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Chair

Mr. David Christopherson

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP)): I call to order this meeting of the public accounts committee.

Monsieur Caron.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Before we start with the agenda, I would like to present a motion.

Since the Standing Committee on Public Accounts is one of the main committees for monitoring the government's activities, I would like to present a motion asking that the meeting be held in public today, so that we can be publicly accountable for our actions.

So the motion is that today's meeting be held in public.

[English]

The Chair: Right.

I have a motion that this meeting continue in public. That motion is in order. There's no debate or amendment.

All in favour of that motion, please indicate.

(Motion negatived)

The Chair: So the next order, Mr. Saxton....

What?

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Mr. Chair, before anything further proceeds, we have not entertained a motion to go in camera; we've just simply entertained a motion to remain on the public record.

The Chair: Correct.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: So we are on the public record.

The Chair: Correct.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Before any further business proceeds, there was an agreement achieved at the steering committee. You may recall that there was an offer made, and accepted, for the Auditor General of Canada to appear before the committee today. The offer was accepted by the Auditor General.

Subsequently, I believe you, Mr. Chair, for various reasons had to ask the Auditor General not to appear today, but we agreed amongst ourselves that, at a bare minimum, we'd ask the Auditor General of Canada to appear before us on October 5 of next week. There was an

agreement taken amongst us that we would pass a motion to that effect.

The Chair: Yes, and it is contained in the second report of the steering committee that is in front of us. As soon as I get to the report, that's the first item of business, and I've assured you that you have the floor at that time.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: You're a good man.

The Chair: Well, we'll see about that.

Mr. Saxton, you had your hand up, sir.

Mr. Andrew Saxton (North Vancouver, CPC): Mr. Chair, I would like to propose that we now deal with Mr. Byrne's proposal that we go ahead with the motion, which was agreed upon at the steering committee, that we have the Auditor General come on October 5. We would support that motion.

As you recall, it was originally proposed by me in camera. This shows the government's commitment to have the Auditor General come here and report on the spring report.

So we would like to support that motion.

The Chair: Okay.

I will afford Mr. Byrne the opportunity, with your indulgence, to actually move it and to speak.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: It sounds good. I think we need to do that post-haste.

It's unfortunate we couldn't have the interim Auditor General today, as was originally planned, but we sought and achieved the compromise of at least October 5.

The Chair: Okay.

Is there further debate?

Monsieur Caron.

Mr. Guy Caron: I would be in agreement as well.

[Translation]

It's also unfortunate that the Auditor General could not be with us today. So I would like it if we could have him here on October 5.

[English]

The Chair: Very good. Thank you.

Is there further debate?

Yes, Ms. Bateman.

[Translation]

Ms. Joyce Bateman (Winnipeg South Centre, CPC): Mr. Chair, I am also very pleased with the compromise we have come to together.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. I won't say it came easy, but we did get there. That's what matters.

The floor is open for further debate.

Hearing none, I'll put the question. All those in favour of the motion, please indicate.

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

The Chair: The motion is carried unanimously.

Mr. Saxton.

• (1535)

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Also in steering committee, we made an agreement that we would have the committee schedule a meeting today, September 28, and, if necessary, Monday, October 3, to finalize the routine motions. I would like to put that motion before the committee right now as well, to be voted on.

The Chair: Am I correct, then, in assuming that you're moving item two on our second report?

Mr. Andrew Saxton: That's correct.

The Chair: Okay.

That is duly moved. Is there any debate?

Hearing none, all in favour of the motion, please indicate.

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

The Chair: The motion is carried unanimously.

The floor is open.

Monsieur Caron.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Caron: I would now like to move on to the notice of motion that was tabled on Monday and that was duly recorded with the clerk. I would like to propose it.

[English]

The Chair: I want to let Monsieur Caron know that now would be an appropriate time. If he chose, he could move his notice of motion now and we would debate it.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Caron: That's what I'm doing now.

[English]

The Chair: The motion is moved. Is there any debate?

I'll give Monsieur Caron a chance to speak on his own motion and then I'll come to you.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: I'd like to discuss something very quickly ahead of time.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Since we are now going into committee business, I would like to move that we go in camera, as we normally do.

The Chair: I gave Monsieur Caron the floor. When you have the floor—

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Mr. Chair, you just gave me the floor, and I'd like to move that we go in camera, since we are now dealing with—

The Chair: No, I gave you the floor to give me some information.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Since we are now dealing with committee business, I propose that we go in camera, Mr. Chair, and we should take that to a vote at this time.

The Chair: I know you should, but I gave the floor to Mr. Caron and he has the floor to move his motion.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Mr. Chair, my microphone is on, which I assume means that I have the floor.

The Chair: Well, it doesn't. I decide when you speak.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Is that right?

The Chair: That's right, and you have the right, as a majority, to overrule me at any time.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: You just gave me the right to speak.

The Chair: I gave you the right to say something to me. I didn't give you the right to move a motion. There is a difference. I told Mr. Caron that I would give him the floor, that his notice of motion was in order and he could move it. When you have the floor, sir, you can move whatever motion is in order.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: It's a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay.

He's going to make that a point of order, and then I'll come right over to you.

Go ahead.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Mr. Chair, I move that because we are now dealing with committee business we go in camera.

The Chair: You are entitled to put your motion when you get the floor.

