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Tuesday, February 4, 2014

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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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•(1305)

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Miriam Burke): I see quorum. We can now proceed to the election of the chair.

[Translation]

Pursuant to Standing Order No. 106(2), the chair must be a member of the government party.

[English]

I'm ready to receive motions for the chair.

Mr. Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): I move that Scott Reid be appointed chair.

The Clerk: Are there any further motions?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare Mr. Reid duly elected chair of the subcommittee.

Before inviting Mr. Reid to take the chair, if the committee wishes we can now proceed to the election of the vice-chairs.

[Translation]

I am now ready to receive motions for the election of the first vice-chair.

[English]

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the first vice-chair must be a member of the official opposition.

Mr. Schellenberger.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): I move to nominate Mr. Marston.

The Clerk: It's been moved that Mr. Marston be elected first vice-chair of the committee. Are there any further motions?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare Mr. Marston duly elected first vice-chair of the committee.

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the second vice-chair must be a member of an official opposition party other than the official opposition. I'm now prepared to receive a motion for second vice-chair.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): With the amount of competition, I'm going to weigh in and firmly say that it has to be Irwin Cotler.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Clerk: Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare Professor Cotler duly elected second vice-chair of the committee.

I now invite Mr. Reid to take the chair.

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Greetings, colleagues.

Greetings in particular to the newest member of our subcommittee, Mr. Benskin. We are very glad to have you here.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Thank you. I'm very excited to be here.

The Chair: Colleagues, we went through this process because that's the way the rules work, but we actually had business under way in the last session, in the last part of 2013.

I want to suggest, although it's not on our agenda—we have no agenda for this meeting other than to go through what we just did—that we do two things, and with your permission I'd like to do them.

First, I want to go through a little review of my own while we're in public. Then, if someone were to suggest it and the committee were agreeable, I'd like us to go in camera so that we can turn to the subject of committee business and do a little bit of planning for future meetings. Would that be acceptable?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay.

Let me just go through what I have here, and then we'll go in camera, if someone suggests it, to discuss business.

Just so people know, I have some notices of motion here that had been put forward. Now that we've agreed to that, they will automatically be acceptable and can be dealt with at that time.

I just want to go through one thing here, colleagues. Last September I took advantage of our first meeting to lay out informal guidelines for selecting the nature of the subjects for future study based on criteria that seemed to have general support among subcommittee members. I made a point of doing it at a public meeting, so they are actually on our record. I won't repeat the details here for that reason. You can look at the Hansard of our first meeting.

We agreed that we ought to, when possible, select topics that are: (a) likely to be the subject of consensus among parties; (b) likely to be the kind of issue where Canada has some kind of influence so that our hearings may actually make a difference in someone's life, or in lives; and (c) likely to allow us to produce a motion or a report in a timely fashion, with the definition of "timely" being up to the subcommittee itself.

Since that time, I think a consensus has developed on something else—namely, that we ought to design any new motions guiding the activities of the subcommittee so that we have a clear mandate from that particular motion. To me this means that we should avoid double-barrelled motions that mandate us to look at—to give a fictitious example—human rights violation X, which took place on the following date, and then go on to say in the text of the motion that we ought to look at the overall human rights situation in that country.

These are two different objectives in one motion. Experience would indicate that this will lead to a general study of the overall human rights situation in the country, in which the original human rights violation that prompted the motion vanishes as a sort of footnote.

There's nothing wrong with doing general country studies, but we should get into them only as the result of a deliberate decision of the subcommittee rather than by accident. As this subcommittee's two-year-long study of the overall human rights situation in Iran demonstrates, you simply cannot do a decent job without devoting a great deal of time to it.

Equally important, you can't do any broad study without crowding out a number of smaller studies. If we reverse that particular lens for a second, you can't engage in a one-off hearing without using up a meeting that could have been used for a larger detailed country study.

This brings me to the point that I really want to sink in. Today is February 4, and the House will rise no later than June 20. Taking into account the intervening break weeks and the fact that we'll lose a day here or there—for example, we will probably not be able to meet on budget day, which is one week from now—I calculate that we have, at most, 26 one-hour meetings at our disposal, and fewer if the House rises early, as it did in December.

That is not the only constraint we face. The subcommittee has indicated a wish to complete at least one and perhaps two reports this spring. We all need to be aware of the fact that the various stages of report preparation, including collating the evidence, writing a draft with potential conclusions, editing the report to take into account the subcommittee's changes to the draft, and adding the finishing work done by the publications branch, will take a total of six to eight weeks. Some of these weeks can be break weeks, but only if we complete our own work up to the requisite stage before the break week begins.

Finally, all of that does not actually put our report before the House of Commons, only before the foreign affairs committee, which then begins its own process.

I mention all of that simply to make sure that we go into any discussion we have with our eyes open as to the likelihood we have of achieving work that will get before the parent committee, or inevitably before the House of Commons, within the timeframe we want.

That said, would people now be agreeable to going in camera so that we can discuss future business?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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