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Chair: Mrs. Sherry Romanado



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. I call this meeting to order.

We are meeting today pursuant to Standing Order 106(4), at the request of four members of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology.

With that, I will turn the floor over to MP Poilievre.

Just an FYI, my last name is spelled “Romanado”.

Go ahead, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Did our motion originally misspell your name? We'll have to get to the bottom of that. I apologize. I don't know how it happened, but we're going to get to the bottom of it. As someone whose name is regularly mispronounced, I have no tolerance whatsoever for names being misspelled.

Thank you, everyone, for coming together on short notice.

Of course, we were all met with the titanic news that two of Canada's major telecom providers were entering into a merger. It is actually an acquisition merger. As you all know, Rogers and Shaw have proposed a transaction to combine forces. It would reduce the number of players in both the cable and the wireless space, and have enormous implications for the structure of our digital economy and for the services available to our customers.

This deal has to be approved by the industry department, by the Competition Bureau and by the CRTC, all three of which report to this committee.

This is obviously an industry file, and I believe that while we do have regulatory bodies that are tasked with looking into these matters, it is the duty of parliamentarians to represent their constituents as well. We are the only ones who are directly accountable to the people who will be affected by this deal.

I am not proposing to interrupt any existing plans that the committee has. We already have an aerospace study [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and those can go ahead, but what I am proposing is that the forthcoming double break week period be used to have 12 hours of hearings. I originally thought 20 hours would be appropriate, but following discussions with colleagues who like to take advantage of break weeks for constituency work, I thought we could reduce

that and tighten up the hearings so that they could be done in 12 hours instead.

Obviously we're willing to compromise and amend this motion to make it agreeable to members of the committee and to suit their desire, as parliamentarians, to have a productive session on this subject. This is just an opening proposition, and we look forward to hearing what other members have to say.

Thank you.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you very much, MP Poilievre.

What I will ask you to do, because I think you are all on Zoom, is to use the “raise hand” function.

I see that MP Masse has his hand up.

I just want to recognize, MP Poilievre, that with respect to those two sitting weeks, there are two statutory holidays. The Friday and the Monday of those weeks are actual holidays, so that gives us two shortened weeks. I just want to flag that to people.

I will pass the floor to MP Masse.

You have the floor.

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thanks for bringing the motion forward.

I have a couple of questions so that maybe we can also get a better idea of a schedule. I have a couple of concerns.

First, I think the number of hours is not consistent with the time off that's necessary in our constituency workweek. For me, that's very problematic. Perhaps we could amend some of the ways we do business here with regard to lowering the time for presentations by witnesses, and perhaps even our own question time, to cram in more witnesses. They can send in written submissions, so we might be able to do something clever related to that.

I also have a concern that this is another Conservative motion and they have a motion on the permit economy. I don't know if they're moving down that study order to accommodate this. I think we've been able to work for over a decade here very co-operatively in this committee to make sure that our studies are done in a way that's fair. This seems to be another priority brought forth, so it would require some compromise, in my opinion.

There is another couple of small things in the motion. I don't really care for telling the minister he can't have staff here and stuff like that. That seems counter to the experiences I've had before. I don't know how much we want to get into that, but those are a couple of minor things, so perhaps if we could get our schedule laid out.... We have a lot of business and a lot of things going on.

The constituency week is very important. I'm from a region where COVID-19 has really ravaged the area. In fact, we have the AstraZeneca vaccine coming here a bit sooner because of the border, the complications and the age and poverty demographics we have in my region, and also the language. We've been helping to deal with that as well, so I have a lot of things on my mind.

I'm interested in the subject matter. For me, it's very easy as an issue. I'm against the merger or acquisition for a bunch of reasons I won't get into right now. I'm more than happy to accommodate this, but it has to be done with compromise.

I'll turn to my colleagues. Perhaps if we get a bit better scheduling as well.... Madam Chair, you mentioned the two holidays. I don't know if they were taken into consideration with the 12 hours that were provided there. Again, I'm open to seeing if we can accommodate in the way we do business in the committee and run more witnesses through, if necessary, to get to the objective.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, MP Masse.

MP Ehsassi, the floor is yours.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. It's good to listen to our colleagues here.

I want to reiterate some of the points made by Mr. Masse. I think they make eminent sense in that I think we would all benefit from reducing the number of meetings devoted to this, as well as relying to the extent possible on written submissions. The reason I say this is that I think it's abundantly clear by now that all the members of this committee are very mindful of Canadians. The welfare of Canadians is something that we care deeply about, whether it comes to cable services or to wireless service as well. I don't think there's any doubt insofar as that is concerned.

