had a principle of giving the

third and fourth parties at least a second turn. That is established. The only change Mr. Aubin is proposing is that the NDP, the official opposition party, begin the second round.

I think Mr. Galipeau's original proposal was a very good one, but there is obviously a flaw. There are 26 minutes between the first time and the second time the official opposition gets the floor. So, for a half-hour, while witnesses are being questioned, the official opposition does not get a chance to speak. It is a matter of fairness. I think everyone would agree that making the official opposition wait a half-hour to take the floor after its first opportunity to speak takes away from the normal exchange of ideas that should take place between the official opposition and the government side.

I realize that this is not ideal for anyone. There are still 21 minutes during which the NDP, the official opposition, cannot speak. But rather than discuss this for a fourth meeting or waiting for the fall to set a schedule, we all need to make some concessions. We all need to accept a proposal that may not suit every single one of our needs but that is still a very good compromise. It is a compromise that is in keeping with Canadian tradition.

I am asking all the members at this table to support what is reasonable and what represents a good compromise, even though I am not 100% satisfied. I think Mr. Aubin put forward a proposal that accommodates everyone.

● (0945)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aubin.

Mr. Robert Aubin: I just wanted to flesh out my thought a bit. The motion would allow for a more diverse exchange of viewpoints during the questioning of witnesses, and that would help give everyone a fuller picture of the issue in hand.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bélanger, go ahead.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Chair, the matter of alternating turns so as not to give two members of the same party consecutive opportunities to speak was raised last week by Mr. Godin. I think everyone supported that principle.

I would also point out that the reason we are having a third meeting on this same topic is that, last Tuesday, the government side introduced a motion to adjourn. And that is why we are now in our third meeting.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Julian, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Julian: We did not get an answer from the government side on this issue. It would be a good idea to know whether the government members are prepared to accept this....

The Chair: You understand that I cannot compel them to provide an answer.

Mr. Peter Julian: That is true, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The same goes for the House of Commons.

Mr. Peter Julian: You are always so wise.

We have all proposed solutions that did exactly what the members of the government wanted. I see no point in having a half-hour when the official opposition is out of the debate. I have never seen that in any committee. To date, I have sat on five different committees. Setting the rules has been the toughest in this committee. In all the other committees, we were able to find some common ground. I find it a bit troubling that we are not all making some concessions. Mr. Bélanger is getting a lot less than he asked for, but he still got a second opportunity to speak, and that principle is being upheld. We, however, are missing from the debate, even with Mr. Aubin's motion, which silences us for more than 20 minutes. Every government member has the right to speak. We haven't been able to reach a compromise, but I think Mr. Aubin has managed to do just that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Galipeau, your turn.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Mr. Chair, my friend Peter is complaining, but we are here because I have already made some concessions. The fact that I reversed the order of the first round, which the committee members had proposed last week, in order to give the official opposition the first opportunity to speak means there is more time between their first and second speaking opportunities.

But if they want to go back to the original proposal, it might make up for that. I, personally, think that the solution I put on the table already shows some openness.

Nevertheless, I know how difficult it is for the opposition parties to deal with the outcome of the May 2nd election. But they were the ones who triggered the end of the 40th Parliament. They were all very much in agreement here at this table, when we were the minority. So they have to deal with the outcome of the May 2nd election and realize that Canadians did not make a mistake. This is how it is now.

• (0950)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Galipeau.

Mr. Harris, go ahead.

Mr. Dan Harris: If you want to bring up May 2nd, let's be clear that the government side has 6 committee members who represent 40% of the population and that, on our side, we have 5 members who represent 60% of the population. It doesn't match up.

Mr. Aubin's motion is respectful of parliamentary traditions and the fact that one party should not speak twice in a row. And we aren't straying too far from tradition in terms of giving parties an opportunity to speak and allowing the third or fourth party to take the floor more than once. I think it may be time to admit that the only reason we do not have a consensus is that the government side is not willing to give the third party more than one opportunity to speak.

We are going to have a great many problems in this committee if we always take that route. We have a lot of work ahead us. Just yesterday in the House, documents were submitted in one official language only. That is a huge problem, and we must take the time to address it. If we stay on this point for days or until the fall, we will have done no work. That does not reflect very well on us, on you, on official languages or on Parliament even. I think the time has come

to make a decision. I think that both sides need to show a lot more give and less take.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Aubin.

