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Standing Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament

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Thursday, March 27, 2014

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• (1205)

[English]

The Joint Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Christine Holke David): Honourable members of the committee,

[Translation]

We may now proceed to the election of the joint chair who will act on behalf of the House of Commons. Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the joint chair must be a member of the government party.

[English]

I am ready to receive motions to that effect.

[Translation]

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin (Senator, Lib.)): Madam Clerk, I would like to nominate Mr. Harris as joint chair of the Standing Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament.

The Joint Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Christine Holke David): It is moved by Senator Charette-Poulin that Mr. Harris be elected joint chair of the committee.

[English]

Are there any further motions?

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

(Motion agreed to)

The Joint Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Christine Holke David): I declare the motion carried and Mr. Harris duly elected joint chair of the committee.

I now invite Mr. Harris to take the chair.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): And now the victory speech.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): Someone asked how many elections I had won and why I win so many. I said because you never go in them to lose.

Anyway, as my colleagues who have been on this committee before probably know already, I've never been on this committee before and I'm looking forward to discovering the mandate of this committee and how it's supposed to operate under normal terms, and also having a look at its historical activities. From that I think I'll get a pretty good idea.

I look forward to working with you.

Thank you to all of you for not saying no. I appreciate that. I'll try to do a good job.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): I've given a first challenge to our co-chair.

One of the things that has been difficult for me as co-chair for the last months was the absence of a steering committee to ensure that we have agendas approved by a steering committee. I think Richard and I will be looking into this in the next few days.

Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Without understanding for sure if we were going to adopt the motion—if you were looking for a motion—I would just like to ask, through you, Chairs, what historically has been the case for this particular committee insofar as a steering committee.

I've been a member of this committee before. I've been a co-chair of this committee before. Could I get some historical perspective on how often there has been a steering committee for this particular committee?

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): I'll ask the senior clerk.

The Joint Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Kevin Pittman): Thank you.

The practice has been for the committee to establish or not establish a steering committee. The last session there was no steering committee for this particular joint committee. Prior to that there was a steering committee. I think there was a session previous to that, again within the last Parliament, when there wasn't a steering committee. But generally it's the will of the committee whether it wants to function with or a steering committee or not.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: It sounds like a coin toss.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Madam Hughes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, NDP): Thank you.

We had a discussion concerning this committee at the last meeting. We had decided who would sit on it.

I think that the fact of making sure that we can decide ahead of time what issues the committee may study and examine is really a good way to proceed.

I would like us to do one thing. We had begun a study on the Parliament 2020 project. We had made a great deal of progress on that and I would like that to continue. I would like to propose that at some point.

[English]

I would also like to congratulate Mr. Harris on his election.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): For the information of the committee, I can remind people of the agreement that was reached in the last session. It was moved by Carol Hughes:

That the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure be composed of the joint chairs, the vice-chairs, and four other members of the committee representing from the Senate the Conservative Party, and from the House of Commons two Conservative members and a New Democratic Party member to be designated after the usual consultations; and that the subcommittee be empowered to make decisions on behalf of the committee with respect to its agenda, its witnesses, and its scheduled hearings.

Mr. Calkins.

• (1210)

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Madam Chair, based on what I heard you say.... My typical knowledge from working in House standing committees is that subcommittees are charged with looking at agendas and then filing a report back to the committee for consideration. In the statement that you just read, you said the subcommittee would be empowered to make considerations in regard to the agenda, which in my opinion means that decisions taken at the subcommittee would be automatically accepted by this committee.

Could you clarify that, please?

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): I'm going to ask Mrs. Hughes to clarify what her intention was when the motion was moved.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I believe the discussion we had was that we would bring back to the committee the suggested...that the committee has an opportunity to indicate what they want to study. Then the subcommittee would look at that and look at the opportunities that are before us, and then bring back the items in priority. Then discussions could be had by the committee to decide. The committee as a whole decides whether or not they move forward, but certainly the discussion needs to be dwindled down, otherwise we're going to be here arguing the items of the day on and on, and not getting anywhere.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): If I may ask, Ms. Hughes, your suggestion.... I don't have the date here, and I don't know whether it was a motion or a suggestion—

Mrs. Carol Hughes: It was passed.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): You're saying that the steering committee would come back with suggestions or recommendations to the committee as a whole to consider, as to whether they move forward on any or all of the suggestions. Was that your intent? Is that how it reads?

Mr. Calkins.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you, Chairs.

