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Tuesday, February 16, 2016

—
Chair

The Honourable Kevin Sorenson

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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•(0900)

[Translation]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Caroline Massicotte): Honourable members of the committee, I see a quorum.

[English]

I must inform members that the clerk of the committee can only receive motions for the election of the chair. The clerk cannot receive other types of motions, cannot entertain points of order, nor participate in debate. We can now proceed to the election of the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the chair must be a member of the official opposition. I am ready to receive motions for the chair.

[Translation]

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.): Madam Clerk, I would like to nominate Kevin Sorenson for chair of the committee.

[English]

The Clerk: It has been moved by Ms. Mendès that Mr. Sorenson be elected as chair of the committee. Are there any further motions?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. Sorenson duly elected chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Clerk: I invite Mr. Sorenson to take the chair.

The Chair (Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Thank you very much for that. I will also pay recognition to Mr. Christopherson who was the former chair of this committee. I appreciate his involvement here and will be looking to him, I am certain, for a lot of input to this committee since he has good experience here.

I think the best thing now is to move to the election of the vice-chair.

[Translation]

The Clerk: Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the first vice-chair must be a member of the government party.

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

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Madam Clerk, I would like to nominate Alexandra Mendès for first vice-chair.

The Clerk: Mr. Godin has moved that Mrs. Mendès be elected first vice-chair of the committee.

Are there any further motions?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mrs. Mendès duly elected first vice-chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

[English]

The Clerk: 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 motions for the second vice-chair.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: May I propose Mr. Christopherson?

The Clerk: It has been moved by Ms. Mendès that Mr. Christopherson be elected as second vice-chair of the committee.

(Motion agreed to)

•(0905)

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

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: We'll carry on. Today's meeting will be very short, but we do have some housekeeping motions called routine motions that we want to pass.

The first motion is as follows:

That the Committee retain, as needed and at the discretion of the Chair, the services of one or more analysts from the Library of Parliament to assist it in its work.

We have Édison Roy-César and Dillan Theckedath here, who observed in their capacity from the Library of Parliament before. Could we have someone move that motion?

Mr. Paul Lefebvre (Sudbury, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I would like to move that motion.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The second motion deals with reduced quorum. I'll read the motion:

That the Chair be authorized to hold meetings to receive evidence and to have that evidence printed when a quorum is not present, provided that at least four (4) members are present, including one (1) member of the opposition.

On occasion, sometimes especially with morning meetings, it's important to start on time. Most of the public accounts meetings will be televised, and this allows us to begin hearing the evidence from the witness if the complete quorum is not here.

Will somebody move that motion?

An hon. member: Could we hear that motion again, please, Chair?

The Chair: Yes. It reads:

That the Chair be authorized to hold meetings to receive evidence and to have that evidence printed when a quorum is not present, provided that at least four (4) members are present, including one (1) member of the opposition.

It is the standard procedure.

Mr. Sidhu?

Mr. Jati Sidhu (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, Lib.): I so move, Chair.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Ms. Mendès.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Can we move a motion on the subcommittee on agenda and procedure?

The Chair: Yes, when we finish. We will go through the order here. Is agenda and procedure in here? Okay.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: It goes with the quorum issue a bit as well.

The Chair: Let's go through the order and we'll come back to that. I am told by the clerk that we can deal with that motion later.

On this next one, we've had some direction I guess from the past and also from PROC. It deals with the time for opening remarks and questioning of witnesses.

The routine motion is that witnesses be given five minutes to make their opening statement, and if they have additional information it should be deposited with the clerk of the committee; and that during the questioning of witnesses five minutes be allocated to each questioner as follows: Conservative Party, New Democratic Party, Conservative Party, NDP, Conservative Party, Liberal Party, Conservative, NDP, Conservative Party, Liberal Party, Conservative Party, NDP, Conservative Party.

Now, this is the last Parliament's... However, I'm willing to take any motion. What I would certainly suggest—it's in my capacity as chair to make suggestions—is that five minutes for a witness to come here is not enough. I think most other committees have adopted the 10 minutes for witnesses to appear. There may also be some question in regard to not so much the order but the time allocation.

Madam Shanahan.

• (0910)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would propose—unless that's the motion on the floor, in which case I am proposing an amendment—that witnesses be given 10 minutes to make their opening statements and that the order of

speakers be as follows: in round one, Conservative, six minutes; Liberal, six minutes; NDP, six minutes; Liberal, six minutes; and going into round two, Liberal, six minutes; Conservative, six minutes; Liberal, six minutes; Conservative, five minutes; NDP, three minutes.

The Chair: All right. Did you make that as a motion?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That is a motion. I'm going to give you a copy.

The Chair: All right. We should have some debate on this.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Oh yes, we're going to have debate.

First of all, I thought we were going to do PROC and the PROC template is to be accepted. It's seven minutes. It's exactly the way it was mentioned in the motion, but it's seven, not six. I'm hoping that's where we go. That's the template that most are using. You even referenced it, Chair, so I hope we can go easily and get by that. Otherwise, we're going to have problem there.

