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Chair: Mr. Ron McKinnon



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• (1155)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.)): Committee, I am hoping to ask if everyone would be in agreement to get an update from the analysts on the state of the previous study on COVID-19. As you recall, the instructions from the House in paragraph (s) of its motion is that we can bring that information, the witness testimony and documentation, into this study and carry it forward. I know that the analysts have put a lot of work into doing a report. I think they are fairly well along in that report and I'm wondering if the committee is in favour of hearing about the status of that report and whether we want to carry on with it.

Is there any disagreement with hearing from the analysts at this point?

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Just a point of clarification, Chair, do you mean a full meeting or just that we get a written update?

The Chair: It would just be a conversation with the analysts, so they can tell us where they are on that study, if it's something we want to carry on with or what we want to do with that data.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Just on that point, Chair, I am just concerned because right now we have only one meeting scheduled a week, so I would prefer that the update come in writing for our consideration first.

The Chair: Okay. There is no unanimous consent to do that.

I think it's up to the committee to carry on now. We called this meeting to consider witnesses and to make plans for going forward with this study.

Ms. Rempel, your hand is up. Go ahead.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thanks, Chair.

Just because I know that this meeting is likely to be interrupted by votes today and there is quite a bit of work for us to do as a committee, this is what I would suggest we do to move forward.

We've got the matter of the COVID study, as well as the matter of the PMPRB study, and I would suggest that we perhaps have an informal, offline conversation with you and whoever the quarterback is on the Liberal side, and me, and perhaps the vice-chairs of the NDP and the Bloc, and just discuss the way forward, and then have another meeting to do this. I know that my colleague Mr. Davies has a suggestion on how we proceed with the COVID study for the selection of topics and witnesses, but I am wondering if ev-

eryone is amenable to that. Then we could come back to have a very quick procedural meeting to formally put that into action. I think there's a general willingness to entertain topics collegially, but I am thinking that this might be the best way forward so that we can give the clerk some instructions.

The Chair: I guess one of the points of doing that in a meeting is that we would then have access to House resources for interpretation, so that all members are able to communicate properly.

Anyway, I will go now to Mr. Davies. Go ahead.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Well, I think that's a good suggestion from Michelle Rempel Garner. What I was going to suggest that we could think about is that we do have the motion from the House that has been directed to the committee, and so what we need to do is to come up with an efficient and fair way of moving forward. What I was going to propose for all of my colleagues to think about is a process like this: that each party would submit, say, four issues it would like the committee to study within the purview of the motion coming before the committee on COVID-19, and that each party rank its four issues.

What I think we can then do is to take each issue and deal with them in rotation, whether that's Conservative, Liberal, Bloc, NDP; or Liberal, Conservative, Bloc, NDP. Then what the committee would just have to do at that point is to assign the number of meetings to each of those particular issues, and then we can, of course, have our witness selection, which I think is prescribed by the motion. The motion does speak to each party having one witness per one-hour meeting and two witnesses per two-hour meeting, so it's basically an equal submission of witnesses on the issues.

I think each party probably knows the one issue they would like to start with, so perhaps by this Friday we could submit our first issue on COVID that we'd like to have studied, and then perhaps by the middle of next week we could follow up with the next three issues ranked in order.

I also think that we should set some loose parameters around the number of meetings—perhaps a minimum of one meeting per issue. I think some of the issues could maybe be handled in one meeting, and some will take longer. I would say that it should be between one and four meetings per issue, and then the committee, of course, could extend that as they see fit. That way, I think we could get to work on the study quite quickly.

I'm happy to sit down in a subcommittee context as well. I am a bit concerned about translation, because I don't really understand why we can't have translation at our subcommittee meetings. The subcommittee is part of this committee, and it has to be able to function with interpretation.

I also just want to touch on the issue of the PMPRB study, because I think there's confusion about this. The motion that we passed last week said that we would ask for stakeholders and witnesses to be invited to provide submissions to the committee by November 6. Then, once we got those submissions, we were going to decide as a committee whom we were going to invite as witnesses.

