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—
Chair

The Honourable Michael Chong

Standing Committee on Official Languages

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•(1530)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)): Welcome to the third meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. The date today is Wednesday, November 6, 2013.

On our agenda today we have committee business. We are going to discuss the routine motions and the planning of our future business.

[English]

This is a point of clarification, because members asked me to clarify what the chair's interpretation would be of the following motion if it were to be adopted:

That one copy of the transcript of each in camera meeting be kept in the Committee Clerk's office for consultation by members of the Committee.

The chair will interpret it in a way that most committee chairs interpret that motion, which is to say that it would include both members of the committee and a designated staff person. However, if a designated staff person wishes to see the transcript, the member needs to send an email to the clerk personally authorizing that staff member to take a look at the transcript.

That's clear now, so we'll continue debate on the following motion:

[Translation]

That one copy of the transcript of each in camera meeting be kept in the Committee Clerk's office for consultation by members of the Committee.

Mr. Gourde, the floor is yours.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair,

If I understand you correctly, even though it says "members of the committee", it implies that any staff member designated by a member of the committee can go and consult one of those documents in the clerk's office. However, that person cannot take document away. Can he take notes?

The Chair: He can take notes, but he cannot copy it word for word.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Okay.

The Chair: The member also has to send an email to let the clerk know that his assistant is authorized to read the document.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: So it can be an email or a signed letter. Basically, it is a proxy.

The Chair: Exactly.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Okay. As long as we understand each other.

This present motion is interpreted that way, even though it is not written that way. Is this the same motion used in other committees?

The Chair: Yes, but not in all committees.

[English]

On most committees, that's the way the rule is interpreted.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Okay. So we are not changing something that has already been established.

[English]

The Chair: Is there further debate?

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): I don't have it in front of me. Could you just read it in English, please?

The Chair: That one copy of the transcript of each in camera meeting be kept in the Committee Clerk's office for consultation by members of the Committee.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Do we have any further motions for consideration?

Mr. Gourde.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a motion about the questioning of witnesses. Here it is:

That, at the discretion of the Chair, the witnesses from any one organization shall be allowed 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 the order of questions shall be as follows:

for the first round of questioning: Official Opposition, government party, third party, government party;

for the second round of questioning, the government party members and Opposition members shall alternate in the following fashion: government party, Official Opposition, government party, Official Opposition, government party, Official Opposition, government party; based on the principle that each committee member should have a full opportunity to question the witness.

If time permits, further rounds shall repeat the pattern of the first two at the discretion of the Chair.

•(1535)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gourde.

I feel that the motion you have made is exactly the same as the one we passed in the first session of this Parliament.

[English]

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The motion is adopted. Are there any further motions?

Monsieur Gourde.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: If we have to add dissenting or supplementary opinions to committee reports, here is a motion that allows that: That any member of the Committee be entitled to submit a dissenting or supplementary opinion to any Committee report in accordance to the Standing Orders of the House, provided that it is no more than five (5) pages in length and submitted electronically, in both official languages, to the Clerk in the 48 hours following the adoption of a report; and that 48 hours' notice be calculated in the same manner as for the House.

The Chair: Thank you.

You have a copy of that motion on the third page of the document that the clerk has distributed.

[English]

Is there any debate on this motion?

(Motion agreed to)

[Translation]

The Chair: Are there any further motions?

Go ahead, Mr. Gourde.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I have one last motion, Mr. Chair.

That, in relation to Orders of Reference from the House respecting Bills,

(a) that the Clerk of the Committee shall, upon the Committee receiving such an Order of Reference, write to each Member who is not a member of the caucus represented on the Committee to invite those Members to file, in a letter to the Chair of the Committee, in both official languages, any amendments to the Bill, which is the subject of the said Order, which they would suggest that the Committee consider;

(b) suggested amendments filed, pursuant to paragraph (a), at least 48 hours prior to the start of clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill to which the amendments relate shall be deemed to be proposed during the said consideration, provided that the Committee may, by motion, vary this deadline in respect of a given bill; and

(c) during the clause-by-clause consideration of a Bill, the chair shall allow a Member who filed suggested amendments, pursuant to paragraph (a), an opportunity to make brief representations in support of them.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gourde.