The only other thing I would also mention is on the witnesses. With the public accounts committee, Chair, you'll find that it's very rare that we have just one witness. Most of the time we will often have the Auditor General, the AG, here. We may have a deputy minister here, we may have an ADM, and we may have someone from an agency. It's not unusual to have six or seven people lined up, so what we did in the past was that we said five minutes was the standard time allocated for witnesses, with the ability to extend to 10. Otherwise, you're going to end up with almost no meeting by the time you hear all of the witnesses at 10 minutes each, and that 10 minutes tends to get stretched a little too.

I would ask the committee to consider the notion of five minutes with the ability to extend to 10, given the nature of this committee and the number of witnesses we have. You'll find that on average it's usually about four, I would say, but we could easily have five, six, or seven, on occasion. Anyway, I just leave that out there. That's not a deal breaker.

For the seven minutes, we're going to be here a long time if we don't go to that really quickly and say, "That fight's been had, so let's just go there."

The Chair: I don't want to hear more debate, but you'd be prepared to make an amendment, I imagine.

Madam Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I have two points on that. Having experienced the special committee on physician-assisted dying, I understand the member's point about witnesses testifying, how important it is to hear them. But I'm going to rely on the chairman and the vice-chair, the steering committee, to organize the witnesses in such a way that we're able to properly hear what they have to say and have the time to question them.

On the second point, my understanding is that while PROC has gone with a different allocation, this is the allocation that most of the committees are agreeing to. Six minutes, to me, is perfect because you gear yourself to five minutes

[*Translation*]

and then you get an additional minute.

[*English*]

I think that's perfect.

The Chair: Is there anyone else on that?

We have a motion.

Mr. David Christopherson: Go ahead. You have your motion for six minutes, and then I'll amend.

The Chair: All right. We have a motion right now for six minutes. The trouble is we're going to ask the question on the motion, then.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm going to make an amendment, and I'm going to start talking. If there's no agreement, we're going to be here a while.

I'm not accepting less than PROC. We fought like hell for that. There was a deal cut. Part of the deal in here.... You'll notice that the Liberals are getting back-to-back. I'm willing to let that go; I'll leave that to the Conservatives. That's how that came to be. There was a switch there, I say to my Conservative colleagues, whereby the seven minutes went to everyone. Right now you're allowing the government to have the floor for 12 minutes. That is an amazing feat, if you can achieve it.

I'll leave that with the Conservatives. The odds are we won't get around to the second round, so my three minutes won't happen very often. That's why I'm fighting so much for the front end, because that's the only time I'm going to get the floor.

It was fair there. There's no reason for it not to be fair here. If I haven't already, Chair, I move an amendment that we move from six minutes in round one to seven minutes, and I strongly encourage the official opposition to take a look at what they're giving the government here, with double back-to-back control of the floor.

•(0915)

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, I would entertain an amendment to her motion, whether it's a friendly amendment or just a straight amendment. We'll vote on the amendment, and then on the motion.

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, it may or may not go that smoothly.

The Chair: But that is the process—

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, the process is also that I can speak.

The Chair: Yes, so you can speak to the amendment.

Mr. David Christopherson: I can, and that's why I'm saying to you that if we can get a quick agreement here that we're going to go to the PROC model, this is going to go really smoothly and we're all going to get along fine.

If not, I intend to get comfortable here and I'm going to speak to this for some time, because what's fair at PROC is fair here. I know public accounts and fair's fair.

The Chair: What would your amendment read?

Mr. David Christopherson: My amendment would read that the opening round, instead of being six minutes, would be seven minutes. That's all for now. I leave it to the Conservatives to give some thought to the Liberals' getting back-to-back. I'm fighting for the first round.

The Chair: We have a question.

Yes, Madam Mendès.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: If we go to the seven minutes,

[*Translation*]

we would still have 14 minutes in the first round, as the order is the following: Liberal Party, Conservative Party, NDP, Liberal Party. We would have even more time than we had under the motion that proposes six minutes. I just wanted to make sure you understand that is what it will be like.

[*English*]

Mr. David Christopherson: Four minutes....

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: No, no. We will have 14 minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. David Christopherson: May I, Chair?

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. David Christopherson: It's 14 minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: It's 14 minutes. If we accept your proposal, we will have more than...

[*English*]

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, you're right. The government would get 14 minutes, I agree. I can fight only one fight at a time, and over here in the third party, it's all I can do to fight for my own little turf.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: May I finish?

[*Translation*]

According to the proposal we initially put forward, we would have 12 minutes. According to your proposal, we would have 14 minutes. I just want us to understand each other.

[*English*]

Mr. David Christopherson: I understand. It's all the more reason that the official opposition shouldn't—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: This will be the order: Liberal Party, Conservative Party, NDP, Liberal Party.

[English]

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, I get it. I'm just talking to the seven minutes.

The Chair: Is that in the second round?

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: No, I'm talking about the first round.

