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• (1315)

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Miriam Burke): Honourable members, I see a quorum. We can now proceed to the election of the chair. Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the chair must be a member of the government party.

I'm ready to receive motions for the chair.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): I move that Scott Reid be nominated as chair.

The Clerk: Are there any further motions?

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

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare Mr. Reid duly elected chair of the subcommittee.

Before inviting Mr. Reid to take the chair, if the subcommittee wishes, we'll now proceed to the election of the vice-chairs.

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

[Translation]

I am now prepared to receive motions for the position of first vice-chair.

[English]

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): I'd be delighted to nominate my colleague and friend Wayne Marston to be the vice-chair.

[Translation]

The Clerk: Moved by Mr. Cotler that Mr. Marston be elected first vice-chair of the committee.

Are there any further motions? No?

[English]

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

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. Marston duly elected first vice-chair of the subcommittee.

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

Mr. David Sweet: I feel that this is almost unnecessary, but Mr. Irwin Cotler would definitely be the one.

The Clerk: Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. Cotler duly elected second vice-chair of the subcommittee.

I now invite the Chair to take the chair.

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Just give us a minute. The clerk and I will have a little conclave.

What we're going to do, if there is no objection, is to pass around the routine motions that were used in our last Parliament by this subcommittee. I assume nobody objects?

These may, if the subcommittee chooses, serve as a template for what we do this time.

While we're waiting for that, I just want to ask members of the subcommittee to deal with an issue that's always been a little bit of a problem for us, and that is picking the right time for all of us to meet. In the last Parliament, we met from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I guess that by default that is what we're doing this time around. But it may not be the most convenient time for members, and it's reasonable for us to have a discussion on this. Our experience was that the discussion on that was itself very time-consuming.

So what I'm going to suggest is that everybody sit down and the those who find this current time problematic submit to the clerk the times that do and don't work for them. Obviously, I'm hoping that this will be conveyed to Mr. Hiebert, who isn't here today because this time is problematic for him.

The clerk will—and I don't envy her in this role—seek to come back with a range of different options. Hopefully out of them we will arrive at something that works for everybody or that is not, at any rate, hugely problematic. It could be this time; it could be a different time.

Please get those to her as soon as possible so that we can have that discussion either at our next meeting—or offline, between meetings, we can bounce options back and forth.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Both meetings.

The Chair: Right now.

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): This isn't an appropriate time?

The Chair: Let's leave it to be done separately.

In the last Parliament, these were the routine motions that were used. I think everybody has two sheets. One says "Principal Routine motions, *Principales motions de régie interne*". The second one says....

Mr. David Sweet: We have principal routine motions, but we don't have anything else.

The Chair: All right. Just wait until the second sheet gets passed out.

You've now got the two lists. The one that says principal routine motions is basically the standard, one-size-fits-all proposal that is put out for all committees to consider. The routine motions adopted from the last Parliament were the ones we used last time.

There are a couple of suggestions that the clerk has made on her own. If I've got this right, she thinks these suggestions might be useful to add to the routine motions we adopted last time. I'm saying this all by way of pre-empting a possible motion that someone may make to adopt all of the rules from last time.

Do you want to go ahead and mention what those are?

• (1320)

The Clerk: Sure. The first would be....

Actually, wouldn't it be better if we just go through them and then when we get there—

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Marston, were you going to say something?

Mr. Wayne Marston: What I was going to say is that I'll move the previous rules that we had, and then amendments can be added to that.

The Chair: All right. That's in order. So we have a motion on the floor.

Mr. Marston is proposing that we adopt the rules we had last time. He then makes a further suggestion that having done that, we would be able to discuss the proposals that the clerk has and go through them one by one.

First of all, is there debate on that?

Mr. David Sweet: There is no debate on it, but can we go in camera then, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: We have a motion to go in camera. That takes priority. That's a simple yes-no vote.

All in favour of going in camera?

Some honourable members: Agreed.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

• (1320)

(Pause)

• (1335)

[*Public proceedings resume*]

The Chair: Mr. Sweet, you indicated you had an item of business.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to say that, of course, I'm grateful to my constituents for trusting me again and re-electing me, and I'm certain that's the case with every member of Parliament who's here. There's one member of Parliament who isn't here, who did some great work with us, and we developed a very professional relationship. I would like to make it known that we will miss MP Mario Silva at our future meetings. He was one of the great examples of our working in a conciliatory fashion. He definitely had a big heart for human rights. He was a big champion in the last weeks of our meetings of the Christian minorities persecuted around the world.