However, that being said, as the member who proposed this motion has made clear, this is an issue that the CRTC, the Competition Bureau and ISED will be looking into as well, so the role that our committee can play is really not that significant, in the sense that this is a very technical issue. As much as I understand his intention to bring many witnesses here, the reality with respect to most witnesses is that they can get into the process and get into the guidelines, but by no means would they [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the specifics or to share some of the disclosures that would occur here, and that's for good reason. The reason is that, while I understand Mr. Poilievre wants the minister to appear, the minister would not want to prejudice the outcome insofar as the CRTC, the Competition Bureau or ISED are concerned.

I say that this is a technical issue that is best left to those three bodies because, as Mr. Poilievre is fully aware, what will happen as this is examined is that it's very technical.... We have to determine where there is overlap between the services offered by the two

companies. In addition to that, they have to specifically look at the various markets in which these services overlap or compete.

As much as I think it's important that we consider this, I would once again emphasize what Mr. Masse has said and work out a compromise where, first of all, we can reduce the number of meetings devoted to this, given the limitations we face in examining this issue and, secondly, if we could [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] not invite the minister, because obviously he will be in no position to provide us with the information that we all so desperately seek.

Thank you.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have MP Erskine-Smith.

You have the floor.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (Beaches—East York, Lib.): I have a question on why the motion wants to sort of jam this in during a non-sitting week instead of during the regular course of our committee business. What is the early urgency to this, given this isn't going to be approved, obviously, in the immediate term, with three reviews pending?

Pierre put forward the permit economy and it was amended to be broader as it relates to competitiveness, including the Competition Act reform. This isn't the only acquisition that might be of concern if one cares about competitiveness. Obviously there was a proposed acquisition of Longo's by Empire, which owns Sobeys.

My view, at least, would be that it would make sense instead to maintain the study schedule that we have and to maybe expand the scope of that Conservative motion, but I think Brian is right. Both of these are kind of related and they are both Conservative motions. Maybe we could, say, look at competition issues including these two case studies and add a couple of meetings to the existing study that we have. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] forward and then we don't have this urgency, this emergency meeting.

I don't really understand the urgency in a non-sitting week, given the timeline.

The Chair: MP Poilievre, would you like to respond?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, there are a couple of things. First of all, the permit economy issue was interesting to the Conservatives. We were not seeking a review of the Competition Act. That was something, Nathan, that you wanted included, so for your benefit we amended our motion to include it.

We are debating whose motion and whose ideas are getting studied here. That was a win for you, so you can take that one and congratulate yourself for it, because that's what you wanted to study. However, we are getting quite distant from the purpose. If we start to morph a study on regulatory red tape and the permit economy into a discussion on a merger between two telecom companies, we're starting to mix two creatures that are not of the same species, if I may.

There is always going to be some mission creep in any study, where we start to creep a little bit more and more outside of the traditional boundaries of the subject, but eventually you get to a point where there is no subject to the study.

The reason it is important is that this is a massive transaction. It is the biggest transaction in modern telecom history, and it might have massive implications for both the economy and customers. This is the committee that is responsible for it. There is no other committee. It's not a finance issue. It is not a heritage issue.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*] I believe we should have a report on it before the regulatory bodies rule, because when they rule, it's over. There is nothing more for us to study at that point because the ruling is done and it's a fait accompli. We, as parliamentarians, represent the most important stakeholders: the citizens of Canada. Therefore, we should get our word in before the final decision is made.

I've never accepted the idea that elected officials should just be quiet and let the so-called experts decide. If the experts were doing a terrific job, we wouldn't have among the highest cellphone bills in the world and some of the poorest coverage.

Obviously this is something the committee is seized with, and that's why this committee has studied the subject. Obviously the committee could not have studied the specifics of this merger as part of that earlier study because it hadn't been proposed at the time. It's important that we do it. Why on a break week? The answer is so that we don't interrupt the rest of the study schedule.

That being said, we're open to some compromise.

Mr. Ehsassi has said he doesn't think the minister should come. I think he makes a good point. I believe he probably could come and give us some overriding principles that he is going to use in making his decision, but if it's a strong objection, then we would be prepared to make that concession to the government and leave the minister out of testifying on this particular matter at this time. At some point in the future, he will be accountable for the decision that he makes and we respect that. As a compromise, we would be willing to exclude him from that.

Mr. Masse, I think you are right. We can, in all committees, do a better job of collapsing some of the testimony and getting rid of much of the duplication, so if it would be more agreeable to you to move, say, down to 10 hours—my original idea was 20 hours and the motion says 12 hours—that would be welcomed.

I would mention that I know the NDP does have a western caucus as well. I'm not going to make any suggestions on how you manage it, but there might be some western MPs in your caucus who are interested in sitting in on some of this. I don't know, but their constituents are going to be more served by Shaw than yours are, I suspect.

