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—
Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): I'd like to call to order this third meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. This meeting is being televised. Today we'll consider committee business and continue consideration of our routine motions.

Just before I make introductory remarks, I'll remind people that at the end of the last meeting, Mr. Christopherson had the floor. I will shortly yield to him after a couple of opening comments here.

As you know, one of the high priorities in committee work is to deal with government business. You did get a letter about some government business, which I'll mention at the end of the meeting. Hopefully it will be for future meetings.

I had a chat with Mr. Christopherson on the weekend. We felt that before we proceeded back to his having the floor on the motion we were discussing, and to facilitate the rest of Parliament doing its work, it would be good if we could first go to the very last motion on routine business. That is the delegation of authority to the whips to appoint all the other committees.

Is that okay, Mr. Christopherson?

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Chair, that accurately reflects our discussion. Yes, I do defer...for the motion to be placed, and would hope that I get the floor back after we've done that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Sure, as agreed.

Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Given that from Mr. Christopherson, we're fine on the government side to proceed in that manner.

Could we then perhaps move that particular motion, if that's agreed by all committee members?

The Chair: Are you moving the motion?

Mr. Arnold Chan: I am moving the motion. I'll read out the motion for the record, please. This deals with the delegation of authority to whips.

I SO MOVE: That the three Whips be delegated the authority to act as the Striking Committee pursuant to Standing Orders 104, 113 and 114, and that they be authorized to present to the Chair, in a report signed by all three Whips, or their representatives, their unanimous recommendations for presentation to the House, on behalf of the Committee.

The Chair: Is there discussion?

These are routine motions. Hopefully a lot of them will go through quickly.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We will now give the floor to Mr. Christopherson.

We will turn to the motion we were dealing with regarding the subcommittee. I believe it was routine motion two in your packages.

David, we're speaking to the amendment you made.

Mr. David Christopherson: Great. Thank you, Chair.

I'm glad that we're able to get a little bit of business done, because I did say that I wasn't deliberately trying.... My sole purpose wasn't just to delay things. I have, I think, a relevant point.

I hope that the government's had a bit of a change of heart, given that, again, this really doesn't need to be an issue. It's both nothing and big at the same time.

The situation is this. We're talking about our committee, which is the only body that can make a decision. We create a steering committee, sometimes called a subcommittee, but we call it a steering committee here. The whole purpose of the steering committee is to make the business of the committee move more efficiently and more quickly.

At the steering committee, we deal with things like the order of witnesses we'll agree upon, or the time frame we'll set aside for public hearings versus going in camera. In other words, what we really do is map out the work plan and the details. Do you know the old expression about the kind of letter you get when a committee writes it? It's the same sort of thing. There's so much detail that for all of us to do it just bogs us down and takes forever, so we leave those kinds of things with the steering committee.

Here's the thing, and this is why I said at the outset that only PROC, as a committee, can make decisions. The steering committee, or subcommittee, is not a decision-making body. Whether or not we agree with the voting or consensus issue that I'm raising, at the end of the day, even if there's a voting system—which I'm arguing we shouldn't have at that level—that committee can't make a decision to order coffee. They have no authority to make any decisions.

With any recommendation that's made when it's a consensus model—which is what I'm pushing for—if there's unanimity among the three representatives of the three parties at the steering committee, that recommendation goes to the committee. Normally, it comes and everybody's just fine with it, because their representative has looked at it. There are some cases where it's a little different, but for the most part, when a unanimous recommendation comes from the steering committee.... In fact, usually the entire report is accepted in terms of the recommendations made, because each of us knows that our representative was there, speaking on behalf of our vested interests as individual caucuses, while at the same time working for the betterment of the entire committee. That works best when there's consensus.

The other rule is that if you don't have unanimity, nothing goes to the committee. There are no recommendations. There's no politics. There's nothing to defeat. If there's no unanimity, it comes directly to the committee as if it had bypassed the steering committee. That's the impact that it has. It goes to the committee, it's discussed. If there isn't unanimity, then it comes right to this committee, acting as if it never went to the steering committee. The only thing that the steering committee does is try to come to an agreement on the details of the business that we do.

Again, if it were the Conservatives, with the greatest of respect, I wouldn't even try to make this argument, because on the committee that I chaired in the last Parliament, they eliminated the steering committee. There was no point in talking about the minutiae and details of a committee when the government of the day just stood there, folded its arms, and said, "It shall not be" and that was the end of that.

• (1110)

We know how well that attitude went over after enough years, culminating in the election we just had and culminating in the election of the new government with a new mandate and a new vision. Part of what this new government promised—and this is the only reason why I'm making this an issue—is that one of our jobs as the opposition is to hold the government accountable. I understand that rules aren't very sexy and they're not very appealing, but I've been around long enough to know that with the rules we agree to today, when we get into crises down the road, go into our various corners, and have pitched political battles—that doesn't happen all the time on this committee but it happens from time to time on every committee—when that happens, we'll thrash it out.

But there's one thing we know for sure, Chair. No matter how controversial the issues are here, the government wins every vote 10 times out of 10. Every vote, they win. I've been in a majority government. It's a great feeling; you walk into a meeting in the House and you know you're going to win every vote, no matter what. This is a government that ran on a platform that said, "We're going to be different at committees".

We really like the mother ship, the Westminster model, and the way they do committees. People who go there to watch them say that it's difficult to tell the opposition members from the government members. That means one of two things. Either you're in a democracy where there is very little democracy, everything is decided from on high and the opposition has no power or doesn't

want power, but you do not have a dynamic democracy... Most of us who've been here for a while have been to those countries, and we know first-hand what that looks like.

It's either that situation, where you can't tell who's government and who's opposition, or the situation where there's a stranglehold on everything. I won't name countries, but we could all put titles to that thought. They're actually functioning in a way that means they're there as parliamentarians and their partisan membership is secondary to trying to do the work of the committee. What they do, very successfully compared to us, is to try to remove some of the partisanship that's in the House. When they get to committee, they act as parliamentarians.

When everybody is focused the same way on an issue or a problem, if you're just observing and it's hard to tell who's the government and who's the opposition, that's a good thing. At most of our committees if you came walking in, within three minutes you'd know who's government and who's opposition, because our speeches can be and often are laced with partisanship. The government ran on a platform of saying, "We don't like that, it's not the kind of democracy we want, and we don't think that reflects the values of Canadians." I'll say to the government that there were an awful lot of us in the NDP who shared that sentiment.

So the government got elected, okay? The dog chased the car and the dog caught the car. Now what? Well, so far, it's the same old same old.

We came here to our first meeting after the government ran on a platform of openness, transparency, new independence, and certainly removing parliamentary secretaries from the chokehold they had over the government majority. We walked in here on the first day and what did we see? We saw Mr. Lamoureux, whom I quite like; I've served with him for quite some time now, but this is not about him personally. Mr. Lamoureux, as the parliamentary secretary, was sitting right where Tom Lukiwski used to sit, who used to be the parliamentary secretary to the government House leader. It was the very system this government ran on, saying that they were going to change it. That was the first meeting. They completely threw everything they said in the election out the window and just went back to normal: "We'll do it just the way Conservatives did".

So we called them on it. I called them on it. He moved down a couple of seats. We called him on it again and he moved down a couple of seats more, so we're making gains. He's getting closer to the door, but he's still here. At that first meeting, the blues will show that he spoke, by my estimate, probably 80% to 90% of the time, which used to be the problem. The parliamentary secretary would roll in here, tell the government members what the marching orders were from on high that day, and regardless of what debate we had, that was the way the vote went.

That exact thing is what the government said they were going to change. They said that they were going to give committees more independence, that they were going to let go of some of the power that the previous government corralled. Okay. That's good stuff and is part of the reason why the government was elected and got as many seats as it did.

• (1115)

Now we're talking about the steering committee in that context. All I'm suggesting and asking and putting forward is that we... because remember, there's no set rule. Most committees go by consensus. I don't know any steering committee where they actually take votes, which is the point.

The government says, "Well, we won't do it very often and we're not looking to do that." No, no, no. First of all, I started out negotiating collective agreements 40 years ago and I've been in politics ever since. That stuff is not going to wash. Once we get into our corners, and fighting on partisanship, those rules are what we have to live by. The government stands by every letter of them in order to maintain the control they want.

