



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

# **Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates**

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OGGO • NUMBER 093 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, June 13, 2017**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Tom Lukiwski**



## Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

Tuesday, June 13, 2017

• (0845)

[English]

**Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC):** I realize we are short of time, so I'll be really brief. I realize we're running out of time, so I'm looking to see if we can add a meeting to accommodate the PBO on the estimates. There are several reasons. We brought this up probably about six or seven months ago when we had Minister Brison here and we were discussing the changes to the Standing Orders for the estimates. We had put forward a motion requesting that he appear and, of course, that Kevin Page appear as well. That didn't come about.

I think it's incumbent upon us to have the PBO attend to discuss the estimates process. There are rumours of the minister pushing ahead with the estimates without our agreement or without unanimous consent.

We heard in committee that he's intending to move ahead. We heard from Mr. Pagan in front of the Senate on May 31, and I'll quote, "I expect there will be some developments on this front in the very near future", which, of course, contradicts what we heard here on June 1, which was, "with respect to Mr. McCauley's question about the estimates..., we've been advised that's parked for now."

We're hearing contradictory information, but both Mr. Pagan and Mr. Brison say they are planning on plowing ahead.

I think it's important that we hear from the PBO on this, since he has been a very outspoken critic of the plans for the estimates. We are concerned that it would take away two months of oversight from the opposition. We would also lose two of our supply days, two opposition days, in the House, and there would be less time to review and decide. If the committee of the whole is moved to May 1, that means the estimates are released and that very same day we have to submit our two committees as a whole.

We also have concerns about the program-based allocation. The PBO has said that, and I'm going to quote:

[With these changes], parliamentarians would [have to] accept the risk that money would be approved for very broad, weakly defined activities, with poor linkages to concrete results.

So far we've heard that the PBO has again put out some very unflattering reports on the government's proposals, and we're hearing that the Liberals no longer want them to appear at committee.

We're very concerned, obviously, that the PBO, who is extremely well respected and very knowledgeable on the issue of oversight,

would be blocked by this government from appearing on the estimates that the government is trying to change without unanimous consent.

I just want to read a couple of quotes. Sorry, I went over the quotes earlier from Mr. Brison.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

• (0850)

**The Chair (Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC)):** We are in public. Could we get informal agreement for Mr. McCauley's earlier comments to be part of the public record?

**An hon. member:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Then after he's finished, we'll go back in camera and start the study of the report.

Mr. McCauley, please.

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** Mr. Whalen has said that they're fine for either next Tuesday or next September. We're comfortable with that, although we do have a concern that this is part of the changes that are being proposed by the government, to make these changes to the Standing Orders or in the estimates before the House breaks.

Again, this is all rumour, but we're hearing that it's going to break Thursday with these changes being done by the government beforehand.

**Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.):** We have no knowledge of those changes.

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** These are rumours. I'm surprised you haven't heard such rumours as well.

**Ms. Yasmin Ratansi:** We haven't, and if you have, we'll have to verify it.

**Mr. Ramez Ayoub (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.):** Normally, we start the rumours.

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** I'll be really brief. I just want to reiterate some of the issues the PBO has brought forward.

Again, we're going backwards with the progress on getting the spending into the supplementaries. We've dropped supplementary (A)s. We've dropped from 70% to 44%, and the PBO has made the comment that "it's unlikely that delaying the release of the Main Estimates by eight weeks is going to provide full alignment." There are no apparent measures required by Parliament to integrate these changes into the business of supply.

My final comment is that he states, “Before agreeing to the changes proposed by the Government, parliamentarians may wish revisit the core problem that undermines their financial scrutiny: the Government’s own internal administrative processes.”

This is what I was arguing about with Mr. Brison back and forth the other day, that it's pointless changing the estimates if it's still taking them six to eight months to 18 months to get the spending moved forward, so it's not going to get in the estimates anyway. It's kind of a moot point taking away oversight for something that the government hasn't been able to prove that they can fix to begin with.

I would end with a really quick quote from William Gladstone, former Chancellor of the Exchequer and four-time Prime Minister of the U.K. He said in 1891, “If the House of Commons by any possibility loses the power of the control of the grants of public money, depend upon it, your very liberty will be worth very little in comparison.”

