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Tuesday, November 20, 2012

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Chair

Mr. Larry Miller

Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

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•(1115)

[English]

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

Go ahead, Ms. Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): The letter that has just been approved—

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): A point of order, Mr. Chair.

Coming out of camera, I believe the floor should be Mr. Poilievre's at this particular point.

The Chair: Okay, but Ms. Chow was bringing up a point. I haven't heard what that point is.

Ms. Chow, what is your point?

Ms. Olivia Chow: I'm moving an amendment to the letter that is now in front of us, as we're coming out of in camera, the letter to the Standing Committee on Finance. It's the second—

The Chair: You can do that at a point, but not right now.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Okay. I'll do that before the end of the meeting then.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): There was a media report about a so-called clerical error, and I'm trying to ascertain whether that was of a substantive nature or whether it was simply a pedantic question that was affected.

I'm wondering if the clerk could shine light on whether there was such a clerical error and what it was.

The Chair: First of all, the clerical error wasn't something that came from me as chair or the clerk. That was something mentioned by one or more media types, as you noted.

I'll ask the clerk to explain it, but he called me last week. The blues did not represent exactly what Ms. Chow had said in the meeting. I was on the road at the time with poor cell service, so I had to trust what have you.

With that, if the clerk wants to explain exactly what those changes were....

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Alexandre Roger): It's as the chair said. The *Minutes of Proceedings* did not appropriately reflect the wording Ms. Chow used in her motion. After clarification, and after rereading the evidence of the committee, I came to the

conclusion that there was an error in the minutes, and I changed the minutes after informing the chair.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Just so we're clear on what the error is and what it is not, I'd like to ask a very precise question. Did you receive a document entitled “Infrastructure Funding Study Proposal” from the New Democratic delegation?

The Clerk: The entire committee got that document. It was circulated by Ms. Chow.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. In this document, it says:

4. “Penny Tax”
 - One percent municipally-levied value added sales tax....
 - Local sales taxes common in several countries in Europe, Southeast Asia and in the United States.
 - Presents an alternative to raising property taxes.
 - Referenda on these taxes (funds earmarked for local infrastructure) in the United States have largely been successful.
5. Reinvest Value Capture Recommendation by Australia Infrastructure Finance Working Group.
 - Properties directly benefiting from new/renewed infrastructure contribute to reduce costs.

The same document makes reference to a proposal of “German subsidization of local roads and transit through surplus revenues of fuel duty”.

Did your clerical error amend this document in any way, shape, or form?

The Clerk: No.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So this document is as it was submitted by the New Democratic delegation to this committee?

The Clerk: Yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Nothing in this document would have been changed or in any way affected by the clerical error to which you earlier made reference?

The Clerk: No. The only thing that has been changed is the *Minutes of Proceedings*.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay, the minutes, but this proposal was not impacted in any way by this clerical error?

•(1120)

The Clerk: No.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I note that the blues and the minutes are fairly regularly fixed after the fact. We recognize that there are errors in taking them due to time constraints, and with the reflection of time we're able to make the proper corrections. These things happen almost always with no controversy on any side of the table.

It sounds to me as if the clerical error is the kind that happens on a semi-regular basis in committees and not something that was extraordinary to this committee. Would that be accurate?

The Clerk: There are mistakes from time to time in the evidence. It happens.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Right.

The Clerk: When the clerk informs the publications directorate, they make the appropriate changes in the evidence of the committee. Some such errors can appear in the minutes, which will be changed and then better reflect what MPs have said during the meetings.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Right.

The Clerk: They do happen.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So that does happen.

The Clerk: Yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: But that is entirely distinct from the contents of the NDP “Infrastructure Funding Study Proposal”?

The Clerk: I did not alter that proposal in any way.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You received it from the New Democratic delegation to this committee?

The Clerk: Yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: And it is as you received it?

The Clerk: Yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: And it was circulated out of camera to the committee members?

The Clerk: Yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow: I want to very clearly mention, since we were talking about minutes on November 1, that the motion I moved is that “the committee consider infrastructure programs of other countries, such as Germany, the U.S. and Australia, and that the study be reported to the House of Commons”.

The document that was circulated was meant as a reference guide. That reference guide was requested from me by Mr. Poilievre, and since we were going to be studying infrastructure anyway, there was a discussion as to what kinds of witnesses and what is the scope.... I thought it would be advantageous for all members to broaden our horizon to look at what's happening in other countries. Unfortunately, some of my friends across the way did not agree with that.

But I do want to say to some members who have talked publicly about the NDP pushing for such a tax that it's blatantly untrue, and no amount of manipulation of the minutes will actually give you the sense that this is what we're pushing for.

The only thing I was doing was putting some ideas in front of the committee and have us look at the example of other countries. To try to make a big deal out of it I think is not very fair, and it's neither here nor there at this point because my motion to study other countries was defeated.