Thank you, Ms. Hughes. I appreciate the clarification of intent, but I believe that the intent of the motion and the wording of the motion are inconsistent. So I would be uncomfortable making an amendment to the motion, and I would be uncomfortable voting for that motion as was read before me.

If I might, I'd make a suggestion to perhaps table or put this aside for this particular meeting until a motion is brought forward that more accurately reflects what I think the intent of the motion is.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): There isn't a motion yet on the floor, Mr. Calkins. This was the reminder of a past motion, based on a report of the clerk.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: When did this happen?

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): It was November 7, 2013.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): If I can interrupt, I've just been told that this was a routine motion that was already agreed to by the committee.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Okay.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): Therefore, I think it's—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: So why are we debating it?

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): Do we need a notice of motion?

You can explain it.

Senator Anne C. Cools (Toronto Centre-York, Ind.): The member, Mr. Calkins, I think is raising very valid and important issues and questions. I think we should deal with them, or attempt to deal with them. There are many committees, and many subcommittees, in particular, that believe that these automatic routine motions that are voted upon at the inception of the constitution of the committee essentially transfer total power for the administration of the committee from the committee to the subcommittee.

All subcommittees are delegated authority. I have always understood that the subcommittee makes suggestions to the committee and those suggestions, when adopted by the committee, then are in force. But the subcommittee doesn't have absolute power to act on behalf.... I know many committees around here do that and act that way, so I'm very thankful to Mr. Calkins for raising an issue that has been a bugbear for many committees and many individuals for a long time.

So I think, Chairman, we have a wonderful opportunity to clarify this situation in a very ample way, even if it means reopening a previous discussion.

• (1215)

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): Senator Cools, that's what I was attempting to do, to clarify whether it was a recommendation or a suggestion, as we understood at first. Then I was told by the clerk that it was a routine motion. I'm just trying to clarify that before we move forward. I think it's important.

Senator Anne C. Cools: I am thankful for that. I've been fighting these routine motions for years.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): Ms. Hughes.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I'm just going to clarify something. I see it in writing now and I understand the concern.

The discussion we had before was that the committee would have an opportunity to put forward ideas as to what the agenda would be. The steering committee would then look at those ideas and prioritize them, and then, based on that, people would have an opportunity to submit names for witnesses.

The committee will look at that, because it says here to invite witnesses and schedule hearings. What is written, what was agreed to, is no different from what is being done in other committees, in which we put forward our ideas about suggestions, about studies.

Once that is done, we have opportunities to put names forward for witnesses. From there the steering committee, with the clerk and the vice-chairs, looks at the witnesses and tries to provide a balance from what was put forward of witnesses coming forward.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Mr. Calkins, would you be willing to make an amendment to the motion that was tabled on November 7, 2013—

Mrs. Carol Hughes: It was a routine motion—

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): —to respect the intent that Mrs. Hughes described?

Mr. Blaine Calkins: No, I would not. If the motion has already been adopted, then it has been adopted. The committee at this point has no other option but to proceed, or otherwise somebody would need to submit a motion changing the routine motions or routine proceedings of this particular committee.

So I beg your pardon. I thought we were discussing something that was going to happen, not something that had already happened. I guess at this point we'll have to wait to see whether the subcommittee, through the routine proceedings motion that was passed, actually acts according to what Ms. Hughes has described as being her envisioned intent. If it does not, then we can revisit this at a future date.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): Colleagues, may I make a suggestion?

There seems to be some confusion around this, and I don't like to proceed until things are very clear. I know that there are many new members on this committee.

I would like to make a suggestion that somebody propose that we table this until the next meeting. We'll give everybody time to fully understand what it is and get a good idea of how we should move forward.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: It has already been passed. I don't know that there is an issue to be tabled, unless you just want to table the discussion.

Maybe what I could get from my colleague Mr. Calkins is whether he could advise us of the concerns he has, so that we can see what type of language he feels needs to be in place so that this committee can start the work that it needs to get done.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Mr. Calkins?

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Chair, I have a fundamental question that also needs to be answered. Between the adjournment for Christmas and the recommencement of Parliament, significant changes were made on the House side in the makeup and the reconstitution of all of the committees.

Did that happen with this committee?

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): I'm told that the joint committee is outside of that scope, so it is not affected by it.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: So that the decisions made prior to Christmas are still in effect here.

● (1220)

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I didn't get an answer to my question. What are your concerns, Mr. Calkins, with the routine motion that was accepted?