The Chair: Can you say that again?

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: It would be Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Liberal. That's the PROC model.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, and again, I'm fighting for the extra minute in the opening round based on the fact that I'm rarely going to get my last three minutes.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: I understand, Mr. Christopherson. I understand where you're coming from. I'm just saying, putting it on the table, this is what it looks like.

Mr. David Christopherson: No, I agree. I can't do all the heavy lifting from the third party. Again, I say to the official opposition—

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: We were there before. We were there before. We know that.

Mr. David Christopherson: I say again to the official opposition, give your head a shake here. You're about to allow, if we go with the amendment, as my colleague has mentioned, 14 minutes to control the floor. I don't know why you want to allow that.

But anyway, what I need to know, Chair—

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: But you say that's what you proposed.

Mr. David Christopherson: I understand that and I'm ready to live with it.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson's argument is based on the fact that he may not get a second round. I think that's the reason for his argument.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's a bigger problem for them than me because all I'm going to get is the opening—

The Chair: On the other hand, what the official opposition may want to consider is not just the minutes but whether it will lead to something else.

Is there any other debate on the time, because that is your motion?

Mr. David Christopherson: I need to get an indication, Chair, whether there is agreement to that, in which case....

The Chair: Well, that is what we do at a vote. You can read the—

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, that's what I'm trying to do, Chair, if you could help me maybe?

I'm trying to avoid getting caught up on this, and I'm just trying to get an indication from the government. I'm not sure who the lead is, but I'm just trying to get an indication of whether they agree or not because if they don't agree, then get a coffee because we're going to be here a while.

If we can agree that seven minutes is good, then I won't be a problem.

The Chair: Mrs. Mendès.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Mr. Chair, I move that we go with the PROC proposal, the seven-minute one, so that we can vote on it and get done with it.

The Chair: Do we have any...?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): I'll second Madam Mendès' motion.

The Chair: Okay. Are you suggesting, then, that the order change?

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Yes, I am suggesting that it would be Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Liberal.

● (0920)

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Madam Vice-Chair has just proposed that we adopt the PROC committee model with a seven-minute opening round, and I want to second that motion.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: The order is, just to be sure, from the top: Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Liberal. That's what I'm proposing. Actually this is what Mr. Christopherson is proposing, and I am moving it.

The Chair: So this motion actually has become more than just what it was originally; in fact, it's changed. Even the amendment has changed from what was originally moved.

Mr. David Christopherson: I could use a little guidance from the chair, if he could help us.

It looked like there might be a majority in support of the PROC model, and if that's the case, one motion to that effect cleans this up.

The Chair: Okay. So the motion would basically read.... Give me a moment here.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: That witnesses be given 10 minutes—

The Chair: That witnesses be given ten (10) minutes to make their opening statement; and that during the questioning of witnesses the time allocated to each questioner be as follows:

for the first round of questioning, seven (7) minutes to a representative of each party in the following order: Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Liberal;

for the second round, five (5) minutes be allocated in the following order: Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Liberal; followed by NDP, three (3) minutes.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Two minutes.

The Chair: It's two minutes there.

Mr. David Christopherson: No, it's three. PROC has three.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: It's two. It's fifty minutes in all.

Mr. David Christopherson: No, PROC stayed at three. Trust me.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: No, it was three minutes in the former proposal. It's not 51 minutes; it's 50 minutes.

Mr. David Christopherson: No, at the last minute they amended it and left it at three. PROC has NDP at three, but it's never going to happen anyway.

A voice: It is at three according to my—

Mr. David Christopherson: Can I just mention, Chair—

The Chair: Okay, let's have some order first. Let's come back. If you want to get on the speaking list here, put your hand up and then we'll try to be orderly.

Mr. Christopherson, you're speaking to the motion.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, of course. What else would I speak to?

Just in the interest of full disclosure, so we understand, the Conservatives at PROC, the official opposition, were prepared to allow the Liberals to have the lead-off, which is not usual, even though it was here at this committee last time—that was another deal made.

But at PROC, there was a switch so that the Liberals led off the witnesses when normally it's the opposition. In doing so, the Liberals then agreed to break up the run that they had, so Madame Mendès' motion that we adopt PROC will split up the Liberal back-to-back, seven-seven. Actually it became seven and six at PROC and the government agreed to let that back-to-back go in exchange for having the lead question, which they did.

That's what's here and that's why it's here. That's full disclosure.

The Chair: There is no Liberal back-to-back.

Mr. David Christopherson: Not in this proposal, no, but the government does get the lead. That is a step away from the norm, but it was part of the deal.

The Chair: Again, we're in the committee, and this committee makes the decisions.

Mr. Poilievre, did you want to speak to the motion as amended?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, I'd like to offer a friendly amendment to it, which is to move to the more traditional opening protocol. I would move that the official opposition have the first sequence of questioning and that this be the only change we make to the proceedings and House affairs procedure. Was the PROC seven minutes?

