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Tuesday, November 5, 2013

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Chair

Mr. Pat Martin

Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

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•(0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP)): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. We'll call to order the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. This is meeting number three.

We're convened today to continue the work of our last meeting, which was putting in place the routine motions, the orders, the bylaws under which we'll conduct ourselves as a committee.

When we adjourned last Thursday, we were still debating not a routine motion but a motion put forward by the government members of the committee, which dealt with how independent members or members of smaller parties will be treated at the committee and the status they will have should they seek to move amendments to legislation.

We were in the middle of the debate on this motion. When we left off, Mr. Mathieu Ravignat had the floor. I'll be giving the floor to Mr. Ravignat and pointing out that the next speaker on the speaking list, as it was left last Thursday, is Mr. Scott Andrews.

Scott, you'll be up after Mathieu. After that will be Charmaine Borg and then Mr. Charlie Angus.

I should observe that this has become a matter of perhaps a disproportionate amount of interest with the country watching. Some of us have had e-mails coming in to our offices. I don't know about my colleagues, but I received over 16,000 e-mails in an eight-hour period from people who are paying attention to what's going on with these proceedings. We may want to discuss as a committee how we're going to deal with that sort of inundation of correspondence in the future. It ends up having a material effect on our ability to serve our constituents if our MP e-mail accounts are rendered virtually useless and inoperable by virtue of the sheer preponderance of e-mails coming in. I think that's a discussion we should have as a committee, perhaps when we go in camera, and we should refer the matter to the Speaker for the Speaker's consideration on how we deal with that particular tactic.

That being said, Mr. Ravignat, you have the floor.

[Translation]

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat (Pontiac, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good morning, everyone.

It is the beginning of the session, and I am pleased to be here to talk about something so fundamental. I am pleased to stand up for

democracy and the right of elected members to take their rightful places.

I had some things to say at the last meeting and I have even more things to say this morning. I have thought about this issue and the motion over the week and the weekend. I even had a dream about the motion.

I apologize to the interpreters. I will try to slow down. You are doing an outstanding job and I appreciate it. Like any Franco-Ontarian, I tend to speak very quickly, but I will slow down for you.

Mr. Chair, you received a letter signed by three independent members of Parliament: Bruce Hyer, hon. member for Thunder Bay—Superior-North, Brent Rathgeber, hon. member for Edmonton—St. Albert, and Elizabeth May, hon. member for Saanich—Gulf islands. This letter was addressed to all committee chairs. However, the letter was not read or discussed at the last meeting, Mr. Hyer.

It is important to discuss the letter. I would like to read something that caught my attention in the letter, which is very important because it allows independent members to have their objections read into the record. As they rightly point out:

The motion to require that members, who are either independent or are members of recognized parties with fewer than 12 MPs, submit amendments to your committee 48 hours prior to the start of clause by clause consideration of any bill is deeply problematic. The clear purpose of this motion is to reduce rights of Members of Parliament.

I agree with them. We, as members of a recognized party in Parliament—our party has more than 12 MPs—are part of a caucus or team in Parliament. We have access to all sorts of resources in the House that allow us to do our jobs properly. In addition, when you have more than 12 MPs, the members can help each other. Since we are part of a recognized political group, we have a research budget and resources that independent members simply do not have. They are asked to introduce a motion 48 hours prior to the start of clause-by-clause consideration of any bill, but that might be a challenge for them, especially since they have to look at all the bills by themselves with the help of their office staff.

•(0850)

I don't think we fully grasp that our independent colleagues live in a parliamentary context that is much more difficult than ours. It is sometimes difficult to follow everything that goes on in Parliament when you have such a small team. I recognize that. I therefore agree with the first paragraph of their letter to you, Mr. Chair, and to all MPs.

This is something vital. We are talking about reducing the ability of some elected members to vote on bills. We must never lose sight of the following principle. I am here today because I used to believe in our democracy with all its institutions and its positive aspects. At the same time, I knew there was work to be done. A democracy needs to be looked after. It is like a baby who needs tender loving care. If we do not take care of our democracy, we will end up in a hole. That has happened before. There was a time when democracy became something else. I am not saying that we are at that point, because we are far from it, but democracy has failed before. We must remain vigilant.

