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Chair

Mr. Bryan May

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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• (0920)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Okay, we're back.

Now that we're out of camera, I want to be the first to officially congratulate the Chicago Cubs for breaking the 108-year drought. If I seem at all drowsy, it's because I haven't had much sleep.

That said, we are here to resume debate on the motion moved by the Honourable Pierre Poilievre on Thursday, October 27:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development, and the Status of Persons with Disabilities study the effects of a federally-mandated carbon tax on low-income families, and that Employment and Social Development Canada and Statistics Canada fully report to the Committee on the number of people the carbon tax will cause to fall below the low-income cut-off line.

The floor is now open for debate.

Bob is first, and then Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

With the understanding especially of what we're studying, strategies for poverty reduction in Canada, and seeing some of the costs from a simple calculation of just fuel and fuel for heating people's homes, even a conservative calculation would put it at about \$1,200 per individual. This is on top of all the other expectations that we have of taxpayers to pay, including now to increase their CPP contributions, and so on. Again, we're just concerned that it's going to hit the ones who really can't afford it the most, and especially with this study in mind, we think it's a relevant point to be discussed because it is real. It's going to really impact the bottom line for people's homes and people's livelihoods, and we're deeply concerned about it.

Thanks.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): We've had witness testimony that there are two major parts to the poverty equation: one is income and the other is outcome. If incomes go up, poverty tends to go down, but if the cost of living rises faster than incomes do, then poverty can actually go up, even in a growing-income environment.

What we're faced with right now is a new, nationally imposed, provincially administered consumption tax that will raise the price of things on which low-income families spend a disproportionate share

of their income. I asked a witness from Stats Canada whether or not that would, all other things being equal, increase the number of people who are below the poverty line. He said yes. The reason is that, whether you use the LICO line or the market basket measure, the goods that carbon taxes inflate in price are all used to determine the threshold at which poverty is measured.

For example, the low-income cut-off line measures the percentage of income that a family must spend on essentials like food, utilities, and housing. The people who spend 20% more of their income on those things than the 1992 average are considered to be below the LICO line. As you raise the price of heat, electricity, gas, and food, you raise the LICO threshold and therefore increase the number of people who are under that threshold.

The same is true with the market basket measure. It takes into account a whole basket of things you need to have to be considered included in society. Among those are heat, fuel, electricity, food, etc. If you raise the price of those things, you automatically increase the number of people who are below the threshold and considered to be in poverty, based on that measure.

Our very first hearings were on those measurements, because we wanted to have some way of measuring poverty. So we obviously consider those things to be important in determining whether or not someone is considered to be in an impoverished circumstance.

On the question of the carbon tax, some people in the room support a carbon tax and others don't. I would suggest to you that, regardless of your position on that question, you can support this motion. There are lots of people who support carbon taxes, who believe they have mitigating solutions to address the problem I've just described, whether it's through rebates or changes to other taxes. Those sorts of solutions should be part of the conversation and could be brought to the floor in testimony from witnesses, and could be included in recommendations that come out of the committee. That doesn't mean we shouldn't study the problem at all.

I think the instinct of someone who sees this motion and is in favour of carbon taxes would be to say, "Let's vote this down". That would clearly be just an attempt to besmirch a policy position that they support. I would argue that this is an opportunity for the government and for anyone who supports carbon taxes to study any mitigating measures that might address the concerns I'm raising. Refusal to do so would suggest that the government plans to do nothing to mitigate the impact on the poor of this new tax, or that they're not even interested in understanding the problem in the first place.

●(0925)

This is a problem. I'm telling you that this will become a problem for the government if it does not think this through. I know I sound like a broken record on this, but 11 years ago the provincial government made a policy decision to raise hydroelectricity prices. They believed they were creating this brand new green energy industry. Some 10 to 12 years later, they have an absolute crisis on their hands. Anybody who is a member of Parliament in Ontario will acknowledge that it is not only an economic crisis and a social justice crisis, but it is also now a major political crisis for the government in power, because they did not consider the impact this policy would have, particularly on low-income and vulnerable people.

I meet these people every week in my riding. They are people who simply cannot afford to live because they can't keep the lights on. Hydro bills have gone up in some cases by over 100%, and that necessarily harms people of lower income on a disproportionate basis, because electricity bills make up a larger share of their family budget.

The same is going to be true with this cost, so even if you believe that we need to have a price on carbon, I would encourage the government right now, before this actually comes into place, to consider the impact on people who can least afford to pay it, and come up with recommendations to mitigate those impacts.

I actually believe I'm giving the government an opportunity here to study those questions now. If they shrug them off, I can tell you, this will come back; this is not going away. With a \$50-a-tonne price on carbon, whether you agree with it or not, whether you think it's necessary to save the world from climate change or you don't, I can tell you there are going to be real people in your ridings who are going to be pounding on your door when this takes effect, and you will be on the record. That's why it was so important for this to be discussed out of camera. You will be on the record having refused to even study that impact or how it could be mitigated.