Yes, Ms. Bateman.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Sir, as you know, I'm a new MP, and I understood—and perhaps somebody like the clerk could clarify this for us—that when somebody interjected and said “a point of order” and then presented a motion, that would take precedence over the existing conversation. Certainly that was the way we always did it at the board I served on in my community.

Could you just verify that?

The Chair: Sure. A point of order does not give you the floor to take action. A point of order gives you an opportunity to tell the chair that something is out of order here, that we're dealing with something and we should be doing other business first, that there was some kind of mistake in the speaking order. A point of order is that something in the business of order of the meeting has gone wrong and you wish to raise that. You have that, but you can't just interrupt somebody by saying "a point of order" and then move a motion and redirect the debate. There are ways to do that, but a point of order is not one of them.

Monsieur Caron, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: The notice of motion that we provided indicates that there are 14 reports, or report follow-ups, that have not yet been reviewed by the committee, or that have been reviewed but not tabled, or else they have been tabled but we have not received a response from the government.

Work was done by the previous committee on seven of these 14 reports. These reports were prepared and tabled during the previous Parliament. Unfortunately, Parliament was dissolved before the government gave a response. So this motion involves ensuring that these seven reports, which deal mainly with reports presented in the fall and in spring 2010 by the Auditor General and on a report concerning the 2010-2011 Main Estimates, are tabled again, in order to obtain a response from the government on the recommendations.

Three of the following chapters deal with aspects of the Auditor General's report that were worked on, but the committee has not yet discussed the report. Three other chapters of the Auditor General's past report deal with aspects that the committee still needs to study, and the work for that still needs to be done; mainly more witnesses need to be heard.

The last report that needs to be done deals with the report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts tabled in 2010. So the notice of motion that is being presented is very simple. In October 2011, this committee should be able to start studying these reports so that we can do the work that was started by the Auditor General and the previous Standing Committee on Public Accounts. We need to make sure that this is done in a way that blends normally with the study of the report tabled in May by the Auditor General. We must proceed in a way that is consistent with the committee's traditions, meaning that we alternate between the previous reports that still need to be looked at and the report that was tabled more recently.

So we are asking that the work start in October, without setting a specific date. This will depend on where the committee is at then, but the work must be done. That's why this motion is being presented.

• (1540)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Byrne.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The motion was originally introduced to us within the steering committee. There seemed to be good uptake for it at that point in

time. I didn't hear any objections. I'm hoping we can adopt this particular motion, the work of the Auditor General and the previous reports. Because of the circumstance of the election and other things, we weren't able to get to a lot of business. This is very important business. I'm hoping we'll be able to adopt this motion.

I certainly hope, Mr. Chair, that as a public oversight committee, given that we've already had an initial review of this particular motion in an in camera session in the steering committee, we don't adopt any motion at any point in time today to move in camera. We're a very public body, and I hope we stay very open and visible to those who are following our actions and deliberations. Given the fact that as a public oversight body we have a very important role in the function of accountability within the parliamentary system, I'm hoping we stay on the public record for the rest of the afternoon at the very least.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next is Mr. Dubé.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to support the motion and the comments of my colleagues on the importance of continuing the meeting in public and of discussing this motion.

I think that everyone can agree that we are working on a committee that aims to ensure transparency, because the government must be accountable for the way it spends money. This speaks to the values of all members, all parties combined.

However, if we leafed through these reports, we could easily understand that it is important to continue the work, given the amounts of money invested. I'm thinking, for example, of chapter 3 on the restoration of the Parliament buildings. It is worth continuing to look into that. Enormous amounts of money have been invested in this. When that kind of money is at stake, Canadians have a right to know what the money is being used for.

We could very well continue this work in public.

[*English*]

The Chair: *Merci.*

Mr. Hayes.

Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC): Thank you.

With the election, much has changed. These issues dealt with the 40th Parliament, which we're no longer in. I'm a new member of Parliament, so I have to speak from the perspective of a new MP. I was not privy to the decisions leading up to the request for studies and reports. I think that puts me at a disadvantage. Without having had a chance for input as to the need for the reports in the first place...we're here because we have a certain level of expertise. I'm probably on this committee because I'm a CGA. I'm not sure I would have agreed to any of those reports. Things have changed rather significantly.

To me it makes much more sense that this new committee move forward on issues of current concern rather than retroactively looking at studies and reports that were driven by a committee that had a completely different makeup in this particular committee. It makes no sense to me. And this is not precedent setting. I spent three terms on city council in Sault Ste. Marie, and when a new council came in we dealt with new and current issues. We didn't deal with issues of the past. That was the reason you had a new council.

Furthermore, we barely have enough time to address the work currently before this committee. We have the Auditor General's spring and soon-to-be-released fall report. We have a new Auditor General to review. We have the public accounts to study in November. As you have mentioned, there are several delegations who are looking to meet with members of this committee. There's just not the time to be looking at these. We need to be looking forward as a committee of this makeup. I'm opposed to the motion put forward.

Thank you.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hayes.

Mr. Saxton.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

With all due respect to comments that were made by opposition members, I would like to say that it is common practice in this committee that when we're discussing committee business we do so in camera. It's certainly something that is very common and it's something we need to do. Therefore, at this point in time, I would like to put forward a motion that we go in camera at this time.

The Chair: Thank you.

The motion is in order. It's not debatable and it's not amendable. I'll put the question immediately to the committee.

(Motion agreed to)

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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