As a sign of good faith...and I really thought this was an easy one. I thought I was handing Mr. Lamoureux a ball that he would pick up and run with all over the bloody court, because he could say, "Oh, we're honouring our commitments. Mr. Christopherson's putting the pressure on us, but make no mistake, we want to do these things. We're willing to do that, blah blah blah." I was worried that I had given him all that, and instead he digs in. In fact one of his members even tried to shut me down. Talk about shades of the previous government.

Back to the point, the steering committee...and here's the thing. If you don't live inside this stuff every day, it sounds like, "What the heck? You're just going on and on, trying to take up time." I accept that this is some of the criticism. Fair enough. It's not true, but it's a fair criticism that can be made.

What happens if you have that voting dynamic? A number of things, Chair. You've been around a long time. You're back now, but you've been here before. You know how this place works.

If we're going by vote, well, now we're into the partisan parliamentary games that happen. They're all legal, but they're games, such as waiting until somebody leaves the room so that you can move a motion. That sort of thing happens even in the House, where House leaders and whips are keeping an eye on who's in the House, who isn't, and whether they can gain an advantage and grab control of the House. It's been done. If you're in a committee where voting matters, then it also depends on winning that vote, because now you have a positive motion going forward. Once you introduce voting into the dynamic of a meeting room....

Again, those of us who have been doing this kind of thing...and it doesn't have to be politics. It can be anybody engaged in community work who understands the difference between working towards something on a consensus basis versus a voting decision. Remember, all of this is in the context that this committee is the only body that can make decisions, and that the government wins these votes 10 times out of 10. All we're asking is that we remove that irritant—that's all it really is—from our steering committee and subcommit-

tees and acknowledge that they are consensus. If there isn't unanimity on an issue, it won't go forward to the committee with a recommendation, and if there is, it does. It's nice and simple.

This is the thing I'm having trouble with, Chair. What I'm speaking to means that the government gives up nothing, really, especially when they argue that they're never going to use the voting. Since it can't be a decision-making body, we're not taking.... It would be hard to measure the amount of power that's being taken. "Power" is not the right word. It's influence, nuance, advantage, but it's not power because that body doesn't make decisions. Even when they're unanimous, they are only recommendations. The subcommittee cannot make decisions for this group.

I come back to the fact that this was an easy one. My problem looking forward, as somebody who has been around here for a bit, is that if they're not willing to loosen up on things that really don't even matter, where there isn't any real power to give—it's more of a nuisance, a nuance, an influence, call it what you will—and they won't even give that up, then really how sincere is the government in terms of doing things differently from the last Parliament?

So far, all I see is same old same old. Nothing has changed. The faces have changed, but I'm still sitting here facing a majority, with the parliamentary secretary possibly still calling the shots.

• (1120)

Also, on the first real attempt to modify anything, a tiny little thing like this, the government is digging in their heels and saying, "Oh, no, we can't do that." Well, you can't have it both ways. You can get elected on sunny ways but that alone isn't going to carry the day. We have to see some change. I'm not getting any indication of that.

I was kibitzing with Mr. Lamoureux in the House yesterday hoping that would provide him a chance to come over and say, "By the way, Dave, we're not going to make an issue out of that other thing." No, that didn't happen so unless I'm hearing something different, and I'm getting no indication the government is going to change, it doesn't look like they're going to acquiesce on this. If they're not going to give on this, then a whole lot of Canadians need to understand that the government is serious about parliamentary change only when it suits them, which, of course, is the antithesis of the point. The point is to try to make this less partisan, but here we are.

I thought I was rather generous. I gave Mr. Lamoureux a Christmas gift when I identified to him what he was giving me as I saw it unfolding. I asked Mr. Lamoureux—I'm paraphrasing myself—why he was doing this. I said, I'm going to keep talking about this until the end of the meeting and that means it's going to carry over into the Christmas and New Year's break, that means when there's a slow news day somebody is going to pick up that little thread and say, "Oh, here's something interesting. I have to give my editor something today. Here's something that's legitimate and real. It's not that big but it's something." Sure enough, that's what happened.

I'll repeat myself from last year. Why on earth would the government want to take a hit on one of their key signature pieces, which was democratic reform, especially, as the government said, in the area of committees? They said they wanted them to be more independent, less under the control of the PMO, less partisanship, more camaraderie, more working together, more acting as parliamentarians rather than partisans.

Sure enough, it wasn't big, but it was big enough. They took this hit and they're continuing to take this hit.

Every time they stand up and brag about their other democratic reforms don't think that this isn't going to come back. This is only one, because my sense is that this government is not prepared to be serious about change. It's going to be drip, drip, drip. The government can make their big headline announcements and then it's going to be drip, drip, drip. At the end of four years if this continues, there's going to be a whole lot of Canadians saying, "Wait a minute, what happened to all that change that they talked about? What about injecting new life and dynamism into our democracy and into our House of Commons?"

Remember that the government said, "particularly in the area of committees". I don't understand it from a procedural point of view. I don't understand it from a reform point of view. I don't understand it from an efficiency point of view. I certainly don't understand it from a partisan point of view, especially when the government says it really doesn't want to use voting.

Why are you maintaining that the voting system even exists there? Why?

There's only one answer. I believe Mr. Chan referred to it. I stand to be corrected. I think he made a reference that "there may be times". Okay, here we go: "there may be times". That's why these things matter now because we get one kick at this in four years, just one. Some committee rules get changed, Mr. Chair, as you know, over the course of Parliament, but for the most part once committee rules are set that's what you live by. That's why I'm making an issue out of this now because it's the only chance we have.

Mr. Chair, I would be interested before I completely relinquish the floor to see if there's a response from the government. If they're willing to say they agree, then I don't need to go on and I don't need to summarize. If they aren't, then I will move on to summarize because I'm not going to die on this political hill.

• (1125)

From a partisan point of view, we've already gotten more from this than anyone would have any right to expect, because of the government's pigheadedness.

Anyway, Chair, with the understanding that I still have the floor, I would offer colleagues on the government side a chance to respond to what I've said so far, and I'd still like a chance to have the floor back.

The Chair: You can't automatically have the floor, but you're next on the list.

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, I'll put myself on the list after I give it, which seems kind of silly. If nobody else takes the floor, there's nobody to get on it afterward. That's my point.

The Chair: You're going to be the only one on the list anyway.

Mr. David Christopherson: Just say yes.

The Chair: While we're waiting, I'm just going to read into the record for Jamie—I welcome him to the committee—and for anyone who wasn't at the last meeting what we're debating. This is the second routine motion of the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure. A motion of amendment was moved on December 10, 2015.

It was moved by Mr. Chan:

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

Then there was an amendment, which we're debating now. It was moved by Mr. Christopherson that the motion be amended by replacing the words "two Government members" with the following: "one Government member".

Is there someone other than Mr. Christopherson who wanted to speak? Will we just carry on?

Okay. You might as well carry on until someone approaches me.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, I think we're getting close to the end, Chair. I said that this wasn't an exercise in trying to deliberately hold things up, and it wasn't, but it is interesting that on the motion we're talking about, we're talking about how many government members.... Quite frankly, if it was about consensus, fill your boots, and bring as many as you want. The whole idea is just to come to some agreement on things. But this matters because now they're getting into the voting aspect.

I've been around and around on this, Chair. I've made my point, certainly more so than I thought I would end up doing. I have to say, Chair, that this is so much like dealing with the last government. This government wants to say they're different, and I know in their hearts they may be, but as PROC has unfolded, this is just like Toryland. This is just exactly the way the last government ran things.

I see members shaking their heads to say no, no. I understand how you feel, but the fact of the matter is that those of us who were here the last time know that this is a repeat of that way, and on this first issue.... Besides, it would be nice to see the member jump in. She has a lot of body language.

Is Mr. Lamoureux not letting you speak? I thought the whole idea was that everybody gets their say.

I see this body language, and you just have so much to give, but there's no.... I used to watch that. I feel for you. I understand what that's like. I've seen it with some of my colleagues in the last government. They were itching to speak. They wanted to bring democracy and oxygen to the discussion, but they were stifled, much like what we see here where the parliamentary secretary keeps himself very busy on his BlackBerry and with his notes, keeps his head down, and tries not to make eye contact, while the rest of the members are sitting there and wondering, "Why are we in this mess?"