A voice: Yes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: So we would have—

The Chair: Okay, but are we dealing with two amendments?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: This would be an amendment to Ms. Mendès' motion. I don't want to be presumptuous, but I think that Mr. Christopherson's motion would be withdrawn if Ms. Mendès' motion went ahead, so we're really dealing with one motion.

Mr. David Christopherson: I think that right now there's unanimous support for the PROC template, and Mr. Poilievre now wants to make an amendment to that. I think that's where we are.

The Chair: You would want it to be as a friendly amendment, and if not, it would just be an amendment.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: If I may, Mr. Chair, we're not ready to accept that. We are absolutely ready to accept the PROC formula and the three minutes at the second round for the NDP, which would make a total of 51 minutes, but we are not ready to change the order of questions.

That is what was adopted at PROC. Everybody agreed on it at PROC, so that's what we are ready to accept.

• (0925)

The Chair: In that case, Mr. Poilievre, we can proceed with the vote, or you can just withdraw your amendment. You may want to speak to whether or not you want to move right into the vote.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Well, if I could speak to my proposed amendment, personally I've never been on a committee where the government led questioning. In 12 years in Parliament, it's just never happened.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: When the chair is opposition, normally that's what happens.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I guess I'm trying to think back to my time in public accounts. It was a long time ago. I'd have to look back at those meetings. In all the other policy-related committees, questioning is typically led by the opposition. That is my experience.

It wouldn't make a big difference to the governing party, because Liberals would get the same number of minutes of questioning as they would under the existing PROC proposal. The only difference is that the opening questioning would be from the official opposition, as is traditionally the case with most committees.

It's not a big change, but I think it's fair-minded, and by far the largest share of questioning minutes would go to the governing caucus, so I would ask that the government consider that approach. It's a very minor modification from the PROC proposal, but one that I think puts us more in line with committee procedure across the various standing committees.

That's my amendment.

The Chair: Is there any other discussion?

Madam Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: You know, I'm all for goodwill and good working relationships and so on, but I think we have come a long way from my original motion. I want to support the motion from my colleague, Alexandra Mendès, as it stands. I think it's more than generous, and it more than shows the goodwill of the governing side.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Poilievre, do you want to vote on the amendment, or do you want to withdraw your amendment?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'm not suggesting that the government is acting in bad faith here. I think the PROC protocol is an improvement over the original proposal. It's just that traditionally, the opposition does lead questioning. That is in recognition of the fact that the House of Commons is a place where governments in general are held to account and that's why the official opposition normally leads questioning on most committees. It doesn't upset the number of minutes each party is going to be eligible to receive; it simply changes the order in which they receive them.

I know that government members will want to protect their speaking time—I have no problem with that—understandably so. But the tone and tenure of a committee is set by the opening round of questioning, and if the purpose of such committees is to hold government to account, then I think we should allow the official opposition to open the questioning. As I said, that is the normal practice across standing committees, and as Mr. Christopherson stated earlier, I think it would be a show of good faith and would be consistent with the government's stated desire to improve transparency and accountability if they would allow my amendment to stand.

I think, by some of their facial expressions, some of them are being slowly convinced, though not entirely yet.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Chair, I think they're suggesting that my skill at reading body language is not what it should be.

The Chair: Yes, I think maybe you're right.

Mr. Godin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joël Godin: I will use my presence here. I'm new to the committee and I would like to understand what the advantage or disadvantage of going first is for the party in power or the opposition party. You have the same number of minutes, so you are not negatively affected in terms of that.

I believe the usual practice in the House of Commons is to have the opposition party speak first. However, it seems that the practice should not apply in this committee.

Like Mrs. Shanahan, what I want is to work in harmony with everyone around the table to advance the issues and do a good job.

I'm asking this question just to understand better and to help us make a decision.

• (0930)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, I'm sure you can read the crowd here. It's a bit of a trade-off, because originally, their motion would have given Conservatives the lead for six minutes, right? I think what has to be determined is time or order.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Chair, earlier one of the things I stood on was fair is fair, and I appreciate that the government listened and made an amendment and went to the PROC model. Again, in fairness, there was an agreement reached by all the parties. As much as normally the opposition parties have a common interest

and a common enemy, if you will, and we tend to support one another, in this instance, I am not able to support my colleague's motion.

Under normal circumstances I would, and his arguments are correct.

The Chair: Do you mean the amendment?

Mr. David Christopherson: The amendment, yes.

I am saying why, because it leaves a few people scratching their heads as to why wouldn't you support that and it's because there were three pieces that moved. We moved from six minutes to seven. We broke up the government having control of the floor back to back for 12 minutes. In exchange, to break that up, the official opposition agreed to let go of the desired lead-off position.

If it's the PROC package in its entirety that's before us, it would be dishonourable of me and totally inconsistent not to support that here when that was my opening comment, that I want the PROC template. I understand my colleague's point of view. He is making the right policy arguments, but in this case a deal is a deal is a deal and fair is fair and I'll be supporting the motion to adopt the PROC model.

The Chair: Are there any other comments?

