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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, colleagues. Welcome back to Ottawa for this meeting of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development under Standing Order 106(4). Today's meeting is to discuss a motion on the state of Canada-China relations and a request to receive a briefing from our ambassador to China, John McCallum.

We're obviously here in light of the unacceptable and arbitrary detentions of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor and the arbitrary application of the death penalty against Robert Schellenberg. I'm sure I speak for all of us and all Canadians when I say that these cases are deeply disturbing and represent an egregious dismissal of the rule of law. Our sympathy and support is with all the families involved. Nothing can be more significant than the safety and welfare of these Canadians, a point that I know transcends any partisan lines.

Now, based on the request in front of us today, on behalf of the committee I've asked Global Affairs if Ambassador McCallum is available for a briefing. It's been indicated that he can do an in camera briefing for the committee tomorrow morning. I'll need the committee's direction to proceed.

Mr. O'Toole, I believe you'd like to introduce a motion to this effect. The floor is yours.

Hon. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Mr. Chair, thank you for your strong words off the top. I appreciate that.

I also appreciate the assistance in this request for the meeting today from the New Democratic Party. It's an example, as you said, of how concern for the families impacted transcends partisan politics. I agree with your quote that we're all deeply disturbed by a situation that since early to mid-December has resulted in a very concerning escalation of retaliatory actions by China with respect to our relationship.

If it's your understanding that the ambassador is available, we would like to move that we question the ambassador tomorrow on the current situation and Canada's response. My one request would be that, with thousands of Canadian families having questions about loved ones on the ground and about travel to China, the appearance of the ambassador not be in an in camera session. If there's certain information at the end of his briefing, we could go in camera for a portion of it, but I think Canadians, particularly those families contacting many of us as members of Parliament, need to hear

directly about the response by Canada on the ground through Ambassador McCallum.

I would suggest that the first part of the meeting not be in camera, and then, if there's a portion that the ambassador wishes to restrict to an in camera session, we bifurcate the meeting that way.

The Chair: Madame Laverdière, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Of course, I support this motion for Ambassador McCallum to meet with us. I also support the idea that part of the meeting should be in public. It may be important for one part to be in camera, because some information may be more sensitive. But it is important for a part of the meeting to be in public.

[English]

The Chair: MP Vandenbeld.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): I think if ever there is a time when this committee needs to have an extraordinary meeting and hear from our ambassador, this is one of those times. It is an extremely concerning situation. I'm hearing from my constituents about it. I know that Canadians are very concerned. I would echo the sentiment that this is not a partisan issue. I think for every one of us here, the top priority is the safety of those Canadians who are detained.

I am very pleased to hear that Ambassador McCallum is available tomorrow. My understanding is that he is available at 10 a.m. tomorrow. I believe that this should be an in camera meeting. I think for us right now, the number one issue is the safety of the Canadians. We know that this is very sensitive. The precedent on consular issues like this, particularly where there's so much implication that anything that is said could impact on the consular cases, is to have those hearings in camera. Certainly on security issues we have had those meetings in camera. I believe it is extremely important, particularly because Canadians are so concerned about this, that we be able to be open and frank with our ambassador and be able to hear honestly what we are doing and what we can do as a parliamentary committee.

Having said that, I have an amendment to the motion. My amendment would add the words "in camera" and "at 10 a.m.", as follows, "That the committee meet in camera on January 18 at 10:00 a.m. for one hour to hear from the Canadian Ambassador to China and consular officials on the state of affairs" and then the rest of the motion would remain the same.

I would not expect that the officials would be there to answer or make statements. They would be there in case Ambassador McCallum needed support with technical questions. I think we would want to spend most of the time we have hearing from Ambassador McCallum.

I want to just reiterate that I think we are all equally concerned. It is not a partisan issue; it is a Canadian issue. I know that Canadians are extremely concerned about this, as are we.

•(1310)

The Chair: We'll have some debate on the amendment.

MP Lukiwski, you're up first.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): I just want to underscore what my colleague Mr. O'Toole said about the need to have at least a portion of the meeting in public.

I fully agree that there may be some issues that Mr. McCallum wishes to brief the committee on that should be discussed only in camera. There may be security concerns or things that should be said only for the ears of this committee. However, I also believe that at the very least there should be a few opening statements—or at least one opening statement—from the ambassador as to the current state as he sees it. After all, he is the Canadian ambassador to China.