I get a sense that they would like to say something, but they aren't. What does that look like? Well, it's exactly the way it was before.

Words alone don't change things, my friends. If you want to change things, you have to change them. This first opportunity, the very first and likely the easiest opportunity this government would ever have to indicate they really do want to do things differently and aren't interested in the PMO having its throat grip on every committee, this was their chance, and there they sit, quiet, just like the Conservatives used to be, waiting for the moment to use their majority vote to ram through what they want to do.

Now, how that is different and is sunny ways and openness escapes me. I will be very interested to see where and how this government is actually going to deliver on making committees more independent, more transparent, and less partisan. I'm anxious to see where that is going to be, because this is the easiest opportunity the government is going to get, and they have no interest.

I'm done.

•(1130)

The Chair: Are there any other speakers to the amendment? Are we ready for the vote?

I'll read the amendment so that we know what we're voting on. It is moved by Mr. Christopherson that the motion be amended by replacing the words "two Government members" with the following: "one Government member".

Mr. David Christopherson: I'd like a recorded vote.

(Amendment negated: nays 5; yeas 4)

The Chair: The amendment was defeated, so we'll go to the motion itself.

Is there any debate on the motion itself?

Mr. David Christopherson: I'd like a recorded vote, please.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: We'll go on to the third routine motion, which, because of name changes, has to be....

Yes, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: I seek your guidance. I wish to place a motion regarding in camera business, and would ask for your guidance, through the clerk, on where best to introduce that.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Number nine deals with in camera.

The Chair: Motion nine is related to in camera.

Mr. David Christopherson: Mine aren't numbered. What's the heading?

The Chair: It's "Access to In Camera Meetings".

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes. I wondered, but because it was only "access", I didn't want to get caught on the narrowness.

You'll allow me to make a motion at that time regarding in camera meetings?

The Chair: This is totally new. Can we just do that at the end of routine motions here?

•(1135)

Mr. David Christopherson: If you want. I just wanted to find an appropriate place for it.

The Chair: Okay. We'll do the ones we normally do, and then we'll do yours at the end.

Mr. David Christopherson: Sure.

The Chair: Good.

Could someone move motion three?

David.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: In relation to the subcommittee on private members' business, I so move:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 91.1(1), the Subcommittee on Private Members' Business be composed of one (1) member from each recognized party and a Chair from the Government party; and that Ginette Petitpas Taylor be appointed Chair of the Subcommittee.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Are we having campaign speeches from the candidates for the chairmanship?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Madame Petitpas Taylor, did you want to give a campaign speech?

Ms. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Good morning.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I guess not.

Are we ready for the vote?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The next motion is routine, related to quorum. Does someone want to move a motion?

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): I move:

That the Chair be authorized to hold meetings to receive and publish evidence when a quorum is not present, provided that at least three (3) members are present, including one (1) member of the opposition and one (1) member of the Government.

The Chair: Is there debate?

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes. I have no problem with it as far as it goes.

The only thing I would ask is that, if we could amend it, either through a friendly amendment or a proper amendment, rather than just one member of the opposition, it be one member of the recognized parties in opposition, or words to that effect. In other words, there are three recognized parties and a number of independents who belong to other parties. Under this, the way it is, both of the other recognized opposition parties could be absent, yet quorum would still be maintained.

I realize this points to the divides between caucuses and independents, and that's something we still have to wrestle with. Our system is still not fair to independents, but it is geared to caucuses. It is geared to recognized parties. It's the basis of our entire structure. I'm just asking if we could make sure that it's clear that when it reads, "including one (1) member of the opposition", it is one from a recognized party.

The Chair: Wait a minute. You want to make sure that when it refers to "opposition" here, it's either of the two recognized parties.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, that it's a recognized party.

The Chair: It's not an independent.

Mr. David Christopherson: Exactly, that's my point, Chair.

I understand and feel bad that it does what it does to independents, but the structure is built around caucuses. I have to protect the rights of my caucus.

The Chair: All right, but—

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Chair, could you solicit a comment from the clerk? My understanding is that for all committees in the past, quorum was the government and official opposition being present. There has never been any consideration to a third party's presence.

I'm wondering if the clerk can provide any indication of whether or not I am right or I am wrong. My understanding is that the presence of a member of the official opposition and a member of the government party is required in order to have a quorum. What's being proposed would be something completely new.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Joann Garbig): This particular motion here provides for a reduced quorum for the purpose of gathering evidence, so the committee can decide what it wants that to be composed of. The quorum for a meeting such as this is 50% plus one, but very often as a courtesy the chair will wait until there's representation around the table before calling the meeting to order.

Does that answer the question?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Would the committee be able to function if we were to adopt Mr. Christopherson's rule, for example, if a third party representative was not at the table?

The Clerk: As this motion reads right now, it is one member of the opposition, so it could be either of the opposition parties represented on the committee. If I understand the amendment correctly, Mr. Christopherson would like to provide for a member of —

•(1140)

The Chair: An officially recognized party....

The Clerk: But it applies to members of the committee already.

Mr. David Christopherson: If I may, I hear your point. Thank you very much, Madam Clerk.

It really would only apply if we added one of the independents to the committee, because they're not on the committee right now. It is not unusual for that to happen. Sometimes parties will bring someone in, and in that situation that one member could be there and that could qualify. It's not maybe as critical as I originally was

thinking, but I still would like it. I think it would still be helpful if it's clear that it's a member of a recognized opposition party.

If I may say to Mr. Lamoureux, if we just added, "including one member of a recognized opposition party", if you drop in those words, my problems go away and I don't think it changes anything. You can check with the clerk, but I don't think it would change a thing. It would just mean that you have to be a member of one of the three recognized parties to qualify when they're doing a count on a small group for quorum, just for the purpose of submissions.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I would have loved that sort of an opportunity when I was sitting in your position.

I don't know if it's a concern—we can talk about it, I guess. The concern is that the NDP would then have to be physically present in order for us to receive tabled documents.

Mr. David Christopherson: No.

If I may, Chair, I was suggesting either-or, but it couldn't be an independent. If the official opposition is here, the government is here, and we're not here, too bad for us. If you're there, we're here, and the official opposition isn't here, too bad for them.

What will not happen is the government and an independent, and then the official opposition and the third party are both left out of a meeting. That's the only point I'm making.

The Chair: Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I just want to know from the clerk, if it's about members who are present, is that members of Parliament or members of committee? If it's members of committee, it's a redundant point. If it's members of Parliament, then it's more interesting.

The Chair: The point Mr. Christopherson is making is that on some occasions a member of the committee has been a member who's not from the two officially recognized opposition parties. For instance, it could be Elizabeth May. It could be an independent, because occasionally the committee will make a motion and allow these people to be committee members. All Mr. Christopherson is proposing is that when we have a quorum that allows an opposition member, the opposition member has to be from one of the two official parties.

Mr. Arnold Chan: I think the point Mr. Graham is making, though, is that they're not permanent members of this committee, so how could an independent substitute, ceding the substitution of this committee...? That's my point, so that's why I think Mr. Graham is saying that it's a redundant point.

The Chair: Mr. Chan, there are occasions when the committee accepts as permanent members people who are either independents or from another party that doesn't have official status, like the Bloc, or the Greens, and actually makes them members of the committee. That's the—

Mr. David Christopherson: Even for a short period of time, for a certain subject they can be recognized members.

Mr. Arnold Chan: I see the point you're making. We're just trying to understand the point you're making.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's fair enough, Mr. Chan. There are no games here. Sometimes, too, the opposition parties, for machination reasons with the government, will let an independent be one of their representatives. Technically, they then have a seat there, and technically that would give them that right. It's a small matter. I'm not going to do what I did last time on the other one. It's not that big. If you don't think it's an improvement....

I'd like to hear from the official opposition, because really, they can be the decider for me, but I'm not going to die on this hill. I just think it's an improvement.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: As the mover of the motion, I think I would accept that as a friendly amendment.

The Chair: Okay.

Are there further comments?

So the motion, with the friendly amendment, will read...?

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: I'll read it again as amended. It says that the chair be authorized to hold meetings to receive and publish evidence when a quorum is not present, provided that at least three members are present, including one member of a recognized opposition party and one member of the government.