I want to put on the public record my expression of gratitude for his work and, of course, my best wishes for him in the future as well. I would also make it public for the members as well that we do have him as our main speaker at the national interfaith breakfast that's coming up in celebration of the 30th anniversary of the United Nations declaration against religious intolerance. I'm certain he'll be a good keynote speaker.

I wanted to say that, Mr. Chair. Thank you for the opportunity.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Does anybody else have items of business? If not, I have something.

Professor Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: I want to share the same sentiments as David did. I think we will all miss him here as a colleague, friend, and contributor to the human rights agenda.

In fact, as I mentioned to you before we began, one of the items I'm going to propose—and I suspect it was inspired by Mario—is that we look at the plight at this point of Christians, particularly what is happening to the Coptic community in Egypt, what is happening in Iraq, and what is happening in Iran. Sometimes it's under the radar screen, and I think we need to look at it. The upcoming anniversary is a good point of departure for that purpose.

The Chair: Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I want to echo the sentiments on Mr. Silva. He was a major contributor to this committee.

I have one other thing...but I've lost my train of thought because I spoke about Mario. I'll have to come back to you. It just flew away.

The Chair: Interrupt me if you want to get back on that, Mr. Marston.

I thought I might take the opportunity to do a couple of things before we wrap up for the day. First of all, I welcome back old members, the previous members, of the committee. That includes Mr. Hiebert who, unfortunately, isn't here with us at this moment; Mr. Sweet; Professor Cotler; and Mr. Marston. Second, I welcome the new members of the committee. We're glad to have you here.

I'd like to take a minute to talk about how this subcommittee has worked in the past, about the culture that has developed. The culture was there before I arrived at this subcommittee, and I arrived in the 39th Parliament. So it was there when the guiding spirits of the committee, at the time, were Professor Cotler, and Wayne—who I think was here at the time—Mario, and Jason Kenney. Among them they developed a culture, which regrettably is unique on the Parliament Hill, of working by consensus, avoiding votes, and avoiding confrontation when possible. It's not always possible but they concluded, very rightly, that the nature of the work we do is not partisan and that we should do what we can to avoid having this committee develop into what happens in some other committees, where everything becomes a proxy battle for partisan advantage. That can only be maintained through the personalities of the people who are here. I think it just takes one or two people changing for that whole system to break down. It has worked phenomenally well. We are quite literally the only subcommittee or committee that functions that way.

This does not mean that the rules of the House are suspended. In the last Parliament, the whip of the Bloc Québécois was concerned enough, on hearing how our committee operated, that he felt we were trying to unilaterally suspend the rules and he came by to sit in on a meeting. We were able to reassure him that wasn't the case. Anybody can, at any point, interrupt—not interrupt, but politely insist on their rights as a member of Parliament, which include the right to call votes, introduce motions at certain times, or move away from the consensus model. There are times when that just speeds things up. Maybe we're not coming to a consensus and, as chairman, I'm very reluctant to be the one to initiate a break from the consensus model. I want one of you to do that job, so one of you has to say that maybe we should move away from consensus and have a vote. But consensus works well.

I see Mr. Marston, so I'll stop there.

• (1340)

Mr. Wayne Marston: I have two things to say, including my last point, which I remember now.

I agree with the consensus model. It's worked very well. Everybody's heart around this table is in the right place when we're looking at human rights around the world. We'll have those days where we don't entirely agree on a point and we may have to go to a vote, but it isn't that frequent. So I support the consensus model.

The other thing that I do remember now, Mr. Chair, was about this committee changing to a standing committee. I think it's essential. In our party we have agreement on this. We're told that the government whip is in line with our doing this. If that's accurate, let's get it done.

The Chair: There was a motion in the last Parliament. Might I suggest that if it's the will of the subcommittee to become a full committee in this Parliament, that either the same motion or a similar one be adopted at a meeting in the near future.

Mr. Wayne Marston: If we could get the previous motion brought back to us, I'd be thrilled to put it through again, because I think this is an important committee. Being a subcommittee, when you consider what the topic is, I don't think it's an appropriate position for the pronouncements that come out of this committee and their importance. We've had, as you indicated, one of our witnesses leave here and three weeks later he was murdered within his country. He saw that it was important enough to risk his life in coming to this committee.

So I think we should view the importance of the committee in the same manner. I'd love to see that go forward.

The Chair: Okay. The clerk will bring back that motion and distribute it to everybody at our next meeting.

The other thing I wanted to discuss with you was this. I tried to develop in the course of our last two parliaments a set of guidelines that might serve to guide us, and I'm reintroducing them here. They seemed to meet with approval in the last Parliament as three considerations, let's call them. As we choose the subject matter, we look at how much time we allocate for each of the topics.