Mr. Robert Aubin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First off, I want to thank Mr. Galipeau for being open and changing the order of the first round. Nevertheless, since this is important to me, I am going to try to push your openness a bit further still. It is obvious to me as well that during the May 2nd election, Canadians clearly expressed their desire to be governed differently. I think this first meeting is a perfect opportunity to choose compromise over confrontation. Mild confrontation, to be sure, since we are only talking about a vote, but regardless of our political stripe, we would all come out on top if we could come to an agreement through compromise rather than a vote. I think that would really put us on the right track for future discussions and meetings. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We have always accepted the outcome of the May 2nd election. The very makeup of this committee is a direct reflection of those election results, but the problem is this: How do we make sure that all the factors are taken into account, in other words, the principle upheld by the government party whereby every member can speak, and the principle we have always had whereby the official opposition begins the first round of questioning and the third party goes second?

We do it with Mr. Aubin's solution. I do not see why we could not reach an agreement, a compromise, that would do everything we want. Why are we still discussing the same issue for a third meeting now?

I have trouble wrapping my head around the idea that the government members do not wish to make this last little change to reach a compromise. I think we could leave here today with something that may not satisfy everyone 100% but that could hit everyone's key elements. That is all we expect. What do we do if we choose not to reach a compromise? What are our options?

This is our third meeting, and we are still coming up short. What are our options? There are now four NDP members at this table. We could ask the chair to hold meetings this summer, and he would have to agree. In fact, if four members sign a document calling on the chair to hold a meeting in the summer, he would be bound by the rules to do so. He would have no choice.

I don't know whether anyone at this table would want to convene in the middle of the summer, but that would be one possibility. Mr. Aubin's proposal is full of compromise, a steadfast Canadian tradition. His proposal would ensure that we do not have to convene in the summer, cut into our vacation time with our families or stop our work in our ridings. Mr. Weston knows full well, as I do, that it is not easy to come back from British Columbia, but we are prepared to do so if need be.

The government members could just put an end to this entire debate by agreeing to a compromise that we are all in agreement with and that does everything you said. We listened very carefully to everything you proposed to us. And Mr. Aubin has addressed everything you proposed.

I don't understand this lack of flexibility, but we still have to work together, regardless. I think that if the government side said it was prepared to accept this compromise, we could take a different approach at our next meeting and do the work we are supposed to do—study official languages across the country and ensure they are being respected.

I will certainly have more to say. But I would like to talk about the issue of representation. The makeup of our committee reflects the makeup of Parliament following the May 2nd election. And yet, when you look at the electoral map and the regions with the largest francophone and anglophone minorities, you see that nearly all of those ridings are now represented by the NDP. When you look at that bilingual proportion—francophone and anglophone minorities—you see that nearly all those ridings are represented by the NDP.

• (0955)

So I do not think it is too much to ask to establish some fairness when it comes to official languages and thus not deny the official opposition—which represents all those regions—the opportunity to speak for a half-hour while witnesses are being questioned. It is normal that we be represented in every round. We have accommodated your requests.

Mr. Chair, I am simply asking the government side to show some flexibility and meet us in the middle so we can finally put an end to this debate.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor.

Ms. Éleine Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): I would have to agree with my colleagues.

We have spent several meetings talking about this, and the time has really come to do something. We have to make a decision. I think the solution put forward by my colleague Mr. Aubin addresses everyone's criteria fully.

Of course, it may not tick every single one of our boxes, but we have to be willing to show some flexibility, as Mr. Galipeau did earlier by wanting to respect the tradition of giving the official opposition the first opportunity to speak.

I think we may be forgetting something my colleagues have already mentioned. Our voting system is flawed, and the visible outcome of that system in the House—the number of seats allocated to the various parties—is often far from representative of the public's desires.

We all have a duty, for the duration of our mandate, to make a conscious effort to try to correct those flaws in the system. We have been mandated to represent constituents, to express opinions, and I think we should at least make an effort to give everyone an opportunity to speak.

With that in mind, I have no problem giving Mr. Bélanger the floor twice. He, too, will have valid points to make, and they need to be taken into account.

In the May 2nd election, Canadians gave us a steady and clear mandate to work towards changing how we interact with one another. And that applies to what goes on in the House, as well as in committees. We must take a much more collegial approach than in the past.