● (1145)

Mr. David Christopherson: Perfect.

The Chair: Mr. Reid was speaking to the motion. It's a friendly amendment, so we're just speaking to the motion. We'll have one vote eventually, but go ahead.

Mr. Scott Reid: Well, that creates a problem for me, because I support the original motion but not the amended motion. I'm not sure if procedurally there's anything I can do about that.

The Chair: You could amend the motion.

Mr. Scott Reid: Oh my goodness, okay. To go back to its original wording?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, Chair, no. The fair thing to do in light of that, then, is to leave the motion as a first motion, the other one as an amendment, and then Mr. Reid can vote against the amendment and vote as he wants on the main motion.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay. We'll have this change as an amendment, and we'll debate the amendment now.

You have the floor.

Mr. Scott Reid: I actually don't support this, Dave. This is purely for the purpose of receiving testimony. I can envision a situation in which there would be a witness testimony of some sort that is of particular interest to members of either the Bloc Québécois or to a Green MP and is for whatever reason not of interest.... Maybe it relates in some respect to the votability of their private member's bill or something like that. I actually can't think of a really convincing example. I'm just not sure that we should diminish their status here and their ability to come here.

It affects us. It doesn't affect the Liberals. In fact, let's say for the sake of argument that Elizabeth May was to hear witness testimony. If we weren't coming, she would have to prevail upon two Liberals

to come in order to make the whole thing work. I just think diminishing their status and their ability to fully participate at the same level as us is something that I'm not sure we should give up.... On that basis, I think my inclination would be to vote against this.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair.

I have no qualms with Mr. Reid's comments, other than I didn't see it as diminishing. I acknowledge that it is recognizing the status of recognized parties, but to say that it diminishes.... It's not preventing anyone from coming that otherwise could.

As I understand it, Chair, any member of Parliament can come and sit at a committee meeting, if they wish. They just can't speak unless they're given a spot from their party or somebody gives them the spot, and they're not allowed to vote. Any one of us can march into any committee meeting, sit down, start listening, and even ask questions if our caucus agrees. I don't see in any way that this diminishes their right. They would still have the right to come. In my view, the only difference is that if we were counting for a quorum, they wouldn't be part of that count. But it in no way diminishes their right to be there. Their status is no less than it ever was. Actually, this is a clarification more than anything.

I hear Mr. Reid's point. I have great respect for his thoughts on these kinds of matters. But I would disagree with the suggestion that passing the amendment takes away anything from any member of Parliament. It does not. In my view, it recognizes the importance of caucuses and recognized parties, and that if you're going to count quorum and you need at least one other opposition party there, it ought to be one of the two recognized parties.

The Chair: Is there further debate, not on the motion but on the amendment?

We're ready to vote: we'd better read out an amendment....

Yes, Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Scott, if you don't mind, I don't quite understand. Could you perhaps focus on your concern in regard to it?

Mr. Scott Reid: It's simply this. Right now the way it works is that this is just quorum for the purpose of getting testimony. In order to be able to receive testimony, you have to have either two government members and one opposition member, or two opposition members and one government member. That opposition member could be any member of the opposition.

Under the amendment, that member could only be from the New Democrats or the Conservatives. That means you could not have the committee sit to hear testimony if both the Conservatives and the NDP didn't want that. But for the sake of argument, it might be the case that the Greens or the Bloc wanted to have testimony and the government thought they were willing to go along with it. Effectively it diminishes....

To some degree, leaving it as is, not putting in the amendment, diminishes the capacity of ourselves and the New Democrats to prevent testimony from being taken. On the theory that in Parliament we should always default towards openness and more debate, I'm simply defaulting towards that direction.

•(1150)

The Chair: Are there further comments on the amendment? We're ready to vote.

Mr. Christopherson, you're making the amendment. Do you want to read it out just so we're clear what we're voting on, for the record?

Mr. David Christopherson: I move that where the current motion says, "including one (1) member of the opposition", it would be amended to say, "including one (1) member of a recognized opposition party". It would be the exchange of those words.

The Chair: Okay.

All in favour of the amendment?

All opposed to the amendment?

Mr. David Christopherson: You have your work cut out for you.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I'm going to vote following convention. I'm not always going to vote following convention, but I don't think it's worth breaking a convention of the House and committees on this particular motion.

The convention, as some of you who have been around here for a while know, is that when the Speaker or a chair breaks a tie, it stays with the convention. It stays with the status quo. It's a vote to not change.

The status quo when we came into this meeting was that there was no rule related to the subcommittee and the quorum of the subcommittee, so my vote, to maintain that status quo, is to vote no on the amendment.

(Amendment negatived)

The Chair: Is that understood? Okay.

If there are no further amendments—someone could amend something on which they could get a majority—we'll go to the debate on the motion itself, as was originally presented by Ms. Vandenbeld.

Is there any further debate? Are you ready for the question?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you, everyone, for this actually very constructive debate we're having. That was very interesting.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Mr. Chair, can I move to the next matter?

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Arnold Chan: This deals with the time for opening remarks and questioning of witnesses.

It originally had read that witnesses be given 10 minutes to take 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 minutes to a representative of each party in the following order....

I'm sorry, I should change that. Let me back up.

It should read that for the first round of questioning, six minutes to a representative of each party in the following order: Conservative, Liberal, NDP, and Liberal. For the second round, six minutes would be allocated for the following order: Liberal, Conservative, Liberal, Conservative. And then finally, on the last one....

Sorry, that's five minutes for a Conservative for number four; and then create a fifth slot for three minutes, allocated to the NDP.

That would total 50 minutes.

•(1155)

The Chair: Does anyone want that to be read again?

Mr. Arnold Chan: My apologies. Do you want me to read that again?

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm not even looking for an amendment; an understanding would suffice that, from time to time, where we have more than one witness, we may want to massage some of the opening remark times, depending. If I may, that's the sort of work that normally the steering committee would look at and make those kinds of adjustments on.

With that understanding, my understanding is that there has been consultation with the parties. As much as it sucks being back in the third party, I accept the reality of where we are. I can live with this.

The Chair: Is there any further discussion?

Mr. Arnold Chan: I'll read it out. Regarding time for opening remarks and questioning of witnesses, it says that witnesses will be given 10 minutes to make their opening statement; and that during the questioning of witnesses the time allocated to each questioner is as follows: for the first round of questioning, six minutes to a representative of each party in the following order: Conservative, Liberal, NDP, Liberal; for the second round, six minutes to be allocated in the following order: Liberal, Conservative, Liberal, then for the fourth slot, it would be a Conservative for five minutes, and then for the fifth slot, the NDP would be allocated three minutes.

The Chair: Is there discussion on the motion?

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): I appreciate the attempts being made to be reasonably fair here, although I will point out that this is certainly a bit of a change from previous practice. I think there is one amendment that needs to be made here. I'll point out why first, and then I'll explain.... Actually, no, I'll explain the amendment I'm suggesting.

In round two, I believe that the order should go Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Liberal. That would actually bring us closer to how it was in the last Parliament, where we had fairly similar distribution amongst government, opposition, and the third party.

I don't have to tell anyone who's been around this Parliament for a while that, when we look at an hour-long panel, if you have a couple of witnesses, which is often the case, very often you're only going to get through six or seven of these slots, let's say. Therefore, what would happen is that those last couple of slots you've indicated, the last two being Conservative and NDP, those often would not actually take place. If you do a bit of analysis of that, it does weight this very heavily towards the government by allowing them that first and third slot in the second round rather than what we had done previously. If you look at the previous practice of this committee, this is a fair-sized change. If you look at the first six slots in this one, under the existing rules from the last Parliament, it would go Conservative, Liberal, NDP, Conservative, NDP, Conservative, which in the old Parliament was government.

The difference is that you've weighted the opposition speaking slots more heavily towards the end of the order, which we don't often get to. If you take those last couple of slots off.... We would often not see those happening. With those two slots it would be 42 minutes of questioning. That's often what you would see. Therefore, as the official opposition, we would actually get almost 6% less speaking time than what our seat count would indicate we should receive.