Mr. Chair, in two meetings' time we will need to figure out who will be the witnesses coming in to talk about red tape reduction,

more bidders, and the very narrowly focused discussion on infrastructure.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I take issue with Ms. Chow's reference to manipulation of the minutes.

Let me ask the clerk of the committee: did any member of the committee contact you to ask you to manipulate the minutes?

The Clerk: I would not say manipulate. I would use the word “correct” the minutes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Who contacted you for that purpose?

The Clerk: It was the member for Spadina, Ms. Chow.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Ms. Chow. Okay. That's fine. There's nothing wrong with that. That does happen, but no one contacted you to ask you to alter them or to manipulate them, or did they?

The Clerk: Not to manipulate, but to correct what was actually said during the meeting.

• (1125)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So the only person who contacted you about the minutes was Ms. Chow?

The Clerk: Yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. Again, I emphasize that she is fully in her right to do that if she believes the minutes did not properly reflect her words. But the implication that somebody manipulated the minutes is false. Nobody has contacted the clerk to ask for an alteration of the minutes whatsoever—certainly not on this side. The only person who did was Ms. Chow, in order to correct what she saw was an error.

The discussion on the “Infrastructure Funding Study Proposal” does not actually come out of the verbatim in the minutes. It comes out of a document the NDP submitted to the chair, which was circulated. Is that correct?

The Clerk: Yes.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow: I just want to be very clear. That document initially was for the subcommittee, because the chair called a subcommittee to look at what we would study after the emerging technologies one, which we concluded.

The Chair: On that, Olivia—not to interrupt you—yes, it came before steering committee. However, you did bring it out. I had it circulated, and it did come out in public to the whole committee.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Yes, absolutely.

The Chair: There are two things that seem to be confused a little bit. There's what you actually said, which is in the minutes, and based on what I've seen, they do reflect that. But it does not take away from the fact that you tabled a report with some recommendations that are public.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Absolutely.

The Chair: I just wanted to point that out.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Absolutely.

I just want to say, though, that what I tabled was really meant to guide a study to explore other examples, not that we are necessarily advocating for it. I just want to be very clear on that. It's neither here nor there at this point.

The Chair: Mr. Toet, go ahead.

Mr. Lawrence Toet (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC): Just for clarification on that, Ms. Chow was actually reading from a document, and that's when I requested.... She was reading from it as if we knew what it was, and I had no idea what the document was because I wasn't in the steering committee meeting. I requested that the document be tabled so that we could all see it. It was a document that she was definitely referencing in the public meeting, and she was referencing deeply into that document. That's why I requested it. As she was going along, I realized that it seemed to be a document that she was reading from. She was going through the process of that document.

That's why it came into the public meeting, on my request, because I thought it would be much easier, rather than listening to her read this whole document, to actually share it with us.

Thank you.

The Chair: Is there further discussion? If there's nothing else—

Ms. Olivia Chow: Mr. Chair, we will be finishing the emerging technologies study in two or three weeks, I believe. When do you want us to submit names of witnesses for the infrastructure study, to give the clerk enough time to prepare? Otherwise it becomes very rushed and people don't have enough time to prepare what they are saying to us.

The Chair: I guess my suggestion or recommendation would be that you can do that at any time, to get ready.

As for the report, the original plan was to go into it on Thursday, but translation wasn't able to be completed, so we're going to start clause-by-clause on that next Tuesday.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Okay. What are we doing this Thursday, then?

The Chair: Well, there's nothing on the....

Ms. Olivia Chow: So we don't have a meeting on Thursday?

I have a motion asking the minister to come and talk about supplementary estimates (B). I believe that in prior meetings there was discussion that he's willing to do so. Is that happening this Thursday, or don't we know?

The Chair: No. I can tell you that at this point it isn't. I don't even think he's been asked to come this Thursday.

I don't know, Mr. Poilievre, if you could.... I would think that probably at this short notice that would be a long shot.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Is the meeting cancelled, or are we still—

The Chair: I haven't officially cancelled, but, yes, unless there's business coming up that the committee wants to do, right now....

• (1130)

Ms. Olivia Chow: Mr. Chair, I know that if the committee is willing to give unanimous consent to allow my motion to ask the minister—not this coming meeting, but in the future—to study....

The Chair: To invite him.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Yes, to invite him for the supplementary estimates (B). We could just deal with it now and not have the meeting on Thursday. It makes no sense for us to.... It'll save a lot of money.

The Chair: You're asking if you have unanimous consent to deal with it today.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Absolutely, rather than Thursday, because we have no other agenda on Thursday.

The Chair: That's right.

Are there any objections to Ms. Chow's request?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: The question is to have our meeting on Thursday or just in general with the minister?