• (1120)

Mr. Brian Masse: Thanks for the advice. I'll take that to heart.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You're welcome.

Anyway, those are some ideas that I have in response.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have MP Dreeshen, and then MP Ehsassi.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer—Mountain View, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

This definitely is a western issue. I know it is uppermost in the minds of everyone here in western Canada. Our study with rural and remote broadband ties in to so much of what we have been talking about. There are concerns about the set-aside spectrum associated with this. We have to make sure that we see where the future is going to be and that we really do have an opportunity to firm up the commitments that seem to be in the agreement at this particular point in time.

I really think it is important that we study this massive transaction and get at it as soon as we possibly can.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have MP Ehsassi and then MP Lambropoulos.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Allow me first to comment on the spirit of compromise that appears to have enveloped all of us today. It's great to see.

First of all, thank you, Mr. Poilievre, for accepting that the appearance by the minister would be of limited utility, given that he can only comment on the guidelines.

Those guidelines, I would add, are available to the members. We can all look at those without having the minister appear before this committee.

The other issue I would appreciate weighing in on is the issue raised by my colleague Nathan Erskine-Smith on the [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] for all of us to bear in mind that we do have a robust process in place with the three different entities that we're all aware of and that this will go on for at least another year. I think it's important for us to bear in mind that, irrespective of when we do produce the report, these three different entities will have the benefit of our perspective.

I would be grateful if Mr. Poilievre could once again respond to why he thinks this is so urgent that we have to do it as soon as possible.

Thank you.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you very much, MP Ehsassi.

Next is MP Lambropoulos, and then I'll go back to MP Poilievre.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Thank you.

To MP Dreesen's point, I think the affordability and accessibility study that we just completed covered a lot of the things that we'll probably hear again during the meetings we will schedule. I just think 10 hours at this point, considering that we've done an extensive study on affordability and accessibility already, is a little bit much.

I definitely agree that it's something to look at. I think it's important to take this into account and to get recommendations that are maybe specific to this deal. However, I don't see us needing more than two or three meetings to get really good recommendations on this and to get some testimony that will help back that up, which we can then add to the study on affordability and accessibility that has already been drafted and that we can actually get recommendations on very soon.

In the interest of time and in the interest of being efficient and effective, I feel that would be the best way forward. I don't see a need for five meetings or more. A couple of meetings to hear about this issue and to hear from a few experts on what difference this makes and how this can complement our study would be good, but not more than that, in my opinion.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Poilievre, you had your hand up, so I'll let you go ahead. Then we'll have MP Masse and MP Lemire.

MP Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I have a very quick point of clarification.

Ms. Lambropoulos, are you proposing that we would have some hearings from the key players in this acquisition, and then include the findings from those hearings in the existing study?

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: If that were the will of the committee, then I'd be 100% down for that, yes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'd be happy to listen to what others have to say. I just wanted to clarify that this was what Madam Lambropoulos was looking at.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Masse.

Mr. Brian Masse: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Maybe to Pierre, are you willing, in this process, to advance this study—and we can even keep some of the extra hours in it, or add them—and move your other permit economy study aside? This is a minority Parliament, and a committee that has worked hard to provide space for everyone. We've had a set agenda based on a lot of things.

I'm willing to meet over part of the break. Many times I've actually even gone to Ottawa, when it was open, to meet in the summer and during other March breaks and so forth, when we didn't have regular committees, so that's not necessarily the issue. It's just that there are extraordinary circumstances now and to try to get the House of Commons translation might be an issue as well. I'd ask

maybe that the clerk might, at some point, have some guidance on that as well, because translation, as we know, is a huge issue.

I would like to know whether you're willing to compromise to maybe look at the dates on our permit economy study and to start slating in this study instead, because those are, together, significant issues that you've brought forth. I think they all have value and they're important, but it's about prioritization and it's about balance in how this committee operates.

To you, specifically, are you willing to do that as a compromise and maybe expand the time for this, if that's what's necessary?

The Chair: I will let MP Poilievre respond to that specific question, and then I'll go to MP Lemire.

He is missing.

Mr. Tony Baldinelli (Niagara Falls, CPC): I think his system froze.

The Chair: Okay. We will go to MP Lemire.

I'm going to see if we can try to get Mr. Poilievre back.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemire, you have the floor.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I had a question for Mr. Poilievre. I'll come back to it later. I'll address the comments made by my colleague Ms. Lambropoulos.

I see our study on Internet accessibility and affordability as different from a study on a transaction between competitors. We'll certainly have related recommendations that touch on the competition aspect, meaning the importance of having four players. However, I wouldn't lump these two things together.