Madame Mendès.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: My only comment is in terms of the order of who speaks.

[*Translation*]

The issue here is not whether speaking first benefits the government party or the opposition party. In fact, this is an agreement that was concluded in other committees. So we are not the only ones who will change the order. All the committees will follow this model, according to which the government party will ask questions first.

I don't really agree that the first round of questions sets the tone in the committee. This is not my first experience, and I know that the tone can change a lot over the course of questioning.

As Mr. Christopherson just said, this is a matter of fairness. We agreed to change the infamous 12 back-to-back minutes. I think it is completely fair to maintain the model of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs as proposed. So the NDP would have 3 minutes instead of 2 minutes in the second round, for a total of 51 minutes of speaking time.

[*English*]

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Poilievre, as it stands, you have brought forward an amendment. Do you want that amendment to stand? We can vote on the amendment first.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I understand that I do have the support of Mr. Godin.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'm still in this fight.

No, I think we'll bring it to a vote.

The Chair: Are you withdrawing your amendment, or do you want the vote on the amendment?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Just vote on the amendment.

The Chair: Okay. We'll call the vote on Mr. Poilievre's amendment.

I'm going to ask our clerk to read the the motion as amended.

The Clerk: The motion would read that witnesses be given 10 minutes to make their opening statements, and that during the questioning of witnesses the time allocated to each questioner be as follows: for the first round of questioning, seven minutes to a representative of each party in the following order: Conservative, Liberal, NDP, Liberal; for the second round, five minutes be allocated in the following order: Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Liberal, followed by NDP, three minutes.

The Chair: All right.

(Amendment negatived)

•(0935)

The Chair: Now to Madame Mendès' motion. Clerk, if you would please read that motion.

Unless you want to read your motion....

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: I can read it, if you like.

I propose that all witnesses be given 10 minutes for their opening statement and that the questions be asked in the following order. In the first round, the order will be: Liberal Party, seven minutes; Conservative Party, seven minutes; NDP, seven minutes; and Liberal Party, seven minutes. In the second round, the order will be: Conservative Party, five minutes; Liberal Party, five minutes; Conservative Party, five minutes; Liberal Party, five minutes; and NDP, three minutes.

[*English*]

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: I wanted to mention that we could keep an eye on the 10-minute thing and at least be open to the idea of revisiting it, if we find out that it is eating up too much time. I won't go for an amendment or anything, but we're going to have to keep that in the back of our minds. It may become a problem. If it doesn't, wonderful, but if it does maybe we could at least acknowledge that we said, "Hey, in that circumstance we may revisit it."

That's all, Chair, thank you.

The Chair: My experience is that they love to come with prepared remarks, so they'll have them prepared. If we get too many at a time, as Mr. Christopherson said, we're going to have to cut that back. If there are one or two witnesses, then a 10-minute time slot works.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Building on that, if we're comfortable, notionally at least, we should let the steering committee know if there's going to be group, that nobody's going to stand on a point of order and say, "Hey, it's not 10 minutes," and that when we have

five of them we can say, "Hey, you have five minutes instead of 10", so that the steering committee would have that latitude. It comes as a recommendation anyway and can only be approved with the committee's support.

Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Any other discussion on the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: All right, so that part of it is complete.

The next motion is:

That the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to distribute to the members of the Committee only documents that are available in both official languages.

Mr. Arya.

Mr. Chandra Arya (Nepean, Lib.): I so move.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Maybe some would suggest the next one is the most important of all motions:

That the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to make the necessary arrangements to provide working meals for the Committee and its subcommittees.

We need someone to move that motion.

Mr. Chandra Arya: I so move.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The next motion is:

That, if requested, reasonable travel, accommodation and living expenses be reimbursed to witnesses, not exceeding two (2) representatives per organization; and that, in exceptional circumstances, payment for more representatives be made at the discretion of the Chair.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: So moved.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The next motion is:

That, unless otherwise ordered, each Committee member be allowed to be accompanied by one (1) staff person at an in camera meeting and that, in addition, each party may have in attendance one (1) representative.

Monsieur Lefebvre moves that.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The next motion is:

That one (1) copy of the transcript of each in camera meeting be kept in the Committee Clerk's office for consultation by members of the Committee.

Monsieur Godin moves that.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: There is a motion regarding notices of motions. It is:

That forty-eight (48) hours' notice be required for any substantive motion to be considered by the Committee, unless the substantive motion relates directly to business then under consideration; and that the notice of motion be filed with the Clerk of the Committee and distributed to members in both official languages before consideration is given.

Madam Shanahan moves that.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The next motion is with regard to the follow-up process.

Mrs. Mendès.

• (0940)

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Mr. Chair, before we go to the follow-up process, could we do the subcommittee on agenda and procedure?

The Chair: All right.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: I move:

That the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure be established and be composed of the Chair, the two Vice-Chairs, and one Government Member.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Just to be clear on that, that leaves us with the chair and the two vice-chairs. That gives us reps from all three, and then you're saying one more government member.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: One more government member, yes.