I am part of the new generation of fresh faces on the Hill, a generation that may have a slightly different vision, a generation that has grown a bit weary of the old way of doing things. I think Mr. Aubin's solution is a step in the right direction, a step towards a better approach, an improved attitude and tangible progress.

We should make a conscious decision to accept this amendment, which seeks to make up for all those little shortcomings that were evident before.

As Mr. Julian mentioned, we are prepared to move over and take a back seat for 20 or so minutes to ensure that every Canadian receives some representation, proportionately speaking. And that still gives the government side a certain advantage, don't forget.

For all those reasons, I think we are really looking at the perfect amendment here and should not spend too much longer debating the matter.

Thank you very much.

• (1000)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Menegakis, you have the floor, followed by Mr. Bélanger and then Mr. Aubin.

[*English*]

Mr. Menegakis has the floor, please.

Could we just have one conversation, please?

Mr. Menegakis, go ahead.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: I need some clarification from Mr. Aubin before I make my point on the second round.

[*Translation*]

Unless I am mistaken, you said the order would be NDP, Conservative Party, NDP, Conservative Party, NDP, Conservative Party, Conservative Party, right?

Mr. Robert Aubin: No, it's Liberal Party and Conservative Party.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Oh, it's Liberal Party and Conservative Party.

Mr. Robert Aubin: Correct.

[English]

Mr. Costas Menegakis: The problem I have is that the proposed arrangement allows for 68 minutes of questioning. In a one-hour deposition, 10 minutes goes to the person or organization that will be presenting. That will leave 50 minutes. In a 50-minute scenario, that will cut the last three or four people from being able to ask questions. It cuts out two Conservatives. That's the problem I have with that. That's why I'm in accordance with the proposal that we made.

In the proposal that we made, if somebody needs to be cut at the end, it will be a New Democrat and a Conservative, and if three people need to be cut at the end because of the lack of time, it will be two Conservative and one New Democrat.

I find that to be reasonable. I find it to be a fair concession on our side. I think it is a very good compromise to move forward with.

I listened very carefully to everything that our friends from across the floor said. We're all here to represent Canadians. There are francophones all over this country. As we move forward, we all want to represent the francophone community and the anglo community fairly and equitably and professionally as one committee working properly.

Quite frankly, at the risk of sounding perhaps a little bit off, it's a real stretch when we count how many minutes are between when one party speaks and when another party speaks. Our proposal, in the first and second round, gives everybody an opportunity to speak. If somebody gets cut off at the end, it's not the member from the Liberal Party. He speaks in the first round, he'll speak in the third round, he'll speak in the fifth round. Every time we go around, even to our deposition, the third party will always have an opportunity to speak among the first speakers.

This proposal, our proposal, the initial motion by Mr. Galipeau, allows everybody to speak. If somebody gets cut off at the end, it will be the majority party and the opposition party. If more people need to be cut off, the next person to be cut will be a Conservative. I think that's very fair. I reject any suggestion that we are being unfair or that we don't want to reach a compromise to this impasse that we're at right now. In fact, it's the opposite. We see it the other way.

We're playing semantics now, back and forth. I don't think it's fair to any of us here. I don't think it's fair to Parliament. I don't think it's fair to Canadians, who voted us in to represent them.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Monsieur Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First I want to react to Mr. Julian's comments, if I may, about the New Democratic Party representing all the ridings where there are linguistic minorities. They do represent some. Certainly they've done very well in northern Ontario, but I'm not sure that holds in New Brunswick. I'm sure it doesn't hold in eastern Ontario. Mr. Galipeau is proof of that. I'm proof of that.

I don't think it holds true in Manitoba either. St. Boniface is represented by

● (1005)

[Translation]

the government party. Let's be fair here, Julian.

[English]

They've done well in certain areas, but they don't represent all the ridings where there are linguistic minorities.

[Translation]

An hon. member: [Editor's Note: Inaudible]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That's what I thought I heard, as well. If that's not what you said, I apologize.

I withdraw my comments, Mr. Chair.

But I would like to thank Mr. Harris for his remarks.

[English]

Mr. Menegakis, when you said at the end that we are playing games here—no, not playing games, but that it's semantics, you're right to a certain extent. He hit the nail right on the head. What's going on here is the government is trying to impose its will—I understand that—and not allow the third party to have a second time to speak. That's basically what we're facing here, and he called it.

I don't know why we're trying to do that. I really don't. Traditionally, in Canada the third party has always had the right to speak in every round. Check that out. If we're going to kill that principle here, you'll be setting a precedent that down the road other parties will come to rue.