Given the possibility of an election, the committee would benefit from discussing the recommendations that it will include in its report as soon as possible and from tabling the report in the House before it's too late. In my opinion, this constitutes a fundamental concern. We need to make sure that we conduct this study on Internet accessibility, which will obviously include the concepts of competition, so that the committee can make recommendations and table its report.

I don't know exactly when the report will be ready. Mr. MacPherson said early April. I'm not opposed to holding meetings during the break weeks. I think that the acquisition of Shaw is a very important issue for western Canada. Even though the issue is much less relevant to Quebec, it's worth looking at from a competition perspective.

I thought that it was important to hold fewer meetings. However, we must keep in mind that a report needs to be tabled as soon as possible.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lemire.

[*English*]

MP Poilievre, you have my apologies. I think you were disconnected. We had a question directed to you, so I want to give you the chance to respond.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'm sorry but I was disconnected, as you correctly said.

We are willing to reduce the number of hours for the committee to examine this matter, but we need to study the issue of the permit economy. We just had today another multi-billion dollar project halted in British Columbia because of the permit economy, and 16 first nations deprived of hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue as a result. To think that those first nations would be denied the ability to speak on that issue—no, I don't think they should be told to be quiet again. They have been waiting long enough for these kinds of opportunities and they should have the chance to speak.

I don't see why we can't do both. We've had committees over break weeks. They meet all the time when there is a major matter of public interest. There are two consecutive break weeks. We can now hold meetings remotely, and there are ways in which these studies can occur.

As to the urgency, let's cut through the BS. We know why it has to happen quickly, because there is a very strong likelihood of a spring election and if that happens, then no parliamentary committee will have an opportunity to have any hearings or ask any questions on this matter until at least October, at which time the process will be well under way and it will be very hard for us to get our input in retroactively.

By the time we actually take witnesses, hear what they have to say and provide input back to the regulators through our public report and into the public debate, because this is a public debate—it's not a secret debate—it will be long gone. It is a major matter of public interest that needs to be studied by the industry committee, and if we don't study it over the break week, it's not going to be studied until October. That's why. It's very simple.

The Chair: Just to clarify, Mr. Poilievre, I don't think anyone considers these break weeks. I know we consider them riding weeks. I'm sure you are as busy as we all are during riding weeks, but I just want to clarify that.

I will go now to MP Lemire.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemire, you have the floor.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to ask Mr. Poilievre a question that Mr. Ehsassi asked earlier. I think that the question deserves an answer. The question is the following. What's the urgency right now? I would like some clarification on this.

As we know, the Competition Bureau normally has about 30 days, depending on the complexity of the issue.

Mr. Poilievre, you said earlier that the elected officials want to resolve this issue and hear from the witnesses before the Competition Bureau imposes a solution on them. I understand that. What are the advantages or disadvantages of acting before the bureau responds?

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm not quite sure.

MP Poilievre, do you want to respond to that?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I think that I already responded by saying that, in the event of an election, as you suggested earlier, Mr. Lemire, the committee wouldn't meet in the summer. The committee would reconvene in October. This means that our guidelines and witness list would be ready in November, perhaps.

This is a major issue for the industry and it falls within the committee's responsibilities. If we don't act now, we may need to wait until the end of the year.

In reality, an election may be coming soon. If this were a general issue, such as a national debt issue, or if we had to deal with this issue for years to come, there wouldn't be any urgency. Since a decision must be made, I think that the parliamentarians should have the opportunity to discuss it.

I think that the committee's schedule allows for this to happen during the break weeks.

• (1135)

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: That completely answers my question. Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: I want to lay out the calendar for folks as this may help in terms of your deliberations.

Right now, there are 21 INDU meetings currently scheduled between now and the end of session in June. We have two meetings scheduled next week for aerospace, where we already have more than 10 witnesses lined up, so the goal would be to continue with that. We also have four meetings for the study that was brought forth by MP Poilievre regarding red tape.

If you recall, at the last meeting, we discussed the green recovery, and obviously we will have to allocate time for reviewing reports for the affordability and accessibility study. We do have time in the calendar, depending on the will of the committee on which meetings we have scheduled [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] as well.

I just wanted to lay out the groundwork so that everyone knows what we are dealing with. Again, there are 21 meetings. If we take away the two from next week, there are 19, so we do have some time and flexibility. What we could do is perhaps come back, once it's decided by the committee what we want to do, with a work plan that we can then map out, but I just wanted to make sure everyone was aware of what we had on our plate at the moment.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemire, you have the floor.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Just so I know, are we planning to prepare a report on the vaccine production study?

If so, when do you think it will be ready?

[*English*]

The Chair: For that, I will turn it over to the clerk or the analysts to see if they have an idea, because there are a lot of reports being issued at the same time.