The way the clerk is dealing with our offices is that we have to have our own witness lists in by this week, which is not what the motion said and not what we discussed last week, because we want to see the written submissions first before we decide. I'm mindful of Mr. Thériault's very eloquent submission that we want to get witnesses before this committee as soon as possible, but I don't want to be submitting witnesses on Wednesday for the PMPRB study before I've seen what the submissions are from the Canadian public. I think we need to clarify that latter point. If I have it wrong, then I do, but I have had a chance to review my understanding with some of my colleagues, and that's the same understanding they had. I think we have to clarify that.

I don't know if we feel comfortable adopting a general way forward on the COVID study at this meeting or if we'd be better served by following Ms. Rempel Garner's suggestion that we refer this matter to the subcommittee for more detailed discussions and then come back to the committee.

I'll conclude by saying that if we do that latter process, then we are going to slow down, because whatever the subcommittee decides will have to come back to this committee for discussion and endorsement. I've had discussions with some of my colleagues from each party, and I think there's probably general consensus that we should just get to work by submitting our first issue and getting them in order. That seems fair. It's equal. It allows every party to put forward an issue and us to get to work on the House motion as soon as possible.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

I should clarify that my understanding of Ms. Rempel Garner's suggestion was for an informal meeting, which is not a subcommittee meeting. A subcommittee meeting requires the resources of the House. It is a formal meeting, and it will also require the whips to agree on timing, as well.

I'll go now to Mr. Van Bynen, please.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Can I just make a quick point of order for a second, Chair? Sorry.

The Chair: On a point of order, Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you, and sorry about this.

Don said that we would choose the topics from those in the motion passed by the House. However, the motion that was passed in the House said “such as, but not limited to”. So I just want to make sure that we get clarity on the other topics that can be put forward by all parties, not just what was in the motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fisher.

We go now to Mr. Van Bynen, please.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think what's being proposed is a reasonable approach. What we really want to do is to get some traction and get started on some studies.

I'm still not certain what we intended to hear from the first portion of the HESA meeting this session. Was the request for written comments for a summary of what was learned and of where we are with the report, or was the intent to bring forward a draft for discussion of what was learned in the first part of the session? I just want to clarify that.

The Chair: That was a suggestion by Ms. Rempel.

Ms. Rempel did you want to clarify?

• (1200)

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, but is that with regard to the reporting process, with the clerks or how to proceed?

The Chair: I had asked if we were okay with having the analysts step in, just at the moment, to give us a verbal update on the status of the previous study. You suggested that you would rather have that in writing. Mr. Van Bynen is asking exactly what you want in writing, as I understand it.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Yes. I'm not sure what you're saying by an “update”. I wouldn't want to spend a whole meeting on that because I think we have a lot of work to do and not a lot of resources to do it.

What I was suggesting as an alternative was that the clerks provide us with their written report and that we can spend more time on that, if members feel like we need it. If it's a 50-second update right now, that would be fine. If it's something that's longer, where we want to have rounds of questions, I would prefer to get it as something I could read.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Van Bynen, does that answer your question?

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: To your intent, Mr. Chair, if you intended to have a very brief verbal update, that would help us decide how we would go forward with the previous report. I think we invested a ton of time and a lot of resources in the first sitting, and I think it could help us put together a framework on how we should be going ahead. I think dealing with or looking at the draft report from the previous sitting would be very helpful for us.

If we could get a brief summary about what's entailed in that, then we could decide whether or not we should go forward to receive the draft report and consider it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen. That was indeed my intent.

Mr. Fisher, go ahead.

Mr. Darren Fisher: I want to thank Don for that suggestion. I think that it is actually a good way to go. I wonder whether we could maybe send our lists in prior to Friday. I do see some value in our getting to work. Perhaps the clerk can put the list together and see which ones we're going to go to, in which order, and then we can get started. If we get our lists in tomorrow or Wednesday, instead of Friday, then maybe we'll get a chance to start talking about getting witnesses in.

Also, I think the informal meeting leaves Mr. Thériault out, because we wouldn't be able to have interpretation. I think we can work as a committee—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: As a point of clarification, Mr. Chair, I'm sure we can find interpretation.

The Chair: Excuse me. Let's not interrupt Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Anyway, I was just going to say that I think Don's onto something there. I think it does give us the ability...and all I've been seeking from the start is some fairness here. I think what he's put out there is pretty much fair for every party.

Without continuing to chat about this forever, why don't we find a way forward that seems fair for everybody and get on with this? If we have two, three or four topics, like Don suggested, let's get them submitted to the clerk. Let's get on with this and then start having a conversation about who our witnesses are going to be, so that we can start doing some work.