I really think you should think very seriously about it.

[Translation]

I also want to commend Mr. Aubin for finding a solution that has the power to please everyone. I know that Mr. Julian has spoken to everyone, and I don't know whether it will be adopted or not.

Certain fundamental principles underpinning how committees operate—and by extension, how Parliament operates—are at play here. I would really like for us to reach an agreement. The committee has recently lived through two periods. During the first, the spirit of cooperation served Canada's linguistic duality. And we were able to produce a report. I was hoping we could get back to that report and refer the matter to the government to address the issues pertaining to immigration. We did an excellent job on that. And so, Mr. Menegakis, both sides can indeed work together cooperatively.

When committee members chose to work together cooperatively, by giving a little here and there, as Mr. Galipeau suggested, instead of refusing to budge at every turn, we were productive and able to serve our communities. But during periods when committee members refused to budge or make concessions, productivity stopped. The committee has seen all kinds of crises, with finger wagging on both sides.

At a certain point, the committee could no longer even function. And that did not serve anyone's interests. I was not on the committee then. I came back after that. I found it very encouraging to see the openness and respect being shown around the table. That atmosphere is crucial to our ability to function and be effective, because that is what will enable us to urge the government, regardless of the party in power, as well as provincial governments across the country, to respect federal-provincial agreements involving linguistic duality and transfer payments. A great many of those transfers from the Government of Canada to the provinces involve education, health, immigration and almost every other area.

If we cannot manage to work together effectively—and unfortunately, that seems to be the reality taking shape—if we have to spend all of our time bickering—and believe me, I can squabble with the best of them—it is not just the committee that will suffer. We are facing the possibility of having to convene in the summer. And I have no qualms there, ladies and gentlemen. You will find out just how beautiful Ottawa can be in the summer. I would be happy to have you here, as Mr. Galipeau would, I am sure. There are other ways to obstruct the workings of a committee, of the House, of Parliament. Unanimous consent is needed to green-light certain projects. There are a plethora of ways. I would hope that we can avoid going down that road and avoid confrontation. And yet, that seems to be what people want. When people are suppressed, they will react. That's basic human nature.

• (1010)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bélanger.

Mr. Aubin, you have the floor.

Mr. Robert Aubin: The decision we are getting ready to make this morning, I hope, may very well be our most important ever. We must be able to leave this room with a consensus in hand. If we want to talk numbers, we can take a different view and say that we have a broad consensus, given that two parties out of three already agree on a potentially acceptable amendment.

Beyond that, what I consider crucial is our ability to reach a unanimous agreement on this process, so that every witness who comes before us in the weeks ahead knows they are appearing before the Standing Committee on Official Languages, not a group of Liberal, NDP and Conservative representatives assigned to the official languages file. They should not have to tailor their remarks in order to please the government majority or side with the opposition in the spirit of partisan politics. I consider it extremely important that we at least be able to look as though we can work together.

I hope we can do more than just look the part, but in order to manage that, we must take the symbolic first step and come to a unanimous agreement on the order of questioners during our proceedings. As for the order I am proposing, clearly, the government side needs to give a little more, I realize. But this doesn't seem to be a crime of lèse-majesté. Over the next few minutes, I think we can agree on an order that respects all the basic principles we have been talking about for two weeks now, as well as this committee's tradition of giving even the third party the floor in every round. I don't think this goes against any of the principles previously established by committee members before me. The

proposal incorporates all the principles that have been addressed in our discussions.

I appreciate this may be a sensitive matter for some; we all feel some level of discomfort with this solution. But since we have not been able to find a better compromise so far, this is the one we should go with, in my view. This compromise truly has the power to please all three parties.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Dan Harris: To continue the theme that I think we have going on this side, we are trying to find balance. We're trying to accommodate as many of the different points of view as I think are reasonable while holding to parliamentary tradition and trying new things.

This certainly gives everybody an opportunity to speak. It maintains a balance in speaking times. It maintains a balance in that no party speaks twice in a row. It maintains a balance at the end. Should the time be cut short, it's true that two of the final three will be the governing party, but two of the final four will also be the opposition. That's balance.