I'm not opposed to the actual times that have been allocated here. I just believe that in round two the opposition should come first, so it should go Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, and then Liberal, and then, of course, the NDP would remain as it is currently there. That would certainly provide a much fairer and more equitable speaking slot based on the number of seats that each party has in Parliament, so that every party is being treated equally and fairly, and each member of Parliament is being treated equally and fairly.

If the government is serious about trying to do that, I would suggest they would be comfortable entertaining that amendment.

I move that amendment.

• (1200)

The Chair: Can I make sure people understand your amendment? Read it, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: The amendment would be that, for round two, the first slot would go to the Conservative Party, the second slot would be Liberal, the third slot would be Conservative, the fourth slot would be Liberal, and then the fifth slot would be the NDP, with all the times remaining the same.

The Chair: You're basically changing Liberals and Conservatives in the second round.

Mr. Blake Richards: Exactly.

The Chair: We'll have Mr. Christopherson and then Mr. Chan.

Mr. David Christopherson: Just on the off chance that Mr. Chan is going to agree, I'll let him take the floor before me.

Mr. Arnold Chan: I have two very quick points.

First of all, in terms of the overall composition of time I would simply note for the record that the government is actually ceding approximately 8% of total time to the opposition relative to its proportionality within the House of Commons. However, I take the point that you raised with respect to the risk that sometimes we don't get to the bottom order of the questions.

The other point I want to make is that I understood that this was already under significant discussion among the House leaders with respect to this particular order. That was my understanding.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson—

Mr. Arnold Chan: Sorry, let me rephrase that. I should have said that among the whips it had been informally agreed upon.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

That point is very relevant. Could we get that confirmed?

I have to say in my briefing I was advised that there was agreement. The advice I was given by our whip staff was that we would support this because there had been an all-party agreement. If that's not the case then that's significant. Can we just clarify? Though we're not legally bound, we may be honour-bound. Was there a buy-in by all three whips' offices? Can we confirm that, yes or no? The only thing to keep in mind, folks, is that these things don't matter much to us but these whips still have to meet. If they had an agreement and it falls apart here, it makes it very difficult for them to do their business. I'm not hearing from the official opposition any sense of where their whip was.

I'll say my thing and then I'm done. I don't have a horse in this race. By virtue of our results I get screwed and there's nothing I can do about it. We don't have enough seats to change it. I don't have a horse in this particular debate but here's the thing. If there was a deal, a deal is a deal is a deal. If a deal was struck, then unless it's agreed to unravel it that deal should hold.

If there wasn't and it's coming to us with just a recommendation as opposed to a deal, then I would argue on the side of the official opposition that there is an element of fairness, recognizing the government was gracious enough to do the 8%. Normally, we try not to have the same party take the floor. There's usually rotation and this does change that. In effect, the government would get a 12-minute run on the floor, theoretically, with almost the same person. If they put somebody in for 15 seconds in between, they can get the floor back. Basically, a government member would get a 12-minute run. I don't really think that's fair.

In fairness, if the Liberals have their lion's share of the time, which they deserve, then at least the order should be government, opposition, government, opposition. Therefore, I would support the official opposition, but only in the absence of an unanimous agreement by the whips. If there was such a thing, that should hold.

I'm done. Thanks.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Vandenberg.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: On the substance of this debate I would just point out that in terms of individual members of this committee, right now there are three Conservative members on the committee and there are three spots for Conservatives to ask questions. There is one NDP member who will then get two spots to ask questions. There are five Liberal members of this committee and four spots for Liberals. Already with this proposal, one of us would not have a chance to ask questions. I think it's probably more than fair. I just wanted to point out that I think the order is quite fair as it is. In fact, probably one of us would have less time to speak.

Mr. Scott Reid: In terms of fairness, I used to chair not a committee but a subcommittee on international human rights. We operated by consensus. We would have hearings and then we would ask questions.

Like in this proposal, we had opposition members at the back end, as the last people to ask questions. The only way we could ever accommodate them was by letting the committee run over time. We met just before question period. We met from one to two o'clock, two days a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Questions run over. Someone asks a question and then the answer winds up running over. This happens all the time. It may be different here, but we would have someone talking about their experience of being tortured, for example. As chair, you can't cut them off, so they go on, and what started off being six minutes winds up being seven or eight minutes.

In order to accommodate the people at the back end in asking questions, we would allow our meeting to run through the S.O. 31s. When I would realize we were running over, I'd send the clerk out and ask the people around the table if anybody had an S.O. 31 so we could change the order. I don't think we will have that flexibility, because the room we're in now will frequently be booked by somebody else coming in afterwards, so we won't have the ability to extend our meetings.

The point I'm getting at is that I think the chances that the NDP will get any of its three minutes at the end are very low. The chances that the Conservatives will get their five minutes, while not quite as low, are pretty low. I think this is a fundamentally problematic issue to be dealt with. I would say that it would make more sense, quite frankly... I like what Mr. Richards was suggesting, but the fairest thing actually would be if the Liberals had the last spot. I'm not saying that they should have three minutes. They should still get six minutes, but it should be in the last spot.

The Chair: Before we continue debate, is there any comment from any of the parties on the potential agreement the whips had?

Ms. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: If I may comment on that, my understanding is that we had presented the information to the whips and asked for feedback, and we didn't receive any negative feedback from it. The parties seemed to agree on it.

Was there a formal deal per se? No, but we certainly didn't receive any negative feedback at all.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Chair, I go to the meeting of the House leaders and whips. It happens every Tuesday in the afternoon, so in the event that we deviate here from what they're doing there, or with what they agreed on, there would be a chance to discuss it within a

very short amount of time. I don't think we should feel ourselves absolutely bound by our... I hate to use the term "honour" when we're talking about party discipline, quite frankly, but I could say by our vows of obedience and chastity or whatever it is we take vis-à-vis our party whips. With regard to this subject, I think we should look at making some improvements here.

The Chair: Do you want "chastity" in the minutes?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Scott Reid: We're in public. It's too late to take it back.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, based on your earlier comment, do you have any comments on that as related to the whips?

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes.

At the end of the day, I think that's the case. Quite frankly, we don't have to honour that. I just wanted to make sure that we knew the context, but we're masters of our own destiny, as we like to say at each committee.

The only thing I would mention is that, yes, if we're going to be fully fair—and I very much appreciate Mr. Reid's sense of fairness—if we're going to make it so that it's not a 12-minute Liberal run and recognize that the bottom two often get dropped, then the fairest way to fix that would indeed be to move the six-minute Liberal in round two from the number one slot and move it into the five slot. That way, we're still maintaining that the NDP at least has a fighting chance of getting a couple of seconds of our three minutes, and the fairness of going government-opposition, government-opposition is maintained. I like that idea for self-serving reasons as well as for an element of fairness.

● (12:10)

The Chair: Is there further debate?

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I wanted to respond, I guess, to Ms. Vandenberg.

I know you had sort of indicated your feeling that it would shortchange one of your members. I would like to point out that if you look at the proposal I'm making in terms of an amendment compared to the original proposal, they're actually the same in terms of the number of slots that each party gets. It's only the order.

As to the reason the order is important, I think Mr. Reid actually did a fairly good job of explaining it. I also had the experience of chairing a couple of parliamentary committees in the past. Having sat on a number of others, I can say with quite a degree of certainty—I think it would be hard for anyone who's been in Parliament to disagree with this—that when we talk about a total order here, there are 50 minutes of questions and answers. As Mr. Reid explained quite well, we know it's very rare that six minutes will be exactly adhered to and that we will jump right from one to the other.

I know that every chair does things a little bit differently, but I know that when I was a chair, I tried to be very strict on the members in terms of keeping them to time. But with witnesses, when they're trying to answer a question and they've only been given maybe the last 15 seconds or something of the member's time, you do try to give the witness a little bit of a chance to actually answer the question. As well, there's always a little bit of a transition when the chair transitions from one questioner to the next.

The reality that exists here is that very rarely, probably almost never, would those last couple of slots actually be utilized. Therefore, what this does is weight the questions very heavily in favour of the government. Frankly, that's not a fairness.

If you were to flip the order so that the Liberal is not first in the second round, it actually would create a fair situation. If the government's intention here is to be fair, they would certainly accept this proposal. If not, it seems like it's another one of those smoke-and-mirrors situations, where they're trying to put something out that looks like fairness but we all know isn't.