Ostensibly he has the ears on the ground in China, and I don't believe there is anything he would be able to tell the committee that would breach any security protocols, because it's been widely reported. The media has been all over this story. We all know that, and that's why we're hearing so much in our own constituencies.

I think Canadians, as Mr. O'Toole has said, would welcome at least a few words from Canada's ambassador to China on the current state of affairs, without breaching any security protocols whatsoever.

I think all on this committee are in agreement that if there are areas Mr. McCallum wants to brief this committee on that are highly sensitive, they should be in camera. We have a committee in Parliament that deals with national security issues, and nobody knows anything that goes on within that committee because of the security provisions and protocols in place and the sensitivity around many of the issues that committee deals with.

While I can understand the concern of this committee to have statements by Mr. McCallum in camera, I honestly believe that if there is at least something he can say to perhaps give some assurances, if nothing else, to Canadians, then that should be in public.

The Chair: MP O'Toole.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: I take issue with the amendment suggesting that the entire meeting should be in camera. I agreed with Ms. Vandenberg's suggestion that this is a Canadian issue, and so Canadians deserve to hear, at least on a preliminary basis, what the Canadian response on the ground has been.

As Mr. Lukiwski has said, perhaps there should be a statement by Ambassador McCallum outlining the situation and outlining Canadian actions with respect to the Canadians detained on security and administrative grounds, and perhaps we could have one round of questions. If there were then some information he thought was

sensitive, he could hold that for subsequent rounds, which would be held in camera.

I'd remind my Liberal friends on this committee that when the Prime Minister ran to seek the trust of Canadians, he ran on an open and transparent government. In fact, Bill C-613, Justin Trudeau's private member's bill in the last Parliament, set as a standard open government by default.

I think the default position should be that we hear from Mr. McCallum, that all Canadians hear a response from our ambassador on the ground so that families get some reassurance on Canadian action. We could have one round of questions from the three parties, and then the subsequent rounds could be held in camera, thereby allowing him to reserve sensitive information for the in camera session. I think that is a very reasonable compromise here to make sure that Canadians, through their parliamentarians, can have assurances with respect to safety.

I would add that just this morning I responded to a Canadian who said that the travel advisory was changed but that their travel insurance cannot be activated unless there is another change to a travel advisory. People are watching these things very carefully, and I think they need to hear from our ambassador, who is very well adept at appearing at committee. Perhaps that is a compromise in the spirit of working together on this.

•(1315)

The Chair: Madame Laverdière.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Actually, I agree that we should have a one-hour briefing session in camera. However, it seems to me that we should add a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting when the ambassador could speak to us publicly, in a spirit of transparency. There could be a series of questions. I do not know whether the ambassador has incredible time constraints, but, given the gravity of the situation, it is important to take the time both to speak to Canadians and to answer our questions in camera.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

MP Fergus, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First, I would like to wish all my colleagues around the table a happy new year.

Having said that, it is clearly not a happy new year for the Canadians in this particular situation in China. I feel that asking the ambassador to come and brief us is an excellent move. But we must remember that Canadian lives are at stake. This is serious. That being the case, it is very important for us to take advantage of the ambassador's presence, but also to insist that it be in camera. We have to make sure that we get all the information that can possibly be passed on to us.

The information that the ambassador could provide in public has already been provided. We do not need to hear it again here. I know that members have travelled a long way to take part in this meeting. We need more detailed information that could have repercussions on the security of Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

MP Wrzesnewskyj, please.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Invoking Standing Order 106(4) is done in extraordinary circumstances, especially when time is of the essence. It clearly applies in these circumstances, but this is a particularly exceptional set of circumstances. As my colleague Mr. Fergus has stated, Canadians' lives are at risk. There is a Canadian who faces the death sentence, and there are two Canadians incarcerated in the Chinese penal system.

I believe it's absolutely important that representatives of the people, of the Canadian electorate, have an opportunity to be briefed so that Canadians can feel secure that we are in fact doing our jobs. However, nothing should be done to inadvertently put at risk Canadian lives and the well-being of Canadians in extremely difficult circumstances. We all understand that at times during committees things sometimes inadvertently come out. We should err on the side of caution. Lives are at risk. Canadian lives are at risk.

To underline another comment from my colleague Mr. Fergus, should the ambassador feel that it would be helpful in these cases, he will have the opportunity to make public statements. This is an opportunity for us as parliamentarians to be briefed directly so that we have a clear understanding of what's happening, and so Canadians can feel at ease that we are in fact doing everything that is absolutely possible to make sure that for these Canadians who are at risk, whatever can be done is being done.