Mr. David Christopherson: I went through a rather prolonged discussion at PROC, and I don't want to have it here if I can avoid it.

It's the issue of how we make decisions at the steering committee. On PROC, it can run hot and cold. I haven't been on that as long, but the whole time I've been on this committee, we've only ever operated on consensus.

Again, I'm not going to make another big thing about it, but I do hope that we stay with the idea of consensus for the simple reason that the steering committee is meant to make it easier for us, rather than all of us dealing with the details of who comes first, and how long, and non-partisan stuff like that—and there is no power.

The steering committee has no power to do anything. It can only make recommendations. Under the model that's been followed for the whole time I've been on—and I've been on there since I got here in 2004 and I've been on this committee that long—if we have a unanimous agreement, if all the party representatives are comfortable with a recommendation, then it comes to the committee as a recommendation of the steering committee with unanimous support. Then it's up to the committee and a vote of the committee to decide yes or no.

If there's disagreement, then we stop discussing and we send the whole thing straight to the committee. The committee decides because the steering committee is meant to be a helpful tool, not a resting place of politics to get into voting and creating the dynamics that happens there.

I'm not going to get into motions and that. We've not had a problem here. I don't want to create one where there hasn't been one. But, Chair, I'm really hoping—and it would make your life a lot easier because then you're not dealing with political squabbles at the steering committee that reflect what we do here—that as soon as we get into a partisan issue where it looks like there's not going to be agreement, we just drop it and it goes directly to the committee, and we move on to the next item.

I hope that's the way we continue. It has worked very well for us. This is the most important committee for oversight in terms of holding the government of the day to account. It's really important that, as much as possible, we try to be non-partisan.

I'm as partisan as anybody in this place, but on this committee, the successful parliamentarian is the one that can be the least partisan as we focus on accountability because that's what we're about.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, to you as the chair of the last committee, there was no subcommittee in the last Parliament of this committee. Is that correct?

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, that's true too. Towards the end the government got rid of it completely because they didn't like the way the politics was going.

The Chair: But there was never—

Mr. David Christopherson: In past Parliaments, they always had it.

The Chair: Yes, in this past Parliament there was no—

Mr. David Christopherson: No, there was in the beginning. The government of the day didn't like the way it was going so they killed it, and we, the NDP and the Liberals, fought like hell for three years to get it back but we didn't. I'm glad to see that we're now going to do that.

The Chair: Okay, so that's good. We have a motion.

Does anyone else wish to speak to that motion?

Madame Mendès.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: To Mr. Christopherson's remarks, I agree with most of what you said.

[*Translation*]

It's not that I disagree with the subcommittee's tone and principle. We want there to be another member of the government because we will be the ones held accountable. The idea is not at all to play politics, but simply to give us the presence that justifies our numbers. Our intention is not to divide the committee. It's just a matter of the committee's direction. I agree that, should the situation become too political, we would bring the issue back to the whole committee, where it will be debated. The issue will not be debated in the subcommittee.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Will anyone else speak to the motion?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Can we please re-read the motion?

The Chair: That the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure be established and be composed of the Chair, the two Vice-Chairs, and one Government Member.

• (0945)

Mr. David Christopherson: Let's vote. You have agreement, man. Don't lose it.

The Chair: Are we ready for the question?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Mendès.

We move now to the follow-up process:

That the Committee Chair and staff be authorized to:

review Government responses to recommendations made by the Committee during the 42nd Parliament;

acknowledge by letter, on the Committee's behalf, receipt of Government responses where they respond clearly and completely to recommendations or request further information or clarification, as required;

monitor the implementation of Government commitments made in response to Committee recommendations, and request further information as required; and report to the Committee on these activities in a timely fashion.

It's moved by Mr. Harvey.

To the motion, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair.

Just very briefly, this was brought in about seven or eight years ago. When I first got on this committee, it used to be the committee would make recommendations on reports and they would just go off into the ether and disappear. The bureaucrats knew that if they could just come forward and get through the public accounts meeting—just get through it somehow with their careers still intact—they didn't need to worry about anything else and they could make all kinds of commitments because nobody was writing them down. They knew that.

We brought in a whole system and as a result of the Gomery commission more resources were given to the public accounts committee because of the work we do. As a result, every time we made a recommendation, it was tracked, and when the government responded that was linked up. If it wasn't good enough, the analysts brought it forward and said that the full question had not been answered, or not all the information was there, or conversely, they would say they did get all the information they wanted.

Now I don't want to make a big issue of that. We had an election. It's over, but to their great discredit, the previous government killed it, and all the work that had been done before then on this motion. This motion failed the last time with the last government. They killed all that work. It was just a crime and not nearly enough attention was paid, and I'll be making the same arguments about carrying over audit reports that weren't....

Sorry, Chair, there's a little residual stuff you've still got to wear. It takes a while—

The Chair: [*Inaudible—Editor*] we had during the election is starting to dissipate.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Christopherson: It takes a while to unpack 10 years.