Before we discuss this motion, I need to tell you that the clerk has distributed a copy of the motion. It is on the second page and it is in both languages.

[English]

Is everybody clear on what the motion is? Are there any questions about the motion?

Madam St-Denis.

[Translation]

Ms. Lise St-Denis (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, Lib.): I would like to move an amendment to paragraph (c) of the motion.

The Chair: Do you have a copy of your amendment?

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you. Can you introduce your amendment?

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Yes.

Paragraph (c) of the motion should read as follows:

(c) during the clause-by-clause consideration of a Bill, which is to be scheduled so as to ensure that no two clause-by-clause consideration of Bills by a Standing Committee are scheduled concurrently, the Chair shall allow a Member who filed suggested amendments, pursuant to paragraph (a), an opportunity to: participate fully in clause-by-clause consideration of the bill, subject to SO 76(5); make representations in support of the amendments commensurate to speaking privileges enjoyed by full members of the Committee; and participate in any in camera meetings.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you.

Is there any debate on the amendment?

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): I would like to speak to the amendment and to the motion at the same time, because the two go hand in hand.

Mr. Chair, from the outset, Parliament has always denied independent members of Parliament the right to participate in meetings of parliamentary committees studying bills. With unanimous consent, they may participate in those meetings and ask questions, as has happened with our committee, but they have no right to vote nor to make amendments or anything else. That has always been the tradition.

Today we have a motion that, I feel, takes away a privilege. It actually deprives an independent member of the right to put forward amendments in the same way as we all can do it. That takes away a privilege. Who are we to change a rule of Parliament?

I would like us to discuss this. It will really be a major change. All political parties have always been of the opinion that a party should be recognized in committee, so that the members of each party have the same privileges as all other members. Independent members have these privileges in the House of Commons.

Certainly, other committees have agreed to study the matter and to invite independent members to come and make presentations and provide their opinions and their impressions before votes are taken. But according to this proposal, we are inviting them to come and present their amendments to the committee; we are not asking for their opinion. I think this is an attack on the privilege that those members have. We are making decisions for them without even consulting them.

[English]

We're not even consulting them and I think that stay.... The motion is on the floor, it's here, and we say before we vote on it that we'll bring them in and hear them. We're all grown-ups. We'll hear them out with respect to the members of Parliament. After that, if a decision has to be taken, we'll take the decision.

The government still has its majority and they will make the decision, but I think it's just normal that we say if we're going to do something here that intervenes in the right of privilege of other members, that those members should be here or invited. If they don't want to come, fine. But I think we should say we'll bring them in. We'll hear them. Then after we hear them, we will make that decision.

[*Translation*]

I recommend that members of other parties consider whether that is a good idea. I would like to hear what government members have to say about it.

This is a major change. In my opinion, this change could have been made at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. Changing a rule that has existed since Parliament began is a major change. It is very significant. The party leaders should come together to discuss it. That is what the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs is for.

A new rule could even come from the House directly. I know that committees are masters of their own decisions, but, at least we would be able to see which way the wind is blowing and whether we want to change a rule like that. It does not seem acceptable to me to vote on matters related to a bill without giving those members an opportunity to come here and have their say.

It is a privilege to be a member of Parliament. Members have privileges, even independent members, because they are elected by Canadians. They have always had privileges. But now we want to take away that privilege of moving amendments...

Do not raise your hands to the heavens, Mr. Gourde. We are not in church; you will not find the Lord here.

All of a sudden, we want to deprive those members of a privilege that they already have in the House? According to this motion before us today, we are inviting them to come here to move amendments; but they already have the right to do that in the House.