• (1320)

The Chair: Madam Laverdière.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am grateful to you for your patience in hearing from me once again.

I have difficulty seeing the problem. My Liberal colleagues want to have a one-hour briefing in camera. We all agree on that. No one is opposed. What we want is a session in public before that. We could even agree that no questions will be asked on the consular cases, given that those files are always handled with discretion. However, there are questions such as travel advisories and their impact on insurance. These are public matters, and we could ask the ambassador about them. These are matters of public interest. Service to the public is one of the ambassador's mandates. It is also our role.

No one is opposed to having a one-hour briefing in camera. We just want a public session beforehand.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

MP Alleslev, please.

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): I'd like to build on what my honourable colleague has just presented. There is no question that this is serious, and there's no question that there may be information that the ambassador can give us. We are totally in agreement with having a portion of the meeting in camera.

However, we also are parliamentarians who represent our constituents. They have come to our offices asking us questions, and they expect us to have the opportunity to represent them and to ask those questions of Canada's ambassador to China. This is the opportunity we have. That's what we have ambassadors for and that's why we have House of Commons committees. Our responsibility is to have that debate and to ask the questions that we, from our expertise and from our constituents, are charged with asking.

If the ambassador can twice have these conversations publicly with CBC reporters who have the opportunity to ask him public questions, then members of Parliament should be afforded the same opportunity. That's why we believe absolutely that there needs to be a portion that's in camera, and that there also needs to be a portion where Canadians can hear that we, as their federal government representatives, are asking the questions they want asked in a state-to-state issue of this magnitude.

The Chair: MP O'Toole.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thanks very much to you, Mr. Chair, and to all of our colleagues for sharing. We won't belabour the point. It's clear that the opposition is united in saying that we understand and agree that a portion of the meeting should be held in camera, but we feel that Canadians deserve to have a portion where they hear in public from their ambassador his statement and perhaps a few questions.

The Honourable John McCallum is well regarded by all of us here. Before he was shuffled to that role, he had always had an active interest in the Canada-China relationship. I think this is probably the most tense time in that relationship, certainly in my parliamentary experience, but also long before that.

Minister McCallum, in his final speech in the House, alluded to the fact there would be challenges in this relationship. In his farewell speech on his way to becoming ambassador to China, he said this:

However, when China and Canada have disagreed on something, and this sometimes happens, all three prime ministers I have served have drawn on this friendship to speak respectfully but frankly to their Chinese counterparts. I know this long tradition will continue.

It seems like it has not continued, Mr. Chair, because the Prime Minister, for a month and a half, has refused to speak frankly and leverage that friendship. I think Canadians need to hear—to at least a limited extent—from Ambassador McCallum on his efforts on the ground and on the decisions related to consular access to the two Canadians detained on security grounds, but also for the hundreds of families with questions about the visa status of their family members teaching or working in China. I hope this representation issue of our constituents weighs on my friends on the Liberal side and that they agree to a compromise to have part of this meeting held publicly and part in camera.

That will be my final presentation on it.

• (1325)

The Chair: Is there any other discussion or debate on the amendment? Seeing none, we will call the question.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Chair, I would like to ask for a recorded vote, please.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): The motion, including the amendment, would read, “That the committee meet in camera on Friday, January 18, 2019—

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Shouldn't we vote separately on the motion and the amendment?

The Clerk: This would be the motion as amended, including the amendment, because the wording is inside.

Would you prefer that I read out just the words to be added? Or would you prefer to have the motion in its entirety?

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I think we should vote on the amendment, where we're opposed, and then vote on the motion as amended. First, vote on the amendment.

The Clerk: Okay. For clarity, the amendment would be to add the words “in camera” after the word “meet” and also add the words “at 10 a.m. for one hour” after the date, “January 18, 2019,” and also to add the words “and consular officials from Global Affairs” after “Canadian Ambassador to China”.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 5; nays 4 [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: We shall now move to the amended motion in its entirety.

The Clerk: The motion, as amended, would read:

That the Committee meet in camera on Friday, January 18, 2019 at 10:00 a.m. for one hour to receive a briefing for the Canadian Ambassador to China and Consular Officials from Global Affairs on the state of affairs and his efforts with respect to Canadians detained in China on security or administrative grounds.

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 9; nays 0)

The Chair: With that, we shall adjourn and reconvene tomorrow morning at 10 a.m. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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