Mike, would you like to jump in there?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Michael MacPherson): Actually, I think Sarah will take the lead on that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sarah Lemelin-Bellerose (Committee Researcher): As soon as the vaccine production study ended, we started preparing the report. It has just been completed. The report will be sent for translation soon, along with the report on telecommunications, which is also being translated right now.

[*English*]

The Chair: Perfect. As you know, we have the Investment Canada Act report, which has been finalized, so we will be putting that one to bed once it has been tabled in the House.

Are there any other questions, comments or debate?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Madam Chair, I circulated a motion, but I deliberately did not move it because I wanted to invite some feedback from colleagues. How would you like to proceed? Would you like me to move an amended version based on the conversation we have had thus far? How would you like to see it proceed?

The Chair: You can proceed, if you'd like to, to amend the proposed motion.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: All right.

I would move, then, that the committee hold 10 hours of hearings on the Rogers Communications acquisition of Shaw Communications; that the clerk be instructed to book witnesses for no more than one hour per testimony; that the hearings occur during the next break weeks at the end of March through to the beginning of April; and that the committee then report its findings on the study at its earliest possible convenience.

• (1140)

The Chair: Go ahead, MP Masse.

Mr. Brian Masse: Maybe we can get the specific dates that are proposed so that they actually fit the time slots as suggested.

Also, given the urgency of the red tape study, I want to confirm and make sure that if this is a true priority, we don't bump any of those meetings, because I didn't say to get rid of them.... I'm glad that Pierre has found interest in this for the aboriginal communities and their urgency, but the reality is that I'm wondering whether or not this is going to push down the rest of the agenda. We need to have specifics on that. Can we maybe take a brief time here to draw out those dates and have something specific in front of us? Then we can check our calendars as well.

As well, I also suggested that we reduce the presentation time for the witnesses so that we can get witnesses here and not be short-changing the individuals who want to present and have this basically dominated by a few, as opposed to making sure that we can shuffle through extra people if necessary.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Masse.

MP Ehsassi, go ahead, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm just wondering if I may have thanked all the members for their spirit of compromise prematurely. I say that because I think the member initially accepted that there would be very limited utility in having the minister appear before the committee, but in the amended version there was no mention of that.

I just want to clarify whether the member would consider taking that aspect of his motion out, and amending it accordingly.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes. I'm sorry. I was intending to rewrite the motion, so the previous motion is null and void. The absence of mention of the minister means that the minister is not included.

However, I do welcome amendments to this. If there is somebody who has a better approach than the one I have just articulated, if they want to put forward an actual amendment now that we've all discussed it, I welcome that. I see that Mr. Masse still has some reservations with regard to his constituency obligations, which I understand and respect. I know that Liberal members are still anxious to get to the green transition study, but I welcome amendments. If, at the end of the day, we can't agree, then members can choose otherwise.

The Chair: MP Ehsassi, you have your hand up, and then it's MP Erskine-Smith.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I'm sorry. My hand just remained up. I actually had no intention of doing that, but I might as well take advantage of this opportunity.

Given what my colleague Mr. Masse was saying about how sacred our responsibilities to our constituents are, may I propose a friendly amendment that it be reduced to eight hours from 10, if that's agreeable to the other members?

The Chair: I would just give a gentle reminder that we don't have things called "friendly amendments", so there is a subamendment.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'll amend it to eight hours if that's agreeable to the chair.

The Chair: We are now at a subamendment that 10 hours be replaced by eight hours.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes.

The Chair: MP Masse, you have the floor.

Mr. Brian Masse: To make things easier, then, I'll withdraw my request for specific dates and let the chair figure that out, because there will also have to be coordination with translation and so forth.

I want it well understood—and I don't know if I have to put this as a motion—that the presentation times should be reduced, as should some of our other intervention times equally, just to allow more witnesses, should we have a robust request, since we're reducing the whole thing. I can make that formal or I am quite comfortable leaving it in the hands of the chair to do that, and the same goes for the date provision.

I just want to make sure that's clear. If I need to do it specifically, I'll do it, or just add something to allow the eight hours and allow the witness list and discussion time to be decided by the chair. I am quite confident in the fairness of the way this has been done.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you very much, MP Masse.

We can do something along the lines of a one-hour panel with three-minute opening rounds and two rounds of questions. There is some flexibility that we could work on, and I can bring that forward to the committee in terms of the timing.

MP Erskine-Smith, you have your hand up.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Yes.

I know that Brian just suggested that maybe we leave the timing to you, Chair, but I have some reservations on the overall timing when you tell me that we have 21 meetings between now and the end of June. If I'm working through all that is on the agenda to the extent that we want it to remain on the agenda, we have two more meetings for aerospace, plus, I would say, a minimum of two meetings to review and finalize the report. If we're really optimistic and thinking it can only take two, then you have four for aerospace.