The number of speaking minutes that each party would receive does not change here, only the order, so that in the event we don't get through the whole order, the opposition will not be shortchanged.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: If Mr. Richards could read the amendment again—

Sorry.

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Maybe I can address it in a broader way, if I can, Blake.

If we go back to the last series of PROC meetings, typically you would have the government start off debate. The government's the one that actually begins the questioning. Here in this proposal, it's the opposition that starts the questions. That is, I think, a progressive move, allowing for opposition to do it.

If you take a look at the last PROC series of meetings, the government always had five slots, so every member of the government side would be afforded the opportunity to speak. Under this new system, the government now is going to.... If every member were to speak, they would have to split their time. If you want to reflect in terms of the issue of just fairness and how it's changing, it actually works to the advantage of the official opposition.

David's right in the sense that he's guaranteed the one spot. It might be tough to get that second spot, but at the very least the NDP is guaranteed that their committee member will be afforded the opportunity to speak. More Conservative members will likely be speaking, because if you get two panellists speaking, the chance of getting that second series of questions will be off and on.

The deputy whip made reference to what has taken place. There was a sense of goodwill discussion, or an offering of what we were looking at here. The general feeling of the committee, from what I understand, was that there was some presentation made to the whips. The official opposition does benefit under this proposal compared to the previous way in which it was administered. The NDP will get, if

in fact it's one presenter and it's a quick go-around, that second series of questions. In that sense there's a benefit.

The party that loses out under this new structure is in fact the governing party, because no longer are they the first to question and there's a very good chance they will lose one of their questioners. That's almost an absolute. I think maybe if you look at it from that perspective...unless you're suggesting that we go back to the way it was, where, for example, it would be the government that would start as opposed to the official opposition, but I don't think I'm hearing that.

In that sense, I think we should accept it. We have that House leadership meeting later on this afternoon, and we can raise the issue there, but maybe consider accepting it. The preference is to deal with it now.

• (1215)

The Chair: Ms. Taylor.

Ms. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: If I may just give a bit of information with respect to the new proposed structures, I have a few figures here. If we look at the past and present, or the recommendations that we're making, we see that the governing party would have had 56.3% of the time. With this recommendation that we're bringing forward, we would only have 48%. The Conservatives would have been at 30.3%. With this recommendation, they would have 34%. The NDP would have 13% of the time. With this proposal, they would have 17%.

That really looks at the numbers with respect to the divisions of time that we're proposing.

The Chair: We'll have Mr. Richards, and then Mr. Christopher-son.

Mr. Blake Richards: I believe what I just heard from Mr. Lamoureux, and correct me if I'm wrong, is that the government is saying that should we flip the order so that the government gets the first question in round one, they would be willing to accept the amendment that we're making. In other words, if I'm hearing it correctly, I would consider that a friendly amendment. The order in round one would be Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Liberal, and in round two, it would be Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Liberal, NDP.

If I'm hearing that, we could accept it as a friendly amendment.

The Chair: Mr. Christopher-son.

Mr. David Christopher-son: I'm willing to hear from Mr. Lamoureux on that point before I take the floor.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Can you just repeat that one more time?

Mr. Blake Richards: You indicated that should the government get the first round of questioning in round one, I think I heard that you were willing to entertain it. If that's the case, I would see a deal on the order being in round one, Liberal first, Conservative second, NDP third, and Liberal fourth; then in round two, it would be Conservative first, Liberal second, Conservative third, Liberal fourth, NDP fifth.

Mr. Scott Reid: I want to ask for clarification from my colleague, Mr. Richards, on this point.

This is without actually changing the number of minutes assigned. You would have a longer six-minute Liberal round following a five-minute Conservative round in the second.

Mr. Blake Richards: You're saying that number four would still be a six-minute slot.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, it would be a six-minute Liberal slot. We're not trying to challenge their time.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm comfortable with that.

The Chair: So you'd be changing that five-minute slot to a six-minute slot.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'd be comfortable with that.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: We'd start off, then.

Mr. Blake Richards: Correct.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Okay.

Mr. Blake Richards: We'd flip the order in both rounds, essentially.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Sure. How would you feel if we went Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Liberal—

Mr. Blake Richards: That's round one.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: That's round one, and then we go Conservative, Liberal, Liberal, Conservative, NDP. It's only because that gives us four. Otherwise, we're taking a risk. We have five members.

• (1220)

Mr. Blake Richards: Again, what you're then doing is taking time away from the opposition if that does happen. I think the other concern is having back-to-back questions from the government. I think it's important that we maintain the order there, so it would be Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Liberal in the second round.

However, we would allow the Liberal to have a full six-minute slot at the end, rather than a five-minute slot.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: On the second round, we'd only have four of our five members. Every other party's going to have the opportunity to make sure that their member gets to speak, except for the Liberals. If we can get the second and third spots, there's a better chance that at least four of the five will be afforded the opportunity to speak.

Mr. Blake Richards: That would be at the expense of one of the Conservative members. That's the issue here. You're already taking time away from the opposition parties, and we'd actually be allocated less time than our seat count would indicate in that scenario.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: However, you're getting the lead in the second round.

Mr. Blake Richards: In the second round, yes. In the first round, I'm willing to allow the government to have that lead and to give more time on that fourth slot in the second round.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair.

Well, hope springs eternal, so I haven't completely given up on trying to get myself out of the fifth spot in the second slot, but it's another hill I'm not going to hold my breath on.

Let me just say to Mr. Lamoureux that I appreciate the fact that they're willing to discuss it, but it still leaves us with the same problem. The problem is that the government's getting a 12-minute run. That's the issue. I'm already in the spot where, if anybody gets jettisoned, we're gone. Those are the results of the election. I have to live with them.

In terms of the element of fairness in everything else—again, I wouldn't have a horse in this race—the problem is a government getting a 12-minute run at a committee. I don't mean the Liberal government, but any government. That's a huge advantage I've never seen before. I think the government has to recognize that as the problem. Quite frankly, to be fair, I thought the official opposition made a very fair suggestion.

I recognize, Mr. Lamoureux, that you're right. We have a lot of committees. Public accounts, of all the committees, is the premier oversight committee, and we had the government lead off. I don't think it's like that anywhere in the Commonwealth, so I recognize that it's to your credit that you were willing to put that the way it should be.

To be fair, I thought that for the official opposition to give up that spot to give the government some latitude to break up the 12-minute run was pretty fair-minded too. You know yourself that when this place is packed and everybody's paying attention, the first up gets the greatest attention. I thought it was something for the official opposition to give that up.

Your counter-proposal, Mr. Lamoureux, still leaves us with.... I might point out that negotiations are still happening with the parliamentary secretary, not anybody else. I would say in fairness that the 12-minute run thing is still there, and that's the real problem. That really is a problem. I'm not aware of any other committee where a government member has ever had a 12-minute run structurally built in. Man, I'd give my political right arm to have that at every meeting I started to go to.

Thanks.

The Chair: We're still on the amendment. Let's carry on with further debate on the amendment.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: I thought for a minute there that it seemed as though we had some willingness to try to cooperate and make this work. In the absence of that, it seems the government is simply making an attempt to appear to be offering something to the opposition but is actually trying to benefit themselves.

It's unfortunate that they're seeking to basically have more time in the committee than their seat count would indicate. We thought we were trying to be reasonable and offer something that could work for everybody so that the committee would be fair and equitable. It appears that this is simply another example of the Trudeau government, a smoke-and-mirrors situation where what they're saying is one thing and what they're doing is another thing. It's really unfortunate if that's the route they're going to go down. I hope they'll reconsider and accept our reasonable offer.

The Chair: Is there any further debate on the amendment?

•(1225)

Mr. David Christopherson: Am I hearing from the government side that they're going to stick with demanding 12 minutes? Is that...? Here we go again.

Here we go again on the easy stuff—the easy stuff—and I say that as somebody who benefited from this. I appreciate it, three minutes or 3%, whatever it was. Everything is relative, right?

But I have to tell you this. To demand a 12-minute run? Even Harper didn't demand that. Apologies to present company, but it's about the most anti-democratic, other than.... After I left the Harris experience in Queen's Park, it took until I ran into Harper to find anybody nearly as undemocratic, and they didn't try to do this. Twelve minutes is a big, big, deal.