I strongly encourage the government to show openness to this question and compassion for the people who are going to suffer. There's still time to investigate these questions before the policy comes into effect; therefore, I ask that members of the committee support the motion.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Ruimy, please.

Mr. Dan Ruimy (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to my colleague for his concerns.

I think those concerns are shared with quite a few people. Today we have 80% of people already living under cap and trade or pollution pricing. It's already there. It's up to the provinces to decide what they want to do with that money.

In B.C., that money is brought back to the people.

You mentioned rebates. Again, I see this right now as the cart being before the horse, because it's not the federal government that is determining what to do with those monies; it's the provinces. They can give it back to the people to reduce their income tax. They can

do a few things. But to have a study right now is bringing in the cart before the horse, and it's not really the time for it.

For those reasons, we're not going to support this motion at this time. I just don't think it's the right time for it.

●(0930)

The Chair: Thank you.

Not seeing any further debate, I suggest we go to a vote.

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): I'd like a recorded vote.

The Chair: Fair enough.

(Motion negated: nays 6; yeas 3)

The Chair: Moving on to the third item on our agenda, and with the permission of the committee, given the sentiment of what Madame Sansoucy is about to bring forward, I suggest we stay in public.

Does anybody have an issue with that?

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: Okay, Madame Soucy.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): My name isn't Soucy. It's Sansoucy.

[English]

The Chair: Sansoucy.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: In French, the “San” is very important.

[English]

The Chair: My pronunciation is horrible. I will continue to practice, and I would like you to continue to give me lessons every time I mispronounce your name, please feel free to do so.

An hon. member: There's no worry.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Yes, exactly. In French, removing the “San” changes the meaning entirely. It's the equivalent of “No”.

I try to live up to my name.

I think the fact we decided to return to a public meeting to discuss the previous motion shows the relevance of the motion I'm moving this morning. I won't read the motion again.

The motion lists the circumstances that lead to a meeting being held in camera. What we have just experienced this morning is a good example.

Many people follow the work of our committees. The continuation in camera of a meeting that had previously been public without providing a reason could result in a loss of confidence.

Will we carry out part of our work and discussions without the help of those who, by listening to us, take part in our discussions?

I think the people who follow our work are part of our discussions. By adopting this motion, we're showing them that, when we continue a meeting in camera, it will be to discuss benefits, contracts or subjects that are more administrative or delicate in terms of confidentiality. For all the subjects in question, we'll each have a maximum of three minutes to show the relevance of continuing the discussion in camera.

This will provide more transparency for the people following our work. That way, they'll at least understand our arguments and will know which subject will be discussed in camera. They won't see all our discussions, but they'll understand why the meeting is being continued in camera.

I think the goal of this motion is to work more transparently and to respect those who follow our work.

● (0935)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

First, we have Mr. Zimmer, please.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, some of us have been around here for a little while—I'll speak for myself—and one thing we've always said is that committees are the masters of their own destiny. Rather than being told what to do or being given another set of rules or a rubric through which we have to function and sift through these particular points we have to deal with, there's a concern that committees can constantly go in camera and keep things out of the public eye.

I agree with Ms. Sansoucy that it's going to be abused—everybody is concerned about that—and that we're not going to hear the arguments in public. I have that similar concern, but to me this is just another level of limiting committees and what committees are intending and wanting to do, so I can't support it based on that reasoning.

The Chair: Mr. Ruimy, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you, Ms. Sansoucy.

[*English*]

I'm going to have to say this in English, because I can't find the words to say it in French.

When I came here to be a member of Parliament, they told us that committee work is where the real work is. I take that personally, and that's very important to me. In being a chair of another committee, I've seen a lot of different things going on. We've heard a lot of stories about past committees. There's one thing I want make sure of: I don't want to hide anything. I don't believe in hiding anything. Unfortunately, there are games that are played. We can't really do much to stop that. There are some rules to stop it.

With what we have here, for the most part we're fine. I do have questions, such as when we were discussing items on who the Centennial Flame Research Award winner would be. I would put that under privacy, or under protection of personal information, and I would hope that most people would see it as that. That's how I view it when we're talking about the nature of privacy. That's where we

should be in camera. For me, I'm okay with this, and personally I will be supporting this motion. I have no problems with that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Tassi, please.

Ms. Filomena Tassi (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): Further to that, I think we've heard from Canadians, and they really want us to be open and transparent. I think this motion gets us closer to that. I think there are times when we need to go in camera, and this motion sets out those times clearly, but we don't want to abuse those times, so in the interests of openness, transparency, and what Canadians want, we are prepared to support this.