An hon. member: That's the problem with institutional memory.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, that's right. That's why term limits aren't necessarily the right way to go.

I don't want to go on and on, but I did want to provide some context because those of you who haven't served on this committee are going to find it's very different from every other committee. As I said, the non-partisan is where we win the most.

This ability to keep that tracking and the same thing with the previous reports.... I don't want to cloud us up now but at some point I'm going to bring in some recommendations that we look at motions so that no government in the future can do that. That's just wrong. That was killing the work of the Auditor General, and we as the opposition didn't do a good enough job to make that a big deal. The

media didn't do a good enough job making that a big deal, and we need to make sure that never, ever happens again. It's so wrong.

Anyway, I'm just glad to see this in here. It continues some very positive changes that were made when we were in minority. Those were the glory days of this committee because it really was about accountability, and nobody could control the outcome of any vote or any decision.

Anyway, I leave that with you, Chair. Thank you for the opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Christopherson.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The last one, I believe, is departmental action plans:

That all departments and agencies of the federal government that have been subject to a performance audit by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada provide a detailed action plan to address the audit recommendations which have been agreed to — including specific actions, timelines for their completion and responsible individuals — to the Public Accounts Committee and the Office of the Auditor General of Canada within six months of the audit being tabled in the House of Commons; and

that departments and agencies that are invited to appear before the Public Accounts Committee to discuss the findings of an audit should, when feasible, provide an action plan to the Committee prior to the hearing; and

that departmental action plans and progress reports received by the Committee be published on the Committee's website.

Madame Mendès moves the motion.

Mr. Christopherson, you have the floor.

• (0950)

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Chair, you may regret it, but you asked me to provide a little bit of guidance in terms of context. I just want to say, with a couple of points along the way, that the action plans are crucial. That's the part where the government actually responds to us and says, yes, as a response to the Auditor General, this is what we're going to do.

What used to happen in the past was that if a department wasn't called in for a public hearing, they didn't provide an action plan. All they had to do was sit back and see if they won or lost the lottery, meaning whether or not their chapter was chosen. If it was, damn, they had to go to all the trouble of doing an action plan; they knew they had to come in here.

By the way, and I'll say this a couple of times over the term, one of the things John Williams said—and it's so true—is that when this committee is doing the job it should, when a deputy minister hears they've been called to a public hearing in front of public accounts, it should ruin their week. I just say that to you.

The action plans were not being provided when they knew they didn't have to come in, so we've made that correction. Now they've been told that within six months, or when they're called in front of the committee, they have to do that action plan. Again, it's so that the work of the Auditor General has meaning and doesn't just get lost out there in all the details.

The Chair: Thank you. Those are very good points.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: All right. We have passed the motion.

Sorry, I should have done this earlier, but I'll invite the analysts. We have two analysts, Édison Roy-César and Dillan. Perhaps you want to take the table.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: I seek guidance as to at what point we will move the continuation of the work we've doing.

The matrix was one piece of that, unless it was buried in there and I didn't catch it. I stand to be corrected, if that's the case, but there are two pieces to it. One is to activate the matrix and make sure that work is being done and to direct the analysts to carry out those functions. The second piece is the work we were doing that was in mid-stride. A lot of it can continue. The government used the excuse that they weren't there for that and killed a whole lot of it. The fact is that there's a lot of good work that can still be done from the previous Parliament that ought not to die.

It is the usual course of this committee to carry over any active work that can practically still be carried on. It's the work of the Auditor General, and it isn't decided whether or not his work is relative just because we had an election. His work is relevant and relative no matter what.

There are some circumstances. If we move a blanket motion to bring it all over, there may still be one or two pieces that are just impractical. If you're finalizing a report, it's pretty tough at that point for us to put, or for our new members...you know, things like that. But there is other stuff that should be kept alive. I'm just seeking when we'll move that motion.

The Chair: That motion can come now.

Again, we would move to the analysts to give us some direction, or to the clerk as to what those areas would be. Typically when you come into a new Parliament, you don't sign your name to a study that the former government has had power of. You typically start again. Mr. Christopherson's point is that there may be some things that will transition into this Parliament and into this committee.

Édison, can you give us an indication of what some of that might be?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Édison Roy-César (Committee Researcher): The briefing book that was distributed to the committee members says that the committee has not received the government's response to certain studies because of the election. In general, the government has 120 days to provide a response. So, given the 120-day time frame, the process is completed.

If the committee wanted to obtain a response to the reports the government has not responded to so far because of the election and the 120-day time frame, the committee should submit those reports to the House again. That is the only way to proceed if the committee wishes to obtain a response to those reports.

[*English*]

The Chair: We would need a motion. I had a few other ideas.

Was there anyone else who wanted to speak to this?

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Chair, if I may, I would suggest that we send this whole matter to the steering committee to sort

through because it gets into a lot of minutia. There's more than just that. There's the government reports, but there are also audits that were done where we were planning to hold a hearing and we didn't hold it. There's no reason we can't. The report is there to be read and we have the time, but we also can't do everything. I'm just saying that we should take this whole matter to the steering committee to sort it all out and bring back a motion that reflects the things we can continue to do practically and the things we cannot.