The government just won't... Here we go again. They're all looking down, talking to each other. Once again, this is the way... The government wants to do things differently, but what I'm telling you is that you're exactly like the last government. They did exactly the same thing. They made their arguments that they thought were reasonable and shut up and wouldn't say anything more. They buried their heads in their books and played with their smartphones and their iPads and chatted with each other, but would not engage seriously because they'd made up their minds.

Again, this is the easy stuff. What evidence is there that this government is at all serious about democratic reform? Even their preferred voting method, which they're talking about now, everyone is acknowledging is skewed in their favour. We'll see how that plays out.

Here we are again at committee, the one area where the government said they were going to be more transparent, with more accountability and less partisanship, and at every turn where we've tried to get them to recognize that there's a little more fairness that can be brought to this very easily, it's "No, no, no, we've made up our minds, we've decided, that's it, we don't want to hear any more". They go quiet, like Harper's people did. They'll sit there and say nothing, and we have two choices over here. We can filibuster, and you can't filibuster everything, or we just acquiesce.

Then this goes away as an issue, and for the next four years we live with the government getting a 12-minute run. Let me tell you, when the government is under attack because of the witnesses who are coming forward, having a 12-minute run to take the public away from where the last series of questions and answers had them to where they want to be is a gift directly from heaven. It doesn't get any better. Trust me, that's from somebody who has a measly three minutes at the end of the second round, which likely I'm going to be lucky to see.

But as much as I'd like this to be about us, it isn't. It's about fairness. Again, I say to the government that a 12-minute run, when we measure these things by the minute and when percentages are all calculated to the decimal point, is a big deal in terms of how we run our committees.

I see a lot of activity over there, but I don't know whether that's the next issue they're working on and this one is already old, or whether there's still hope that the government may decide that maybe they'd let a little fairness in.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, it's nice to hear you speak, though. It's nice to see you jump in. We appreciate that. It gives Mr. Lamoureux, the parliamentary secretary, a chance to get a rest from being the one who's leading all the discussions, which is another reform that they've already broken, by the way. I mean, you're racking them up pretty quick around here: boom, boom, boom.

But I have to tell you this. I'm defending the opposition, but really what I'm defending is fairness. This is not fair. It is so not fair that even the Harper government didn't attempt to ram through this kind of scenario.

•(1230)

Now we know why they threw a few crumbs to the NDP and a couple of percentages to the official opposition. It was because they hoped that would be enough to buy them this incredibly lucrative political gift of having the floor for 12 minutes straight with a witness or a series of witnesses. It's not fair. This government said fairness would matter. When are they going to start showing it? When?

Because they're not showing it yet. It's all talk. It's talk, talk, talk, sunny ways, talk, talk, talk, sunny ways, change, democracy, transparency, non-partisanship, talk, talk, talk. When it's time to do something, it's nope, and arms crossed, no way, end of debate: "We'll just wait and use our majority to shut down the pesky opposition again". That's where we are, and you know what? We just spent 10 years in that, and this government was elected with a mandate to be different. Where's the difference?

Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Vandenberg.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We talk about fairness. I actually find it interesting that it's Mr. Christopherson, who has two chances to speak in every round, who is talking about those of us who.... One of us will not get a chance to speak because there are five members and there are four spots.

But I would like to propose an amendment.

Mr. Richards, you mentioned to me the fact that it's possible that we may not frequently get to number four in the second round—and that's something I'm not as familiar with—but I think what we could do to meet you halfway is that if we were to reduce the number of minutes in the second round for the first three questioners to five minutes, that would save us three minutes, and we would go five, five, five, and three minutes. That makes it more likely that we would get to that fourth spot in the second round.

I think that's only fair, because I do think it's important. We on this committee are all individuals—

Sorry?

Mr. Blake Richards: What order would it be in?

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: The order would stay the same, but we would be reducing, so in fact we would be losing—

An hon. member: Instead of 12 minutes, it's only 11.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: In fact, if you look at the percentages compared to the previous Parliament, both opposition parties have more time to speak. This would be reducing our time more, but it would make it more likely that we would get to that fourth spot.

Just to meet you halfway, I think that would be fair also to individual members of the committee who as well want to have a chance to ask questions as individuals.

The Chair: Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I appreciate the offer there and the feeling there. If the government is quite certain that this would then make the fourth slot come up in most meetings, then why not make the switch so they don't have two slots in a row?

If they're quite certain that this proposal would then allow the fourth spot to exist, why not make the flip so there are not two Liberal spots in a row? That's still 11 minutes. It's a slight improvement, I suppose, but not much of a one. Make the flip, then, if you're so confident that the number four would then come up. Why not make it if you're so convinced that it will change the fourth spot and give that opportunity? I don't understand why you wouldn't make that flip.

The compromise has already been made. To give the government that length of time all in one stretch is certainly not fair, as has been pointed out many times, and if you're convinced that number four would then come up, why not make the flip? I don't see any reason why you wouldn't.

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Thank you, Chair.

I want to be sensitive to what Blake and David are saying.

I must admit, Blake, that I'm a little bit surprised that you're prepared to surrender that first line of questioning, so maybe what we'll do is take advantage of that. If you're prepared to say that the government should have the first round of questions, I think we'll take that back.

What about the idea of seven minutes? Remember, the way it worked was that it was seven minutes at the very beginning. Are you content with the six minutes? The governing party starts off with six or seven minutes. It used to be seven minutes. What are your thoughts? I'd like to maybe come up with a proposal, but I want to get your sense on the amount of time for questioning.

• (1235)

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm not quite certain exactly what you're asking there, Kevin. Are you indicating that you would want to change the whole first round to seven minutes? Or are you indicating that you want just that first slot to be seven minutes? What are you indicating?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: It seems to me that your preference is to go back to the old system, and I'm open to that, but the old system led off with seven minutes by the government, seven minutes by the official opposition, and seven minutes by the third party. You would do that whole first round with seven minutes, and then you would go to five minutes. Is that also your preference?

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, no, that's not what I indicated, but give us a minute to consider that.

You're suggesting that the whole first round would then go to seven minutes, and the second round would become five minutes. Is that what you're indicating?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I'm just trying to get a sense of what your preference would be, if we come up with a proposal. Strictly thinking of that first round, is it seven minutes, six minutes, five minutes, or do you want to stay with the six minutes in terms of what's being proposed?

I want to make sure you're confident that you want to surrender that first line of questioning. That's a big one for me.

Mr. Blake Richards: Why don't you give us a moment to give some thought to this, okay?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Okay.

The Chair: Would the committee members like to suspend for a couple of minutes so we can discuss this?

Okay. We'll suspend for a few minutes so the parties can discuss this amongst themselves.

• (1235)

(Pause)

• (1245)

The Chair: I think we may have come to an agreement here. There's some good work going on, anyway.

What I'd like to do, to make this clear for the minutes, is to withdraw first the amendment and then the motion.

I'd ask the committee first of all if we could withdraw Mr. Richards' original amendment.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Yes, withdraw the original. I'll reread the motion that I think we all have consensus on—

The Chair: Okay, wait.

All in favour?

(Amendment withdrawn [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I think Blake was going to have—

The Chair: Now I want to withdraw the original motion. Then we'll start with a new original motion.

Is anyone opposed to withdrawing the original motion?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I believe, Blake, you were going to withdraw your amendment and then reintroduce a new amendment.

I believe that's what was—

The Chair: No. We're going to withdraw, though, everything we started with. We're going to just start with a new motion now.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: We thought it might be better, because it's the official opposition that is giving up that first spot, that the record would show the official opposition actually moving the amendment. That's the...

Mr. Blake Richards: Obviously there has been some discussion. I think everyone has agreed that we're all trying to find a way to compromise here.

The Chair: Just to clarify, we have withdrawn your first amendment.

Mr. Blake Richards: Correct. I'm willing to withdraw, yes.

The Chair: Now you're going to propose a different amendment.

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Blake Richards: Based on the discussions we've all had, I think all parties seem to have an agreement here that we can proceed with the following: in round one, all slots would be seven-minute slots, with the order being Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Liberal; in round two, the first four slots would all be five-minute slots, and the order would be Conservative, Liberal, Conservative, Liberal; the fifth slot would remain a three-minute slot, and it would be an NDP slot.

The Chair: Does everyone understand? Is there any discussion on the amendment?