The three considerations that I think will help us are, first, that we discuss topics on which we are likely to achieve consensus. One of the realities of the situation we face is that the world provides us with a smorgasbord of human rights abuses from all parts of the world, including every continent, or maybe every continent other than Australia, countries that professedly are followers of every kind of ideology. Therefore, there is no need for us to find issues that are going to divide us, when ones that might unite us are the ones that we can look at. I can't force that on people. And our history will demonstrate this, if you look back at the records of our committee and what's gone through here. When we find items on which we can have a consensus, we are more likely to move forward and get some action taken.

The second consideration, which was important in the last two parliaments, because they concerned minorities, was that we deal with items in a timely fashion. We had the extraordinary circumstance—and it worked out okay, because of the people on this committee—of actually getting part way through a very thorough study on human rights in Iran, having an election intervene, and then picking up the study afterwards. Prior to that, there had been a study on China and one on Cuba, and a similar election had intervened and the work on those was lost. So that suggests it's a consideration. This is less important from the point of view of elections, but nonetheless considering time is important.

One of the things that happens when you discuss topic A is that topic B is necessarily pushed aside or delayed.

The third item is to look at areas where we are likely to actually have some kind of influence. I don't think we want to be a talking that produces no benefit other than to make us feel good about ourselves. There are some parts of the world where Canada is a significant player and has a meaningful influence. Sometimes it's a moral influence, sometimes it's a more direct influence as a significant source of aid and donations. But whatever the case is, there are places where we are more influential and ones where we aren't. Trying to focus more on where we can actually have a practical result, produce a benefit, and actually improve the human rights of some individuals seems to me to be preferable to the alternative.

So I simply throw those out. No one is bound by those, but I thought they might be worthy of consideration.

Mr. Marston.

• (1345)

Mr. Wayne Marston: I certainly support them.

One of the things proposed last time, which we started to undertake—and I don't know whether it was Mario or you who proposed it—was that from time to time this committee might want to make a statement, as opposed to doing a full study on a particular thing. When we think of the value and influence this committee might have, there are strategic times and places when we might want to do that.

I would encourage us to revisit that and to take the time to utilize that particular way of getting a message out from this committee in support or criticism of whomever, as necessary.

The Chair: What Mr. Marston is referring to, for the benefit of our new members, is that as a subcommittee, we write and submit reports. They then go to our parent committee, the foreign affairs committee, which reviews them. A report itself is not made public until the committee has approved it, and it then becomes a report of the foreign affairs committee. That process sometimes hasn't been so bad, but sometimes it has been very slow. As an alternative, in the last Parliament...

That was Mario's idea, not mine, by the way.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I thought it might have been.

There is another side, which is the politicization. You mentioned that the Bloc was concerned about the consensus-based activity on this committee. That was one of the things that caused one of our reports to be stalled at the foreign affairs committee. They obstructed it, based on their concern about this. They didn't realize it was a genuine consensus; it wasn't gamesmanship at all.

The Chair: Is there any further discussion?

Go ahead, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: Just to emphasize that point, particularly for the new members, that means not only that the study is delayed but

also that we're bound by parliamentary rules. The report is in camera, so we can't really talk about it at all. We can talk about evidence that was given, but as far as the report goes, it's still an in camera report until they release it.

The Chair: That's right.

Professor Cotler, please.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: We succeeded in a rather unusual way, albeit reflecting our consensus, to have a unanimous report with respect to Iraq. That was then adopted by the parent committee and tabled in the House in December of last year. I guess we were overcome by the electoral process or whatever. We never moved that the House adopt the report as a whole.

I am wondering if we could get a resolution to adopt the report, because I have found that the report is looked at when other countries know about it. They know less about it than they could, because it was tabled as a committee report rather than as something adopted by the House.

The Chair: I take that, Professor, as a notice of motion to that effect.

Mr. Wayne Marston: The committee report would have been tabled on a given date. It would have had a report number.

Could not somebody from this committee move a motion of concurrence on that report, even though it is afterwards? We could move concurrence on it, and then it could be raised in the House, as opposed to it coming from this committee.

Would it be as simple as that?

• (1350)

The Chair: What I would suggest is that something like that is normally dealt with by the House leaders. They have meetings on Tuesdays. If you were to bring it up with your House leaders, they could suggest that. The House is a big machine, and we're all trained to say no to any proposal for unanimous consent, unless something has been pre-cleared.

That would be the logical way to go, if you choose to take that avenue.

Alternatively, we could take Professor Cotler's comments as a motion and bring it forward here.

I suggest we pursue both options to see which one works.

Are there any further comments?

Thank you very much. We will see you all on Thursday. Do not forget to submit your suggestions as to the time we meet and the topics we discuss. That's what we'll be talking about next Thursday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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