This motion can actually carry because it's part of that matrix motion, or the suggestion is there. Do you follow me?

The problem is that most of the members don't know the usual work that we do, so when I say, the usual work is sitting there, it doesn't mean anything. That's why I'm suggesting the whole thing be sent to the steering committee.

● (0955)

The Chair: A lot of the work in a lot of committees has been disrupted by the election. Some can be restored and brought back. Some is probably finished.

Mr. David Christopherson: I think in the case of most committees, Mr. Chair, usually it's government business and bills that they're dealing with. When the election comes and there's a change in government, all of that dies. However, the work of this committee churns on, regardless of who the chair is or who the government is. It's just like the Auditor General. Whether it was Sheila Fraser or Michael Ferguson, it just churns on.

To have an artificial line that ends everything we did in terms of auditing doesn't make practical sense, but a blanket motion saying everything should come forward doesn't make practical sense either. I'm suggesting we take that whole little subject, shoot it off to the steering committee, and see what they can do to sort it out.

The Chair: Can you put that into a motion?

Mr. David Christopherson: I move that the issue of the work of the committee in the previous Parliament be delegated to the steering committee for review and recommendations.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair : Thank you.

The schedule of our meetings will be Tuesday mornings from 8:45 until 10:45. That means that we have a meeting coming up pretty quickly on Thursday. There is no way the steering committee is going to have time to meet and then get back to this committee, so I invite some ideas or motions.

We've had an Auditor General's report in the interim. A week and a half ago he came down with a report. Some of you were at that lock-up where he spoke. That's a suggestion.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: The normal practice—and we're masters of our own destiny; we're not bound by it—is that on the day the Auditor General presents his report, you, Chair, would be asked by him to chair that early morning meeting where MPs and senators get a chance to find out what's in it. It is then tabled in the House at 10 o'clock. At that moment, everything goes public. The next step is normally for the committee to call in the Auditor General to present his report. It is much like what he did in camera only it's a public meeting. Everybody can come as usual but not everyone is invited. It's a formal meeting of the committee. Then, after that presentation, the committee decides on the chapters we want to hold public hearings on. Then the clerk, with the steering committee and the chair, sorts out the order, the witnesses, and all of that business.

Therefore, if the Auditor General is available on Thursday, we are in a good position to be able to have him come in and present his report. That puts us right at the front end of new work, new business. We don't need any briefings beforehand. It's a self-contained thing and it gives us our first starting point. I would recommend, Mr. Chair, that we ask about the Auditor General's availability on Thursday to come present to the committee. This normally would have been done at the first meeting after it was tabled, but because of the beginning of Parliament.... I recommend that we try to do that on Thursday, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: My understanding is that he is available. He would be available to come on Thursday. Mr. Christopherson made that into a motion.

Any other debate on the motion? Any other discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mrs. Mendès.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: I have a question. Are we always going to meet here? Do we know where we're going to be meeting?

The Chair: It can change as different things happen. It will be in Centre Block typically. I met with the clerk and the analysts earlier. Typically, this is one of the good committee rooms in that there is easy access for the cameras.

Mr. Christopherson knows, too, that upstairs the Reading Room and the Railroad Room, those are better rooms as far as cameras are concerned.

Most of these meetings, when the Auditor General appears, are televised, so it will be in a room that provides that.

• (1000)

Mr. David Christopherson: Most of our public meetings are up there for the cameras. The Auditor General is all about publicity, transparency, accountability. This is where we do our work.

The Chair: What we would want to do is.... Since it's the Auditor General it should be televised. That's my sense. We'll wait to hear if the room is available and if it is, then that will be in your notice of meeting. The clerk will have that out by the end of the day, or by Wednesday, for sure.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Something to put in front of you for consideration is that after we meet with the Auditor General on Thursday, the normal practice is.... Sometimes it's that day, depending on how much time we have or thereafter. Anyway, there's an immediate process where we do two things.

One is to identify how many chapters we want to hold a public hearing on. That depends on a lot of factors and it will change from time to time. In the last Parliament, we did a minimum of four. It's a bit light by the way. We could do five, but four at a minimum. The question each time is how many we are going to do publicly and then the process for deciding.

Normally, and I'll throw it out while I have the floor, the practice was that the choices were made roughly by the ratio of seats. Therefore, if we did four, the government picked two chapters, the official opposition picked one, and the third party picked one.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Just to be clear, if there are five chapters, we get three.

The Chair: Yes. This is all going to be worked out.

What Mr. Christopherson said earlier and what we need to bear in mind is that typically we work with consensus. When it comes to the different chapters of the Auditor General's report, we'll look at that. There will be some give and take. Some of it may go through a steering committee, it all comes back here to ratify what the steering committee says, and then we go on.

The meeting is adjourned.

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