Sébastien, quite rightly, is going to want to get the affordability study done. Again, that's going to be a minimum of two meetings. We're up to six. You have four meetings now that we're planning for this acquisition piece, despite three other reviews that are going to happen. If we're going to table a report, that's another two meetings, let's say. That's six in total, so we're up to 12.

Then you have the permit economy for, let's say, plus two, so we're up to 18. Then you have green recovery at four plus two. We're up to 24.

We routinely at this committee seem to want to add to our work in a completely ad hoc way. What do we actually want to accomplish?

I have concerns about this acquisition, Pierre. I think we should care about consumer protection and price. I disagree with the Premier of Alberta on this front. I also think this committee is better placed to address actual Competition Act reform and to push the government on that front. Yes, we can raise our voice, but our voice won't be heard in the same way when three other reviews are going to be taking place.

My question really is this: What do we want to accomplish here? Are we going to bring in a few witnesses and wag our fingers at them? Fine. I enjoy that, at times, but what do we actually want to accomplish? When I look at the agenda, it's overloaded. It doesn't look like we're actually seized with.... We're not focused. We're not going to drive a point home here in any serious way.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Here's what I want to accomplish with this study.

A lot of very important public policy issues that come to the fore here have been central to the issue of spectrum auction, of competition, of high-speed Internet. They all converge in this one merger. For example, Shaw got its spectrum at a discount because it was supposed to be the fourth entrant in the western market. Now Rogers proposes to buy that spectrum via buying Shaw. Are we allowing that to happen? Are we just going to say, okay, you got in the back door, you paid a discount and you took the spectrum on the cheap?

That's an issue for the industry committee. No other committee deals with spectrum auctions. That is this committee.

There has been a stated policy of both Liberal and Conservative governments to have [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] achieved, but it has been the goal. The western market might end up with three. Are we as parliamentarians just shrugging our shoulders and saying that's great?

On the flip side, Rogers is telling us, and they might be telling the truth, that this will result in massive rural investment in western Canada, and across Canada actually, to expand 5G into not just rural communities but also indigenous and remote communities. That's a big issue. These are big things. I want to know how serious this is. Is that firm? Do we have a covenant that they're signing as part of this proposal, or is it just a press release that we'll find out three years from now was not true? These are serious matters of public policy.

I understand your concern about a committee running off in a bunch of different directions, but unfortunately we have a committee with a vast jurisdiction. We cover a lot of stuff. Industry Canada as a department—maybe we can blame C.D. Howe for his vast tentacles—has a system that is very wide-reaching. Therefore, we end up having to do a lot of things at the same time.

I'm open-minded, though.

Nathan, if you think this might be something we could work into a broader study on the Competition Act, I'm fine. I don't think it belongs with the permit economy. I think it's a separate issue, but if you have an amendment that you think would make this sensible, then I'm open to it.

This is a big merger. I think a \$50-billion enterprise will come out of this. That's the equivalent of our GDP for almost a month in Canada. That's a lot of impact on a lot of people—13 million customers affected and something like 30,000 employees. It's not just a mosquito that we're chasing around here. This is a big one. I think we have a duty to at least examine it and see if we as parliamentarians think it's in the public interest. That's all.

• (1150)

The Chair: I would just gently remind MPs to keep their remarks through the chair.

MP Erskine-Smith, you still have your hand up. I'm not sure if you would like to intervene again, but then it will be Mr. Généreux.

Go ahead, Mr. Erskine-Smith.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: I have two things. I agree that this deal should be scrutinized, and price and consumers should be put at the very forefront of our consideration. I am already concerned that we are a country of oligopolies, and it seems we are getting greater consolidation, not only in relation to the telecommunications sector but also, as I mentioned, in things such as the acquisition of Longo's by Empire. There is an oligopoly in another sector.

I just want to make sure we are accomplishing something and we are not just flitting from topic to topic in a very shallow way, I suppose, and not then making meaningful recommendations in a serious way that are going to be acted upon and make a difference.

I tried to jam competition reform into the permit economy, perhaps inelegantly. It may make sense to instead jam competition reform into this very question instead.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: If you are open to that...and I can add a few meetings on that front or a couple of meetings on that front. That may make more sense as far as it goes, but I just want to make sure we are not just going to have a few witnesses, have a few days, listen to testimony.... Ultimately we are going to do a fraction of the job that ISED, the competition bureau and the CRTC are going to do in analyzing this. We'll get the flavour of it, but I don't think we're going to be able to weigh in on it in quite the same way.