• (1545)

I would like to hear what government members have to say about this. I would like to know whether committee members belonging to the government party are ready to invite independent members to tell us what they think about the motion. When they have had their say, we will continue to study it and see what happens.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Galipeau, you have the floor.

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): Mr. Chair, I listened to Mr. Godin and I did not want to interrupt him. At the start, I thought we were discussing Ms. St-Denis' amendment. But, as I paid more attention, I realized that he was not talking about the amendment before us for our consideration; he was talking about the motion itself.

So could I have a clear answer? Should this discussion be about the amendment or about the motion?

The Chair: The debate is on the amendment. I give members—

Mr. Royal Galipeau: With all due respect to Mr. Godin, I really feel that the comments I have just heard, and which I did not

interrupt, were not on the amendment but on the motion. Members should probably stick to the amendment at the moment. Then they can have their say about the motion.

The Chair: Thank you for the reminder about the rules of the committee, Mr. Galipeau. I have always given committee members a lot of latitude in discussing the matters before us.

At the moment, we are debating the amendment. So let's discuss it.

Your turn, Mr. Nicholls.

[*English*]

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On the—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Excuse me for interrupting you, Mr. Nicholls.

I agree with Mr. Galipeau, but before starting to talk about the amendment, we really need to hear what members have to say about the motion. That is why I talked about it. We can discuss the rest afterwards.

I wanted to put an end to the discussion at that point. That is the only reason I spoke to the motion. I recognize that my comments were not directly on the amendment, Mr. Galipeau; they should have been, but I just wanted to deal with the problem as a whole. In my opinion, after hearing what members have to say on the main motion, we could focus our attention on the proposed amendment. We are working on the amendment and the motion together.

That is the only reason. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Merci.

Mr. Nicholls.

Mr. Jamie Nicholls: In the presentation of the amendment, I'm having difficulty understanding how it changes the character of the motion before us. In presenting it, the member of the third party didn't really clarify to members of the committee what substantive changes it's going to bring and what the intent of the amendment is. In regard to understanding why this amendment is being made to the motion, I have difficulty with the lack of clarification by Madam St-Denis.

I have problems with the motion itself as moved by the government, which I will discuss when we get to the main motion. I share concerns that are similar to those of my colleague, Monsieur Godin, in terms of how this might exclude certain members of Parliament who do not have an official party affiliation. I'm worried that this exclusion will threaten the privilege of those members to act as full members of Parliament.

As you know, Chair, committees aren't accountable to political parties. They're accountable to Parliament. I think we're starting to move in a direction that's a little bit dangerous. I'm willing to discuss this more and at length when we consider the main motion. I hope the government will give us the opportunity to debate this fully.

I would just like a clarification from Madam St-Denis on what the intent of her amendment is.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nicholls.

[*Translation*]

Do you have anything to say, Ms. St-Denis?

Ms. Lise St-Denis: No, I have no comment.

The Chair: Over to you, Mr. Dionne Labelle.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP): Mr. Chair, the intent behind the amendment is to end up making acceptable a proposal that is fundamentally unacceptable. So I am completely against this amendment. I hope that we are going to deal with it quickly, so that we can get to the heart of the matter: are we taking privileges away from members of Parliament or not?

The Chair: Do other members of the committee want to discuss the amendment? It seems not.

[*English*]

(Amendment negatived)

The Chair: We'll go back to the main motion.

Mr. Godin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Good, I am going to be able to repeat everything that has been said.

Voices: Ha, ha!

Mr. Yvon Godin: No, no, I think you have heard my arguments. I just wanted to add a few comments.

Your problem is that you do not want to see another situation like the one we had with the Nisga'a agreement. It was about an agreement with a First Nation in the west. At the time, the Reform Party introduced 471 amendments in the House. It all started on a Monday morning and ended on the Wednesday morning. Each Reform member of Parliament stood up, one by one, very slowly, day and night. That was the party whose members discovered the trick and started to use it in the House. It was so slow that Jason Kenney took a nap in the House. He had one of those little pillows you use on flights. By taking a nap, he made the front page of the *Globe and Mail*. Perhaps you do not want to see that kind of thing happen again.