Mr. Blaine Calkins: My concern, which I think I expressed when Madam Chair read it out, was that the subcommittee is empowered to make decisions in the absence of the main committee. That language led to confusion in my mind. My understanding of committees from the House side—understanding that this is a joint committee—is that a subcommittee is a creature of the committee and simply reports back to the main committee, in which the decisions are ultimately taken.

The language that I heard here was that the decisions would be taken unilaterally by the subcommittee and not reported back. Your describing the subcommittee as being responsible for setting the agenda and inviting witnesses means that those decisions will be taking place outside the scope of the main committee, which I think is an infringement upon my privileges as a parliamentarian, if I'm not a member of the subcommittee.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): Are there any further comments on that?

Let me ask the clerk whether it is appropriate that we table this discussion until our next meeting so that new members of the committee can have a chance to look back at the historical activities of any steering committee that was part of this main committee and get a clear understanding of exactly the role and the mandate that the steering committee would have.

My understanding from having been on other committees is that the steering committee is pretty much a group who gives advice to a main committee, and then the main committee makes decisions on how to move forward on that advice.

Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): I wonder whether, through the chair, it is possible to get some advice from the clerks to tell us whether whatever happened—inadvertently I would think from what I can gather.... I don't think Ms. Hughes wanted the motion that was passed; I don't think that was her intent.

Is there a way to undo it procedurally so that we can go back to square zero and start over?

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Mr. Harris has a question.

Mr. Dan Harris (Scarborough Southwest, NDP): I am just following up on Monsieur Lauzon.

In the committee, we are masters of our own domain. We can't undo the motion, but we can pass a new motion, if it's found that people don't like the current one.

We could keep debating it back and forth, but until somebody comes up with a new motion, we're not going to accomplish anything.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Both the co-chair and I are looking for a practical approach here so that we can move on as a committee to get some work done here.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: That's fair enough.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): We know that there are different traditions in the two houses regarding the wording of the responsibilities of steering committees. If we want to move on, my clerk is telling me that we can simply come forward with a new motion, keeping it simple but also reflecting the intent that Ms. Hughes conveyed a few minutes ago to the committee.

Senator Cools has something to say, I believe.

Senator Anne C. Cools: I appreciate that, Chairman, but I want to emphasize again this point, because it's extremely profound and very relevant.

Because I came to the meeting a bit late, I was going to ask the chairman what the question was that is before us right now, and what was the form of the question, because we could simply adjourn it and take it up at a future time when the members are a bit clearer on what they actually agreed to.

I notice you said the word "table." I don't know the term "tabling"; I think you meant "suspend the discussion" and carry it on later.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): I've been advised by the clerk that—

Senator Anne C. Cools: —that there's no question before us?

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): —there is no question and that the discussion really is moot and that a formal motion to amend the existing motion would be in order.

•(1225)

Senator Anne C. Cools: Okay.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I'm going to hopefully simplify things with what I'm about to say.

I think the question before us is about the composition of the subcommittee if it is to do its work; that's my understanding.

I don't know whether the members have been assigned. Madam Chair, you spoke of the slots that would be available according to the routine motion.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): I was under the impression—and maybe, Mr. Calkins, I'm wrong here—that the question before the committee right now is the wording of the previous motion, concerning the authority of the steering committee.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: That has been the discussion, but I think you brought it forward—and maybe you can clarify this for me—the

matter of filling the vacancy so that the subcommittee could do its work.

Was that not why you brought it forward?

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): No.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Okay.

Madam Chair, correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe I heard you say that the subcommittee would consist of the joint chairs and the vice-chairs and four members of the committee.

Could you clarify for me whether those positions that are not clearly known already have been assigned?

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): No, they have not. I have not been informed of any positions that were filled for the House of Commons side. I did consult my colleagues, the two Conservative senators, who themselves came back to me with a name, but I have never received information about the House side.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Then if I may, I propose, or I move, or whichever the case might be, that this issue be tabled until the next committee meeting to decide the composition of the subcommittee...

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Oh, absolutely, the composition is for the next committee, because as you know, there is a tradition of consultation for these positions.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Yes. I'm feeling very unconsulted right now.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): But going back to the previous discussion, for practical reasons, it would be really nice to agree on the power of the steering committee—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I think we can deal with both at the next—

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): —that you raised, and that was seconded by Senator Cools.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Okay.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): I think—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: We leave that to the next meeting?