Maybe later on, once we've dealt with things like this, we might decide that if we're running out of time, for balance we'd actually cut things short at those final four speakers rather than at the final three, just to make it fair. That's something we can look at down the road, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Again, we're looking at the way this is laid out. We're looking at 34 minutes for the governing party, 22 minutes for the official opposition, and 12 minutes for the third party. If you add the two opposition parties together, it's 34 minutes. That's a balance in speaking time between the governing party and the opposition parties, but it does reflect, by comparison, that the governing party has 12 minutes more than...Everything that the third party has, the government has over and above what the official opposition has in speaking time. That reflects the fact that there are six people sitting opposite.

We'd all certainly like to move on, but that's not going to happen unless there's at least one vote on the other side of the floor. We have a consensus on this side, so hopefully we won't be held back for much longer.

• (1015)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to pick up on one thing. Actually, I did not want Mr. Bélanger to misunderstand my....

The Chair: Mr. Galipeau on a point of order.

Mr. Galipeau?

[English]

Mr. Royal Galipeau: I've been patient as I see the ragging of the puck on the other side. We're discussing a principle right now, no matter how valid it may be. We're discussing a principle on which we've already had a vote.

We've had a vote on whether the third party should be included in the second round. Some people may not like the result, but the result is right there on the record. I don't know why we're continuing to discuss this. It's done. Frankly, I even think that this proposal is out of order.

The Chair: It's in order, Mr. Galipeau, but thank you for the intervention. Mr. Julian is discussing the amendment moved by Mr. Aubin in front of us, so I'm going to allow him to continue.

Through amendments and subamendments, we've had a number of different suggestions regarding the order of parties, so I've allowed the amendment. I'm going to allow Mr. Julian to speak to it, but thank you for—

Mr. Royal Galipeau: When am I on to speak?

The Chair: You are next on the list.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As always, you showed wisdom in dealing with a point of order. You are absolutely right. The amendment put forward by Mr. Aubin is the seventh attempt at compromise by those on this side of the table. We have had discussions, made proposals and listened carefully to the government members. And after seven tries, the government is saying it wants to reject any attempt at a compromise. That bothers us, to be sure, because the Standing Committee on Official Languages has always been a forum where partisan politics took a back seat. I have been on this committee seven years and have always felt that the concerns of my colleagues were rooted in the country's official languages principles.

First, I want to respond to Mr. Bélanger's comment. I think there was a misunderstanding. I just want to point out, through the chair, that we are talking about the strong presence of official language minorities in the country—the French-speaking minority across Canada and the English-speaking minority in Quebec. There are approximately 120 ridings today. The New Democrats represent 59 ridings in Quebec, the ridings of Acadie—Bathurst, Ottawa-Centre and, of course, northern Ontario. I need not go into the details, but the same goes for the riding of Timmins—James Bay to Sudbury, and for the ridings around Windsor, the riding of Welland and the regions of Toronto, represented by Mr. Harris.

We have a strong presence and representation in regions where language minorities live. That is why this committee is so important to the official opposition. I know it is also important to the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, but we must find some middle ground. For three meetings, a week now, we have been making proposals, and every time we have come up against a flat-out refusal to find some middle ground, to reach a compromise. That is not only sad, but also unfortunate. We truly care about official languages,

about this committee and about the order of precedence. They are important to us.

With that in mind, we proposed solutions. We want to uphold certain principles. As Mr. Bélanger clearly explained, we have a principle of giving the third party an opportunity to speak in every round. We support that principle, just as we support the government side's principle of giving every member an opportunity to speak. We also feel it is important not to push the official opposition out of the debate and questioning for a half-hour. That is why we offered up a compromise. I did not ask my colleagues how they felt, but I certainly do not like being absent from the debate for 21 minutes. But we are willing to accept that because we feel that the proposal giving the government side two opportunities to speak during the first round, with seven minutes for each questioner, also adheres to an important principle, one we support.

Even under Mr. Aubin's proposal, we are absent from the debate for more than 20 minutes. During televised hearings, we are entitled to speak first and then we are missing in action for more than 20 minutes. And yet we are prepared to accept that for the sake of the committee. We have proposed several compromises. The responses from the government side are really starting to disappoint me. This could have been resolved two days ago. Mr. Bélanger made some concessions, and we did the same, of course. Mr. Aubin's proposal is not perfect, but we have agreed to be silent for 20 minutes.

• (1020)

This is probably not a perfect solution from the government's perspective either. Mr. Aubin already mentioned that, and I agree with him.