The problem with independent members attending committee meetings is that they are not committee members. The committee's role is to study bills, to propose amendments and to submit everything to the House. An independent member could decide to block the work of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, for example. The way of doing that in committees is not the same as in the House. We voted 471 times on

the Reform Party amendments. People had T-shirts saying that they had voted no 471 times on the Reform Party amendments. It took three days, around the clock.

What would happen if an independent member introduced 700 amendments at the committee and we had to devote our two weekly two-hour meetings to them? The committee would be paralyzed. I feel that you would regret making this decision.

This kind of thing happens in the House, but not every day. But if an independent member started taking part in all the committees and bringing forward 500 amendments each time a bill was up for consideration, it would open the door to a situation you can hardly imagine. Excuse me, but, with all due respect, I think you are going to be opening a real Pandora's box without even realizing it.

Personally, if I was an independent member, I would assign my staff to this full-time and it would really exasperate you. You would be sorry for allowing me to attend committee meetings and to make amendments there and not in the House.

Then one of you might well have the gall to get up and propose going in camera. So then we would sit in camera for six months to hear amendments from an independent member of Parliament who had come to sit on the committee and paralyze its work.

We say that we are masters of our own actions, but the real ones are those who are going to paralyze parliamentary committees. I do not know if this has been well thought out. Sometimes pressure can be exerted in the House, as the Reform Party did, but it does not happen every day. I get the impression that the Conservatives have started being Reformers again after their convention. It looks like Reform ideas are coming back. You are really throwing the door wide open.

Independent members of Parliament, who are not part of any political party and who answer to no political party, could come here and propose not just 500 amendments—that figure I gave was very generous—but 1000 amendments. We would not know what to do in a situation like that. We would have to vote on one amendment at a time. There would be no end to the voting.

Mr. Chair, maybe you have a good idea. Maybe you are going to cut off my right to speak.

Some hon. members: Ha, ha!

• (1555)

Mr. Yvon Godin: I am looking at this and I am wondering what the problem is. You are trying to undermine something that has already taken place in the House. I am just saying that this should go to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, because it is too big. We might then say that we have not looked at it from such and such an angle. We should study this further, take a short break to consult with our party and ask ourselves whether we are headed in the right direction, if that is what we want.

Perhaps the government really does not care about the Standing Committee on Official Languages; perhaps they think it is not very important. However, it could happen in the Standing Committee on Finance. If the finance committee thinks it has authority, it is not true. An independent member could go to one of the committee's meetings and annoy everyone by introducing 1,500 amendments. The member would take their time to read all the amendments and make their arguments, and no one could stop them.

The Chair: I just want to tell you that debate on a time allocation motion has started in the House of Commons. The bell will go off at 4:20 p.m. and the vote will be held at 4:50 p.m.

We will not continue our meeting after the vote. If we have not planned the committee business or passed all the routine motions, we will resume everything after the Remembrance Day break week.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you for reminding me of the rules. You are a good chair. That said, I have the floor.

I said that 1,500 amendments could be introduced, but there might be 2,000.

Ah, my cell phone is ringing; it is my daughter. I am sorry, I thought I put it on vibrate. I know you would like me to leave and take the call. If you want to take a 10-minute break, I don't mind. However, last time one of you left the room, his motion was defeated. So I will carry on with my speech.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Can I ask Mr. Godin a question, Mr. Chair? Perhaps it will inspire him.

Mr. Yvon Godin: If it does not cut my time short, I don't have a problem with it.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: He will get the time back afterwards.

Mr. Yvon Godin: It is fine if I can continue.