(Amendment agreed to [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: Now we'll vote on the amended motion, which is basically the same thing.

(Motion as amended agreed to [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: Thank you for your co-operation. I think there's been some excellent work so far. That's why I came to Parliament, to have rational debate in committee and to move things forward in a thoughtful way.

We'll go on to the next motion, which is document distribution.

Ruby.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): I'd like to move the next matter regarding document distribution. I move:

That only the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to distribute documents to members of the Committee and only when such documents exist in both official languages and that witnesses be advised accordingly prior to appearing before the Committee.

The Chair: Is there any discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Next is working meals.

Does someone want to move that?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: In the interest of recognizing that it is lunchtime, I'll move number seven on working meals. I move:

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

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Next is a motion related to travel, accommodation, living expenses, and witnesses. Would anyone like to make a motion on that?

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: I so move:

That, if requested, reasonable travel, accommodation and living expenses be reimbursed to witnesses not exceeding one (1) representative per organization; and that, in exceptional circumstances, payment for more representatives be made at the discretion of the Chair.

The Chair: Is there any debate?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Next is access to in camera meetings.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Mr. Chair, I know that Mr. Christopherson had wanted to make an amendment. Could I suggest that we move to item 11 first, dispense with it immediately, and then we can come back to your point?

The Chair: Okay, so we'll do the two on in camera meetings at the end.

Mr. Arnold Chan: If that's acceptable to you and it's acceptable to—

• (1250)

Mr. David Christopherson: I think the chair had suggested that we do it at the end.

Is that what you're also reaffirming?

Mr. Arnold Chan: Yes.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, I'm fine with that.

The Chair: Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan: On notices of motions, I propose:

That 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;

That the notice of motion be filed with the clerk of the Committee and distributed to members in both official languages;

That 48 hours' notice be calculated in the same manner as for the House; and

That the motions be submitted to the clerk no later than 6:00 p.m.

The Chair: If it's okay, I'm going to ask the clerk to speak. Administratively, they have a little bit of an issue with the time. This may facilitate things. I'll let the clerk talk about her thoughts.

The Clerk: Thank you, Chair.

I just want to flag for members that when we receive notices of motions, we do all we can to turn them around quickly and distribute them to the membership as soon as possible. With a 6:00 p.m. deadline, it will be very difficult to turn them around and distribute them to the members the same day, because at that time of day we do not have access to the services that we normally need to process a notice of motion.

It's up to the committee what it would like to adopt, but I just want to flag that particular difficulty with 6:00 p.m.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: What time do you need?

The Clerk: Earlier in the day would give us better access to the translation services, and also to the offices of the members if we should need to call for clarification.

The Chair: "Earlier" being what?

The Clerk: Four o'clock is good.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm curious, did we have this last time?

A voice: Yes.

Mr. Christopherson: Was it a problem last time, too? Is that why you're raising it, Madam Clerk?

The Clerk: I'm not aware since I was not with the committee in the last session.

Mr. Arnold Chan: I move a friendly amendment to move it to 4:00 p.m.

The Chair: There's a friendly amendment to move it to 4:00 p.m. Is there any further discussion on the motion?

(Motion as amended agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: The clerk would like to put on the record that she thanks the members who accommodated to make the administration easier and more efficient.

Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'll move number nine, unless you wanted to say something.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: On access to in camera meetings, I move: That, unless otherwise ordered, each Committee member be allowed to have one staff member present from their office and one staff member from their party at in camera meetings.

The Chair: Is there any discussion on this?

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Is this as it was previously?

The Chair: Yes, it reads exactly the way it was last time.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Transcripts of in camera meetings, does anyone want to move that?

Ms. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: On transcripts of in camera meetings, I move: 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: Is there any discussion? Are you ready for the vote?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Just before we go to Mr. Christopherson, I want to make two points.

First of all, once again, thank you for a very thoughtful and productive session. I think that's what the people of Canada are looking for in their Parliament—at least I heard that at the doors. Thank you very much, everyone, for thoughtful discussions of the points.

As I mentioned at the beginning, I want to say that for the next meeting, which is on Thursday already—and maybe we can discuss this after Mr. Christopherson's motion here—we have a letter from the House leader, which I think you should have all received. Our highest priority is government business, so it might be timely to accept the government leader's offer to appear before our committee.

However, we'll discuss that after Mr. Christopherson's motion.

David, the floor is yours.

•(1255)

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

You know what? In fairness, Chair, I can't imagine that I would be anywhere near done in five minutes. If you want to move ahead to that one order of business, as it speaks to the next meeting—it basically involves inviting someone—I'd be willing to do that, again, as long as I can get my motion right after and you recognize we're not yet done all our rules until my motion is dealt with one way or another.

It's up to you. I'll go ahead if you want.

The Chair: Yes. If we don't finish the debate on your motion, could we do that at the next meeting as well?

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, that's my thinking.

The Chair: Okay. Let's—

Mr. David Christopherson: Was the government looking to invite the government House leader to the next meeting?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. David Christopherson: We really should do that first, or you're not going to get to it when I get the floor.

The Chair: Would the committee like to invite the government House leader to the next meeting, based on the letter that all of you received? Would anyone like to move a motion? From any party?

Mr. Arnold Chan: I so move.

An hon. member: I second the motion.

The Chair: Is there any discussion? All in favour? Is anyone opposed?

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Christopherson, if we don't finish your motion today, we will at the next meeting.

Mr. David Christopherson: Just to be clear, because we will only have a few minutes and it takes me that long to clear my throat, would we bring in the government House leader and do all of that and then return to me? Or were you looking at finishing my motion and then hearing from the witness? I have a fair bit to say and I don't want to disrupt an otherwise productive meeting because of rules.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: If we could have the House leader before [Inaudible—Editor]

Mr. David Christopherson: That's why I'm offering and that's kind of what my sense is, because I have something to say on this, and where I come from it's important.

I don't want to hold up the business of the committee, so for what it's worth, Chair, I leave it with you that I'm quite prepared to even adjourn this, have our witness on Thursday, and then upon conclusion of our business with the witness, if you direct that I will then be given a chance to place my motion and it gets its full hearing, I'm fine with that, sir.

The Chair: That's probably a good way to go. Will this be a notice of motion today?

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, a notice of motion, with the assurance that it comes up right after we hear from the government House leader. If that's your ruling, I'm fine, Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have a very quick question for the chair. Just for clarification, do the 12 rules we've passed here apply for the next meeting or not until after the motion is dealt with?

The Chair: They all apply immediately. They were passed.

The understanding in our friendly group here is that at the next meeting we will have the government House leader and then do Mr. Christopherson's motion. Does everyone understand that?

Do you want to submit...?

Mr. David Christopherson: The clerk has circulated it already in both languages.

The Chair: Okay. That's perfect.

Is there any further business in the two minutes we have left?

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Further to the motion we passed at the beginning of the meeting about the tabling of the committee reports, when would it be your intention to table that report to the House?

The Chair: As soon as we can have it ready because we want the committees to get started.

Mr. Blake Richards: Do we have an estimate of when that might be?

The Chair: I'll ask the clerk to respond officially to that.

The Clerk: We will prepare the report as quickly as possible as soon as we have all of the information we need.

The Chair: I'm sorry. Are you talking about the report with all the names or just the fact that we're letting the whips go ahead...?

Mr. Blake Richards: It's the report with the names.

The Chair: Whenever the parties have submitted all their names, we can do it as quickly as possible, and we will.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. Do you have to first table the fact that we're allowing the whips to do so?

The Chair: No.

Mr. Blake Richards: Does the report have to be tabled?

The Chair: No, not the permission. It's just the big report with all the names.

•(1300)

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. Thanks.

The Chair: I would like to ask for a clarification.

Does that motion have to be unanimous in the House to support the one where we're reporting back what the whips are proposing for all the committees?

The clerk indicates that the practice is that the chair presents that report and asks the House to adopt the report.

Is there any further business? We're right on time in this very productive meeting.

Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is it possible for the clerks and the analysts to have name tags as well for future meetings?

The Chair: Could you have name tags for the clerk and the analysts, Madam Clerk?

Mr. David Christopherson: They have to remain anonymous.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: That's a good point, Mr. Graham. I think we can arrange that.

Thanks, all of you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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