Frankly, we have a responsibility for official languages, and we must come to an agreement. We have 20 minutes to do it. I think we should adopt Mr. Aubin's suggestion, even though it's not quite to our liking, far from it, in fact. But I would say it is the most acceptable of the proposals. I know it isn't to Mr. Bélanger's liking either, because it gives him a lot less than what the NDP had in the previous committee, but he is willing to go along with it to reach a compromise.

Mr. Chair, we are asking the members on the government side to make a small concession as well, so that we can move forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Galipeau, you have the floor.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Mr. Chair, here we are for the third time, a few days having gone by between each meeting.

We all have colleagues on other committees. Some of us are also on other committees. What I proposed today is in line with what other committees have already agreed to, including the Standing Committee on Finance, the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology, and the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Why are we indulging in hairsplitting? I have no idea. There is unhappiness about the amount of time between the first and second turns, giving the official opposition the impression it got a bit of a raw deal. That interval, I will admit, is the result of my amending my original proposal in order to give the official opposition the first opportunity to speak in the first round. If the official opposition grows too weary during that long interval, perhaps we can go back to the original proposal. I really do think it benefits the official opposition, however. Those members told us they preferred to speak first. But that does give rise to a long interval between speaking opportunities, as they have noted.

The proposal I put on the table today is not unusual. It has already been agreed to by a number of other House of Commons committees, including not just those I mentioned, but others as well.

If you don't mind, Mr. Chair, I would like to put the amendment to a vote, so we can settle the matter once and for all and get on with it.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1025)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Galipeau.

If we're not going to come to an agreement in the next 20 minutes, I'm not sure what we're doing here.

As well, I have six speakers on the list, so if we don't come to an agreement and somebody demands a meeting under Standing Order 106(4), I will call it, obviously, as I'm bound to do by the standing orders of the House, but it is going to be a huge inconvenience to everybody. The chair will call the meeting at the chair's convenience, because I've been sitting through three of these meetings now, and I'm going to be calling it within the rules as provided by the Standing Orders. If people have to come halfway across the country or all the way across the country to get here, it will be at my convenience, because I've sat through three of these meetings and members on this committee have not yet come to an agreement on the rounds of questioning, while other committees have.

Being forewarned is being forearmed. I just want to make sure members are aware of that.

We're now going to Mr. Menegakis.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: The guiding principle behind our proposal has always been fairness and respect for all of the parties and all of the members here.

I want to respond to what Mr. Bélanger said. At no time in our discussions did we decide that we were going to cut the Liberal Party out of any round. Our strategy was simply based on the fact that there are 11 members here, and every single one of those members should have an opportunity to speak. If somebody is going to be cut off because of lack of time, it will be the governing party and the opposition party, and not the third party, which has one chance to speak because they have only one member here. That was the guiding principle behind our discussions. Everybody speaks, all 11 people.

To be fair to Mr. Bélanger, since he's the only one here representing his own party, he speaks in the first round, which

gives him an opportunity over a lot of the members who only get to speak for five minutes instead of seven. There was never any discussion about winning this point or losing this point. We just said we'd sit down and give everybody a chance to speak, and then we'll start over again.

I reject, Mr. Chair, any suggestion that we don't want to come to a solution or that there's an impasse or that we don't want to compromise. We are compromising. We feel that it's standard, if you will. It's common sense. It's common sense to allow everybody to speak and to allow everybody to speak once in the first two rounds, and then we repeat those rounds all over again.

We're starting, in keeping with tradition, with the opposition party asking the first question. I don't see why it has now become a question of who finishes one round and who starts the other round and that kind of stuff. We have to bear in mind what happens at the end. There's a reality here, and we can't hide that.

I listened very carefully to what Mr. Harris had to say: if it goes to four rounds, two of us get cut out. We're accepting up front that if it goes to the last three speakers, two of us are going to be cut out, not one of you. If you want to go four, five, or six, that kind of logic doesn't make sense. If we have no rounds, nobody speaks.

I think it's a good compromise. It's on the table. Everybody speaks. Everybody has an opportunity to say what they want. If we don't have enough time, we get cut off at the end more than anybody else. I don't see why you're positioning this as us being stringent. As Mr. Harris said at one point, we represent 60% of the population on this side, and you represent 40% on that side. There are two parties on that side. There's no coalition here. We haven't mentioned that word. Mr. Harris can't speak to 60%. He doesn't represent 60%.