Following on what MP Ruimy said, I think it could fall under paragraph (h). We do have the pleasure of the Centennial Flame award, so I'd like it to go on record that we could have agreement when we are discussing applications and those sorts of things—if other awards come up with information that we believe is sensitive like that—that this would fall under paragraph (f), if we weren't going to get unanimous consent under paragraph (h). I would appreciate an agreement that this be considered. I don't believe there's an amendment to this motion required, but just an understanding that when we're talking about people's personal information, we would agree that for awards and that sort of thing it would fall under paragraph (f).

Thank you, Madam Sansoucy, for bringing this motion forward.

The Chair: Before we move on to Mr. Warawa, can we agree that this particular unique reality of this committee is something we would obviously want to go into camera for, given the potentially private information that is dealt with in those conversations? Yes? No?

Okay.

Mr. Warawa.

● (0940)

Mr. Mark Warawa: Procedurally, you'd have to amend the motion to do it properly.

The Chair: I'm not.... Okay.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Do I have the floor to speak at this time, then, or did you want to deal with that as amending the motion?

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Warawa, and then we'll potentially come back to that.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Okay. Thank you.

Chair, when the committee began, if we think back to December when we started here in this new Parliament and were appointed to this committee, we elected a chair and we created rules for our routine proceedings. That really would have been the time to come up with the rules to guide this committee. Can they be changed through the process? Yes.

Having been here for almost 13 years, and at one time as chair, I learned to use O'Brien and Bosc as a guide to help me, as you do, Chair. It's been developed over a long period of time by people who have a lot of experience here.

There is guidance in here on when we should be going to in camera. It says:

On occasion, a committee may decide to hold an *in camera* meeting to deal with administrative matters, to consider a draft report or to receive a briefing. Subcommittees on Agenda and Procedure usually meet *in camera*. Committees also meet *in camera* to deal with documents....

It goes on to explain when a committee does that. It also builds into the rules discretion for the chair. At any time, a member of the committee could present a motion that we move in camera. And it works.

My concern is that we would only go in camera when we create a motion and amend it. We get very prescriptive that these are the only times. We now take away the discretion of the chair and take away the discretion of the committee. We'd actually be amending our routine proceedings to be able to make a practical change that needs to be made because we've restricted ourselves. We have a system that works well, and if we abuse it, then the government would wear it, because in this case we have a majority government.

I don't see the necessity, and I think it could create a problem for this committee because we get prescriptive in the list, saying that we only do it then and then and then.

I'll just give you an anecdote. The former Liberal government came up with compassionate care. They were very prescriptive of who would qualify for compassionate care. I had somebody come into my office whose sister was dying. The sister who saw me did not qualify to give compassionate care to her dying sister. The intent of the previous Liberal government was to allow people to take care of each other in the last six weeks of their life, but they created a very prescriptive list.

When we became government in 2006, we opened it up and said that provided the person qualifies for EI benefits, let the dying person choose who is their care provider. That was very easy. Suddenly the problem was solved so that a sister could take care of a sister, or a friend could take care of a dying person.

I think it would be in our best interests the more open and practical we leave it, leaving the discretion with the chair, leaving the rules and the structure that we have in place that's worked well for Canada. If we move to something that sounds good but is prescriptive or restrictive, it could create problems for us.

For those reasons I would recommend that we do not support the motion. I appreciate its intent, but it really could restrict and not serve the committee well.

• (0945)

The Chair: Monsieur Robillard.

Mr. Yves Robillard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, Lib.): I will give my place to Ms. Sansoucy. She is the expert here.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: I think point (f) of the motion certainly includes the study we could conduct on the award. I don't think it's necessary to amend the motion to include examples. If not, each time a new element is referred for study purposes, the motion will need to be amended to include it.

The way we interpret these elements could enable us to include certain things.

I think it's accurate to say that privacy and the protection of personal information are at stake in this type of discussion. When listen to us that, when we're not in front of them, it's for very specific reasons.

We know that new information technology makes it much easier for people to follow our work. The motion assures the people who listen to us that, when we're not in front of them, it's for very specific reasons.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we move on to Mr. Ruimy, please.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you.

I have two points to make.

First, coming back to the Centennial Flame award, I don't believe we need an amendment to the motion in that regard, because it's about privacy. When you're talking about multiple people and their qualifications, that is a private matter and I think that speaks directly to that.

The second thing is, again yes, we're all new here, at least on this side. Time and time again, we've heard that previous committees got shut down multiple times by in camera sessions. I'm not making this up; even members of the opposition have said the same thing. To me, this holds us to a higher standard and we can't be afraid to have that higher standard of transparency. If we can't discuss in public the appropriate things, other than what's in the motion here, then the question is, what are we trying to hide? Again, that's why I'll be supporting the motion.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Tassi, you're good. Okay.

Seeing no further debate, I call for a vote on the motion. Do I need to read the motion for the record? No, okay.

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

The Chair: Using paragraph (g) of the motion you just adopted, I would like to proceed in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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