Our democracy's health often has to do with the details. Thank goodness we live in a country that respects the rule of law. Through legislation, we can change this country for the better or for the worse. Clearly, it is our privilege as parliamentarians to make legislation. We can have many motives for introducing bills. We must pay close attention to why we are changing the laws.

We must also be careful not to become lazy. Democracy is not easy. I have a master's degree in political science and I was mentored by political thinkers. The two political thinkers I really like are Charles Taylor and Douglas Moggach. They are both Canadian. Douglas Moggach is probably not as well known. He used to teach at University of Ottawa. Mr. Moggach taught me a lot of things. He often used to tell me that, when parliamentarians and lawyers become lazy or negligent, they can undermine some of the fundamental principles of our democracy. That is why we have to constantly be on our guard.

●(0855)

I will continue reading the letter. I really think it has some very interesting points. The third paragraph says:

The context surrounding this motion should give committee members pause. The identical motion has already been tabled in both the—

[English]

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Ravnat. I hate to interrupt you, but I'm wondering if the other committee members would benefit if they could see a copy of that letter. Has everyone received a copy of the letter which Mr. Ravnat is making reference to? Has it been circulated to other committee members, and do members have a copy of it with them? I have some 16,000 copies in my office. If you would like one, I could forward it to you.

[Translation]

Mr. Mathieu Ravnat: To my knowledge, it was sent by the clerk.

[English]

The Chair: I understand people do have it.

[Translation]

Mr. Mathieu Ravnat: Of course, I think it is important that all committee members around this table have access to the same information, so I understand why you interrupted my reading of the letter.

I will start the paragraph from the top:

The context surrounding this motion should give committee members pause. The identical motion has already been tabled in both the Procedure and House Affairs and

Finance Committees, and the same motion will soon be tabled in each of the other Standing Committees.

It is not plausible that it was actually drafted by the member who has submitted it for consideration. The only explanation for identical motions in multiple committees submitted by Conservative MPs is that the Prime Minister's Office is coordinating and mandating these actions.

Those are allegations, but, based on many facts, I agree that the current Prime Minister and his cabinet have created what is probably the highest concentration of power in the history of this country. The Prime Minister and his cabinet like having control. They have centralized a great many of the responsibilities that used to belong to ministers' offices or officials.

I personally don't understand that type of political instinct. I come from a culture, a political tradition and even a family that recognize that it is impossible to control everything, to know everything, and that centralized decisions are often founded on very few facts and very narrow views. We all have our weaknesses and our strengths, and we must recognize that knowledge is everywhere.

When I was working as a researcher for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, we started to recognize that knowledge did not come from academics only, from an ivory tower, as they say. I think the Prime Minister and his office have created

●(0900)

[English]

an iron tower of secrecy and of control.

[Translation]

The letter points that out, and I think it is a good thing.

Knowledge exists beyond us and our communities. Let's take the Aboriginal people, for example. Through history, most white people all too often assumed that they knew everything and that there was nothing to learn from Aboriginal wisdom. However, I think we have a lot to learn from them. That is just one example. That type of knowledge is not academic knowledge; it comes from communities and people dealing with real-life situations. True leaders must be open to those sources of knowledge and use them to make evidence-based decisions.

I am talking about that because this motion is part of the government's authoritarian vision, which seeks to silence the voices that the government finds marginal. However, there is no such thing as a marginal voice.

At our meeting last week, I talked about St. John the Baptist and the expression "crying in the wilderness" to show how a seemingly marginal voice can leave its mark on our democracy. Think about David and Goliath. David was considered marginal, someone not important who could not contribute much. He was a simple boy who didn't know how to hunt or how to do anything for that matter. Yet that boy changed the world—

●(0905)

[English]

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): I'm sorry to interrupt, but on a point of clarification, was he a shepherd boy?

[Translation]

Mr. Mathieu Ravnat: Yes, he was.

At that time, who would have thought that David, the boy, the prophet, was going to write some wonderful psalms that still inspire poetry around the world today? He would have been silenced. He would have been told that he had nothing to say, that he had to drop his weapon and not throw the stone, not challenge the giant. What should I do today? My question to you is: who is the giant and who is David? Let your conscience be your guide.

Furthermore, we do not have the right, nor is it healthy, to muzzle those we think or consider to be on the margins. I am here to say that I refuse to do that. This letter motivates me.

Here is the picture. A majority party in the House—let's call it Goliath—is trying to eliminate the only possibility that independent MPs have—why not call them David—or members of recognized political parties with fewer members, to introduce amendments, to express their views and to vote on the issues.