There are 11 members here. To give everybody an equal chance to speak is fair. It's equitable. It's balanced. We can try to present and twist and turn and look at this thing left, right, and centre, Mr. Chair, and I have no problem if you call a meeting every single day from now until Christmas to resolve this thing. We're not going to be budging on a question of very strong principle, which is that we allow every member here an opportunity to speak once before we start again with the second round.

To allow somebody to speak more than once is not fair to anybody else. It's not fair to any parties. It's not fair to the parliamentary system. It's not fair to the standard business practices that I think a committee like this should employ to guide it every day and in every session we have.

• (1030)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Monsieur Bélanger.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to underscore a few points. We have heard that other committees have agreed to this approach, and that may very well be true. Other committees, however, have also agreed to different approaches.

I have been told that, at the Standing Committee on Health, the order in the first round is: New Democrats, Conservatives, Liberals. In the second round, the order is: New Democrats, Conservatives, New Democrats, Conservatives, New Democrats, Conservatives and Liberals. That is what one committee has adopted. The principle I am trying to maintain is that each party can speak in each round. The same thing was accepted in government operations—*government orders*—I'm sorry, legislative affairs. If we are looking at other committees to see which direction we should go in, we should look at them all, because there are some where this principle has been observed.

As for what Mr. Menegakis has just said, the new aspect that the government is trying to have accepted is that everyone can speak, and we accept that. Perhaps there is another way of doing things to be considered, and I know that we will have to go back to something that has already been decided. We could reduce the time allocation. If we are afraid that some opportunities to speak at the end of the meeting will be cut off, we could reduce the speaking time. So someone would have to do the math—the clerk, perhaps—to decide which round to reduce the time in. We could reduce the time in the first round from seven minutes to five, as has been done at this committee for a long time, or we could even reduce the time in the second round to four minutes. We would have to do some calculations to see what could be done. If the fear, the concern, is about the time, if we are afraid that some people would have no time to speak, another possibility would be to agree to have two options, two speaking orders with different time limits, one for one-hour meetings and another for two-hour meetings.

Once again, I can be flexible in an attempt to get the principle accepted. Let me give you an example, Mr. Chair. Perhaps you have heard of it before. I agree that it is maybe not the best example, but nonetheless, it is a real one. Let me give you the distribution of the parties in the 37th Parliament. There were 173 Liberals in the majority government; there were 66 from the Reform Party making up the official opposition. There were 37 from the Bloc, 13 New Democrats and 12 Progressive Conservatives. This is the speaking order that one committee adopted: the Alliance, the Bloc Québécois, the Liberal Party, the New Democrats and the Progressive Conservatives. In total, the Liberals, who had seven committee members, had 12 minutes. There are six of you now and there were seven of them, including the chair. The Alliance got 12 minutes, the Bloc Québécois got 12 minutes, the New Democrats got 12 minutes and the Progressive Conservatives got 12 minutes. So each of the parties got 20%. I am giving you this example to illustrate how the majority went about safeguarding other principles, such as giving each party the chance to speak, and such as an acceptance by the government party that, in a committee, opposition parties had a different role from theirs. I go back to what I said in the debate today: one of the fundamental roles of Parliament is to ensure that the government is held accountable for its actions and its decisions. That is also the case in the committees.

Gentlemen, as you deliberate, and as you dig in your heels to insist that you want one way and no other way, consider how things have been done in the past. This committee has evolved. I could tell you about the same committee in the 38th Parliament. Yes, things have evolved and the percentages for the governing party have increased. But they have never equalled the percentages for all the

opposition parties combined—never. That is what is being proposed at the moment.

● (1035)

Perhaps it is not deliberate, I am making no accusations. But what you are doing could lead to the erosion of some of the fundamental principles of Parliament. It is dangerous.

Precedents are created, perhaps by accident, perhaps by design, I do not know. We have to be careful about that. I have given one example, and I am going to repeat it so that I am sure you understood.

When our party had a majority, it had seven members, just like the Conservatives today. All opposition parties could speak, even those with only 12 or 13 members. They were given the same amount of time. The second round was similar to the first, as I was saying just now. All parties had a right to speak in the fourth and fifth rounds. I am not talking about the third round. I can give you a copy of it, if you like; these are all facts.