The Chair: Mr. Gourde, go ahead.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Godin, you are contradicting yourself in your remarks. In the beginning, you said that this motion will take away the rights of parliamentarians, but now you are saying that independent members have too many rights because they will introduce too many amendments. That is really contradictory and I don't understand. If you could explain that to me, I might understand what you are saying about this motion.

•(1600)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you, Mr. Gourde. Please ask me that again on other occasions, because it does inspire me to talk more about the issue. I will do my best to enlighten you.

When I said that the motion takes away a privilege from MPs, I was talking about a privilege they had in the House of Commons. However, they have never had that privilege in committees, and that is how it has been since 1867. The privilege I was talking about earlier is the privilege of going to the House of Commons to express their views; that is the right to speak in the elected House, where nothing is in camera. We want to introduce that right in committees now.

I forgot to mention something and you reminded me by asking for clarifications. If you take away that right from independent members, you may well upset them and they might seek retribution. Since you wanted to take away that privilege in the House of

Commons, they could show you what might happen in committees. They might show up at a committee.

The committee rules do not allow them to sit non-stop for three or four days. Committees sit for two hours, then adjourn and come back. In the House of Commons, when we start to sit, a meeting can sometimes go on forever. That is why the Nisga'a agreement had 471 amendments. The work of the House started on Monday and continued until Wednesday morning. I remember that very well. We said no 471 times. Once that was done and over with, we continued studying the bill.

What might happen in one committee may well happen in three or four other committees at the same time. If you take away their privilege in the House of Commons and give it to them in the committee, four independent members could get together, decide to appear before three or four committees studying bills, and take over the committees.

For instance, if a committee is studying a bill on crime, which the Conservatives love, a member could appear before the Standing Committee on Justice to introduce 1,500 amendments to the bill that the government wants to adopt. An MP could simultaneously undermine the business of the finance, environment and transport committees. As a result, no committee, no bill would move forward. Is that what you want?

I suggest that you go and tell your party members that MP Godin might have raised a good point. Your political party might say that it had thought about it and it is fine. However, I don't think you have thought about it.

I am telling you, you should think about consulting with your party's leadership. It is not the end of the world. We could revisit the issue after the parliamentary break, when we are going to work in our ridings. It is really a break, not a holiday. I personally have never gone back to my riding to take a holiday. We are supposed to go back to our ridings to take care of our constituents and work with them. At the same time, we could think about this and decide whether we will move forward with the motion when we come back.

Once again, I ask the government to support our request.

Mr. Gourde, you also seem very concerned about the privilege of MPs. You said that I was contradicting myself, but I am sure you would not want to lose your privilege if you were in the opposition. You will not be on the government side forever. One day, you will be in the opposition. What you are passing today will be in effect later. This story will not be over.

Based on my 16 years of experience in the House as an MP, it was the Reform Party of Canada that came up with this tactic. Once the door was open, we saw that it was an option. However, it has not been used that often. Instead, the practice has been to have little negotiations between the House leaders and the independent members. That usually does not take very long.

In that particular case, the Reform Party did not agree and the debate continued until Wednesday morning. However, in other situations I have seen, the debate stopped. So it wasn't the end of the world.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: It happened in 2011.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, but I don't think it lasted as long.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: That was the week that had three Thursdays.

Mr. Yvon Godin: My colleague is talking about 2011. I think we debated the budget for 58 hours. There were not 200 amendments. No, it was actually the debate on getting postal workers back to work. The number of amendments was not an issue in that case.

That will happen again in the House if the government goes after unions and workers again. I was not too keen on what was said at the Conservative convention last weekend, Mr. Chair. They seem to think that workers' representatives are all demons. However, without workers' representatives, unions or workers' associations, we would be in the same situation as some third world countries where people earn \$2 an hour and do not have a pension plan or any other benefits. That is something we could discuss some other time.