The only other caution, the secondary caution, has to do with the number of meetings that, as I mentioned, we are going to have be-

tween now and June. We're already looking at having more meetings to address this, so something has to give and something has to drop. We have to prioritize.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Erskine-Smith.

Mr. Généreux.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Madam Chair, I don't understand why the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology can't take eight or 12 hours to study, on a priority basis, an issue that's extremely important to Canada and to all Canadians. This will give us the opportunity to hear evidence that's truly important to all Canadians.

When Bell purchases Vidéotron, will we say that we're too busy to study the issue? We must do our job. We're working in the public eye, especially in this committee.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Généreux.

I don't think that the committee members are unwilling to study the transaction. It's just a matter of a consensus on the motion.

[*English*]

I will ask the clerk if he could read out the proposed motion, just because there were some tweaks along the way there, and I want to make sure we all know what we are discussing and debating.

Mike, would you be able to read that out for me, please?

The Clerk: Sure. Feel free to jump in and correct me here. This was based on my understanding of what MP Poilievre moved and the subsequent consent of the committee to slight tweaks. Perhaps this can be used as a base layer to begin with for members to make further changes.

The motion reads:

That pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a study on the proposed acquisition of Shaw Communications by Rogers Communications; that the study consist of a minimum of 8 hours; that the clerk book witnesses for 1 hour panels; that opening remarks for witnesses be limited to 3 minutes; that the meetings take place during the Easter break weeks if possible; and that the committee report to the House as soon as possible after witness testimony has concluded.

• (1155)

The Chair: Is there any further debate on the motion as read by the clerk?

Seeing none—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemire, is your hand raised?

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: I think that the motion is a good compromise. However, three minutes for remarks seems rather short. Of course, we can ask the witnesses questions after they've made their remarks. However, I often feel that we give them a limited amount of time to speak. I'm not opposed to the idea, but it seems rather short.

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, do you have any comments on this?

[English]

The Clerk: Yes, perhaps I can comment on that.

This was based on Mr. Masse's remarks about limiting the opening remarks for witness testimony to three minutes. That would allow for the committee to get through the opening remarks—normally we have three witness groups on a panel—and we would be done with the opening remarks of all three witness groups in under 10 minutes or in about 10 minutes. That would leave 50 minutes, which would allow for two rounds of questions from the members.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Okay. That's fine with me.

I'm used to question periods that last two and a half minutes, and I often find this very short. I'm looking forward to seeing how this will be done in three minutes.

[English]

The Chair: MP Poilievre, do you have your hand up? Go ahead.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I suggest the clerk notify the witnesses to submit written comments as well if they have broader thoughts. Some of them will say that they can't tell us everything they need to say in three minutes. They can send us a memo. We're vigorous readers.

The Chair: I don't want to say that it's standard practice, but we normally invite witnesses, should they want to include a written brief, to absolutely do so. We could maybe make sure that is sort of standard on this one, given that they will be getting a shorter presentation period.

Is there any further debate on this? As chair, I want to flag just one thing.

As you know, the clerk and I work on scheduling witnesses, but I want to flag this because the analyst mentioned that we might have the report for telecommunications ready in April. If it is possible for us to deal with that and to be able to finalize it, my concern would be that by using those Easter weeks for these meetings, we wouldn't be able to get to that report. I want to flag that so people are aware of what we're able to do, unless there's some flexibility on the part of the committee to allow the clerk and me to work out the availability of witnesses so that, once we get things that are coming in that are time sensitive, we can book them in.

I wanted to flag that for the committee because we have had the opportunity to work in a very flexible way in the past, and it has worked out well for us. I don't want to be holding up any of our work with a rigid schedule. I just wanted to flag that for folks.

Is there any further debate on the motion?

Go ahead, MP Erskine-Smith.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Just very briefly—and I don't know the right language to use, because I don't have the text in front of me—from this study to the permit economy and competitiveness writ large study, I don't know whether it makes sense as it relates to the Competition Act piece that whatever meetings we were to set aside for that in relation to the permit economy get pulled into this, which may just intellectually make more sense as it relates to the topic.

I don't have the text in front of me, and it may well make no real difference, because it sounds like they're bleeding into one another anyway. That was the only thought I had.

The Chair: What we could do, MP Erskine-Smith, is that if this motion passes, obviously, and once we start scheduling in terms of when we reach witnesses that we book each week, it could be that we go from one to the next that makes the most sense in terms of flow, so that—

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: That makes sense, because I think that for the witnesses, as it relates to Competition Act reform, it probably makes more sense to fit it around this kind of consideration as opposed to strictly the permit economy.

I defer to you, Chair. I think you'll be able to manage this with Mike.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you.

Are there any other further comments or debate on this before we go to a vote?