Let me add that the number of time allocation motions introduced by this government in the House is unprecedented in Canadian history. This government is afraid to let people speak. Yet listening to people is one of the greatest assets and qualities in a true leader. This government is clearly impatient and has decided to recreate our country in its own image and to refuse to listen to the parliamentarians who were duly elected by Canadians. That is no small matter.

When I talk to my constituents—my true bosses, the people who elected me in the riding of Pontiac—I tell them straight out that I did not have an opportunity to speak to the bill because the government decided that I did not have a right to speak. They are not very happy with that; they are upset. I understand why. They trusted me and they trusted my party, so I want to be ready and able to speak when I feel that my constituents need me to do so.

Mr. Chair, I will leave it at that. Thank you for giving me time to talk about this crucial democracy issue. I also thank my colleagues for their attention and I thank the Canadians watching us on television.

• (0910)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ravignat.

Next on the speaking list is Mr. Scott Andrews of the Liberal Party.

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Mr. Chair, it's interesting that the government members all of a sudden have an interest in independent members and in helping them. It might have to do with the fact that we've been seeing a lot more Conservatives sitting as independents in recent memory. I guess at some point in the future they may see themselves as independent members and they'd like to make sure they have a role in Parliament as independents.

We support giving independent members more of a voice at committees and more of a voice in Parliament, because they truly represent their constituents as an elected member. Some independent members are elected as independents. Crossing the floor and sitting as an independent is different from actually running as an independent and getting elected. During my short time here in

Parliament, in 2008 and 2011, some members were elected as independents.

I'd like to propose a little amendment to the government's motion. I have a copy I'll give the clerk to pass around to the other members. It's in paragraph (c), so I will read the amendment as we have it here:

(c) during the clause-by-clause consideration of a Bill,

—and we insert an amendment here—

which is to be scheduled so as to ensure that no two clause-by-clause considerations of Bills by a Standing Committee are scheduled concurrently,

—and then we go back to the original motion—

the Chair shall allow a Member who filed suggested amendments, pursuant to paragraph (a), an opportunity to:

—and we insert an amendment here—

participate fully in clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill, subject to SO 76(5); make representations in support of the amendments commensurate to speaking privileges enjoyed by full members of the Committee; and participate in any *in camera* meetings.

I move that amendment.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Andrews.

Unfortunately, we didn't have enough copies to circulate to all the committee members. I wonder if we might take a moment while the copies are being made so that everyone has the advantage of seeing your recommendation in writing. We could suspend the meeting for two or three minutes while we do that.

Mr. Paul Calandra (Oak Ridges—Markham, CPC): I think we have the gist of it on this side. If my friends over there are okay, I think we understand what he said. I know it's rather extraordinary that we wouldn't have copies for everybody, but I think in this instance we can grasp what he's trying to say.

Mr. Scott Andrews: It's my fault. I should have made enough copies to bring this morning. I'm sorry.

The Chair: Fair enough, if people are satisfied that they understand the amendment, the debate will be on the amendment and not on the main motion.

On the speakers list for debate, we have Mr. Angus and then Mr. Calandra.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Chair, thank you for your excellent work so far. We're off to a good start, I think, because we've had a very reasonable chair, as well as excellent staff, by the way.

As New Democrats, we have stated our position. We think this is very serious, the stripping of rights of independent members regardless of their political affiliation. It is, I think, a fundamental threat. We feel there's a real opportunity at this committee, the ethics committee, to hold the line and to really air this so the public begins to know that as we're trying to do our job, we're being attacked on Twitter by one of the independent members, Ms. May, who is accusing us of blocking the debate. I'm not quite sure what that's about, so we're more than willing to go to a vote.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Chair, may I have the floor for a moment?

The Chair: Well, you may if you have a point of order; otherwise, there's a speaking list, Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I'm sorry, but I don't think it's a proper point of order trying to correct the record. I would never attack Mr. Angus for his efforts to help us.

The Chair: Ms. May, you're actually next on the list after Mr. Calandra, so you may have the floor after Mr. Calandra.

Mr. Paul Calandra: I move that we go in camera.

• (0915)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Could we have a recorded vote?

The Chair: A motion to move in camera is non-debatable. A recorded vote has been requested.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4)

The Chair: We will now go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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