●(1605)

In this particular case, we can tell that the proposal comes directly from the government because it was introduced in all the committees. We are told that committees are their own masters. We also know that political parties help their members to introduce motions in committees. However, when a proposal is submitted everywhere, we know that it comes from the party. In this case, I don't think it was deliberate. I do not say that unkindly. But I think I am right in saying that, if independent members are unhappy with the proposal, if they feel that a privilege is being taken away from them and if they want to make us pay for it, they can go to major committees where the government is trying to pass bills and shut them down at the same time, all in the same week.

If the Conservatives have not thought about that, I am sure that they will be aware of it once they read what I am saying in the "blues". It could happen. Are you ready to pay the price? In your shoes, I wouldn't want my government to tell me that Mr. Godin raised an issue, that he might have been right and that perhaps it is time to consider the issue again. That does not seem to be the case. You seem ready to take action along those lines. I don't know. I look at you and feel that you are really listening. Perhaps I have raised a good point. Perhaps you will not fall asleep during my speech.

This idea has not been fully explored. I think the government members figured that, if they allowed independent members to introduce amendments in committees, those members would stop introducing them in the House. But they did not think about the fact that the same problem could occur in committees, where they are trying to push some bills through. In some cases, when their bills go through the Senate and it takes a few days, the government becomes impatient. The Senate is there, but they wish it weren't. They feel that what the Prime Minister says should be approved right away and we should go along with it, but that is not how things work.

Imagine if we were debating a bill that the government would like to pass again and it took weeks. That will happen if it is what those members want. I repeat: it could affect a number of committees and bills at the same time.

We may have sometimes thought that independent members should not have the right to ask questions, but we must admit that the Speaker has always given them the right to speak. Since all members

are part of the House, the Speaker has always allowed them to ask questions in the House of Commons. Independent members have had this opportunity since the inception of Parliament.

I think the issue is too significant to be addressed piecemeal in our committee. Let us refer it to our experts from the Committee on Procedure and House Affairs and let us try to develop procedural regulations. There is no harm in that.

●(1610)

I know other people would like to have a turn and I would like to give them an opportunity to do so, but we still have 10 minutes. The chair said that the division bells will ring at 4:20 p.m. It is now 4:10 p.m., so we still have at least 10 minutes.

I am not sure if I made myself clear about the danger of this amendment. You don't have to agree with me. I don't want much. We should invite the independent members to appear since we are talking about one of their privileges. If we must go ahead with this motion, we should hear what they have to say. If the government changes its mind and refers the issue to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs because it thinks it is important, that is fine. We must consider what the outcome will be if our committee does the study. Perhaps that point has never been considered or raised. If we come back to the issue later, we will have time to think it through.

Other committees may suggest things, but the Conservative members reject them, saying that they received instructions from the Prime Minister's office and that they are doing what the government tells them to do. You are not losing anything if we wait until the next meeting; you have the majority. I don't know how long we will talk about this or what priority we will give it, but I just want to caution you.

Thank you.

The Chair: Are there any further comments on this motion?

Mr. Nicholls, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Mr. Jamie Nicholls: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I too share the concerns of my colleagues about procedural hijinks stalling the work at the committee. I think the question that we have to ask here, colleagues, goes to the heart of the purpose of committee work. I think it's an important question and I think this motion shows a misunderstanding of committees' purpose. As they stand right now, committees work fairly well. They're not perfect, but why should we start mixing up this system if it's working fairly well with something that, as my colleague said, could tie us up in procedural hijinks that would stall the good work of the committee?

At the last meeting we were trying to frame routine motions so they better reflect the ideal functioning and efficiency of committees. We were not trying to change the way committees function or their composition or add new elements. We were trying to better frame the best practices.

I believe this motion will change how committees function and will perhaps change the purpose of committees. It seems to me that the motion will move the privilege of a member to make amendments from the Commons to committee. There's a reason why we have an official opposition and a ministerial party represented in committee. The Canadian system of Parliament allows third, fourth, and fifth parties, if the numbers warrant, to best reflect the franchise of Canadians. The system, I underline again, is not perfect. That's why we've asked for many years for some kind of proportional representation to better represent Canadians' franchise. Some parties in Parliament are not recognized, but they receive a fair amount of the vote in Canada, and they do not get party status in the House. As I said, that's not perfect. When a million people vote for a party and they don't get representation, it doesn't reflect the way they voted.