Seeing none, if it's the will of the committee, we do not need a recorded division. I will reread it just so everyone has it. I'm going to see if I actually have it.

Mike, could you reread the motion so that everyone has it before we go to the vote?

The Clerk: Yes, of course.

It states:

That pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a study on the proposed acquisition of Shaw Communications by Rogers Communications; that the study consist of a minimum of 8 hours; that the clerk book witnesses for 1 hour panels; that opening remarks for witnesses be limited to 3 minutes; that the meetings take place during the Easter break weeks if possible; and that the committee report to the House as soon as possible after witness testimony has concluded.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mike.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.

With that, I understand that MP Lemire would like to speak to the committee.

Go ahead, MP Lemire.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I wanted to take this opportunity, while there are no witnesses, to analyze the motions that we submitted with regard to translation. You received them by email on February 22—

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Masse: I have a point of order.

The Chair: MP Lemire, I think we have a problem with translation.

Mr. Brian Masse: Ironically, that's what I was raising.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: I turned the sound off.

The Chair: Please wait a moment, Mr. Lemire. We'll check whether it's working.

Mr. Masse, I'll speak in French to check whether it's working now.

Okay.

Mr. Lemire, you can start again.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: I could hear the English interpretation in my headphones, so I turned the sound off. I thought that it might be an issue with just the French channel.

I want to thank the interpretation team. Their work is absolutely vital, and we want to acknowledge this through these motions.

I'll come back to the motions that our clerk sent to you by email on February 22. The first motion concerns documents translated or reviewed by the Translation Bureau. Here's the motion:

That all documents submitted for Committee business that do not come from a federal department or that have not been translated by the Translation Bureau be sent for prior linguistic review by the Translation Bureau before being distributed to members.

The words “or member's office” could be added after “federal department” to support the adoption of each motion.

The goal is to ensure that these motions aren't translated through Google Translate and that they have been reviewed by a person, to avoid any translation errors.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lemire.

[*English*]

As MP Lemire mentioned, we received notices of motion on February 22 from the clerk, and these are the three motions that were proposed by Mr. Lemire. The first one is dealing with official translation of documents.

Is there any debate on that motion?

Go ahead, Mike.

The Clerk: It was just unclear to me if Monsieur Lemire had proposed that motion with the inclusion of “member's office”.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Lemire, please go ahead.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: I gather that I can't move an amendment to my motion. However, I would be open to this compromise, since

it has been introduced in other committees. If someone moves it, I would gladly agree to it.

• (1205)

[*English*]

The Chair: This is not to include members' offices—is that correct?—or does it include members' offices?

The motion you had would actually include members' offices if the documents came from a member's office, and I am assuming, you also mean that for a minister's office. Is that correct? I just want to make sure I am understanding.

[*Translation*]

Is that right, Mr. Lemire?

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Yes, that's right.

We want a human being, a professional approved by the Translation Bureau, to translate the documents, rather than Google Translate.

The Chair: Okay.

[*English*]

Is there any further debate on that motion?

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

The second motion concerns technical tests for witnesses. It's a common practice and we're used to doing it now. The day before an appearance, the witnesses participate in a technical test session to ensure that their equipment meets our standards. Here's the motion:

That the Clerk inform each witness who is to appear before the Committee that the House Administration support team must conduct technical tests to check the connectivity and the equipment used to ensure the best possible sound quality; and that the Chair advise the Committee, at the start of each meeting, of any witness who did not perform the required technical tests.

If a witness hasn't conducted the tests, we can reject the witness without wasting too much time. Sound quality is obviously important. That way, we can protect our interpreters by ensuring that they have the best possible working conditions.

The Chair: That's fine, thank you.

[*English*]

Just for the committee's knowledge, this is something that we have been doing and we plan on continuing to do.

Is there any debate on the motion in front of us?

(Motion agreed to)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll set the third motion aside. We didn't take the motion into account in the exercise that we just completed, and it still worked out well. We'll come back to the motion concerning the translation of motions later.

The work done by the clerk and the interpreters helped us to fully understand and keep up with what happened in the past hour. We can talk about this again.

I want to thank my colleagues for passing the first two motions.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Thank you so much, everyone.

Before we adjourn, I want to remind members that next week we will have meetings with respect to the aerospace study. We will

hopefully be able to complete those meetings. We will be back, too, with respect to a work plan regarding these various studies that we've agreed to.

With respect to the study we agreed to today on Shaw and Rogers, I would ask that each party submit to the clerk directly their witness list as soon as possible. Please prioritize them, because if it's the will of the committee to have these meetings during the constituency weeks, we need to have those witness names as soon as possible.

With that, I will declare this meeting adjourned.

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