I hope that Mr. Gourde is listening because he has a role to play as a representative of the government that has to make sure that both chambers and their committees operate properly. I agree with Mr. Julian, who recognized that the government party and the third party have duly elected representatives in regions with official language minority communities. He talked about the need to recognize and to respect certain principles, and the request for everyone to be able to speak has been accepted. I will come back to that question.

I feel it is a question that must be asked. Perhaps we should ask Mr. Gourde, or all members individually. Since you are insisting that each member of the governing party be able to speak, for that is what you are doing, would you be interested in adding another mechanism that would allow each member of the committee to speak? You will be protected. When the time comes to count heads, the parliamentary secretary would probably be the one to speak, unless you agreed otherwise. But after that, it would have to be required for the other members, like Mr. Weston, Mr. Lauzon and Mr. Galipeau to have the chance to speak. We are not talking about that; we are just talking about the governing party.

If you want to take the principle you are suggesting to its conclusion, you would have to include a rule stipulating that every member will speak. Unless, as Mr. Harris was saying just now, we do not want to lose the right to give up our right to speak. We have to give that right, so that Mr. Lauzon has to give up his right to speak so that Mr. Gourde can speak for a second time. Then Mr. Weston would give up his right to speak so that Mr. Gourde can speak for a third time.

If you take the principle you are suggesting to its logical conclusion, it would have to be written into the committee rules. I am going to think about it because we will have the time to include a rule like that, perhaps not before the end of this meeting, but at the next one. If we want your principle to be observed, we will have to make sure that it is done in the right way.

● (1040)

The Chair: I am an expert at summer meetings.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: You are indeed, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: When I was chair of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology, I believe I called about 12 meetings in July.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes, I went to two of your meetings, I spent a whole day there.

The Chair: Who said the meeting would be during the day? It could be at night.

I am joking.

Your turn, Ms. Michaud.

Ms. Éloise Michaud: I find it interesting that we are giving so much importance to the principle that each person must speak and that we are defending it to this extent. I actually share Mr. Bélanger's concerns that we may ask for it as a principle but not really apply it. That is an interesting possibility to consider. You never know.

I also find it quite relevant to indicate what other committees have done and how they have decided to operate. It is up to us as a group to establish our own operating rules, ones we feel comfortable with and that allow us to work better as a team. Previous traditions and ways of working at this committee, in my opinion, were principles that helped to establish more respect, more openness and more collegiality. At the moment, there is an attitude of resistance. It seems a lot like partisanship, which is not really necessary when we are dealing with a subject like official languages. It seems that, in the view of my opponents, my position is not particularly relevant. But I am still going to continue.

Mr. Peter Julian: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Michaud is making a very interesting presentation, not to say an impressive one. But I find that my colleagues opposite are not giving her the respect she deserves.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

Just make sure that whatever conversations are going on are below audible levels.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor.

Ms. Éloise Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We saw people asking for attention earlier. I am asking them to show me the same respect. Mine is the only female perspective that you can get here.

As I was saying, the subject of official languages goes beyond partisan concerns. We all have a stake in helping official language minority communities expand and develop. We should work towards that and take concrete action. The presentation before us really involves all parties. I think that we should rally to its support. We are all ready to accept some things we do not like. The other side of the table should do the same.

Thank you for your attention. I really appreciate it.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Michaud.

We have one minute left in this committee, so we're either going to call these votes if debate has collapsed, or we're going to continue to debate.

The next speaker is Mr. Julian. Before I give the floor to Mr. Julian, I will just put it to members of committee that we have one minute left. We could conduct and conclude this meeting in two votes, or we could continue debate. I just wanted to be clear about that.

On a point of order, go ahead, Mr. Galipeau.

• (1045)

Mr. Royal Galipeau: I know there have been complaints about our chatting here, but it was all in the spirit that Mr. Julian has been trying to engender, which is compromise. I'd like to propose a compromise, which is that the system I have proposed be put in effect for the fall session. It would not be for four years but for a tryout of two and a half months, for the fall session, and we would review it afterward.

If you guys are willing to go along with this, we can solve it right now.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Galipeau.

Mr. Julian, do you have a comment before I adjourn the meeting?

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, it's not really a compromise.

Before I speak, I would like to offer that if Mr. Bélanger did propose that we could look at another format for an hour-long meeting and if the ministerial party is willing to accept the amendment of Monsieur Aubin—

The Chair: I'm going to interrupt you as chair. There is no clear consensus here.

The meeting is adjourned.

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