However, that said, committees aren't accountable to parties, they're accountable to Parliament. Allowing independents to introduce amendments at committee I think is a misunderstanding of the purpose of committees. The purpose of committees is the idea of scrutiny. The U.K. studied this idea of scrutiny quite extensively and how Commons committees should scrutinize. I wish to share with members of the committee some of the findings of Westminster when it studied this very important question of the purpose of committees and the purpose of scrutiny.

They said: While there is no clear and agreed statement of what scrutiny is for, the purpose of the scrutiny committees is often described as being to “hold Ministers to account”. Certainly an important element of our work is to require Ministers and civil servants to explain and justify their actions and policies, to subject them to robust challenge; and to expose Government — both ministerial decision-making and departmental administration — to the public gaze (though some elements of scrutiny — where matters of national security are involved, for example — have to be in private). Some would argue that scrutiny, and the openness it brings, are an end in itself; others that its ultimate purpose is to improve Government. The political reality is that, individually, Members' agendas will differ.

And I underline this point. When large blocks of Canadians vote, say, Conservative, NDP, or Liberal they're voting for a program, they're voting for a set of ideas shared by a group of people.

• (1615)

Independents often strongly represent the interests of one particular riding in the country, a certain set of constituents, rather than having the national focus, as with the parties that are voted for all across the country. That's not always the case. There are certain members who get voted in by certain parties and only get one seat, and they're effectively independents in Parliament even though they represent a large body of people across the country.

To get back to the purpose of scrutiny, members' agendas will differ. Some will be keener to improve the government's perfor-

mance, others to expose its weaknesses. But collectively, committees should influence policy and have an impact on government departments and the agencies to which their functions may be devolved. This is our first objective. The extent of this influence and impact is a primary measure of the effectiveness of committees.

I said at the top of my speech that I share the same concerns as my colleague from Acadie-Bathurst. If we move the privilege of presenting amendments from the House of Commons Parliament to committee, this effectiveness of scrutiny will be affected in a negative way. It will tie up the work of committee. It will tie up the work of the ministerial party in a way that will reduce the ability for us to scrutinize legislation carefully, scrutinize ministers, and scrutinize all elements of legislation and the direction of the country.

There are other purposes of scrutiny. The reason I'm bringing this up is because I'm trying to argue to members that it's important that this effectiveness not be cut by introducing a new element, a possibly radically element, as my colleague mentioned, of independents being able to flood the committee with amendments that would make our work and our scrutiny more difficult.

As presented in this report by Westminster, which is the mother of all parliaments—that's where our Parliament gets its inspiration, and we should look at best practices across Commonwealth countries; the U.K. took the time to look at best practices—they said that while a committee's primary purpose is to scrutinize government, it is sometimes in the public interest for them to extend their scrutiny to other organizations. That's why we invite witnesses here and question them.

If we're tied up with amendments from independents, our ability to scrutinize other organizations, witnesses, who come before committee, will be affected negatively. It will allow us less time to question witnesses. It will tie us up in more procedural hijinks, and the efficiency of this committee will be affected.

Another finding is that scrutiny committees are not just involved in scrutinizing others but have to have an active role in putting issues on the agenda and acting as a forum for public debate. It's well known that certain independents have certain pet issues. In our political system, that's the way they often get attention from the public and the media. There are certain independents who are one-issue members, or they frame their interests around a couple of issues, whether it be transparency or the environment.

Chair, I'll conclude my remarks there.

I see that the bells are ringing, so I will give over the floor.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nicholls.

[*Translation*]

We will continue the discussion after Remembrance Week.

The meeting is adjourned.

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