The Chair: No, to invite the minister in the future. Rather than come back here Thursday and deal with her motion, she's asking for unanimous consent, because it's not on the.... She basically didn't give the 48-hour notice, but this committee can approve that.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I would have to refrain from offering unanimous consent at this time. However, I know that the minister is aware of Ms. Chow's desire to discuss infrastructure and transportation. He's aware of that request, and I know that he tries to make himself as available as possible to the committee, as he has shown in the past.

Thanks.

The Chair: So—

Ms. Olivia Chow: Just to be clear, we will then meet on Thursday to deal with my one motion to ask the minister to come for supplementary estimates (B). Is that right?

The Chair: Mr. Coderre, do you have a point of order?

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): I have no objection to going back and forth to attend committee meetings; it's my exercise. But the parliamentary secretary is saying that the minister will be able to come and testify before us in the future. We don't need to hold another meeting to discuss a motion. Since this meeting is public, everyone heard that the minister was going to appear before the committee in the future. Saying that he will come in the future and presenting a motion to explain that he will come in the future, is the exact same thing.

I truly want to believe that we must spend time within the committee, but I find it totally pointless to come back on Thursday to discuss this motion, given that we already got an answer today. If we have work to do, I will be delighted to show up. But I am not fond of showing up just to study a bogus motion, simply to pass the time. Not only are we wasting our time, but we are also wasting taxpayers' money.

[English]

The Chair: My advice would be, and I hope you will agree with it, Ms. Chow.... This motion of yours should not take any more than two minutes. My suggestion would be, if it's okay with everybody, that before we start the report on Tuesday—you will have put your 48 hours in—because there would be time after that to invite the minister anyway, rather than bring everybody here on Thursday....

Ms. Olivia Chow: I agree, Mr. Chair. However, given that it only takes two minutes and that it's only 11:34 right now, there's absolutely no reason that we can't spend two minutes to debate whether we should invite the minister to come to talk about supplementary estimates (B). That is supposedly what this committee should do—i.e., study the supplementary budget. Isn't that right?

It is a standard motion. I want to make sure that we approve it—or not. I want a vote on it, because previously I was told that the minister didn't get enough notice. I want to make sure that he gets proper notice as quickly as possible, and if we wait until next Tuesday to ask.... We could ask formally a week before. Why don't we do it now, rather than wait until next Tuesday, given that it will only take two minutes?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Chair—

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre: I find it regrettable that we could not present this motion. Unfortunately, Ms. Chow wasn't available last time. We could have tabled this motion then and there at the meeting on budgetary matters. This is just small "p" politics, and we know how that works. The same thing is going on here. We shouldn't be breaking the rules continually to please whomever, no matter what side they are on.

If we decided that a motion needs to be tabled 48 hours in advance, there's a reason for that. I find it a little regrettable that it couldn't be tabled at the last meeting. In fact, we knew that in the ways and means, the supplementary estimates were coming and that we were going to want to meet with the minister sooner or later, regardless of what side we sit on. The parliamentary secretary just told us that the minister will attend in the future. The thousands of television viewers and listeners therefore know that the minister will appear.

I find the fact of presenting a motion just to present a motion unfortunate. We cannot achieve indirectly what we cannot do directly. The 48-hours' notice isn't working, so we ask for unanimous consent. If we don't get it, we move on to something else.

Since we know perfectly well that the minister will not be there on Thursday anyway, nothing is stopping us from dealing with this next Tuesday. The meeting is public. We need only tell the parliamentary secretary to warn the minister. I will speak to him during question period so that he can appear before us in the near future, quite simply.

•(1135)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I can confirm to the committee that the minister is prepared to discuss the supplementary estimates. It's a matter of coordinating the committee's schedule with his. That's what Ms. Chow was asking for.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Why couldn't we deal with the motion now? What is the problem with dealing with the motion and having it approved and moving forward with it?

Hon. Denis Coderre: We have to invite him, and you don't have that 48 hours. You should have done your homework before.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Yes, but there's unanimous consent.

Hon. Denis Coderre: That's your problem.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Why is it that I can't get unanimous consent for a simple request to ask the minister to come? I don't get it.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, you're suggesting that the minister would quite possibly be available to come after we've done the report?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Yes.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Mr. Chair, isn't there a deadline, though? The supplementary budget often gets caught in the deadline.

The Chair: There will be a deadline. I'm not clear what that deadline is.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Does the clerk know the deadline? I believe it's December 1.

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): It's December 4.

Ms. Olivia Chow: It's December 4, so we will need to study the supplementary budget before December probably. We may not have enough time between finishing the emerging technologies report and the deadline by which we have to report back to the House. That has happened several times before at this committee, which is why I think it's important that we move ahead.

If the minister is free next Tuesday or Thursday, between now and December 4, surely he can find the time to come.

The Chair: I can't disagree with you about timing, but Mr. Coderre did have a point too, that you could have brought this up at the last meeting. You could have also given 48 hours' notice prior to today.

Is there any further discussion?

The meeting is adjourned.

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