Okay.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Yes, I don't have a problem. I mean, that's exactly what you said at the beginning, that it had to be approved by the parties as to who is going to be sitting on the steering committee. Again, you know, there seems to be some problem with the wording. I am prepared to fix it so that the steering committee has the same type of wording that is basically how the other committees work with.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Could you come forward with the new wording?

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I can. I'd be glad to work with Mr. Calkins to make sure that there's something there that he's in favour of. I'll look at the other committees that have steering committees to see how that wording is. The clerk can help us.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): Colleagues, given the composition of this committee and the number of new members on it, I would like you to consider it a good idea that this committee move forward based on what we decided as a new committee and the new members. Then we'd have a good understanding of what we've done ourselves, rather than something that was done prior to us all getting here. I think that would be a far more sensible way to move forward. I don't know what the procedure is to do that, but I imagine when we come back for our next meeting perhaps a form of a motion could be made that would sort of cancel this and we could form our new one.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Could we therefore agree that at the next meeting there would be an agreement for a new motion, but also the composition so that we could really move forward?

Senator Anne C. Cools: That's what you just said, you hope there will be an agreement. We can agree to debate the issue.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): Someone would have to...a notice of motion for next week.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: If there was to be a change at all.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): Yes.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): I'm looking for consensus here.

We did receive information from Mr. Simms.

Mr. Simms.

• (1230)

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-sor, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I want to put this motion in front of us today, because I think it's a very important one, which clearly states, as you can see, "that...the Library of Parliament already scans Sessional Papers...tabled in response to Order Paper Questions..."

So why can't we make this a public venue for Canadians to see? I think as a government we are promoting more use of the Internet. We're able to see online resources everywhere in every department, in every which way, shape, or form. We are asking Canadians to engage with the government online more so than on paper or through actual visits, because, in the government's words, it saves money, it's quicker, you can do it off-hours, etc. So I just thought that in response to order paper questions, that this, too, could be available for the general public to see more transparency within government.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Mr. Simms, would you like to table the motion formally, or would you like to wait until there's a discussion when our chief librarian will be here?

Mr. Scott Simms: I'd like to table it, please.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): The motion is tabled.

Is there a seconder? Do we need a seconder for debate? No, we don't need a seconder for debate.

Debate on the motion....

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): No debate?

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): We could call the vote if—

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: First of all, just to clarify, the motion is in order because it was received within 48 hours.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Yes.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I see the date of February 25, so the debate before us is in order.

The Library of Parliament already scans sessional papers, which are tabled in response to the order paper questions in the House.

Mr. Simms has given us his rationale for this. My guess is that this has come up in the past before this committee. If it has, I'd like to know when it was.

There must be a good reason as to why this isn't.... This is a change in operations of the Library of Parliament, and I would like to hear from the Library of Parliament people themselves as to the practicality or the implementation of this, because this would actually change the procedure. For us to make a unilateral decision about it without consulting the chief librarian or somebody from the department I think would be ill-advised at this particular point in time. I'd like to know, and I'd like to be able to ask questions of the officials from the Library of Parliament.

I wonder if Mr. Simms would be amenable to having an opportunity to discuss this motion in context with the officials from the library.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms: Sure. That's fine.

They already do it. I just thought it would be a perfunctory thing for us to do to say that we're all in favour of transparency and we want responses to OPQs. I think it's the responsible thing to do. If the committee would like to hear from the Library of Parliament, then I'll abide by those wishes. I don't really have the numbers, as you can see, to actually fight it, so I'm at the will of the committee.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Are you therefore suggesting that it be part of the agenda of the next meeting, Mr. Simms?

Mr. Scott Simms: Yes, please.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Thank you.

So be it.

Senator Anne C. Cools: I can move a motion to that effect, or somebody can move a motion, that the Library of Parliament—

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Senator Cools is proposing, therefore, the motion that on the next agenda of this committee—

Senator Anne C. Cools: Well, it will be at the next sitting, at the next opportunity, when the motion is being debated—

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): In the presence of the chief librarian.

Senator Anne C. Cools: Well, I wasn't getting that far. I was saying that we should invite the personnel directly affected. Maybe you have an idea, or maybe Mr. Calkins has an exact idea, of who it is, but whoever it is, that person should be invited to respond so we can move forward.

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): We'll leave that to the chief librarian.

Thank you, Senator Cools.

(Motion agreed to)

The Joint Chair (Senator Marie-P. Charette-Poulin): Are there no other matters?

Thank you very much. We will try to reschedule another meeting sooner rather than later.

● (1235)

The Joint Chair (Mr. Richard Harris): The meeting is adjourned.

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