Again, we want to stress that the whole reason we're here as a Parliament can be argued as spending oversight. We very strongly disagree with any weight or any means pushed upon us to limit our oversight. It's incumbent upon us to hear from the PBO, etc., before we move ahead with these changes to the estimates that take away oversight from Parliament.

I appreciate your indulgence in listening to me chat.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Mr. Kyle Peterson (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.):** You've still got a quorum of Liberals.

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** We appreciate that.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. McCauley.

I have Mr. Weir on my speaking list.

**Mr. Erin Weir (Regina—Lewvan, NDP):** I put my hand up, first and foremost, to suggest that the motion should be in public rather than in camera, and we've already dealt with that.

I'm certainly in favour of the motion. It sounded from Mr. Whalen as though the government was also amenable to hearing from the Parliamentary Budget Officer on the estimates. I think we should go forward.

**The Chair:** Okay. Is there any further debate?

**Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.):** I don't think we are able to schedule a meeting outside, based on commitments, but if it was okay just to schedule it for Tuesday, if they would be open to...

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** That's the original day.

**The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Philippe Grenier-Michaud):** It was today originally.

**The Chair:** As chair, I have a few options. I can schedule a meeting at any time as a special meeting, but we also have the possibility of having a regularly scheduled meeting time allocated for next Tuesday at 8:45 a.m. We have a couple of options before us.

•(0855)

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** Shall we see how far we get today with our recommendations and decide at the end of the day?

**The Chair:** What we have from a procedural standpoint, Kelly, is a motion before the committee. Seeing no more debate, I'm going to call that motion to a vote.

**Ms. Yasmin Ratansi:** I just want a clarification. It's not a debate: (a) you've heard; (b) we're all in agreement that oversight is our function; and (c) I've no idea who is going to change the Standing Orders without coming here.

I'm in agreement that we need the PBO. We want to listen to the PBO, but the time is debatable in terms of our report, and whether we have time. We are in agreement with your motion, but change—

**Mr. Nick Whalen:** Yes, but for it to be held Tuesday, June 20 or the next scheduled meeting of the committee thereafter.

**The Clerk:** I thought the motion was more flexible.

**The Chair:** Yes, I'm just reading the motion here myself:

That the Committee invite the Parliamentary Budget Officer to appear before the end of the current Parliamentary session....

What does that mean, Philippe?

**The Clerk:** We can interpret it as this June or this fall.

**The Chair:** Yes. A parliamentary session is not just the sitting in the spring.

**Mr. Nick Whalen:** I understand that.

**The Chair:** Literally, we could have this without any formal motion from this committee. The PBO's appearance could be scheduled this fall, if we wish.

**Mr. Nick Whalen:** Oh yes, at the semicolon, just put a period. I want to make it stronger, say next Tuesday, or the next sitting of the committee thereafter, but during the regular time, not as a special session.

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** We want the PBO heard before we move forward on any changes to the estimates.

**Ms. Yasmin Ratansi:** Agreed.

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** Especially in light of Mr. Brison's dismissive comments about the PBO.

**The Chair:** What Nick is saying is even a little stronger than that. He's putting some precision behind the appearance time of the—

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** We're fine with that. Again, we want the PBO heard before changes are made.

**The Chair:** I don't think there's any disagreement on the government's side.

**Mr. Nick Whalen:** No.

**The Chair:** Okay, so if that's the case, if we may, leave the motion as presented even without a semicolon or period. That would allow some flexibility, particularly for the chair, to schedule a meeting. If we're all in agreement with the PBO appearing at some time that's convenient, then we'll make sure that it happens. We still need, from a procedural standpoint, to vote on this motion.

**Mr. Nick Whalen:** I don't want it to be held outside of the committee's regularly scheduled business.

**The Chair:** You're suggesting then, Nick, that the committee invite the Parliamentary Budget Officer to appear before the end of the current parliamentary session to provide a briefing on the estimates process and its recent report to Parliament, period.

**Mr. Nick Whalen:** Yes.

**Mr. Kelly McCauley:** I'm fine with that.

**The Chair:** All right, the amended motion, then.

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

**The Chair:** Whether it's this coming Tuesday or at the first opportunity, and it may be the fall, definitely the intent is to bring the PBO here to discuss what the motion today says. Okay?

Thank you for that, colleagues. With that, we will go in camera and start discussing the debate.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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