Thanks.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, did you wish to make a point?

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Yes. There is no intention of excluding anybody with any language. I'm sure we can ensure that we can have interpretation available for any form of meeting. I'm just looking for a solution on a way forward, given that the House of Commons is telling our committees that we don't have the IT resources to have more than one or two meetings a week. I'm looking for ways to move forward on behalf of the Canadian people, showing that we have are resilient and innovative in being able to meet beyond our scheduled meeting times. I'm sure that interpretation is possible.

The Chair: I'll add a point of clarification. We went through this process at some length in the spring when we had to hold informal meetings and were only able to get consecutive translation, which

doubles the length of the meetings and makes it awkward to get anything done.

That's why, to use House resources, a subcommittee meeting or a regular meeting of the committee was proposed.

We will go now to Mr. Kelloway.

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): What MP Don Davies has put forward would get right to the heart of the matter.

My dearly departed dad, who was in charge of mine rescue for years here in Cape Breton, would say “Pitter, patter, let's get at it”, and in that respect, this motion is fair. It is balanced, and I support it.

Whatever party you are with, it's time now to get to work, and this does that as well.

Again, details and facts matter, and being new to this, I don't know about our ability to get translation services for an informal or formal meeting. I'll defer to the clerk on that, but we need to make sure that we have access to it, and as Ms. Rempel said, to make sure that everybody is included. I want to put that on the table as well.

To sum up, I would love to be able to leave this meeting with some wind at our backs with respect to Don Davies's motion.

Let's get to it. Canadians are depending on us.

• (1205)

The Chair: Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, just quickly, I'm not certain whether Mr. Davies moved a motion.

I would support something similar to what he moved, if he's willing to move a motion, but I don't know whether he put a suggestion on the table or an actual motion.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: As a point of clarification on my part, maybe I'm just too eager to get going, so I'll retract that last statement.

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Chair, with the indulgence of my colleagues, I'm happy to move that, if it helps move the conversation forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

Mr. Thériault, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault (Montcalm, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll start with Mr. Davies' concluding remarks about the Patented Medicine Prices Review Board and the study.

We agreed that November 6 was the deadline for witnesses to submit plans to appear along with a brief or document that would help us make the right choices. However, I want to remind my colleagues that the committee voted on this type of motion because, throughout this whole process, people have been feeling denied the opportunity to come and speak. I wouldn't want us to interpret the limitation of witnesses in a narrow or exclusive way. I don't think that it's in our interest to do so. We must still see, on November 6, how many people have submitted a plan to appear along with a brief.

In terms of informal meetings, if there isn't any interpretation, then count me out. Clearly, we can work properly in a subcommittee as many times a week as we want. The bottom line is that I think that we should work formally, whether we do so in a committee or subcommittee. I'm not interested in informal meetings, especially if there isn't any interpretation. It must be made clear that this is out of the question.

It's time for us to start working. However, I supported this motion in particular to ensure that we don't overlook all the work done earlier. Logically speaking, when we want to be briefed on the topic, we usually need a summary. It turns out that the analysts have been working very hard. I wish that we could have received this and that we could have found a way to ask questions and have a short presentation. I think that, when we want to move forward, we must also look at what has been done and remember a number of things. I would have been in favour of this.

We're spending a considerable amount of time trying to find a methodology, but we're wasting a great deal of time right now. Maybe we should agree to speed up our approach a bit.

This was what I had to say this morning. I think that the constituents deserve to see us focus on this study, and we must move forward.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thériault.

[*English*]

Colleagues, the bells are ringing. We require unanimous consent to proceed any further. I suggest that we could go for another five minutes.

Would there be unanimous consent to do that?

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Chair, I'm just concerned because some of my colleagues are on rural Wi-Fi, and they need a little bit longer to make sure that they're logged in appropriately. We've had incidents when people have not been able to log in ahead of votes.

The Chair: There's no unanimous consent.

Very well—

Mr. Darren Fisher: Can we just get to the point where we get the motion on the floor, and then just agree quickly with moving in that direction so that we can get our lists submitted by end of day tomorrow?

The Chair: The votes will take quite some time. I suspect that there will be no time after the votes to carry on the meeting, so I propose that we adjourn at this time.

That being said, the meeting is now adjourned.

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